Rise of the Unholy Trinity

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Summary

The Zero Requiem was successful, but to some, the price was too high. C.C. does not care about world peace, not when she has lost the last person who gave her existence meaning. Suzaku Kururugi takes refuge in the last orders from his emperor, but he aches for what could have been.

They hate each other, but in a world that so eagerly accepts Lelouch’s sacrifice without thanking him for it, they cannot help but take refuge in one another. And when C.C. hatches a plan to turn back time and bring Lelouch back, Suzaku eagerly welcomes it. She will be his shield and he will be his sword, and this time, they will get it right.
Okay, so I swore that I would not write another fanfic until I finished all my WIPs in the Marvel universe, but this just happened and today is Lulu's birthday. I couldn't help myself!
SORRY!
I promise that a large part of the story is already written - otherwise I wouldn't have posted it. No idea how many fans Code Geass has on the Archive, but I hope you like it.

It all starts with C.C. But then, most things start with the blasted witch, and Suzaku can't even bring himself to blame her for it any longer.

They're only weeks away from the Requiem. Everything is in place. Lelouch is making the final arrangements for Nunnally's eventual rule.

Technically speaking, Suzaku should not be in the palace at all, but all the guards of the Imperial Wing are under Geass. The only ones who can see him come and go are Jeremiah, Cecile and Lloyd, and they'd never say anything. They know what is at stake.

Suzaku is sitting in front of Lelouch's desk, listening to his friend drone on something about the future organization of the Black Knights. A headache is pounding at his skull. He is not happy with the fact that he's going to be forced to work with people who apparently betrayed Lelouch, but it's not like he can point fingers given what his role in the Requiem will be.

C.C. stalks in, manifesting out of nowhere, like she usually does. "You know," she says, "you work too much. At this rate, you'll be a virgin when you die."

Lelouch's eyes widen and he cuts himself off mid-sentence. "C.C.!"] he exclaims. There's more life in his voice than there has been for weeks, and more color in his cheeks than Suzaku has seen for ages. Suzaku doesn't know if he's grateful, or if he hates C.C. for that.

"You know I'm right," she answers, her voice as stoic and flat as always. "Come on. Come with me."

Lelouch flails as she grabs his collar, but he's always been terrible at saying no to the people he loved. Much to Suzaku's dismay, C.C. now falls into that category. He is still protesting when she drags him toward the bedroom, but they disappear inside regardless.

C.C. doesn't bother to fully close the door, and soon, Suzaku can hear Lelouch's soft moans, accompanied by the distinctive sound of naked bodies sliding against one another.

He flees before he can eavesdrop further, but the memory haunts him.

He returns to Lelouch's quarters a few hours later. Lelouch is still in bed, sleeping, and for that, Suzaku is grateful, because he knows his friend has slept poorly in past weeks.
C.C. is next to him, petting his hair almost absently. She instantly notices Suzaku loitering in the doorway and gracefully releases her hold on Lelouch. The sheets slide off her naked body, but she doesn't seem to mind. She is beautiful—almost as beautiful as Lelouch—and Suzaku has never hated her more.

"You don't need to be jealous, you know," she tells him. "He'd kiss you too, if you asked."

"I'm not jealous," Suzaku snaps. It's a lie, and they both know it. She snorts, but doesn't bother to comment further. Instead, she curls around Lelouch, pulling him closer. It's a strangely loving embrace, and it doesn't fit the lack of expression on her face.

Suzaku leaves them, feeling empty and aching for the days when he could take refuge in simple hatred.

Under different circumstances, he would have probably avoided Lelouch for a few days, but nowadays, he can't afford that luxury. The next morning, he is at breakfast, like clockwork, with both C.C. and Lelouch.

"I was thinking of having my body burned," Lelouch says as he butters his toast.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," C.C. says, adding another lump of sugar to her tea. "Being burned alive is horrible."

"Yes, but I won't be alive," Lelouch argues. C.C. says nothing, but even Suzaku can feel the weight of her disapproval. The entire conversation is morbid, and Suzaku wants to stab himself in the eye with his fork if only to make it end. Alas, the Geass Lelouch has cast on him keeps him from an easy solution. Idly, he finds it odd that C.C. can even eat anything other than pizza. He thinks he may be losing his mind if he's worried about that at such a time.

"Maybe we can find another option," he grits out, just because he needs to do something to end the whole debacle.

"It's a little complicated though." Lelouch sighs. "By then, everybody will hate me, and I don't want my limbs to be strewn out in the streets. Nunnally doesn't deserve to see that. This whole thing will be hard enough for her."

Suzaku can't help but feel irritated for the fact that even now, Lelouch is still thinking only about the grief he will cause his sister. But at the end of the day, his pain is of no consequence. The Requiem is not just Lelouch's way to atone. It's Suzaku's too. He is a dead man walking, and he will forever wear a mask, meant to protect Lelouch's legacy of peace.

He wishes that were a comfort.

"What do you want to do then?"

In the end, it's Jeremiah who comes up with a solution. They discuss the matter with the Knight of Orange and he promises to spirit away Lelouch's body after the Requiem. "It will be my honor to protect you, My Liege, even after death," he says.

Somehow, Suzaku finds that fitting, that one of Lelouch's knights would guard Lelouch's wishes, and the other his remains. Lelouch seems satisfied too, and the matter is set to rest. But the whole conversation drives the inevitability of the Requiem even closer to home. That evening, Suzaku slips into his emperor's bedroom. Miraculously, C.C. is not there. Perhaps she went to get some pizza.

"Suzaku?" Lelouch asks. "What is it? Is everything all right?"
Suzaku can't help but let out a bitter laugh. "No. Nothing is all right. Nothing about this is all right."

Lelouch looks confused, and Suzaku can't take it any longer. He stalks to the side of the man who had been the center of his life for so long and kisses him.

It is just as C.C. said. For about two seconds, Lelouch goes rigid. It doesn't last, and he melts into Suzaku's arms, parting his lips for Suzaku's kiss. It's a little clumsy at first, since neither of them have that much experience, but it doesn't matter. Suzaku is working on autopilot, peeling Lelouch out of those ridiculous white robes, draping him over the silken sheets. He lets his body do the talking, because he can never say what he wants to through words, and if he started speaking, he would probably say something they would both dramatically regret.

Lelouch welcomes every touch. He whispers Suzaku's name against his lips like a prayer. He clutches Suzaku's shoulders, grinding his heavy erection against Suzaku.

They falter only once, as Suzaku readies himself to enter Lelouch. "Do you want me to turn around?" Lelouch asks.

The question holds more weight than it should. Suzaku clutches Lelouch's hip so hard he will undoubtedly leave bruises. Maybe it's selfish, but he shakes his head. "No. Like this. I want to look into your eyes."

There's a flash of understanding on Lelouch's face, followed by something undecipherable, like resignation. It vanishes quickly, and then Lelouch is pulling him closer. Suzaku wonders if maybe he imagined it, and then, he doesn't wonder anything anymore. Lelouch's body is hot and welcoming around him, and Suzaku clings to his friend as he thrusts, desperately wishing that this night would never end, that they could stay like this forever.

He is crying when he comes, and as he collapses by Lelouch's side, Lelouch pets his hair and kisses his forehead. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Suzaku wants to tell him not to apologize, but the words won't come. Euphie's memory is still between them, even now, so he says nothing and simply clings to Lelouch.

He doesn't remember falling asleep, but he must have, because when he comes to, C.C. is in the room with them. She slides out of her white clothes—and why in the world is she still wearing that ridiculous straitjacket now?—and joins them in bed.

Lelouch stirs awake as she climbs in bed with them. "C.C.?

"Mmmhm," she hums. "Lie back, boy. Let us take care of you."

She really is a witch, because Suzaku finds himself complying with her wishes. He did not expect this when he entered Lelouch's bedroom the night before, but he doesn't complain when she positions Lelouch between them. She follows her whispered orders like he did Lelouch's when they were on the battle field. Together, they take Lelouch apart, and as his emperor's cries escalate, Suzaku wonders just how much grief C.C. will feel after the Requiem.

In the end, their budding love affair changes nothing. Lelouch remains as determined as ever, and Suzaku cannot go back, not now. He takes the mask Lelouch grants him and stands tall in front of the crowd, now as Zero.

The peaceful smile Lelouch gives him grants him the strength to drive the sword through Lelouch's heart. This is for Lelouch too. If nothing else, the Requiem will give Lelouch peace. Suzaku can carry the burden of the world. It is better for Lelouch to rest.
He tells himself that even as his emperor caresses his mask with bloody fingers. He clings to that hope as he watches Lelouch's body slide down the platform.

But his head is already starting to spin, and the scent of Lelouch's blood is fresh and cloying in his nostrils. He feels like he's about to throw up, like he's ten again and he just killed his father, or like after the disaster with the FLEIJA in Tokyo. It should not be the same. Lelouch planned this himself. It's for a purpose, and one life can hardly compare to all the blood they have spilled so far.

It hurts regardless, more than anything he has ever felt. He wishes he was the one lying at the base of the platform in a pool of his own blood. As the crowd starts chanting Zero's name around him, one question pops into his head.

How did it come to this?

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It takes a month for him to be able to leave Pendragon. He's busy with guarding Nunnally, introducing her to everything Lelouch left behind, making sure Schneizel obeys him and that Cornelia won't use the chaos to make yet another mess.

When he finally manages to sneak away, he makes his way to the orangery. Jeremiah's home is a gift from Lelouch, both their inside joke and a safe place for the Knight of Orange. Jeremiah nods at Suzaku in welcome, and Anya waves at him from one of the trees. Suzaku is glad that she's managing to rebuild some semblance of life after what Marianne has done to her.

Guided by Jeremiah, he makes his way to Lelouch's grave. It's hidden well, in the shade of the trees. Nobody will ever find Lelouch here. It was a good choice.

Jeremiah leaves him at the grave site, and Suzaku kneels on the ground, brushing his fingers over the stone. It has no identifier, nothing to show this is the last resting place of Lelouch vi Britannia. "I miss you," he whispers, even if he knows Lelouch can't hear him. "I'm sorry."

"Touching, but it's too late for regrets."

The voice is so sudden that he shoots to his feet and pulls out his sword. He stops seconds before he can stab C.C. through the stomach. C.C. stares at him, as impassive as always.

Frustrated, Suzaku sheathes his sword. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see him, of course," she replies, her tone clearly suggesting that she thinks he is an idiot.

"Now of all times? Forgive me if I think that's a pretty big coincidence."

"You're right." C.C. sits down on the grass, leaning against the trunk of a tree. "I came to talk to you."

Suzaku forces himself to not turn away from her. "Why? I think we've said everything that needed to be said."

"Not quite." Suddenly, her voice shifts, and it's filled with something thick and malicious. Suzaku has never heard her sound like that before. Her eyes burn with vitriol. It's more emotion than he has ever seen her express, outside her brief moments with Lelouch. "I came to tell you something."

Suzaku tastes dread in his mouth. "Tell me what?"
"You know... I always thought that the Requiem was a mistake. But I thought that maybe, after the world of C, Lelouch would have managed to take Charles's code, and he'd survive your stupidity. Apparently, I was wrong."

Well, now it makes sense why C.C. insisted on them not burning Lelouch's body.

"But that doesn't matter anymore," C.C. continues. "He's dead and so are the promises I made to him. So I will tell you this now. What happened to Euphemia was not his fault."

Suzaku feels like he's taken a hit in the solar plexus. He did not expect her bringing up Euphie. It was one of the things they stopped talking about, much like they never spoke about C.C.'s own betrayal of Lelouch. "W-What?" he stammers.

"The Geass went out of control. You know he had no way of turning it off at the end. That's the moment it started. It was an accident. He fully intended to join his sister, but instead, he ordered her the kill all the Japanese. A stupid joke, apparently."

That can't be right. It just doesn't make any sense. Why would Lelouch make such a joke anyway? It has to be a lie. Lelouch admitted to having deliberately placed Euphie under Geass. He said so, with his own mouth.

Then again, Lelouch has always been a great liar. Back at the Kururugi Shrine, Suzaku would have never believed such an outlandish and unlikely thing. He did realize something wasn't right during that fateful conversation, but the incident with Kanon quickly wiped away any chance of Lelouch pursuing the avenue of truth. Suzaku himself should have pressed, should have asked again... But he never bothered to even try.

As he stands there, in front of Lelouch's grave, he can't help but believe every word that came out of C.C's mouth. She is definitely petty enough to make up the story, but he knows she is being honest.

"Shirley Fennette was similar." She smiles bitterly. "In fact, I never did get why you blamed him for that. It was Rolo who killed her."

Rolo. The assassin assigned to replace Nunnally. Suzaku should have been more surprised. Instead, he's wondering why he never realized it before. How could he have ever believed that Lelouch killed her?

"Why tell me this now?" he croaks out. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"He didn't want you to know," C.C. replies, her voice once again toneless. "He thought that it would make things more difficult for you... after."

Lelouch was right of course. Suzaku did not even realize how much Lelouch's involvement in Euphie's death helped him until now. The image of Lelouch shooting his own sister will never leave his mind, nor will the memory of Euphie's last moments, but just the knowledge that he had not cold-heartedly planned it is earth-shattering.

He cannot find his voice to reply. C.C. gets up and brushes past him. She briefly places her hand on the grave, then walks away without looking back.

Suzaku falls to his knees and screams.

Chapter End Notes
It's my head canon that Lelouch never told Suzaku the truth about Euphie and Shirley. It doesn't seem like his style. He had ample opportunity to do it on screen and always went with the "avoidy" one, possibly out of denial or guilt. Even in Miraculous Birthday (which this isn't really complaint with), Suzaku says he can't forgive Lelouch. Sure, it's possible that he may have maintained this resentment even with having the knowledge of the Geass accident, but I doubt Lelouch ever sat down to give excuses. So yeah. Also, Suzaku will not be the healthiest person mentally in this fic. But then, that's not a big change from canon.
The Wait before the Storm

After that, the days start to blur. He continues his work as Zero, but half the time, he feels like he's underwater. Sometimes, he doesn't even know how he manages to keep up coherent conversations with the people around him. Perhaps he doesn't, and it's the Geassed Schneizel who fills all his silences.

Schneizel always was very useful. He's even managed to answer many of the questions Suzaku bothered to ask after the Requiem, filling in the blanks that Lelouch, C.C. and everyone else left. But the answers give him little satisfaction, and the thought of revenge just makes him feel empty. As satisfying as it would be to hurt the people who did the same to Lelouch, those weren't the orders he was given. The mask of Zero doesn't mean revenge.

For a while, it's the mask that saves him. At first, it seemed like a burden, a symbol of all the responsibilities he now has, as the guardian of the Requiem. It seemed to swallow him whole, to wipe away the remaining traces of Suzaku Kururugi. Soon, it becomes more than that.

It is among the few things he has left from Lelouch. As long as Zero lives, Lelouch will never be truly gone.

And he has something else. Lelouch's Geass, the wish Suzaku hated for so long.

He clings to the mask for as long as he can. He desperately tells himself that regrets are pointless, that Lelouch's accidental Geass on Euphie changes nothing, that the Requiem still has a purpose, that he has his orders from his emperor. But in the end, he succumbs.

It's on the first anniversary of Lelouch's death that he cracks. Seeing everyone celebrating in the streets is too much for him. He stays for as long as he can, and is grateful that the empress is not expected to linger at the feast thrown in the honor of her brother's death. As soon as Nunnally retires, so does he.

He takes off his mask and his cloak and pulls his sword out of its sheath.

It's very easy to bring the sharp tip to his flesh. And when the Geass starts buzzing at the back of his mind, it feels like an embrace, like a hope and a dream. He closes his eyes and remembers Lelouch's eyes, the way they were before the grief and guilt extinguished their fire. Blood trickles down his blade, but he doesn't mind the pain.

He is forced to pull the sword back before he can do too much damage, but the sensation remains. He mends his wound on autopilot, and when he goes to bed that night, he dreams of laughter, sunny days and kisses that taste like tears.

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The next time he sees C.C, he is visiting Lelouch again. Two years, three months and four days have passed since the Requiem. She is sitting in front of the grave when he arrives, eating pizza.

He feels strange, coming here at such a moment, but he doesn't want to go either. Instead, he walks around her and kneels on the ground, keeping a fair amount of distance between them.

They don't speak and Suzaku allows himself to relax. He doesn't feel comfortable talking to Lelouch while C.C. is present, but it doesn't matter. Just being here is enough.
When she reaches for him, he is unprepared. He shoots to his feet and tries to pull back, but she always was faster than she seemed and the element of surprise makes all the difference in the world.

She isn't a threat to him, not really, but what she does is perhaps worse than an outright attack. She grabs his wrist and lifts his sleeve. The marks of the countless cuts are there, branded into his flesh, a clear sign of his weakness.

He extracts his hand from her grip and pulls his sleeve back. "The Geass?" she asks.

He nods. "Sometimes, when I feel it... It's like he's with me."

For the longest time, C.C. is silent. Suzaku would think she didn't hear him, but he knows she has. It's just that C.C. acknowledges only the things she wants to. He wonders how in the world she even knew about his scars. Damn witch.

"You are lucky then," she says at last. "All I have left is the hole where the contract used to be."

The unexpected words melt away most of his anger. Suddenly, he just feels tired.

"I hate you," he says even as he kneels again, this time next to her.

"I know," she replies, leaning against him. "I hate you too."

Their hands entwine on the grass in front of Lelouch's quiet grave. For the first time in ages, Suzaku takes off his mask in a place outside his quarters. He buries his face in C.C.'s shoulder and cries.

She cries too, although her tears are silent, like everything else about her. He can tell anyway, and his guess is confirmed when he pulls away and sees it, the crystalline drops sliding down her cheeks.

She is as ageless as always, but that just makes her grief truer and more powerful. She is the only person who can ever truly understand. Even if other people mourn Lelouch—Nunnally, Jeremiah, Kallen—none will ever be like C.C.

He kisses her and she kisses him back.

Two days later, when he is back in Pendragon, he receives a present. It's a simple thing, a vial filled with liquid and a vaporizer. He is suspicious at first, but the item doesn't trigger his Geass, so he sprays it on a piece of material.

His eyes widen.

It smells like Lelouch.

No matter how hard he's tried, he's never managed to capture the exact essence of Lelouch's scent. As he remembered it, at Ashford, Lelouch smelled like the herbal and slightly sweet shampoos Nunnally favored—he never bothered to buy different things for himself, so he ended up with the same cosmetics—mingled with the wax he used to clean his chess pieces. Later, his scent changed as he threw himself into the smoke of war and machinery, into the ink on paperwork meant to safeguard a world that would celebrate his death.

This is all that, and more. Suzaku doesn't cry, but he comes very close. He makes a mental note to thank C.C. properly when he sees her next time.

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They don't set up a routine. In fact, nothing really changes. C.C. will sometimes find him, mostly
when he visits Lelouch's grave. A few times, she'd even pull him deeper into the orangery, and they'd take comfort into one another. Slowly, they start talking more. She tells him stories of her time with Lelouch, the days she had spent at Ashford or when he had been Zero. He narrates brighter memories, of the summer he and Lelouch met, of the strange friendship they struck despite their differences.

It's not something they can afford to do too often. C.C. is still on the run, and he has his duties. Still, this strange thing that they share helps, as does C.C.'s gift. He brings his sword to his wrist less often. That makes it all the stranger when suddenly, around five years after the Requiem, the Geass starts acting out on its own.

The first few times, he deems it an anomaly. Maybe he pushed it a little too hard during his last... moments.

It doesn't take him long to realize this is not the case.

Zero seems plagued by constant accidents and misfortunes. Stray bullets from untested Knightmares almost hit him. Decorative busts, bricks or vases almost fall on his head. A statue of Charles zi Britannia, currently in the process of being dismantled, nearly crushes him.

On one memorable occasion, he blanks out for a whole day. It's the first time since the FLEJA in Tokyo that he has lost control of the Geass, and he wakes up two miles away from Pendragon, in a knightmare he doesn't recognize.

When he returns to the settlement, he goes over the surveillance tapes. Apparently, he was trapped in the hangars which were then flooded by toxic smoke. None of the knightmares worked. He assumes Gefjun disturbers must have been planted around the location. The weaponry of the machines was not functional.

To escape, he tore a limb off one of the machines through sheer strength and used it to make a hole in the walls. Suzaku stares at the sight of himself literally ripping through tons of metal and is torn between awe, disbelief and confusion. "Huh. That's new. I didn't know I could do that."

The Geass was not supposed to be able to make anyone do things their bodies aren't capable of. Then again, his was always a little different, and he's been using it as a tool for so long he's forgotten what it's like to truly be under its influence.

In the end, it doesn't really matter. The whole thing just confirms what he already knew before. Someone is trying to kill him.

When he sees Nunnally at dinner that day, she is pasty white and cannot look at him. Well, that answered that.

He doesn't really blame Nunnally for it. Suzaku may have been granted the role of Zero by Lelouch, but he doesn't have to be the one to wear the mask. If Suzaku is killed, someone else will take over. He is not strictly necessary to the Requiem. And he did kill Nunnally's brother. Even a person like Nunnally, who was once the epitome of gentleness and kindness, cannot be expected to forgive that.

Besides, it doesn't bother him. The whole-day Geass put him in a good mood, kind of like he just had a vacation, a day off with Lelouch. He acts normally and pretends he doesn't notice anything different about Lelouch's sister.

He wonders what she will try next.
When he meets C.C. next, he is coming off two inventive assassination attempts and his head is slightly spinning. He suspects the one involving electrocution was not Nunnally's idea. It just doesn't seem like her style. Perhaps Cornelia. She never did get over the fact that Euphie fell in love with a Number.

This time, C.C. comes to him. They are in front of the discreet mausoleum Nunnally has built for her brother, where Lelouch's ashes are supposedly kept. The place is well guarded to prevent any vandals from sneaking in. Somehow, C.C. has still managed, but it's a surprise that she's taken such a risk.

"You look a little... peaky," she comments as she enters the crypt.

"Nunnally is trying to kill me. The Geass keeps turning on and off, like I'm on a roller-coaster."

C.C. takes off his helmet and passes her fingers over his cheek. The strangeness settles into a more familiar, comfortable sensation. He smiles. "Thanks. But you really shouldn't be here. They still have a watch on you."

After all, the Black Knights knew her as Lelouch's mistress, and while she kept out of the public eye during their time in Pendragon, some people still saw her.

"I know. I needed to speak with you and it couldn't wait. It's about Lelouch."

Of course it is. Everything between them is about Lelouch. But she already knows that, and she wouldn't say it if it didn't mean something special.

"What would you say if I told you I could bring him back?" she asks, confirming his guess.

Suzaku's breath catches. He opens his mouth to ask if she's serious, but closes it when he realizes it's a stupid question. Of course she's serious. C.C. wouldn't joke with something like this.

"I'd ask what you needed," he replies. As soon as the words leave his lips, he knows they're true. There's nothing he wants more, nothing he wouldn't do, if it meant getting Lelouch back.

"Even if it means scrapping the Requiem?" C.C. insists.

"Even then."

There's no hesitation left inside him. Deep inside, even if he carries the mask of Zero, Zero is not the person he sees when he looks in the mirror. It's just an abbreviation of his true identity—that of the Knight of Zero, his emperor's knight.

"Anything," he adds.

C.C. smiles. It's an unsettling smirk, but it also holds an edge of fondness. She presses a brief kiss to his lips. "Good. I'll be in contact. I'm still making preparations, but I'll tell you when."

She slides out of his arms like smoke and disappears. Suzaku almost thinks he imagined the whole encounter, but his lips are still tingling and he can still smell the perfume of her surreally colored green hair.

He leaves the crypt in a daze. He dodges a rushing car on his way to the palace and wonders how long he is supposed to wait now.
The Plan

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented and kudosed! I hope you'll like where I'm headed with this story.
I'll put some WARNINGS for this chapter here with the caveat that they contain some SPOILERS: minor character deaths, human sacrifice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few months later, the assassination attempts stop. It's been almost seven years since the Requiem now. He's gotten used to the routine of his Geass acting up, so he immediately notices the change.

He wonders is Nunnally has finally given up and made her peace with the fact that she can't kill her brother's murderer. The thought is strangely disappointing.

As it turns out, that's not the reason for the change. He finds out the truth when Nunnally summons an unexpected meeting with both the Black Knights and her closest companions.

He is startled to see Kallen present. She returned to Japan after the Requiem and started a new life with her mother. Why would she be here now?

The strangeness doesn't stop there. Cornelia's expression looks almost as grim as during the anniversaries of Euphie's death, and Viletta has also joined them. That's even more startling than Kallen's situation, since Viletta has a child to worry about.

There are others, Guilford, Schneizel, Kanon, some of the senior Black Knights—other than Ohgi, who must have stayed in Japan. Fortunately, Cornelia doesn't prolong the suspense. "We found C.C.," she says.

Suzaku has never been more grateful for the mask than at that moment. He's a far better actor than he used to be, but he knows that, if they saw his face, they would realize the news doesn't make him happy at all.

"What?" he asks, proud when he manages to keep his voice level. "Where?"

"Euro-Britannia," Viletta replies. "She appears to have restarted the Geass order."

"But why?" Kallen cries. "Lelouch hated the Order."

"Zero, do you know what her reasoning might be?" Nunnally asks.

Suzaku shakes his head. "Nothing in her demeanor prior to Lelouch's death suggests that she intended such a thing."

Tohdoh narrows his eyes at Suzaku. "You haven't seen her since then?"

Suzaku hesitates. He probably should not have, but most of the people here are aware of his true identity and know that he and C.C. worked together in the months before Lelouch's death. "I saw her once, a few weeks after," he says. "At Lelouch's grave. She expressed her disdain for me, I nearly
stabbed her. She didn't say anything that would imply such plans."

There is a long pause. Perhaps they blame him for not having captured her then. Nobody says it, though. In those days, they were too busy worrying about ensuring Nunnally's coronation and reign went well and did not really focus on C.C. all that much.

"Wait, she hated you?" Chiba asks.

"Yes, of course," Suzaku replies. "She blamed me for the failure of many of his plans and especially the incident with the emperor." Not to mention the fact that he'd killed Lelouch, but he doesn't want to point that out in present company.

"That doesn't justify what she's doing," Kallen shouts. "How dare she jeopardize everything Lelouch worked for?"

Several of the people in the room look uncomfortable at the evidence of Kallen's enduring loyalty toward Lelouch, but she doesn't seem to care. Suzaku can appreciate that, but he has no intention of sharing the truth with her.

Somehow, he suspects that Kallen might not be on board with whatever C.C. has in mind. If it involves bringing the Order back, it is likely very questionable.

He finds he doesn't really mind. Certainly, much of what happened can be blamed on Geass. Euphie's death, for example. For that reason, he once hated it, and C.C. more than anything in the world. But without it and without the immortal witch, Lelouch would have never survived Shinjuku to begin with. C.C. has given Suzaku all the details and he understands that very well. If C.C. can use the Order to bring Lelouch back, so be it. He has long since stopped being the man who argued that results acquired through unethical means have no worth.

"I take it we're going to capture her then," he offers, already knowing he won't be on the same side as them.

There are nods all around. Suzaku falls in line with them, and as always, Schneizel follows his lead. They plan to corner C.C. at her current headquarters in Euro-Britannia. Nunnally expresses her desire to use non-lethal methods on the rest of the members of the Geass order, which Suzaku finds mildly humorous given her attempts on his life. He supposes the comparison isn't fair, and she truly does not want any more bloodshed.

"We will try," Cornelia decrees, "but we don't know what kind of foul powers they have."

"If we stay in our knightmares, we should be fine, right?" Chiba asks.

Suzaku shakes his head. "Not all Geasses work the same way. Lelouch's needed eye contact, but others are not like that."

It's true. Rolo's had been different, and he'd been able to affect a whole range of people he wasn't looking at, including some in knightmares. Viletta nods, obviously aware of it as well.

In the end, Cornelia says that they will try gas at first, but should that fail, they will go in guns blazing and eradicate everything that moves.

Nunnally is unhappy with the conclusion, but she has no choice. Like all of them, she believes the Geass Order must stay dead so that Lelouch's legacy can be safe.

"Very well. Bring C.C. to me once you secure her. I want a word."
They are set to leave at once. Cornelia rallies a large part of her troops, while Tohdoh is meant to lead the Black Knights. Suzaku will be with him and presumably work side by side with Kallen, to hunt C.C. down.

"Be careful," Nunnally tells him before they depart. "The Geass Order is dangerous, Zero."

It occurs to Suzaku that they could have easily gone to chase C.C. without him. After all, his role is to guard Nunnally and assist her in everything that she needs. He did offer to participate, in a way, but they must have wanted to include him to begin with.

Friendly fire is a very easy and convenient way to take someone out. Suzaku remembers a certain encounter, between Jeremiah and the rest of the purist group, so many years ago.

Behind his mask, he smiles. "Don't worry, Princess Nunnally. I will always do my duty."

Her hands clench around the handles of the wheelchair, but she doesn't acknowledge the slight. As he leaves, Suzaku wonders if he will ever see her again.

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When the operation starts, Cornelia doesn't even try to use gas on the Geass Order like she told Nunnally she would. "It is pointless," she says. "As long as there is even one of them left, we are all in danger."

Suzaku doesn't refute her and leaves the Witch of Britannia to her work and her revenge. As the nightmares invade the chambers of C.C.‘s new headquarters, he rushes ahead, fully intending to find her, like he was supposed to. Sadly, Kallen, Tohdoh, Chiba and five others follow.

C.C. isn’t even trying to hide. She appears to be waiting in front of something that looks an awful lot like a thought elevator.

"So... Here you are," she says.

"Surrender, C.C.!!" Kallen shouts. "You're completely surrounded."

"Oh, am I?" C.C. smiles, that same expression from the crypt. "You know, I always found you odd, Kallen Kozuki. You were so loyal to Zero, but not so when it came to Lelouch. It’s like you never saw they were the same person. Why is that?"

"It's funny that you should speak of loyalty, witch, given that you're spitting on Lelouch's grave with what you've been doing," Kallen shoots back.

It's a good retort, but it doesn't really address what C.C. has said, probably because C.C. is right. Not that Kallen’s loyalties are all that relevant now. To Suzaku, the two sides are clear. It's him and C.C. vs. everyone else.

He points his Varis at the witch. It's an empty threat, and she knows it. "Kallen is right. It's time to end this."

"It is. I'm ready when you are."

"What?" Chiba asks.

They never get the chance to say anything else. Suzaku has already turned his weapons on them. Chiba is dead before she can even figure out what is going on.
"Kururugi!" Tohdoh bellows. "Traitor!"

"Oh, please." Suzaku snorts. "Half the reason you are here is to kill me."

After that, the only thing that remains is the battle. Fortunately, this version of the Shinchiro is only similar to the original in name and general structure. It operates like the Lancelot, and Suzaku moves as fluidly as he did in the frame he lost to his fight with Kallen.

Just as before, Kallen's rebuilt Guren is the most dangerous one. "Stop this, Suzaku," she screams as she attacks him, her claw ablaze with the fire of the Radiant Wave Surger. "Lelouch wouldn't have wanted this."

"No, he wouldn't have," he agrees. "But Lelouch is dead, and I want him back."

That gives her pause, and it's an opening he exploits to sweep through the rest of his opponents. Meanwhile, he catches sight of C.C. activating the thought elevator.

Kallen rushes at him again as he decapitates Tohdoh's knightmare with his Slash Harken. She is beyond words, and as fierce in her fury as always.

Maybe she doesn't believe him. Maybe she thinks it's not worth it. It's beside the point.

Once upon a time, he had a lot of trouble beating her. He still isn't sure which of them was the better pilot during the Rebellion. Now, though, things have changed, and he has an unfair advantage.

His Geass buzzes at the back of his mind. He moves faster than ever before. When she hits him, it's only with glancing blows. He dances out of the range out the Radiant Wave Surger, idly wishing the area was high enough to allow him to use his wings better.

In the end, he collapses a massive wall onto Kallen. She manages to extract herself, but the Guren is damaged, the claw sparking. She still fights back, but it's a losing battle.

He separates the limbs of the knightmare from its body and leaves it there. He has no desire to kill Kallen. Despite everything, Lelouch cared about her, and that, at least, he can respect.

By now, more knightmares are approaching. Cornelia and her forces must have received news of his treachery.


"Excellent. You have done well, Jeremiah. Suzaku, come."

Suzaku doesn't hesitate. He opens his hatch and jumps out of the machine. Jeremiah takes his place and salutes. "Good luck, Knight of Zero. I shall see you on the other side."

Suzaku has no idea what that means, but he nods. "And good luck to you too."

As he follows C.C. inside the thought elevator, the last thing he hears is Jeremiah shouting, "For my loyalty!" and then everything goes silent.

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They are in the world of C. Suzaku expected this. It looks just like he remembers it, a wreck of blackened ruins, the same place where Lelouch killed both his father and the mother he once loved so dearly.
As he and C.C. approach, a woman manifests from the ether. Suzaku is immediately struck by her resemblance to C.C. It's not just physical. They do share the same stoic expression and an almost identical hair cut, although this stranger's hair is shorter, and black through pink instead of C.C.'s green. These similarities pale compared to the aura she exudes, so much like C.C.'s.

"You have made your decision then," she says as they reach her. "You're going through with this."

"It is the only way," C.C. replies.

Suzaku is sorely reminded of his own last exchange with Lelouch. He is tired of secrets and he just wants to understand.

He removes his mask and clears his throat. "Excuse me, but what does this exactly entail?"

The woman gives him a blank look, and for some reason, Suzaku feels she doesn't like him very much. It doesn't matter. He's used to that, so he meets her gaze without flinching.

There's something frightening and endless in her eyes, something that goes beyond even C.C.'s power. He holds his ground regardless. He's come this far. He refuses to back down.

"Time travel," the woman says at last.

Suzaku gapes. "Wait... That's a possibility?"

"Normally, it would not be," C.C. replies. "Going back in time to avoid a specific event is impossible, as without event occurring, you would not have left your original timeline to begin with. It is too risky and temporal paradoxes can unbalance the entire world of C."

"Then why are we here?" Suzaku tastes despair in his mouth. "You said there was a chance."

"There is," the strange woman replies. "Upon close consideration, we have decided to make an exception."

Suzaku frowns. We? Is that a royal we, or something else? "Who are you exactly?" he asks.

"You may call me the Dimensional Supervisor," she answers. "I am the manifestation of the collective consciousness of the Universe."

Her voice suddenly sounds different, like she's speaking through a million different mouths, not just one. Suzaku is crushed under the realization that he is standing in front of what is basically a god. Since his experience on the world of C, he's more or less seen that name as a metaphor, but clearly, his interpretation hasn't been correct.

"I... see," he manages to say.

"We heard Lelouch vi Britannia's call to not stop the march of time. We felt his loss in the earthly world was... unnecessary. Thus, we will grant you and C.C. this one chance to fix things."

The spark of hope in Suzaku's chest comes back with a vengeance. "Thank you. We will not waste it."

"Understand this," the Dimensional Supervisor continues without acknowledging his gratitude. "There will be consequences. Certain events cannot be changed, and even we have no way of knowing when and where you will awaken. It could be when you were born, or when one of you met Lelouch vi Britannia. It could be when he received his Geass, when it evolved or when it was
awakened. It could be ten seconds before his death. There are no guarantees."

"That is a risk we must take," C.C. answers. It's clear that she has made her decision, and will not turn back no matter what.

Suzaku doesn't say anything. To be able to go back into the past seems like a dream. He's afraid that if he speaks, it will shatter, or the Dimensional Supervisor will change her mind.

She doesn't. Instead, she waves a hand, and another figure appears from the void. It is another woman, but she appears to be unconscious. She more or less floats their way, her long blond hair trailing over the surreal floor.

"Leila Malcal," C.C. says, caressing the side of the woman's cheek. "One of my contractors."

Once again, Suzaku is confused. "Why is she here?"

"Sacrifices must be made for all things," C.C. answers. "I rebuilt the Geass Order in attempt to find a contractor powerful enough for this project, but it didn't work. Then, I finally found Leila. She is an older contractor, from before Lelouch, and I found her power is exactly what we need."

As C.C. speaks, Leila cracks her eyes open. "W-What... What happened? Akito?"

C.C. ignores her. Both she and the Dimensional Supervisor stare at Suzaku. "You are here because your Geass still ties you strongly to Lelouch," C.C. explains. "I don't have that any longer. Our contract was severed when he died. You are the only one who can do this."

Leila tries to struggle. Her eye burns with a Geass—blue, not red, like Lelouch's—but she is no match for the Dimensional Supervisor. Suzaku knows what he must do.

He retrieves his sword once again. It's Zero's sword, the same one he used to kill his lover and brand his regret into his own flesh.

Gods willing, it might be the last time he'll have to use it.

Suzaku braces himself. C.C. sets her hand over his. Her hair starts to float, exposing the Geass mark on her forehead.

The Dimensional Supervisor disappears, and around them, the world of C starts to spin. Leila continues her struggles, but even now, it is futile.

She is so much like Euphie, down to the way she wears her hair.

It doesn't matter. He takes a deep breath and plunges his sword straight right through her chest.

Her shocked look reminds him of Lelouch's expression during the Requiem. Her face becomes a blend of Euphie and Lelouch's, the two people he loved most in his life. Her eyes look so much like his, and her tears become an expression of his repeated betrayals. When she screams, it's Lelouch's voice he hears, from the time he himself held Lelouch down in front of his father.

It's agonizing, but Suzaku holds on. A part of him is shouting that Kallen was right, that Lelouch didn't ask for this. Lelouch's last words and orders were clear, and they did not involve what he is doing.

But what is one more betrayal after everything he has on his list? Besides, if Lelouch knew about this possibility, he may have wanted to take it too.
Unlike Lelouch, Leila doesn't bleed out in front of him. Instead, her body shatters in a million shards of white glass. Suzaku has enough time to wonder what will happen to her if they go back in time, and then the spinning of the world of C intensifies. The bridge beneath his feet cracks.

Suddenly, C.C. is gone, the warmth of her palm on his vanishing into the cold emptiness. He is falling through empty space, choking, dying, screaming and unable to hear himself utter one single sound. Flashes of incomprehensible images scroll through his head, and he wants to claw his eyes out to at least try to hold them back.

His Geass is a painful buzz at the back of his mind. He scrambles for it and clings to it like it's a lifeline.

He must have done something right, because the next thing he knows, a voice shatters the ominous silence. "Live on!"

It's Lelouch's voice, so familiar, so dear, so true and full of emotion. He desperately follows it, and just like that, he stops falling.

He opens his eyes to the sight of clear, blue skies. The sound of waves reaches his hearing and the bright sunlight caresses his exposed face.

Where is he? Since the Requiem, he's only felt sunlight at the orangery, and he's clearly not there. With a groan, he starts to get up and looks around.

It only takes him seconds to identify his location. The Island of the Gods. He would know this place anywhere. It changed so many things in his life. It's where he allied himself with Lelouch, only to agree on their mad plan he would later regret so much.

Has he traveled back in time? He can't tell.

Suzaku stares down at himself. He's wearing... his devicer uniform from his first days as Lancelot's pilot, back when he was Euphie's knight.

Suzaku's breath catches. Live on. Of course! He must have traveled to the moment when he first received Lelouch's Geass.

If memory serves him well, Kallen is somewhere on this island, and so are Lelouch and his sister.

The thought freezes the breath in his lungs. Where does that leave him? What is he supposed to do now?

He really should have asked C.C. more questions before he agreed to this.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, this chapter contains references to Akito the Exiled. If you haven't seen it, you probably should. There's not much of our boys, but when they do get their moment to shine, they are awesome. Leila Malcal and Akito Hyuga are the main characters of the OVA. Her Geass is never fully explained, but it seems to be some sort of method of warping reality, thus me using her here. The Dimensional Supervisor is also from there.
In the end, Suzaku decides to follow through with what happened in the original timeline. Too many variations would be risky, given that Schneizel's force isn't very far from his current position. Trying to find Lelouch now may put the entire plan in danger.

It hurts to have to wait, but he has no choice.

Like before, he finds Kallen taking a bath in the waterfall. Like before, she tries to stab him.

She's strong, stronger than she ever seemed at Ashford, but she was never a match for him in hand to hand combat, not when he was actually putting up a fight. He pins her down with ease.

This time, he does not ask her if she knows Zero's true identity. He decides to remain as discreet as possible.

If things goes the way he hopes, he may eventually join the Black Knights, at least until Lelouch leaves them behind like the dead weight they are. Until that happens, he will need Kallen's help. Her loyalty to Zero will come in handy.

"Come on," he tells her. "We should get something to eat."

Like the first time, he makes sure she is dressed and manhandles her to her feet, keeping her hands bound and pocketing her weapon. She peppers him with questions, but for the most part, he ignores her.

"You're quiet," she says at last, as he is in the water, fishing.

"I'm thinking," he deigns to answer.

Predictably, Kallen takes the chance to get a good dig in. "Oh? That sounds like a change compared to what you usually do. Following orders like a good Britannian dog."

Once, that may have offended him, but these days, few words can get to him, and uttered by even fewer people. He suspects the list is down to two—Lelouch and C.C., three if he included Euphie. "Following orders is not shameful. You should know that. You take orders from Zero, don't you?"

"It's not the same!" she angrily shouts at him. "How can you even make the comparison? Britannia has taken everything from us!"

"We still have our lives," he replies. "As long as that is the case, Japan is never truly dead."

It's one of the things Lelouch said in his past speeches, that Japan is not just a country. It goes beyond its territories, buildings or any of the material things Britannia has destroyed.
Japan lives still in its people, and it is those people that must be protected.

Suzaku didn't really do a good job the first time around, although the situation massively improved after the Requiem. Ohgi was many things, but as a Prime Minister, he managed to rebuilt much of what was lost.

Lelouch can do it better. Suzaku is convinced of that, and it's why he is here, foregoing the oath he made to his dying emperor.

Well, that and the fact that he wanted Lelouch back. Still, he can multi-task.

Kallen doesn't seem to know what to make of his reply. "Is that what you think? That Japan can endure under Britannian occupation?"

Answering that question would open a whole different can of worms. Suzaku is relieved when he doesn't have to, because he finally catches the fish he's been hoping for.

"Let's leave that aside for now. We can argue about it later, once we're off the island, okay?"

"Okay," Kallen reluctantly mumbles, "but just so you know, I'm watching you. I don't trust you. I haven't forgotten you tried to kill Zero."

Suzaku stares at his own reflection in the water. "Yes. I suppose I did."

If only Kallen knew. But she must never know. Hopefully, she will never have to mourn Lelouch again, nor will she be forced to face him in battle.

This plan must work. It can't have all been for nothing.

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The next day, Suzaku follows the same path as in his first life. Of course, he runs straight into Lelouch and Euphie.

For a few seconds, Suzaku almost loses his grip on Kallen. It's surreal to see Zero again in front of him, after he has been wearing that costume for years. Not to mention that Zero is standing next to Euphie, who remains one of Suzaku's biggest failures and regrets. It's kind of like he's looking in a twisted mirror, and he experiences a dreadful moment during which he fears all this might be a nightmare, intended to torture him with false hopes.

Then, Lelouch moves, and just like that, Suzaku snaps out of his trance. Seeing him point the gun as Euphie makes him break out in cold sweat, but he knows Lelouch does not intend to shoot her. Nothing should happen here. They're fine. They're safe.

"I'll take back my subordinate you have there," Lelouch says. "We'll exchange prisoners."

Suzaku clenches his jaw. The last time, their exchange ended in argument, but there's no point for that now. "Deal."

Lelouch jerks slightly. He's clearly surprised by this turn of events, not that he lets it show beyond that brief moment. "I see there's hope for you yet," he says with a brief laugh. "Your mistress is more important than your misguided ideals. Good."

He takes a few steps forward. Suzaku mimics him. The first time, he was distracted by Zero and lost track of Kallen, who freed herself and attacked him. He will not make the same mistake again. He
has to remain in complete control of the situation.

There are soldiers beneath them. Suzaku wishes he could have avoided them, but he does not know how to find evacuation options that would keep both Euphie and Lelouch safe. The Gawain remains the best option. He has to hope things will stay the same and they'll all get out of this debacle alive.

"Now, let my subordinate go and I will do the same for your princess."

"Can I trust you to not attempt to attack us?" Suzaku asks.

"Yes, of course," Lelouch says. "You have my word."

He lets go of Euphie's arm. Now that Suzaku is paying attention, it's obvious that Euphie isn't in the least bit frightened. He always suspected Euphie knew Zero's true identity and C.C. later confirmed it. He was blind not to see it before. It's clear that even while she has a gun pointed at her, she believes her brother would never hurt her.

The tragic irony is that she's right. If Lelouch's Geass hadn't gone out of control at the SAZ...

But that hasn't happened yet. Suzaku can still change things. Euphie and Lelouch are alive. He can save them both.

He releases Kallen and she runs toward Lelouch. Euphie moves forward as well, intent on rushing to Suzaku's side.

Suzaku should have known Kallen would never be just a passive participant in anything. Instead of retreating to Lelouch's side as she seemed to intend, she tackles Euphie to the ground. Even with her hands bound, she is still an enemy to be reckoned with, and Euphie cannot free herself from her hold.

Perhaps Kallen thinks this is the Black Knights' chance to gain an advantage over Britannia. He supposes he can understand that, but the angry beast of his protectiveness still stirs when he hears the pained cry Euphie makes upon hitting the ground.

"I have her, Zero," Kallen calls out. "I have the puppet princess."

Suzaku takes a few angry steps forward. "You..."

Lelouch quickly points the gun at him. "Keep your distance, Kururugi. We don't want any accidents."

Yes, that is the last thing Suzaku wants. He despairs at how situations always seem to escalate around him and Lelouch, even when he is deliberately trying to not antagonize his friend.

Lelouch crouches by Kallen's side and helps her out of her bonds. "All right. Let the princess go."

"But Zero..."

"No, Q1," Lelouch says, his voice stern, like a sentence. "I gave my word. We're going."

She looks confused, but she complies, allowing Euphie to return to Suzaku's side. She gives him a wide smile far too reminiscent of the one she offered him on her death bed. He wants to hug her, but he never gets the chance.

The ground beneath them lights up with the familiar mark of Geass. He doesn't remember seeing it in his first life, but back then, its power paralyzed him with flashes of the past he regretted.
This time, it doesn't work. His Geass snaps around him, almost like a protective embrace. It hasn't changed. It's just as powerful as it was before he entered the world of C with the witch.

Other things have, though. As the red light intensifies, Lelouch clutches his chest and lets out a choked cry. Suzaku's eyes widen in shock. Oh crap. This could be a huge problem.

"Suzaku..." Lelouch grits out. "What... What have you...">

Kallen kneels next to him, trying to help him up, but the platform is already collapsing. Suzaku doesn't think. He only has one chance to keep them all safe.

He shoots forward, dragging Euphie along with him. He hates using her as a shield, but the soldiers won't risk hitting her. They didn't when this happened in their original timeline. Although the details of the incident are still blurry, he thinks he remembers that much. After all, if they'd wanted to take the chance, they could have probably gunned Lelouch down on the spot. So he just needs to make sure things happen the same way, to give Lelouch time to recover.

Euphie stumbles, but goes along with it anyway. They end up standing right in front of Lelouch and Kallen, essentially blocking the soldiers' view of their foes.

"Suzaku, what...?" Euphie tries to ask.

"Shh," Suzaku tells her. "I'll explain later."

As the platform comes to a grinding halt, voices erupt from the darkness. "Major Kururugi?" Lloyd. "Princess Euphemia?"

"Euphie?" Schneizel asks. "Thank goodness. We were all so worried. Are you all right?"

Behind them, Lelouch gathers his breath. "Zero, there's a knightmare over there," Kallen whispers. "We can make our escape."

"Good thinking, Q1," Lelouch replies, his voice thick with tightly suppressed pain.

Suzaku and Euphie are still blocking the soldiers' view. Suzaku has never been more grateful for Euphie's propensity to wear voluminous dresses.

Of course, he and Euphie can only provide a delay for so long. Lelouch gets up, and just like that, chaos explodes.

"Is that... Zero?"

"Don't shoot, you fools!" General Bartley barks out. "You'll hit Princess Euphemia. Capture them. Capture them."

Lelouch runs toward the knightmare, and it's only because Suzaku knows him so well that he notices the slight shakiness in his stance. He can't do anything to help now, and making the attempt would just endanger them all.

He shoves Euphie out of the way, hoping and praying he can rely on Kallen to act like she must have the first time, when he was paralyzed by the Geass. Should the worst occur, he is prepared to incapacitate or even kill the guards. There is also the option of taking Schneizel captive, but he isn't sure if that is wise or if it would change things irreparably and destroy their chance to stop the Ragnarok Connection.
Thankfully, he is not forced to interfere. Kallen takes out the guards and delays them long enough to allow Lelouch to start the knightmare. She climbs on, and Suzaku stands there and watches as the Gawain rushes toward the exit of the cave.

There must be something wrong with him, because all he can think about is that he should be the one on the Gawain's shoulder, not Kallen.

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After that, things progress just like they did the first time. He's almost arrested and confronted with the evidence of what he did when Lelouch placed him under Geass.

He acts shocked, but inside, he finds he feels little resentment over the whole episode. If not for Lelouch's actions, Suzaku would have killed them both, just to follow orders.

Later, he returns Euphie's pin, but when she looks at him and argues, he struggles with providing the explanation. He should probably give her the same story, his argument about dishonor. But on the other hand, he never did explain his actions in the cave, and Euphie is clever. She knows something is wrong that he isn't saying.

"The truth is... Princess Euphemia..."

"Euphie," she corrects him with a gentle smile.

"Euphie... Well, the truth is... I don't know if I ever told you about... about my last summer as a Japanese citizen."

Euphie blinks, having clearly not expected that. She shakes her head. "No, no, you didn't."

Suzaku takes a deep breath. He's nervous about this. There's a reason why he and Lelouch kept their past under wraps. Even at Ashford, they were never upfront about how far back their acquaintance went. In their first life, Euphie did know about his and Lelouch's friendship, but he never really went into detail about his past beyond telling her he killed his father.

It's necessary to tell her now, to make her understand. She deserves that much, at least. "That summer... My father was the Prime Minister of Japan and we received two guests. A Britannian prince and princess. Against all odds, we became friends. The best of friends."

He doesn't say the name, but he doesn't have to. Euphie's eyes widen. She is beginning to understand.

"I have reason to believe that he may have gotten himself into a situation he cannot fully control," he continues. "I feel like... I feel like he may need me. And... I can't.... I deeply apologize for what I did in the cave, but..."

"I understand," she cuts him off, cupping his cheek gently. "I wondered about it, but I didn't know how to ask. You did the right thing. They wouldn't have shot me."

"Still... The fact remains that I can't..." He swallows around the knot in his throat. This is it, the moment when he has to utter his choice. "I can't be a knight for two people."

Euphie's fingers jerk slightly. He half-expects her to slap him.

He really should have known better.
All of a sudden, she wraps her arms around him and pulls him close. Her soft perfume tickles his nostrils. She is so very warm, and he hates himself a little for all the deception he will have to put her through.

"Thank you, Suzaku," she whispers. "My brother really does need someone by his side, and there's no one better than you to watch his back. I was so worried, but now, I know he will be safe."

Suzaku's eyes fill with tears. Of course she would say and do something like this. It is why he once loved her so very much.

It's also why the two of them can never be. She is a pure soul, and he is so very selfish. He's always been a murderer, desperately looking for redemption and just digging himself into a deeper hole by making all the wrong choices.

He has a chance to undo that now. While he would love to remain by her side, he knows the dream they once shared is just that, a dream, a naive illusion. At this stage in world history, peace can only come through the kind of methods Lelouch employs.

And in truth, it goes beyond that. Any romantic love he felt for her seems to have disappeared. It's disconcerting. He loves her still, so very much, but it's more similar to the affection he feels for Nunnally than the all-consuming passion Lelouch stirs inside him.

"I don't know what will happen," he tells her. "I still need to talk to him, to understand. It's all very confusing. But under the circumstances..."

He can't seem to eager or too sure of his place by Lelouch's side. His past self rejected Zero's approach, and while he is basically telling her he is doing this for his friend, his ideals would not have changed overnight. He is not Euphie's Suzaku any longer, but she doesn't know that, and she must remain in the dark.

"I understand," she says as she releases him. "Don't worry. I won't say a word."

Of that, Suzaku is convinced. She died still keeping Lelouch's secret. This time, it will not be necessary.

It is with that decision in mind that he boards the Lancelot, ready for the Kyushu mission. He just has to do this one thing, this one last thing, and then he will see Lelouch. This is one of the few battles where they fought together, side by side, before he became the Knight of Zero. It felt odd at the time, but now, it's his purpose.

Sure, he knows that he will unavoidably meet with Lelouch at Ashford, but that does nothing to put a damper on his anticipation.

As he flies toward the enemy base, he crushes all the resistance in his path. This version of the Lancelot is nowhere near as dangerous as future models are, but it does the job. It helps that, despite the fact that he is in his younger body, he appears to have preserved most of his speed and muscle memory, if not all of his physical strength.

The Geass he now uses at will makes an even bigger difference this time than it did in the past, although he is reluctant to do too much damage on his own. He wants Zero to show up, after all.

He pretty much tunes out much of the conversation with Sawazaki. He's a non-entity, already a part of the past, and he will soon be eliminated, if not by him, by Cornelia. The end result of this mission is set is stone, and Suzaku will not lose to him of all people.
It's immensely frustrating to have the Lancelot's power down on him again. This time, at least, he's not surrounded by enemy troops. He was careful to take them all down so that he wouldn't end up in the same situation as before. Just the same, it's never pleasant to be stuck in enemy territory in a dead knightmare.

When his coms alert him of incoming transmission, Suzaku accepts the call. He's expecting the conversation with Euphie, since it's not over open coms. Instead, what he sees is Lelouch.

He is in his Zero outfit, but without the mask. The cockpit of the Gawain is visible behind him. His eyes both burn with the red of the Geass sigil. "Well, well. It would seem you've finally manage to acquire some self preservation, Sir Kururugi."

Suzaku chokes on his own spit. "Lelouch."

"Yes, it's me," Lelouch drawls. "Don't tell me you're surprised to see me."

As he speaks, the Gawain descends from the sky. Suzaku wants to cry. Lelouch always was so dramatic. Now that he can't destroy the enemy units surrounding Suzaku, he has to compensate by being unnecessarily verbose.

Suzaku has missed him so much it hurts. "How did you even get this com frequency?"

Lelouch gives him an exasperated look. "You do realize it's the same one you used for the Albion. I simply remembered it. And speaking of which, you still owe me an explanation."

At that, Suzaku manages to muster a degree of coherence. "Hasn't C.C. explained?"

C.C.'s soft laughter sounds over the coms. Right, she's the one piloting the Gawain. "Don't think you'll get out of this one so easily. He is convinced I blackmailed you or forced your hand somehow. Besides, we didn't get much chance to talk. Kallen was ever so concerned when they learned of Zero's apparent heart attack on the island."

Heart attack? She must mean the moment when Lelouch clutched his heart on the island.

"You should have seen it, Suzaku," C.C. continues. "Everyone fussing over poor Zero. Kallen was ready to wrap him up in cotton wool."

"Damn witch," Lelouch mumbles, rubbing his eyes in clear exasperation. "This isn't funny."

"It may well be, for her," Suzaku points out.

It's a familiar exchange, the biting banter reminding him of the time they'd spent together before the Requiem. But at the same time, it's different, no longer shrouded by the knowledge of imminent death and loss. It gives Suzaku a heady feeling. He wonders if this is what taking Refrain is like. If so, he is not surprised so many people were addicted on it.

The Gawain offers Suzaku an energy filler, which Suzaku accepts with no hesitation. "Come on, Suzaku. Let's finish this mission already. Let's take out the enemy base. Leave Cao to me."

The orders are clear and stern, but the softness in Lelouch's tone eases something tight in Suzaku's chest. Until now, a part of him feared Lelouch would be angry at them for destroying his Requiem. He clearly isn't. Therefore, even if he broke his promise, even if he went against Lelouch's last wishes, he must have made the right decision.

"Yes, Your Majesty."
As he and Lelouch once again storm the Kyushu base, Suzaku feels freer than he has in many years. C.C. has managed the impossible. This is real, not a product of Suzaku's fevered dreams. He truly does have another chance, and he will make good use of it.
Finally, here we have... a Lulu chapter. AUDIBLE GASP! And it's only 5 days after his birthday. I feel like I'm late with it, but Suzaku wanted a POV first :P
Hope you like it. As always, thank you for comments, kudos etc.

Lelouch once thought he understood at least on some level what happened after death. He thought that, after the Requiem, his soul, tainted as it was, would return to the world of C and blend with the common consciousness of mankind.

The idea of losing all individuality scared him more than that of physically dying, but he figured it would be worth it.

At any rate, before the Requiem, he was pretty sure the afterlife didn't involve physical pain in any way.

He should not be so surprised that he was wrong.

The pain from the stab wound doesn't fade. Better said, it returns with a vengeance. A numbness set in once he fell to the bottom of the platform, so he barely felt anything at all, but now, it's back.

For a few moments, his brain cannot process what is happening. Then, his mind makes some adjustments and finally processes what is going on and where he is. Kaminejima, with Euphie, Suzaku and Kallen. It feels like it's been an eternity since then.

He would deem it a cruel illusion or a flashback, but there are strange differences between what he remembers and what is going on. Everything about Suzaku is different. Even with his chest throbbing, his mind assaulted by strange images and his eyes burning, he can tell that much.

He honestly isn't sure how he manages to drag himself to his feet and repeat his actions from the first time he did this. It must be the knowledge that there's only so long Suzaku can stall Schneizel and his soldiers. Or maybe it's spite, confusion, anger. Either way, he reaches the Gawain and blasts his way out of the cave, with Kallen on his shoulder.

"Zero?" Kallen cries over the rush of the wind.

Lelouch cannot focus on whatever else she is saying. "Just hold on," he tells her. He needs to think. He needs to understand what is going on.

He needs to find the witch. She must have something to do with this, he just knows it.

When he reaches the Black Knights, he fully intends to do exactly that—go in search C.C.. That is made difficult when Kallen blurts out what happened on the island, apparently in a complete panic.

It's not a huge surprise. As Zero, Lelouch actively tried not to show any weakness. He pretended he didn't feel pain and fear, that he was beyond trivial things like human necessities. The illusion was perpetuated by the fact that he never ate in front of them and when he slept, he did so at Ashford. When he did receive injuries, C.C. usually helped him to hide them.
Sure, they must have been aware he was human like them, but being intellectually aware of something isn't the same as acknowledging it to your innermost self.

That image of invulnerability helped him gain power quickly. He now suspects that in the long run, it may have been one of the factors behind the Black Knights' betrayal.

It hardly matters now, since Zero has apparently received an injury serious enough to nearly cripple him in front of the enemy. In hindsight, he should have spoken with Kallen and told her to keep her mouth shut about it. Too late for that now.

"I don't have a heart condition," he tells Rakshata, irritated. "I assure you I'm perfectly fine."

Rakshata looks unconvinced and Kallen gives him a pleading glance. "But Zero..."

"Zero, if you are afflicted by a health-related matter, we should be aware," Diethard insists.

Tamaki nods anxiously, and seeing those two agree on something is eerie enough that Lelouch has to wonder if he has in fact fallen into some sort of weird hallucination. Maybe Suzaku failed to kill him, and he's in the hospital, imagining this whole thing.

Fortunately, before the situation can escalate or he can panic further, they are interrupted by the incident with Sawazaki. Lelouch directs his forces to head toward the Kyushu base, leaves Rakshata to calibrate the Gawain and drags C.C. away. She's the only one who can answer his questions.

"What the hell is this, witch?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," she says.

Her tone is as dead-pan as ever, but that's where the similarities stop. As soon as they are behind closed doors, she pounces on him, pulls off his mask and kisses him on the mouth.

The uncharacteristic enthusiasm makes him think that he must be missing more than he originally realized. He and C.C. were never lovers until the last months of his life. Lelouch appreciated the support and comfort, even if he knew it probably came from the guilt over having kept so many things from him.

He never really blamed her for her deception. C.C. had never made him any promises, beyond that of keeping him alive. Lelouch jolts. Is his sudden resurrection connected to that? C.C. is certainly resourceful, but... What could she have done to turn time back?

"Don't play games with me, witch," he tells her as he pulls away.

"Not playing games," she replies, this time completely serious. "Not this time. This is real, Lelouch, I promise you. It wasn't easy, but we're really back."

The "we" immediately catches Lelouch's attention. He would think she is referring to him and herself, but somehow, he knows that's not the case.

A flash of the island crosses his mind, of the way Suzaku protected him, even putting Euphie in the line of fire to do so. It seems such an uncharacteristic thing to do. Something isn't right.

He narrows his eyes at C.C. "Suzaku. How did you get him involved in this whole thing? What did you do to him?"
"Believe it or not, I didn't do anything to your knight. He was very willing to contribute." She lets herself fall on the couch, draping her legs over its sides. "You're so ungrateful, boy. Here we are, saving your life, and you keep questioning our reasons."

Lelouch wants to ask if she can really blame him for that, but something stops him. There's a strange vulnerability in C.C., kind of like the time she suffered from amnesia. It makes him feel awkward and uncertain. He doesn't understand how this is possible and why they would have done it to begin with.

"It's not that I'm not grateful. I just need to know why. Did the Requiem not work?"

"I suppose it depends on what you mean by that," C.C. offers, completely unhelpful. "Does it really matter though? It's done and gone."

"It matters," he says. "We've kept enough secrets for a lifetime."

"Fair enough."

She never does get the chance to explain, because a knock sounds at the door. It's Kallen. He puts his mask back on and lets her in. Apparently, they have to make further preparations for the Kyushu operation, and she's still not reassured after the debacle on the island.

"Are you sure about this, Zero?" she asks. "You still need to rest."

"I'll rest when I'm dead."

It's probably not the best thing to say when he literally just came back from the dead, but they don't know that, and C.C. is good at pretending she isn't affected by his comment. Kallen winces, but doesn't question him again. She can probably tell he's reaching the limits of his composure.

It doesn't help him at all that he has to force himself to call Nunnally. His overnight stay on the island concerned her even the first time around, so as soon as he can get a signal on his phone, he contacts her.

She replies after only one ring. "Big brother?"

Her soft, gentle voice is like a dagger to his chest. It's so easy to remember how she looked at him the last time they truly spoke, on the Damocles, when she called him a demon. "Hi, Nunnally," he says, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "I'm sorry about the delay. I hope I didn't worry you too much."

"Just a little, but Sayoko said you were surely all right, but this whole thing with the Chinese Federation has made a mess of everything. Communication lines are down, right?"

"Yes, that's right," he replies, mentally thanking Sayoko—for a second time—for coming up with an excuse. "Don't worry, though. I'm coming back for sure tonight, and I'm not in a dangerous area at all."

The lie falls easily from his lips, even easier than before. It's strange, but that helps him. Slowly, the pieces start to slide into place.

By the time he finds Suzaku again in the Kyushu base, he's a little more clear-headed. He still cannot understand how time travel of this magnitude was possible, but he is beginning to grasp both C.C. and Suzaku's reasoning. Suzaku undoubtedly wants Euphie back. Of course he was willing to contribute. That doesn't explain the incident in the cave, but then again, Suzaku could have easily
pushed Euphie out of the way had Schneizel's soldiers done anything stupid. The risk to her was slim to none.

As for C.C., she must still be trying to end her life. Certainly, she could have snared another contractor, but given what he knew so far, it seems that it's not so easy to find someone willing and able to take a code.

As he pulverizes Sawazaki's forces, it occurs to him that he may have come back in time just to lose two of the people he cares about most. But it's all right. He will grant both Suzaku and C.C. their wishes. Suzaku will have his happy life with the woman he deserves and C.C. will have peace, even if Lelouch needs to carry her curse instead.

He supposes it's only fair. It was cruel and presumptuous of him to think he deserved the mercy of rest while the rest of the world continued on, suffering the consequences of his actions. The Requiem must have failed, but this time he will do it better. This time, he will not fail.

When they finish the mission in Kyushu, he and Suzaku go their separate ways, just like before, although they do make arrangements to speak more when they go back to Ashford. Lelouch is once again left alone in the Gawain with C.C.

"I can hear you thinking, you know," she surprisingly says, breaking the silence. "Ask me again."

"All right," he replies, feeling that strange mix of exasperation and fondness he did when she played her games. "Why? What happened? What went wrong? Schneizel?"

It's his best guess. His brother always was very resourceful and there are ways to break the Geass or work around it. The one he cast on Schneizel was absolute and not as vague as Suzaku's "live on", but in his heart, Lelouch always feared that one day, Schneizel would force himself to no longer acknowledge Suzaku as Zero.

"No," C.C. says, much to his surprise. "Your plans worked. Perfectly, in fact. It's almost funny, if you think about it, that everything would turn out like you meant it to only when it involved your death."

She laughs, but the sound holds no humor. He isn't sure what to say, so he just stays silent.

She places the Gawain on autopilot and turns in her seat. "I don't care about world peace, Lelouch," she says. "I've lived through to many regimes to place any stock in something so transient. I never wanted the Requiem, but I hoped until that last day that you would survive it. When I noted the mistake I had made, I took steps to fix it."

Lelouch stares at her. "Took steps?" he repeats dumbly.

She leans in closer to him, her lips twisting into a small smile. "You make my life more than a series of experiences. I wanted that back, and I refused to let anyone—even you—keep it from me."

He should be angry with her, but all he can feel is a strange spark of warmth and hope. "Your wish..."

"Can wait," she cuts him off. "I don't want to die, not when I finally have something worth living for."

That's the biggest compliment someone like C.C. can ever make. Words of love would sound strange between them, but he can hear it anyway.
It's the same odd love that made him cling to her, even at a time when logic stated he should have pushed her away.

Her eyes shine golden in the dim light of the knightmare. He wants to kiss her so very badly. She pulls away and sits back down before he can do so.


"You know it," C.C. says with a laugh. She pauses, and her voice turns serious again. "You know... What I did... There were no guarantees. Suzaku and I had no knowledge of when we would return. It could have very easily been after your sister's death."

"What."

It's not even a question. It's a statement. The only reason why Suzaku would go so far and scrap the Requiem is Euphie. They both agreed on the necessity of their plan, for the sake of the world, to atone for their sins, but also to save Euphie's memory, at least a little.

Even when the two of them were lovers, Suzaku only touched him out because of his loneliness and because of the slight resemblance between him and Euphie. The two of them were only half-siblings, but when he wore his contacts, his eyes were the closest Suzaku could ever find to Euphie's, closer possibly than Cornelia's.

He definitely seemed pleased at their reunion, but Lelouch cannot allow himself to read too much into it. Suzaku isn't C.C. He has never loved Lelouch, not like that.

He must have said that out loud, because C.C. snorts under her breath. "You underestimate him. Just don't jump to any conclusions and talk to your knight. You might be surprised at what you find."

He takes a deep breath, but nods. Like he has told C.C. it is time to leave all the secrets behind. He will speak with Suzaku and make a decision then.

After all, he needs to know if Suzaku remains his knight, or if he is Euphie's.

"I suppose I can't complain," he says, his mind already running over all the things he can change. "Who else knows about this? Orange? Can anyone else remember? Is V.V. aware?"

C.C. laughs again. "Setting your chess board in place, are we? The Dimensional Supervisor was right. Your loss would have been such a waste."

"Who?"

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For the better part of his life, school meant nothing for Lelouch, a useless chore intended to be only a part of his cover. He did come to fear certain aspects of it, largely because of Milly's wild ideas and her irrational tendency to sic the whole school on him, but in his heart, he also treasured those memories.

That only makes his return to Ashford stranger.

It's actually a minor miracle that he even managed to get back here. His Geass is back as it was during the last days of his past life, and without C.C.'s help, he may not have been able to make the trip. It's necessary, though. He's already been away for too long, and he still needs to keep his cover.
They do make a brief pitstop at an oculist and instruct the man in question to make him some contacts. As soon as Lelouch is safely behind the walls of the Academy, C.C. goes back there to hopefully pick them up.

As for Lelouch, he drags his tired, sore body into the Student Council Building. It's very late and Nunnally is sleeping. He's grateful for that, because he doesn't know how he could have explained what happens next.

Suzaku ambushes him within two seconds of him entering his bedroom. His breath catches as his knight pins him to the door. He tries to come up with something to say, but his mind is drawing a blank. He ends up blurting out a question that isn't that relevant in the big picture. "How did you leave the military base?"

"After all these years, I have a lot of experience sneaking around," Suzaku says. "I couldn't wait to see you any longer."

He's pawing at Lelouch, frantic, his hands shaking as he rips open Lelouch's shirt. There is something feverish in his gaze, something dark and wild, as fierce as the anger that once led him to drag Lelouch in front of his father. Lelouch isn't afraid, though. If anything, he's concerned.

For the first time, it occurs to Lelouch that he never asked C.C. how long it took her to find her time travel solution. Her deal with the embodiment of the Gods still has Lelouch slightly terrified, because something like that can only come with serious consequences for all of them.

"It's all right," he says as Suzaku smooths his hand over Lelouch's unblemished chest. "I'm here. I'm okay."


His strength seems to fail him as that thought processes and he slides to the floor on his knees. Lelouch kneels next to him and Suzaku buries his face in his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Lelouch."

"You don't need to apologize, Suzaku, not to me." Never to him.

They both wronged each other so very much, but at the end of the day, Lelouch was the one who started their circle of hate. He was the one who killed Euphie. He was the one who took Suzaku's will away and forced the "Live on" Geass on him.

Looking at Suzaku now, Lelouch wonders what the Geass did to him after the Requiem.

Suzaku lifts his head, as if hearing Lelouch's thoughts. He doesn't seem happy about Lelouch's refusal to accept his apology. "I should have expected that. After all, you never blamed me for supposedly killing your sister. You only ever blamed yourself, and I allowed it."

"Suzaku..."

"C.C. told me, you know, that it was an accident. I won't ask you why. I know why. Just... Never again, Lelouch. Don't lie to me again. Don't push us away. This time, let's do it right."

In the darkness of his bedroom, Lelouch nods. "Yes. We'll do it right."

He doesn't know who leans in first. Maybe it's him, or maybe it's Suzaku. Either way, they're suddenly kissing. Suzaku's uniform flies off and so do Lelouch's remaining clothes.

Feeling Suzaku inside him once again is just as good as the first time—no, better. The bitter taste of
dread no longer tinges their kisses, and if they cry, it's because of hope and release.

At some level, Lelouch still doesn't understand why Suzaku is with him and not with Euphie, but he isn't an idiot. He's not going to question it. He clings to Suzaku's shoulders, clawing at his skin and allows himself to fall into the pleasure only two people could ever give him.

As always, Suzaku's stamina is insane and he fucks Lelouch until he's a puddle of incoherent goo. When it's finally over, they collapse together on the pillows, covered in sweat and semen.

"Suzaku, I have a plan."

It's not the best example of post-coital conversation, but then, that never was Lelouch's area of expertise. Suzaku doesn't seem to mind.

"What do you need of me, Your Majesty?" he asks, suddenly in his Knight of Zero mode.

"Many things... But for now, we have some people to retrieve. Last time, I put my faith in certain individuals I should not have trusted. This time, it will be different."
The Loyal and the Loving

Chapter Notes

Another Lelouch chapter! Aren't you lucky? I'm not very happy I am with the title, but I didn't really have any ideas on how to describe Jeremiah other than 'orange' and 'knight' which would have sounded weird and Nunnally as 'little sister', which meh. So we're stuck with that one.
As always, thanks for the comments and kudos!

Finding Jeremiah is easier than expected. The Knight of Orange told C.C. exactly where he had been kept at this stage of his life. Infiltrating Bartley's scientific facility is easy with C.C. and Suzaku by his side.

Suzaku rushes forward, a whirlwind of anger and aggression. For the most part, Lelouch doesn't even have to use the Geass to kill anyone. Suzaku's presence and speed makes it unnecessary. Impossibly, he seems even faster than during their first life, but he displays disappointment toward his performance. "I'm still getting used to this younger body," he explains as he makes his thirteenth kill. "Apologies for the delay, Your Majesty."

"Not a problem, Suzaku," Lelouch replies. "We're making good progress."

What else could he possibly say?

C.C. stays by his side, shielding his body with hers. Both she and Suzaku insisted on this the moment he brought up this plan. Like before, Suzaku would be his sword and she would be his shield, only this time, it would be a little more literal. Of course, he has no desire to see her die for him, but he does see the sense in the approach.

The precautions prove to be unnecessary. Bartley's guards are a pathetic bunch. Within half an hour, Lelouch, C.C. and Suzaku have taken the facility, and Bartley is on his knees in front of Lelouch, under an absolute Geass to serve him. Much of his staff—those who aren't dead at least—are in the same situation.

Lelouch stares at the tank where Orange is still floating and narrows his eyes. He dislikes seeing Jeremiah like this. At one point, he has become fond of the man, despite the strange, rocky beginnings of their relationship, and he appreciates the help he gave C.C. and Suzaku.

He can only hope this will work, but if it doesn't, he can always fall back on him being Marianne's son which had convinced Jeremiah the first time. He hopes it will not be necessary, for more than one reason.

"All right," he tells one of the scientists. "Let him down. Carefully."

"You should keep your distance, Your Majesty," Suzaku says, "just in case. The last time, he was quite unstable after the first experiments."

Lelouch complies, if only because Suzaku has been looking jumpier the closer they got to meeting Jeremiah. Besides, he knows full well how strong Jeremiah became after being turned into a cyborg.
At this stage, he doesn't have all his enhancements yet, but that doesn't change the fact that he's dangerous.

Predictably, as soon as he opens his eyes, Jeremiah zeroes in on Lelouch's presence. "Zero!" he screams, half-mad with hatred and pain.

He tries to leap toward Lelouch, but Suzaku is already there and pins him down with surprising ease. His Geass seems to have evolved a shocking amount since the Requiem and it apparently makes Suzaku strong enough to compensate for Jeremiah's enhancements.

Just the same, Lelouch has no intention of prolonging the situation. As Orange tries to free himself from Suzaku, Lelouch removes his mask. "Yes, I'm Zero," he says. "But I'm also someone else. Lelouch vi Britannia."

Jeremiah freezes, no longer attempting to shove Suzaku off. "N-Not possible. You and Lady Nunnally... You died... I failed you."

"Not yet, Jeremiah. I am willing to give you another chance."

Jeremiah nods, looking dazed and desperate, still not completely in his right mind. "Thank you, Your Highness." He moves forward, as if intent to kiss his hand. Suzaku grabs his collar and keeps him pinned to the floor.

"There's one more thing we need to do before." He waves C.C. forward. "This is C.C. She is here to help you clear your mind a bit after what was done to you."

Jeremiah acquiesces, but Lelouch has no doubt that he doesn't really understand. He'd probably agree to anything right now. Oh well. It couldn't be helped.

Suzaku forces Jeremiah to his knees and C.C. glides closer, silent as a cat. She kneels next to Lelouch's two knights and presses her lips to Jeremiah's forehead. The Geass mark on her forehead flashes and Jeremiah's body starts to seize. He's contorting so badly Suzaku is forced to let go of him. It looks painful and he screams as he clutches his eye.

Lelouch doesn't flinch. He knows very well that Orange consented to this in the previous timeline. He would not be able to help even if he tried, not until Jeremiah's mind and body get accustomed to his current form.

He wonders how bad it was for Suzaku and for C.C., and the thought makes him ache.

Finally, after what seems like forever, Jeremiah stops jerking. He stills on the floor, breathing heavily, slight tremors still coursing through his form. A sudden realization seems to course through him and he shoots to his feet, facing Lelouch.

His eyes—now clear of madness—fill with tears as he catches sight of Lelouch. "Your Majesty. It worked. It really worked."

"Yes, Orange, it worked. I have returned, and I thank you for your enduring loyalty. How do you feel?"

"Odd..." Jeremiah rubs his chest with a thoughtful expression. "Not quite right. Like I'm not in my own body."

Suzaku mentioned this discomfort was a strong possibility, so Lelouch is not surprised at the comment. "What about your eye?"
"The Geass? I'm not sure... I haven't tried."

"Wait," Suzaku curtly says before Jeremiah can do exactly that.

He puts distance between him and Orange, clearly not wanting to lose his Geass. After how much Suzaku hated it in the first timeline, it's very disconcerting to see.

Once Suzaku is at a satisfying distance, Orange tries his power on one of the scientists. Despite the fact that Jeremiah still has his human eye, his reverse-Geass still works.

Lelouch smirks. All the conditions are now cleared. He will soon have all his people by his side, and after that, he can proceed with his plan.

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Rolo is both easy and difficult to find. The headquarters of the Code R Research Team—coupled with their knowledge from the first timeline—provide him with all the information he needs. The OSI does not exist yet, so Rolo is still with the Geass Order.

Sneaking into V.V.'s base is unwise at this time, and would destabilize all of their plans, so instead Lelouch decides to wait until Rolo is out in the open. He sends C.C. to track Rolo down and turns to the other issue that he has pending. His little sister.

He has delayed this conversation, precisely because he is aware it will be the most difficult one of all. He has no intention of giving her back her memories. She doesn't need to remember pressing the button of the FLEJA or watching him die.

Still, he acknowledges now that he made a mistake in trying to shelter her from the truth of what he was doing. It backfired so very badly, and how could it not? He should have trusted her more, given her more credit.

He doesn't know what to do with the knowledge of her trying to kill Suzaku, but Suzaku doesn't seem to blame her for it. If anything, he speaks of it with approval. Lelouch sort of understands, even if it does unsettle him. He did not want that life for Nunnally, but he's happy she still loved him enough to want to avenge him.

Perhaps that's exactly the point and they were always more alike than he wanted to acknowledge.

He finds her in the living room of their quarters at Ashford. "Big brother. How are you?" she asks as he comes in.

She smiles sweetly at him, cradling an origami in her palms. The same protectiveness surges in his chest, and he almost chickens out. Surely there must be another way. Surely he can still keep her safe from all the bloodshed and the war.

Memories of the past timeline flash through his mind. Her fierce eyes as she faced him and declared herself his enemy. C.C. holding his hand in the dark and his own admittance that he could no longer give her special treatment.

That was true then and it is true now.

After everything that happened, after all the sacrifices and the insanity of C.C.'s stunt, he cannot afford to make the same mistakes.

"Fine. I just... I came to talk to you about something."
Her smile fades at his serious tone. "Does this concern the reason why you've been absent for so long?"

Lelouch flinches as he realizes she must have long ago realized he was doing something crazy and possibly dangerous. After all, they do live together and his excuses weren't always that believable.

Has she been waiting for him to come to her all this time? He's humbled at the thought, and it gives him the courage to go through with what he needs to do. He kneels in front of her wheelchair.

"I have a confession." He takes her hand and squeezes tightly, willing her to understand, to not spurn him like she did in the first timeline. "Nunnally, I... I'm Zero."

Nunnally's breath catches. "What? What do you... Zero? But... Brother Clovis..."

"Clovis was not the man you may remember from Pendragon. He slaughtered innocent Japanese citizens just to cover up his own mistakes. He experimented on C.C." He tempers his tone at the memory, not wanting to scare his sister. "I did not enjoy killing him, but becoming a viceroy ruined him."

Now that he's said out loud, he realizes how right he is. The artist who painted portraits of him and Nunnally when they were children became a twisted parody of his former self, all because of Britannia. Lelouch doesn't know if he really has the right to judge Clovis, after everything he's done, but in his heart, he believes that he did do the right thing.

"But, big brother... Why? Why go so far?"

"Originally, it was because of you," he admits, "to build a kind and gentle world for you."

She opens her mouth, perhaps intending to protest, but he stops her. "Then, after founding the Black Knights, I realized I had a lot of people relying on me. A lot of Japanese are placing their hopes in Zero. I have a responsibility to them, to the world, to make this work. I'm sorry, Nunnally. I'm a failure as a big brother."

He can't completely hide his self-disgust, not when the memory of Nunnally in chains is still so close to his mind. Nunnally must realize it, even if she can't see his face, because she throws herself at him.

It's difficult for her since she can't brace herself using her legs, but he's close enough that he manages to catch her.

"No, no," she shouts. "You're the best brother ever."

She buries her face in his shoulder, and he holds her as she cries, feeling a mix of guilt and relief. She doesn't hate him or blame him, and hopefully, she never will.

"Listen, Nunnally. With what I'm doing, it might become a necessity for us to leave the Academy. I may even bring in another guard to help Sayoko. But I promise you, I'll keep you safe, no matter what."

"I believe you, big brother," Nunnally says, slowly starting to calm down. "And don't worry about me. Just please... I know I don't... I don't have a lot of power, but if I can do anything, anything at all to help..."

Lelouch's first instinct is to refuse, but he thinks about another sibling he lost, a sibling not by blood, but by bond. He has a tentative plan about how to handle his relationship with Rolo, but he also knows he made a lot of mistakes there, and he needs to fix them.
Nunnally can help him with that.

"There might be," he tells her, "but not yet. I'll tell you when, all right?"

She nods at his tentative agreement, but she doesn't release her hold on him. "Big brother..." she whispers. "Are you... Are you safe? Are the Black Knights protecting you?"

"I have a lot of people protecting me," he says, not wanting to lie. "Suzaku and C.C. first and foremost."

Nunnally cheers up immediately, her trust in Suzaku chasing away her fear for Lelouch's life, at least for now. "So Suzaku knows... I'm so glad. So glad. You should stick together always."

"We will, Nunnally," Lelouch replies as he pets his sister's hair. "Rest assured that Suzaku and I will never be parted."

If she understands the underlying romantic meaning, she doesn't show it. Maybe she's can't really focus too much on that right now.

"Neither will we," she offers instead, her voice filled with the same determination he remembers from the first timeline. "Even if you're Zero and you have to protect the Black Knights, I'll always be by your side."

Lelouch closes his eyes and doesn't reply. Any words he could utter feel inadequate. He just holds her close and swear to himself and to any gods that may be listening that he will not fail her again.

That night, he receives a call. "We've found him," C.C. says. "He's in the Chinese Federation."

The Chinese Federation. Perfect. He needed to go there anyway.

One sibling down, one to go.
Here it is, as promised, Rolo's chapter. I hope I did his character justice and got the dynamics between him and the others right.
As always, thank you to everyone who kudosed and commented! So happy you're enjoying this little indulgence of mine!

Rolo makes his way through the immobile people in the busy street and slides into an alley, away from all indiscreet eyes. He hasn't had a good day, or a good month for that matter. The last assassination he was assigned was irritating, because it took far too long. He should have been able to walk right up to the target and take him out, but there were unexpected complications, far too many cameras. He's finally completed his mission, but he's frustrated with his inefficiency.

He pulls off his gloves and stained clothes and quickly finds the stashed outfit he placed here beforehand. Once he's done, he will be able to make his way to the airport and return to the Geass Order.

He's just about to leave the alley, when a figure manifests in from of him, blocking his way. Instinctively, he reaches for his knife, but then, the mysterious person steps into the light. "Rolo."

Rolo narrowly manages not to gape. "Mistress C.C."

Mistress C.C. has been missing for a while. Rolo doesn't even know her that well, since his memories of the years she was with the Order are sketchy. What is she doing in Shanghai of all places? Master V.V. has been looking for her, but none of them expected her to be so close.

As he stares into her unfathomable gold eyes, he struggles to come up with something to say. "Are you coming back to the Order?" he asks.

"Not exactly. That's not why I'm here."

"Why then?"

"Because I asked her too."

A second figure emerges from the shadows. Rolo assesses him clinically. Tall, but skinny. Unlikely to be a physical challenge. Then again, Rolo himself doesn't look like much, and he's one of the best assassins the Order has produced. He can't afford to underestimate anyone.

"You don't remember me right now," the man says, "but I made you a promise. I'm here to keep it."

There's something in his voice that makes shivers course down Rolo's spine. It's not scary, not exactly. It's... fond? Affectionate?

He isn't sure. He has never felt fondness before, although he faked it once or twice, for missions. It unsettles him, and he takes a step back.

He catches himself before he can display further weakness. What is he doing? He should be
eliminating the threat, not cowering from it.

He activates his Geass, intent on rushing at the man.

Of course, he's forgotten a very important thing. C.C. is immune to his Geass.

It's a bit embarrassing, but Rolo has never been the fastest assassin in the Order. Sure, he does his best, especially since the limits of his Geass mean that he does need to be quick to fulfill his missions. However, the repeated use of his power has left him with a lingering heart problem that keeps him from reaching top physical fitness.

When fighting C.C., he's at a distinct disadvantage.

As it turns out, it's not an issue at all, because a second man jumps him from behind. Rolo gasps and loses control of the Geass. In desperation, he activates it once again, but the man holds onto him just as tightly, unaffected. "That won't work on me," he tells Rolo calmly as he pins Rolo to the ground.

C.C. nods. "You should always remember that there are other people with gifts out there."

Another Geass user? But who could he be? Rolo has never seen him before, in person or in surveillance files.

He's forced to stop suspending time and the dark-haired man—the only one who was affected by Rolo's Geass—begins to move again. "Be careful, Jeremiah. I don't want him hurt."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the man, now identified as Jeremiah, says. He still keeps Rolo pinned down, but his hold is a little less tight. Still unbreakable, but it doesn't hurt anymore.

The dark-haired man walks up to them.

"I am sorry about this, Rolo. I wouldn't do this if there were any other way. Please know it's for the best."

He nods at C.C., and that's the only warning Rolo gets before she approaches him and presses her lips against his forehead.

Rolo's world shatters. Conflicting images swirl around him, confusing memories of blood and pain, sometimes his own, others not. But there are also memories of warmth, of a lie that turned into a truth, at least for Rolo.

Memories of Rolo's big brother, Lelouch.

The time they spent together is chased away by fury and agony, and Rolo screams as his heart skips a beat, then another, over and over. He feels like he's back in his brother's knightmare, trying to pilot the far too complicated machine and using his Geass over and over to compensate for his inability to use it to its full potential.

When he comes to once again, he's no longer in the knightmare, but back in Shanghai. Jeremiah has released him, and Lelouch kneels in front of him, extending his arms. "It's all right, Rolo. I'm here now. Big brother is here."

Rolo doesn't understand how this is possible. He distinctly remembers escaping with his brother in his grasp after the betrayal of the Black Knights, then blacking out and... presumably dying?

He doesn't regret it, not at all. He just... doesn't understand. Why is he back with the Order? Was it
all some sort of dream, or is it something else? Is it some plan of C.C.’s?

He collapses against his brother, dazed and confused. "H-How is this possible?"

"It's a long story," his brother says, "but things didn't work out as well as we'd hoped. C.C., Suzaku and Orange managed to find a way to turn back the clock."

Time travel. Well, he supposes that makes as much sense as anything in Rolo's life. If anyone can do it, it's probably C.C.

But what was that his brother said about Lord Kururugi? He was big brother's enemy. Why would he want to help?

He doesn't get the chance to express his doubts and confusion. Lelouch grips his chin and forces their eyes to meet. "Rolo, look at me. Do you trust me?"

Rolo knows the answer should be "no". His brother used him the first time around, turned him into a tool.

But this is different. His brother came for him. He remembered their promise. He didn't have to. He could have abandoned Rolo to the Order, or killed him if he was in the way.

Certainly, Rolo's abilities are useful, but Zero doesn't strictly need them. Jeremiah is a good assassin in his own rights and isn't limited by a weak heart. Obviously, he still has his Geass and he can easily complete any mission Rolo would be assigned.

It is that knowledge that makes him nod. "The first time, you and I made some mistakes," Lelouch says. "I lied to you and you hurt people I cared about."

People he cared about? Rolo flinches. Right. Shirley Fennette. He never realized that he made a mistake in killing her, not until his brother's explosion of temper, after Nunnally's death.

"I know it's your training, though, and you mean well," Lelouch continues. "You're only trying to protect me. So I'm going to protect you too."

The next thing he knows, his brother is releasing him from the embrace and getting up. There's a slight disconnect in the air, a shift of not-quite right that reminds him of his time suspension skill. "You used your Geass on me, didn't you?" he asks.

"Yes," his big brother says. "You're more than a tool for killing, Rolo, but given some of the unpleasantness of the last timeline, I have to take some precautions. I don't want you to do anything regrettable."

Rolo decides to trust his brother knows better in this. Killing always served him well, but if he wants to fulfill his part of the promise, to build a future with his brother, he can't always rely on it as a crutch.

He isn't sure what kind of command Lelouch put on him, but it must surely help him with that.

"You're right, big brother," he offers with a smile. "I understand. Thank you."

His brother stares at him with an undecipherable expression. Rolo stares back, unsure what to make of it. The moment doesn't last. Lelouch blinks, and it shatters like glass.

"We should go," Lelouch says, already turning away. "It will take us some time to get back home."
Rolo knows he should just agree outright, but something is still bothering him about this whole situation. Suddenly, he needs to know, to understand properly. He can't go anywhere until he does.

"Big brother... What exactly happened?"

Lelouch doesn't answer. C.C. does so in his stead. "Lelouch died," she says, her tone flat and emotionless. "Suzaku killed him."

Rolo freezes, his mind going blank. Oh.

His brother sighs. "Don't worry about that now. It was all a plan."

Lelouch narrates a convoluted story of his Zero Requiem and the way he planned his own assassination at his own knight's hands. Fury fills Rolo, hot and bright, but he knows there is nothing he can do. It's over and done with. Besides, judging by his brother's expression when he speaks of Lord Kururugi, he would not be thrilled if the former Knight of Seven suffered a sudden accident. That is, if Rolo can even arrange it, now that he is under Geass. Damn it.

"I know this is upsetting, Rolo, but I promise that won't happen again. That's why we're here, remember?"

"Yes, big brother. Of course."

And that's why Rolo is here too. He needs to protect his brother better this time, so that Lelouch isn't forced to rely on people who clearly didn't do a good job.

They dump all of Rolo's remaining equipment—everything that can be traced—and while he's relieved, he's also still angry. He only snaps out of it when they reach Ashford Academy.

Seeing the academy again is strange. He was happiest at Ashford. In fact, it was the only place where he ever felt happy, where he learned the meaning of the word.

Ashford is different now. He no longer has a place here. That place is taken up by another person, and he is cruelly reminded of this when he is hustled into the quarters he once shared with Lelouch.

Nunnally is in the living room, waiting for them—well, for Lelouch. Jeremiah and C.C. disappear... somewhere, giving them privacy. "Big brother, is that you?" she asks.

"It is. I want you to meet someone."

She lifts her head, facing Lelouch even if she can't see him. "Oh? Who is it?"

Lelouch ushers Rolo along. He follows, because he knows he has no choice.

Lelouch takes his hand and places it on Nunnally's smaller one. "Nunnally, this is Rolo. He's our brother."

Nunnally jerks, but doesn't pull away. "Brother?"

"Not by blood, but by bond," Lelouch explains. "He saved my life more than once."

"Oh. I see." She perks up and gives Rolo a bright smile. "Then he's my brother too."

"Yes, he is," Lelouch confirms.

Rolo doesn't know what to do with this. His last conversation with Lelouch prior to their escape from
the Ikaruga made it clearer than ever that he can never hope to replace Nunnally in Lelouch’s heart. He once hated her so much and fully intended to kill her like he did Shirley.

He can’t do that now. Even without the Geass, he still remembers how much her death must have crushed his brother.

He has no choice but to accept this strangeness.

Besides, they may not be siblings, but they could be allies. It’s something to consider, at least.

"Can I touch your face?" she asks.

"Yes," he replies.

When she cups her cheeks with her gentle hands, he finds that he doesn’t really mind it. Something inside him seems to crack and all tension drains out of his body.

"The three of us, we’re a family," she tells him.

"Yes," Rolo hears himself say. "Yes, we are."

He’s still uncertain about his role in this new timeline, but he has a chance, a chance for a real life and a real future, just like he dreamed. He’s not going to waste it.
Suzaku balances his sword on the tip of his finger, idly watching Cecile and Lloyd move around the HQ of the ASEEC. He knows he's sulking and he shouldn't really be doing this sort of thing in the open, but he can't help himself.

Technically speaking, he should have lost his sword when he gave up the position as Euphie's knight, but nobody came to ask him to hand over his weapons. Suzaku suspects it's because of the imminent founding of the SAZ. He may not be assigned as her knight, but it's impossible to create something like that and exclude him.

He wishes things were going a little faster, or at least that he could get involved more. Case in point, today. He insisted on going with Lelouch and C.C. after Rolo, but Lelouch said no. It makes sense, of course. Suzaku can't just leave of his own accord. He still has to be at the disposal of the Britannian army. He may be able to dodge their inquiries and eyes to go to Ashford, but he wouldn't get away with a trip to Shanghai. Proof in point, the fact that Lloyd called him in to do some adjustments to the systems of the Lancelot.

The knowledge that Lelouch was right doesn't mean he isn't irritated with the situation. It's hypocritical of him, but he doesn't trust the murderous brat. Lelouch does, though, and that's what matters. Suzaku will just have to deal.

He feels better at noon, after he gets a message from Lelouch. He's supposed to come in to Ashford as soon as possible.

It's not the ideal meeting spot, since neither of them want to involve the Academy too much. However, for the moment, the only other option is the Code R Research Facility, and the distance makes it impractical.

It's certainly not difficult for Suzaku to excuse himself after work and claim he promised to meet his friends. Cecile beams at him, clearly pleased he has friends to begin with. Lloyd mumbles something about parts and waves him off without looking away from the monitors.

Suzaku gives them both fond smiles and flees before Cecile can offer him a snack to go.

They meet underneath Ashford, in the exact place where Mao once held Nunnally captive. It's him, Lelouch, the Knight of Orange, C.C. and Rolo.

The moment he steps into the light, Rolo zeroes in on him, his nostrils flaring and his eyes flashing with unconcealed anger. It's a remarkable lapse for someone with a poker face as good as Rolo's. "Lord Kururugi."

Well, then, that answers one question—how much Rolo knows about Lelouch's death. Interestingly,
though, his Geass isn't screaming, so Rolo is apparently not a danger. Hmmm.

"Please don't try to stab me," he says calmly. "I'm not sure Lelouch wants to test my Geass against yours."

Rolo twitches, but surprisingly doesn't move. "It's fine, Suzaku," Lelouch says. "Rolo understands the situation."

Suzaku shares a look with C.C. He highly doubts that. Rolo always was very prone to eliminating people he considers threats, so the only explanation as to his sudden reticence to attack Suzaku is... Geass.

Of course. Lelouch would not take any chances, not now, not again.

He nods at his emperor's words. "We will proceed to the next step of the plan, then, Your Majesty?"

"Yes," Lelouch gives them all a serious look. "This will take all of us. I need to be sure of your cooperation. We can't afford to make any mistakes."

Suzaku doesn't hesitate for a second. He kneels. "I am yours to command."

Orange follows his example. Rolo doesn't kneel, but he rushes to assure Lelouch of his agreement.

C.C. just leans against Lelouch, her long hair brushing against his hand. She doesn't have to say anything at all. They all know where her loyalties lie.

Lelouch leaves C.C. at the Academy to keep an eye on Nunnally. The rest of them change in less noticeable clothes and pile up in a car Lelouch has appropriated from... somewhere.

It's late afternoon by the time they get to the ghettoes. They leave the car at the very edge, since it would be far too eye-catching.

It's not easy for three Brittanians—one of which is a known Purist—to sneak through the place, but Rolo is very good at infiltration missions and Suzaku is not all that conspicuous out of uniform. There is a slight hiccup when Rolo offers to just hijack a car and Geass them through, but Lelouch goes very pale and shakes his head. "No. We're not doing that."

In the end, they come up with a system. Rolo does use his Geass, but Suzaku is careful to stay out of range and mostly manages to make sure that isn't necessary. Slowly, they reach their destination, a nondescript apartment building, just one of the places where the Japanese take refuge in the ghettoes.

There's not much movement here, so Lelouch leads them up a few flights of stairs. Rolo picks the lock of the apartment that is their target and they go in.

Viletta Nu is seated on the couch, absently staring out the window.

Ohgi's relationship with Viletta always seemed a little strange to Suzaku. Back in the past timeline, he learned that Ohgi saved her life at one point, although when and how was never clear beyond that it was before the Black Rebellion. Between that, and the information Schneizel has given them, Lelouch has managed to draw some conclusions, and that provides them with the opportunity to forestall possible problems.

Viletta shoots to her feet when she sees them approach, but she doesn't get to do much else. Jeremiah rushes forward and grabs her before she can try to scream, make her escape or anything similar. His eye flashes, the range of his Geass missing Suzaku and Rolo and focused on Viletta alone.
Dazed, Viletta shakes her head. The moment of confusion doesn't last long and she jerks, trying to free herself. "Lord Jeremiah?" she asks as she takes in the identity of her captor. Clearly, remembering whatever Lelouch made her forget the first time he used his Geass shocked her enough to recall everything else.

Jeremiah doesn't bother to say anything. If there was a bond of fellowship between them, it has long since vanished. He forces her eyes open and Suzaku watches with no small degree of satisfaction as Lelouch approaches and places her under Geass once again.

Suzaku is very tempted to kill her now and let that be the end of it, but there's time enough for that. Besides, this is better. This way, the people who betrayed Lelouch will know how betrayal feels like. He looks forward to it so very much.

After Lelouch is done, they leave Viletta—now again in her amnesiac persona—and sneak out of the apartment. It's easy enough for Lelouch to procure another apartment nearby that will allow Rolo to keep an eye on her until the time comes for her to play her part.

Lelouch is clearly reluctant to go through with this part of the plan, but Rolo just smiles at him. "It's fine, big brother. It'll be perfectly safe, you know that. Someone needs to watch her and I can defend myself."

"Yes, I know." Lelouch sighs. "I just wish it wasn't necessary. It won't be for long, Rolo. I'll bring you to my side soon."

After Rolo disappears inside the apartment, Jeremiah heads out as well. He needs to go back to the Code R base, since his improvements are still not completely stable and they can't risk anything going wrong.

Once it's just the two of them in the stolen car, Suzaku finally approaches the topic he wanted to discuss. "His death was not your fault, you know."

"No, it wasn't," Lelouch agrees quietly. "It was theirs." He laughs, and the sound holds little amusement. "You know, Suzaku, I never really knew, in my past life, what actually made them turn against me. I never really found out what ultimately caused their betrayal."

Suzaku nods. He's aware of that. Lelouch didn't bother investigating the matter of the Black Knights's betrayal. The Requiem took precedence over the past. Both of them believed that.

"And after everything that's happened... Is it hypocritical of me, Suzaku, to want revenge for us? For all of us? Even if none of what happened then has happened yet? Even if you and I have done far worse things?"

"I suppose it might be," Suzaku replies, "but when has that ever stopped us?"

Lelouch smirks, his eyes glinting with something angry and fierce. "Quite right, my knight. Quite right."

Suzaku can't help himself. He leans in closer and steals a kiss from his emperor's soft lips.

This is the worst possible place to make out, and they don't have time for it. Suzaku ends up giving Lelouch head anyway. He loves feeling his emperor's dick in his mouth and he rarely gets to do it, since C.C. so often hogs it.

As for Suzaku himself, it doesn't take him much to come. He jerks himself off and comes against the
back seat of the car, his groan stifled by the dick still in his mouth. Lelouch follows him shortly after.

"You know," he says after a few moments of breathless silence, "we should probably stop getting distracted."

"Probably," Suzaku offers, "but I can't help myself."

It's not just lust, although that certainly plays a part. Suzaku sometimes still expects opening his eyes to the old timeline, to having to wear Zero's costume and pretend he isn't falling apart under the mask. He still looks at his arms and wonders why they are no longer scarred.

Sometimes, he fears that this is all a dream and he will wake up to find Lelouch dead all over again, dead by his hand.

Maybe Lelouch realizes this, because he doesn't chastise Suzaku again. When Suzaku leans against his shoulder, he allows it and even pets his hair.

It's a strange mimicry of the time they spent in the cell in Euro-Britannia, when Suzaku was so maddened by grief and betrayal he almost strangled Lelouch. He wraps his arm around Lelouch's waist, holding him tighter, closer. Never again.

"It's all right," Lelouch murmurs. "We're going to be fine. You'll see."

Suzaku nods. "We've gone too far for anything different."

With that, he regains his composure. Lelouch starts the car and drives them away from the ghettos.

Amusingly, they end up returning the car to its Geassed owner. It makes sense, since stolen vehicles can be traced, and while abandoning it would work fine once or twice, it could lead to discovery. Better to return it and make sure its original user eliminates all traces of their presence.

Including that of their... indiscretion.

From the Tokyo Settlement, they take the subway. It's as they reach the Academy that Lelouch provides him with his next and most important task, possibly the one he was truly necessary for today. He passes Suzaku an USB stick. "You know what to do. Don't get caught."

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Suzaku replies as he pockets the device. "I won't."

He isn't. It takes a day for Lloyd to call him back. From there, it's as easy as distracting Cecile—by demanding a snack, the things he does for his emperor—when Lloyd isn't paying attention. There are cameras, but not many down here, and they have blind spots. It's easy to insert the USB stick in the slot of the nearest computer.

He leaves it in for a few minutes, as long as it takes for him to painstakingly eat the sandwhich Cecile makes for him. Halfway through, his cellphone buzzes in his pocket. Suzaku hides a smile in the next bite of the weird meal and when he's done, pulls out the USB.

One more step complete.

****

Things settle down within the Black Knights after the debacle on the island. Urabe is relieved. While he's fundamentally a soldier, that just makes him all the more appreciative of the brief interludes of peace.
He spends a lot of time with Rakshata and he thinks they're beginning to form a bond. She's not like any woman Urabe has met before, so much smarter and more surprising than he ever expected. Still, he's tentatively hopeful that they may be able to have more.

The sensation of peace doesn't last. Zero leaves them with tentative orders to stand by, and both he and C.C. disappear to parts unknown. His long and unexplained absences always make the Black Knights restless, and Urabe is no different.

He trusts his leader. He's sure Zero will return to them. He's the only one who has been able to give the Japanese people hope when all seemed lost. Zero will not fail them. Urabe believes that.

Still, he inwardly rejoices when Zero makes his appearance once again, his mistress by his side, and announces they need to have a meeting. They're all eager for news and for action, for the next step in the quest to free Japan.

"I've finally managed to crack the security around the systems of the Britannian army here in Japan."

Urabe can't help but gape. He wasn't even aware Zero had been trying to do that. "What? How?"

"I wish I could claim all merit, but I have an inside source," Zero replies. "The bad news is that the more confidential data appears to be off the Intranet and it's harder to get to. I'll look into trying to get closer, but for now, there's still a lot of data I didn't get the chance to focus on. The most important thing is this."

Zero turns on the monitors behind him and a title shows up on the screen, first in Britannian, then translated into Japanese. The Special Administrative Zone of Japan.

"What is this?" Tohdoh asks.

"A new project from Britannia. The idea is to create a zone where the Japanese people would be allowed their own national identity, where they would be able to live together without fearing persecution."

He passes over the next slides which detail the main points of the document. Urabe has mixed feelings about it. On one side, it seems like a step forward, on the other... He's just not sure. Would taking this offer mean giving up their real dream? "The full document will be available after this meeting, but these are the main points," Zero says.

"What do you think about it, Zero?" Tohdoh inquires. "You don't seem convinced."

"When it comes to Britannia, nothing is what it seems," Diethard points out in Zero's stead.

"Is it really a bad idea, though?" Ohgi asks. "I mean, isn't that what we've been fighting for?"

"Well, yes, but if we do this, we're going to have to disarm," Rakshata points out.

Zero nods. "This project is Princess Euphemia's brainchild, and I believe she is genuinely trying to help stop the conflict. However, she is not a politician, and she doesn't truly understand the depth of the issue. Furthermore, her project would have been refused outright had it not benefitted Britannia. But Schneizel knows very well that this is a minor concession to make compared to how much trouble we've been. It's the perfect solution for him, but not so much for us. To put it plainly, the SAZ will be a glorified cage."

"What do we do then, Zero?" Kallen asks, her voice trembling with concern.
"What do you mean?" Tamaki explodes. "We're going to say no! We're not gonna accept to be Britannia's slaves! Right, Zero?"

"Sit down, Tamaki," Zero says. "I'm not done.

"We can't exactly refuse," he continues after Tamaki complies. "Most civilians only support us because they see no other solution. If they have another alternative that is safer, they're going to take it. We'll lose their faith in us either way, and that's already disastrous. Therefore, we can only say yes."

Chaos immediately explodes. Tamaki is shouting once again. Ohgi ends up arguing with him, and Chiba joins in, seemingly against the whole idea. Kallen bristles, predictably taking offense at the sight of anyone daring to go against Zero's orders.

"Enough!" Zero shouts, and his voice is filled with such authority that it freezes them all in their tracks. "We can't afford to bicker amongst ourselves, not right now.

"I understand all of your concerns, and no one here is wrong. But there is a very important thing we must keep in mind. It's highly unlikely that such a project would work as a long-term solution. Having only seen the first draft of the project, I cannot afford to make too many speculations, but it is very vague on how exactly we would provide the necessities for all the people inside. Not to mention that I can't imagine the Britannian populace will be thrilled with having space they see as theirs claimed by a group of Numbers. There will undoubtedly be threats, and it's unclear who would be required to deal with them. Presumably, it would be funded by Britannia, but how long will they be willing to do that and will the funds they provide even suffice? Food, healthcare, education—all these things cannot be arranged in a handful of months—especially not in a hostile zone and with the threat of war dangling over our heads. I have no doubt that the SAZ will fall apart within months of its incipience. Our job is to make sure the civilians don't get hurt because of it."

Nobody can disagree with that. Zero is, of course, right, and any argument they may have put up is irrelevant.

"This isn't a bad thing. It'll buy us time to strengthen our position. We will continue recruitment and outfitting in secret. I'm sure I can wriggle some concessions out of Princess Euphemia, so the SAZ may even help us grow. But you all need to be prepared for what this project will mean. It will leave us exposed in a way we haven't been before. Now... Any further questions?"

"When is this project supposed to start?" Urabe asks.

"The timeline is uncertain at this point, but it's likely that we'll see an official announcement soon, perhaps within the next month. I've already started accumulating funds to prepare."

Of course he did. Zero is like that, always a step ahead.

"What about your inside source, Zero?" Diethard inquires. "Can't they tell you more?"

Right. In the shock of the announcement, Urabe completely forgot about the fact that Zero had a spy feeding him intel. Trust Diethard to remember.

Their leader shakes his head. "There's only so much he can do without risking his cover more than he already has."

"I don't suppose you can tell us who he is," Tohdoh says.

"Not yet, but you'll find out soon. You'll probably be working closely throughout this whole SAZ
Zero turns off the monitors and the slides vanish. "That being said, there's always the chance that the project will be scrapped. I find it highly unlikely, but it's something worth keeping in mind. While we wait for the official announcements, we'll comb through the rest of the data we can take from Britannia's servers without being noticed."

"Oh, are the plans for the Lancelot there?" Rakshata perks up. "I'd love to take a crack at the Earl of Pudding's work."

"Yes, most of his work is on it, including the plans for the Lancelot, the Gawain and the float system the Lancelot used at Kyushu. I'll leave that in your capable hands."

The meeting starts to wind down after that. As Zero dismisses them, Urabe approaches the rest of the Four Holy Swords. "What do you think?"

"Zero's way makes sense," Senba says.

"I hope it will work," Asahina offers. "The last thing we need is more civilian casualties."

"Damn Britannia," Chiba mutters.

"It will work," Tohdoh finally intervenes. "We need to trust Zero. He has never failed us before."

Urabe couldn't have put it better himself. He doesn't know what this whole SAZ thing will bring them, but he will support his leader, no matter what.

Chapter End Notes

I won't lie, I'm totally biased when it comes to some of the BKs and it'll show. Other than Diethard, Urabe is my fav. His epic sacrifice in S2 really stuck with me and I will honor that.
The School Festival

Chapter Notes

I'm back! This update will be a little shorter than the last ones, but I was happy with the ending. The next one will be longer I promise.
As always, my thanks to everyone who has kudos-ed and commented. Enjoy!

The day of the school festival dawns bright and sunny, just like in the first life. Lelouch wakes up sandwiched between Suzaku and C.C. and feels reluctant to leave his very comfortable spot. He is even more reluctant when Suzaku starts to nuzzle his neck while C.C. kisses down his chest.

His morning just improves from there, even if he's slightly late for breakfast. He and his lovers rush through a shared shower—which would have probably led to more if they had has the time—and meet Nunnally and Sayoko for breakfast.

Sayoko smiles at him like she isn't completely aware he spent the night with two different people. "Good morning, Master Lelouch."

"Good morning, Sayoko, Nunnally. Sorry for being late. I overslept."

"That's all right, big brother," Nunnally replies. "I know you're always so busy. You need your rest."

C.C. smirks and Lelouch can practically hear her thinking that he hasn't been doing much resting this morning. Come to think of it, he should probably start exercising more if he wants to continue this whole threesome thing. It was never an issue in the first timeline, but if he doesn't improve his stamina, he'll just be unable to satisfy them, which will be an embarrassment.

Sigh. He's going to have to stop avoiding PE classes. The things he does for sex.

"How have you been, Nunnally?" Suzaku asks, seamlessly sliding into the conversation.

"Very well, Suzaku, thank you. I'm excited about the festival. Did you stay over last night?"

"Yeah. It would have been useless to go back to the barracks and return today for the festival, so I asked Lelouch if I could crash here and he said yes."

Nunnally tilts her head, perhaps confused as to where exactly the three of them all fit in Lelouch's room. Fortunately, at her age, her mind is unlikely to reach the real conclusion. "I see. Well, it's very nice to have you spent more time with my big brother. I really appreciate everything you've been doing for him."

"You don't have to thank me, Nunnally. You know Lelouch is important to me."

It's a good breakfast, and Lelouch feels warm inside as he shares the meal with some of the most important people in his life. He wishes Rolo were here too. Then again, there's still a lot of tension between him and Suzaku. Lelouch is going to have to work on that.

It's on this note that he and Suzaku head out to see Milly for the school festival proceedings. She, Shirley and Nina are already in the Student Council Room, flailing about in a panic.
"Lulu!" Shirley huffs as they enter the room. "Where have you been? It's already so late."

"Sorry," he says with a smile. It's always so good to see Shirley. He may not love her like she wants, but that doesn't mean he doesn't love her at all. "Got a little sidetracked at breakfast."

"Sidetracked?" Milly intervenes.

She pops up from behind Shirley and zeroes in on Lelouch—more specifically on Lelouch's neck. "Ohh... Is that a hickey on your neck?"

Lelouch's mind goes to Suzaku's earlier attack and he freezes, his face heating. He wonders why he's always excellent at keeping his calm in life-or-death situations, but faced with comments on his love life, he's incapable of providing a coherent reply.

"Oh, it is." Milly cackles in obvious glee. "Our little Lulu, all grown up. Tell us, who do we have to blame for your sexual awakening?"

Shirley looks stricken, and Nina's face goes very red. Rivalz is looking at Lelouch with a mix of awe, interest and betrayal. They're all focused on Lelouch, which is probably a good thing, because Suzaku has gone very still by his side.

"Milly!" Lelouch says, not even having to fake his outrage. "Now's not the time."

"Oh, come on. Don't be such a spoil sport!"

"Who is being a spoil sport?"

Lelouch turns, only to note that Kallen entered the room at one point. What is it with her and her timely arrivals? "Lelouch," Milly explains. "He won't tell us who his new girlfriend is."

Kallen blinks in confused surprise. "New girlfriend?"

Nina mumbles an explanation about the bruise on Lelouch's neck. Lelouch is too busy calculating his timeline for the day to care. God, he hopes he hasn't delayed things too much because of his recklessness. If he did, the consequences could be dire.

"Do you know, Suzaku?" Milly asks, oblivious to Lelouch's rising panic.

Suzaku scratches his head, doing the perfect impression of his regular Ashford self. It seems he's a far better actor now than he once was and the delay Kallen provided helped him gather his composure. "I sort of thought it was... Well..."

He looks at Shirley, who begins to shake her head violently. "No, no. It wasn't me."

Lelouch clears his throat, having had quite enough of this conversation. "Okay. We'll discuss this another time. I think we've already established we're late as it is."

Fortunately, they aren't as late as Lelouch thought, and things fall into place pretty much the same way they did the first time. There's a lot of running around while Lelouch coordinates the stalls and makes sure everything is in order. Suzaku is still in charge of the pizza, under dire threats from C.C. to not drop it this time.

Most importantly, they run into Ohgi and Viletta, which was what Lelouch wanted to begin with.

This time, he doesn't get involved. He has to stay out of it for his plan to work properly. Instead, he goes to the control room, keeps an eye on Kallen and contacts Suzaku when he sees her moving
toward the supply room with Ohgi and Viletta in tow.

Suzaku quickly makes his excuses and runs off, this time not taking Shirley with him. He ends up intercepting Kallen, Ohgi and Viletta right in front of the storage facility.

Lelouch can't hear their conversation, but he can see their faces through the cameras. Kallen's shock and panic is actually pretty funny.

Suzaku narrows his eyes and leans forward, as if to look at Viletta better. Ohgi tenses. Lelouch picks up his phone and dials.

Suzaku takes the call within seconds. "Hey, Lelouch."

"Suzaku? Have you gotten those spare fuel tanks for the pizza?"

"Umm. I'm going now. Sorry. Guess it's one of those days for distractions."

By the time Suzaku hangs up the phone, Ohgi and Viletta have vanished. It doesn't matter. So far, everything has gone exactly as planned.

Then comes the harder part.

Euphie's visit.

He hasn't seen her since the island. At the time, he didn't remember shooting her, seeing her hopeful eyes turn shocked and desperate. The sight of her standing behind Nunnally almost makes him crack right then and there.

He doesn't, though. He's prepared for this. Besides, all he has to do is mimic the events in the first timeline, and all the conditions will be cleared.

He still can't help but be a little warmer to her than he was in the past. Suzaku has already told him about her reaction to his refusal of the knighthood, and Lelouch loves her even more for it, for her complete and utter selflessness. He knows he would not have been able to do the same in her place. He is still fundamentally a selfish person, no matter how much the grief and loss have changed him.

Lelouch leads her and Nunnally outside and they sit together on the stairs. Together, they watch Suzaku spin the pizza. He's even better at it now than he was before.

"Last year, it was my turn," he comments, "but I can't compare to a real pro."

Euphie giggles. "I wouldn't underestimate your talents." She takes his hand and squeezes it. "But you know, Lelouch, I was very happy to hear you and Suzaku are friends. Very happy and very relieved to know you have him."

"You're too kind to me, Euphie," he replies with a sigh.

"I'm really not."

"Ignore big brother," Nunnally pipes up. "He beats himself up over the craziest things."

"I know, right? Maybe we can cheer him up together."

"You can count on me," Nunnally replies with a bright smile.

"Don't worry, Nunnally," Euphie reassures her. "I found a solution for everything."
On cue, the highly opportune gust of wind blows off Euphie's hat. Her bright pink hair instantly draws the crowd's attention.

Lelouch can do nothing but run away with Nunnally. Any divergences at this point could be disastrous.

They take shelter in one of the stalls like before. By some sort of miracle, Suzaku manages to set the pizza down instead of dropping it before rushing in to pick Euphie up. Once again, Lelouch watches his sister announce the forming of the SAZ.

He remembers the day the Massacre Princess was born and tastes bile in his mouth. It will not happen, not this time. "Big brother?" Nunnally asks from behind him. "This plan of Euphie's... What will it mean?"

"Nothing good," he admits. "She means well, but unfortunately, it will never work."

"But..."

"Trust me on this, Nunnally. I'd only ever do what is best for the Japanese people. Not to mention that her project will draw a lot of attention and our identities and location may be compromised."

Nunnally pales. She doesn't really remember what happened to their mother, but she knows enough to fear such a disastrous event.

"Don't worry. I'll keep you safe." Her and Euphie both. There are no other alternatives. He can't lose loved ones again after everything that happened in his first life.

The SAZ will not be a safe place, but he will build a haven for everyone he loves.

Despite the emotional roller coaster of the meeting with Euphie, the day goes well. Lelouch returns Nunnally to their quarters while everyone is distracted. Eventually, Euphie's staff herds off the people and the press and the agitation begins to die down. Suzaku escorts them out. He may no longer be Euphie's knight, but most people aren't actually aware of it.

Once Euphie is gone, they manage to get back to the original project of making the giant pizza. Most of the excitement over it has faded, but the batter is right there and still usable, and Milly insists. Lelouch ends up spinning it around a few more times, and then they're finally back in business with the cooking part of the process.

C.C. emerges from the Student Council Room as the pizza is cooking. She is far more discreet than she was in the past and sticks to the shadows, but she's still carrying her plate dutifully.

Lelouch doesn't bother to chastise her. He just provides her with a giant slice of pizza once it's done. Suzaku finds them under the shade of a tree, carrying some more of the meal. "So... That went well. I think."

Lelouch nods. "As well as it could go. I..."

C.C. grabs some pizza from Suzaku's plate and shoves it into Lelouch's mouth. "Eat. You're far too skinny."

Lelouch starts to chew, if only because he doesn't want to die choking on pizza after being brought back to life by time travel. Suzaku laughs at him, the traitor.
It feels just like this morning, and the ominous dread brought back by Euphie's visit is chased away. Yes, they'll make this right. Together, the three of them can do anything.

They changed the world once. They can do it again.
Merry Christmas everyone! As a present, here is a new, longer chapter! Hope you enjoy!

The confirmation of the forming of the SAZ leaves the Black Knights in a state of uproar, but less so than in Lelouch's first life. Most of them trust him to make the right decision about the situation and are almost relieved that it's happened, since it confirms that the information they got was accurate.

Others remain leery and upset, and Ohgi is not always subtle about his restlessness on their approach—which is exactly what Lelouch wants.

He actually considered putting the man under Geass, but he doesn't even have to—not yet, at least. Ohgi is already playing right into his hands. The Geass will come later.

Of course, the Black Knights are not always his focus. He can't afford to meet Euphie again face to face, but he does provide Suzaku with an untraceable phone which he gives to his sister. They have long conversations, and Lelouch explains his concerns and demands.

Euphie admits that she didn't consider everything he did, but that she will be very happy to work with him on this when he is clearly so many steps ahead.

If only she knew.

A week after the announcement, when it becomes obvious that the construction for the Zone has indeed begun, Zero sends out a message.

"Princess Euphemia has made us an offer, and has extended a hand of friendship to the Black Knights," he says. "We will not refuse this hand. We are knights of justice, and we wish to ensure the safety of the Japanese. To this end, I demand negotiations over the exact structure of the SAZ and its organization. If the Special Administrative Zone is to be a refuge and a safe haven for the Japanese as Princess Euphemia claims, we are the only ones who can protect it."

Cornelia grants his request with as much grace as can be expected. After all, Lelouch may not have killed Euphie but he has still killed Clovis.

"Zero, what are your requests?"

"Always so efficient, Viceroy Cornelia. Very well. As I said in my message, I am not convinced by the vagueness of your sister's promises. I require more details before I commit to anything. The Black Knights must be involved in safeguarding the Japanese inside the SAZ."

Cornelia cooperates. It's almost suspiciously easy. Lelouch would like to blame it on Euphie's influence, but he knows the hard part will start only after the SAZ is actually up and running.

It still takes a while for them to reach a tentative agreement on something Zero would actually be on board with. Everything from the budget to the exact living space intended for the Japanese is under
scrutiny. The area originally assigned to the SAZ becomes larger because its original dimensions are unsuited to everything they need.

While he's in charge of negotiations with Cornelia, he assigns Tohdoh with taking over recruitment. During a brief break, he sees Urabe and finally manages to go through with something he's long ago planned on.

Lelouch likes Urabe, insofar as he likes any of the Black Knights at least. He remembers his sacrifice and respects him for it. It is entirely possible that he too would have turned against Lelouch if he'd lived, but that was not the case, so Lelouch cannot judge him the same way he does others, not when it was so obvious that Urabe did not care about Lelouch's civilian identity as a Britannian student.

Besides, he needs to pull a few more people in. He may have Kallen's loyalty and Diethard's, for now, but that's not enough. Urabe will make a good starting point to prepare for the storm that will soon shake the Black Knights. Besides, he has picked Urabe for a reason.

"Urabe. A word with you."

Urabe looks befuddled at being singled out, but he follows Lelouch—and C.C., who is always with him these days—regardless. When they reach his office, Lelouch turns to face him. Urabe may not be able to see beyond the mask, but that doesn't always matter.

"Urabe, I've asked you here for a very important reason. There is a slight chance that this SAZ project may have other consequences and my... civilian identity may be compromised in the future. We have to prepare for that too."

Urabe freezes. "Are you in danger, Zero?"

"Don't worry," C.C. replies flatly. "That's what I'm for."

Urabe doesn't look very convinced, but to his credit, he doesn't comment on it. Lelouch supposes he doesn't really blame Urabe. Most of the time, C.C. doesn't look all that threatening.

"C.C. is right. My security is not the issue here." He pauses for effect. "The information I am about to give you is very sensitive, Urabe. I must have your word that it will stay between us, no matter who asks."

"Yes, of course, Zero," Urabe rushes to assure him.

Lelouch believes him, enough, at least, to go through with his idea. He nods. "Someone very important to me will join us soon. My little brother. While I am protected by many people, the same is not true for him and I need to know there will be someone to watch his back should it be necessary. Can you do this for me?"

Urabe's agreement in the matter is important. Rolo doesn't like the Black Knights, but Urabe is not included in that. In fact, given that Urabe died protecting Lelouch from Rolo himself, Lelouch would hazard a guess that Urabe is the only Black Knight whose presence Rolo would stomach.

Urabe doesn't disappoint. "It would be my honor. But... Can I ask, Zero... Why me?"

"I trust you," Zero says. He doesn't elaborate, and Urabe stares at him, clearly trying to figure out his reasoning.

"Does that mean that you don't trust everyone here?" he finally asks.
Behind his mask, Lelouch smirks. This is going even better than he expected. He doesn't reply, but he doesn't have to. Silence is an answer too.

Urabe's eyes widen. "Zero... We would never—"

"Even people who are generally trustworthy can make mistakes," Lelouch cuts him off. "Perhaps I am merely jumping at shadows. I suppose we shall see. It doesn't matter that much. My brother needs a guard either way. Fair warning, there may be times when these duties will take precedence over your work with the rest of the Four Holy Swords, so I won't force you to agree."

"I understand, Zero. I'm sure the others will be able to make up for my absence, should it ever be necessary."

"Excellent."

With that out of the way, Lelouch is free to slowly plant the seed of distrust within the Black Knights. Urabe doesn't seem to share his news with anyone, but Rakshata wriggles something out of him and starts giving the rest of the Black Knights considering looks. Chiba is uncomfortable with the idea of any of the Four Holy Swords having a separate duty, and that shows. It also doesn't help that Lelouch has been running the Black Knights ragged with increasingly demanding preparations—all of which will be necessary after the SAZ starts.

Things finally come to a head when he leaves two days to stay at Ashford. He mostly skips his classes and goes out to procure funding. It's not all that difficult. Once upon a time, he would have relied on gambling, but now, all he has to do is hunt down a particularly obnoxious noble and convince him to donate a generous amount of money for their cause and wave it off later. It's still not an ideal method, but it cannot be traced down, and Lelouch needs the liquidities.

When he returns to the Black Knights, he runs into a tense-looking Kallen. "Q1? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing..." Kallen rubs her eyes in clear exhaustion. "Everyone is really tired."

"Things will get better, I promise. I wouldn't push you all like this if it weren't necessary." He knows the situation must be particularly difficult for her, since she has to juggle her double life on top of the preparations for the SAZ, and they can't afford to give up her cover yet.

"I know that, Zero. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. There's just been... some tension."

Tension is putting it lightly. When he steps onto the main deck of the submarine, all eyes turn to him. He is reminded of a different time, when most of them pointed guns at him on the orders of a man who was their enemy.

He's never been more grateful for having C.C. by his side. Should things go wrong, she knows what to do and how to step in.

"Good morning all," he says. "Updates?"

"We’ve received some information from Kaguya on possible developments in the Chinese Federation," Tohdoh reports. "Nothing urgent to address. The recruiting process is still going strong, and nobody seems to be suspecting anything."

Lelouch nods. Suzaku would have sniffed something like that out. At this point, it seems unlikely that Cornelia will try to interfere with Euphie's project anyway.

"The number of people who are set to join the SAZ is both encouraging and midly worrisome,"
"That's not a surprise. We were prepared for that."

"Zero, if I may?" Minami intervenes hesitantly. "We did want to talk to you about something else."

"Of course, Minami. What is it?"

"We were just wondering..." Minami swallows, and he seems to already regret having spoken up to begin with. "I mean... This has been a difficult time for everyone and we were wondering where you... Where you were. Where you go."

Several of the Black Knights seem surprised at the comment, having probably not expected Minami to say it outright. Inoue actually elbows Minami, and several of the others seem very uncomfortable.

"I'm sure Zero has his own duties and tasks," Tohdoh offers, narrowing his eyes at Minami. "It's not necessary for us to know every single detail."

Lelouch appreciates the words, but he knows that, in his heart, Tohdoh does foster doubt. How can he not? His main loyalty is not to Lelouch, but to the JLF and the general Lelouch secretly killed. The rest of the Black Knights are similar, if not for the same reason.

"Tohdoh is right," Diethard adds. "There is no reason to poke into the private affairs of our leader."

Tamaki looks like he wants to say something—probably unwise, offensive and still somehow unexplainably supportive—but he never gets the chance. "That's fair, but how can we trust our leader, when he doesn't trust us?" Ohgi asks.

And there it is. The issue in the open, like Lelouch wanted, and probably the reason why Minami dared to ask his question to begin with.

"I think you'll find, Ohgi, that the reverse is also valid. Why should I trust you, when you don't trust me?"

Ohgi's nostrils flare and he shoots to his feet in fury. "Don't tell me that. That's not an answer, it's just another mind game."

Lelouch can see several of the other Black Knights agreeing, and he's not surprised. Ohgi is an influential figure and led the cell that was the base for their current group. That's why Lelouch must tear him to pieces like this, visibly, to expose his treason in a way everyone can see.

Well, that, and the fact that he's enjoying himself.

In his heart, he always asked himself why the Black Knights jumped to obey Schneizel's word like they did. It made no sense to him. His brother was exceedingly good at manipulation, and Lelouch did make his fair share of mistakes, but still, a piece had been missing from the puzzle.

That piece was Ohgi—or rather, Ohgi and Viletta.

It was Suzaku who revealed the whole mess to Lelouch. C.C. never even knew it, since she'd been wandering around as an amnesiac at the time. She never even realized it in the first life, since Ohgi and Viletta weren't much of a factor for her at all. However, Schneizel did know. In hindsight, it should have occurred to Lelouch to ask during the pre-Requiem months, but at the time, he focused on the future and not the past. The fact that Suzaku later investigated the issue comes in handy. After all, he needs to know who his enemies are in order to eliminate them, and his quest is finally paying
"All right," he says slowly. "Let's leave all mind games aside. If our aim here is honesty, tell me, Ohgi... Who is the Britannian woman you're living with?"

The very air in the room seems to freeze. "Britannian woman?" Minami asks. "What Britannian woman?"

Ohgi goes very pale, his mouth opening and closing like he's a gaping fish. "Do you want me to say it for you?" Lelouch drawls. "I'll help you out since it appears you lack the ability to offer the explanations you demand."

He steps toward the computers and presses a few keys, bringing up Viletta's military photo on the screen. "Does this woman look familiar?"

"I recognize her," Diethard says, his eyes widening. "Her name is Viletta Nu. She's a member of the Purist Faction in the Britannian Army and she fell into disgrace after the Orange incident. The last I heard of her, she was investigating Zero."

"I think I caught a glimpse of her file while collating the data," Inoue pipes up. "She's officially declared dead."

"She's not dead. She was with Ohgi at Ashford," Kallen whispers. "Her hair was different, but it was definitely her."

"Quite right, Q1. Viletta Nu is alive. She was also one of the people involved in the Shinjuku massacre, which is why she had some leads on me to begin with. So tell me Ohgi... What exactly have you been doing with a woman who is an enemy of the Black Knights?"

"I-I didn't know," Ohgi stammers.

"Oh, didn't you?" Lelouch asks coldly. "So you had no idea she has knowledge that could lead to you learning my true identity. No idea whatsoever that she has been investigating me since Shinjuku."

That was a stab in the dark and more of a guess on Lelouch's side than anything else. The fact remains that Ohgi always hated the secrecy Lelouch enforced, as proven by the fact that he jumped at the chance to unmask him when Kirihara insisted on it.

His guess proves to be right on the money, and Ohgi doesn't have the benefit of a mask, or a good poker face for that matter.

"Y-You... collaborated with a Britannian to learn Zero's identity?" Tohdoh hisses in fury. "Ohgi!"

"It's not like that!" Ohgi tries to defend himself. "Chigusa doesn't remember anything. Yes, I thought I could draw information from her at first, but now... It's not like that. She's a good person."

"And we're expected to just believe that?" Chiba asks in disbelief. "What makes you think she's not fooling you and working with Britannia behind your back?"

"I have monitors installed in my house. She's harmless, I swear."

"I don't even want to address the stupidity of that latter claim," Lelouch says. "Harmless is the last adjective I'd ever use for Viletta Nu."
"But she's not that person now!" Ohgi insists, digging himself deeper into his hole. "She even said it herself, that she doesn't want to return to who she was before. I saved her life. We're in love."

Awkward silence. Lelouch manages not to cackle maniacally, but it's a close call.

He did want to bring up the fact that Ohgi is sleeping with the woman, but it's better for Ohgi to do it himself. Now, if only he can take advantage of this opening without revealing that he's about to roll on the floor laughing.

C.C. saves him from his predicament. She bursts into laughter, but hers is cruel and bitter, holding no trace of amusement. "Oh, this just keeps getting better and better. Let me get this straight. You found a Britannian officer and you took her in because you thought she had info on Zero. Then, she turned out to not have any memories, and you decided to sleep with her instead. You do realize that she's in no condition to consent, right? Congratulations, Ohgi, you're a rapist."

Kallen recoils and looks at Ohgi like she's never seen him before. Several Black Knights look disgusted. If Tohdoh's lips were any thinner, they'd disappear entirely. Chiba seems seconds away from throttling Ohgi.

"It's not like that..." Ohgi tries to defend himself weakly. "I would never hurt her."

"Ohgi, don't be absurd," Lelouch finally says. "Our memories are what define us. If she's a completely different person without them, it's because she was a blank slate when she woke up wherever you had her. She probably attached herself to the only person she knew and who showed her kindness, but don't lie to yourself. You used her." He waves a hand. "At any rate, while these ethical considerations are important, it doesn't eliminate the fact that her true self remains a danger for our organization."

"Right," Kallen says. "You're right, Zero. Of course."

"Are we even sure that Britannian bitch is not lying to Ohgi?" Tamaki blurts out. "She could easily be tricking him into thinking she has amnesia."

"Give me some credit, Tamaki. You didn't really think I found out about this and just sat on the information, do you? I have someone of my complete trust keeping an eye on her."

Diethard looks relieved. He must have realized how risky it was for Zero to allow Ohgi to continue his game, but didn't want to bring it up in front of the others under these circumstances.

Lelouch may just give him the benefit of another chance. Maybe. After all, Schneizel did say Diethard tried to come to his defense during the original timeline.

This new information seems to trouble the others. Tohdoh gives him a serious look. "Zero... Can I ask... How long have you known about this?"

"Since the day of the official announcement of the SAZ," Lelouch replies. "I found about it from a reliable source, but I didn't want to jump to any... unfortunate conclusions. I've been waiting for Ohgi to come to me. Alas, it seems we've reach a stalemate."

Just like that, the last piece falls into place. Ohgi zeroes in on the provided information like a bloodhound and blurts out, "Ashford Academy. Kururugi. He's the one who told you."

He's probably trying to direct the heat away from himself, but it won't work. Lelouch smiles behind his mask. "Yes. Yes, he did."
"That's right..." Kallen whispers. "He was there that day. He seemed so suspicious of... Viletta, but he never mentioned it again. I thought I'd imagined it and it wasn't important..." She looks at Lelouch with pleading, betrayed eyes. "But why, Zero? Why would Suzaku even give you that information?"

"Q1. I trust Suzaku Kururugi with my life. As for why, I'm pretty sure you can draw your own conclusions."

Kallen is smart. She's not just an ace pilot. She's also a girl who manages to keep her grades up at top level while leading a double life. Lelouch knows that and he knows there's no way he can fool her forever. He has no intention of even trying. He's already decided to reveal his identity to her. This will just have to be the trigger.

There are only so many things that can lead Suzaku Kururugi to have a change of heart about his allegiance. One option would be that he worked with them from the very beginning, but Kallen would naturally doubt that. The Suzaku from the previous timeline—the one she knows—was far too guileless. Not to mention that it makes no sense that he would try to kill Zero if he was on their side.

So, the natural conclusion, at least for Kallen, is that he must have turned at one point, something which he would only do for a very good reason.

Coupling that with Kallen's original suspicions of Zero's identity, it's not hard for her to make the leap. He sees the moment realization dawns. "We'll have a conversation about it another time," he says before she can blurt out anything that can give him away. "Suzaku is not the issue."

"He's the one who provided you with the way into the Britannian files, right?" Rakshata says with a laugh. "I should have known. There are only so many people who can get close enough to the Earl of Pudding to manage that sort of thing."

"But why not tell us about it sooner, Zero?" Asahina asks.

"Don't be ridiculous." Diethard snorts. "A double agent would not have much value if everyone knew about him."

"Quite right. As Tohdoh has said, sometimes a commander must keep secrets for the well-being of the organization. And on that note, we must return to the original point. I've left this issue hanging for far too long.

"Kallen, Urabe, I want the two of you to go to Ohgi's apartment. Retrieve Viletta and return here."

"Wait!" Ohgi shouts. "You can't just—"

"I can and I will," Lelouch cuts him off. "You had your chance to come to me with this information. I won't risk prolonging this debacle any longer. As of right now, you are dismissed from your position."

Nobody protests. They all saw this coming. How could they not?

"Kallen, someone will meet you there," Lelouch continues. "He'll greet you by name. Follow his instructions. He can be trusted."

"Someone? Do you mean Suzaku?"

"No, not him. My younger brother, Rolo."
Everybody stares at him. Urabe alone is unsurprised, having already been informed about Rolo’s existence. "Younger brother?" Inoue squeaks.

"Why so shocked? Yes, I do have family, yes, I have loved ones. Proof in point, C.C. here."

"Flatterer." C.C. says blandly, leaning against him.

Lelouch shakes his head. "Moving on. First off, Rolo will need a quarters of his own. Inoue, deal with that. Yoshida, Sugiyama, secure Ohgi in a separate room. Kallen, Urabe, you have your orders."

Yoshida and Sugiyama look conflicted, but comply. Ohgi goes without comment. Perhaps he is entering a state of shock. Kallen and Urabe follow them out, intent on completing their mission.

"As you can imagine, this unfortunate incident will bring about some changes. Until further notice, C.C. will take over Ohgi’s previous role. Kaguya will have to be informed. If neither of us are here, command falls to Tohdoh, and he’ll coordinate with Diethard in administrative matters." He sighs. "I know it’s not ideal, especially at this delicate time, but we must adapt. We will go over the issue again at a later date. Questions?"

"What will happen with Ohgi?" Chiba asks.

"We’ll have to figure out just how compromised he is," Lelouch replies. "I don't want to lose him entirely. I am considering a position as a regular pilot, but it is too soon to tell. In the meantime, we'll set a guard on him and the woman. I don't trust her in the slightest and there is no telling when her memories will return."

Chiba nods, satisfied by the response. Lelouch is a little surprised at her easy acceptance. Then again, he hasn't lost the Black Rebellion yet, so her natural distrust of him isn't as pronounced.

"We’ll continue operations as previously set up. Rakshata, my latest trip was fruitful. We’ll have funds for a new shipment of knightmare parts and supplies. I'll need you to set up a Burai for Rolo with Britannian controls. Until we can find another frame to cater to his strengths, it'll have to do. I'll have him speak to you after he's here."

"Oh, another ace pilot, I take it?" Rakshata laughs, clearly interested. "I'm always willing to take on a new challenge. Why didn't you bring him on board before?"

"Rolo is only fourteen. I suppose I wanted to protect him, at least a little. There's no more time for that now, and if things go the way I think they will, there will be no safer place for him than here."

"Zero... What do you think will happen?" Tohdoh asks.

"The SAZ will fall, Tohdoh. When that happens, we will be prepared, and we will take Japan back. Britannia will not easily let it go. In other words, Tohdoh, we'll soon have war on our hands, and this is a battle we can't afford to lose."

Just like that, the fire of patriotism is lit under the Black Knights, and their feeling of regret over losing Ohgi is forgotten. It's only temporary and there are still certain things Lelouch needs to do to truly win this battle, but for the moment, he's satisfied.

Ohgi is gone and Suzaku's place in the Black Knights has been secured. C.C. will have a better position too. The Black Knights are not very likely to question him again in the near future. An excellent result, if he does say so himself.
Once the meeting ends, he and C.C. retire to his office and he sends Rolo a message. After that, he allows himself one simple luxury. He brings up the video feed from his confrontation with Ohgi and laughs until he cries. It's still far too easy to remember how the Black Knights turned against him, and seeing that distrust and anger directed at Ohgi is very satisfying.

"We'll have to show it to Rolo and Suzaku," C.C. says. "They'll love it."

"Oh, I'm sure they will. I certainly did."

Chapter End Notes

I realize the word 'rapist' may sound harsh for Ohgi, but I still think that in his relationship with Viletta, as it existed originally, the consent Viletta could provide was dubious at best. Also, I don't like Ohgi :P
Hey there everyone! New chapter for you today. As always, I appreciate every comment, question and suggestion. They really feed my muse :) Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Kallen is grateful for being given the mission to retrieve Viletta Nu. It gives her time to process everything she just learned.

As she makes her way through the ghettos with Urabe, she muses over her new realization. She supposes she should be angrier about the fact that Zero obviously lied to her, but thinking back, the whole incident with the phone was before the Black Knights existed properly. He couldn't have trusted her then. The important thing is that he seems to trust her now. After all, he could have certainly avoided mentioning things that made her suspicious if he really wanted to.

No, he clearly trusts her not to say anything, and so she will not. She's the only one out of the Black Knights who has this information, his Q1. She will not fail.

Besides, the problem isn't Zero's true identity. Him being a Britannian student and Suzaku's friend is beside the point. Ohgi's betrayal is the issue right now. She still can't believe he did all those things and had the nerve to speak to Zero like he was the one in the right.

When did things go so wrong? When did Ohgi become a stranger?

"Are you all right?" Urabe asks her.

"As well as I can be. It's just... such a shock. Even if I saw them together, I never expected something like this to come of it. What does that say about me?"

She should have said something to Zero about it. She should have questioned Ohgi a little more, done something to stop him from this insanity.

"Kallen, you can't blame yourself," Urabe tells her. "There was nothing you could've done."

"I should have told Zero about what I saw at Ashford."

Urabe shakes his head. "You couldn't have known it was relevant, and we all have the right to our private lives. Besides, it's not like it's a sin to date a Britannian."

"Yes, I suppose that's true." Kallen tastes bile as she realizes they may have never found out about it if Suzaku hadn't happened by and recognized Viletta.

The Purist group was the one in charge of his supposed execution. No wonder he'd seen right through the disguise. What a mess.

"I just don't know what is going on anymore. Ohgi betrayed us and Suzaku is apparently on our side. I'm confused."
"I'm sure a lot of people are, but we just have to trust Zero. I believe in him."

"So do I."

Zero's true identity may be of Lelouch Lamperouge, but he's never failed them. The Black Knights would not exist without him. Yes, Urabe is right. They just have to trust Zero and everything will be fine.

It's on that reassuring note that she and Urabe reach Ohgi's apartment. A young man pops up by their side as they reach the first floor of the building. "Kozuki, Urabe."

Kallen almost laughs when she sees him. If she wasn't already convinced Zero was Lelouch, Rolo's physical appearance would have settled it. He looks just like a male version of Lelouch's little sister.

She nods at him. "Rolo."

"She's been quiet," he reports. "Big brother tells me that we're to bring her back to base?"

His Japanese is a little clumsy and strongly accented, so Kallen replies in Britannian. "Yes. Do you think she's dangerous?"

"Right now, no. If she regains her memories... It's an entirely different matter."

They go up the stairs to Ohgi's apartment. It's eerie to be here without him, but she has already decided not to dwell on that, not now. She also doesn't know what to make of Rolo. He's small, almost frail, definitely not someone she would deem a threat, but there's something about his calm demeanor that makes it clear he's more than what he seems.

Lelouch would not have left him in the ghettoes if he didn't know how to defend himself. How did a Britannian teenager even stay under the radar for so long in this place?

She wants to ask, but breaking the silence seems like a bad idea. It's just as well that they have a job to do and conversation is not a part of it.

It's only when they're at the door that she realizes she forgot to ask Ohgi for his keys. As it turns out, it's not a problem. Rolo picks the lock, gesturing for them to remain very quiet.

The precautions are unnecessary since they find Viletta asleep. They sedate her and are on their way within minutes.

Returning to the transport goes just as smoothly and Kallen takes the driver's seat, more than a little ready to leave the settlement and go back to the submarine.

Urabe and Rolo stay in the back of the mobile base, keeping an eye on Viletta. She reports in, conveying the fact that they have successfully retrieved Viletta, and then focuses on the drive.

They're halfway through their trip and out of Tokyo when Rolo slides into the seat next to her. "Every all right back there?" she asks.

"Yes. Everything is fine. She's sedated still and Urabe is watching her." He pauses. "I wanted to speak to you about something, Kozuki."

"About Zero," she guesses. It makes sense. She's the head of his security team and he is Zero's brother.

"Yes. My brother... He's very good at taking care of other people, at giving orders and winning
battles, but... He's not so good at taking care of himself."

"That's what I'm for, right?" she replies.

Seconds later, she berates himself for her far too dismissive comment. Rolo doesn't seem to find it offensive. "In some ways. You're certainly competent in your role, which is why I'm talking to you. There will probably come a time when all of us, the people who love my brother, will have to fight together side by side."

What is he trying to say? She knows that. It's not like it's not obvious. "I will protect Zero with my life."

He doesn't seem happy with the reply. "Even knowing who he really is?"

So that's what this is all about. He must be worried she's going to give Lelouch away. "It doesn't matter to me. Well, it does, but in the big picture, it's Zero's actions that count, not his identity."

She still isn't sure how to fit her image of Lelouch Lamperouge the lazy student with that of Zero the leader, but she knows a few things about using masks. She still wants an explanation, but she's sure Zero will provide it like he promised.

Rolo says nothing else, and the rest of the drive goes by in silence. Kallen feels awkward around him. She wants to ask why he isn't at Ashford like Nunnally, but she can't come up with a way to phrase it that wouldn't sound invasive.

By the time they return to the submarine, she's ready to tear her hair out. She drives into the waiting vessel, focusing on not jostling the mobile base too much. Rolo disappears in the back, presumably to help Urabe with Viletta—not that he needs it.

Zero—or rather, Lelouch, because it's clear enough that he's the one behind the mask—is waiting for them in the hangar when they emerge, with C.C. by his side, as always. "Rolo, Kallen, Urabe. I take it there were no problems."

Rolo's demeanor changes entirely when he sees Zero. "No, big brother. Everything went well."

"Nobody saw you?"

Rolo shakes his head. "All clear."

Lelouch squeezes his brother's shoulder. "Excellent. Come on. Let's secure Viletta and then we can introduce you to everyone."

He turns away and starts to walk toward the elevator. Rolo follows. He's not exactly a bundle of joyful enthusiasm, but it's a clear change from his attitude toward Kallen.

It's sort of... sweet.

Zero has already established a rotation of guards on the cell that will be Viletta's. Currently, Tamaki and Kagesagi are the ones in charge. Tamaki seems proud at finally having an important role. At least somebody is happy at these developments.

Lelouch leaves Tamaki with brief orders to watch her carefully and let him know when she wakes up, and then they return to the deck.

The introductions are brief. "Everyone, this is my brother, Rolo. Please introduce yourselves."
There’s a brief moment of pause while the rest of the Black Knights adjust to the sight of the tiny slip of a boy next to Zero. Finally, Inoue gives Rolo a welcoming smile. "Naomi Inoue. I deal with logistics."

The rest of the Black Knights follow her example. It's pretty easy, since it soon becomes clear to Rolo is already familiar with most of them, probably from personnel files, and they're only doing this for the sake of the Black Knights themselves.

Once everyone is done, Lelouch moves on to the important part. "Rolo, you will occupy two roles in Black Knights. On the battle field, you will be part of the Zero Squad. The rest of the time, you will work with Diethard in Intelligence."

"Yes, big brother. I understand."

"Speak with Rakshata about your knightmare, then report to me in my office."

Rolo rushes off, and Lelouch gestures for Kallen to approach. "Come on. You and I have a conversation pending."

Kallen happily complies. She isn't so happy with the fact that C.C. remains by Lelouch's side, but it doesn't really surprise her either.

Despite his usual cryptic nature, Lelouch is strikingly straightforward. Once they're inside Zero's office, in privacy, he just removes his mask. Kallen considered herself ready for it, but she can't help but still be shocked by the sight.

"So... Here we are, Q1," he says.

"Here we are," she repeats, a little dazed.

"I owe you an apology for deceiving you at Ashford," he tells her, setting the mask down on his desk. C.C. picks it up and pets it. Lelouch ignores the weirdness of the gesture and keeps looking at Kallen. "However, I believe you understand my reasons for it."

Kallen nods. "You couldn't have been sure of my loyalties then. I understand."

Lelouch smiles. It's strange to see that, to acknowledge the fact that Zero is actually human. Kallen has grown so accustomed to the mask that seeing Zero without it is... disconcerting.

"Excellent. I knew I could rely on you."

His smile fades into a more serious expression. "Now, Q1, I don't believe I have to tell you that this incident with Ohgi may have dire repercussions. The last thing we need right now is dissension among the ranks, and being disorganized could lead us to fall apart entirely. There's also the chance Viletta may have jeopardized my civilian identity, in which case I'll have my sister to worry about. Unlike Rolo, she can't protect herself, so she is a vulnerability our enemies can easily exploit."

Kallen stands a little straighter. "What are your orders for me, Zero?"

"For now, you will continue your work as Commander of the Zero Squad. While you're at Ashford, I'll require you to work with Suzaku. Eventually, I may change your position, depending on how things progress."

Kallen blinks, taken aback by his words. "Change my position? But Zero..."
"To tell you the truth, Kallen, I find myself in a bit of a predicament. Ohgi's indiscretion has left me with a vacant spot I need to fill, and I have few people I can trust to occupy it. Now, I like Kaguya, but she isn't always here and she'll be needed for international diplomacy. C.C. can do it, but her role will be different—not to mention that she's not Japanese and people don't trust or know her too well. Do you see where I'm coming from?"

Yes, Kallen could understand his point of view. Everybody knows he is Britannian, so he needs someone Japanese to act as his second in command. Still, she isn't sure she is the best person for the role. "Zero, I'm a pilot, not a leader. My role is to watch your back."

Lelouch waves off her concern. "You don't need to worry about losing the Guren or anything like that. You'll still fight in the front lines. You just won't have to watch me. I'll have Rolo for that, and Suzaku will eventually join us. And C.C. will never leave my side. Believe me, we're not taking any chances."

Kallen gives the woman in question a dubious look. C.C. smirks. "I'm more than I seem."

Kallen supposes that's fair. A lot of people in the Black Knights are not what they seem, and that includes her.

"I appreciate the trust you place in me, Zero," she finally says. "I will not fail you."

"I know you won't. You'll be notified about the official change in role when the moment comes, of course. In the meantime, any questions?"

Kallen considers his words carefully. She has many questions, but she doesn't know how to voice half of them. In the end, she settles on the one that bugs her most. "Do you really not have a heart condition?"

C.C.'s lips twist into a little smirk. If she'd been anyone else, she would probably be laughing.

Meanwhile, Lelouch stares at Kallen. Clearly, he thought she forgot about the incident on the island. After everything that happened, the Black Knights sort of set it aside, but she can't let it go, not after seeing him clutch his heart and collapse like that.

"No, Kallen, I don't," he says finally. "It's just..." He purses his lips, as if considering his words. "Phantom pains. An old injury, acting up."

"Old injury?" Kallen repeats. She didn't expect that.

This time, when Lelouch smiles, it's dark and bitter. "You're not the only one who's had bad experiences with Britannia. Don't worry. It's not crippling or anything like that. I'm fine."

Kallen believes his explanation, but isn't so certain about his assurances. A part of her always wondered about his reasons for fighting Britannia. It makes sense that he would have clashed with them before. But she still remembers Rolo's words about his tendency to not take good care of himself, and she wonders if maybe he's brushing off the old injury as irrelevant when he really shouldn't.

She doesn't get the chance to delve deeper into the topic, as there is a knock on the door. C.C. passes Lelouch the mask, but he doesn't put it on.

The reason why becomes obvious when C.C. goes to open the door and Rolo is the one who steps in. "Everything go okay?" Lelouch asks.
"Yes, big brother," Rolo replies. "Everything went fine. I'm going to be outfitted with a Burai, but I've already given Rakshata a few details on what I work with best."

Lelouch nods. "I'm sure she'll come up with something good for you. Take your time to familiarize yourself with the machine. Use the simulators once you're ready. You'll have full authorization for that."

"Will there be a mission for me soon, brother?" Rolo asks.

He sounds eager, and Kallen is strikingly reminded of herself, at his age, begging for Naoto to give her a chance. Lelouch's response is similar. "Not yet. For the moment, we're still waiting. But it will happen."

Rolo looks disappointed, but unsurprised. "All right."

"There's one more thing I wanted to ask both of you. Keep an eye on the rest of the Black Knights and let me know if there are any problems. We need to prevent any issues like the one Ohgi from arising."

Kallen doesn't hesitate for a second. She's already made the mistake of not reporting information to Zero once. She won't make it again. "Of course. You can count on me."

"I understand."

Lelouch dismisses Kallen after that, but Rolo stays behind. Kallen leaves Zero's office feeling both shaken and determined.

The whole structure of the Black Knights has changed overnight. One of her oldest and dearest friends has betrayed her. A man she considered an enemy—Suzaku—turned out to be secretly an ally. She has no idea where they're all going to go from here, but she does know one thing.

She will remain loyal to Zero and she will help him in whatever position he needs her to occupy.
Happy New Year! An extra long chapter for all my lovely readers today, one starring our favorite knight and our favorite witch! I hope you like it! Don't forget to comment! It helps!

Sometimes, Suzaku hates being in the Britannian army. It's a bit of a paradox, since his loyalty is to the man who will hopefully be the future emperor of Britannia, but that doesn't make the current situation any less frustrating.

His constant inability to be at Lelouch's side continues to annoy him, especially now that Viletta is on board the submarine. Sadly, it's not easy to assuage the doubts of the people he works with. He's not known for his guile, although his years as Zero have helped. He wishes he could just fast forward time and they could all go to Pendragon and have Lelouch take the throne, without all the pain and bloodshed in between.

But he knew what he was getting himself into when he agreed to this, so he waits for orders from his emperor and follows the orders from his official superiors. He is relieved when he learns the Black Knights have finally been informed of his future role. Things are finally falling into place.

He's just as happy when, one day, Euphie asks him to come see her. It's actually pretty surprising. She is quite busy these days and he isn't always with her, since she has been assigned a new knight by Cornelia. When he goes to her office, he finds David Darlton hovering by her side, eyeing Suzaku with visible suspicion. Suzaku wonders if Darlton will do a better job at protecting her than Suzaku did in his first life.

The anniversary of her first death has already been and gone, but that doesn't mean they're entirely safe.

Euphie dismisses Darlton with a smile and a wave, and Darlton's gaze darkens even more as he departs. Suzaku ignores him.

"You wanted to see me, Princess Euphemia?" At her mock-serious glare, he corrects himself. "Euphie."

"Actually, yes, I wanted to ask you about something. Speaking to my brother, these past weeks, I noticed he's been... different. And maybe... So have you, a little."

Suzaku struggles not to recoil. He hasn't realized he's been in any way obvious about his feelings for Lelouch. But he supposes it makes sense. Unlike before, Euphie never ordered him to "love her", nor did she mention her own affection toward him. He's an idiot for not realizing there must be a reason.

She doesn't seem upset when she asks, "You and my brother... What is your relationship exactly?"

Suzaku swallows around the sudden knot in his throat. "I think that, if you're even asking me, you
already know."

Euphie nods. "I suppose I did. I just... I needed to be sure."

Suzaku doesn't know what to say to this. The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her, but he was always aware that it would happen. He just isn't good with this sort of thing. Even with Lelouch, they don't much talk about their feelings. If not for C.C., Suzaku would have probably never done anything about them to begin with—which is saying a lot, given how emotionally removed the witch tends to be.

"I... Uh..." He wants to say he's sorry, but the apology dies in his throat. He can't apologize for the way he feels for his emperor.

Euphie laughs lightly. "Don't look so upset." She gets up and sort of dances to his side. "I think I'm glad for that. When I met with him the first time, he was so angry. He hated us so much. I was afraid for him. And when he said the SAZ wouldn't work, I was afraid that I would never get my brother back. But I'm not afraid anymore." She cups his cheek gently. "Suzaku, I want to see the people I love smile. Do you think that's selfish of me?"

"No," he whispers. "It's not." He's the one who is selfish, but telling her that wouldn't help the conversation any.

She presses a brief, barely-there kiss to his cheek. "Well, I'm not sure if that's true," she says as she pulls away, "but I'll let you indulge me anyway." Her expression turns serious. "Suzaku, I want you to make me a promise."

"A promise? What about?"

"No matter what happens, I want you to stay at my brother's side."

"Of course," Suzaku replies. "That will be my role and my goal. But... Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know... I just... I have this bad feeling. Maybe it's just nerves. I want to believe that everything will go well, but the more I look at everything that's going on... I just... I don't know."

She sounds so uncertain, and for a few dreadful moments, Suzaku considers the possibility of her actually remembering what happened in her previous life. Then, he realizes that can't possibly be the case.

No, this is the result of something entirely different, the fact that this time, Lelouch got actively involved in forming the SAZ.

"Euphie, you're doing great," he tells her. "None of this would even be possible without you."

"I suppose... It was a little arrogant of me, to think I could make something like this work so easily." Her shoulders slump. "I don't know why Schneizel even allowed it to begin with."

There's no reason to point out Schneizel is using her. That would just upset Euphie more.

"Prince Schneizel always preferred solving conflicts without bloodshed," he says, "and he did it because it's a good idea. I know it can be overwhelming project, but everyone will be there to help. For you, and for the Japanese. The Japanese people finally have hope, and that's because of you."

That earns him a small smile. "Well, technically, because of me and Zero."
"That too. Now, don't worry so much. I promise I'll protect him, no matter what. I've already given him my sworn word, as a knight. We'll be fine. You'll see."

Euphie cheers up a little at that. "Thank you, Suzaku. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you."

He puts on a brave face and smiles back, but when he leaves her office, a part of him is still shaken. They are doing the best they can to make sure nothing will go wrong... But what if their best won't be enough?

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C.C. will never admit it, but sometimes, she still struggles with experiencing regret. She has not felt much in so long. Regret was an emotion she pretty much left in the past.

Up to a point, she mourned Mao, but did she really regret leaving him and then shooting him? Probably not.

She would definitely not have come back in time for him.

Lelouch is different, though. C.C. wonders when that started, when he became so special to her. Maybe it was when he asked her not to die without a smile on her face. Maybe it was when he collapsed the Sword of Damocles using his "request" to God. Or maybe it was after, when he and Suzaku put together their insane plan for a better world.

C.C. has seen so much that it's impossible to surprise her, and Lelouch always surprises her. His ideas, his dedication, his tendency to sabotage himself for his loved ones, his ruthlessness... They create a mosaic of a person more fascinating than she ever met in her long life.

After all, who else could have determined God to go through something so crazy and make such a huge exception—just through the act of dying? Only Lelouch.

Yes, regret and guilt have been alien to her for many years, but she feels them now, knowing that she had a direct hand in his ultimate fate, simply because by the time she cared, it was too late. But she is trying to do better now. They all are.

But the thing is her good intentions don't change who she is, which leaves her very frustrated at having to withstand the presence of the Black Knights and actually share Lelouch with them. More often than not, she ends up clinging to Lelouch in a way she wouldn't have in the first timeline.

Things settle down after Viletta's capture, and while there's still a lot of restlessness, she easily slides into Ohgi's place and takes over his role. She hasn't gone through life without learning a thing or two. She's just usually too lazy to put her knowledge into practice, but she can make an exception. Besides, she knows the position will eventually be occupied by Kallen, as she is meant for more.

Not to mention that Lelouch has promised her a lot of pizza if she does this, and he tends to keep his word.

She is therefore very annoyed when the situation is once more disrupted by the arrival of one Sumeragi Kaguya.

In the first timeline, C.C. didn't particularly care about Kaguya. She found her attempts to win Lelouch's heart amusing, mostly because he's an idiot about anything resembling romance and he never would have had a sex life of any kind if she and Suzaku hadn't taken the bull by the horns. Kaguya's approach is simply not good enough.
That, and she's still a naive child.

It's unclear to C.C. if Lelouch blames her for her role in the debacle of his first life. She thinks that maybe he understands that she acted with what information she had at the time, but he's still sore over it.

Either way, that leaves Kaguya out in the cold and with no chance whatsoever to win Lelouch over—which is just the way C.C. likes it.

But C.C. finds that she's a little more vengeful than Lelouch, so when the door of the main deck opens and reveals Kaguya, she drapes herself over Lelouch's lap.

She's actually done this before, many times, but they were in private then, or only with Suzaku present, and he doesn't count, because he's Suzaku. He gets it.

She's taking advantage of the situation, of course. Lelouch is reading something on his tablet and he hasn't even heard the door open. In fact, he is so distracted by what he's doing that he takes it in stride. Amusingly, he ends up combing his hand through her hair in a sort of absent-minded caress that so often characterizes the interaction between him, her and Suzaku these days.

Kaguya doesn't really react to C.C.'s actions, but that's not surprising. She always insisted on being one of his court ladies and didn't seem to mind sharing him.

She bounds over toward them, a bundle of overenthusiastic concern. "Zero. I heard what happened with Ohgi. How dreadful."

Lelouch looks up from his work and faces her. "Kaguya. Yes, it was most regrettable. Given the circumstances, I decided a few changes are necessary."

Yet again, Kaguya doesn't even blink. "I've heard," she said. She turns toward C.C. with a smile. "It will be my pleasure to work with you, C.C."

Ironically, C.C. believes her. Too bad she isn't as generous as Kaguya.

Kaguya's presence does help soothe some of the Black Knights, especially those who didn't trust C.C.'s abilities all that much. Not that she allows Kaguya to take over, but for the moment, appearances are what count. In some ways, Kallen is more trustworthy and more likely to unquestionably defer to Lelouch as a second in command, but for the moment, the situation isn't stable enough to allow her to take up the position. There are still pieces Lelouch needs to slide into place.

There is a delicate balance they're currently relying on. This prompts Lelouch to take one more step. Bringing his knight to his side.

Suzaku is clearly overjoyed when Lelouch makes the offer. C.C. knows he hates being a double agent. He was never built for the life a spy. He far prefers acting in the light, being his emperor's sword without hiding his true allegiance. Besides, being apart from Lelouch makes him jumpy in the same way he was back in their first life. He's been even jumpier since his strange conversation with Euphemia.

Suzaku's mental health is still a work in progress, but C.C. can't exactly point fingers. Besides, neither of them particularly mind. They might all be broken beyond repair, but the shattered pieces of their souls fit together like a puzzle.

She never thought she would come to care for Suzaku too. She's getting soft in her old age. She
They drag him off from Ashford one night, after school. Technically speaking, they should be headed back to the Black Knights, but instead, they drop by Pizza Hut. They buy pizza to go and drive to a secluded spot so they can eat in privacy. The night is cool, but pleasant, and C.C. enjoys the soft breeze as it passes through her hair.

"This will be interesting," Suzaku says as he finishes a slice of pizza. "I've repeated a lot of stuff I've done before, but I'm curious about the submarine."

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to get accustomed to it. We'll have to see what we do about the Ikaruga later."

"How long will the SAZ last, do you think?"

"Half a year, maybe more? It depends on a lot of factors. We have to see how the weather will be this winter. I don't really remember."

Suzaku flinches. It's not an intentional dig on Lelouch's part, but it's still a reminder of what the emperor did to Lelouch's mind.

Lelouch notices immediately. "Hey. I didn't mean it like that. Relax."

"It's over and done with," C.C. declares. "Besides, it will never happen again. That's our main goal and that's why we're here."

"Right. I know that." Suzaku falls silent. C.C. and Lelouch let him have a moment. Lelouch doesn't speak too much about it, but C.C. is aware the whole incident was very painful for him, in more than one way, and it's not so easy to let go of it.

"I've been thinking," Suzaku finally comments. "The mask... You should probably make some changes to it if we're going to go through with this."

"Changes?" Lelouch repeats, embracing the change in topic despite its suddenness.

Suzaku nods. "It gets very uncomfortable after extended periods of time, and you really can't breathe properly. I get that it was never built to be worn for long, but we have to consider practicalities. Also, I suggest some sort of sliding mechanism so you can eat and drink without having to take it off."

Suzaku would know, having worn the blasted thing for longer than Lelouch himself did.

"I suppose that's a good point. I'll look into making the change."

Suzaku smiles, although it's still a little tremulous around the edges. "Great. You're skinny enough as it is."

Lelouch mumbles something about "working on it" and C.C. leans against him. Slowly, the tension between them dissipates and C.C. feels content. Sometimes, she wishes she did have the power to stop time like she planned with Charles, if only because she never wants to leave such moments.

Unfortunately, peace—like pizza—doesn't last forever, and so they are soon forced to be on their way.

"Is it strange that I'm looking forward to this?" Suzaku asks as they head toward a more secluded part of the Tokyo settlement.
C.C. laughs. "Not really. Just try to keep the bloodshed to the minimum, will you, White Reaper?"

Suzaku rolls his eyes, not offended in the slightest. "Yes, yes, witch."

Lelouch snorts. He's already in his costume, ready for the new stage in their game. "Behave, you two. We're almost there."

The mechanics of getting Suzaku on board are actually a little elaborate. They don't have personal transports for people which they can afford to take whenever Lelouch needs them. With the exception of the former mobile base, most of their equipment is focused on transporting knightmares. Lelouch and C.C. tend to use the Gawain to travel from the submarine and regular vehicles—now permanently and discreetly appropriated—in the city. Tonight is no different. Lelouch has commandeered the usage of a warehouse, making sure everybody who might approach would not accidentally stumble onto their operation. They leave the car there, and slide into the knightmare. The submarine isn't far, but it's not practical for it to approach the coastline whenever Zero leaves, so they still need to fly the rest of the way there.

Fortunately, the Gawain is a very spacious frame, and C.C. ends up seated in Suzaku's lap. They fit without too many problems, and C.C. even wriggles around a little to tease him. "Witch," Suzaku mumbles again. Lelouch just laughs at him.

C.C. ignores his frustration and pilots the Gawain to the awaiting submarine. As soon as they reach the vessel, a veil seems to fall on Suzaku's face. It's no longer surprising, not for her, or for Lelouch. By the time the Requiem happened in their first life, Suzaku went through enough mental trauma to nearly crush him entirely. After, he had the burden of his role as Zero and the duty Lelouch left him with. The mask did offer him some protection, but at the same time, he lived in almost complete isolation for years on end. These days, he's only ever open and happy around her and Lelouch, but he turns to ice whenever anyone else—except perhaps, Euphemia—enters the equation.

Personally, C.C. finds it a good thing that he can open his heart to them. At the end of the day, the three of them are the ones that matter anyway. Everyone else is secondary.

Suzaku's poker face and thick skin helps them tremendously, because the reaction of the staff is... mixed. It's sort of amusing really. They welcome her and Lelouch with wide smiles, but when Suzaku emerges from the knightmare—last—they freeze like deer in the headlights. It makes sense, since most of them were completely unaware of Suzaku's double agent role to begin with.

Rakshata is in the hangars, though, and she takes his arrival in stride. "Oh... This is a surprise. The devicer of the Earl of Pudding. I suppose I owe you some thanks for all that data."

"I'm sure you'll find some way to make it up to me," Suzaku replies. "I'll probably need someone to work on the Lancelot pretty soon. I can't imagine Lloyd will follow me here. Come to think of it, I'll probably need a new knightmare."

"We'll make sure to have something for you," Lelouch says nonchalantly. Turning toward Rakshata, he asks, "How is everything, Rakshata? Any updates?"

"I'm currently working on customizing a Burai for your brother, although I have a new project based on specifications he mentioned on the list."

"And everyone else?"

"Most everyone is still awake and on deck. You're turning all of us into night owls."

C.C. is relieved, because she doesn't want to wait until morning to wrap this up. Besides, she's
looking forward to this almost as much as Lelouch is, if not more. She enjoys their discomfort and frustration.

She wonders if the Black Knights can even handle Suzaku. Thinking back at the last time Suzaku met any of them, she thinks the answer is a definite 'no'. She wonders how he feels about facing people he once killed. Does he even care? What is she thinking? Of course he doesn't. He was called the White Reaper for a reason.

Lelouch thanks Rakshata and leaves the hangars. Suzaku and C.C. trail after him. "Want to make a bet on who will try to attack me first?"

Lelouch snorts. "That's a fool's bet, Suzaku. If Tamaki doesn't say anything regrettable, I'll eat my helmet."

The imagery amuses her and she suspects Suzaku would have actually laughed if not for their location. They don't have much time for jokes. In no time at all, they reach the deck.

"Anything to report?" Lelouch asks as he comes in, repeating the inquiry he made to Rakshata.

"Nothing much, Zero. We..." Inoue trails off as she looks up from her monitors. "Oh."

By the time she finishes the phrase, everyone has already noticed the same thing she did. "I'll make the introductions," Lelouch says, "even if they're largely unnecessary at this point. Everyone, this is Kururugi Suzaku. At present, he is working as my spy in the Britannian army, but he will also be acting as my personal guard in the near future and coordinate with Tohdoh for military operations. Further instructions will be available at a later time."

"Good evening everyone," Suzaku says blandly. "It's a pleasure to be here."

Diethard nods, accepting the command. It's like he's forgotten that he once suggested to assassinate Suzaku. But then, Diethard always was very practical. "Welcome."

Kaguya walks up to them next, scrutinizing Suzaku with keen eyes. It's pointless, because there's nothing she can discern from his expression. "Hello, Suzaku. How have you been?"

"Not as well as you, I expect. It's nice to see you, Kaguya."

"Wait, the two of you know each other?" Tamaki shouts.

"We're cousins," Suzaku explains. "We were also engaged to be married when we were younger, before the invasion."

Tohdoh coughs awkwardly. He was of course aware of Suzaku's history with Kaguya, but he kept it under wraps for understandable purposes. Most of the Black Knights look befuddled, like they're not even sure how to react anymore.

"That's not an issue right now," Lelouch says. "I wanted to have Suzaku here since he will be deeply involved in the SAZ project, and in what comes after."

Despite the awkwardness, it's easy for them to fall into a conversation over practicalities. Suzaku pipes in with his own observations on where Britannia will likely post their people around the SAZ and the extent of their involvement. Tohdoh occasionally gives him long looks, but he doesn't interrupt the meeting to address whatever is bothering him.

As expected, it doesn't take long for Tamaki to become unable to keep his mouth shut. "Wait just a
minute. How will we even work together? Kururugi is Euphemia's knight!"

"Actually, I'm not any longer," Suzaku says. "I returned Princess Euphemia's pin, as I couldn't serve her when my loyalties lay elsewhere. I am, after all, the Knight of Zero."

Trust Suzaku to say something like that with a straight face.

Despite their name, the Black Knights don't have a system of ranks similar to the Britannian one. They do have the Zero Squad, which is, in a way, like a royal guard, but the concept of a personal 'knight' is still very much Britannian. Suzaku very clearly doesn't care. In fact, C.C. would hazard a guess that he prefers it this way. He wants to make them uncomfortable as much as she does.

Lelouch doesn't leave Suzaku hanging either. "The official title will be present in the revised version of the attributes of our members, which is in process of being completed," he says calmly.

"Is that really necessary?" Senba asks carefully. "There's already Kallen and the Zero Squad. How will it work?"

"I've already spoken to Kallen about it and we'll be moving things around a bit. On the battlefield, watching my back will primarily be Rolo's job. Suzaku and Kallen will be our main firepower. The rest of the time, either C.C. or Suzaku will be with me. But again, you'll receive the finished diagram soon."

Asahina shoots Lelouch a hesitant look. "But Zero..."

"Enough," Lelouch cuts him off. "This incident with Ohgi has made it clear to me that we do need a little more transparency in the Black Knights. While I cannot remove the mask at this time, for my own reasons, I believe it's fair to provide a little more information into what we will be doing—as evidenced by Suzaku's visit. This does not mean I will allow you to question my decisions. Clear?"

"Yes, Zero," Asahina says quickly.

"Excellent. Now, if there isn't anything else, I have some paperwork to catch up on."

This time, there are no questions, and they leave the Black Knights to adjust to this new information. C.C. finds that she enjoys rocking the boat like this. Ohgi has given them the perfect opening for Lelouch to mold the Black Knights better than he did the first time. It's almost karmic, given the extent of the damage Ohgi and Viletta did to Lelouch's plans.

That doesn't mean she doesn't look forward to just retire with Lelouch and Suzaku. She's eaten her pizza. Now, she wants some sex.

She has two lovers in their prime. It shouldn't be so difficult to find enough time to squeeze in an orgasm, even if Lelouch's stamina still isn't the best.

She must be cursed, because they don't get very far before they're stopped by Inoue. "I forgot to ask you something, Zero," she calls out as she comes rushing down the corridor. "Where will Kururugi be accommodated?"

"There's no need for a separate room, Inoue. He'll stay with me and C.C."

Inoue's expression is priceless, and she looks at Suzaku with wide eyes. Suzaku doesn't waste the occasion and smirks.

Lelouch seems oblivious to her shock, but C.C. knows better than to believe it. She would bet her
immortality that he's smirking too behind the mask. He likes showing off Suzaku. It's his... thing. He's always been possessive and obsessive about the few people he loves, and Suzaku's obstinate insistence to be a Britannian soldier crippled many of Lelouch's plans—much like his love for Nunnally did. C.C. knows for a fact that one of the few things Lelouch enjoyed during his time pre-Requiem was having Suzaku as his knight, dressed in his colors and in the somewhat... revealing uniform of the Knight of Zero. In fact, she highly suspects he's planning to have him wear something similar now. It probably won't affect the Black Knights very much, since their dress code isn't as formal and stiff as that of the Britannian army, but their reaction may still be amusing.

Also, it may distract them from the more complicated matter—the exact way Suzaku and Zero became lovers. It's no secret that Zero is Britannian, so they may naturally conclude that they met during Suzaku's time as an Honorary Britannian. However, there is a small chance that somebody will remember Suzaku and Lelouch's friendship as children. It wasn't an issue in the first life at all, but at the time, Suzaku's loyalty to Britannia was never in question and his relationship to Zero always hostile.

Just the same, Lelouch isn't willing to hide their relationship, so they've decided to act normally and enjoy themselves. After all, Lelouch would give up on the Black Knights before he gave up on Suzaku.

As for C.C., she will take her entertainment wherever she can, and right now, the source is Inoue.

"Oh.." the woman says, her eyes very wide. "Umm... I... uh... see."

She looks between the three of them again, and C.C. keeps the placid expression on her face, knowing very well it just confuses Inoue more. "By the way," Lelouch adds, "you don't need to worry about uniforms for him and C.C. I'll handle that privately."

C.C. almost bursts into laughter, because she totally nailed it. Suzaku shoots Lelouch an inscrutable look. She wonders if he's realized Lelouch's reasoning by now. He could be very obtuse too, and while he's changed since the days of the Requiem, it doesn't necessarily mean he will always understand Lelouch's silliness.

She'll have to make it clear to him one way or another. He'll probably enjoy the idea. He has a thing for... belonging to Lelouch too.

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupts their amusing exchange. They all turn, just in time to see a female figure burst into the corridor.

It's... Viletta.

Everything happens so fast. Viletta points her gun and shoots. C.C. shoves Lelouch down and they hit the floor with a jarring thud, with her covering his body with her own. Suzaku is already moving, pulling his sword out of its sheath. C.C. can see his Geass flaring around him like a wave. In fact, if not for the brightness of the Geass, she may not have been able to see him at all.

He catches the bullet with his sword and diverges it from its path. Then, he shoots forward, faster than any projectile.

His sword goes straight through Viletta's chest.

The light is already going out from her eyes when Inoue snaps out of her shock and starts to scream.

The corridor is now flooding with people, all alerted by the sound of the gunshot and the screaming. Suzaku seems oblivious to their arrival. He pulls out his sword from the wound and rushes back to
Lelouch and C.C.

"Are you okay?" he asks, pawing at Lelouch with frantic, shaking hands. His palms are stained with Viletta's blood and he gets it all over Lelouch's Zero cape and suit. That just makes him more agitated, since the sight is eerily reminiscent of the time Suzaku himself killed Lelouch. His own black uniform is stained, but he doesn't seem to see it at all. "Are you okay?" he repeats.

"Just a little shocked," Lelouch says, clutching Suzaku's wrists. "And maybe I bruised my hip when I fell. C.C. is heavy."

It's a bit of a joke, perhaps not the best one, but as good as Lelouch can ever manage. It still helps Suzaku calm down. "Right. You're fine. You're alive."

"Yes. I'm fine. You kept me safe."

Suzaku is still buzzing with adrenaline. C.C. brushes her fingers over his cheek, slowly getting his Geass to settle. She's aware that there are currently a lot of eyes on them, but she doesn't care.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Lelouch had plans in place, specific plans that weren't supposed to come into fruition until further along the line.

"What happened?" she asks, unable to keep her anger from her voice. "Who was supposed to keep an eye on her?"

"Sugiyama and Yoshida," Lelouch replies, finally releasing Suzaku. Of course he would remember. His voice is already calm again, and Suzaku helps him up.

By now, the alarms have already been sounded and Tohdoh has proven that he is in fact worthy of his job and has alerted the guards on the inferior levels. They make their way there anyway, with Lelouch leading the way and Suzaku hovering by his side, still in over-protective Knight of Zero mode.

He makes quite a picture, especially since he hasn't bothered to clean his sword of blood. C.C. does her very best to not look at him and Lelouch. It's bringing back bad memories for her too.

On the scene of Viletta's cell, they find two glum-faced guards carrying a body out. It's Ohgi, and his neck is hanging at an awkward angle.

"He must have tried to free her and got himself killed for his trouble," Tohdoh murmurs.

"What about Sugiyama and Yoshida?" Lelouch asks between gritted teeth. "Report, damn it."

"They're fine," one of the guards says. "They were sedated. We had them sent to the infirmary."

Well, C.C. supposes that's a good thing. She doesn't care about the Black Knights, but Lelouch can't afford to lose people, not yet, at least.

Lelouch lets out a slow breath. "Thank God for small mercies." He steals a look at Ohgi's body, silent. After a few moments, he finally says, "Carry on. Everyone else, meeting on deck in ten minutes."

He turns on his heel, his cape flaring dramatically as he leaves. C.C. and Suzaku follow him to his quarters.

As soon as he's there, he starts to remove his stained clothes. A part of C.C. wants to help him out.
It's unlike her, but she decides not to question it too much. She pulls off his neckerchief and tosses it aside, feeling irrationally resentful of the white material. It's not his blood on the thing, but it easily could have been.

Suzaku only finds his voice once the cape and jacket have been replaced with clean ones. "What happened? What went wrong?"

The Geass Lelouch placed on Viletta was elaborate. She wasn't supposed to get out until the SAZ was up and running, until they could control the aftermath without too much trouble. Lelouch also made sure she would not be able to say a word about his true identity, and that she would remain the harmless Chigusa until Ohgi stepped in. She was eventually supposed to attempt an attack on Zero, but only under specific circumstances, so that whoever was with him could eliminate her without them actually risking her escape.

"I don't know. Ohgi was meant to..."

He trails off, as if he's just had a realization. Then, much to C.C.'s surprise, he starts to laugh. "I Geassed Ohgi to free her during the SAZ, at which point her Geass was supposed to activate and she would kill him. But... I didn't tell him not to do it before."

Suzaku stares at him. "So... He did it himself? Out of his own initiative?"

"It seems like it."

"Free will," C.C. drawls. "Don't you just love it?"

"Not so much now, I admit," Suzaku offers with a frustrated sigh. "We have to be more careful, Lelouch. I can't lose you again."

Lelouch's amusement instantly fades. "I was never in any danger. She couldn't have killed me. She'd have missed if you hadn't been there. You know that, Suzaku."

"I know that's what you planned, but plans go wrong," Suzaku insists. "Promise me. We won't do anything like that again."

Suzaku sounds so lost, in pain, like in the days when she still hated him, when he would cut himself just out of the need to feel Lelouch close. Lelouch must sense that too, because he hugs his knight close. "All right. I promise."

C.C. ends up joining in on the embrace. It should have been strange, but by now, it's their new normal.

They don't have too much time to linger on their embrace. Lelouch has to doctor the video of Suzaku in the corridor to keep the Black Knights from seeing anything suspicious. As she watches him work, C.C. leans against Suzaku, closes her eyes and tries not to think about the Dimensional Supervisor's warning.

Some things are simply meant to happen. Some things cannot change. What if they've come all this way for nothing? What if she'll lose him—lose them both—all over again?

Chapter End Notes
I decided to start out 2018 with death... I wonder what that says about my state of mind. ROFL. Well, I suppose whoever has read my stuff before shouldn't be too surprised.
Yay! Here is another update for you guys! Thank you to everyone who reviewed since my last update. You guys are awesome! Hope you enjoy this new chapter!

Diethard stands in the corner of the main deck, struggling not to tap his foot nervously. He's never been one to easily panic, but today is a day for exceptions.

The core members of the Black Knights have already assembled on deck. The only one missing is Kallen Kozuki, who is currently at Ashford.

It's silent. Most of them are still in shock. Losing Ohgi is a huge emotional blow, moreso because of the way it occurred.

It's not unusual for someone to die on the battlefield. They all know that, and they're prepared for it. But Ohgi didn't die fighting for Japan. He died on board their submarine, in what is essentially their home, after he turned on them for a Britannian woman.

Diethard doesn't care about Ohgi, though. He cares about Zero, about how close they came to losing him.

If Kururugi hadn't been there... Maybe C.C. could have protected Zero, but it's doubtful that she could have done it so efficiently. Does she even have a weapon? Diethard has never seen one on her.

To make matters worse, Kururugi's behavior after eliminating the threat alarms Diethard. He hasn't forgotten about Zero's apparent heart attack on the island, and the way Kururugi pawed at Zero's chest suggests there is a problem there, something Zero's inner circle is aware of.

He carefully watches everyone in the room, wondering if there is anyone here who would know. His eyes fall on Zero's little brother.

Rolo is strikingly still, but in that way that means he's vibrating with tension inside. He hasn't looked away from the door since he first came into the room. He's leaning against the wall, waiting and watching, ignoring everyone else.

It would be unerving if everyone wasn't too distracted by recent events to care.

Diethard approaches the young man, knowing this may be his one shot to find out if Zero's health is in peril. He joins Rolo, but Zero's brother doesn't acknowledge him. "Can I ask you one question?"

Diethard inquires after a few long moments of silence.

Rolo still doesn't look at him. "You can, but I may not answer."

That's fair. "Zero... Is his heart okay?"

At that, Rolo finally faces Diethard. "His... heart? What do you..."
His nostrils flare, and his eyes fill with a sudden realization. It quickly vanishes, but Diethard has already seen the surge of fury. "So there is something."

Rolo doesn't reply. He's even tenser than before, clenching and unclenching his fists. He retires to one of the corners of the room, and the aura of "do not approach" is so strong it's practically palpable.

Diethard wonders why Rolo didn't go to find his brother in his quarters. Too late to ask now.

In the end, it's irrelevant, because Zero does show up eventually. It's been a little longer than ten minutes, but nobody calls him out on the delay.

Both he and Kururugi have changed out of their stained clothes. They look as put together as they did earlier, before the entire debacle. The Black Knights uniform isn't the best fit for Kururugi, but it's still a better option than the student clothes he was wearing before.

Rolo practically runs to his side. "Big brother, you're okay."

"Of course, Rolo, but you already knew that."

Rolo doesn't say anything, but some of the tension drains out of his stance. He shoots Kururugi a long look, then takes position by C.C.'s side.

Zero delves right into the topic. "Do we know what exactly happened? I had Ohgi watched precisely to avoid him doing anything stupid."

"We've procured the surveillance files," Diethard replies. "Minami was with him, but it would appear Ohgi got him drunk and knocked him out. Then, he procured the sedatives from the infirmary, which he used against Sugiyama and Yoshida."

He brings up a series of videos on the screen. They all watch the sequence of events, starting with Ohgi's escape, to Viletta's attack on him. There is some understandable flinching when she breaks Ohgi's neck, and the tension only increases when she finds a gun in his jacket, leaves, then runs into Zero. The life-changing event is over very quickly. She attempts to kill Zero, but C.C. pushes him down and covers his body with hers. The bullet never reaches them, as Kururugi deflects it with his sword and proceeds to eliminate the threat.

Diethard has already seen the videos once before, and going over them again makes him realize something about the one with the attack on Zero seems a bit... not right. No one else notices. Diethard himself probably wouldn't have if not for his experience in video editing. He can't tell what is actually wrong with it, but something about it niggles at him.

Just one more mystery on the list of numerous ones surrounding Zero.

Zero is notably displeased upon reviewing all the footage. "Why did no one notice this? Security should have been monitoring the cameras."

"That's usually how it's done, but... There was some commotion during Kururugi's arrival," Tohdoh replies. "People got distracted."

Kururugi narrows his eyes. Clearly, he doesn't appreciate the excuse.

"If it hadn't been Kururugi, it would have been something else," Diethard says. The last thing they need right now is an argument about whose fault it is, especially not if the rest of the Black Knights decide to point fingers at Zero's savior.
Surprisingly, there are nods all around. "He was just waiting for his chance," Rakshata says. "He knew his girlfriend would never escape."

"He may have planned to take her once we were in the SAZ," Asahina muses.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Zero cuts them all off. "It's done. We need to tighten security and make sure such mistakes don't happen again. Distractions are no excuse."

Nobody argues with that. They're all far too aware of the massive mistake that has been made.

"Technically speaking, this is our base, and it's understandable that our guard shouldn't always be up," Zero continues. "However, we can't afford to be lax, especially not at this time. I realize I have been pushing you all very hard. I will review the rotation of the guards and see where we can make adjustments.

"Next item on the list. Ohgi's funeral. As far as I recall, he has no family. The closest one to him would be Q1, correct?"

"Yes, Zero," Yoshida replies. "Ohgi was a good friend of her brother's."

"We will notify her of the incident. In the meantime, do you know if he had preferences or arrangements on a final resting spot?"

Nobody replies. It simply wasn't something either of them had the time to worry about.

"Perhaps we could take him to the Kururugi Shrine," Kururugi surprisingly suggests. "Technically, it's not my place to offer, given that it's long stopped being mine, but it's a peaceful location and nobody would think to disturb the site."

"That's a good idea, Suzaku," Kaguya answers.

"We'll discuss it with Q1, and if she's for it, we'll do that," Zero decides.

"What about the woman?" Chiba inquires. "What will we do with her?"

"We're going to have to bury her in the same place."

Diethard can see the protests already forming in the minds of the Black Knights. Zero stops them before they can say anything.

"I know. I realize it's not ideal. But we have no other choice. She's cost us a good man and I still don't know how many Japanese she may have killed in the past. Even so, abandoning her body is not an option. It would stir suspicion among the Britannian ranks. Dumping it in the water is out of the question. We simply do not have the facilities to burn it, and finding a different spot to bury it would be far too time-consuming. Besides, we're not Britannia. We don't desecrate the bodies of the fallen. An enemy she might have been, but she's dead. We will let the matter die with her."

Diethard listens to the speech and hides a smile. Even now, Zero manages to be as charismatic and convincing as ever. The Black Knights don't always take into account practical considerations, but honor? Yes, that is something they understand.

This is why Zero is important. This is why they need him, why they can never exist without him. Zero's genius shines even in dark moments like these.

It is humbling that such a man could have been so easily extinguished tonight. But no, Diethard
cannot believe that.

He wonders now... Could Zero have planned it all? It would make sense. Ohgi had been a big problem, since dealing with him in a way that wouldn't stir the anger of the rest of the ranks seemed next to impossible. Zero could have had him assassinated in secret, but he chose not to. He chose to expose his treason.

Why?

There's something Diethard is missing, some piece of the puzzle that he doesn't have. Kururugi. Rolo. C.C. How do they all fit in?

Zero surrounded himself with his people. He must have known that he would be attacked at one point. Could he have arranged it? But how? It doesn't make any sense. Could it have something to do with the doctored video?

He shelves the thought for a later date. It suits Zero's MO better than his new model of transparency, but he's not going to share that realization with anyone.

Besides, there is still the heart attack, which again, seems unusual. Diethard doubts it was faked. He can't see a reason why Zero would display vulnerability at such a delicate time, on the island, as reported by Kallen Kozuki. That's more important right now.

He doesn't mention that either, but as it turns out, he doesn't have to. Inoue brings it up in his stead. "Zero, if I may ask... How are you feeling? I mean... How's your heart?"

Zero turns toward Inoue. So do C.C. and Kururugi. Diethard can't interpret the expression on Kururugi's face, but it's not a stretch to say the question upsets him.

When he speaks, Zero sounds exasperated. "Not this again... I've said this several times already. I'm fine. I do not have a heart condition."

"Forgive us if we are skeptical," Tohdoh answers. "I understand why you would be reluctant to share such details with us, but we all saw Kururugi's reaction to the attack."

Kururugi goes very still. His face is like stone. Perhaps he did not expect to be called out on his actions.

"Suzaku tends to err on the side of caution when it comes to my safety. He may be at times... overzealous. It's true that I did suffer from a serious injury in the past, and I do experience phantom pains. But it's a very rare occurrence and not something of concern."

"If you're sure, Zero," Kaguya says slowly. "But you know, you don't have to hide things like that from us."

"Of course not!" Tamaki says, suddenly having a surprising amount of fire. "You're my best bud."

Zero clears his throat. "I appreciate your words. Rest assured that I'm not being reckless."

"That's what Suzaku and I are for," C.C. pipes up. "To make sure he's safe."

Kururugi nods silently. He's calming down, and that appears to calm everyone else.

After all, if there truly had been an issue, Kururugi would be panicking. That much was obvious from the earlier scene.
Kururugi's reasons for becoming a double agent are unclear. Diethard isn't certain as to how that whole thing came to pass. Nevertheless, his loyalties do lie with Zero, and for now, that's good enough.

"Moving on," Zero says, "I have decided that it is time to review the personnel files. This could have all been avoided had we had more information about Ohgi's home life. I have always believed the Black Knights had the right to their privacy, especially given my own situation. However, we may have to make some sacrifices for the safety of everyone here. I will devise a form and we will all have to fill it in and hand it over to the Intelligence Department."

"So you will be completing this form too?" Asahina asks, clearly surprised.

"Yes, of course," Zero replies. "I don't have anything to hide in that regard. My significant others are right here."

He extends his hands toward C.C. and Kururugi. Diethard finds that he isn't as surprised as he should have been.

The air in the room seems to freeze.

"Wait, you're gay?" Tamaki screeches.

Inoue elbows him in the stomach. "Tamaki!"

"The word for it is bisexual," C.C. drawls. "Problem?"

"No, of course not," Tohdoh says quickly. "We were all just surprised."

Diethard clears his throat. "I believe that for the purpose of this conversation, Zero's sexual orientation is irrelevant." In Britannia, that sort of thing doesn't matter, but the Japanese are a little more restrained, so he isn't actually sure what their take on it would be.

As it turns out, it doesn't seem to be much of an issue. If anything, a lot of the people there steal a look at Kururugi and seem to relax. They didn't understand his reasons either, but now, his actions make sense.

"Now, if that is everything, this meeting is adjourned," Zero declares.

He retires shortly after, and his lovers and Rolo rush after him. Following his departure, conversation immediately explodes.

"Wow," Chiba says, "I didn't see that coming."

"Well, it's a good thing," Kaguya offers. "It means he's very open-minded. And Suzaku will make a great addition to our household."

Diethard suspects he's fooling herself if she thinks there's room for anyone else in Zero's bed, but it's not his business to say that.

"To be fair," Rakshata pipes up, "he always was very..."

She makes a sort of hand gesture, trying, but failing to mimic Zero's persona. "Dramatic?" Asahina suggests.

"Fabulous," Rakshata corrects him. "And always so surprising."
"I suppose that's true," Tohdoh replies. "And it does make sense that Kururugi decided to join us if they're involved."

His practical comment is set aside by Tamaki's irreverent one. "How does that even work, though? The three of them together?"

"I suppose it depends if C.C. and Kururugi are together too, or if they're just with Zero, but separate," Diethard replies, unable to keep himself from fueling the fire.

At this point, he is proud that he is managing to keep himself from laughing. Somehow, Zero has succeeded to turn the whole mood of the Black Knights around by dropping the bomb of his sexual orientation on them.

Undoubtedly, they will remember the issue with Ohgi, but their lost comrade will soon become nothing more than an unfortunate footnote in the history of the Black Knights. Diethard has absolutely no doubt that this is exactly the way Zero planned it.

Chapter End Notes

I won't lie. Diethard is one of my favorite chars. I was always unhappy with the way he died in R2.
As planned, Ohgi and Viletta are buried at the Kururugi shrine. All the Black Knights are present, grim-faced, but respectful. Kallen is quiet, but C.C. can tell it's a kind of silence that doesn't hold just grief. It holds fury.

As she looks at Ohgi's grave, there is something akin to hatred in her eyes. She cannot forgive the fact that Ohgi's actions almost caused Lelouch's death.

C.C. sticks to Lelouch's side and remains silent. Suzaku isn't here, since he couldn't absent himself from work. Rolo is on Lelouch's other side, quiet and watchful. The whole thing is clearly bothering him a lot. It's not just Viletta. The Black Knights' insistence to dig into Lelouch's heart issues have made him even angrier at Suzaku. C.C. hopes it won't become a problem at a later date.

For the moment, his job is to keep an eye on Tohdoh and make sure he isn't suspicious. They are testing his memories, to make sure how likely it is that he'd remember the young Britannian prince who once lived here. So far, there's been no sign of anything.

Should push come to shove, Lelouch can use his Geass on the man, but he doesn't want to waste it. After Viletta, it's become obvious that they need to be even more careful with its use.

Sometimes, C.C. wonders why Lelouch refuses to simply enslave the Black Knights like he did to the Britannian soldiers in the Requiem period. She supposes that's one of the reasons why he's special. He may have the power of the king, but he's never truly abused it, not until he became emperor, at least. She suspects that's part of the reason why the Dimensional Supervisor gave him a second chance to begin with.

Lelouch holds a small speech for Ohgi, praising his work in the service of the Japanese people and studiously ignoring the way that service ended. It should have been awkward, given that Ohgi almost caused Lelouch's death, but Lelouch's true gift is inspiring people and making them believe what he wants them to. Amusingly, more than one Black Knight is touched. Tamaki even tears up a little at Zero's 'generosity'.

Viletta is buried with little pomp, and her gravestone carries the name Chigusa Ohgi, in Japanese writing. Ironically, it was Kallen's idea. "She would have hated it, I think," she explained.

They're all relieved when the grim affair is over, but the mood of the Black Knights is still dark as they return to their base. Lelouch sets up a guard rotation and orders everyone else to take a day off.

"Tomorrow, we have to return to work, but a break will perhaps do us all good."

The Black Knights are visibly relieved. They are surprised when they learn Zero does not intend to leave the submarine as he usually does, but he waves it off. "Paperwork," he explains.

C.C. carefully watches their faces as Lelouch turns to leave. They're finally understanding that he is
just as human as them, but he holds himself at a far higher standard.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll sit on him and get him to eat and sleep."

She doesn't wait to assess their reaction and instead rushes after him. As soon as they're in his quarters, Lelouch takes off his mask and lets out a long breath. C.C. plops down on his bed with her arms extended like she's a starfish. "It's a little surprising, isn't it? Their reaction."

"A little." Lelouch laughs. "I half-expect them to distrust me while I'm in the field, just because I don't look superhuman anymore."

"You tried that once and it didn't work. Who knows? Maybe this will turn out better."

"If it doesn't, I have plenty of contingency plans."

He does. After all, there's a reason why he needs so many funds, and it's not just because of the SAZ. "Making progress on the safe house?"

"Everything will be ready soon. I've already wiped all the records of the existence of the house from electronic files, and had the physical evidence destroyed."

"I honestly can't believe it was so easy to get General Cao under Geass." It is through Cao that Lelouch is setting up everything he needs done in the Chinese Federation. His jurisdiction over Liaodong makes him ideal as a pawn in Lelouch's new chess game.

"It's Cao's own fault for working with Sawasaki," Lelouch says. "Anyway, I don't want to resort to that just yet, not until we see what happens with the SAZ and get it up and running."

He's already starting to boot his laptop, no doubt intending to go over the reports he had pending. C.C. knows she should probably help, but she's bored. They've done enough work for the day. Just dealing with the stupidity of the Black Knights should warrant a prize.

"Lelouch, come to bed."

Lelouch shoots her a bemused look. "Witch..."

C.C. arches a brow at him. "It's hardly fair that they'd be the only ones to have a day off, now is it?"

She can see him succumbing already and mentally pats herself on the back. She's half-regretful, half-relieved Suzaku isn't here. This way, she can have Lelouch to herself for a change, but at the same time, it would be nice to have their little triad complete.

Ah, well. Suzaku is sure to compensate for it at a later date.

Before Lelouch can go through with her completely reasonable request, a knock sounds at the door. Left with no one to cuddle, C.C. grabs Cheese-kun and holds him close.

"You should probably get that," she tells Lelouch.

Lelouch grimaces, but puts his mask back on. C.C. leans against the pillows, watching the door with little interest. She hopes whoever it is will leave quickly. They should understand who Lelouch really belongs to.

As it turns out, their unexpected and unwanted visitor is Diethard. Lelouch lets him in with little fanfare. "My apologies for interrupting you in your private time, Zero, but I wanted to discuss something with you."
"And what's that, Diethard?" Lelouch asks.

"It's about your recent health issues." Lelouch goes very still, but Diethard faces the blank Zero mask without flinching. "I want to understand how you wish to... present this information to the rest of the Black Knights. This new approach you have been taking is different from what I've seen in the past, but I doubt you would let something like this slip if you didn't intend to."

C.C. analyzes Diethard closely. Other than Kallen, he was always the Black Knight with most confidence in Zero. His strange idea, his idealization of Zero's image, could easily backfire on them. Or it could help them.

She wonders what path Lelouch will take. He's less resentful over Diethard betraying him over Schneizel in the first life since the man did make an honest attempt to support him. But is it enough?

"Tell me something, Diethard..." Lelouch says. "Who are you loyal to?"

"You, Zero," Diethard replies without missing a beat. "You know that."

"And who am I to you? What do you expect of me?"

Diethard almost seems surprised at the question. "What I expect? I expect you to destroy this world order and rebuild it in your image. It's my dream to document these momentous events as they occur."

"I see. All right, Diethard. I will give you this chance, to document Zero's true story. But for now, it must stay between us."

A manic light shines in Diethard's eyes. "Yes, of course, Zero. I understand."

Lelouch sits down on his couch and crosses his legs. Making the sacrifice of abandoning Cheese-kun, C.C. leaves her spot on the bed and plops down next to him. She leans against him and Lelouch idly pets her hair. "Did you ever learn, Diethard, what was in the canister I opened that day, when I released Suzaku?"

"I believe, officially, it was supposed to be the poison gas the terrorists stole," Diethard replies. "It was never poison gas. That canister held C.C."

Diethard stares between Lelouch and C.C. "Pardon?"

"For a while now, Britannia has been involved in human experimentation. C.C. was one of the subjects. So was I. I won't bore you with the things that were done to us, but I will tell you this. The reason behind my chest pains is that I was stabbed in the heart. It was a lethal wound... But I lived because of C.C. and Suzaku."

C.C. is beginning to understand where Lelouch is going with this. Diethard always did want to turn Zero into a god. He betrayed Lelouch when it became obvious that his god was falling, but with this revelation at this point in time, his loyalty would be assured.

"Britannia's aim is to create a form of superhuman, but so far, their results are very random," she says. "Allow me to demonstrate."

She gets up and retrieves a letter opener from the table. Without hesitation, she stabs herself through the arm.
It hurts, but after all the physical deaths she has experienced, it's largely irrelevant. She's been burned alive, crushed by oceanic pressure, suffocated and tortured. A tiny stab wound leaves her cold.

She pulls the small knife out of the wound. Lelouch retrieves his handkerchief and wipes her arm clean of blood.

The wound heals before their very eyes. "I want pizza," she demands.

"Sure," Lelouch offers. "I'll see what I can do."

They look up at the other occupant of the room. Diethard seems torn between shock and manic glee. "And you... You're like that too, Zero."

Lelouch shakes his head. "My power is different. I can order anyone to do whatever I want them to. I could order you to die right now, and you would take your gun and shoot yourself. I've done that to many people in the past. Britannians. My enemies."

He gets up, and there's something about him, an aura, that seems legitimately terrifying. Not to her. She knows him too well for that. But all the blood on Lelouch's hands has left a mark on him too. She's sure he's smirking behind the mask, that mad little smile that always heralds unfortunate events for the people around him.

"Are you scared, Diethard?" he asks, sounding strikingly calm.

Miraculously, Diethard finds his voice. "Yes. No. I'm not sure." A pause. "Is that how you killed Ohgi?"

Lelouch laughs. "Ironically, no. I did plan for something similar, and Viletta was ordered to kill him, but he freed her of his own accord. But unexpected things happen all the time."

"That's why Suzaku and I exist," C.C. adds. "I am his shield and Suzaku is his sword."

"The video," Diethard whispers. "That's why it was edited. One of you did something, something the rest of us weren't supposed to see."

"Precisely. I can't tell the rest of the Black Knights any of this. I've never used this power to acquire their loyalty. I could, but I have no desire to surround myself with zombies. That doesn't mean my ability wouldn't cause fear. Inoue might have witnessed the whole episode with Viletta, but anything she saw can be set aside as influenced by shock. Video evidence is entirely different."

Diethard is already convinced, but Lelouch must want to drive the final nail in the coffin. "I am not just a terrorist, Diethard," he says. "I am the future emperor of the world." He pulls off his mask. "Lelouch vi Britannia."

"Le-Lelouch... vi... Britannia... The... lost... prince..."

Diethard is shaking, and C.C. is vaguely disturbed by his expression, wondering if he's having an orgasm on the spot. Lelouch ignores the weirdness. "So Diethard. What are you willing to do for me?"

"Anything," Diethard blurts out, dropping to his knees. "Anything, Your Majesty."

While Diethard is on his knees and looking away, Lelouch puts on his contacts, to keep himself from accidentally using the Geass on him. "Good."
When Diethard leaves, it's with orders to monitor the information flowing between the Black Knights and make sure it doesn't undermine Zero's position as a leader. C.C. isn't surprised when Lelouch doesn't Geass him to keep the revelations a secret. Sometimes, the most powerful Geasses are the ones you place on yourself, and Diethard's loyalty has been completely assured.

"That was amusing," she comments. "Human experimentation?"

"It's close enough to what happened, and it's a logical explanation I can provide should the truth ever come to light. This is just the beginning, C.C. You know that."

"Yes. I suppose I do."

And because of that, because she knows all to well what is at stake, Lelouch's paperwork is once again delayed, just like C.C. wanted.
Goodbyes and Remembrances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Summer is quickly approaching, and with it, final exams. School hasn't changed much. Lelouch dozes off in the classroom as always and wakes up to Suzaku elbowing him in the side.

Life is so simple at Ashford, but at the same time, so complicated. He hates the mask of Lelouch Lamperouge even more than he did when he was pretending to still be an amnesiac.

Still, there's a part of him that will always love this place, this refuge. Soon, he will have to leave the Academy, perhaps permanently. He will miss it. It is a paradox.

But some things are more important than others, and it is this simple fact that leads him to the Council Room on what should have been a normal afternoon. He's sent Suzaku to make sure Shirley, Rivalz and Milly remain out of the way. Nina is alone, typing away at her computer.

"Hi, Nina," he greets her as he goes inside.

She lifts her head from the screen and gives him a small, shy smile. It's difficult to believe that this girl was the one to create the most destructive weapon in the history of the world. "Hi."

Lelouch smiles and removes his contacts. "You will never create anything that can be used to hurt people in any way. You will delete all the work you've done so far on your current project and dedicate your life to peaceful pursuits. You will think this is your decision."

The Geass takes and Nina's eyes glaze as she accepts the command. "Yes. I understand."

It takes a while for the rest of the Student Council members to show up. Suzaku is holding Arthur, who is biting him, as always. "Thanks for helping me find him," he says. "He keeps running off."

"No problem," Shirley replies. "It was our pleasure."

"You should have just let me alert the school like last time, though," Milly adds with a huff.

"There's only so many times you can disrupt classes, Pres," Lelouch offers.

Milly pouts. "If you want to be boring."

Suzaku sets Arthur down and meets Lelouch's gaze. Lelouch looks back, wordlessly telling his knight that the problem has been dealt with. Suzaku smiles and sits down. Now, for the next item on the agenda.

"I wanted to talk to everyone about something important," Lelouch says, setting aside all amusement.

Milly's expression immediately turns serious. "Oh? That sounds serious."

Lelouch nods. "Starting next year, Nunnally and I will be leaving the Academy."

There's only so long he can divide himself between his two lives, and continuing to keep up the pretense of Lelouch Lamperouge is useless. His father already knows about this identity, so there is no point in trying to hide here. No, it's time to make sure Nunnally is away from danger, even if that means leaving their friends behind.
For a few seconds, there's nothing but stunned silence in the room. "Leaving?" Rivalz repeats at last. "Leaving where?"

"St. Petersburg. There are some new medical developments in Euro-Britannia." He doesn't need to elaborate. Everyone knows he'd do anything for his sister.

Shirley's lower lip trembles. She looks like she's about to cry. Lelouch hates hurting her, but this is for the best. His life is not compatible with someone like Shirley.

A part of him wishes he could have shared more with her, or at least spared her some of the confusion and torment. He's not sure exactly what she's thinking now, since he has wiped her memories of everything pertaining to him, but their friendship has been reignited nonetheless. Either way, her grief is genuine. He will miss her, but she is safest as far away as possible from him.

"Lulu," she says, sounding a little lost.

Lelouch doesn't say he's sorry. "I'll miss everyone here very much. You have no idea how much my time here has meant to me and Nunnally."

"Did you know about this, Suzaku?" Rivalz asks. It's weirdly reminiscent of the time he asked about Milly dating Lloyd.

Suzaku nods. "Lelouch told me a while back, but it wasn't a certainty at the time."

Milly takes a deep breath. She probably knows there's a little more to the situation than he's saying, but she'll never reveal it. She claps her hands and sets her face in a determined expression. "Well, you know what that means? We have to throw you, Nunnally and Suzaku a farewell party!"

By now, everyone is aware that Suzaku won't be staying at Ashford either, since he'll presumably be with the SAZ.

"Oh, all right, as long as it's just us. I don't want the whole school to make a fuss about me. It would be distressing for Nunnally."

"Just us then. That sounds perfect."

And so it is that, one week before the scheduled opening of the SAZ, the Student Council members all gather on the roof of their building. There was pizza, drinks and laughter, and now, there are fireworks.

Even Kallen is here, as always under her Kallen Stadfeldt guise. She seems sad, but if that's a genuine emotion, it's definitely not because of Lelouch's departure from Ashford.

Lelouch sits with his friends and launches fireworks, idly remembering a time he'd done something similar, when the group had been very different.

"You will write, won't you?" Shirley asks him.

"Of course," Lelouch promises—lies. After he leaves Ashford, his whole life will become dedicated to Zero. The old Lelouch will be no more.

"It won't be the same here without you," Rivalz says with a sigh. "No one to drive around to illegal chess matches."

"I'm not sure you should be complaining about that," Suzaku pipes up.
"Still, the important thing is that Nunnally will be better after this, right?" Nina points out. "Right, Nunnally?"

Nunnally shows no sign of being disturbed by the deception, even if it concerns her own disability. "I have high hopes that it will be so. Thank you, Nina."

The evening ends on that optimistic, if sad note. Slowly, but surely, everyone starts to leave, returning to their dorms.

Milly is the only one who stays behind, and Lelouch is glad for that. "Thank you, Milly," he tells her when they catch a moment alone. "For everything."

"You don't have to thank me," Milly replies. "You're my friend. But you know... You never did tell me who your girlfriend was."

Lelouch gulps. Trust Milly to not forget about that, even if he had done his best to dodge her previous inquiries. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you with the curiosity, at least for now."

"Oh... Mean! You know what? I'll ask Nunnally if you don't tell me."

"Don't you dare!" Lelouch shouts, flailing. "She doesn't know anyway!"

"Who doesn't know what?" Suzaku asks, popping up from behind them.

Lelouch steals a glance at Suzaku, then looks at Milly. There must have been something on his face that gave him away, because Milly bursts into delighted peals of laughter. "Oh! I see how it is now. Of course. I should have known. Poor Shirley never had a chance."

Lelouch doesn't bother to correct her. "Goodnight, Pres."


Lelouch watches her go with a small smile. "You know," Suzaku says, "I'll miss them. I didn't think that I would, but..."

"I suppose you never realize how much something means to you until you have to give it up."

He's referring to Ashford, but Suzaku takes the words in a different sense. He grabs Lelouch's hand and pulls him closer.

As Suzaku kisses him, Lelouch lets go of all of his fears and misgivings. He will miss Ashford too, but as long as he has this, the truth of what he shares with Suzaku and C.C., he will be fine.

A few days before the SAZ is set to start, Rolo receives a call from his brother, asking him to join them at the Academy. Rolo eagerly complies. The Black Knights are a buzz of activity, but these days, they rarely question Lelouch's absences or the orders his inner circle receive. They're aware that Zero has a civilian identity and presumably needs to wrap up loose ends before he can ensconce himself in the SAZ, so they don't much comment on it, or on Rolo's departure.

It's easy for Rolo to sneak into the quarters he once shared with Lelouch. He doesn't have to bother to pick the lock. Sayoko is there to let him in. By now, she has been made aware of the situation and she's eagerly accepted the role Lelouch has assigned him.

She greets him with a nod and silently gestures him to the living room. Lelouch is waiting there with
his sister.

It's honestly strange to see Lelouch without one of his permanent shadows. Rolo doesn't know if he's relieved or grateful for that. On one hand, he doesn't much trust C.C. and Kururugi, on the other, they do seem dedicated to his brother's safety. He thinks he prefers having them around, rather than not, which is an odd thought to have.

"Rolo," Lelouch says with a smile. "Glad you could make it. I thought we could spend the day together."

Nunnally nods and shoots him a wide smile. "The three of us, like a family."

Rolo blinks. He still doesn't know what to make of Nunnally's response to him, and this strange feeling he gets when he looks at her. Nevertheless, he will never be able to refuse such an offer. "I'd like that."

He and his brother end up baking in the kitchen. Nunnally can't much contribute, but she doesn't seem to mind. She sits with them, folding paper cranes, laughing and joking with them when they fool around.

Rolo will never understand how she can even smile at all, but every moment they share feels like a gift.

The thing is, Rolo has done this before with his brother, in the first life. It was different then. Nunnally wasn't there, of course, but it's not just that. Rolo had been an undercover agent, replacing Nunnally and always aware that he's living a lie. His brother's affection had been fabricated by Geass.

Those beautiful memories became the reason why Rolo chose his brother instead of his duty, but he was always aware that a part of them had been a lie.

There's nothing deceitful about today. Rolo doesn't have to pretend. Even when he feels awkward or doesn't know what to say, Lelouch and Nunnally never blame him. Nunnally pets his cheek and tells him not to worry, and Lelouch is always there, always solid, so strong.

At one point, C.C. drifts in and steals some batter, but she doesn't stay. She grabs an extra snack and retires to Lelouch's room. Rolo suspects Kururugi is there too, but decides it doesn't matter.

"One day," Lelouch promises, "we'll be able to do this more, and out in the open. You'll see, Rolo. One day."

After lunch, Lelouch gets a call. He retrieves his cell phone and grimaces. "Just a moment. I'll be right back."

He leaves the room already in Zero mode. Before the door closes behind him, Rolo hears him ask, "Yes, Tohdoh, what is it?" He wishes he could do more to help his brother carry the burden he bears.

"Big brother Rolo?" Nunnally calls out, startling him from his contemplations.

Rolo turns toward her. He hasn't realized it until now, but this is the first time the two of them have actually been alone together. "Yes?"

"You know, big brother Rolo... Sayoko once told me a legend. She said that if you fold one thousand paper cranes and make a wish, your wish will come true."
Rolo think that's a very naive concept to have, and when he looks at Nunnally, he realizes she must be aware of it too. "I used to wish for the world to be a kind and gentle place," she says. "But now... I just want for big brother to be safe." Her voice drifts into something sad. "I know he's doing the right thing, fighting for the Japanese, but I still worry."

"I'll be with him, Nunnally," Rolo says. "I'll never leave him." He pauses and reluctantly adds, "And C.C. and K... Suzaku will always help."

Nunnally perks up. "Yes, that's true. That does make me feel better." She squeezes his hands with her warm, smaller ones. "And I believe in big brother."


Lelouch comes back to Nunnally teaching Rolo how to fold paper cranes. Rolo smiles at him over Nunnally's shoulder. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, just a minor detail. Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow."

Rolo isn't sure that's true, but it doesn't really matter in the end. His brother has prioritized them over the Black Knights, and that's what counts.

A little while later, Nunnally grows tired and Lelouch tucks her in for an afternoon nap. Once she's asleep, the two of them go back to the living room. Lelouch produces a package and offers it to Rolo. "For you."

Rolo's heart start to race. He recognizes the box. How can he not? It's related to one of the most prized memories he has.

With trembling hands, he takes the box and opens it. Surely enough, nestled within it is the heart-shaped locked he once wore attached to his phone.

"I know I originally meant it for Nunnally, but it's yours now," Lelouch says. "It was always yours, I think."

Rolo barely manages not to burst into tears. "Big brother..."

"I would have given it to you sooner, but I had some trouble finding the same one, especially with the craziness that's been going on." His deep eyes grow darker, harsh with emotion. "Keep it close. And most importantly, take care of yourself. I never want to hang it over your gravestone again."

Realization dawns for Rolo. Oh. Today was the anniversary of his death. One year from now, in the last timeline, he'd given his life to save his brother.

He'd honestly forgotten. Since this whole time travel craziness started, he's been doing his best to focus on the promise he and his brother made—that is, on building a future. It doesn't always work. All he has to do is look at Kururugi, and he feels a murderous anger building in his chest. He thinks he's doing a fairly good job at withstanding Kururugi's presence, if not hiding his hatred toward the former Knight of Seven. The same goes with some of the Black Knights, although not quite to that extent. But within all that, he's completely forgotten about the date of his own death.

How like his brother to remember. But then, his brother always was very smart.

He briefly wonders if this whole thing today is solely out of misplaced gratitude before discarding the thought. That's not the kind of person Lelouch is. Sure, Lelouch has always been an excellent liar, but there's only so far he's willing to go for a lie. If it were just gratitude, he would have never
included Rolo in the family unit he shares with Nunnally alone. That has always been sacred. Rolo understood it before on some level, but not like he does now, when he's finally gotten to know his sister.

"Thank you, big brother," he says. "I will remember and I will be careful."

Lelouch nods, acknowledging his promise. "Our last life wasn't great, Rolo, but we'll make new memories," Lelouch tells him, "better ones, ones that will never fade. With all of us."

Rolo can't think of anything to say to that. He clutches the pendant in his fist and makes another silent, vow. No matter what he has to do, he will protect his family.

Chapter End Notes

Agh! So much fluff! I almost can't bear it. LOL.
In case anyone is wondering, at this point, Shirley does know about Lelouch being Zero. However, Lelouch doesn't know that. While she was dying, Shirley only told him that she fell in love with him all over again despite her realizing that he wiped her memories, but he doesn't think it happened so quickly and he relates it more to the events in R2 rather than something so random like a piece of paper in a diary that Lelouch was unable to destroy.
New chapter! Go me! Thank you to everyone who has reviewed and kudos-ed! Believe it or not, you make a huge difference in my ability to upload!
Side note: I'm an author and my experience with administrating stuff is limited to say the least. Don't expect too many details on how the SAZ actually works. Not even the original writers of the anime bothered with that. I worked with what I had and developed it a little, but it probably won't grow too big. That's not the purpose of this fic.

It's finally happening. After months of preparations, the day of the SAZ inauguration has arrived.

Suzaku is vibrating with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. He still remembers far too well how it all went down the first time. It's one of those memories that will never blur, the sight of the Japanese gunned down by the Britannian knightmares, Euphie shot by Zero (by Lelouch, by Lelouch), her death. Then, shortly after, the Black Rebellion and his own horrible confrontation with his best friend.

For so long, it was these events that stood between them. They've been careful so far and it's been going well... But after Viletta, he can't help but wonder... Will things continue on the same vein?

He's standing on the Britannian side, like he did the first time, next to Euphie. On her other side is David Darlton. His presence is probably a good thing, even if having him here may bring about some tension.

The exact structure of the SAZ was always a cause for friction, as evidenced by Euphie's increasing panic. Suzaku has no idea how Euphie planned it in the first timeline, but Lelouch has created several separate divisions. Euphie is meant to manage things like Social Affairs and Education, while Lelouch handles everything pertaining to the Security of the SAZ, as well the general management and infrastructure of the zone, with involvement from Kaguya. For obvious reasons, Euphie and Lelouch share the responsibility of dealing with Britannia. Finance is mostly meant to be handled by Kirihara.

Suzaku's official job is supposed to be in Euphie's department, but in practice, he'll be heading a lot of the security of the SAZ. On paper, that would be Tohdoh's job, but he'll be required to train new recruits and continue the development of the Black Knights.

It's all very complicated, but it's solid and it shows. There are even more Japanese citizens than before. Zero's participation encouraged them. They trust him, believe he will keep them safe. Suzaku believes that too. The Black Knights are already here, framing all entrances and exits. They haven't disarmed and are instead in their knightmares, keeping a close eye on the Britannian soldiers as ordered by Zero. Rolo is somewhere there, which is a relief since he's been giving Suzaku the evil eye even more as of late.

This time, Lelouch doesn't arrive dramatically on the shoulder of his knightmare. He's already here and has been since the night before, making the last checkups.

C.C. is, as always, with him, but Suzaku will still be relieved when the whole thing is finally up and
running without any problems.

Zero emerges from the depths of the building to the cheers of the crowd. He takes position on the stage, nodding at Euphie.

Euphie takes her cue. She's the one who started this, so the next part is up to her. "To all Japanese, welcome to the SAZ!" she says. "It is my hope that this day will herald a new dawn of peace and togetherness for everyone, no matter what their blood might be.

"I'd like to thank Zero for accepting my invitation and offering his help in building the SAZ. I am convinced that without him, the Zone would have never been possible."

It's true, if not something Lelouch would have liked her to say. "Thank you, Princess Euphemia. As for myself, I appreciate your kind words and generosity. It is our shared goal to make sure the Japanese people are safe from oppression, and I trust that we will work together for a better, brighter, future."

They shake hands to the exuberant cheers of the crowd. All the while, Suzaku acts as Euphie's guard. Once again, he has the feeling that he's standing on the wrong side.

The formalities take less than expected. The members of the Six Houses of Kyoto are all asked to say a few words, but not even Kirihara is all that verbose. They may not be as jumpy as Suzaku, but they're not happy with the presence of all the Britannian knightmares either.

Finally, the agreement is signed and the SAZ is officially up and running. "I now declare the SAZ officially open!" Euphie announces.

After all the stress and the buildup, it's almost anticlimactic. Suzaku counts his blessings for it and remains at Euphie's side as the Japanese trickle into the space actually assigned to them.

Slowly but surely, the Britannian forces begin to leave. Suzaku is pretty sure many of them are reluctant to just leave their princess there, but Euphie has made her choice. She's abandoned her title for the happiness of the Japanese and the only reason why she still has some protection is because of Cornelia's affection for her.

Of course, Lelouch has no desire to leave Euphie unsupervised either, so as soon as he can spare a moment, he approaches Euphie again.

"Princess Euphemia, if you will allow me, I'd like to supplement your guard with a Black Knight."

Darlton opens his mouth to protest, but he doesn't get the chance to say anything. "Thank you, Zero," Euphie replies sweetly. "I appreciate your concern and assistance."

Lelouch assigns Minami as an addition to Euphie's guard. Suzaku is pretty sure the assignment is also a punishment for Minami, since he was the one who messed up and allowed Ohgi to escape.

The day passes quickly as the Japanese are assigned living quarters and introduced to their new homes. While it's strenuous, it's also a relief for Suzaku, because all he has to do is to take orders from his emperor and the pretense is irrelevant.

Around mid-afternoon, a surprise arrives. The mobile unit of the ASEEC makes its way into the SAZ under the astonished glances of the Japanese.

"Earl Asplund?" Lelouch asks. "What are you doing here?"
"Well, there's no point in having a knightmare without a devicer, and we were given permission to relocate here."

Suzaku resigned himself long ago to losing the Lancelot, so it's a huge surprise to have Lloyd and Cecile here. It's also a welcome one.

Lelouch seems both pleased and mildly suspicious. "Welcome then," he says. "I'm sure your talents will come in handy."

Suzaku can already see him reshuffling some of his assigned people in a new position. Part of the problem with consolidating the Black Knights while keeping the SAZ in working order is the fact that a lot of people have too much to do. Rakshata is one of these people. With Lloyd and Cecile here, things will be easier, especially since it's not in their character to stab anyone in the back. Still, their direct superior is Schneizel and that's something that needs to be taken into account.

Suzaku is personally glad to have them here. Cecile was once his only emotional support, and Lloyd was the one to give him a chance as a pilot to begin with. He hasn't forgotten that, although he does wonder how Lloyd will get along with his rival. More importantly, he wonders what Schneizel was even thinking to send the ASEEC here—if he was even the one to give the command.

Despite the little incident, the day ends well, and soon, they all retire to the official living quarters of the superior ranks. On paper, Suzaku has a separate room assigned, but he doesn't bother going there. He goes directly to Lelouch's room.

C.C. lets him in. She's wearing only her underclothes and holding a slice of pizza. Lelouch is currently half-way out of his suit too.

"I don't know what's more appealing," Suzaku comments, "the food or the two of you naked."

"Your priorities are skewed, Knight of Zero," C.C. replies blankly. "Obviously, the pizza is better."

Lelouch rolls his eyes. "I wonder if we should be insulted, Suzaku."

Suzaku grabs a slice of pizza and bites down. "It is good pizza, I suppose. I don't know... Maybe we should just leave it all to her and I can have you all to myself."

He wraps his arms around Lelouch and pulls him against his chest. Lelouch stumbles and almost falls as Suzaku manhandles him. "Hey!"

C.C. gives them both an unimpressed look. "Boys. What am I going to do with you?"

Suzaku wriggles his brows and C.C. sighs. "Okay. But we'll still finish the pizza first. It'll get cold otherwise. Besides, Lelouch is still skinny. You keep saying you're going to eat and exercise more, but you never do."

"It's not like it's my fault, witch. There's only so much time I have and going to the gym hasn't been a priority."

"We'll make sure you have time to exercise," Suzaku says teasingly.

Just then, Arthur decides he's had enough of the humans arguing and emerges from his hiding spot. Naturally, Suzaku only notices this when he feels the now familiar pain of the bite against his ankle. It is weirdly lighter than in the past lifetime.

"You know, sometimes I wonder about that cat," C.C. comments. "I feel like he used to hate you far
"Maybe he knew I was on the wrong side all along," Suzaku replies.

He still doesn't lean over to pet Arthur—that's just asking to be bitten. Instead, he continues to keep his emperor captive while C.C. takes over the task of handling the cat.

They're too tired to do much of anything that night, but Suzaku is still content. He holds Lelouch tight in his arms and allows himself to believe that this time, they won't be separated by any massacres.

****

Living in the SAZ is... strange. Much like Zero said, it is a cage, and Urabe never loses sight of that. Still, that doesn't mean it's not nice to walk around freely, talk to happy civilians, see Japanese people smiling for a change.

The project is not without its challenges. They've had to divide their forces into a group meant to protect the civilians and one that would boost the recruiting. The latter actually goes in and out of the SAZ through the underground supply lines set up by Zero and don't spend much time in the SAZ at all. Urabe and Asahina are both involved with protecting the Zone, even if Tohdoh is in charge of the recruiting.

It is a little strange to not work all the time with his longtime companions, but he's dealing with it fine, and he understands the logic. After all, Zero only has so many people he can assign important positions to.

It is in the course of his job that Urabe gets to know Kururugi Suzaku a little better.

Technically, Urabe did know the Kururugi heir as a child, but they never had much contact. Now, Urabe can safely say that Kururugi has grown up to be an interesting man. He's young, but sometimes, he doesn't seem like it. He takes charge of the group under his command with ease, as if he has a lot of experience doing it, even if Urabe knows that's not the case. Zero trusts him implicitly, which makes sense given the fact that Kururugi shares his bed.

Interestingly, they're discreet when they're in public and Kururugi always keeps a respectful distance, treating Zero like a superior officer. It's probably the only reason why their relationship remains something known just by the Black Knights.

He also seems close to Princess Euphemia, although the princess's feelings toward him are unclear.

Kururugi's real introduction to most of the SAZ is more eventful than Urabe expected, though. It happens around a week after the inauguration. People have seen him walking around, but usually he is with Zero or the princess, and the rest of the time he always seems in a hurry, so nobody knows how to approach him.

For this reason, it's all the more surprising when, on what should have been a normal day at the SAZ, Kururugi bursts out of a building at lightning speed, making his way through the crowd. "Coming through! Excuse me! Coming through!"

He's moving quickly, but he's hindered by the large number of people walking around the SAZ. "Catch the cat!" he shouts, visibly frustrated.

That's when Urabe sees it. There is a blur of black running his way, with the Zero mask on its head.
What even.

Several Black Knights attempt to stop the cat, but the feline is cunning and manages to elude their grasp. They still delay it enough for Kururugi to extract himself from the crowd—by doing a weirdly acrobatic leap in the air—and reach it. With a huff of triumph, he finally grabs the cat and removes the helmet from its head.

"Oh, Arthur. What am I going to do with you? We're in so much trouble."

As if on cue, Zero emerges from a building, his cape fluttering dramatically. Princess Euphemia and C.C. manifest behind him. "Suzaku!" Zero bellows. "Where is that damn cat of yours?"

Kururugi rushes off to meet Zero, pointing out the cat like a prize. "Got him. Got the mask back too."

"I'm starting to think he has a fetish for it," Zero mumbles. "This is the second time he's stolen it."


Zero groans. "Right. At this rate, I'll need another spare."

"Oh, I'm sure he doesn't mean any harm," Princess Euphemia says as she retrieves the cat from Kururugi. Immediately, the feline turns into a purring mess.

Kururugi doesn't seem surprised at the display. He just rolls his eyes. It's more emotion than he usually shows in public.

Zero seems just as exasperated. "Everybody, this is Suzaku's cat, Arthur. Do not trust him. He will insinuate himself into your home and then proceed to steal your objects of value. Especially if they're helmets."

Urabe doesn't know what's funnier, the fact that Zero appears genuinely angry at the cat or C.C. and Kururugi's reaction to it. "There, there," C.C. says in her regular emotionless tone. "If it makes you feel better, he likes you best out of the three of us."

Confirming this, Princess Euphemia passes Zero the cat. It doesn't protest the treatment, and instead starts to play with the high collar of Zero's cloak and the ruffles of his neckerchief.

"This is undignified," Zero mutters. He still doesn't put the cat down. "All right. Back to work everyone."

He departs, with his small entourage trailing behind him. Behind him, everyone—both civilians and staff—erupt into excited conversation. "Did that actually happen?" Asahina asks. "I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"Pretty sure it was real," Urabe replies.

One little black cat shouldn't be a big deal. But the cat is just the beginning of a larger thing, or at least, another step in something that was already happening.

Prior to the forming of the SAZ, none of them really knew Zero that well. Even his goals and reasoning seemed mysterious and vague. His only close companion was the strange green-haired woman who originally kept insisting they were accomplices and nothing more.

But that's all changed now. Zero is very much a human being, an extraordinary one with a great deal
of leadership abilities, intelligence and charisma, but a human nonetheless—and one with a very strange life.

On one notable occasion, as Urabe is about to report to work, he runs into Kururugi again. He has a struggling Zero draped over his shoulder and is effortlessly carrying him despite the fact that Zero can't be that light. "Suzaku!" Zero protests, his voice barely audible because his cape is over his head. "Put me down right this instant! This is insubordination!"

"Sorry, My Lord, but I have other orders," Kururugi says, completely unruffled.

Urabe would be alarmed at this development, except C.C. is following them. "Stop whining, boy. You promised you would exercise more. Since you're not about to do it out of your personal will, we'll just have to coerce you."

Zero huffs, muttering something about undignified circumstances and traitors. C.C. winks at Urabe. "Don't worry. He complains a lot, but he knows we wouldn't do anything that won't benefit him."

There's something in their interactions that has always niggled at Urabe, and that's when he finally realizes what it is. Zero is young. Very young, maybe as young as Kururugi. The Black Knights haven't really discussed the obvious fact that their leader is sleeping with a minor, but that is in large part because Kururugi acts so much older than he actually is. It would seem it may not be an issue at all.

Then comes the unavoidable day when Zero takes the mask off. Well, sort of. It's one of those exhausting days that seem to have no end. They're all tired and have been stuck in a meeting for hours because Kirihara and Tohdoh keep trying to pull the budget in their directions, and Kaguya often steps in to do the same. At one point, C.C. picks up her phone and starts to fiddle with it.

Urabe half-suspects she's playing some sort of game on it, but as it turns out, that's not the case. A half hour or so later, the doors open, revealing Kururugi carrying several boxes of pizza.

"Pizza delivery."

"C.C.," Zero says slowly, "did you get my knight to bring you pizza?"

"I got him to bring us pizza," she corrects him.

Kururugi dutifully hands over two boxes, which are apparently for her. Then, he shoves one at Zero. "I hear you haven't eaten all day."

"I ate at lunch."

"He had an apple," Rolo pipes up.

This appears to be a recurring conversation between them, so Zero gives up on the argument and takes the box. Under everyone's astonished glances, he presses a button on the mask and it slides open half-way.

There's another mask made out of textile material underneath, and he rolls that down too. Finally, he opens the pizza box and takes out a slice. "Thank you, Suzaku," he says.

It's actually the first time Urabe has heard Zero's voice out of the mask. He's always wondered how it would sound. He knows Kallen and some of the others heard him when they went to see Kirihara, but that just piqued his curiosity more.
He sounds just as proud and majestic while eating pizza. It must be some sort of secret ability.

"I didn't know the mask could open like that," Inoue comments.

"The original one didn't," Zero explains. "But after it became obvious I'd have to wear it for extended periods of time, I had this version made."

"Don't lie," C.C. mumbles. "It was Suzaku's idea."

Zero turns toward her, his lips curling into a half-grimace. Urabe suspects that the Zero behind the mask must be very expressive, which makes sense given his tendency toward flashy gestures. "Are you going to gang up on me again?"

"We wouldn't dream on it," Kururugi says with that eerie calm of his. Urabe would almost believe it if he didn't know for a fact that it's false.

Kururugi steals a look at the others. "Oh, and by the way, I got a few things for everyone else too."

The Black Knights cluster around the boxes. "Where do you even get Pizza Hut in the SAZ?" Chiba asks, befuddled.

"I stole the Lancelot to get it," Kururugi replies, as if that's the most normal thing in the world.

Everybody stares at him. C.C. nods approvingly. Zero simply continues to eat his pizza. "He didn't," he says when he finishes his slice. "Suzaku knows better than to waste energy fillers like that."

Kururugi just smirks. "Some things are more important than others. Oh... Before I forget..."

He produces a chocolate shake from... somewhere, which he offers to Rolo. For a few seconds, Zero's brother just stares at it. Zero finally gives him a nudge, and Rolo takes the shake. "Thank you, Sir Kururugi," Rolo replies.

"Just following orders," Kururugi drawls.

Urabe never does find out if Kururugi did in fact hijack his own knightmare for a pizza run, but it makes about as much sense as everything in his life. He is interested in the strange tension between Rolo and Kururugi, but nobody seems to know anything about it either, so it's safe to say that Zero will always have his fair share of secrets.

Still, things are going fairly well at the SAZ, at least from his perspective. He knows that Zero is really struggling to keep it aloft financially, especially since they need to maintain the growth of the Black Knights too. There are protesters, Britannians who show up sometimes to cause trouble, but their numbers are pretty low. The sight of the Lancelot, the Burais and the Gekkas is usually enough to chase them off and Britannian patrols actually do help. Perhaps they're meant to monitor the Black Knights, but they must have received orders to keep civilians away from the Zone too, because it's pretty rare for vandals to manage to approach the Zone.

He supposes he shouldn't be all that surprised. If Prince Schneizel really did want this place to work, even on a temporary basis, he would make at least some effort to ensure its safety. Cornelia would do the same, given that her sister is here. Earl Asplund's relocation proves that much.

And so it is that, most of the time, Urabe doesn't have much to do. After a while, he finds himself keeping Rolo company. Rolo still keeps his distance from the Black Knights. He displays a clear dislike toward Kururugi, but he's not very warm to the rest of them either. Urabe makes it his business to occasionally engage him in conversation, at least a little. Maybe they'll work together
better if he does.

Rolo doesn't seem all that thrilled with his efforts, but doesn't ignore him either. "You know, you don't have to talk to me because big brother told you to," he comments one day, when they're watching the SAZ, out of their knightmares.

"Zero never instructed me to socialize with you, just to watch your back on the battlefield," Urabe explains. "But perhaps you will resent me less for doing that if we speak."

Rolo gives him a blank look. "I'm not sure what you expect of me."

"Nothing, really. Maybe that you don't hate me as much as you hate Kururugi."

Rolo's eyes flash with something angry and dark. "Few people can top Sir Kururugi on the list of people I hate."

"Can I ask why? What did he do?"

Rolo's expression turns flat again. "More than enough."

Urabe wonders if maybe this has something to do with Kururugi being part of the Britannian army and fighting against them. Zero never did tell them when Kururugi changed sides. They've all been assuming that Kururugi must have been a double agent from the beginning, but that can't be right either. He repeatedly stood in their way in Shinjuku, at Narita, even when they went to free Tohdoh. Tohdoh never seemed to begrudge the boy for his choices, or for the fact that he was apparently the one supposed to carry out his execution. These days, he seems a little relieved at not having to fight his own student, although he'd never say it outright.

That doesn't mean Kururugi's loyalties were with them from the beginning.

He brings it up with Tohdoh later that evening, when the shifts change and he can meet up with the rest of the Four Holy Swords. Tohdoh doesn't seem surprised.

"Kururugi puzzles me too," he says. "I would have sworn on my sword that he was truly fighting for Britannia. There's just one problem with that." He presses his lips together and falls silent, as if considering something.

"Colonel Tohdoh?" Chiba asks. "What is it?"

"Chiba, I looked into Kururugi's eyes when I fought him that day. When I look into his eyes now... I don't see the same person."

"So it's entirely possible that he faked it from the beginning," Asahina concludes.

"Besides, loyalty like Kururugi's doesn't show up over night," Senba points out.

Tohdoh nods. "Whatever reasoning he may have when it comes to his actions, he is loyal to Zero now. That much we can all agree on, and that's what matters in the end. We won't discuss this again. Right now, Zero is Japan's best hope, and Kururugi his protector. We'll leave the past where it is, in the past."

Urabe doesn't know why, but he gets the feeling Tohdoh knows more than he's saying. Still, he has already made a vow to follow Zero's lead, and the colonel's support reinforces it. Nothing is perfect, and soon, they will probably have to leave these days of general contentment behind. But as long as they have Zero, Japan has a chance to achieve its freedom. Like Tohdoh said, that's the only thing
that counts.
Happy Birthday, Suzaku!

Chapter Notes

I know it's not Suzaku's b-day now :), but it is in the fic. I hope you like the little thing I did for our favorite knight. As always, thank you to everyone who commented and kudos-ed. Do let me know what you think about where I'm headed with this and if you have questions about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July dawns hectic and sunny. During his first life, Suzaku had already become a Rounds by now and had been well on his way to becoming the White Reaper. He has no real regrets about it. Mostly, what he regrets is the reasons for him ending up in that position to begin with. Euphie's death, then him dragging his best friend in front of the emperor and keeping his eye open while Charles zi Britannia raped his mind.

He doesn't think about it much—or at least, he tries not to. It's easier than expected. The SAZ keeps him busy, and he always has something to do, either for Lelouch or for Euphie.

It's sort of strange, because when he agreed with C.C.'s crazy plan, he expected to ditch the Black Knights as soon as possible, and that doesn't seem to be in the cards now. There are times when Suzaku isn't sure what to make of it.

All sorts of strange things keep happening. After the first few times Arthur makes his escape from the quarters Suzaku shares with Lelouch, Lelouch unilateraly decides to just bring the damn cat to the offices of the Black Knights. They have staff there that is mainly stationary, and they don't mind watching the errant feline.

Inoue becomes particularly fond of it, and is often seen giggling with other members of the Black Knights whenever Arthur attacks Lelouch's cape or neckerchief. The cat quickly turns into a mascot for the Black Knights, and the light-heartedness Arthur brings is always welcome, especially in a place that is so difficult to run. And all the while, Suzaku remembers that he was the one to originally kill most of these people.

He doesn't really care, but still... It's an interesting realization to have.

Meanwhile, Lelouch is incredibly busy keeping both the Black Knights and the SAZ in working order. There have been few attacks on the Zone, but Suzaku fears that as time passes, people will get more organized and may find ways to bypass patrols. Plus there's the biggest problem—the fact that getting supplies for the SAZ is increasingly difficult and expensive. They have greenhouses where they manage to grow some produce, but that is a slow process.

The funding they receive from Britannia soon trickles down to almost nothing. What little is sent is probably just because Cornelia still wants to help Euphie, but it's not nearly enough. As a result, they're already struggling to balance their budget. They're forced to risk leaving the SAZ a few times to go procure more liquidities, and it's a risk Suzaku isn't very happy to take.

On the other hand, his relationship with his two lovers is going great. He and C.C. have managed to convince Lelouch to finally do something about his physical fitness, but Suzaku suspects that part of
the reason why Lelouch accepted is because it means that, every morning, the three of them will be together. It doesn't matter what duties Suzaku has after—he's required to be Zero's personal trainer in the morning. It may not be exactly true, since C.C. is perfectly qualified to bully Lelouch into exercising, but that doesn't mean they don't all enjoy their bonding time. And it does actually help Lelouch with everything he has to do, which is a bonus.

Then, about midway through the month, Suzaku wakes up to C.C. on top of his chest and Lelouch mouthing his naked cock.

The fact that Lelouch woke up before him is unusual in itself, but Suzaku doesn't get the chance to express his surprise. Lelouch really starts to get serious on his dick, while C.C. focuses on the rest of his body. It doesn't take long for him to come down his emperor's throat.

Of course, they're not done with him yet. Suzaku's stamina has always been excellent and he's hard again mere minutes after Lelouch's excellent blowjob.

C.C. straddles him and impales herself on his shaft. She's tight and wet around him and his eyes roll in his head as he feels her pussy clench around his erection.

He flails, badly needing to touch his emperor too. Lelouch doesn't leave him wanting. He climbs on top of Suzaku and feeds his cock into Suzaku's waiting mouth.

It's perfect, everything Suzaku wanted and more. He comes again with the taste of Lelouch's spunk on his tongue and C.C.'s cries echoing in his ears. He thinks he blacks out a few minutes.

When he finally recovers, he's still between the two of them. Lelouch is on his side, watching him with a soft expression. C.C. retrieves a small package and places it on his chest.

"Happy birthday, Suzaku."

Suzaku blinks. Right. Today is his birthday.

Lelouch must have remembered. He himself had disregarded it completely in his last life. He had wanted to die so much that celebrating a birthday seemed ridiculous. The last time he'd actively thought about it was probably during the summer he spent with Lelouch.

The memory brings a smile to his face and he picks up the package. He opens it, only to find a strange pendant inside.

The pendant itself is beautiful, black and sculpted like a triangle. Each side displays a different chess piece—the king, the queen and the knight.

Suzaku appreciates the symbolism very much. Their little triad, complete. He opens his mouth to thank them, but C.C. stops him.

"It opens with a password. My true name."

She brushes her thumb over the queen side of the triangle and whispers a word. That in itself is a gift. C.C. offered her affection to few people and her trust in even fewer, and to have that bestowed upon him leaves him humbled.

The triangle opens. Inside, there is a small screen with numbers on it.

"I had Rakshata make this for us," Lelouch explains. "It connects to a bracelet I'll wear at all times. It monitors my heartbeat and my location and transmits it to your pendant. That way you'll always
know where I am and be sure I'm alive."

He lifts his hand, and indeed, Suzaku sees that he is now wearing a black bracelet. Suzaku is
dumbstruck. To have something like this on his person at all times... It's a safeguard, his own
personal piece of Lelouch.

"It's only fair," C.C. says. "I always know he's alive, but you don't have that certainty."

Suzaku remembers a different time, when they'd held hands in front of Lelouch's lonely grave and
C.C. had confessed 'all I have is the hole where the contract used to be'. He wonders how he went
from hating her more than anything in the world to loving her. "Thank you," he says with a
trembling voice.

"No, thank you," Lelouch replies, wrapping his arms around him. When he pulls away, he retrieves
another package from under the bed.

"And now, for your second present."

The second box is larger than the first. Upon opening it, Suzaku's breath catches. It's his uniform...
The uniform of the Knight of Zero. It has some minor modifications, in that it holds a little more
black and the red accents and Britannian symbols have been changed to Zero's mark. Nevertheless,
it's still very distinctively the same one. A cape is included. It's more reminiscent of Lelouch's current
cape and not quite as fancy as the original Knight of Zero cape. For one, it lacks that completely
useless hood. Nevertheless, he hopes he won't have to use it a lot, since it would still hinder his line
of sight. He always did hate that about Britannian capes.

"I have mine too," C.C. says with a grin. "But I did warn him I don't ever want to see him in those
ridiculous white robes."

"Noted, witch."

C.C. smiles melts into her familiar, blank expression. "Finally, the third present. Well, it's more like a
selfish offer from me. I'd like to give you Geass."

A strange feeling stirs in Suzaku's chest. It's a mix of apprehension, excitement, dread and need. "I
already have the Geass from Lelouch," he argues.

C.C. shakes her head. "That doesn't count. It's an order, not a power in itself. The fact that you
managed to twist it for your own benefit... To be honest, it's an anomaly. I've never seen anything
like it before. Nevertheless, it wouldn't conflict with having your own Geass."

"Are you sure?" Suzaku asked, still on the fence.

"Absolutely. I wouldn't have offered if I hadn't been sure."

Right. Of course she wouldn't have. She knows how important Lelouch's Geass is for him.

Suzaku doesn't hesitate further. It's half out of practicality—whatever power he will have will surely
come in handy—and half because, as much as he hates to admit it, he always was a little jealous of
Lelouch's connection to C.C. This way, their little triad will be complete.

"I'll take it."

C.C. grabs his hand, and just like that, Suzaku is plunged into a world that makes no sense. It's the
world of C.C., but flickering around him in a kaleidoscope of images that confuses him. C.C.'s voice
rings out in his head. "I offer you the Power of the King. It may condemn you to a life of solitude. Do you accept this contract?"

Just like he once did, a little more than a year from now, Suzaku says, "This Geass, I do solemnly accept."

The light flashes and settles. A heartbeat later, Suzaku opens his eyes. He flexes his fingers and stretches his muscles. A little taken aback, he meets C.C. bright golden gaze. "Did it work? I don't feel any different."

"It worked," C.C. confirms. "But it doesn't always manifest immediately."

Suzaku is really curious about what his power will be, but he shelves the thought for later. They don't have time to linger in bed after that, but they do have breakfast together. Lelouch cooks, which is great, because he's still excellent at it. Sometimes, Suzaku thinks that Lelouch should just stop being Zero and take over the world with his cooking.

They emerge from their room a little later than usual and they skip their regular gym session, but nobody seems surprised. Lelouch must have notified them of a change in schedule. He gets a few long looks because of the clothing, but he can't be bothered to care.

He doesn't expect anything from anybody else. He couldn't have been more wrong. Euphie receives him with enthusiastic congratulations, a warm hug and a package she advises him to open later. When he goes to see the Black Knights, Kaguya ambushes him. "Happy birthday, Suzaku!"

The Black Knights are still a little awkward around him, but they do offer their sincere congratulations regardless. Arthur rubs against his ankles, as if sensing the celebratory mood. Suzaku shares a look with C.C., who just shrugs. "Don't look at me. I didn't tell them."

As it turns out, Tohdoh had been the one to remember. He isn't at the SAZ, but he did tell Urabe about it, and Kaguya later confirmed it. "He was there when you got your first sword," Urabe tells him. "Of course he hasn't forgotten."

Suzaku thinks about Tohdoh's final words to him in the last timeline. 'Kururugi, you traitor!'. He wonders what Tohdoh would think of him if he knew the truth. He probably wouldn't be nearly so generous.

"I'll remember to thank him later," he says with a light, Japanese bow.

"I like what you're wearing," Kaguya says. "Is it a gift?"

"Yes. From Zero. C.C. and I match."

They don't have the time—or the budget—for an actual party, but it's still overall an enjoyable day. When he reports for duty at the ASEEC, Cecile receives him with cookies and a hug. He accepts the hug, but declines the cookies with the excuse that he's already eaten. And all the while, his mind is always on the pendant he now wears around his neck.

As he patrols the outskirts of the SAZ, Suzaku finds himself smiling. It's the first birthday in forever during which he hasn't wanted to die, and it's all because of Lelouch. Maybe it was arrogant of him and C.C. to turn back time, but it's still the one choice he will never regret.

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A few days after his birthday, Suzaku finally gets the chance to meet with Tohdoh. Actually, it's the
other way around. He's in the ASEEC hangar, waiting for Lloyd to finish his work on the Lancelot. It's a nice day and a slight breeze is blowing through the air.

He's been thinking about approaching Rolo for a serious conversation since he doesn't want the tension between them to linger, as justified as it may be. But Tohdoh shows up before he can track Lelouch's adoptive sibling down.

Since he's in charge of recruitment, it's rare for Tohdoh to be in the SAZ to begin with. He does come by, but he spends most of his time in meetings with the Black Knights. He's never once come to the ASEEC before.

The fact that he's made an exception today doesn't bode well. "Kururugi... Can I have a word?"

"Tohdoh-sensei. Of course. What is it?"

He's already guiding Tohdoh aside, to a private spot where Cecile or Lloyd won't be able to hear and the cameras won't be able to see them. Tohdoh doesn't speak until Suzaku stops.

"You told me once that you hated the fact that I wanted to live so badly I would compromise my principles. You told me that you believed a society needs to accept you so that you can change it. I don't think any of that was a lie."

Suzaku doesn't bother to argue. It hadn't been a lie, not at the time. "Tohdoh-sensei... You remember what I did, don't you? That summer."

He was never really sure one way or another, and his memories of that time are fuzzy. He used to remember killing his father so very well, but now, even that has faded to the background of his mind, replaced by the memory of killing Lelouch. Anyway, mentioning it does come with some risks, but it is better to compromise that secret and give Tohdoh a real explanation than have the man continue digging into Suzaku's motivations and create friction or doubt within the ranks. Not to mention that it should help them figure out what Tohdoh does know and remember.

"What you did?" Tohdoh repeats. "As far as I recall, you managed to escape the ruins of the Shrine and made your way to us. After your's father's death, I believe Kirihara-dono..."

"That's not what I meant."

Suzaku nods. "I was a child," he continues, "but I could still hear the arguments, how the generals would say that it was hopeless, that there was nothing we could do and Britannia would take Japan either way. And Father would say that regardless of that, the Japanese would fight until their last breaths, until the last man.

"But I thought..." He pauses, staring out into the distance. "I thought that the rest of the Japanese didn't deserve to die for the sake of my father's pride. I went to talk to him. He wouldn't listen. And then..." A flash of a knife. Flesh yielding to his strength. Suzaku always had been very strong, for a child. "Before I knew it, he was dead."

There had been a little more than that involved. His father had been planning to kill Nunnally, and that was what had finally made Suzaku act. But he has no intention of mentioning that part, since he doubt Tohdoh is aware of it.

He faces Tohdoh once again. "When I realized what I had done, I came to believe that surely there must have been another way. I believed that I had taken the choice away from the Japanese because
"...of my selfishness."

"And you don't believe that now, Suzaku-kun?" Tohdoh asks quietly.

"I don't really know," Suzaku replies. "But the thing is, Tohdoh-sensei... I can't go through that again. I can't kill another person I love, not again. No matter what I must do, I will stand by his side."

"I see," Tohdoh murmurs. "So it really is about Zero's true identity."

Tohdoh pauses and Suzaku knows without being told that Tohdoh has figured out who Lelouch really is. Interestingly, though, Tohdoh shows no sign of being alarmed by it. In fact, he doesn't even seem surprised. He must have figured it out ages ago but decided to not reveal it.

"Tell me something, Suzaku-kun," he says instead. "Does Zero truly fight for Japan?"

"He fights against Britannia, for freedom, for the wellfare of the weak. You must know why."

"Yes. I suppose I do."

They look at each other for a few more moments. Tohdoh is the one who breaks their stalemate. "Suzaku-kun. Genbu and I had our differences. However, we all believed in him, believed that we should stand against Britannia, fight just like he said. But we never truly thought about the rest of the Japanese, not until you did. I think that was our biggest failure. Zero once told me that without Genbu's suicide and Japan's following surrender, the JLF and the resistance would not exist. He's right. I do not blame you for the past. I never did."

It's strange to be told something like that by his old teacher. Tohdoh is the last person Suzaku would have ever thought would make this argument.

Then again, Tohdoh is a leader, not only a warrior, and he understands the meaning of hard choices. He's also known Suzaku since childhood. He must realize what his father's murder had done to Suzaku. It's probably why he never seemed angry with Suzaku for being his would-be executioner.

Tohdoh squeezes Suzaku's shoulder. "You've become an excellent young man, Suzaku-kun, and you do your family name honor. I will tell you this once again. Stick to the path you have chosen and fight to the end. I am pleased that our goals no longer put us at odds."

Suzaku watches his old teacher go in silence. He's tentatively satisfied with the way that conversation went, although Tohdoh's reaction did take him aback a little. Either way, Lelouch needs to be informed about this, so as soon as Tohdoh is gone, Suzaku reaches for his communicator.

Lelouch isn't surprised when Suzaku tells him Tohdoh has figured out the truth. "It's not unexpected," he says. "Should push come to shove, I'll use the Geass on him to make sure he doesn't say anything."

"Why not do it now?"

"It's precisely because he has kept silent that I'm willing to wait for a while. He's useful as he is. I'll give it a few days and have Diethard keep a close eye on him. You and Rolo will keep an eye on Urabe and Asahina, since they'll be among the ones who'll find out first should Tohdoh ever be decide to be loose-lipped. In the meantime, I'd rather not waste the Geass if I can help it. Besides, if things progress the way I think they will, my identity will probably revealed eventually, and having him stumble over knowing it or not could hinder me rather than help me."

"You think the Black Knights will..."
"We always expected that, Suzaku. The problem is not them finding out, but how they find out and when they do it. It's actually good for us that Tohdoh knows, but isn't planning to say anything."

That makes sense. Ultimately, if Tohdoh ever doubted Lelouch, it wouldn't be because of him being a prince. That doesn't seem to matter to him at all. It's Lelouch's actions that count, and Tohdoh always respected Zero. And having the support of Miracle Tohdoh will mean a lot when the mask will finally fall. Certainly, Lelouch could force that too, but it's better to keep the Geass for emergencies rather than rely on it all the time.

"Besides," Lelouch adds, "there is no telling what kind of Geass users V.V. has at his disposal. We think Jeremiah is the only one with a Geass canceler, but if that's not true and V.V. sends someone like that after us, the consequences of forcing Tohdoh to obey me would be disastrous. Should something occur, we can intervene in a more forceful manner."

That's true. Suzaku looks forward to the moment when they won't have to look over their shoulder because of V.V.'s shadow.

"I understand, Your Majesty," he says. "It will be as you wish it."

Lelouch ends the call and Suzaku goes back to the hangar. Absently toying with his pendant, he wonders if he will soon have to kill his old teacher all over again.

Chapter End Notes

It was also never quite clear what actually happened to Suzaku between the time he and Lelouch escaped the shrine and when they were reunited. He couldn't have become a Honorary Britannian when he was 10, not in the context of it being a war zone and him being the son of the former prime minister. Besides, it's clear that you need some sort of education to become an Honorary, probably a military academy of some kind, and I don't feel like a 10 y old would have been able to attend that. So where would he have gone? It couldn't have been with the JLF or the 6 houses of Kyoto. They were in hiding and it seems very unlikely that Suzaku would want to stay with rebel forces. They wouldn't have left him to wander on the streets like a hobo. So, the obvious answer, in this continuity, would be that he may have stayed with Kirihara for a while. This would also fit in with the fact that Kirihara appeared to cooperate with the Britannian government, which was what Suzaku wanted to do. Obviously, I'm not 100% sure this is accurate and it may have holes, but it's the best theory I can come up with and it's what I will be using for the purpose of this fic.
Hi, hi everyone! First of all, thank you for the wonderful response on the last chapter! I am so glad you enjoyed it!

PLEASE NOTE:
I made some mild modifications to it since I originally uploaded it. In the first version, Tohdoh did not know about Suzaku having killed his father. I then realized that he actually did know and I edited the conversation between them a bit. I also elaborated slightly on Suzaku's new uniform. They're not huge changes, but I just wanted to point it out.
Now, I have a question for you guys. Who wants to give me guesses on what Suzaku's Geass will be? (I've already decided, but I'm curious :D).

As the temperature escalates, so do problems in the SAZ. Britannians are found trying to sneak into the water supply system—by Cornelia's patrols, no less. They're harshly fined, but Lelouch can't touch them, which leaves everyone feeling both sour and ironically relieved.

The thing is Lelouch did anticipate problems in that regard. For this reason, the water they all drink is not actually linked to the Britannian public supply system at all. It's only the sewage they have in common. The fact that one more of his theories has been proven correct cements the Black Knights' trust in him.

He would be happier about it if it didn't get him swamped with more work and more odd interactions.

Ever since Suzaku's birthday, some of the Black Knights have been acting strangely. He'd have thought it was because of Tohdoh, but it's not the kind of strangeness that comes with the news that their leader is a member of their enemy's family.

He has mentioned it to Suzaku and C.C. and Suzaku has confessed to being just as confused. C.C. has given them both unimpressed looks and proclaimed them to be idiots.

Diethard sheds some light on the subject during one of their regular intelligence meetings. "It appears that Sir Kururugi's new uniform has garnered some attention."

Suzaku stares at Diethard. "My uniform? What does that have to do with anything?"

C.C. mumbles something around the mouthful of pizza she's currently eating. Diethard coughs into his fist and fidgets in an uncharacteristic display of uncertainty. "There's been some... discussions on your private life. People are wondering about the... dynamics of your relationship."

Ah. Lelouch finally gets it. So it's the fact that Suzaku looks good in the uniform. Well, he definitely can't blame the Black Knights for that opinion.

"Also," C.C. adds, "I'm pretty sure there's been some talk about wanting to sneak into your gym sessions. It appears more than one Black Knight is curious about how you look like sweaty."
Lelouch remembers a different life, when Sayoko accidentally scheduled countless dates for him with every girl who was interested, and blanches. "Oh, God, no."

"Don't worry," Suzaku says, narrowing his eyes. "I'll make sure they keep their distance."

C.C. chortles and pats Suzaku's head. Damn witch is always getting a kick out of their frustrations.

In the end, Lelouch decides that when it comes to C.C., discretion is the better part of valor, and ignores her behavior. He doubts the Black Knights would actually sneak into his gym, anyway, since it would involve seeing him without his mask, and they respect his desire for privacy.

"Okay then," he says to a befuddled Diethard. "Any other... more dangerous discussions to report?"

"There is still a slight level of confusion on when exactly Sir Kururugi agreed to join our cause. I've noticed a pattern of resurgence of these questions when Sir Kururugi interacts with Your Majesty's brother."

Lelouch sighs. "I'll talk to Rolo. We'll figure something out."

"I wouldn't call it dangerous per se," Diethard adds quickly. "The general belief is that the timing doesn't really count. Sir Kururugi has already proven his worth and his loyalty, and that's what counts."

Suzaku smiles darkly. Undoubtedly, he's remembering just how he did that. Even if it was an example of how things can still go wrong, killing Viletta was still somehow satisfying for him.

"In any case, the Black Knights are confident in your leadership and your new approachability seems to cemented their loyalty."

"Excellent. Keep up the good work, Diethard."

He's about to dismiss the former reporter when all hell breaks loose. It's as sudden as all the disasters that have occurred in Lelouch's life. One moment, C.C. is giving Suzaku that little infuriating smirk of hers, and the next, she suddenly collapses.

Suzaku shoots up from his seat and catches her before she can hit the ground. Lelouch joins them, slapping her face gently as Suzaku sets her down on the couch.

"C.C.? What's wrong?"

The witch groans, but doesn't reply. The Geass in the center of her forehead flickers. Lelouch feels his own buzzing in response.

Suzaku gives him a confused, panicked look. Lelouch's hands start to shake. He wonders if his mother has finally realized C.C. is no longer on their side. C.C. has claimed they don't need to worry about that, since she's perfectly capable to keep Marianne unaware of what they're doing simply by repeating the same exchanges they had before. Marianne and Charles can't actually monitor C.C. or see anything of what C.C. is doing. Or so C.C. said. Lelouch is no longer so convinced.

Furious knocking suddenly sounds at the door. "What?" Lelouch bellows.

Yoshida barges in, his face white and his hair astray. "Zero, there's something you should know."

"Now really isn't the time..."

Rolo pushes past Yoshida, and his clear alarm gives Lelouch pause in a way Yoshida's didn't.
"Brother, we've just intercepted a communication from Britannia. Pendragon has been attacked. A large part of it has been destroyed."

Lelouch's mind goes blank. Surely not. Surely the SAZ couldn't have made such a big difference in the history of Britannia. And what could have possibly done such damage? The FLEIJA Schneizel originally shot at Pendragon doesn't exist yet, and the Geass on Nina guarantees that it may never be invented at all.

"What? What happened?"

"It... It was a missile. It came from... It came from Europia."

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After everything he's been through, one would think Suzaku would be immune to shocks. Apparently, that's not at all the case. The news of what happened in Pendragon leaves him mute in surprise and horror.

"Europia? " Lelouch repeats. "But..."

He trails off as he makes the connection. Lelouch will never say it, but Suzaku suspects Lelouch's memories of the time they spent in St. Petersburg are still blurry and unfocused due to the two memory Geasses the emperor placed on him. As for Suzaku, he never really believed the two of them made that much of a difference then. Lelouch's plan as Julius Kingsley did create instability for Europia, but they hadn't actually been too involved in the military coup of Shin Hyuga Shaing.

The volatility of the emperor's Geass on Lelouch had caused him to break his cover and led to Shaing discovering his true identity, which in turn caused Suzaku to attempt to assassinate him. Shaing's guard seemed to have been on standby, to the point that one of the knightmares had caught the bullet meant for Shaing. Therefore, one can only assume Shaing must have been planning to act the same way before Suzaku and Lelouch even stepped into the picture.

Suzaku does know that Shaing was killed later, but the hows and the whys of that particular development were lost in the aftermath of the coup. Out of the four Grandmasters of the Knights of Euro-Britannia, only Andreas Farnese survived. The knights corps themselves was decimated.

After the incident, Suzaku had been relieved to be recalled to Pendragon, because he hadn't wanted anything to do with the mess. He wishes now he'd stayed a bit longer, or had shown more interest in the incident.

He can already see Lelouch's mind working furiously as he mentally adjusts his pieces on the chessboard. "Diethard, Yoshida, give us a moment," he says. "Assemble everyone and wait for us."

"Yes, Zero. Right away."

The two Black Knights leave and the door closes behind them. "This is about what happened when the two of us were in Euro-Britannia," Lelouch says once they're gone. "It has to be. Rolo, do you know the details of what happened after Suzaku and I were imprisoned?"

Rolo shakes his head. "I was never told much. I did learn of the death of Shin Hyuga Shaing, but beyond that, the situation in Euro-Britannia had nothing to do with what I'd come there to do."

That's pretty much what Suzaku expected. Lelouch doesn't seem surprised either. "Well, clearly, something must have gone differently. As I see it, there two options. Perhaps without my interference and plans, Europia was able to deploy this weapon at Pendragon. On the other hand, it may also be
related to Shaing's coup. Without us there, he may have had more time to prepare it."

That's true. It was Lelouch and Suzaku who triggered the coup at that specific moment. If not for them, who knows what could have occurred?

As Lelouch finishes his sentence, C.C. finally cracks her eyes open. "Well, that was unexpected."

Lelouch jumps at the chance to learn more. "C.C., what happened?"

"Charles is dead. So is your mother."

Well, that's good news. At least they don't have to worry about the Sword of Akasha any longer.

On the other hand, that means Anya Alstreim is dead too. A shame, since it means she will never get the chance to live out her life, unlike in the past timeline.

To top it off, if that is the case, it's possible that the rest of the Rounds suffered the same fate. Suzaku thinks about the one real friend he had during his time as a Rounds. Gino Weinberg. Despite himself, a pang of grief courses through him.

He never wanted Gino to die. Even when they became enemies on the battlefield, he had tried to spare his friend.

Still, when he turned back time, he was prepared for the sacrifices he'd have to make and the possible losses he may have to endure. If Gino is dead, so be it. Also, there's a chance that Gino may not have been in Pendragon at the time of the blast. After all, the Rounds are dispatched on the front all the time. The only ones the Emperor tended to always keep close—or at least send on shorter missions—were Anya and Bismark. During their first lifetime, he'd actually deemed Anya's stay in Area 11 strange, until he'd found out about Marianne, of course.

He pushes back the thought and focuses on the conversation.

"What did we do to make that much of a difference?" Lelouch asks. "Was it the Ark Fleet plan?"

C.C. shakes her head. "Not really. Your involvement did influence the situation on the front, yes, but at the end of the day, this is because of Leila Malcal. She is the one who changed the course of things."

"Leila Malcal?" Lelouch asks. "Who is she?"

"A commander from Europia and one of my contractors," C.C. replies. "She was in charge of a special squad in the EU war. She's also part of the reason why we could turn back time to begin with. She had a very powerful Geass which we sacrificed for the plan."

Suzaku remembers the blonde girl he'd killed so many years from now. "So me killing her there had the same effect in this timeline?"

"No, she lived. But from what I understand..." C.C. hesitates, her gaze flickering uncertainly. "She didn't have her Geass. She must have done something during your time in Euro-Britannia, something that involved the Geass I originally gave her. But without it..."

Suzaku supposes that makes sense, more sense, at least, than he and Lelouch having inadvertently changed the world while sitting in a cell, cuddling. Not that Lelouch's crazy bluff and his own interventions couldn't have made a difference, but it just didn't seem feasible.
"Leila Malcal," Lelouch muses. "So if Europia is actually the culprit, does that mean Shaing's coup isn't related at all?"

C.C. shakes her head. "Shin Hyuga Shaing was still behind it. The Dimensional Supervisor told me when I blacked out. Europia had some sort of device that allowed them to transport their machines behind the front, and Shaing used it to attack Pendragon. Shin Hyuga Shaing has Geass as well, so V.V. will know about most of this and he won't be happy."

"A Geass?" Suzaku asks, remembering the man who almost killed Lelouch in Euro-Britannia. "What does it do?"

"It appears to be similar to Lelouch's Absolute Obedience one, but its sole purpose is to kill. His Geass in particular was cursed, an anomaly caused by a distortion in the world of C. The Dimensional Supervisor believes it must be eliminated at all costs, but it's likely V.V. will be able to do that for us. In the meantime, we are to remain watchful."

"Is he liable to attack us here?" Lelouch asks.

C.C. shakes her head. "Shaing is very dangerous in that he feels that life itself is a curse that must be eliminated, but it's not within his means to target everyone, and he doesn't see Japan as a point of interest at this time, so in that respect, we're safe. We can monitor the situation using my connection with the world of C, but for now, we are to stay out of it. If our intervention becomes necessary at a later date, we will step in."

Before they can continue their conversation, the phone rings. Lelouch takes the call and Euphie's face pops up on the video screen. "Euphie, what happened?" Lelouch asks without preamble. He doesn't even bother to hide the fact that he knows about the explosion and Euphie doesn't call him out on it.

"Pendragon... Oh, Lelouch, it's so horrible. Father, Odysseus, everyone... They're all gone."

"Schneizel too?"

"No. He was at a conference when it hit."

"Thank heavens," Lelouch says.

Strangely, Suzaku has the feeling that he means it, although Suzaku doesn't really understand why. He expects his emperor will eventually tell him.

"I need to talk to my men," Lelouch says. "Stay with your knight and your guard. Do not go anywhere unaccompanied for any reason. I have no doubt that this will affect us too."

"Cornelia said... Cornelia said that I should leave the SAZ."

Lelouch shakes his head. "Euphie, no. That won't help you. In fact, that's the last thing you want to do right now." Euphie looks conflicted, so Lelouch says, "It's for the good of the Japanese too. Cornelia and I can reach an agreement as long as you're here, and we'll need to work together to keep everyone safe."

Just like that, Euphie is convinced. "Oh, of course. I understand. I'll stay here."

Lelouch ends the conversation with a promise to go see Euphie as soon as possible. Once he hangs up, he dials another number. "Jeremiah... Have you heard?"
"No, My Liege. What's happened?"

"Pendragon has just been attacked. You need to be on full alert. Make sure you're ready to evacuate Nunnally at any time. And be ready. I'll have a mission for you and Rolo."

"Big brother?" Rolo asks. Suzaku had almost forgotten he was there. "What mission?"

"It's likely that V.V., Schneizel and Shin Hyuga Shaing will keep each other busy, at least for some time. This leaves us with a chance, and a whole new set of problems. In fact, I very much suspect war will be coming to Japan within the next couple of days."

Chapter End Notes

So obviously, a lot of the content in this chapter references Akito the Exiled and you may not understand what exactly happened if you haven't seen it. To sum it up real quick, it takes place during the time when Lulu is an amnesiac and Suzaku the Knight of 7. They go to Euro-Britannia, Lulu hatches one of his classical schemes, they come up against this psycho who is planning a coup against Euro-Britannia and who ultimately attempts to blow Pendragon up using an Europian weapon. Leila Malcal and her bf Akito Hyuga are both involved in that.

For those of you who did see Akito, you can assume that Leila died during their meeting at the castle, ultimately leading Akito to lose his will to live and succumb to his brother's Geass. Obviously, without Akito and Leila, Shin took over the castle and succeeded in his plan. Now, this part is IMPORTANT... I read in the wiki that Shin's Geass affects only the people he loves. To me, that makes no sense whatsoever, since it was Leila's Geass that saved her life when she met with him. In that sense, the way the events happened in this continuity may be a mild canon divergence - it depends on your interpretation I guess.

Finally, one more note. This story will probably ignore most elements in Oz the Reflection. I haven't read the manga and there are too many details there to cram into an already complicated story line.
Hey, hey, everyone! Thank you for all your feedback, kudos and comments. They've really encouraged my writing. Here is the next update. Do let me know what you think about the direction I'm taking it in.

The mood among the Black Knights is dominated primarily by confusion. They've all heard about the missile attack and have no idea what to make of it.

Diethard is uncertain as well, but he's also a little excited. He does know Zero has nothing to do with it. His shock in the office was genuine. However, he cannot help but wonder how Zero will use this chance. The world has already been thrown into chaos, and that can easily become Zero's playground.

Zero finally emerges from his office twenty minutes or so after they first received news, his inner circle flanking him and looking glum. He doesn't bother to explain the delay. Instead, he just gets down to business.

"Everyone, as you all know, a missile has recently hit Pendragon. We are as of yet unsure on civilian casualties, but we do know the royal family has been decimated. Charles zi Britannia is dead. First news suggests that the next emperor will be Schneizel el Britannia."

"What does this mean for us, Zero?" Kallen asks.

"This complicates our situation seriously. While the attack came from Europia, its actual source may be related to an internal threat in Euro-Britannia. I have been unable to reach all my sources to double check. Even if this is not the case, I have no doubt that Euro-Britannia will want to use the chance to secede from the motherland. Grand Duke Velaines, who is the official leader of Euro-Britannia, has long since believed they shouldn't have to bow to the emperor anymore. Naturally, this means Schneizel will be sandwiched on the continent between Europia and Euro-Britannia, which will leave him unable to pay much attention to many of the Areas, including Japan."

"But that's good, right?" Tamaki asks, scratching his head.

"Yes and no. The world order has been seriously imbalanced. Prior to this, Britannia had a treaty with the Chinese Federation, but now, I have no doubt that the eunuchs will want to take advantage of the chaos and come at Japan."

"But they've tried that before and it didn't work," Chiba argues.

"The force they sent then was minimal," Zero replies. "They couldn't afford to show too much support to the Japanese government in exile. Now, it won't be about pretense. It will be about occupation."

"The invasion all over again," Tohdoh murmurs. "For sakuradite."

Zero nods. "Among other things, yes. Schneizel doesn't like to fight battles he can't win. He may
order Cornelia to abandon Japan altogether. Our main goal now is to keep Princess Euphemia here and safe. As long as we do that, Cornelia will want to work with us, against the Chinese Federation, to secure the Area and keep her sister from harm."

"Work with Britannia?" Chiba asks. "But..."

"Cornelia is very protective of Euphemia," Zero cuts him off. "She will ignore orders for Euphemia's sake. We can use that and, if needed, throw the Britannians at the Chinese forces that come at us. I'll handle Cornelia."

It's a brilliant plan, and Diethard is in awe with how quickly Zero is adapting to these unexpected circumstances. Of course, it probably helps that he does know these people personally. If he remembers right, Cornelia was once close to Prince Lelouch's mother, Marianne.

Either way, the Black Knights seem satisfied by the logic, not that Zero bothers to wait for anyone to protest. The decision has clearly been made, and they're already moving on.

"Now, other than the Chinese Federation, there is another factor to consider. There is a slight possibility that the emperor's older twin brother, Victor, may step up to take the throne in Schneizel's stead, either now or in the future."

"I've never heard about Charles zi Britannia having a brother," Senba says.

Diethard scowls, trying to remember his history lessons. "No, he did... But as far as I recall, he died when he was very young. Carriage accident or something similar."

"He didn't die. He merely stepped out of the limelight. Britannian succession has always been very brutal, and during the days of Charles zi Britannia's childhood, this caused most of his closest relatives, including his mother, to be killed. As a consequence, Victor decided to leave the throne to his younger sibling and become the chief of a special unit that serves Britannia. Most people don't even know this unit exists. I've had the misfortune of finding out about it, the hard way."

Several Black Knights exchange uneasy looks. This is new information and the way Zero presented it seems to worry them.

Zero doesn't give them the chance to ask questions. "Victor is even more brutal and crueler than his brother. He is a madman who revels in the suffering of others. Should he take the reins of Britannia, the results would be most unfortunate. But at this point, it is unlikely that he will want to focus on politics. He will lash out at the people who killed Charles zi Britannia."

Diethard wonders if Victor zi Britannia has anything to do with the experimental procedures that gave Zero and C.C. their abilities. It seems likely. If so, their lives have just gotten exponentially harder.

"For the moment, I want the intelligence department to focus on the Chinese Federation, but keep a close eye on developments in Euro-Britannia," Zero continues. "We are preparing for war with the Chinese Federation and as far as I know, Victor has been known to be active there. Keep both aspects in mind."

"So... Zero... If you're worried about the future emperor, you think we can beat the Chinese?" Senba asks.

"I don't think we can. I know we can."

And he's off, shooting orders right and left. The base becomes a hive of activity as everyone rushes
to fulfill Zero’s commands.

It doesn’t take long for Zero to receive the call he foresaw. He takes it in the presence of everybody else. Cornelia’s face pops up on the video screen, and from the very first moment, it's obvious that she's not happy. "Princess Cornelia," Zero says. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

"Cut the pleasantries, Zero. You know what I want."

"Princess Cornelia, Princess Euphemia has already made her choice. She has decided to stay here, with us. I have no influence over that."

Cornelia grits her teeth in obvious frustration. "As if I would believe that. I don't know what you've told her..."

"It doesn't matter what I told her," Zero cuts her off. "What matters is the truth. And you and I both know where Japan stands at present. The Chinese Federation is coming and you don't have the forces to keep them at bay."

Cornelia twitches. Diethard has noticed this about the Witch of Britannia before. She's excellent on the battlefield, but her poker face isn't that great. Often, when she loses her temper—which seems to happen a lot around Zero—her thoughts are all over her face.

"Oh I see. Are you running with your tail between your legs?" Zero shakes his head in disappointment. "How unlike you, Viceroy Cornelia."

"You know nothing about me, Zero," Cornelia snaps.

"Perhaps not, but our personal opinions of each other don't matter that much. What matters is that Princess Euphemia is within my reach and not yours."

Cornelia takes a deep breath, clearly trying to control her temper. "All right, Zero. Let's stop the pretense. What is it that you want to let Euphie go?"

"I want what I've always wanted, freedom for Japan. I will not allow the Chinese Federation to step up and crush us. You can work with us, Cornelia, or you can stay out of the way. I will have no qualms to remove you should you interfere."

Without further ado, Zero ends the call. The Black Knights are frozen. "Was that wise, Zero?" Asahina asks.

"Princess Cornelia is an excellent commander, but contrary to popular belief, she isn't a goddess. She did just lose family. She might not have been fond of all of them, but they were in their own way important. The entire Britannian chain of command has been torn asunder. She and Schneizel would be able to handle it, but with Euphemia's life hanging in the balance, Cornelia will not want to take the chance. After all, she knows that if she tried to come at the SAZ with Britannian forces, the Japanese would turn against Euphemia in an instant."

Diethard isn't so sure about that. It's been a while since the beginning of the SAZ, and the Japanese citizenry has become fond of the young and idealistic princess.

"But Princess Euphemia is on our side, right?" Tamaki asks.

"You don't have to worry about Euphie," Kururugi says. "I'll deal with that. She does want to help the Japanese and she trusts me. She'll do what we say. She won't be an issue."
Diethard highly suspects that the entire situation is not so much about the trust Euphemia places in her former knight, but rather, the affection she feels for her brother. He isn't sure if Euphemia knows the truth about Zero's identity, but it would make a lot of sense. After all, she wouldn't have been so willing to work with Clovis's killer, unless that person was another sibling, one she had presumably mourned for many years and who needs her help.

"I expect Cornelia will go to Schneizel with this," Zero continues. "Normally this kind of bluff would not work with him, but with the state of things in Britannia as it is, Schneizel will not want to alienate Cornelia by endangering Euphemia. He always was more prone to diplomatic talks that war, and that will help us, at least for now."

Yet again, Zero is proven correct. It takes a good couple of hours, during which they're all running around to fulfill Zero's orders, but finally Zero gets the second call they've been waiting for.

Diethard doesn't get the chance to witness this one, but he is present when Zero makes the announcement. "Schneizel has agreed to return Japan to the Black Knights in exchange for a peace treaty that would be beneficial for both sides. We'll work with Cornelia to hold the Chinese Federation at bay, and once their forces are repelled, Japan will be free."

"Do you believe that, Zero?" Tohdoh asks.

"Of course not. Peace treaties are as easily broken as they are signed. But by doing this, Schneizel buys time to handle his problems in Europia, leaves the Chinese Federation to us and makes sure he doesn't turn his sister into an enemy. It's win-win for him. He can always take Japan later, if he needs it. Or so he thinks."

"We won't fall this time," Kallen says decisively. "This time, Japan has you."

The entire room erupts in cheers. "Zero! Zero! Zero! Zero!"

They're all so busy celebrating their good news they don't notice the dark expression on Kururugi's face. Diethard wonders what that is all about. It vanishes as quickly as it comes, once Zero resumes their preparations for the imminent battle with the Chinese Federation, but Diethard notices. And he wonders why, if Zero is so confident in their success, his brother is now nowhere to be seen.

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It doesn't take long for Lelouch's theories to be proven correct. The day after his conversation with Schneizel, news comes of Chinese forces already heading toward Japan. Lelouch is surprised they even waited that long, but he supposes it must have taken some time to gather their forces. Not to mention that they would have wanted to figure out how these new developments would affect the balance of power before they made a decision. The eunuchs are arrogant, power-hungry and cowardly, but they're not complete idiots.

He actually believes that their decision to come at Japan has a lot to do with the possibility of capturing Cornelia too, since that would give them leverage against Schneizel. But while he and Cornelia have had their differences in the past, he has no desire to sell her out to the eunuchs, and even if he did, it would ultimately still end in war for Japan.

For the first time since the inauguration of the SAZ, Zero officially leaves the Zone. As always, he is accompanied by Suzaku—who makes no attempt to hide his new allegiance and is wearing his Knight of Zero outfit—in the Lancelot and C.C. who is still piloting the Gawain with him. He has an additional escort of Black Knights, but he doubts it will be necessary. He's left most of his people in the SAZ, to make sure the Zone and the people inside are safe.
He meets with Cornelia at her own headquarters. Technically speaking, it's a risky move, but he's confident Cornelia won't try anything stupid or rash. Besides, the alternative would be allowing Cornelia into the SAZ and that is just not the best idea. It may give him access to her, but it's still far too risky to have Britannian units so close to so many Japanese civilians. He still remembers the original SAZ massacre, after all. He's not about to take any chances.

Cornelia is clearly very unhappy with him, but she doesn't try to attack him. Their meeting is held in public, in front of cameras, which is unfortunate because he can't use his Geass on her, but somewhat reassuring, in that it does appear that Britannia won't be trying to double-cross them anytime soon.

The first thing Cornelia does is hold a press conference. By now, rumors have already reached the Britannian citizenry of the events in Pendragon. Most of them don't actually know what happened, but there are those who have loved ones in mainland Britannia, so the disaster can't be kept under wraps.

"Yesterday, at 11:25 a.m, the capital city of Britannia, Pendragon, was the target of a cowardly attack. My father, 98th Emperor Charles zi Britannia, is dead, as are many others.

"I am aware that some of you may still have connections to Pendragon. All the civilian casualties have not been identified at this time, but you will receive notifications regarding the situation as soon as it is possible, and once the communication lines are clearer.

"Unfortunately, these recent developments have caused a resurgence in the hostilities between Britannia and the Chinese Federation. It is likely that Japan may be the target of an attack in future days. Our purpose now is to keep them from succeeding. To this end, Britannia has decided to cooperate with the Black Knights."

She nods at Lelouch, and Lelouch takes the stage. "Citizens of Japan, Britannians and Japanese alike. This is a moment of great sorrow. The attack on Pendragon is mourned all across the Empire, and the countless deaths of innocents stirs my anger. The Black Knights will stand against this injustice and protect Japan from all those who threaten it.

"I have spoken with His Majesty, Schneizel el Britannia, 99th Emperor of Britannia, and he has guaranteed his support in the matter. He has also agreed to a future peace treaty between Japan and Britannia, one that would safeguard Japan’s rights and liberties as a nation.

"Britannians and Japanese alike must stand together for this to be possible. I urge you to remain in your homes and preserve public peace. We cannot afford to turn on each other at this time.

"You need not fear. We will protect the Japanese shores from all foreign intrusion. As knights of justice, we will triumph once more!"

Naturally, the Black Knights from his escort instantly burst into applause. "Zero! Zero! Zero!"

By Lelouch's side, Cornelia twitches in irritation.

After that, the formalities are quickly wrapped up. Lelouch has already made most of the arrangements with Schneizel. The document is ready to be signed. All Cornelia has to do is put her name on the piece of paper.

She does so with little grace, but that's the most they can expect. Lelouch signs next to her name, then has Suzaku add his own signature. It's for more than one reason. He is technically affiliated with the Six Houses of Kyoto and the Japanese government, both due to his relationship to the Sumeragis and the fact that he is the Kururugi heir. As an Honorary, that only brought him problems and made
him a bigger target, but he's not just an Honorary now.

Most importantly, as the knight of a Britannian royal, he can occupy the role of attorney-in-fact under special circumstances. Following the guidelines of Britannian legislation, Suzaku has actually become the only person who can act in Lelouch's stead in a legal, official capacity. It's kind of funny to think about, given Lelouch's past choices and the Requiem plan. Should Schneizel ever make noises about Zero not being a legal name, they'll be covered.

Suzaku signs in both Japanese characters and Britannian letters. He even adds the Knight of Zero title. Trust Suzaku to be thorough.

Once the paperwork is out of the way, they reconvene behind closed doors, in a meeting with Cornelia's inner circle.

"I'm not sure that was wise," Andreas Darlton says. " Aren't we advertising the extent of our forces to the enemy?"

"On the contrary, General Darlton," Lelouch replies, " it will make them underestimate us all the more. The eunuchs are very much aware of the enmity between Britannia and the Black Knights. The fact that we would agree to work together would suggest to them that we are individually weak. And while this isn't necessarily false, it's not the truth either."

"I take it you already have a plan to defeat them," Cornelia says. She's still pissed, but she's not petty enough to not cooperate with him for the purpose of military victory and still aware of him dangling Euphie's life over her head.

"Indeed."

Reaching an agreement with Cornelia takes a bit longer than Lelouch would like and there's some predictable shouting involved. He uses a spare moment during one of Darlton's rants to type up an email to Milly and assure them he and Nunnally are fine and unaffected by the unrest in Europia, but his productivity does little to improve his mood. By the end of the meeting, Suzaku has started looking... stabby, C.C. is irritable and Lelouch has a headache. Cornelia's hand keeps going to her gun and Guilford's stance is almost as rigid as Suzaku's, which should have been an impossibility.

They're all greatly relieved when they have a coherent plan in order, even if a lot of it hinges of Lelouch's stratagems.

When they return to the SAZ, they're received with great enthusiasm by the Japanese. If they are afraid, they don't show it. They seem completely convinced in Zero's ability to protect them.

In his past life, Lelouch failed at that. In his past life, Lelouch failed at many things. He spilled rivers of blood for his Requiem and destroyed countless lives. This time, he will make sure that won't be necessary. For the sake of everyone he loves, he will build a peaceful future, one they can all share.

Chapter End Notes

First off. Yes, V.V.'s real name is actually Victor. As for why Lelouch mentioned it, obviously, it's because the wacko is bound to act differently now that Charles is dead, so he's thinking ahead. More on that in future chapters.

Next. Suzaku being Lelouch's attorney in fact. With the caveat that I'm not actually a
lawyer, I'm basing this theory on Guilford's behavior in R2, when he took command during the Calares episode in Cornelia's name. This could have been an impromptu thing, but I feel like there may have been some sort of legal aspect involved too. It just seems like the title of a royal knight has to come with some extra benefits and they're not just glorified guards.

Yes, I realize that both Suzaku and Lelouch are minors (based on the regular, age 18 thing and their physical ages during the second timeline), which would mean that Lelouch should not be able to do this at all and should perhaps be Schneizel's ward. But age doesn't seem to matter much for Britannians. Anya of all people is a Knight of Rounds and nobody seemed to find it strange. She's not an exception either. Gino and Monica are both very young too (I think 16 and 17). And as Rounds, they have the legal authority to sign executions. Not to mention that Euphie is a sub-viceroy and she's 16. Nunnally was viceroy and empress at 15. (And there is of course, Kaguya, who is even younger, but I left her aside for the purpose of this discussion.) I'm interpreting this as maybe something related to nobility/royalty.

So, in this instance and to not prolong the discussion further, even if age would matter for participating in the signing of an official treaty in Britannian law, Lelouch - who was never actually disinherited and remains a royal - can sign and has the authority to grant Suzaku what is basically power of attorney. I realize it's a bit weird, but go with it. It's Code Geass. Weird is to be expected.

(Also, I didn't want to develop upon the legal aspects so much, but ugh. I always go too deeply into the details.)
For this chapter, just a brief note. Author is not Lelouch, a military strategist or a scientist. So there will be some... hand-wavey stuff during more complicated battles. I wouldn't manage to explain everything he did if I tried. That being said, as always, thank you for the comments and kudos! Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The force of the Chinese Federation reaches Japan that very same day. By now, V.V. will have already mounted an attack against Shin Hyuga Shaing. Hopefully, it will keep him busy long enough for Lelouch to go through with his plans.

The eunuchs do not send Cao again, but Lelouch actually prefers it that way. He's still using Cao as a sleeper agent in the Federation and his presence will keep Nunnally safe despite the restlessness that it sure to follow and the fact that the headquarters of the Geass Order is there. He trusts Sayoko to watch Nunnally, but reinforcements never hurt in this kind of situation.

He's already spoken with his little sister and told her not to worry, that he will be able to handle this. He can tell Nunnally is very concerned, but the only thing that she says is, "I know. I have complete faith in you."

He really should have told her the truth sooner in his past life.

As expected, Euphie fully understands the situation and has no qualms with putting herself at risk for the good of the Japanese. "I wish we didn't have to lie to Cornelia, but I know how she is," she says. "As long as it will help you, I will do whatever I must."

Her knight isn't nearly so pleased, so Lelouch places a Geass on him, just in case. It wouldn't do for David Darlton to attempt to extract her from the SAZ sooner than Lelouch planned. Cornelia may have signed their agreement, but her cooperation still hinges on Euphie regardless.

The moment of the decisive battle finds Lelouch calm. The main advantage of the Chinese troups is that they've come in high numbers. The fleet alone is enough to give Cornelia pause. But he's faced far worse odds and has even flown in the direction of a FLEIJA missile, with an infinitesimal chance to disarm it. He is completely convinced they will succeed.

The enemy fleet is not coming from the exact same direction as the Britannian navy did in the last lifetime, but the ground is similar. He sends Rakshata in the submarine and has her direct the torpedos at the right angle. Bubbles erupt from the water, consuming the approaching vessels.

"You know," Suzaku tells him through the comlink as they watch the ensuing chaos, "that's far funnier when it's not happening to me."

Cornelia is baffled, and so is Tohdoh, although they both make a valiant attempt at hiding it. Ensconced in his knightmare with C.C., Lelouch cackles.

Of course, the bubbles don't actually destroy everything the Chinese Federation wants to throw at
them. They have other forces, coming from a different direction, where Lelouch cannot so easily wipe them out. They have flying units, that are all probably carrying knightmares. And they have the Shen Hu. Li Xingke.

Lelouch had actually been counting on that. His absence from the Forbidden City will make Rolo and Jeremiah's mission easier. Besides, the man may be excellent at what he does, but he will never be able to defeat Suzaku.

The current version of the Lancelot isn't nearly as good as the Albion, but Lelouch did have the foresight to make Lloyd and Rakshata improve on it during their stay at the SAZ. The largely inefficient float system has been replaced by energy wings similar to those of the Gawain's. They're draining on the energy filler, but Suzaku knows how to pace himself.

The Guren is a bit more problematic. The Radiant Wave Surger is a powerful weapon, but it also requires a lot of energy to use. They've managed to improve on it too, but they ultimately decided to use a float system for it rather than energy wings, at least until they can improve on the technology—which would take a little more time and resources than they had available at the SAZ.

Either way, both their knightmares and Lelouch's own are vastly superior to what the Chinese Federation is using. The Shen Hu is an excellent frame and Xingke an excellent pilot, but in the end, he's just not good enough.

Lelouch's calculations prove to be entirely correct. He hovers over the field of battle and directs his Hadron Cannon at the flying vessels, so he can't fully focus on the battle between Xingke and Suzaku, but he does realize it's over almost embarrassingly fast.

Suzaku goes at him at full speed. He's probably using his Geass—the one given to him by Lelouch—because he moves so quickly Lelouch becomes unable to track him. When Lelouch sees Suzaku again through the chaos, he already has Xingke at a clear disadvantage.

"I was expecting a bit more of a challenge," Suzaku says. He almost sounds disappointed. Knowing him, he probably is. The meeting with Cornelia has left him with some anger to let out.

"Oh, well. I'm sure you'll get your chance from someone else at a later date. Take him alive if you can. He may come in handy. And if you can incapacitate him and leave the frame still useful in the near future, do so."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Trusting Suzaku to follow his orders, Lelouch directs his attention to the rest of his troops. Kallen is causing beautiful destruction, as always. While not as fast and superhumanly efficient as Suzaku, she is still easily superior to her opponents.

Since the three of them are so destructive, the rest of Lelouch's flying units, which are primarily Britannian in nature are on standby. Rakshata hasn't had the chance to build their flagship yet, but for the purpose of this battle, it doesn't seem that it will be necessary.

The Chinese troops attempt to sneak past them, but they are intercepted on the ground by Cornelia and Tohdoh, whom he has deployed in the areas most vulnerable to attack.

Suzaku follows his orders to the letter. He cripples the Shen Hu, forcing an automatic eject of its pilot. The frame is badly damaged, but Lelouch estimates that they will be able to fish it out of the ocean eventually and use it in some way.

It's a shame that the Shen Hu didn't conveniently run out of energy like Kallen's knightmare in their
first life, but ah well.

Suzaku intercepts the escape pod, dumps it on the submarine, then goes back to his destruction spree. To their credit, the Chinese don't give up so quickly and many seem interested in going to rescue their general. It's of course, a futile endeavor, since Lelouch easily blocks their path.

Then, his final plan comes to fruition. His communicator buzzes, and when Lelouch takes the call, it's Rolo's voice that sounds in his ear. "Big brother, we're done here. We've managed to accomplish all mission objectives."

"Excellent, Rolo. I knew I could count on you and Jeremiah."

"Sending you the video feed now."

A few minutes later, the open coms connecting to all channels flare to life with Zero's image. "To all Chinese Federation forces. This is Zero. I have a message for you."

The image shifts, displaying an entirely different person. It's the Empress, and she is tied up and in the hold of a man dressed in a Black Knights uniform and wearing a bright orange mask. The video goes back to Zero. "The eunuchs are dead. Your empress is in my grasp. Surrender now."

In the wake of the crushing defeat and the capture of their empress, the Chinese can do nothing but comply. Behind his mask, Lelouch smirks. He really does love to win.

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Trapped in a cell in the belly of the submarine of the Black Knights, Xingke paces. He never expected to be defeated like this. He didn't underestimate Zero—the man is clearly a military genius—but the superiority of their forces alone should have given them enough of an advantage to compensate.

The whole reason for his presence was removing Zero and his black nightmare, the one that had done the most damage during the original attempt of the Chinese Federation to intervene in Japan. With Zero gone, the Black Knights would have fallen apart, Cornelia would have folded and left, and Japan would have been theirs.

He'd seen the red knightmare, the one supposedly led by the Black Knights' red ace, and he'd deemed it a threat. But that machine, while spectacular, hadn't been the one to take him out.

The Lancelot. Suzaku Kururugi. Euphemia's knight. How had it been possible for Kururugi to move so quickly?

It doesn't matter anymore. He's trapped. He's failed the Tianzi, and the eunuchs were clear. If he didn't kill Zero, the Tianzi would pay the price.

Can the rest of his forces win without him and the Shen Hu? It's doubtful, if not impossible. His only hope now is that it seems unlikely that the eunuchs will attack the Tianzi in the wake of their defeat at Zero's hands. Perhaps they are bluffing. He's never wanted to take chances with her safety, but now... He's all out of chances, out of time, and out of allies.

In front of his cell, there are a few Black Knight guards who are watching him carefully. They don't seem too alarmed, though, which doesn't bode well. He tries not to feel like an animal trapped in a cage, but he utterly fails.

When something actually happens, Xingke is both relieved and not. His guards stand to attention and
Xingke watches as Zero appears within his line of sight. A green-haired woman is with him, walking behind him with soundless footsteps. Like the others, she's dressed in a Black Knights uniform, a pilot suit, but hers is far more ornate.

Zero waves the guards away and they leave with a silent salute. As they depart, Zero approaches the cell.

"Li Xingke. Truly an honor to meet you. I've heard a great deal about your exploits and your famed loyalty to the Tianzi. It is regrettable that our first meeting has to be under these unpleasant circumstances."

"Regrettable indeed," Xingke says between gritted teeth. "Although I have to wonder why Zero would bother to visit a humble general now of all times."

"You are many things, Xingke, but humble is not one of them." Zero laughs. He produces a tablet from his coat and places it in Xingke's line of sight. The images on the screen make Xingke's blood boil.

It's the Tianzi, captured, at the mercy of Zero's forces.

"No."

He rushes forward, furious, but of course, the secured glass between them keeps him at bay. Zero doesn't even flinch. "Yes," he says. Xingke has the feeling he's smirking behind the mask. The woman stares at Xingke impassively, like he's an uninteresting insect.

"Now, don't look so upset," Zero says. "It's not like she was free before. Her former captors are dead now. She simply has different ones now."

"You have no right to treat her like this," Xingke hisses. "She's not an object you can buy or barter."

"Indeed not," Zero replies. "Now, I have no desire to hurt the Tianzi. She is but a child, after all. However, in the context of current international developments, we will need the strength of the Chinese Federation. Your support and loyalty would be appreciated."

"My support? My loyalty? That only belongs to the Empress."

"I thought you would say that." Zero's mask snaps open and Xingke's attention is drawn to his lone, visible eye. "But you will trust me nonetheless. You will trust me no matter what I say. You will trust me with The Tianzi's safety, with your future, that of the Chinese Federation and every other problem that may come up."

A few seconds later, when Zero explains Xingke his plan for the United Federation of Nations, Xingke is more than happy to agree. Of course he will help. Zero will clearly take care of the Tianzi. He is far more trustworthy than the Eunuchs and her being in Area 11 will fulfill his promise to her to see the world. Not to mention that she will have friends here, Kaguya Sumeragi, perhaps others. Yes, it is perfect. Zero will take care of everything. It makes complete sense.

Chapter End Notes

I don't actually know when the Shen Hu was made, but my theory, for the purpose of this fic, is that like the Guren, it did exist. It just wasn't as powerful as the version we
saw in R2. At this point in the timeline, every flying knightmare (except Lelouch's Gawain) appeared to be using float systems, not energy wings, so that too would’ve been a change.
Runaway Geass

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Here I am with another update! I hope this one makes Lulu's use of the Geass on Xingke a little clearer. As always, thank you for all your comments! They really encourage me to continue and update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The meeting with Xingke amuses C.C. slightly. She half-expected Lelouch to simply turn him into a puppet like he did Schneizel. His new approach is interesting.

"Trust?" she asks as they leave the Chinese general in his cell and start to walk away.

"Of course. Obviously, I'm not going to use an army of brainwashed people. That's far too risky, since we don't know the extent of V.V.'s abilities. Not to mention that in the long-run, they act suspiciously and they tend to be unable to do anything except what they're ordered to do. This way, Xingke will simply act normally and the Geass will cancel out anything he may have objected to. Beyond that, the Federation's army is very sheep-like in nature. As long as the Tianzi and Xingke say something, they will obey."

C.C. nods. After all, the eunuchs effortlessly kept up the entire nation subjugated by controlling the Tianzi. It would be easy to do the same through Xingke and a handful of generals like Cao, especially since the Tianzi trusts Xingke implicitly.

Trust. It's all about trust.

They leave the cell block, satisfied with their progress. As Lelouch passes the guards, he says, "Continue to keep an eye on him. I may have gotten him to cooperate, but for now, we still need to be wary." It's not true, but Lelouch can't make the use of his Geass too obvious.

"Yes, Zero," they say eagerly.

These days everyone is so eager to follow Lelouch's commands, and even more so after the way Lelouch so effortlessly beat the massive force the Federation sent at them. It's nice to see.

C.C. wonders if Lelouch will try the same tactic of 'trust' on the rest of the Black Knights. She doubts it—unless they force matters, at least. He wants loyalty that is won fair and square.

During the Requiem, they've abandoned all scruples, and that hasn't really changed now. Nevertheless, they're building something new with the Black Knights, and in his heart, Lelouch doesn't want to break that, not if he can help it. It's still not completely real—they have too many secrets for that—but it's better than what they used to have. Lelouch will still use his Geass if he's forced to, but for now, the Black Knights have given their trust to their leader out of their own free will, so it may not be necessary.

Besides, Geass isn't 100% reliable, just like Lelouch said. Even an Absolute Obedience command can go very wrong if they aren't careful. And well... It's actually debatable if the more subtle approach Lelouch took in Xingke's case is better than what he did to Schneizel and his army of
brainwashed soldiers. Their consciousness appeared to be completely suspended. As far as C.C. can tell, Xingke will remain himself... mostly, but unless a Geass canceler is used, something about him has permanently changed. It's a little funny to realize that Lelouch never ordered people to feel a certain way before, and it's only actions he affected.

Well, C.C. doesn't really mind either way. As long as Lelouch and Suzaku are safe, they can do whatever they want. Although... Maybe it does please her a little.

Prior to their time travel, a part of her did wonder what Lelouch's take of their new chance would be and if he would resent her and Suzaku for scrapping his Requiem. But there is no sign of that, and Lelouch is clearly willing to do whatever it takes so that this time, they can truly succeed. She suspects that a great deal of it is because of them, because C.C. and Suzaku, and idly wonders how Nunnally could have turned away from such devotion in their first life. She gives herself a mental pat on the back for having managed to steal it, at least in part.

For the moment, Lelouch's plans have mostly gone well, but that doesn't mean their work is done. The submarine is already headed back toward the Tokyo Settlement, where they are due to meet up with Cornelia and where Lelouch will probably hold a very dramatic and inspiring speech and Suzaku will end up very uncomfortable due to all the "Zero, Zero, Zero" chanting. But first, they have a debrief pending.

The core members of the Black Knights are already on deck when Lelouch and C.C. arrive. Suzaku is there as well, and he not so surreptitiously makes his way to their side as soon as they enter the room. Since Tohdoh is not present and Lelouch had Xingke to handle, he's been keeping an eye on post-battle operations for them, but he much prefers sticking to Lelouch's side, just like C.C. does.

The Black Knights naturally erupt in cheers but Lelouch quickly silences them. "First of all, good job everyone. Today, we scored a great victory, a victory for freedom. But the battle is just starting, and we have a very difficult challenge ahead."

Lelouch then contacts every other important member not there for the meeting—Tohdoh, Kirihara and Kaguya—and brings them up for a conference call. The signal isn't great and a video call isn't within their means, not yet, but it'll have to do. "All right, everyone. Once we return to the settlement, we'll have to deal with the aftermath of the treaty with Britannia."

"Do you think they will cause us any problems, Zero?" Kallen asks.

"Not right now, but problems will emerge due to the nature of the situation. To put it bluntly, we will have to rebuild the organizational structure of Japan from scratch, and we'll need to do this while still in a state of war.

"What do you need us to do, Zero?" Tohdoh asks, sounding glum, but determined. He understand how difficult this will be.

"The current plan is for the Britannian military forces to depart. The Britannian civilians will be given a choice of stay or go. Most will probably decide to leave, but it seems unlikely that everyone will take this path. This will mean that the rest of us will need to prevent any internal conflicts or backlash against the Britannian civilians. Tohdoh, you'll be in charge of continuing recruitment for a special Black Knights militia, to prevent chaos from occurring. Meanwhile, we'll need to fill in the positions that are left vacant with Japanese citizens, and we'll start out with people from the SAZ, since we already know their abilities and what they would be able to do. I'll speak with Cornelia to coordinate with her in this matter."

"What about the Chinese Federation?" Kirihara asks. "I take it you have a plan with respect to them
"Yes. They're at a disadvantage now, but we don't have the numbers or the time to intervene there too much overtly. It would be too risky for any of us to leave Japan. I am having Rolo bring the Tianzi here, and we'll go from there."

"Go from there? What do you mean, Zero?" Kaguya asks. Her voice is steady, but it does hold a level of... concern, barely perceivable, but there. C.C. remembers that she befriended the young Chinese empress, so these new developments probably unsettle her. She understands and won't protest, but that doesn't mean she's completely happy about it.

"We will create a new treaty, a union of countries, one that can stand together in the name of freedom. The United Federation of Nations. Its current members will be Japan, The Chinese Federation and India."

Rakshata gapes at him. "India?"

"Don't look so shocked. I did make you a promise. I'm merely starting to keep it. And I have no doubt that I will be able to wrangle some extra concessions out of the Federation."

Extra concessions indeed. That's putting it mildly and they all know it.

"In any case, I will be sending you the document of the treaty in question. Read it and we will discuss it again once I arrive in Tokyo. In the meantime, these are the main points."

The document itself is not exactly like the one Lelouch used in the first life. Instead of disarming, the countries are basically surrendering leadership of their armed forces to the Black Knights. This would not normally be possible, but India has no army of its own, Japan already belongs to the Black Knights and the Federation's leaders are under Geass, dead or captured.

It is also over twenty pages long, and written in legalese not everyone in this room has the education to understand. Thus, just like in the case of the SAZ, he's put together a smaller file which he brings up on screen.

The Black Knights are suitably impressed. Of course, Diethard chooses this exact moment to point out his admiration of Lelouch's skills. "This is amazing, Zero," he says. "When did you even have time to do this?"

"He hasn't slept properly since the Pendragon bombing, obviously," C.C. pipes up.

That is both true and not. Even Lelouch would have had trouble writing something as elaborate as that particular document while still monitoring military operations for the imminent battle with Xingke. But there are advantages about being from the future, and Lelouch has had the UFN treaty sitting on his hard drive for a while now. All he had to do was some minor modifications because of the circumstances.

That doesn't mean Lelouch has been taking care of himself as much as C.C. would like, though.

"C.C., stop nagging me," Lelouch says irritably. "I told you, now is not the time."

Suzaku brushes against Lelouch, and his eye flashes. C.C. blinks. For a moment, she thinks that she imagined it, but no. It was definitely there, a Geass. He doesn't seem completely aware of it either.

Lelouch sits up a little straighter. Suzaku's hand twitches. Lelouch's Geass flares around him, and his expression smoothes out.
What.

She needs to study this a little more. Runaway Geass is very dangerous, as evidenced by Lelouch's problem. Suzaku shouldn't be in that position but... Could he be subconsciously using it just like he does Lelouch's?

Oh dear.

This can't be good.

Kallen frowns, clearly a little worried and some of the Black Knights exchange looks. Lelouch ignores them. "As I was saying, this will be the basis of our future international policy. Once we address matters with the Chinese Federation, we will look at Euro-Britannia. My sources tell me that the conflictual situation is indeed intensifying there and we'll need to be prepared for the unavoidable moment when we have to intervene."

"I have a headache," Tamaki mumbles under his breath. "This is hard."

C.C. has no doubt. Tamaki is well-meaning, but kind of an idiot. Fortunately, the Black Knights don't actually need to understand everything. They just need to do what they're told, and they seem very happy to do that.

After that, the meeting doesn't last for much longer. C.C. is very relieved when it finally ends, because she notices Suzaku brushing against Lelouch for a second time and taking something else. They really need to talk about this before it becomes a problem.

As soon as Lelouch dismisses his people, C.C. grabs his hand and Suzaku's and pulls them out of the room. The Black Knights may assume she's after sex, but for now, she doesn't care about their opinion. "We need to talk about something important. In private."

She drags them both to Lelouch's office. Predictably, both Lelouch and Suzaku are concerned. "C.C.? What's wrong? Please don't tell me Shaing or V.V. did something..."

"No, that's not it. Suzaku's Geass is acting up."

Suzaku and Lelouch recoil like they've been struck. "What?" Suzaku asks, his eyes wide. "But I haven't felt any different."

"You've been using a Geass for years, so now that you have the one from me, you're using that one too when you subconsciously feel the need to do so."

Suzaku now looks like he's hyperventilating. Hmm. Perhaps she should have broken this to them a little more tactfully.

"C.C., you said my order won't interfere with the Geass from you." Lelouch's nostrils flare in anger. "How could this happen?"

C.C. grimaces. "Technically, the two aren't getting in each other's way. It's more like... they've molded."

Suzaku covers his eyes, like he's expecting disaster to strike if he simply looks at them. "This can't be happening. I can't go out like this. What if I..."

"Relax," C.C. interrupts him. "Breathe. Your Geass appears to be harmless, perhaps a healing power of some kind. But you do have to learn how to control it. So we need to test it out.
"I first noticed it earlier, in the meeting room. You appeared to absorb Lelouch's fatigue and draw it in yourself, and Lelouch's Geass compensated for that. That could come in handy in the future... But you can't afford to do it randomly. If it's more than fatigue, it can incapacitate you."

In hindsight, it actually makes a lot of sense. Suzaku is a knight. In his heart, he always wanted to protect people. Later, the list of people he felt that need for diminished greatly, but that need remained. That, coupled with his own feelings of guilt and self-loathing naturally caused this Geass to emerge.

"A Geass that... heals?" Lelouch asks. "I've never heard of that before."

"Well, there are many kinds, and you know your knight. He always was so self-sacrificing."

Slowly, Suzaku's breathing begins to even out. "Okay. So that isn't so bad. Disaster averted. That... That could be useful. But... Still..." He shoots her a dark glare, and C.C. can't blame him for being upset. She did say she was sure nothing would happen, and she was proven wrong.

"Yes, I know. For what it's worth, I am sorry."

Lelouch rubs his forehead. "Well, at least we know what it does and we won't be surprised by it at the wrong moment. Or at a worse moment, at least. And since we know, we can experiment with it and see how it works exactly." He looks at the clock. "C.C. is right. This can't wait. Since C.C. obviously can't do it, I'll have to be your guinea pig."

C.C. isn't happy with what this will involve but they have no choice. Geass comes with burdens and they've all accepted that. They've already lost and sacrificed so much. This experience, no matter how unpleasant it may be, will just have to become one more sacrifice on the list.

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Since C.C. turned back time, Suzaku has made an oath. He's sworn that he will make sure his loved ones will never be hurt again.

Seeing it happen in front of him, even in a small way, aches, especially since he knows that, indirectly, it's because of his own inadequacy.

When Lelouch picks up a letter opener and makes a small cut on his hand, Suzaku starts to sweat. The injury is barely there, insignificant, but it still reminds him of things he really wants to forget, of a gunshot that cracked open more than a mask, of Lelouch's flesh yielding to his sword, of all the pain he's caused to his emperor.

In the blink of an eye, he's at Lelouch's side and he takes his hand. Within seconds, Lelouch's wound vanishes and appears on Suzaku's own hand, in the exact same place. His skin tingles with the power of Geass and the flesh knits back together.

"Well, that was fast," C.C. says, eyeing his hand with interest. "Almost as fast as my code."

"It's not a life-threatening injury, though," Lelouch points out. "How does my order help him?"

C.C. shoots him an unimpressed look. "Lelouch... Suzaku and I lived seven more years after the Requiem. Your order massively mutated into something else. Surely you must have realized it by now."

It's true. These days, he doesn't need to be threatened to use the power of Lelouch's Geass. It just... happens naturally. Granted, the tendency did exist in their time pre-Requiem, but not to this extent,
Lelouch seems stricken. That's right. They never did tell him how long they had to live with the consequences of his death.

C.C. sighs. "Perhaps that was uncalled for," she says, and the begrudgingly self-deprecating comment speaks volumes of the fact that she really does regret this entire situation. "It's all right now. We're here. We'll figure this out too."

Lelouch takes a deep breath. Suzaku can practically see him shelving C.C.'s unwise words, to be discussed at a later date. "Most everything you do is by instinct," he tells Suzaku. "Can you learn how to do it on command in the time we have at our disposal?"

Suzaku nods. He can do it. He has to. C.C. is right. What if he accidentally used the Geass to help a random person and he's incapacitated because of it? His emperor would then be left without him. That's unacceptable.

"I can. We just... I feel like maybe we need another test subject."

"Suzaku may have a point," C.C. points out. "There's no way he can control the Geass when it's you or anyone he actually loves, not right now. That's the whole problem. His instinct is to protect you, thus the Geass activates without him having to think about it. It may not work the same way with others."

Lelouch pauses slightly, musing over their words. "Diethard," he says. "We'll use him. He already knows about Geass and he won't say anything."

Suzaku doesn't bother to hide his relief. He wasn't actually present for Lelouch's conversation with Diethard, but he does know the former reporter took the whole thing well. Yes, this should work.

Lelouch calls Diethard to his office and the former reporter eagerly promises to report in. While they wait, Lelouch puts on his contacts. Diethard arrives mere moments after.

Suzaku opens the doors, double-checking for any other people since Lelouch doesn't have his mask on. There's no one other than Diethard, and Suzaku lets him in without comment.

Diethard bows in front of Lelouch, acknowledging his position as royalty. It's not exactly an imperial bow, but it'll have to do, at least for now.

"Your Majesty," Diethard says. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes Diethard. I've summoned you for an important matter referring the... abilities we've discussed in the past. There's been a development and I need your assistance with it."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Diethard replies. "I'm at your command."

He sounds completely willing to serve. Suzaku approves.

"You see, Diethard," he says, "until recently, my abilities were mainly... offensive in nature." There's no reason to go into detail, since Diethard doesn't have to know everything. "But after this last battle, we've noticed a change, or rather an addition. I seem to have developed a... healing ability of sorts."

Diethard is surprised at Suzaku's explanation, which could be both because of the explanation itself and the fact that Suzaku has actually spoken with him. "Testing it on His Majesty isn't ideal," he continues. "My natural protectiveness toward him causes this ability to act without my express
knowledge. C.C.'s ability makes mine unnecessary. So we need to do... a controlled experiment if you will."

"Don't worry," Lelouch adds. "It will be entirely safe. No actual lasting harm will come to you."

Suzaku expects Diethard to be at least a little wary. The complete opposite happens. "Of course, Your Majesty. I would be honored."

Lelouch blinks, and his lips twist into a small smile. "Right. Please, sit."

Diethard does, and Lelouch proceeds to repeat the same process he used on himself. He takes his letter opener and makes a small cut on Diethard's hand.

Suzaku approaches Diethard, keeping his distance at first. He lets his hand hover over that of the former reporter, taking a deep breath. Focus. He needs to focus.

He remembers how he used to feel like when Lelouch's Geass threatened to overcome his will. He can do this. He's done it in the past, many times. Lelouch's command may have become a part of him, but that doesn't mean he can't still control it.

In the end, it's not that difficult. He can feel Diethard's wound, like he has a sixth sense. Also, it appears that Diethard may have a small lung problem. Former smoker?

Either way, he's a good test subject. He lowers his hand over Diethard's and wills the smaller injury to close, but leaves Diethard's lungs alone. The Geass works, just expected, and the cut heals, appearing on Suzaku's instead. It then vanishes, a few seconds later. The lung-related issue remains unaddressed.

Diethard stares at his hand, then at Suzaku's like it's an alien thing. He may have known about Geass and even seen it in C.C., but witnessing the process like this obviously amazes him.

"Right," Lelouch says. "Once again, to double check. Try it without touching his skin."

Of course. Lelouch's Geass can only be used once and needs specific conditions to work. Learning a little more about Suzaku's own limitations can't hurt.

Diethard is happy to comply, and the experiment goes the same way. It would appear that Suzaku can heal someone through clothing, but it is a little more difficult. He may not be able to do it at all through body armor or thicker items. There isn't a limit to the number of uses, though, and that's good.

Suzaku is tempted to help Diethard with his lungs, but decides against it in the end. This is clearly a case of learning something in small steps and he doesn't want to stumble into something too serious, not just yet.

"Thank you for your assistance, Diethard," Lelouch says once they're done. "Naturally, this will remain between the four of us."

"Of course, Your Majesty. It was my honor to participate in your experiment."

Once Diethard leaves, Suzaku turns toward his emperor. "It seems I can feel injuries in others, even those they aren't aware of, latent conditions. I can try to practice on healing the others of the smaller things." After all, most people don't pay attention if a rash goes away faster than expected or something like that. They just assume it healed naturally.
He wonders how big of an injury he would be able to heal. Could he manage to heal Nunnally? He wants to bring it up, but C.C. almost seems to read his mind.

"Don't push yourself too much, too quickly. It could result in disaster. We already know your use of Geass is unusual. We can't afford to take extra chances."

Suzaku can hardly disagree with that, not when he himself has made Lelouch promise to be careful, so many times. "Yes, of course. I won't push it. I promise."

Lelouch sighs, looking displeased, but resigned. "All right, Suzaku, but always remember. You're the most important one in this equation. You need to live on. The rest is secondary."

Lelouch's words make his Geass flare at the back of Suzaku's mind. It feels like a kiss, as intimate as sex. "Yes, Your Majesty," he replies. "I will always remember. I will not fail you."

Chapter End Notes

So, did you expect this Geass from our favorite knight? What did you think? Oh, and there have been comments about how things have been going too well for the gang. Haha, you guys are mean. You probably shouldn't worry too much in that sense. If you've read my writing before, you must know that I will unavoidably add something super angsty to compensate :P
Hey everyone. Thank you for all your comments, kudos and bookmarks! Here we are with the next update, dedicated to everyone who's asked about what is going on behind the scenes, in Britannia. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After that frustrating episode, Suzaku leaves, intent on investigating his new power. Lelouch hates to see him go—they have so little time together—but they have no other choice.

The first thing he does once they're alone is to put in some calls he should have made sooner—both of them to family.

Rolo answers on the first ring. "Big brother. I take it everything went well."

"Yes, Rolo. Everything is in order. You can come in and bring the Empress here tomorrow, as soon as I wrap up a few loose ends."

As he speaks, Nunnally's voice sounds from the phone. Rolo must have put them on speaker. "Can I come too?"

"Not just yet, Nunnally," he replies. "It's too risky. You're safe there. No one will think to look for you and Jeremiah and Sayoko will protect you. But here, you will be exposed to too much danger." He sighs. "I honestly wish I could leave Rolo there, but..."

"No, no," Nunnally cuts him off. "I completely understand. It's better for brother Rolo to be with you and help you. I just wish I could do more."

"It will happen, Nunnally. Just give me a little more time."

"Big brother..." Nunnally whispers. "Rolo told me that... In Pendragon..."

"Yes. Almost everyone is dead, except Schneizel, Cornelia and Euphie. If there are other survivors, I don't know."

Nunnally lets out a soft sob. It's understandable. As much as he hated Britannia, a lot of his siblings were innocent of his father's misdeeds. Many of them had been just as young as Nunnally. Lelouch has done too much in his past life to dwell on such passing grief and fleeting attachments, but Nunnally isn't in his position.

"The culprit will be caught, Nunnally. Schneizel is handling that as we speak. But we are still at risk from other sources, so we must be careful."

"I understand, big brother," she says. "Just don't worry about me and stay safe."

"Always."

After Rolo and Nunnally, Lelouch has one more sibling to contact. He calls Euphie.
Like Rolo, she immediately takes the call. "Zero! Is everything okay? Did things go well?"

"Yes, everything went well. And you don't have to worry about saying my name. This line is secure."

Euphie lets out a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad you're safe, Suzaku?"

"He's fine. Performing a task for me. I'm sure you can talk to him later."

"I see," Euphie says simply, easily accepting his words.

Lelouch feels both grateful and humbled by her trust and generosity. Despite being aware that he and Suzaku have a romantic relationship, she doesn't seem to begrudge him for it at all. Dear, sweet Euphie.

"Euphie, I need to ask you a question," he offers. "This is important."

"Of course, Lelouch. What is it?"

"After the treaty that has been signed, much of the Britannian population will be leaving. Cornelia will be forced to evacuate. I want to know—will you stay with us, here in Japan?"

He's almost positive that she will say yes, but he doesn't want to force matters either, and being in the SAZ is different from what is going to happen now. Lelouch feels he's in a better position to protect Euphie, precisely because he knows the full extent of their problems, but at the same time, just being by his side puts Euphie in a precarious situation.

"Of course I will stay," she tells him with a huff. She almost sounds offended that he's asked. "I've already made my choice, Lelouch. You know that."

Yes, he does know, and for this exact reason, he will allow it. He doesn't want to force her to go, not when he still remembers how hard she fought the first order he gave her. He will just have to make sure she is kept safe from any possible harm. There is no other way.

"All right, Euphie. Just as long as you don't take any unnecessary risks. No more jumping in the middle of explosions, please."

"That doesn't count," she cries. "It wasn't an unnecessary risk. They were trying to kill Suzaku."

He can't argue with that. "Okay, okay. I can't disagree with you there. It's not like he can point fingers. He's done plenty of crazy things for loved ones, after all. "Suzaku does need to be kept safe too."

Her voice softens, turning warm and soft. "Yes. That's right. I knew you would understand."

For a few seconds she hesitates, and Lelouch feels concern stir in his gut. "Euphie? What is it?"

"Lelouch... Do you think... Do you think my stay here will be problematic? Because of Cornelia."

Lelouch sighs. "Maybe up to a point. But I want to tell her the truth about my identity. Hopefully, she will trust me to protect you then."

He expects the idea will please Euphie a lot. Being torn between her favorite siblings made her very uncomfortable. She always did love Cornelia very much, and the fact that she had to go against Cornelia to help Lelouch and the Japanese weighed on her.
"Oh, Lelouch," Euphie predictably exclaims. "This will be great. You'll see. Cornelia always missed you. She will understand."

Lelouch doesn't think it would be that easy, or that Cornelia's cooperation is guaranteed just because he's Marianne's son. Cornelia isn't Orange. Nevertheless, that's what Geass is for, to make sure Cornelia doesn't decide to interfere with his plans. But Euphie doesn't know that, and he has no intention of telling her.

"Yes," he offers instead. "She was very loyal to my mother. I have faith in her."

"I'm so glad, Lelouch. We... There's so few of us left now. We have to get along."

"I can't make any promises with Schneizel," Lelouch warns her.

"Yes, yes," she says with a slight giggle, "although I feel like he would like to play chess against you again. Who knows? Maybe you can reach some agreement there too?"

"Perhaps. It all depends on how things progress."

Technically, if he puts both Schneizel and Cornelia under Geass, it would not be difficult to take Britannia's throne the normal way. But that's something to worry about later, once V.V. is hopefully out of the picture.

"I'll see you soon, Euphie. Keep up the good work at the SAZ and make sure the people remain calm. I'll make an official announcement once I'm in the Tokyo Settlement."

"Looking forward to it."

As they end the call, Lelouch can't help but smile a little. C.C. pokes him in the arm. "You're such a sap, you know that?"

"Shut up, witch," he grumbles. "She's my sister."

C.C. chortles. "Mhmm. And if she weren't, I would have competition."

Lelouch tosses a pen at her head. C.C. ducks, still laughing at him. Somehow, the simple exchange lightens up the darker mood that settled over them earlier.

"C.C. Do you really think everything will be all right with Suzaku's Geass?"

C.C. sighs. "At this point, it's safe to say that nothing is absolute, and I can't be sure of anything anymore. But I believe in him. He can handle it. So trust in your knight. He's done harder things before. He will be able to do this too."

C.C. is right. Suzaku has an incredible mind and an incredible will power. The new Geass won't be enough to bring him down. It is only a tool, one that will help them. But this time, Lelouch will be there with Suzaku to help him deal with it.

This couldn't have been a mistake. He refuses to believe that anything the three of them create can ever be wrong.

****

A few hours later

In her offices in the royal palace in Tokyo, Cornelia stares at the screen in front of her, trying, but
failing not to gape.

"You want me to what."

Schneizel gives her a soft, bland smile that could mean anything at all. "Cornelia. Surely you must know that Euphie will refuse to go with you."

"Schneizel, we can't just leave her here, at Zero's mercy."

"Zero won't hurt her. He needs her as a hostage. Her life is the price for our treaty, after all. And honestly, Cornelia, where else could we leave Euphie?"

"I can take her with me when I leave."

"On the battlefield. In a war zone? The areas will be rebelling, Cornelia. It's only a matter of time. I'll need you there on the front, and Euphie isn't equipped or prepared to handle that kind of situation. I will be working on rebuilding Pendragon, of course, and she could stay with me on the Avalon, but I can't actually be sure we won't be targetted by another attack."

"But... To leave her with the Numbers..."

"Euphie has already chosen to stay with them. She always wanted to help them, you know that." He sighs. "Cornelia, I don't like anymore than you do, but we have no other choice. Once the situation is stabilized and we can be sure the Empire won't crumble around us, we can get Euphie back."

Cornelia clenches her jaw. The idea of leaving Euphie in Area 11 is repugnant to her, but Schneizel has a point. The front is no place for Euphie, and despite his faults, Zero always seemed to provide her with the comforts she needs. David reported that she was treated fairly and the Numbers were respectful, even welcoming.

She doesn't actually think there isn't one single place in the Empire where she can stash her sister, but Euphie would refuse such a thing, and there's only so much Cornelia can force. There may not be another solution.

"Of course, you can discuss it with Zero further," Schneizel says. "Don't reveal our agreement outright. Perhaps we can wriggle some concessions out of him if he doesn't realize we're on the same page in the matter. Just remember. The areas stand on the brink of rebellion, and they may be looking at Japan for cues. After all, Zero did manage to wrangle a peace treaty out of me because of this."

Cornelia twitches. She hates this so much, but there is nothing she can do. Schneizel is emperor now. She has to obey him and to trust that he knows that he's doing.

If there is one thing the attempted invasion of the Federation has proven, it's that Zero cannot be underestimated. He is smarter than her, and the only one who can match him is probably Schneizel. She has to follow his lead on this one.

"All right, Schneizel. Understood."

"Report to me in St. Petersburg after. The Knights of Euro-Britannia have been decimated. We've still heard nothing about the remnants of the Knights of St. Michael. With Shin Hyuga Shaing missing, he's still a threat. I've sent the Knight of Three and the Knight of Twelve to the front and to investigate, but we've been dealt a serious blow, and the vultures are circling."

Cornelia grimaces. Objectively speaking, leaving aside their own grief, that's the biggest problem. While the loss of troops and human life is regrettable, in the end, it's the fact that this was even
possible that poses the biggest threat. Between the Euro-Britannian coup and the Pendragon explosions, both sides of their empire are unstable, and their visible vulnerability is something their enemies can exploit.

Kanon manifests within view and whispers something in Schneizel's ear. Schneizel nods. "I have to go now, Cornelia. Remember what I told you. We'll play along with Zero for now, until we remove the other, more immediate threats."

With that, Schneizel ends their conversation. Cornelia can't help herself. She picks up a random desk ornament and throws it at the wall so hard it shatters.

A knock sounds at the door, drawing her out of her furious trance. "Princess Cornelia? Is everything all right?"

"Guilford. Yes. Come in."

He opens the door and enters her office. His gaze briefly flickers to the shattered ornament, but he doesn't address it in any way. "What is it, Guilford?" she asks.

"Princess Cornelia, Zero is arriving."

Cornelia feels a migraine begin to pound at her skull. Joy. Now, she has to play nice with that smug bastard when all she wants is to rip the helmet off his fucking head and beat him to death with it.

"I see. Well, let's get this over with, shall we?"

Guilford follows her as she leaves her office to welcome her enemy. Zero comes in through the front door. On his left is the same green-haired woman who always seems to accompany him. On his right is Suzaku Kururugi, once again wearing his new Black Knights uniform. He couldn't have made it more obvious that he's changed sides if he tried. Disgusting piece of filth. She wishes so very badly that Zero had not managed to stop his execution. Oh how she loathes him for wriggling his filthy way into her dear sister's heart.

But no, she cannot think such things. Regardless of her hatred for him, he does seem to care for Euphie and he may be one of the few things still keeping Euphie alive. And right now, she needs to focus on practical matters rather than her own emotions.

"Zero. Congratulations on the victory."

"Thank you, Princess Cornelia. I'm sure we couldn't have done it without you."

They're empty words, and it's obvious to everyone there. Cornelia's guards fidget, all aching to reach for their weapons. The tension is so thick it could be sliced through with a knife.

"Let us adjourn to the war room," Cornelia says. Anything, just to have this blasted meeting end faster and get him out of her face as soon as possible.

The meeting goes pretty much as she expected. Other than her, Guilford, Zero, the woman and Kururugi, there's also Darlton and the rest of the Glaston Knights. On Zero's side, she recognizes Tohdoh Kyoshiro, but the others are strangers. They go over the results of the battle, placing special emphasis on the Chinese captives. Obviously, Zero doesn't have the facilities to stash them, so Cornelia has been forced to step in.

"We need to figure out what to do with these people. We don't have the supplies or the facilities to hold them."
"We'll let them go, of course," Zero says.

"Let them go?" Darlton repeats in disbelief. "But..."

"They're not a threat any longer." Zero waves a hand in dismissal. "I have their empress and their general. The rest of them are irrelevant, sheep without a shepherd."

He has a point. The whole reason why the eunuchs were able to keep the Chinese Federation was because they had the Tianzi in their grasp. Now that Zero has her—and how did he even manage that in such a short amount of time?—the Federation is basically in the palm of his hand.

She would be impressed if she didn't hate him so much. She hates him even more because in that moment, she can't help but compare him with Schneizel.

"So will you be starting your own empire then?" she drawls, unable to keep herself from getting a dig in.

"Viceroy Cornelia... I am a freedom fighter. I do not believe in imperialistic governments. No, we will merely arrange for an advantageous treaty."

Cornelia has absolutely no doubt that the treaty will be far more advantageous for Area 11 than for the Federation. She hopes Schneizel has a good plan to handle Zero, because this could easily turn into an even bigger disaster than what they are currently forced to handle.

The topic of the Chinese Federation is soon set aside for other practicalities, namely, Britannia's imminent departure. Zero has prepared a plan for the withdrawal of their troops. As expected, he refuses to accept having any Britannian military stationed in Japan, but he argues the biggest problem is not the military at all, but the civilians.

Despite herself, Cornelia cannot disagree with him. With a few exceptions, the civilians will be too afraid to remain in a Japan ruled by Zero, and right now, it will be very difficult to send them to other places. She will need to coordinate with governors from other areas and see if she can find accommodation there.

They settle on organizing a census of sorts and create a list of both those who decide to leave and those who want to stay. Ideally, everyone would then go to places where they are actually needed. Unfortunately, in their current situation, that will not be possible. An elaborate placement of individuals would take time, time Cornelia doesn't have. Zero is in a similar situation, in that he has Japan to think about and he needs to move the uncooperative Britannian citizens as soon as possible to begin rebuilding.

In the end, they settle on a compromise. The tentative timeframe for full Britannian evacuation will be a month. Any less than that could cause a panic and start rioting they can't afford. The Britannian army will start departing immediately, leaving only a small garrison that will eventually depart once all the civilians are gone. Cornelia herself will leave once all the arrangements for the placement of the civilians are made. If she is needed on the front before this happens, she will just have to hope Zero won't screw them over.

Of course, they haven't discussed Euphie's situation yet, and the chance doesn't come until the end of the meeting. "Princess Cornelia," Zero says. "I would like a word with you in private."

"In private. So you can assassinate me like you did Clovis?"

"I have no desire to respark hostilities between Britannia and Japan. And besides, we've come too far for such things. But of course, your knight and mine would both be allowed to stay. I believe that
would be fair. The matter concerns the safety of your family."

Cornelia clenches her fists in anger. Despite Schneizel's warnings, blood is already rising to her head. "Very well," she says between gritted teeth. "We can take this to my office."

"Thank you. C.C., take the others outside. I'll only be a minute."

"Of course," the green-haired woman replies.

The rest of the Elevens leave, following the woman. Zero's mistress? His bodyguard? Whoever she is.

Either way, Cornelia doesn't know how to feel about the fact that Zero is so sure of himself he's willing to remain in her own headquarters with nobody but Kururugi as security. Then again, it's not like he's wrong. She can't touch him and he knows it.

That aside, when the hell did Kururugi even become Zero's knight? Oh how she wishes she could arrange the execution of the backstabbing Number.

Livid, she leads them both to her office, and just having Zero there grates on her tremendously. She tells herself this is for Euphie and she will not antagonize the bastard unnecessarily. "I take it you wanted to discuss Euphie with me."

"Yes and no." He retrieves a device from his pocket and activates it. The lights flicker and die. The cameras are deactivated.

Cornelia instantly reaches for her gun. "Zero," she spits out, "I knew you couldn't be trusted."

Guilford steps in front of her, pulling out his sword. Kururugi tenses slightly, but doesn't move.

The reason for this becomes obvious when, much to Cornelia's surprise, Zero reaches for his helmet.

Cornelia gapes as he removes it and reveals a very familiar face. "Hello, Cornelia."

Cornelia's world start to spin. Those eyes. The sharp angles of his face. That dark hair. He's older now, but it's still very distinctly him. "Lelouch?" she can't help but ask.

"Yes, sister, it's me."

Suddenly, everything makes sense. All the pieces of the puzzle slide into place. No wonder he reminded her of Schneizel. They always used to play chess together when Lelouch was a child. And he was always so very, impossibly smart.

She isn't offended that he beat her on the battlefield now. If anything, she feels proud. No wonder he made mincemeat of the Chinese Federation. He is her little brother and the son of Marianne the Flash.

But... He is also Zero. And his actions remain grave.

"I see now," she says. "You did all this... For Nunnally? For your mother?"

"In a way," Lelouch replies. "But also because of everything the Empire has been doing."

Lelouch passes the helmet to his knight, who takes it and holds it under his arm. "You know, sister, I never did understand you," Lelouch says. "You admired my mother so much, despite the fact that
she was a commoner. You worshipped her when countless others whispered behind her back and sneered at her. So I have to ask... Why would you care so deeply about a person who is different, and spurn so many others in the same situation? Why love my mother and hate Numbers?"

"It's not the same, Lelouch," Cornelia protests. "You can't possibly compare..."

"Of course I can," Lelouch cuts her off. "All that hatred, for people who are different." He smiles bitterly. "Also, let's not forget the little fact that Britannia killed my mother and crippled my sister. Suzaku saved my life. Tell me. Who is better?"

Cornelia jerks and stares at the Number. He stares back, impassively.

She does remember that it was his family whom Lelouch and Nunnally stayed with, but she never really thought they knew each other that well. "Kururugi?"

Kururugi's face is like stone. "Do you understand now, Princess Cornelia, why I had to leave my post as Euphie's knight?"

Cornelia is confused. Does that mean Kururugi didn't originally know Lelouch is Zero and found out about it on the island? She can't be sure, but there is the fact that Euphie accepted Kururugi's resignation without too much protest, which Cornelia always deemed odd.

"Euphie knows, doesn't she?"

Kururugi nods. "She understands. She was glad Lelouch has me to protect him."

Of course. This must be why Euphie put her faith in Zero to begin with, why she insisted he could be trusted despite the fact that he'd killed Clovis. And as much as she aches inside for Clovis's loss, Cornelia can't help but feel the same.

"I see then. Then it would seem we owe you a debt and an apology, Kururugi. For keeping my brother safe."

For a few seconds, Lelouch just stares at her. Then, he bursts into genuine laughter. "That hurt to say, didn't it? Still, I'm impressed, dearest sister. We might make a decent person out of you yet."

Cornelia shoots him an unimpressed look. "You grew up to be a brat. These Numbers have ruined your education." She sets all joking aside and addresses one very serious matter they haven't approached so far. "Lelouch... What of Nunnally?"

He hasn't mentioned her at all and pretty much avoided her question when she asked. The idea that she may be dead chills Cornelia to the bone.

Lelouch stops laughing, but fortunately, he doesn't seem upset either. "She's alive too, but when the situation worsened here in Area 11, I sent her away. Once the situation isn't so risky, you can see her. In the meantime, we can make arrangements for you to talk to her on the phone. I know she'd love to hear from you. She was crushed when she learned about what happened in Pendragon."

"Yes, I imagine she would be."

Lelouch sits down on the couch, crossing his legs. "Cornelia... Have you spoken to Schneizel about what is going in Euro-Britannia?"

"I have, but... He's been vague."
"Of course he has. He probably has even less information than I do. Tell me. Did you ever learn why my mother died that day?"

The apparent non-sequitur takes her by surprise. "What? No, Lelouch. I have no idea what happened. She ordered me to withdraw the guard and the next thing I knew..."

"Yes, I'm aware. You see, Cornelia, the culprit behind my mother's murder is our uncle. Our father's brother. He may be peripherally involved in this incident with the explosion in Pendragon too."

What? Their father's brother? Surely not. Victor died when he was very young. Everybody knows that.

"Lelouch, you can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am."

Lelouch smiles and makes a strange hand gesture, like he's wiping his eyes. "Trust me. You will trust me, no matter what I say."

"Yes," she says mechanically. "Yes, of course."

By her side, Guilford parrots her words. He had been facing Lelouch too. But Cornelia doesn't find her knight's behavior odd. Cornelia trusts her brother and whatever Lelouch says makes complete sense. And if Guilford is her knight, that means he is Lelouch's knight too.

As Cornelia and Guilford blink back into awareness, they find Lelouch sitting in the same spot like nothing's happened. Cornelia rubs her eyes. "I'm sorry. I must have... had a small lapse there."

"Perhaps you should sit down, dearest sister. These past few days have been taxing for all of us."

Cornelia nods. He's right. "In any case... You were saying about our uncle?"

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Lelouch leaves his sister's office more than a little satisfied. He has Cornelia and Guilford under his sway. Like Xingke, they will act normally unless he tells them something they may usually find odd, in which case the Geass will activate. Neither will them will reveal the truth about his identity, simply because he has told them it is too risky. With Cornelia's genuine affection for him and Guilford's undying loyalty to his princess, it probably won't activate much at all.

To top it off, he has a list of the dead in Pendragon. Gino Weinberg isn't on it, and that has put a spring in his knight's step. Even if they're unlikely to have the same friendship they did in the past, Suzaku remains fond of the Knight of Three, and Lelouch knows that he was secretly grieved upon thinking Gino was dead. Maybe, if things go well, Gino can be brought on board later.

In the meantime, Cornelia has told him that Schneizel is currently busy organizing things in Euro-Britannia and there has been no sign of Shin Hyuga Shaing and V.V. This unsettles him somewhat, as he would have preferred to know where his enemies are, but V.V. is prone to sadistic approaches when it comes to revenge. He will probably want to take his time with Shaing.

For the moment, all the conditions have been met here and it is time for the next step of his plan.

Chapter End Notes
I actually like Cornelia quite a lot. I hope I did her and Schneizel's characters justice. Also, the one month tentative time frame is pretty much picked at random, because it's so difficult to judge timelines in Code Geass. It may be too long for one of Lelouch's plans, especially under these circumstances, but go with it.
I feel like I'm late with this chapter. I've been busy with some RL stuff, but fortunately, I'm back :) As always, my thanks to everyone who kudos-ed and commented. I love you all.

In a large, well-lit room in a safehouse in the Chinese Federation, Rolo stands behind his sister, combing her long hair. Nunnally has told him this is something Lelouch used to do for her, and while sometimes, Sayoko is better at working out the tangles, she still liked Lelouch's way best.

She's been quiet since the call from Lelouch. Despite Lelouch's reassurances, she's not over her concern. But then, how could she be?

"Do you think big brother will actually let me come back to Japan?" she asks him. "I wish I could help."

Rolo understands that very well. Every single day, he's more and more aware of his limitations, of the fact that, despite his Geass, he did die the first time around and was unable to help his brother when he was most needed.

He must have zoned out a little, because Nunnally seems to grow alarmed. "Big brother Rolo?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't pull on your hair, did I?"

"No." She smiles gently at him in the mirror, a hint of concern in the expression. "You just tensed a little. Tell me. I'm not being a pest, am I?"

"No, of course not, Nunnally," he rushes to reassure her. "I worry about him too, you know. And some days, it does feel like my contributions aren't really enough.

"But... But we have to believe that big brother knows what he's doing. And I have no doubt that, once the war is over, we'll all be together, in Japan. It's our home."

"Yes, I suppose it is," she whispers. "Big brother Rolo?"

"Mmm?"

"Why are you mad at Suzaku?"

Oh no. Rolo didn't think that he'd been so obvious in his dislike of the former Knight of Seven in Nunnally's presence. Clearly, he was mistaken. He needs to find an excuse, fast.

"I'm just..." His mind scrambles quickly for something that would make sense. Finally, he blurts out, "I'm not sure about their relationship, that's all."

"Oh. You mean the fact that they're dating?"
Nunnally knew that? When did she figure it out?

He must have asked that out loud, because she giggles slightly. "Oh, it was obvious. I mean, ever since Suzaku came back into our lives, big brother would always mention him. And he gets this soft tone in his voice... I can't really explain it. But I could tell. I was actually worried Suzaku didn't feel the same, but Sayoko says that it was a misunderstanding and they cleared it up."

God bless Sayoko for making this easier.

"Yeah, that's exactly it. I sort of felt that maybe... Sir Kururugi may have hurt big brother when he was picked as Euphemia's knight."

"Oh, I see. Now, that you mention it, I do remember big brother seemed a little odd around that time. He must've been jealous.

"But it's not something we should worry about now, right? I actually do feel much better, knowing that Suzaku is protecting him. Do thank him for me for that, once you're back in Japan."

It grates on Rolo to admit that Nunnally is not wrong in her conclusion. For all his faults, Kururugi is an excellent soldier and an even better knight, especially now when he has Lelouch's Geass. He does come in handy for watching Lelouch's back.

"Yes, you're right," he says slowly. "It's just difficult to remember sometimes."

"And maybe it's difficult when he spends so much time with Suzaku and C.C., right?" Nunnally asks.

Rolo jolts. He doesn't know how she keeps reading him so well, even when he himself doesn't understand all of his emotions. Yes, he still has a lot of trouble dealing with the whole story of the Requiem, and the knowledge that Sir Kururugi in specific has such a big role in his big brother's life doesn't sit well with him. But he also knows that there are things his big brother will never tell him, secrets he only shares with his two lovers, and that displeases him.

"I suppose it is," he replies, not wanting to make his sister worry.

He leaves the hairbrush aside and kneels next to her wheelchair. "Maybe I'm the one who's being a pest."

Nunnally shakes her head and squeezes his hand. "Not at all. Lelouch and I had a friend at Ashford. Her name is Shirley, and she always said that love is power. I believe that too. If we surround big brother with as much love as possible, surely, he will be safe."

Maybe Nunnally is right. Love didn't really keep Shirley Fennette safe from Rolo during their first life, but Shirley herself is not relevant for Rolo. It's the offer that she made to him during the last minutes of her life that counts. If he hadn't been so hasty in killing her... Perhaps things may have turned out differently.

He wonders now if maybe he and Shirley aren't alike, at least a little. He chose to forgive his brother despite knowing Lelouch had been using him as a tool, and she forgave him for causing her father's death.

It's something to consider, at least.

"I can't be there for him now," Nunnally says, "but you can, and that's precious. You'll give him all my love, won't you?"
"Of course I will," Rolo promises automatically. It's one promise that he knows he can easily keep. He will always do his best to keep his promises to his sister. He owes her that much, at least, after what he attempted in their past lifetime.

It's so strange to think now, when the mere idea of hurting her is as repulsive to him as that of hurting Lelouch. It's so strange to imagine himself squashing the light of Nunnally's smile, when all he wants is to protect it.

How much can he truly cling to the hatred he has for Sir Kururugi, after all the things he has done? He doesn't know. He isn't sure what to think or feel anymore.

Later, when Nunnally retires to bed, he meets up with Jeremiah. As the third party involved in the time travel plan C.C. hatched with Sir Kururugi, he is perhaps the person best capable to give him some advice.

"Sir Gottwald, will you tell me about what happened after I died?" he asks. "Will you tell me... why you agreed to my brother's plan?"

The Knight of Orange studies him with keen, piercing eyes. "Of course. I will answer any questions you may have. You are My Liege's brother, after all."

And so, Rolo sits with Jeremiah and listens to the tale of the Demon Emperor and his cruel white knight, and he makes a decision. After everything that has happened, after everything his brother was forced to endure, it's time to finally accept their new beginning for what it is. It's time to make his peace with his brother's knight. There is no other way, if they are to build the future his brother dreams of.

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The Tianzi arrives the next day, in a small transport piloted by Rolo and manned by a group of Cao's men—all of whom are under Geass. None of the Black Knights are aware of these developments as Lelouch doesn't want them to look too closely into why exactly he has Chinese staff to begin with.

Therefore, it is Suzaku who takes over cooperating with Rolo in the matter while Lelouch wrangles everything else. It may actually be the first time he's been alone with Rolo in this life, and it's not comfortable at all.

They lead the sedated empress into a comfortable room, where Kaguya is already waiting for her. Once they've fulfilled their task, Suzaku wants nothing more but to leave and find something else to do.

He doesn't. "How's Nunnally?" he asks instead.

"Worried, but otherwise fine," Rolo replies. "She misses Lelouch. She said to tell you thank you for keeping an eye on him."

Suzaku can't help but let out a little laugh. "Oh, how things have changed."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh... You don't know? C.C. hasn't said?"

Rolo shakes his head. It's strange that he's even paying attention, that he hasn't turned around and left, but maybe he too is acknowledging the problem that they have.
He pulls Rolo aside in a corner where nobody can see them or overhear them. "The first time... After the Requiem..." Rolo clenches his fists, but he doesn't move, nor does he show any sign of being affected by Lelouch's Geass. Suzaku keeps talking, ignoring his tension. "I was Nunnally's guard. I was supposed to make sure the peace Lelouch dreamed of endured. But of course, Nunnally wasn't very happy with me. So she kept trying to have me killed. She always failed, of course, but she never gave up. That made me a little happy... I think.

"Rolo, I don't blame you for wanting to kill me. For the longest time, it's what I wanted more than anything in the world. To die. But right now, I don't want that anymore, and even if I did, we don't really get a say."

"I know that," Rolo bites out. "Big brother has already made it clear."

Suzaku supposes that's pretty accurate, since they're both Geassed to not do anything stupid.

"Anyway, you don't have to like me." Hell, Suzaku himself isn't sure he likes Rolo much, since he's seen far more of Rolo the assassin than Rolo, Lelouch's brother. "But if V.V. is coming after us, we can't be at each other's throats," he continues. "And you giving me the cold shoulder has been making the Black Knights ask questions. We can't afford to make them doubt him."

Rolo grimaces and looks away. "You killed him, Sir Kururugi."

"I'm aware." He is very, very aware. He will never forget, not even if Charles zi Britannia somehow comes back from the dead and tries to put a Geass on him.

Rolo stares at the wall, motionless, like a blank puppet. "Sir Kururugi? Does it hurt. To kill someone you love."

"Worse than anything in the world," Suzaku replies.

He half-expects Rolo to be happy about that. He isn't. "You know... These past days, I was with my sister. I kept thinking... In the other life... You know... I wanted to kill her. Because she had big brother's affection." He flexes his fingers and stares at his hand. "I can't understand... I don't want..."

He shakes his head, like he's physically pushing back a thought. "Sir Kururugi, I have decided something. Regardless of our past differences, I will work with you to protect Lelouch and Nunnally. You're right. We cannot afford to be at odds."

It's shockingly mature of Rolo, but when Rolo offers Suzaku his hand, Suzaku takes it. It occurs to Suzaku that they really don't give Nunnally enough credit. It looks like she managed to reach out to Rolo in a way even Lelouch never did.

When they touch, Suzaku can't help but sense the problem with Rolo's heart. Arrhythmia, his mind somehow manages to provide. Maybe it's because of the use of his Geass, maybe it's something different. He lets go before the Geass can get away from him. He can't risk his own heart for Rolo, just like he can't risk his eyes for Asahina.

At the last moment, when he looks into Rolo's eyes, Suzaku has a realization. He and Rolo are, in some ways, pretty similar. Both of them are far too desensitized to killing. Both of them love Lelouch. Both of them hurt him or betrayed him in some way.

Is it any wonder then that Suzaku dislikes him?

His brief epiphany makes him blurt out something he normally wouldn't have said. "Thank you, Rolo. For keeping Lelouch safe. Back then."
"You don't have to thank me. I did it for him, and I would do it again... if I could. I get the feeling that maybe, he may have Geassed me to not be able to do it."

Suzaku remembers a different time, when his past self attempted to kill Zero and the order Lelouch gave was 'Live on'. He could have said anything. He could have said 'Save me.' But Lelouch was never like that. Lelouch always was far too self-sacrificing when it came to the people he loved.

"Well, technically... He must have ordered you to not endanger your life using your Geass," he says. "Because of your heart. But... Maybe I can help you with that."

Rolo's eyes widen and he leans in further. "Help me? How?"

"It's just something... tentative... You understand. I'm still practicing. But my new contract with C.C. heals people. It wouldn't fix your... limitation, but it would fix the problem you already have because of it."

Rolo nods eagerly. He's smiling, and it's a genuine expression, not the fake, nauseating mask he used in Euro-Britannia. It makes him look younger, softer. "That would be great, Sir Kururugi. I've been worried about not being able to help big brother enough."

"We're in agreement then. I'll have to ask Lelouch first, of course, and we'll need to wait until the situation is a little less... delicate so I don't accidentally cripple myself when he needs me, but as soon as I can, we'll do it."

"Excellent. Thank you, Sir Kururugi."

"You don't have to thank me, Rolo," Suzaku replies, just like Rolo did earlier. "After all, we're not doing any of this for each other. We're both here for him."

When they go their separate ways, Suzaku is tentatively satisfied that he has reached an agreement with Rolo. It will probably take them some time to actually be comfortable with one another, especially given their history, but they're making progress. At this point, that's the best thing they can expect.

Chapter End Notes

I know this is a bit of a slower, filler-y chapter, but I wanted to show a bit more of the relationship between Rolo and Nunnally, especially since Nunnally can't be present in most of the other chapters. Anticipate a longer chapter next update.
Here I am, back with my customary update. Please, do let me know what you think about this one. As always, all comments are much appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Three days after the battle against the Chinese Federation, a grand ceremony is held. Zero has already announced their victory to the citizens, and of course, they are relieved, but this is different. This is about the United Federation of Nations.

Kallen cannot deny that she is both nervous and excited. Everything has been happening so quickly that sometimes, she thinks she has fallen into a strange hallucination. But then she realizes she cannot possibly be imagining all this, not when the good things have still come with so much loss.

Nevertheless, she cannot believe that she ever entertained the hope of distrusting Zero because he is Lelouch. How foolish she had been. Who else could have saved them all from imminent disaster, when all seemed lost, when they could have fallen victim to yet another invasion? Only him. Only Zero. Only Lelouch.

He's already arranged for her mother to be pardoned, released from prison and given medical care at a real hospital. That alone made everything worthwhile. But even beyond Kallen's own family life, there is so much they have accomplished.

Today, Lelouch has told them that he would be officially announcing the formation of the UFN. For this purpose, the Black Knights gather in front of the SAZ, in the same place Euphemia declared it open.

Kallen is in her Guren, carefully watching the crowd for any disruptive elements. Many of the others have received the same orders, but no one minds.

"This is so exciting," Inoue tells her through the coms. "I mean... I almost can't believe it. Zero really won our independence."

"I wish Naoto were here to see this," she replies. Distantly, she thinks that it could have easily been lost because of Ohgi's selfishness and stupidity.

"I'm sure everyone we've lost is watching over us, wherever they are," Inoue answers.

It's a nice thought to have, and she definitely hopes that. She hopes that Naoto is proud of what they have accomplished, despite everything they've had to go through to reach this point.

The gathering crowd is massive, perhaps even larger than the number of people who came for the SAZ. Lelouch hasn't made an official announcement about the UFN yet, but Diethard did leak a few bits and pieces, so everyone is clearly very excited. Of course, they would have probably come anyway, just because they want to see Zero, the man who won their independence, but that is beside the point.

Finally, as the hour strikes twelve, the people whom they are all waiting for finally arrive. Lelouch,
Suzaku and C.C. are first, and the crowd explodes in cheers the moment they see them. Together, they make a striking image, especially since Suzaku and C.C. have added capes to their regular garb, matching Zero's more elaborate ensemble.

She has to admit that a part of her is jealous of their place at his side, but at the same time, she feels that maybe, it is for a reason. Everything he does is for a reason. She doesn't always understand it, but their closeness goes beyond what she has with Lelouch. They must know each other for years. Taking that into consideration, she can't really begrudge them for it.

Besides, both of them really do a good job at protecting Lelouch and at the end of the day, that's what counts.

Also, she suspects that she would hate walking around in that dress of C.C.'s. Then again, it's far less weird than the straightjacket-like thing she used to wear.

Behind the trio, Cornelia appears, accompanied by her sister and their respective knights. Cornelia's presence is surprising, but Kallen guesses it must have something to do with Euphemia. Also, the Britannians are still present here in Japan. Lelouch has some sort of agreement with Cornelia that will guarantee the gradual and peaceful withdrawal of their forces, but in the meantime, they are all expected to play nice.

Then comes the young empress of the Chinese Federation. By her side is her general, Li Xingke and Kaguya. Kirihara and the other members of the six houses of Kyoto follow, with Tohdoh by their side. Like Kallen, the Four Holy Swords are in their knightmares, prepared to deal with any problem should it be necessary.

Kallen would be surprised Rolo hasn't been asked to come with them, but she's noticed that Lelouch is visibly trying to keep his brother out of the limelight. Whenever cameras are present, Rolo is not. Like them, he is on knightmare duty, but he never seems to mind.

Of course, not all of the Black Knights are here. Zero has peppered the borders with garrisons that will notify him should anything go wrong or should there be any sign of an approaching enemy. So far, there's been no sign of anything. Kallen hopes things will continue on the same vein.

Lelouch steps up to the microphone, extending his arms in a grand, dramatic gesture. Before he can begin his speech, C.C. jerks like she's been shot, her gaze dancing over the crowd. "No!"

After that, everything happens so quickly Kallen barely has the time to process it. Suzaku shoots into action, shielding Lelouch with his own body. Then, a voice rings out from the crowd, "Suzaku Kururugi!"

Just like that, Suzaku's body goes rigid. He falls to his knees, clutching his head, screaming. C.C. jumps on him, trying to pin down his flailing limbs.

"Get back!" she shouts. "Get back!"

Lelouch staggers back, away from C.C. and Suzaku, clearly shocked. Perhaps he's torn between listening to C.C. and wanting to help Suzaku, but reason wins out. Meanwhile, Kallen herself shoots into action. Something is very wrong.

Kallen was never really sure how Suzaku actually felt about all of them but since he joined them, she always did have a certainty—that his purpose in life is to defend Lelouch. However, C.C.'s reaction is not encouraging. C.C. only shows such emotion when Lelouch is in danger, and Kallen isn't willing to take chances.
Kallen launches the Guren and flies all the way up to the stage. She doesn't know how to interfere yet. Obviously, she can't use the massive guns of the Guren, not when she isn't even sure what is going on. She'll just have to get out of the machine once she's there.

As the knightmare approaches, Suzaku's body goes rigid. He throws C.C. off of him, breaking off her hold with ease—which makes Kallen wonder why he didn't do it before. As C.C. hits the side of the stage and goes still, Suzaku pulls out his sword, his gaze fixed on Lelouch.

Kallen has seen that look before, on the video in which he killed Viletta.

Oh, God, no.

She lands the Guren between Lelouch and Suzaku, no longer thinking of holding back, already aiming her guns. She doesn't even have the chance to shoot them. He jumps on the machine, using it like his own personal trampoline.

She jerks to the side, trying to throw him off or at least stall him, to buy time so Lelouch can run, hide or retreat. But there's only so much she can do. The Guren is a heavy machine and the stage is already creaking under its weight. He's much faster than her, so very impossibly fast.

Reality seems to grow jerky. Her vision staggers and the Guren no longer seems to obey her. She blinks and suddenly, Rolo's knightmare is there, in front of the stage.

When did that happen? How? Unlike her, Rolo doesn't have a float system. Rakshata never got a chance to equip his Burai with one.

Kallen doesn't bother trying to use the Guren again. Suzaku has already jumped over her, and from this angle, anything she might try would hit Lelouch too. She opens the hatch, already pulling out her gun and hoping against all hope that she won't be too late. Tohdoh and some others are there. Maybe they had the chance to help.

When she comes out, she finds Suzaku right in front of Lelouch, his sword inches away from Lelouch's chest. Cornelia and Guilford are both pointing their guns at him. Tohdoh and Xingke are within reach too. They could hit him. So could Kallen. But it would not be fast enough.

"Don't move," Lelouch says. "Nobody move. This isn't Suzaku. Somebody is in his head."

What? What does that mean? Does it even matter?

"Zero," Kallen starts to protest.

Suzaku is shaking, shaking so hard. "Do not move," Lelouch insists. "Stay quiet."

Everything inside Kallen rebels against the idea of doing nothing, but at the same time, she realizes that he is right. Moving or shooting would just cause Suzaku to react and that would likely end in Lelouch's death. Even the people in the crowd have frozen, obviously acknowledging the seriousness of the situation.

"Suzaku, listen to me," Lelouch says. "You're stronger than this. You can beat it. You need to live on."

Suzaku jerks. His sword slices through Lelouch's coat and shirt. In the crowd, several women scream. Lelouch doesn't move. "I-Lelouch..." Suzaku whispers. "I... I can't."

"Of course you can," Lelouch says. "You're my knight."
To their right, C.C. climbs back on the stage. "Suzaku. Remember our promise, our contract. Remember what we said, when we came here. You said you'd do anything for him."

Suzaku lets out a loud, excruciating shout. He snatches his sword away from Lelouch and turns it on himself. Lelouch grabs his arm before he can go through with it. "There's nothing the three of us can't accomplish, Suzaku," he says, desperation clear in his voice. "Remember?"

Suzaku would have probably broken free easily, since he's far stronger than Lelouch, but the touch buys them time. "This isn't you. Somebody else is here," C.C. blurts out quickly. "Somebody is trying to kill him, through you. You're his sword. You know what to do."

It's like a cue. Suzaku's nostrils flare and his head shoots toward the crowd. He frees himself from Lelouch's hold, shoots past Kallen, past the Guren, past C.C. He jumps over several people, moving so quickly he's barely visible. People are trying to get out of his way, but compared to him, they seem to be moving in slow motion and he ends up bracing himself on shoulders and heads.

Within seconds, he has reached his target. Kallen doesn't have a clear enough view to distinguish what is going on, but she does distinguish a very distinctive blood splatter. The screaming people are also a dead giveaway.

"Thank God," C.C. says, and Kallen assumes Suzaku must have aimed for the right person, not some random bystander.

By Kallen's side, Rolo's Burai opens and he emerges from inside, panting, sweating, clutching his chest like he's run a marathon. "I'm sorry, big brother. I tried, but..."

"I know, Rolo. It's not your fault. Don't worry about it now."

He's barely listening, and Kallen doesn't really blame him. Suzaku manages to turn and look toward the stage, as if checking that Lelouch was still alive. Then, he collapses, like a puppet with his strings cut.


He's already rushing off the stage and it's a testament to the respect he has earned that the Japanese obey him with no question. C.C. runs after him, and Kallen and Tohdoh follow. So does Euphemia.

C.C. and Lelouch both kneel by Suzaku's side. He's unconscious and there's blood coming out of his nose and ears. C.C. presses her lips together and takes his hand. "We need to get him someplace private. Quickly."

"Will he be all right?" Euphemia asks, crying softly.

"Let's hope so," Lelouch replies tightly. "Tohdoh, I need to deal with this. Evacuate the people. Kaguya will handle the rest of the matters with the UFN and have Diethard prepare some sort of official statement that will keep people from panicking. Kallen, stay with Rolo. He will help you look for signs of other intruders."

Tohdoh obviously has a lot of questions, and so does Kallen, but Lelouch stops them before they can ask. "I'll explain everything, I promise, but I don't have time now. I miscalculated and Suzaku needs help."

"Yes, of course," Tohdoh says. "I understand."

By now, someone has already called in a medic. Suzaku is mounted on a stretcher and rushed into
the SAZ, and the decapitated body of the intruder is bagged. Kallen watches Lelouch, C.C. and Euphemia—with her knight trailing after her—go and wonders what in the world will happen to all of them now.

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It takes only a couple of minutes for Suzaku to be rushed into the infirmary. As soon as he is set on the bed and hooked to the machines, C.C. sends all the doctors away. They can't help him now, and their presence is just a hindrance. His best bet is his Geass, and she can see it flaring, bright, brilliant and true.

They try to protest, but a look from her is as efficient as Lelouch's Geass. Euphemia is visibly confused, but Lelouch keeps her from intervening and David Darlton, still under his Geass, is quick to help. Once the doctors are gone, C.C. sits down next to Suzaku and takes his hand.

Her Geass flares and slowly, Suzaku opens his eyes. "W-What... What happened? Where am I?"

"You're in the SAZ," Lelouch replies. "There was an attack from the Order."

"An... attack?"

His gaze frantically shoots through the room. His shoulders sag in visible relief. Since Lelouch, Euphemia and C.C. are all here, the damage couldn't be too great.

"Wait... Why can't I remember? What... What did I do?"

"A member of the Order took control of your body and attempted to get you to kill Lelouch. Fortunately, you managed to fight it and stop yourself in time."

The whole scene had been like something out C.C.'s nightmares and it could have so easily gone differently. C.C. does not have the physical strength to stand in Suzaku's way and nobody there would have been able to stop him. It was just like the day of the Requiem, all over again, and for a moment there, C.C. truly did think everything they did was for nothing and Suzaku would kill Lelouch all over again.

Suzaku starts to shake, looking like he's about to throw up any moment now. Lelouch sits by his side, and unsurprisingly, Suzaku throws his arms around Lelouch and clutches him with all his might. "It's all right," Lelouch murmurs. "It wasn't your fault. You fought it off. You protected me."

For a few moments, they can only sit there, helpless, with Lelouch petting Suzaku's hair, trying to provide comfort. "Don't try to hard to remember," C.C. offers in turn. "Right now, the last thing you need is to force your mind."

Suzaku nods, still clutching Lelouch. He's still clearly dazed and confused, but that's not unsurprising, since the Geass he fought off caused some brain damage that may have normally killed him.

Thank God for their contract and for Lelouch's 'Live on' order.

Meanwhile, Euphemia finally snaps out of her shock. "How is all of this even possible?"

"Euphie, I know you're worried, but this is a really long story," Lelouch explains. "I'll tell you everything later, I promise. The important thing is that nobody got hurt."

And that had been a very close call too.
The thing is, C.C. understands there is more than one reason why Suzaku stopped. The idea of hurting Lelouch is so fundamentally repellant to him now that he could not bring himself to fully go through with it. Due to the unique nature of this particular Geass, though, it may still have won out, like Lelouch's did in Euphemia's SAZ massacre—if not for Suzaku's own double Geass. Lelouch's command and C.C.'s contract gave him an extra level of protection against the attack. It took the three of them to fight off V.V.'s assassin.

Despite all that, Suzaku would have still killed everyone who attempted to intervene—Tohdoh, Cornelia, Guilford—if not for Rolo stopping time. In fact, Rolo's use of the Geass may have been slower than Suzaku and it may have been unable to overwrite the order Suzaku had received, but it did buy C.C. time to recover, which may have indirectly saved Lelouch. So yes, things could have still been so much worse. Not that they are all that great now.

She, Lelouch and Suzaku need to talk about this in private. At once.

"Euphie," Lelouch says, probably thinking the same thing, "would you do me a favor? Could you take your knight and go help control the situation a bit? Make sure Cornelia isn't in a panic. Check up on the Tianzi and speak with the Black Knights. Tell them... Tell them I'll be there to see them in a bit. In the meantime, there's something I need to talk to Suzaku and C.C. about. I'll explain everything after, okay?"

Euphemia seems torn, but Suzaku intervenes to reassures her. He finally releases his hold on Lelouch and shoots her a weak smile. "It's okay, Euphie. I'll be fine now. This is important."

"Right. Okay. But I expect an explanation, from both of you."

She isn't happy, but she departs, with her knight trailing after her. C.C. is relieved and so is Lelouch. He finally removes his helmet and textile mask and sets them both aside.

"Well, it seems V.V. has finally declared open war. Any idea what exactly happened, C.C.?

"Without more investigation, I can only make guesses. While originally, it may have been your father who attempted to kill God, V.V. was also directly involved. He would want to continue the Sword of Akasha plan. Not only would it fulfill his and Charles's original contract, but it would give him Charles back, in a way."

Lelouch grimaces. "Right. It would appear I miscalculated there."

C.C. doesn't blame him. In their first life, Lelouch's confrontation with V.V. was pretty brief and did not involve the Sword of Akasha at all.

"Am I his only target, because of you, or would he actually want Japan because of the Thought Elevator?" he asks.

"Technically, the Sword of Akasha can be accessed from any Thought Elevator, including the one in the Geass Directorate," C.C. replies. "However, Charles did believe that gaining control of more of them increased the chances of success of the Ragnarok Connection. That was the whole point of his campaign of world conquest."

"So... Yes, he does want Japan. Once he's done with Shin Hyuga Shaing, he'll probably want to go after Schneizel to take over the mantle of emperor or at least rule it from the shadows."

"Between what's been happening as of late, he must know that I may have given you my allegiance. He also knows very well that I can sense Geass in others and large disturbances in the world of C would have drawn my attention. Therefore, he sent one inconspicuous assassin after you, presuming
—and rightly so—that I would never actually spot her until it was too late. His assumption was that once you were dead, I would agree to work with him again, due to my desire to die."

Once, it would have probably been correct. Now, she very much wishes she knew who in the world had given V.V. his code, so that he could track the person down in the world of C and torture them for all eternity. With Lelouch gone and Suzaku the culprit, the alliance between Japan and Britannia would have fallen apart and the results would have been catastrophic—but C.C. doesn't really care about world politics. She cares about Lelouch and Suzaku.

"So there was only one assassin then?" Lelouch asks.

C.C. nods. She remembers the girl now. "Her name was Clara Lanfranc. She possessed the ability to take control of other people's bodies and make them do whatever she wanted them to."

Lelouch frowns. "Clara. I think... I think I know her. She posed as my sister before Rolo, didn't she?"

"Yes. It appears that she was given other orders in this lifetime."

"So... Her power was like Lelouch's?" Suzaku asks.

"Yes and no. Clara's Geass was actually more absolute than Lelouch's. It was like a possession, replacing your consciousness with her own. You shouldn't have been able to fight it, which is why doing so, even with the help of my Geass and Lelouch's, did damage to your brain. Killing her may have made matters worse."

Lelouch doesn't seem happy to hear that. He takes a deep breath, as if trying to brace himself, but his hands are still shaking and when he speaks, his voice echoes the tightness and dread in C.C.'s own chest. "All right. Here's what we have to do right now. Suzaku, you focus on getting better."

Suzaku opens his mouth to protest, but Lelouch stops him. "No. I don't want to hear it. You need rest. Consider it an order."

Suzaku grumbles, but shuts up. In his heart, he must be aware that Lelouch is not wrong. Physical damage can be shaken off more easily than a mental attack, and while the actual brain damage is healing, the emotional trauma of having attacked Lelouch again is not so easily overcome. She wishes she could have kept it from him, but under the circumstances, it was not a possibility.

Suzaku doesn't seem to remember what happened, but C.C. suspects the whole thing hasn't actually processed. He may have woken up and he's on his way to recovery, but he's not there yet.

"Lelouch is right," she says. "You need to give yourself time to recuperate."

She may have hated him once, so much so that she made his guilt over killing Lelouch worse, but that has very much changed, and she wants to protect him too.

"Meanwhile, C.C. and Rolo will stay with me," Lelouch adds. "And... We'll have to speak with the Black Knights. We have to decide what we finally tell them. Where do we go from here?"

Chapter End Notes

Here we have it, the moment you've all been waiting for! Me making the bunnies suffer!
Hope it didn't disappoint. It'll only get crazier from here.
Clara Lanfranc is a character from Oz the Reflection. She was killed by one of the MCs there, which led to Rolo taking her place. It's doubtful that I'll add any other elements from there, so you don't need to worry about what happens in the manga.
The Discarded Mask

Chapter Notes

Yay! As promised, despite me getting distracted by the Kanon one-shot, here is the update! Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter! Let me know what you think about this one too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the SAZ headquarters of the Black Knights, the agitation within the ranks has increased to unprecedented proportions. Asahina watches helplessly, anger, frustration and dread stirring in his gut.

Tohdoh has already given out a statement—provided by Diethard—which calmed down the waters a bit. Officially, there has been an assassination attempt on Zero that has been foiled by his knight. Suzaku Kururugi has been injured in the process of defending Zero, but he is on the mend.

Diethard claims that it will suffice until Zero can give them more details on what in the world they're supposed to do next, and to give credit to the reporter, it seems to have worked wonders.

That doesn't change the actual situation, though. Despite Kururugi's previous actions, Asahina never actually doubted his loyalty to Zero. It was just so obvious, in everything he did. For him to turn his sword on Zero is like Chiba suddenly deciding to kill Tohdoh. It makes no sense.

"Do you suppose Kururugi actually meant to betray us all along?" Tamaki asks.

"Kururugi is the devicer for the Earl of Pudding, and the ASEEC responds to Schneizel el Britannia," Rakshata muses. "Perhaps the two things are related?"

"Shut up," Rolo surprisingly snaps at both at them. "Sir Kururugi wouldn't turn against us like that. You need to wait for big brother. He will tell you."

It's very unusual for Rolo to jump to Kururugi's defense, since it's common knowledge that the two don't get along. Asahina narrows his eyes at him. "But you know, don't you? You know what he meant when he said somebody is in Kururugi's head."

Rolo nods. "Yes, I know. But I can't say. It's not my place."

"Is it some brainwashing technique?" Rakshata asks, not seeming insulted as Rolo's intervention. "As I understand, it is possible to trigger a brainwashed individual like that."

Rolo doesn't deny it, which is like a confirmation in itself. Brainwashing? How could that be possible?

Asahina remembers what Zero once told them about Charles zi Britannia's brother. A cruel man. Far worse than his sibling. Could it be related?

"Rolo, please," Kallen says. "Just... Tell us something. Don't leave us like this."

Rolo grimaces and looks away. Diethard clears his throat and intervenes before anyone else can
press Zero's brother.

"The situation is indeed a little more complicated than you know, but we are not at liberty to make revelations at this time. I'm sure Zero will inform you, like he's promised."

"He's told you?" Inoue asks in disbelief.

"It was necessary for my work in the intelligence department," Diethard explains.

This whole incident reminds Asahina of Ohgi, except that it is far worse. As much as he tries to explain it to himself, he cannot understand how it was possible for Kururugi to attack Zero so quickly. It's not that Tohdoh didn't try to intervene. Even Cornelia and her knight attempted to help. But they were far too slow. If Kururugi hadn't stopped, hadn't fought whatever brainwashing had been placed on him, Zero would be dead. The thought makes Asahina break out in cold sweat. They've just earned the freedom of Japan. They can't lose it, not again.

Before they can question Diethard any further, the door to their meeting room opens. Surprisingly, the new arrival is Princess Euphemia. She's left her Britannian knight... somewhere, but she's remembered to have Minami as an escort, like Zero originally asked her.

"Hello, everyone. I hope you don't mind me intervening in your meeting. Zero said that he would be coming to talk to everyone soon and explain."

A few months ago, the presence of a Britannian princess in their midst would have taken them all aback. But they have since come to care about Princess Euphemia. She is so visibly grieved by what happened and her eyes are still red-rimmed. She's been crying.

Asahina gets up and offers her his seat. "Please, sit."

She shoots him a small smile and takes him up on her offer. "Thank you."

"What do you make of this, Princess Euphemia?" he asks. "What could have made Kururugi act the way he did?"

"The only thing I know is that the person Suzaku killed did something to his mind. He's awake now, but very shaken and upset. He doesn't remember a thing." Her tone changes and she shoots to her feet. "I... I don't know what will happen, but please, do not blame him. It's not his fault. Suzaku would never hurt Zero."

Asahina believes her. In fact, everyone seems to agree. After all, why would Kururugi decide to assassinate Zero now of all times? Even if, through some absurd convoluted plan, he acted like a double-double agent for Schneizel el Britannia, now would be the worst possible moment to attack him. Asahina isn't a politician, but even he can tell that Britannia is far too unstable at this point for Schneizel to take advantage of Zero's death.

"In any case," Euphemia says, "while we wait, we need to deal with the aftermath of what happened. Cornelia has returned to the settlement. As far as I know, the civilians have been evacuated, right?"

"Yes. Kaguya is keeping an eye on the Tianzi. She is very scared."

"We'll have to leave signing the UFN for a later date," Euphemia says. "Was all that broadcast on an international feed?"

"No," Diethard says. "I killed the feed right after Kururugi threw C.C. off him. But a lot of Japanese
citizens saw what happened. People were right next to him when he killed that woman. We've released a first official statement, but we'll need something more from Zero."

Euphemia clenches her fists. Asahina suspects she feels as helpless as most of them.

It takes ages, but at last, Zero arrives, just as he promised. As always, he is accompanied by C.C. She's never been the most expressive person, but since the SAZ started, she's started to show a little more emotion, usually when she bullied Zero into eating and sleeping. That part of her seems to have vanished now, melting away under an expressionless mask.

Asahina always did think that Zero's featureless helmet was a little unnerving, but it's nothing compared to C.C.'s blank, stoic eyes.

Zero doesn't even wait for them to greet him. He gets right down to business, something Asahina is secretly happy for. "You're all probably wondering what happened outside and where that assassin came from and how such a thing could have been possible. I'm afraid a fair amount of blame lies on my shoulders. I haven't been completely honest with all of you, and for this reason, as you see, I've paid a very personal price."

Without further ado, Zero reaches for his helmet. Asahina expects him to open it half-way, perhaps because he's having trouble breathing. Instead, Zero removes altogether.

Zero is young, but Asahina already knew that from Urabe. He also looks familiar, although Asahina cannot for the life of him remember where he's seen that face before.

The explanation is quickly given by Zero himself. "My name is Lelouch vi Britannia, son of 98th Emperor Charles zi Britannia and Empress Marianne vi Britannia."

Oh.

Zero made no secret of the fact that he was Britannian. From the very beginning of the Black Knights, he made it clear that he wasn't Japanese, and while he may not have stated his true nationality outright, it was obvious to anyone who spent at least some time in his company. Despite this, Asahina never connected him—or his obvious closeness to Kururugi—to the young prince who arrived at the Kururugi shrine, so many summers ago. Asahina didn't have much contact with Prince Lelouch and he only saw the princess once or twice. He has to admit that he never gave them much thought, since even then, resentment for Britannians had been high. Perhaps if he'd paid more attention, he would have realized the truth.

Tohdoh doesn't seem surprised at the revelation. He must have known about it then. So did Euphemia, obviously. She is giving them all worried looks, perhaps thinking that they would lash out at Zero because of his identity.

Judging by Diethard's calm manner, he may have also been aware, but Kallen was clearly not informed. Surprisingly, she is the one who shatters the silence. Asahina expected Tamaki to be the one to say something stupid before any of them ever asked. "You're a Britannian prince?" she cries.

The question naturally triggers an onslaught of further inquiries. Why would he help them? Why is here? Why kill Clovis if they're related?

Zero remains standing, implacable, his face unreadable. Rolo isn't nearly so calm. He takes position by his brother's side, in the same place Kururugi usually takes, presumably prepared to defend him.

"Silence!" Tohdoh finally bellows. "Let Zero speak."
The Black Knights all quiet down. Zero's lips twist into a small crooked smile. "Thank you, Tohdoh. Yes, Kallen, I am a Britannian prince. An exiled prince, but a prince nonetheless. I'd apologize for the deception, but it was necessary. My being royalty is one of the reasons why I had to wear the mask. But... There are other, more important reasons, and before you ask any further questions, I would urge you to listen to what I have to say."

He's not loud, not like Tohdoh was, but the words have an even more sobering effect. Kallen visibly deflates. Several people shift uncomfortably, but a lot of people start nodding hesitantly.

"As most of you are probably aware, my mother was assassinated in 2010," Zero begins. "What is not common knowledge is that the culprit behind the crime was my uncle Victor. At the time, I did not know this either. I asked my father to investigate the murder deeper, and for this, my sister and I were banished to Japan.

"During that summer, my sister Nunnally and I stayed with the Kururugis, where we befriended Suzaku. We became very close. But then... The invasion happened and we were separated.

"Suzaku made his way to his family, but I could not turn to the Japanese for assistance during such a time, so I contacted some old friends of my mother. The Ashfords. Only... Unbeknownst to me, Victor still had agents in Japan and he was hunting Nunnally and I. He hated my mother deeply. He had somewhat of an obsession for my father and she was the only empress Charles ever truly cared about. Nunnally and I were found, kidnapped and taken..." Zero's voice trails off, his gaze turning distant. "Taken to his headquarters," he finishes, rubbing his eyes.

Asahina is starting to get a very bad feeling. Originally, Zero's motives for his rebellion were unclear, but as time passed, it became clear to many of them that Zero had a lot of personal reasons for hating Britannia. Asahina is now genuinely afraid of what he is about to hear.

C.C. squeezes Zero's shoulder in a gentle show of support. "Victor has an organization that is in charge of human experimentation," she says, taking over the conversation, since Zero appears to be having trouble. "Lelouch has mentioned it before, if you remember. Their purpose is to create an army of superhumans, but the process is painful and the results are very random and often have unwelcome side effects. Lelouch, his siblings and I were all test subjects. So was Suzaku, after he became an Honorary."

"T-Test subjects?" Euphemia stammers, shooting out of her seat. "But... But..."

"Euphie, please," Zero cuts her off. "Sit. I promised I would explain. I know this is hard, but it cannot be helped."

The princess nods. She's shaking as she sits back down, but she says nothing.

"I do not remember everything that happened there," Zero continues. His sister's interruption seems to have snapped him out of his fugue. "Victor has staff that is capable of altering memories. I do know that it is there that I met C.C. and Rolo."

"Rolo?" Chiba repeats. "But... Isn't he your brother?"

"Yes, he is. But not my actual blood brother."

"But he looks so much like Nunnally," Kallen protests.

"You know the princess Nunnally, Kallen?" Asahina can't help but ask.

"Kallen knew me and Nunnally under our fake names, in our more recent civilian identities," Zero
replies in her stead. "I'll get to that part soon. As for Rolo..."

"I don't actually know who I am," Rolo says blankly. "My first ever memory is being experimented on. I could have easily been created to look like this. We don't know."

Princess Euphemia looks even more dazed and nauseated than before, which should have been an impossibility. "I always assumed that you saying he was your brother was because of his age and the resemblance was a coincidence or, at most, something that would have determined you to take him under your wing... I had no idea..."

Asahina understands what she means. Rolo is so young. His distinctly antisocial personality now makes so much sense. No wonder he doesn't know how to associate with others if he lived through such an ordeal. As Zero's true blood sibling, Euphemia would have known Rolo wasn't truly their brother, but how could she have possibly guessed the actual, horrible truth?

"Rolo and I were both held captive there for many years," C.C. continues. "By the time Lelouch, Nunnally and Suzaku were brought in, we barely had a sense of identity and naturally wanted to escape. But of course it was not so easy. There was a lot of security. As some of you may be aware, Nunnally is crippled and blinded, and her injury made matters even more complicated. And there were other prisoners we would have liked to free, a lot of them children, even younger than Rolo."

"We were there for several years, during which most of us were tortured in various ways," Zero adds.

"Your heart injury," Inoue whispers, like a realization. "That's where you got it."

"Among other things, yes. I won't give you a list." He shoots Euphemia a glance. "It's not for present company.

"Nunnally was too fragile for Victor to be able to do much to her, but he dangled her over my head so that I would cooperate."

"What happened then?" Kallen asks tremulously. She looks like she's seconds away from bursting into tears and is only holding back through sheer force of will. "How did you escape?"

"We didn't. Not really." Zero looks away. "Clovis found us. He was involved in the experimentation and after some time, he decided it was... uncouth to have his siblings in such a situation. Mine and Nunnally's memories were wiped. We remembered nothing of the incident. We were placed in Ashford Academy, where we lived until this year, unknowing, and obviously, where we met you."

"And Suzaku?" Euphemia inquires, a little desperately. "Rolo? C.C.?"

"We never made it out," C.C. replies, "not until much later. Suzaku joined the army largely because Victor—or V.V. as is his code name—wanted to test the abilities he gained through the experimentation. Rolo remained with the Order. I was with Clovis for a year or so. In fact, I was the one in the capsule that was stolen that day, in Shinjuku."

There is gaping all around. Asahina was not there for the infamous Shinjuku incident, but he does know it was the basis of the Black Knights. There were a lot of civilian casualties, so it's a bit of a sore spot. "You?" Kallen blurts out. "But... But..."

Zero nods. "That's how I remembered. It was really... an accident of fate. I was simply passing by—coming from one of my chess gambling matches—when I saw your car accident and I rushed over to help. I fell into the truck when you started the car. And yes, I was there the whole time when you left in the Glasgow. Imagine my surprise when I realized my classmate was actually a terrorist."
His expression turns darker. "While we were in the Shinjuku tunnels, after Kallen left, the capsule opened. C.C. got out and managed to break through my amnesia. Naturally, we were not happy about what had happened to us. Of course, we wanted to help Suzaku too, but we didn't know to what extent we were being monitored. Perhaps more importantly, his mental state at the time wasn't the best and we feared that if we pushed him, his psyche would completely shatter."

"No wonder." Tohdoh whispers. "No wonder he was so different that day, before he was supposed to execute me."

"When we were on the island..." Zero swallows and stares at his hands. "The island is actually one of the locations where the Order was active. Suzaku received orders, as you know. He was going to kill us both. Due to our location, I was... not at my best. So I was forced to use my own ability on him—the ability granted to me due to the experimentation—which in turn triggered the return of his memories."

"He's not in the best condition right now, but he's getting better," C.C. says. "Or... He was. It happened again, just now, so it may take him some time to recover. You'll have to be patient with him."

"Of course," Chiba replies. "We completely understand." How could they not? Those damn Britannians. How dare they do something like this to one of their own?

Asahina shares a look with Chiba. He hasn't really made an actual attempt to befriend Kururugi until now, but clearly, that was a mistake on their part. After this incident, they will need to do better.

"After I reunited with C.C.," Zero continues, "I went in search of Rolo. It took some effort, but I finally managed to find him and free him, since at the time, he wasn't stationed at V.V.'s main headquarters. Once I deemed it safe enough and I believed his disappearance would not be connected to the Black Knights, I brought him here. I had to keep my cover at Ashford, again, in case we were being watched, but after Cornelia and the SAZ became an issue, I knew I could no longer afford to do so. Since Clovis was dead and V.V. not here, I deemed it safe for us to... cut loose, so to speak. Or, as safe as it could ever be, at least."

"Zero, if I can interrupt. I have a question," Rakshata says. "You talked about your abilities. But what do these abilities actually do?"

Asahina blinks in surprise. That's right. He was so distracted by the whole human experimentation and torture thing that he missed its purpose of what Britannia had been attempting.

"It varies," C.C. replies. "I'm immortal. I can be killed, but I will heal from any injury, which is why I act as Lelouch's shield."

Everybody stares at her in disbelief. Immortal? Surely not...

"Suzaku has an increased speed, strength and reaction time, but he's also shown signs of improved healing, which is probably what saved his life today." C.C. continues. "Rolo can suspend other people's perception of time. Lelouch can order anyone—with a few exceptions—to do what he wants them to do, within reason."

Asahina's head is starting to spin. "Zero, with respect..."

"I know, Asahina. I know this is hard to believe. Rolo, if you can demonstrate."

"Yes, of course, big brother."
The next thing Asahina knows, Rolo is no longer standing in his previous position, next to Zero. He's on the other side of the room, holding a gun to Rakshata's head. Presumably, demonstrating.


Just like that, Rolo puts his gun away. "Apologies," he says, no honesty whatsoever in his voice. "It's been a long day. We're all a bit on the edge."

"It's no problem at all," Rakshata replies. "That was quite a fascinating skill you have there. I don't suppose you..."

"No, Rakshata, I won't let you analyze it, not at this time," Zero pipes up before she can finish the phrase.

"Do you read minds too?" Rakshata asks, interested.

"Don't be ridiculous. I just guessed. It's not like it's difficult to know that right now, you're thinking about the scientific applications and possibilities of our abilities."

Rakshata falls silent. It occurs to Asahina that maybe Rolo associated the inquiry with the scientists that once poked and prodded at him. That's not a pleasant thought to have. No wonder he targeted Rakshata with his... demonstration.

C.C. huffs. "Lelouch. I'm tired of this. We need to make it clearer. Rolo, shoot me."

"C.C.," Zero immediately starts to protest. "No... This isn't necessary."

"I'll be fine. You know that. And it's the best way to make them see what we mean. Come on, Rolo. Shoot me. Kill me."

Rolo waits, staring at his brother. Zero looks pained. "Euphie," he tells his sister, "do me a favor. Would you mind stepping out for a moment?"

Princess Euphemia stares between Zero and C.C. in disbelief. "Lelouch. I don't... understand."

"Please. I don't think it's a good idea for you to see this. You're not a soldier, not like the Black Knights."

"You can't protect me forever, Lelouch. I don't want to hide or look away. I'm not a child."

Zero grimaces. "Very well. Rolo, do it."

Just like that, Rolo turns his gun on C.C. and pulls the trigger. The bullet goes straight through her forehead. Blood and brain matter splatter all over the floor. She goes down, her golden eyes wide and shocked, green hair covered in crimson liquid. Zero catches her before she can hit the floor. Some of her blood stains his cheek.

Despite her earlier words, Euphemia recoils and covers her mouth, looking like she's about to throw up. Zero ignores her reaction.

"Rolo, bring C.C. something to eat, will you?" he asks, sounding tired. "Do we have pizza?"

Pizza? Zero's brother just killed his girlfriend and Zero is talking about pizza? What is this insanity?

"I can go check, big brother," Rolo says, calmly putting away his pistol.
"Please. And maybe find something to mop up the mess."

"Will do. Be right back."

The whole exchange takes maybe a minute, during which time Asahina is completely frozen. Inoue's mouth is open, like she's silently screaming. Tamaki's face is uncharacteristically blank. Nobody—not even Euphemia—seems to be able to even breathe or move a muscle.

Zero gently places his now dead lover on the couch. Once she is positioned in what looks like a moderately comfortable position, he stares at the wall and just waits.

Times seems to slow and then, finally, impossibly, C.C. stirs. The very first thing she says is, "I want pizza."

Zero looks at her with a small, fond smile. "Sent Rolo after some." He pulls out a handkerchief and helps her clean her face and hair. Only after does he wipe his own face. He ignores the small puddle of congealing blood on the couch.

While he does this, C.C. shoots them all an inquiring look. "Did that make the extent of my ability clear?"

Rakshata swallows and nods. Even she is speechless.

"As I was saying earlier, I was with V.V. longest, which is why my ability is like this. C.C. is a code name too. And no, I'm not going to tell you my real name. It's a secret."

"I... see..." Tohdoh manages to croak out.

"Obviously, we can't demonstrate Suzaku's ability, but you've probably caught glimpses of it before," Zero says. "And mine is something I prefer to not demonstrate."

The comment finally manages to make Asahina's brain work again. "Right. You mentioned you could order people to do what you want them to? Then why not use it on Britannians to keep them from attacking us?" God, let Zero please give them an answer that will make them stop thinking about the implications of what just happened in front of them.

"It doesn't work like that," Zero replies. "It has a range, and I need eye contact with the individual in question. It can also only be used once. Besides, I prefer not to use it much. People can sometimes interpret orders... creatively. For example, I could give out a completely harmless order and end up accidentally damaging the person in question. One time... After Narita, as you may recall, some civilians died in the avalanche. The father of a dear friend was there. Through a sequence of events, she learned I was Zero. She forgave me for what I had done, but I wanted to protect her from her guilt and grief anyway, so I ordered her to forget her traumatic memories. I ended up wiping her memories of me altogether."

"Wait... That's what happened with you and Shirley?" Kallen gasps out. I always thought it was so weird..." She sounds dazed, like she's blindly reaching for the one piece of information that makes sense.

"Everything comes with a price, Q1," Zero says. "Of course, I will use this ability if I have to, against our enemies, to ensure their cooperation, but it's preferable to try the... regular route first."

"So does that mean you've never used it on us?" Sugiyama asks.

"Just on Suzaku and Kallen."

"Kallen... You were a terrorist with a capsule that held C.C. inside it, suddenly at my school. While we were in the ghettos, I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt, which is why I helped you at that time. But once we were back at Ashford, things changed. Even if you weren't working for Clovis, you still presumably stole a bio weapon. I didn't trust you. I didn't know you. I thought you might be dangerous for Nunnally. So I simply used my skill to ask you some questions, which is pretty much the only way it can be used in a completely harmless way that would 100% not damage a person. It was that time, in the courtyard."

"When you mentioned Shinjuku. I remember now. But..."

"If it helps, Q1, I do regret it. I trust you now, and I realize that people do a lot of things when they're desperate. I should know." Zero closes his eyes, like he's in physical pain. "And... This power that I have... I keep calling it ability but its actual name is Geass. I never wanted to use it on those I care about. It's why I never used it on Ohgi. I... I admit I considered it. But I had no way of knowing how deeply rooted his affection for the Britannian woman was, and if the command from me contrasted with it too much, it could have shattered his mind. I could have seriously hurt him. And unfortunately, I could not use it again on Viletta, since I had already done so in Shinjuku—which is why she remembered me to begin with and knew to investigate me."

Well, that sounds like a lose-lose situation to Asahina. This Geass of Zero's sounds like a terrible burden to bear.

Kallen lets the topic drop. In the silence that follows, Rolo finally makes his appearance, pushing along a cart with some leftover pizza and cleaning supplies.

C.C. instantly gets up and makes a beeline for the plate. She snatches a slice and digs in, ignoring the fact that, despite Zero's efforts, there are still some traces of blood on her face.

Rolo goes ahead to start mopping the floor. For some reason, maybe out of the desire to just do something and not think about what actually happened here, Sugiyama rushes to help.

Two slices of pizza later, they've all recovered a little more and Tohdoh manages to ask another question. "Zero... What about Suzaku?"

"The command on him is to live. As I said, he wasn't... completely stable prior to regaining his memories. We got lucky in that our reunion gave him a reason to live, in a way he didn't have before. Of course, it's not an ideal situation, and I would've preferred to not be forced to use it, but the important thing is that it helped him and it keeps him safe."

"But earlier... He turned his sword against himself," Euphemia whispers. Asahina is surprised she can even speak given how pale and shaken she is.

"That's because he received another command, from another person," C.C. answers. "As far as we can tell, the command was to kill Lelouch. However, Suzaku's whole being was protested against that. Since it's agency that is manipulated, not emotion, he resisted. He probably would have killed himself if not for Lelouch's order. Between that and the two of us reinforcing his memory, he managed to shake it off long enough to take out the assassin."

"And the... person..." Inoue manages to say. "Could have done that to any of us?"

Zero nods. "Yes. She chose Suzaku because she knew nobody could have gotten past him, but she could have easily targeted any of you. The only exception here is C.C., who has a degree of mental
immunity due to what was done to her.

"And yes, before you ask, there are more people like that out there, with different Geass abilities, but all of them serving my uncle. Given what we've heard from Cornelia, it appears that at this time, he's mostly still busy with the man who killed Charles zi Britannia, but I have no doubt that he'll eventually attack again."

"Zero... How are we supposed to fight off an army of superhumans?" Tamaki asks.

"Technically... They're not an army. The experimentation is very risky and has a high chance of failure, thus Victor using it on me even if he hated my mother. They are dangerous, but they aren't unbeatable. Immortality like C.C.'s is actually very rare. Only V.V. himself has it. It's part of the reason why he's so insane. He experimented on himself using the data he gathered from C.C. Either way, as luck would have it, I can kill him. I just need to get close enough."

"I assume you plan to use your ability to do this," Tohdoh says.

"Yes. But it won't be an easy matter. We do know the location of his main facility, but we have to take into account the fact that a lot of the people there are very much like we used to be—brainwashed subjects, dangerous, but ultimately innocent. I am working on a plan, but until we find the right approach for that, we need to keep a close eye on developments in Britannia, to monitor V.V.'s next move, just in case he targets Schneizel."

"Would he do that?" Euphemia asks. "Go after Schneizel?"

"There's a possibility. I know what you're thinking, Euphie, but we can't tell Schneizel about this. Not everything at least. Schneizel is not Charles, but he may want to use the Order as a weapon. We can't take the chance. Of course, I actually have told Cornelia part of what's going on, and I will speak with her and give her another head's up, to maybe warn Schneizel to be a little more careful too. But we can't do anything more."

"Oh..."

At this point, the princess sounds beyond downtrodden and going well into the realm of depression. Zero sighs. "Listen, Euphie. C.C. and I still have some work to do here. Would you mind keeping Suzaku company for a while? We sort of chased you out earlier and he needs someone to stay with him right now."

Euphemia jumps at the chance. She doesn't exactly cheer up, but she obviously needs some time to process what she's seen and heard. "Of course I will. Just let me know if you need anything else."

Before she goes, she gives her brother a hug. Zero hugs her back. It's very strange to see. Asahina has never seen Zero be affectionate to anyone except C.C., Rolo and, less often, Suzaku. He obviously cares about her, although, somehow, Asahina knows that it wouldn't have made a difference had she betrayed their cause.

Zero waits until she's gone and then turns toward the rest of them again. "I know I've dumped a lot of information of you. I know this is even scary. To some, I've been even more unfair than to others." He straightens his back and just like that, all show of emotion vanishes. "But as much as I would like to give you more time to process this, we need to be more careful than ever. We'll tighten the guard and electronic systems. Nothing V.V. can do affects cameras. Stay in your knightmares if possible and don't activate open coms. A lot of these abilities work through contact, other visual or otherwise, so this will provide you with some defense. Watch each other's backs. Also, keep in mind that a lot of these individuals look harmless and are often children. Even V.V. looks like a child.
C.C. and Rolo will compile a list with what they remember from the Order. We'll get past this too. I have the utmost faith in our capabilities.

"I will also need a more elaborate story for the populace. Diethard, you've done well so far, but there were a lot of people there who saw Suzaku threaten me with a sword and may not have heard our exchange. We need to make it clear that it's not his fault and I don't want people to question his suitability as my knight. Thoughts, anyone?"

"A subliminal weapon of some kind?" Rakshata suggests. "Without analyzing the process personally, I'd say it's pretty much the truth, in his case at least."

"That could work," Zero replies. "It will cause agitation, but we have no other choice, and a weapon from an outside threat is far better than internal betrayal. We'll tighten gun control and enforce some extra security measures in the civilian population. Technically, that won't help us with this sort of ability, but it will help us with everything else and prevent civilian unrest."

As Zero settles down to prepare his speech, Asahina cannot help but compare him with Tohdoh. The two of them are so very different, with Tohdoh being so stern and Zero so flashy. But in some ways, they are alike. Asahina has seen Tohdoh do this countless of times, bury his emotions and turn into a leader in the blink of an eye. It's all the more awe-inspiring when it comes from a seventeen year old.

Asahina would be grateful for it if he did not know that this determination quite possibly hides countless tortures the seventeen year old in question has suffered. Damn Britannia.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked Asahina's POV. I picked him for a reason and I wanted to give a little more insight into the minds of the other Black Knights. We'll have more of the others at a later date.

I actually do think Geass is, like Rakshata said, a subliminal weapon - a command that affects the subconscious of an individual. I'll probably go into my interpretation of it deeper in a future chapter. Keep it in mind.

And finally, I trust Lelouch's explanation of what happened made sense. The following chapters will probably show some of his reasoning on exactly why he said everything that he did.
Reverberations

Chapter Notes

So first off! Thank you everyone for your comments on the last chapter! I'm glad you liked Lelouch's explanation. An extra long chapter for you today, in reward :) Do let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Zero stays with them a little while longer. As he checks in with all their garrisons and coordinates their security, C.C. manages to unearth an image of Charles zi Britannia's older twin brother, explaining that V.V. looks almost exactly the same now, except with longer hair.

"Does that mean you're older than you look too?" Rakshata thinks to ask.

"Good guess," C.C. replies. "Yes. I'm much older."

Tohdoh watches the exchange in silence. He believes her. She always did seem to carry a burden on her shoulders, and her silent, stoic demeanor made him wary and uncomfortable. It wasn't a behavior born out of discipline. C.C. is many things, but a disciplined soldier isn't one of them. But pain? Apathy? Yes, he can see it. And after the earlier display, how could he possibly doubt her words?

When it comes, Zero's speech is as inspiring as ever. He explains the situation to the Japanese, clears his knight of all culpability while emphasizing he basically saved Zero's life. He mentions that the outside threat remains, but reassures the Japanese that both he and Princess Cornelia will be vigilant. He does warn them that at this time, the Area is under a form of martial law, but as long as they remain indoors and cooperate with the Black Knights, no harm will come to them.

The whole thing flows over Tohdoh like a wave. He has no doubt that it will achieve the purpose it is meant for, but it does little for Tohdoh himself.

As he promised Princess Euphemia, Zero contacts Cornelia and gives her the warning he spoke of. Cornelia assures him that they have the matter covered and she has already spoken with her eldest brother. Zero acknowledges the words, but seems unconvinced.

When Zero finally announces that he is about to leave—with the promise to send them all further details on what they're going to face—a part of Tohdoh wants to go after him, to ask some more questions. In the end, he decides against it. The only reassurances he can ask for at this point have already been given, and any further inquiries would not be appreciated.

Rolo leaves with Zero and C.C., and once they're gone, the whole deck falls silent. It's like Zero's absence has suddenly sucked all the air out of the room. Or maybe there was a tension there before, something pushing them to move past their apprehension and horror. Now that Zero's presence is no longer there to motivate them, everyone freezes at their work stations.

Inoue bursts into tears first. Sugiyama rushes to her side to comfort her. After that, it's like an avalanche.

Kallen slides to her knees and buries her face into her hands. "Oh God. Oh God."
The sentiment is shared all across the Black Knights. It's like something cold that has settled over all their souls, something they cannot chase away or discard.

As for Tohdoh... He looks away and clenches and unclenches his fists. All he can think about is the little boy who was once his student, the boy with wide, innocent green eyes, but with so much fire, such determination. The same boy who so often seems so emotionless.

The taste of failure is like poison in his mouth. He's experienced before, many times, with all the losses that he's had. But even then, even when he saw friends and loved ones die on the battlefield, he never had this feeling. That scream Suzaku let out when he was outside... It sounded like he was being ripped open from the inside.

"Colonel Tohdoh..." Chiba whispers by his side. "It's not your fault."

"It is. I should have done more. Instead, I hid under the mountain like a coward."

The words come out with difficulty, but they come out. He will always be loyal and respect General Katase greatly, but the fact remains that the JLF stood by and did nothing while people like Suzaku and the rest of the Japanese suffered.

It was only Suzaku who stopped the massacre of the Japanese when Genbu's pride would have killed them all. It was only the young prince of Britannia who stepped in when they were being crushed by Clovis.

Tohdoh grits his teeth and does his best to control his fury and revulsion. "All right everyone. We need to pull ourselves together. Right now, the best thing we can do is offer our support and make sure what happened to them doesn't happen again."

"T-That's right," Tamaki stammers. "Zero needs us. We can't let him down."

"I still can't believe Rolo shot C.C., just like that," Sugiyama mumbles.

"Technically, she's the one who asked him," Diethard points out. "And I think she doesn't really care about such things anymore. When they showed me, she stabbed herself clean through the arm and didn't display any reaction except for asking for pizza."

"So... Nutrients," Rakshata muses. "Her body constantly regenerates. Maybe the calloric intake from the pizza helps with that. I wonder how many times she must have gone through the experience in order to become like that."

"You are not to ask, Rakshata," Tohdoh says. "This is hard enough."

"I think Rolo made that clear, thank you."

"But you know, guys, I think we're actually... pretty lucky that Zero is a good guy," Tamaki pipes up. "He could have turned us all into tools if he wanted to, but he didn't."

Tamaki is, of course, correct, although it goes beyond that. Tohdoh realizes all too well that Zero must have already used this ability against his enemies. It may have been how he got Clovis to rescind his order in the massacre of Shinjuku. Perhaps other times, he may have used it as a weapon or to procure all of the things he's needed for the Black Knights. But the fact that he did not use it on them—except on Kallen, at a time when he feared for family—means something.

He cannot deny he does feel a dose of apprehension. Genbu was a good man too, and his decisions as prime minister nearly led them all to an even bigger disaster. Power has a way of destroying
people.

But Zero seems very aware of this, and the fact that he dislikes using his skill reassures Tohdoh.

"Zero wouldn't turn us into tools," he says, "not after he himself was used for so long, not after what was done to his siblings, C.C. and Suzaku."

His comment makes Inoue bring up another topic. "That's right... Zero mentioned a sister. The princess Nunnally. Kallen, you know her, right? Why do you suppose he never brought her here after he broke his cover?"

"I think maybe... Maybe she doesn't remember what happened to her. Nunnally is very nice, but she's always seemed so innocent. Rolo isn't like that. So maybe he didn't want to involve her in all the bloodshed. And like he said, she's very vulnerable. If V.V. had tracked him down here, she would have been the first to be targeted."

"We could have still protected her, though," Tamaki claims, a tone of defensiveness in his voice.

"Could we?" Diethard arches a brow. "We couldn't protect Zero, let alone a blind, crippled little girl."

"Do you know where she is, Diethard?" Tohdoh asks.

Diethard shakes his head. "I doubt anyone except Zero, C.C., Kururugi and Rolo know."

"Well, there's no point in thinking about it now," Kallen says abruptly. "Zero will tell us or he won't."

For the first time, it occurs to Tohdoh that Kallen may not be dealing with the entire thing all that well. After all, she was the only one out of all of them whom Zero targeted with his ability. "Kallen? Are you feeling all right?"

"I don't think anyone here is feeling all right." Kallen smiles bitterly. "I feel like maybe... I was stupid. After Naoto, I thought I understood all the monstrous things Britannia did, but now... It's just one thing after the other. They just... take and take and take and destroy... When will it stop?"

"As for the rest of it..." Kallen stares up at the ceiling, her face blank. "Does it really matter in the end? That my classmate is a prince? That he lied to us? In the big picture, does it really matter? After what was done to them... Does it even matter... How I feel..."

"It matters, Kallen," Chiba says. "Otherwise, Zero wouldn't have apologized for using his ability on you."

Kallen still doesn't look that convinced. He shakes her head and straightens her shoulders. "Anyway. Tohdoh is right. We need to pull ourselves together and follow Zero's orders. But in the meantime... There is one more thing we need to think about. Rakshata was right, earlier."

"Hmm? Me?"

"Yes. When you wondered about how many times C.C. died. Lelouch never really said what kind of damage they actually suffered. He was vague about it, probably because of his sister." Kallen clenches her jaw. "We have to ask. We can't risk... We can't risk him collapsing like he did on the island."

That's right. She was the one of the few people present during Zero's original fit, the one that let them
all know there was a problem to begin with.

"I'll bring it up with Zero," Diethard offers. "I don't think he would refuse us, not now."

Kallen nods, but her expression remains glum. As they return to work, Tohdoh wonders what Zero will spring on them next and how they will all be able to manage it.

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Meanwhile, at Ashford Academy, the members of the Student Council stare at the TV screen with open mouths.

"A... subliminal weapon?" Nina squeaks. "But... How... Who could have..."

"Probably whoever bombed Pendragon," Milly says. "Now that Zero and Britannia are tentative allies, Zero has become a target too. Thus, the martial law."

"But what about Princess Euphemia?" Nina cries. "They didn't say anything about her. Is she at risk too? Did they hurt her?"

Shirley can barely hear them. All he can think about is the mysterious disappearance of her memories.

The fact that Lulu is Zero is the only reason why she's remained at the school after classes ended. She was uncomfortable with going back to her family home, knowing what she did, and the rest of the Council—except for Milly who already lives here—decided to stay behind too. Their presence did help her sort through her feelings, especially since, for a while, she believed her amnesia may have been caused by Lulu himself. But now...

What if something like that was done to her too? What if... What if they wanted to turn her against Lulu?

She scrambles for her cell phone, already speed dialing the well known number. Just like before, during the countless times she's tried to call him, there's no response. Lulu's phone isn't even on.

Suddenly, Shirley's chest feels tight. She can't be here any longer. She needs to talk to Lulu. She needs to see him, for real.

She shoots to her feet, making a bee line for the door.

"Shirley? Shirley, are you all right? Shirley!"

Shirley doesn't listen. She runs out of the Student Council room, her mind already dead set on getting to the SAZ.

It's only once she's outside that she realizes she has a big problem.

Right. She's forgotten. The whole school is on shutdown. The area is being patrolled by nightmares. Most public transportation has been closed or is monitored by the Black Knights. Martial law.

She isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Milly and the others catch up with her in the courtyard. They're all breathing hard, having presumably chased her from the Student Council Room.
"Listen, guys. We can't just go bursting into the SAZ, even if we're worried. I have an idea."

She produces her cell phone, a small, hesitant smile on her lips. "Wish me luck."

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Suzaku waits. He still has a mild headache, but it's boring to just sit there and 'recover', and it makes him antsy in that it reminds him far too much of the solitude of his time post-Requiem. He opens the pendant around his neck and looks at it, taking in the digital display that registers Lelouch's heartbeat and location.

It would have been so easy for today to go so very wrong. It's so very frustrating to be stuck in the infirmary while Lelouch goes to talk to the Black Knights. He needs to get better faster, so that he can return to his emperor's side.

Clara Lanfranc is dead now, and presumably there aren't a lot of Geass users like her around. But if more people with the ability to control others show up, he needs to be there to protect Lelouch.

It's strange to think that if not for the Geass from C.C., he may be dead now. So far, he hasn't had time to explore it too much. Before the attack happened, he managed to heal Tamaki of an ingrown toenail, Inoue of a scratch from Arthur and help Kallen with menstruation cramps. That one had been very weird, and it caused a surge in his anger and frustration before it melted away. He'd had a wild thought that maybe Kallen was on her period every time they fought, but quickly dismissed it. Kallen is prone to violent responses every day of the month, and he didn't want to think about her biological processes further.

At the time, he didn't intend to push his new ability, especially after the warnings C.C. and Lelouch have given him. Now, he thinks the Geass may be far more powerful than he expected. Can he make it work faster? How would that even work?

He has no idea, but he decides to try. Following a sudden instinct, he lets his mind drift and tries to think about good things. The smell of C.C.'s hair. Lelouch's deep eyes, so very purple. C.C. curling around Cheese-kun with a slice of pizza. Lelouch's frustrated yelping when they coax him into eating or exercising. The three of them chasing Arthur on a day when the cat was being particularly stubborn. The three of them in bed together. The pendant, registering Lelouch's steady heartbeat.

Lelouch's 'Live on' Geass, the wish that kept him alive. C.C.'s contract, flaring inside him, so very warm.

It helps, and before he knows it, he's falling asleep. He only realizes it when a knock at the door jolts him from his slumber.

"Yes?" he calls out. "Come in."

The door opens and Euphie walks in with soft, careful steps. "Hi, Suzaku. Were you sleeping? I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I wasn't asleep. Just, you know... Thinking." Suzaku shoots her a quick smile. "I've been summarily ordered to stay put. I'd love the company, especially when it's yours."

Euphie takes him up on the invitation and sits down on the edge of his bed. The silence is strange and uncomfortable. She's clearly been crying, and she doesn't know how to address what is on her mind. "Did Lelouch explain?" Suzaku finally asks.

Euphie nods. "I'm so sorry, Suzaku. I had... I had no idea."
"None of it is your fault, Euphie," Suzaku replies. "I just... I'm glad you came to see me, because I want you to know something. Even if... Even if I wasn't quite myself when we met... The two of us, the friendship that we have... It's real. It's important to me. You're important to me. I think maybe... It was among the few real things I had, at that time. You, and Cecile. Even Lloyd, up to a point. You helped me a lot, more than you know."

What he's saying isn't one hundred percent true, but then, their elaborate charade of being test subjects is necessary and far more believable than what actually happened. He knows that their lies are hurting Euphie, but in the long run, it will be for the best. They can't keep her isolated from all knowledge. Lelouch has already learned how badly that works due to his complete failure with Nunnally the first time around, and even making the attempt, especially when she is here with them, would endanger her.

Euphie's eyes fill with tears at his response. "You're so brave," she chokes out. "I came here to supposedly help you and here you are, comforting me instead. I guess you're still my knight, a little bit."

"A little bit." Suzaku grins. "I don't think Lelouch would mind it, just this once."

Euphie leans in closer and wraps her arms around him. They don't say anything, but they don't have to. The hug is enough.

It feels like... closure. He did realize before that he didn't love her romantically, but this well and truly settles it, like they can finally fall into a clearer relationship without awkwardness.

A knock at the door interrupts the moment. Suzaku breaks the embrace between him and Euphie and calls out, "Yes. Come in."


"Ms. Cecile. Lloyd. What are you doing here?"

"What kind of question is that?" Lloyd arches a pale brow. "We had to check on the condition of my favorite devicer. Can't have my parts breaking, just like that."

Suzaku doesn't really mind Lloyd's comment—that's just the way Lloyd is—but Cecile elbows Lloyd in the gut. "Lloyd!" She turns a wide smile on Suzaku. "Ignore him, Suzaku. We were worried about you, of course, and we heard through the grapevine that you were awake. I hope we're not interrupting anything."

"No, not at all," Euphie tells them. "We can all keep Suzaku company, as long as he feels well enough."

"Yes, absolutely. Please, stay."

It actually is nice to have them all here with him. They don't make up for Lelouch and C.C.'s absence, but they do help and their words and reassurances fill a hole inside Suzaku.

They notably avoid talking about the assassination attempt, though, and Suzaku is reminded that they don't actually have a real explanation beyond the official one. Lelouch has decided to give them their official story, but he's left it up to Suzaku, since he's far closer to them than he is. "I actually wanted to talk to you about something important," he says. "You're probably wondering what happened earlier."
"Suzaku, Zero did give a statement," Cecile replies kindly. "Anything further can wait."

Suzaku shakes his head. "I think you should know. You've actually... helped me a lot, so Zero... Lelouch thinks you can be trusted."

Lloyd's expression sharpens with clear interest. "Lelouch? Lelouch as in your friend Lelouch from Ashford Academy?"

"That too. But also Lelouch vi Britannia, son of Emperor Charles and Empress Marianne."

Hilariously, Lloyd should have probably guessed sooner, since he is one of the few people in Japan who knew Lelouch as a child and was familiar with Marianne. However, Lloyd doesn't really look at people so the details of their physical looks just... wash over him.

The whole story comes out, a little haltingly. He takes breaks, and Euphie dutifully provides him with water, looking concerned and several times insisting that he shouldn't strain himself so.

"I can tell them the rest of it," she insists.

"Thanks, Euphie, but I'll be fine."

By the time he's done, Cecile is sitting down, paler than the first time they explained the plan of the Zero Requiem. Lloyd is very quiet.

He's probably thinking about ways to experiment with their abilities, but can't come up with ways to say it without it sounding awful. Lloyd may be primarily a scientist, but he's also a noble and not completely unaware of human sensibilities.

"Oh, Suzaku..." Cecile murmurs. "I don't know what to say."

"It's fine, Ms. Cecile. I just wanted to explain, so that you understand and you'll be ready if anything happens. And well... I do owe you. If Lloyd hadn't given me the Lancelot, who knows where I'd be now? Maybe I would have died in Shinjuku, before C.C. and Lelouch could actually remind me who I really was."

"Oh, it was our pleasure," Lloyd says. "Although I suppose this whole thing does explain a lot. Your reaction time during these past few battles has been... remarkable. The Lancelot isn't really keeping up anymore. You're actually putting a strain on the circuits."

"Am I?" Suzaku didn't realize that. It must be because he's used to piloting the superior frames that are even faster and can handle more.

"Not to worry! I'm sure I'll come up with something that will allow you to use your abilities to their full potential."

Lloyd suddenly seems alight with scientific excitement. Cecile and Euphie open their mouths at the same time to chastise him.

They don't get the chance. The sound of a ringtone echoes in the infirmary room. Lloyd stops mid exclamation and reaches into his coat. "That's strange," he mumbles.

"Who is it, Lloyd?" Cecile asks.

"Hmm? It's Milly Ashford."

Something cold slithers over Suzaku's spine. "Take it. It could be important."
At Suzaku's words, Lloyd looks up from his phone. There must be something on Suzaku's face, because the scientist doesn't argue. It's actually kind of strange, since Lloyd has argued with him plenty of times in the past. Maybe Suzaku has changed more than he himself realized.

"Lloyd Asplund," Lloyd says as he takes the call. "To what do I owe the honor of this call, my dearest fiancee?"

There's a pause as Milly says something. "Oh. I see." Lloyd hums thoughtfully. "Well... That will be a little difficult, but..." He shoots Suzaku a look. "One moment."

He covers his phone with his palm, a small, bemused smirk on his lips. "Apparently, my dear fiancee and her schoolmates are worried about you and want to see you."

Suzaku's mind goes blank. What? Why would they show such interest in him?

It's not that he didn't make friends in the Student Council. They like him well enough. Even Nina sort of accepted him by the end of his stay there, despite her general dislike toward Numbers.

But Milly hates her engagement with Lloyd. That's common knowledge. For her to call him... She wouldn't do that for just Suzaku.

She would do it for Lelouch.

Does she know about Lelouch being Zero? Could Shirley have told her? Does Nina know, and could they pose a danger now or in the future?

Lelouch has told him he has Nina under Geass not to make the FLEIJA, but that doesn't mean Nina is completely stable. Her obsession with Euphie still exists. Lelouch has believed in the past that it may never manifest aggressively if Euphie isn't harmed, but Lelouch has been wrong before. It's not out of the question that she may do something regrettable if the situation isn't addressed.

Suddenly, the panic he's been holding back since Lelouch's departure from the infirmary returns with a vengeance. He shoves off the covers, already making plans. "Tell her you need to speak to someone in charge to get authorization. You'll call her back."

He's halfway across the room before they can even realize what's going on.

"Suzaku? What's wrong?" Euphie cries behind him.

Suzaku doesn't listen. By now, he knows all too well that even the smallest thing can spiral into disastrous consequences. They need to handle this quickly, and he needs to go see Lelouch.

Brain damage or no, orders be damned, he won't be kept from his emperor any longer.

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In Zero's private office, Lelouch and C.C. watch the feed of the Black Knights conversation. Normally, they would not do this, but Lelouch needs to assess the reaction of his men to their story in order to make his next move.

C.C. is actually pretty surprised about what happens after they leave, and Lelouch is too. "This is going... surprisingly well," he comments.

"They fixated on the torture element like we hoped, but I feel like we underestimated the extent of their affection for you."
"Tohdoh is helping a lot. He feels guilty for Suzaku. Thank God I didn't use Geass on him. It wouldn't have worked as well if I had. Although it is a shame that Euphie had to be there to see it."

"Well, personally, I think it's kind of hilarious that Rakshata thought of a better excuse than we did. Maybe we should have gone the subliminal weapon route too."

Lelouch shakes his head. "No, it's better this way. Our skills were going to come out sooner or later, if only because Suzaku is going to heal far too quickly. This way, we can control the outcome."

Kallen's suggestion of once again looking into his medical history takes them both aback. In fact, her overall reaction is very surprising. When Lelouch decided to tell the truth about him having put a Geass on Kallen in order to deflect their attention from the possibility of him putting one on Ohgi, C.C. feared the consequences. In their first life, just the realization that Zero was Lelouch Lamperouge caused her to flee in shock and abandon Lelouch to Suzaku. Her loyalty always tended to have ups and downs, according to her perception of who Lelouch truly was. Zero may have been her hero, but she never felt the same way for Lelouch.

Things have changed massively in this lifetime. Apparently, Lelouch being a torture victim and experimentation survivor trumps him being a Britannian prince in possession of a superhuman ability he's used on her and she has suddenly gone into overprotective Red Ace mode.

"You know," Lelouch comments as they watch her, "I almost feel bad about lying to them."

C.C. arches a brow at him. "No, you don't."

"No, I don't. Well... To Kallen, maybe. Just a bit. But anyway, I know she would never understand." His thoughtful expression changes, twisting into a savage smirk. "I still have the Code R files from Clovis and some stuff I scavenged from the facility when we went after Orange which will help us with Rolo. We can elaborate a bit from there when it comes to me and Suzaku. This could work nicely, C.C."

C.C. nods and reaches for his hand. The smirk fades into something a little less... manic. He deflates like a popped balloon and slumps with his head against her shoulder.

"It's going to be okay," she says. "He'll be fine. We're going to be fine. All of us."

Lelouch nods. For a few moments, he's silent. It's much too reminiscent of their time pre-Requiem, and C.C. hates it with a passion.

Lelouch must feel the same, because he finally shakes himself and says, "Let's go see Suzaku. I think we've given Euphie enough time with him."

"Always so possessive of your knight," C.C. teases him.

"Well, what can I say? I'm still just as selfish as you."

C.C. very much doubts that. Her list of people she cares about includes only two names. In fact, a tiny part of her wants to use Mao's plan and drag Lelouch and Suzaku out of here to Australia. But she knows that as long as V.V. is still around, they'll never get any peace, so they need to deal with him before she can think of taking extended vacations.

A long, long vacation with nothing to do except have sex and eat pizza, just the three of them. Yes. Absolutely. She will definitely do that after all this is over.

"What are you even thinking about now?" Lelouch asks her. "Should I be worried?"
"Oh, it's nothing much. Just... the future. Come on. Your knight is waiting."

Lelouch gives her a bemused look, but lets it slide. He puts his mask back on and they leave his office. As they head toward the infirmary, his hold on her hand is very tight.

They still have so much to do before C.C. can even hope to fulfill her wishes. Some of her plans... She doesn't even know if they can come to fruition. But she's not alone anymore. She has a new dream and a new hope. She will not let V.V.—or anyone else for that matter—trample over it.

Halfway toward the infirmary, they run into Suzaku himself. He's in Knight of Zero mode, clearly intent on talking to them. The very first thing he does is eye Lelouch carefully, as if checking him for injuries. C.C. mentally sighs. They're back to that, then. It's not surprising, but she wishes it didn't have to be this way.

"Suzaku?" Lelouch asks. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's the Student Council at Ashford. They want to come here."

C.C.’s breath catches. All right, so maybe Suzaku's reaction wasn't as out of proportion as she thought. This is the last thing Lelouch needs right now, to worry about his schoolmates. Not to mention that said schoolmates have been known to be dangerous before.

Lelouch hisses in frustration. "How did they even contact the SAZ?"

"Milly called Lloyd."

"Right." Lelouch takes a deep breath, visibly forcing himself to regain his composure. "That's... unfortunate. We have to deal with this and make sure they don't accidentally do anything that would put them at risk."

"Will you bring them here?" Suzaku asks.

"I have no choice," Lelouch says. "I can't afford to leave the SAZ, not now. I need to be here to monitor Black Knight operations."

"Also I need to get a look at them to check if V.V. may have been next to them," C.C. points out, "and I have no intention of leaving Lelouch's side anytime soon."

Suzaku is obviously in agreement, and well aware that their visit isn't about him. "What are you going to do if they are?"

Lelouch grimaces. Right. Shirley and Nina are already under Geass and without Jeremiah here, he can't command them to do anything. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

As he finishes the phrase, Lloyd, Cecile and Euphie manifest in the corridor, followed by a group of Black Knights. It would appear that Suzaku's departure from the infirmary may have been somewhat abrupt and perhaps alarmed some people.

"Lloyd," Lelouch tells the scientist, "tell Ms. Ashford to stay put for now. We'll be sending someone to get her and her friends so that they can visit Suzaku."

Lloyd blinks in apparent surprise, but nods. "Of course."

As Lloyd reaches for his phone, Lelouch does the same and speed dials a number. "Kallen, I need a favor."
So, what do you make of the reactions to Lelouch's revelations? Are they what you expected? Also, next up, we'll see some more of the Ashford Student Council, as I promised to some readers :)

Chapter End Notes
Not Soldiers, but Friends

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Here I am with my customary update! As always, thank you for all the comments and kudos! I hope you like this chapter too! And without further ado, onward with the fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kallen drives the Black Knights transport through the street of the Tokyo Settlement, angry and frustrated. She doesn't want to deal with this right now, not after today's revelations, but she doesn't have a choice. Orders are orders.

She isn't sure if any of members of the Student Council know the truth about Lelouch being a prince, but judging from the information Lelouch gave them before, she suspects Milly Ashford must. If Lelouch deemed it necessary to bring them to the SAZ now of all times, they must have noticed something else, something he deems a possible vulnerability.

It's just that any of them can be a threat. If Britannia got Suzaku to turn on Lelouch, it would be very easy for them to manipulate another person. They may not have Suzaku's mental resilience and the love for Lelouch that kept him from going through with the vile act.

In her heart, Kallen wonders if she herself could have done it. She's so very relieved Suzaku is up and about again. If something happens, Suzaku and C.C. will intervene.

Her hands shake on the wheel as she thinks about everything Lelouch told them today. Some things make so much sense now. Lelouch's strange comment during the Viletta debacle, his defensiveness about Ohgi 'taking advantage' of Viletta when she was an amnesiac. She always found that odd, because why would he care? Rolo's demeanor, Suzaku's strangely conflicting behavior, even C.C.'s insistence to have pizza all the time.

She remembers Narita, finding them in a cave with C.C.'s clothes torn, then Lelouch's mysterious and emotional comment about snow. Kallen made some wrong assumptions then, but she now suspects that C.C. may have died to defend him then. She remembers the island and her conversation with Suzaku, how different he seemed from the Suzaku who dragged Zero into the Lancelot. She'd chalked it up to Suzaku's epiphany that Zero was Lelouch. As for his occasionally absent and cold demeanor... A part of her believed that maybe at one point, he may have stumbled into a Refrain addiction. The truth is far worse.

The leather of the wheel creaks under her fingertips and she wipes her eyes of the tears now blurring her vision. The only thing she wants now is to be in her Guren and destroy every single person in charge of that monstrous project. But instead, she has to come to the school, to make sure Lelouch's friends haven't been turned into weapons.

She half-hopes they actually have this excuse, because if Milly Ashford called the SAZ for some sort of trivial reason, Kallen may very well lose her mind and do something Milly will regret far more than Kallen will.

"You know," Rolo says from the seat next to the driver, "I can drive if you want."
His voice snaps her out of her thoughts and she realizes she's practically forgotten he was there. "No, it's fine," she replies. "I'm good. Having something to do actually helps."

Rolo doesn't question her. He seems to trust her in his own way, which, all things considered, is actually pretty flattering.

This is what prompts her to break the silence again. "Say, Rolo... Can I ask you something... maybe a little insensitive?"

"Go ahead, although keep in mind that I may not answer."

"You know Suzaku from your time with... that person, right? Why do you hate him then?"

"It's because... It's because V.V. has used Sir Kururugi to hurt big brother in the past," Rolo replies. "It wasn't always even... direct, like today. They were very close as children, and that friendship was a weak point V.V. exploited."

"But that's hardly Suzaku's fault..."

"I know," Rolo replies. "I've always known. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Kallen falls silent. That's right. Rolo is only fourteen. He won't be rational about everything. And who knows what kind of twisted approach V.V. used to make them turn against one another?

"Anyway, you don't have to worry about that. We've sort of... reached an agreement. We won't fight any longer, especially not now. Big brother needs us."

Well, that explains why Rolo defended Suzaku earlier, before Lelouch told them the whole story.

"Can I ask you a question back?" Rolo says after a few moments of silence.

"Sure."

"Why aren't you angry about him using his Geass on you?"

Kallen doesn't immediately reply. Maybe she should feel hurt that Lelouch used his skill on her, but... She isn't. "Rolo... I've always believed, always felt that maybe... The Shinjuku massacre was indirectly our fault, that we never should have stolen that strange capsule. Sure, it was Clovis who gave the order, but if we hadn't taken the capsule, he wouldn't have purged the ghettos, so in a way, those deaths are on us." The accusing words of the Japanese civilians have never truly left her mind or her conscience, but she keeps fighting, because she knows she has to, that she can't turn back now. "Zero said that people do a lot of things when they're desperate, and at that time, we were so desperate we were willing to risk anything. Not that it's an excuse. Anyway, I don't blame him for doing what he felt he had to do. Especially when he feared for Nunnally. Besides, if his power works the way he says, he could have actually hurt me using it, and he didn't."

"No, he wouldn't. He's very careful with it."

There's something in his voice that makes realization dawn inside Kallen. "You sound like you're talking from experience."

Rolo smiles, a strange, twisted thing. It's fond, but also a little bitter. "Kallen, let's not pretend. Knowing what I can do, knowing how long I was with them, I think you can draw your own conclusions about what my purpose was at one time. So my instinct is to do certain things, things big brother wouldn't approve of. The brainwashing is gone... mostly and I'm getting better, but
sometimes, I kneejerk. So he put a command on me. I don't really know what it is, but it's to keep me from hurting anyone if I lose my temper."

"Like today, with Rakshata."

Rolo nods. "I could have never pushed the trigger, on her, or even on C.C. when she told me to, not until big brother gave me the go ahead." He rubs his chest lightly. "Of course, there's also the fact that what I can do comes at a price and he doesn't want me to endanger myself while using it. I've done so in the past and he wants to protect me, even from myself."

Kallen wants to ask what that price is, but something tells her it would be too invasive. Besides, Rolo is not the most important one in this equation. "And who protects Lelouch from himself if he keeps doing all that?"

"See, Kallen. Now you're getting it."

The conversation dies after that. Kallen half-wishes she never started it to begin with, because it just makes her more anxious about Lelouch's well-being.

It's just as well that the drive doesn't last for much longer and they soon reach Ashford. The Student Council is already waiting outside the school gates when she arrives. She jumps out of the driver seat. "Hey. Zero sent me to take you to the SAZ. Get inside everyone."

Everyone gapes at her. "Kallen?" Rivalz screeches. "You're a Black Knight?"

Could he possibly be louder and more obnoxious? "Obviously. Keep your voice down and come on."

"But how is that possible?" Nina asks tremulously, ignoring Kallen's attempt to rush them along. "You're not an Eleven!"

"It's Japanese, not Eleven," she snarls. "And I am Japanese. If you can't deal with that and be respectful, you're staying here. I don't have time for this."

She regrets the words as soon as they come out, since Lelouch didn't give her leave to say such things and his instructions were clear. To bring them all to the SAZ.

Fortunately, Nina doesn't back out. "No, I'll go," she says sheepishly. "Sorry."

After that, no one else asks questions. They all enter the mobile base and find seats. Milly shoots her a concerned look. "We're sorry about this, Kallen. But we really are worried."

Kallen purses her lips and doesn't reply. "Stay here and hold on. It may be a bumpy ride at one point."

She's not resentful enough to drive excessively fast and draw attention, and the streets are full of Black Knights vehicles so one more doesn't count. Still, when she actually approaches the SAZ, she goes through the underground tunnels. Everything is in shutdown now, and the main gates haven't been opened since the assassination attempt.

Rolo doesn't go to see the group at all. He doesn't seem to have much interest in them. Kallen doesn't blame him. She suspects the only reason he's here to begin with is specifically because he knows what to look for when it comes to this mysterious Order and he can protect them should something happen.
As instructed, she drives the mobile base to the ASEC facility. The only people visible upon their arrival are the two ASEC scientists and Princess Euphemia. Suzaku, Lelouch and C.C. are somewhere around here. Lelouch didn't want to alarm the entirety of the Black Knights, not until they actually know what's going on, so they're approaching matters discreetly.

She parks the car in front of the Lancelot and leaves the vehicle. Rolo jumps out after her. "Kallen, Rolo," Euphemia greets her with a smile. "Everything go okay? No sign of anything suspicious?"

Kallen actually appreciates the fact that the princess is trying so hard to help Lelouch. She realizes now that she underestimated Euphemia. She isn't a soldier like them, but at heart, she's a Black Knight, and Kallen respects that.

"There's been nothing, Princess Euphemia," Rolo replies. "The school seems secure and I haven't spotted any other possible assassins."

The transport doors open and slowly, the Student Council members begin to step out. Princess Euphemia is there to greet them. "Hello, everyone. How have you been? Thank you for your concern. We all appreciate you worrying about Suzaku, although it wasn't actually necessary. The injury wasn't serious."

Nina bounds to the princess's side, shaking with enthusiasm, her cheeks red. "Hello, P-Princess Euphemia... I'm not sure you remember me. I'm Nina. Nina Einstein."

The princess giggles slightly. "Of course I remember you. How are you, Nina?"

Nina goes even redder and Kallen understands. No wonder Nina agreed to come here despite it being a location meant primarily for Japanese citizens.

"Thank you for being here to receive us, Princess Euphemia," Milly says politely. "We're honored by your presence."

"Oh, no need to be so formal. And it's not a problem at all. It's always a pleasure to see Suzaku's friends."

"So, this is the SAZ, huh?" Rivalz says, apparently somewhat embarrassed about being received by the princess herself. "It doesn't look like I expected."

"That's because this particular location is a scientific facility meant to store the Lancelot," Lloyd says from his place next to his giant mech.

"Sir Lloyd," Milly says. "Thank you for your help."

"It's not a problem," he replies, waving off her gratitude. "Just following orders."

Cecile Croomy quickly steps in. "Ignore Lloyd. Like the Princess said, we're very happy to see Suzaku's friends. We were actually very relieved to learn he was doing so well at school. I'm glad you welcomed him there."

Despite Cecile's warmth and Euphemia's kindness, the whole atmosphere is pretty awkward—for everyone except Nina who is too focused on Euphemia to realize they haven't actually been invited to go anywhere where they could see Suzaku as they claimed to want. Kallen watches them in silence, waiting for any sign that she may be needed.

Fortunately, they aren't required to force themselves through extra pleasantries for much longer. A side door opens and Lelouch—dressed as Zero—enters the hangars, followed by Suzaku and C.C.
"Apologies for the delay," Lelouch says. "We had a little something to wrap up at HQ."

Upon seeing Zero, several people in the room freeze. Nina goes pale. Rivalz visibly tenses up and sort of tries to take up position between him and Milly. It's kind of cute, although maybe also a little ungrateful, because if not for Zero and the Black Knights, Milly, Shirley and Nina would have likely died at the hotel.

Milly doesn't seem concerned. She eyes Zero's blank mask with keen eyes, and she suddenly no longer looks like the carefree Student Council president Kallen remembers. But it's Shirley who makes her move first.

She shoots forward, rushing toward Zero.

What happens next is very strange. Kallen blinks, and the next thing she knows, Rolo is holding Shirley down, pinning her to the floor. Suzaku is in front of them, blocking their view of Lelouch.

"Rolo," Zero says. "I don't think that will be necessary. Let her go."

"Sorry, big brother," Rolo says in a disgruntled voice. "If you're sure."

"Positive," C.C. replies in his stead. She seems to have moved slightly from her previous position. When did that happen?

Rolo gets off Shirley and Suzaku steps up to them, offering her his hand. "Shirley, don't do that. Today is really not a good day to launch yourself at him. Although I understand the impulse, we're still a little on the edge here."

Shirley takes his hand shakily. She doesn't seem to begrudge Rolo for his actions and shoots both him and Suzaku a smile. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"W-What just happened," Rivalz stammers. "I don't understand. Shirley... What... Do you know Zero?"

"I suppose you could say that."

Lelouch reaches for his mask and takes it off. Rivalz gapes at the sight and Nina staggers back, her eyes wide. Shirley shows no such apprehension. "Oh, Lulu. I'm so happy to see you. We missed you so much."

Milly just huffs. "I knew it! I absolutely knew it."

"Yes, Pres, I'm aware," Lelouch grumbles. "And thank you, Shirley. I missed everyone at Ashford too.

"Anyway, we should take this conversation somewhere more comfortable and more private. Everyone, back on the transport."

Kallen half expects them to protest, but nobody does. Then again, the mobile base boasts far more comforts than the largely sterile and economic space of the ASEEC. They couldn't have missed it.

The members of the Student Council, together with Euphemia, Lelouch, Kallen and Suzaku enter the vehicle. Rolo remains outside, probably a good thing, given the little incident with Shirley. As soon as they're inside, Lelouch addresses Milly again.

"You shouldn't have called Lloyd, Milly. You know better. It's much too risky for you to be here."
"I know, but Shirley was in a panic, and quite frankly, you've been so curt and brief in your emails. I was so worried after what happened in Pendragon, and even if I wasn't actually sure you were Zero, I had to do something."

Kallen blinks. Right. Somehow, it never occurred to her, and probably to any of the others that Lelouch lost a lot of siblings in the Pendragon explosion.

He may not have been close to all of them, but still, they're his blood, and judging by Princess Euphemia and Nunnally, they couldn't have all been like Clovis.

It really is just one thing after the other.

"I'm fine, Milly," Lelouch says, sitting down on the same couch he usually occupied during the time they spent here. "I'm handling it. I have friends and family here to help me."

"Oh... Is Nunna here then?" Shirley asks.

"No, that would be too risky," C.C. replies in Lelouch's stead. "He meant other family."

Kallen thinks Lelouch may have been referring to Euphemia and Rolo, since they're the ones who are actually his siblings, but C.C. does not seem inclined to give that explanation. Kallen wonders if perhaps the rest of the Council Student members are unaware of Lelouch's identity as a prince. Either way, if anyone is confused by the flow of the conversation, they're promptly distracted when C.C. plops herself next to Lelouch on the couch and practically drapes herself over his lap. "You know, he, Suzaku and I are practically married."

That was news to Kallen. Judging by Suzaku's gobsmacked expression and Lelouch's wide eyes, they probably were not consulted on this either.

"Ehhhhhh?" Rivalz screeches, his eyes comically wide.

"Married?" Shirley repeats weakly. "But..."

Nina looks between the three of them, her face very red. Maybe she doesn't understand how their relationship works. It's probably the first time Kallen has empathized with Nina even a little.

Suzaku recovers first. "I suppose that's a pretty good description, actually," he says.

Lelouch lets out a long sigh, passing a hand through C.C.'s hair in a gentle caress. "Technically, it's more like... a long engagement," Lelouch says. "We don't have time for an actual ceremony now. But I guess maybe... It will happen. One day. Hopefully."

Milly squeals. "Oh, who needs official ceremonies! You're married in your hearts, right? I love it! Although you need to make the introductions. I don't believe any of us have met your... wife-to-be."

Lelouch grumbles and his visible exasperation with Milly reminds Kallen of their days at Ashford. It's strange to see here, in the mobile base of the Black Knights. "Right. Pres, Shirley, Rivalz, Nina, this is C.C. C.C., you know everyone."

C.C. nods in slight disinterest, still clinging to Lelouch's shoulders. Maybe this is her way to express her general disapproval with their presence. At least she's not the only one who is frustrated with the interference of the Ashford Student Council.

"When did this even happen?" Rivalz asks. "I had no idea you were even dating Suzaku."
Kallen feels like Rivalz's priorities may be out of whack and he should be focusing more on the fact that his friend is Zero. But maybe that hasn't fully processed yet and he's focusing on something he can actually understand.

"Suzaku and I are childhood friends, Rivalz, you know that. Us... dating is more recent, obviously."

"It was actually C.C. who made us realize how we felt about each other," Suzaku points out. "We were still sort of stuck in the best friends phase before she stepped in."


"And nobody... Nobody has a problem with it?" Nina asks. Like Rivalz, she seems to be focusing on this, rather than the Zero thing.

"We were a little shocked, at first," Kallen replies, "but in the end, it didn't matter. C.C. and Suzaku are good for Lelouch and that's what counts."

"I'm surprised you can even keep up with two lovers," Milly teases Lelouch, "what with you skipping PE class all the time."

"I've been exercising," Lelouch admits sulkily.

"What? Really?"

"Mhmm. "C.C. sort of manhandles Lelouch through his clothes. "You can't see it because of all these ridiculous ruffles he wears, but he actually has abs now."

Lelouch goes very red. "C.C.!"

C.C. cackles and Suzaku snickers a little. "It's not like it's not true." He somehow makes his way through the room and sits on Lelouch's other side."Come on, Lelouch. Be proud of your accomplishment."

It's a light-hearted conversation, obviously relaxed, but at the same time, it's clear that Suzaku and C.C. are claiming ownership. Thinking back, Kallen has actually noticed it before. And she can't begrudge them for it either, because she's feeling possessive too. Lelouch may not be her romantic partner, but she is still his Q1 and special in a way these people will never be.

"It's actually kind of funny," she says. "A lot of Black Knights kept talking about sneaking into his gym sessions. I kept thinking about the way he was at Ashford. If only they'd known, eh?"

"So you knew Lulu was Zero?" Shirley asks her. Her behavior actually confuses Kallen. Lelouch has told them that he used his ability to wipe her traumatic memories, but she clearly still remembers something and she knew Lelouch was Zero before coming here.

Still feeling a bit wary, Kallen can't help but be a little snappish in her answer. "Oh, sure. I've known for a while. I'm Zero's Q1."

"Q1? What does that mean?"

"It's complicated to explain and some of it is confidential," Lelouch says, "but it basically means she's one of my most important Black Knights. Probably the most important one, after Suzaku, C.C. and Rolo."

The words fill Kallen with pride. Even if she's 'after' someone, the people in question are practically
his family. She's happy that he's gone from distrusting her to putting so much faith in her loyalty.

Shirley's reaction to their explanation surprises her. "Oh. I'm... I'm glad that you have people you trust and to protect you..."

She sounds a little lost, and Lelouch obviously notices. "Shirley, is everything all right?"

Shirley is shaking now, and is very clearly not all right. "Lulu... I'm sorry," she says. "I realize that... Well, we intruded and maybe we shouldn't have come. But... It was pretty much my fault. I heard the thing on TV, and I was so afraid... I was afraid they'd done something to me too to maybe harm you."

The whole story comes out in fractured sentences. Shirley confesses that she has a blank in her memory that alarms her, but she discovered a lost page from her diary on which it was stated that Lelouch was Zero.

Lelouch stays silent as she explains, and nobody else seems to know what to believe. As for Kallen... She can see now why Lelouch was so pained earlier when he spoke about Shirley and about his power being risky and not something he liked to use on loved ones.

"Listen, Shirley," Lelouch finally says. "You're not a danger to me or to anyone at the academy. It's a long and complicated story, but you don't have to worry. You're right in that something like this did happen before, which is why you don't remember, but right now, the person who targeted you is dead." He squeezes her hand. "For what it's worth, Shirley, I am very sorry for what happened at Narita, with your father. It was never my intention. Believe me, I know what it's like to lose a parent. I won't ask for your forgiveness..."

"No, Lulu... It's okay. I've already forgiven you. I know you and I understand that... If you did what you did... You must be fighting for something right." She takes a deep breath, like she's bracing herself for something difficult. "So I wanted to ask. Is there anything we can do to help? I mean, with what you're doing?"

"Not right now. I don't want you involved in the bloodshed. That's why I'm doing all this you know. To bring about a better, peaceful world. It will take some time and it's not something you can help me with. But... things won't always be like this."

Princess Euphemia smiles at them. "Peace will come, and when that happens, we'll need people we can trust to help rebuild. I'm sure you can contribute then."

"Well, you know you can rely on me if you ever need an extra voice or set of eyes in the Britannian aristocracy, Lelouch," Milly says. "And I'm pretty sure the Ashford Foundation can arrange something if you need supplies for the Black Knights. We may not have the influence we once did, but that doesn't mean we can't help at all."

"I've had some ideas too," Nina pipes up shyly, "I mean... On maybe how to stop the war."

"Really, Nina? How do you mean?"

"Well... I've been studying the actual properties of sakuradite and how it works, and it occurred to me that maybe... Maybe we can create an artificial version, something that would keep people from coming after Japan for sakuradite? It would take work, but if it's made in a certain way, I think it may also help encourage clean energy. There's not enough actual sakuradite right now for nations to use it as a replacement for fossil fuels, but if an artificial replacement existed, that wouldn't be a problem. Nuclear power is problematic for many reasons, but I think that, using the molecular structure of
sakuradite as a basis, it's possible to create something that circumvents those problems."

Kallen is shocked. She had no idea that all the work Nina did on her laptop was dedicated to something like this.

Maybe she was too hasty to judge the girl.

"That's brilliant, Nina! What a great idea!" Euphemia exclaims.

"Absolutely," Lelouch adds. "Keep working on it and don't share it with anyone else but the people who are here. It could be dangerous, okay?"

Blushing brightly, Nina nods. "I'll remember."

"We'll all think of something to help you, Lelouch," Rivalz said, pumping his fist in the air. "We'll be Black Knights... in secret. Like Kallen."

There are giggles all around. "All that talk about you being frail..." Milly says. "It was a front, wasn't it? I should have known."

"If it helps, it fooled everyone," Suzaku pipes up, "even me."

"You should talk, Suzaku," Kallen teases him. Knowing what she now knows about him, she has to admit that it was brave of him to stay with the ASEEC even after he remembered the truth, and he did manage his role as a double-agent fairly well.

Suzaku shrugs. "Eh. I'm actually not that good of an actor. I much prefer the straight-forward approach."

"Lelouch is the one with all the brains in our little triad," C.C. says lazily. "Suzaku is the muscle."

"What does that make you then?" Milly asks.

"What kind of question is that, Pres?" Shirley huffs. "She's obviously the heart."

Uh. Okay then. That is really not the way Kallen would ever describe C.C.

"The heart?" C.C. repeats, blinking at her with the same stoic expression. "How so?"

"You've already said so, haven't you, that you made them see what they feel for each other? So clearly, you're the heart."

Lelouch's lips twist into a small smile and he shares a look with Suzaku. "You know, I think you may be right, Shirley."

It's very strange, but as they speak, Kallen's defensiveness fades. Even C.C. stops clinging to Lelouch so tightly, and the barely visible tension in Suzaku's body fades.

That's when Kallen realizes the reason why Lelouch actually brought them here, why he left the Academy, why he was so careful. In their own way, the Student Council members are important too. Maybe not as much as C.C., Suzaku or the Black Knights, but important nevertheless.

Princess Euphemia is right. Not everyone can fight. Not everyone is a soldier. And not everyone can truly know the inner workings of the Black Knights. But that doesn't mean they can't contribute to the cause. That doesn't mean they can't help Lelouch.
Kallen doesn't really understand Shirley and how she can let go of her grief over her father's death, but she doesn't have to. It seems to have lifted a bit of the burden off Lelouch's shoulders, and for that, Kallen is grateful.

The Student Council members don't stay long. Lelouch gets a message, checks his phone and just like that, he's back to being Zero again. "We have to go," he tells the others. "Remember what I said. Stay in the Academy and you'll be safe. Q1, you're to take them back. Report any incidents upon your return. And be careful."

"Understood, Zero."

Like before, Rolo goes with her. Like before, he's mostly silent, focusing on the road. But Kallen feels a little less angry and more hopeful.

They could have lost everything today, but they didn't. Lelouch is still with them. She has to focus on that, and she will be fine.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering how Milly guessed Lelouch was Zero, she simply put the pieces together. She knew he was a prince and not happy with Britannia. He saved Suzaku and then left specifically when the SAZ was about to start. Then, Suzaku showed up, having apparently changed sides. He was there during the meeting with Cornelia before the fight with China and it was televised. And of course, the other smaller bits - the mysterious thing that was stolen, the way he slept in class more etc. Lelouch guessed that she must have figured it out, which was why he wasn't shocked. And yes, I know the others take these revelations well, but at this point, it still hasn't processed 100%. Thus, them focusing on Lelouch's relationship with Suzaku and C.C. rather than him being Zero. I'll probably go back to a POV from them at one point, but not now.
Yay! Thank you everyone for 500 kudos! I'll be honest and say that when I started posting this story, I didn't think it would draw too much attention because the Archive isn't that popular for the anime community. I'm so glad people are enjoying it!

Now! Onwards with the chapter!

The visit of the Student Council members is a welcome break. In part, it's because they now know Milly, Shirley and the others are safe. C.C. managed to look them over, both before their conversation, and during it, when Rolo stopped time, and she's guaranteed that their minds are free from any interference from V.V. And while that is definitely a relief, the visit has also brought a fresh dose of normality that strangely helps.

Sometimes, Suzaku forgets that people outside the Black Knights do care about them. Their lives have become so entangled in world politics that the simplicity of Ashford seems... trivial. But after today, Suzaku desperately wishes he were just another student like the others, and he could rejoin them at the school, with Lelouch and Nunnally. C.C. could always hunt around for pizza while they're at class.

That's not possible, of course. He does know that in their past lifetime, the remaining members of the Student Council mourned Lelouch. It wasn't just Kallen either. He'd actually spotted Milly at Lelouch's crypt in Pendragon a few times, and during Nunnally's few visits to Japan, Rivalz's grief was fairly obvious. Like in the case of the Black Knights, none of them can truly understand, but their kindness soothes him somewhat and it does seem to calm Lelouch too. When they go back to their shared quarters, the atmosphere is a little less strained than earlier.

It's not like Suzaku has forgotten what he almost did earlier. If nothing else, the way the Black Knights chased after him is a clear reminder that they may distrust him now. But still... Maybe, he can cling to this moment and not think about all that, just for a bit.

He ends up leaning against Lelouch's shoulder, absently playing with Arthur while C.C. and Lelouch work on their computers. C.C. is wrapping up the list of the known abilities of Geass users, while Lelouch is setting up something for the medical file the Black Knights apparently want from them. For a while, Suzaku just enjoys the silence, Lelouch's warmth, the knowledge that they're all safe.

But he's never been great with inactivity, and before long, he ends up offering the occasional suggestion for Lelouch, especially for his own file.

He doesn't have any practical experience with torture—thank God for that much, at least—but he is very well trained in various types of combat, has heard far too many stories from the Vampire of Britannia and was the unfortunate recipient of numerous assassination attempts. Not to mention that, despite not actually being a test subject, his time as an Honorary wasn't pleasant.

Lelouch builds his file heavily around mind wipes and torture methods like electrocution and sensory deprivation. He also includes the chest trauma and an eyesight sensitivity, presumably leftover from the experiments. Should the Black Knights ever wonder why Lelouch doesn't have a stab scar, they
can always say it was cosmetically removed before they were sent to Ashford. Since Suzaku has a
greater physical resilience and now, an advanced healing factor, his list contains a lot more physical
injuries, including, among other things, the use of unknown substances meant to leave his body and
mind more vulnerable.

They take a brief look at C.C.'s medical file, then promptly seal it. Unlike theirs, her details are real
and they don't want to read about C.C. being burned alive, repeatedly killed, vivisected and had
organs harvested for experimentation. The only thing they add, upon consulting C.C., is a lingering
problem of sterility. C.C. isn't actually sure if it's a problem she had before, or if it's because of her
code, but it's still something that needs to be noted.

They leave most of her data and Rolo's alone, just making sure the files don't contain anything that
will contradict their story. They also put something together for Jeremiah, since now that the Black
Knights have been informed of V.V.'s existence, Lelouch aims to eventually bring the Knight of
Orange on board.

Finally, they put together a briefer, less elaborate version of the medical files. Lelouch wants to send
the main one to Tohdoh, Diethard and Rakshata, and save the less gruesome one for the others,
should it be necessary. He will probably not give it to them at all. There's no point in taking things to
extremes. It would be problematic if the Black Knights suddenly decided Lelouch wasn't competent
to be a leader because of the damage done to him. Stirring sympathy is all well and good, but they
need to be careful to not take it too far.

Once they finish, C.C. sends off her own document and solemnly declares. "Lelouch. You are
cooking me pizza. Suzaku will help."

"You know, witch, I haven't actually made pizza before," Lelouch half-heartedly protests.

"Nonsense," C.C. tells him. "I'm sure you'll do great."

Lelouch sighs, resigned to obey her, and Suzaku falls in line with him. He's not as good of a cook as
Lelouch, but he's chopped more potatoes than half of his unit and he's always been very good with
his hands. If nothing else, he can help with preparing the ingredients.

Naturally, the witch just curls on a chair with Cheese-kun and watches them work. "You know, you
could help us too," Lelouch mumbles as he works on the batter.

"What would be the fun in that?" C.C. asks, poking the toy's hat. "I prefer to observe."

She also prefers to steal the occasional bite of batter and she keeps getting in their way as they move
around the kitchen, but nobody minds.

They don't talk about anything work-related or involving the Black Knights in any way. And Suzaku
knows that this is actually pretty crazy and irresponsible, that normally, leaders of terrorist
organizations wouldn't randomly take breaks to cook pizza. If Lelouch is doing it now, it's for his
sake, and he's grateful.

He doesn't have the words to say it, so instead, he throws all caution to the wind and starts a flour
battle. They all end up a mess, even dirtier than Lelouch's personal kitchen—which is a minor
miracle really. There's flour, ketchup and batter all over them, but the pizza is in the oven and Suzaku
feels so very alive.

After, they sit on the floor in the middle of the kitchen, curling together in a pile with the witch on
top of them. "I'm sorry," Suzaku whispers to Lelouch. "For attacking you."
Lelouch pokes him in the chest. "Don't be ridiculous, Suzaku. It wasn't your fault."

"I know that. But still, I'm sorry. For this time, and every other time. Before."

He isn't sure he's actually apologized to his emperor. He apologized in front of his grave, but that doesn't count.

"Suzaku... We've all hurt one another a lot." Lelouch clenches his jaw, his eyes flaring bright with decision. "But that's why we're all here now, right? To fix that. And..." His expression turns hazy, almost distant. "As much as it hurts, as much as I hate some of the things that I did, I think now that I wouldn't change them. Because it brought us to this moment."

The concept should be shocking, but after a few moments, Suzaku realizes Lelouch has a point. Suzaku will always regret some of the things he's done, with the Requiem being at the top of the list. He will never forget the scent of Lelouch's blood as he stabbed his emperor clean through the chest.

But... The person he was before, at this point in his past lifetime... He wasn't Lelouch's knight then. He is now, and he's proud of it. Lelouch is happy now in a way he never was before. His fire is back. His smiles are real. He believes. He has a better, more honest relationship with Nunnally. And C.C.... C.C. is no longer the person who used Lelouch like a tool. She no longer wants to die.

Sure, it would have been better if they'd managed to bond like this the first time around, but since that wasn't possible, this option is the best. Yes, Lelouch is right. Everything they did before was worth it, for the sake of what they have now.

Despite this realization, though, Suzaku can't help but be wary. "Yes, but... What if... What if I attack you again... So many things have been happening... Like before."

"You mean Rolo attacking Shirley. The explosion in Pendragon. Clara Lanfranc."

Suzaku nods. Of course Lelouch couldn't have missed it, couldn't have missed the similarities between what is happening in this timeline and what happened before.

"Suzaku, I don't believe in fate. If I did, I never would have told God to not stop the march of time."

"And I wouldn't have asked the Dimensional Supervisor to turn it back," C.C. says. "The most important thing right now is not that you attacked Lelouch in the past. It's that you didn't actually do it today. You beat it. You beat her. We're better now, better than we were."

"Some things won't change, that's true. Life is about a series of choices, and other people may make the same ones they did before. We can't affect everything. But we've already made a difference. You know, Rolo didn't make use of Lelouch's Geass to not attack Shirley. He just did it naturally."

Suzaku pretty much guessed that, since Rolo didn't even pull his knife on Shirley. Lelouch seems to have been aware of it too. But then, he never would have sent Rolo with Kallen if he didn't have at least some faith in his little brother.

"And really..." Lelouch says. "Who would have ever said C.C. is 'the heart' of our little trio?"

"Shirley, apparently. But maybe we can share," Suzaku teases them with a smile. "These days, you're not as scrawny as you used to be and I'm not that much of an idiot, so it's not so clear cut."

C.C. rolls her eyes at them. "You're always going to be idiots. Both of you."

Suzaku would be insulted if the comment came from anyone but C.C. He knows she means it
They can't say words like "I love you" as easy as Milly and Shirley, but they don't have to. This works for them.

They drag themselves off the floor and stumble into the shower. The hot water feels nice on their tired bodies, but predictably, the bath soon turns into far more. Feeling C.C.'s breasts against his chest, Lelouch's mouth against his neck, their hands on him... It's a gift.

Suzaku genuinely doesn't know what he's done to deserve this, but he embraces it wholeheartedly.

Two orgasms later, they stumble out of the bath, just in time to rescue their pizza. They're in the middle of having dinner when a knock sounds at the door.

Suzaku gets up and opens it. Lelouch doesn't bother to put on his mask. Anyone who would come here at this hour would have already seen his face.

Their guests turn out to be Sugiyama and Inoue, and they have a cart with a few covered plates. "Hi," Inoue says. "I hope we're not interrupting anything. We wanted to bring you some dinner. We thought that maybe you haven't eaten."

"Oh," Suzaku says, somewhat befuddled by their gesture. "That's nice. You didn't have to. We actually... cooked."

"The more pizza the merrier," C.C. calls out from the living room. "Come on in."

Suzaku steps aside and the two Black Knights enter the room, pushing along their cart. They seem a bit uncertain, and Suzaku doesn't blame them. It's the first time they've been here when Lelouch actually has his mask off, and they're still getting used to seeing his face.

"We can trade," C.C. says. "I'm curious whose pizza is better."

"I didn't know you could cook," Sugiyama comments as he starts unloading the plates.

C.C. eyes him balefully, as if offended at the implication that she was the one to do the cooking. It's probably unreasonable, since Suzaku is pretty sure Sugiyama is the one who made the pizza they brought to begin with.

"Lelouch was actually the chef," he says before C.C. can do anything regrettable. "I just helped and C.C... offered suggestions."

"Zero can cook?" Inoue asks.

"He's excellent at it," Suzaku replies. "Too bad he doesn't have more time to do it. He made an exception today. For... therapeutic purposes."

That would have probably made things awkward, since it was a reminder of every bad event that happened today. But C.C. has already directed her attention to the pizza, so Sugiyama and Inoue do the same. "This is... really good," Inoue says as she takes a bite.

"It's actually the first time I ever made pizza," Lelouch admits. "I'm pretty surprised it turned out... edible. Or at least to C.C.'s standards."

"Mmm. I'm sure you can practice more when you have the time."

Lelouch shakes his head, taking a slice from one of the plates for himself then pushing the rest in
C.C.'s direction. He knows she and Suzaku need more food than him.

When he's done, he wipes his hands off the crumbs, looking as regal and elegant as always. "Did you get the chance to look over the information C.C. sent?" he asks the two Black Knights.

Inoue fidgets in discomfort. "Yes. We went over it. I won't lie, it's pretty intimidating."

"I realize that, Inoue. It's part of the reason why I wanted to be honest with you." He purses his lips. "In any case, as you can probably imagine, I'm making preparations for our new operation as we speak. Once I receive some extra information I'm waiting for, we'll be making our move against V.V. In the meantime, you should go get some rest. It's been a long day."

"Of course, Zero."

Sugiyama coughs lightly. "Before we go... There was... actually something else. Diethard said he was going to talk to you, but while we're here... If we could maybe ask..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"We realize it's a little intrusive," Inoue says, "but we're concerned about any lingering injuries that may have persisted due to your... treatment at Britannia's hands. We were hoping you could provide a file with... some details?"

She flinches as she finishes the phrase. Obviously, she's not comfortable at all with asking the question.

Lelouch just nods, his face set in a calm expression that could mean anything at all. "Yes, of course. We'll work on that tonight."

"You don't have to... I mean... Maybe... Not now?"

"We'll be fine," C.C. tells him calmly. "It's not like typing a document about what happened can be more unpleasant than actually living through it."

"Besides, it's a good idea to stay busy while we wait for news," Suzaku adds. "Don't worry so much. We can handle it."

Inoue stares at him. Suzaku knows what they're thinking. How can he even be upright when he was just the recipient of a mental attack that almost made him kill Lelouch?

The thing is... In a twisted way, this is familiar territory for Suzaku. He remembers very well how it felt like to actually hurt his emperor.

Back then, the only refuge he had was the mask and his emperor's last wishes, when he used Zero's sword to both punish himself and feel Lelouch closer. But C.C.’s plan changed that, and they have a new chance. He refuses to waste it. And like his lovers said, it's not what he almost did that counts—it's the fact that he didn't do it.

He will not break. He must remain his emperor's sword, and he will not allow himself to crack, not now, not ever.

The pendant around his neck is a promise. The three of them have a future, and for that future, he will fight.

Besides, this new operation of Lelouch’s sounds promising. Lelouch always did come up with the
best ideas while he was cooking.

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Late that night, Tohdoh receives an email from Zero.

Tohdoh,

As per the Black Knights' request, I have prepared medical files for all the people involved in the matter we discussed. Attached, please find the documents in question.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am also sending you additional data I acquired during my search for Rolo. This is data from a secondary server, so it does not contain any details of the experiments done on me and Suzaku, but that doesn't mean it is pleasant.

The files tagged as Code R are all focused on C.C. The files tagged as RH are Rolo's.

You will notice also notice a file named Project Orange. It may be wiser to view that one than anything from the others. The subject matter is Jeremiah Gottwald. With everything that's been happening, I didn't get the chance to mention him too, but he was also a target of the experimentation. He was very loyal to my mother and attempted to investigate her murder, thus drawing V.V.'s attention. The consequences were most unfortunate for him. The experimentation gave him a level of immunity to all outside Geasses, but it also did a great deal of physical damage.

Orange is currently acting as my sister's guard and my agent in special missions. You probably noticed him in the video with Tianzi's capture and he will be involved in dealing with V.V. in the future. We'll talk more about it as a group, in the morning.

This content is for your eyes only. I will also send everything to Rakshata and Diethard. The others will only be notified of our enduring injuries. There is no reason to upset them further.

Should you arrive sooner than me on deck, you have my authorization to notify Kaguya about these developments.

Zero

As Zero stated, there are several archives attached to the email, and they contain a group of files. Some are documents. Other are videos.

He doesn't go to the Project Orange file. Instead, he picks the Code R one. Almost immediately, he wishes he hadn't.

He is unable to watch the entirety of it. He throws up halfway through it, comes back to the computer and reads through the Word documents. It doesn't help at all.

It was indeed C.C. on the video. She was the one to suffer through such monstrous acts. And while he feels grief for her, one of the attached documents details the acts that Suzaku went through, and it's all too easy to imagine him in her place.

A few hours later, when Chiba knocks at his door, he lets her in. When she gives him a concerned
look and offers him comfort, he doesn’t turn her away.

Tomorrow, he will be capable to follow Zero’s orders like before. But tonight, his strength has left him.

How was this possible? How could he have failed so badly?
Heya! Today's chapter is a bit shorter, but I had it done, so I figured I should post it. Hope you like it! As always, my thanks to everyone who has kudos-ed and commented. You guys are awesome.

Morning finds Diethard in an excited mood, barely managing to contain his enthusiasm. Every other Black Knight looks tired and glum, but Diethard is extremely pleased at these developments. He knows for a fact that Zero is not as scrupulous with the use of his ability as he is trying to appear, and he is secretly enjoying watching Zero weave his story around the Black Knights.

The strangest thing is that even he doesn't know what part is the truth and what part is the lie. Some of it is definitely genuine, as evidenced by C.C.’s demonstration. But Diethard is well experienced in the manipulation of public opinion and is aware that even that part was carefully calculated. The shock value of her death made the Black Knights dismiss Zero's own ability in a way they wouldn't normally have.

He suspects that at least some portion of Zero's personal history is completely fabricated, as is Suzaku Kururugi's. There are bits and pieces that don't perfectly fit there, portions that were vague and glossed over. But he's never going to point it out. Watching the chaos is far too beautiful. It's a dream come true.

Not to mention that, while he may not have all the information, he does know more than the rest of the Black Knights. The fact that Zero trusts him means a lot, and Diethard aims to gain more of that trust, to fully understand the man who is sure to shape the world in his image.

Things only get better from there.

When they meet early that morning, Tohdoh seems particularly stony faced. He pulls Kaguya aside, presumably to explain. Since she spent most of yesterday making sure matters with the Chinese Federation didn't fall apart, she missed Zero's big announcement, and when she was here, no one knew how to approach her about it. Tohdoh seems to have finally decided to change that.

Once they finish the conversation, the normally upbeat girl is ashen-faced and quiet.

Zero emerges from his quarters shortly after that. Weirdly, he is not dressed as Zero at all. Instead, he is wearing plain clothes, a white jacket and a white pair of pants that make him look so very young. C.C. is back in the white straightjacket that used to be her go-to garb and Kururugi is wearing one of his older, white Lancelot devicer outfits. Rolo's clothes match those of his brother.

Everyone blinks at them in confusion. Kaguya is particularly shocked. "Zero?"

"Yes, Kaguya. It's me. I trust Tohdoh has explained a bit of what's been going on?"

"Yes, Zero. I've been informed. But..."
"You're confused on why I'm dressed like this. It's because we will be mounting an operation against V.V. For this purpose, Suzaku, C.C., Rolo and I will be going undercover in their headquarters. These clothes will help us blend in a little better."

Chaos explodes. "But Zero, that's way too risky!"

"You can't go there alone!"

"Take us with you!"

Zero lifts a hand. Somehow, he's still as imposing in the plain clothes as he was in the ornate Zero suit.

"Let me finish. At this time, we believe V.V. is not in his headquarters, which is an advantage we can use. He will have his most active agents with him while he seeks out Charles zi Britannia's assassin, and that leaves his base vulnerable. As for the reasons of this approach... It's quite simple. V.V. is not known for his openness toward his staff. Most of the members of the Order are completely cut off from outside information and won't know we've defected or that I've become a target. We can simply walk in. Of course, there will be security, but we're confident we can handle it using our abilities.

"We will, of course, take a small military escort with us. However, we don't want to draw V.V.'s attention to our motions and bursting in would cause unnecessary bloodshed, so everyone other than us will stand by."

"Zero..." Tohdoh says. "With respect, perhaps it would be best if..."

"Tohdoh-sensei," Suzaku cuts him off, "this is for us too. We need to face this."

"Also, you're not really equipped to handle the Order," C.C. continues. "Any one of them can turn you against Lelouch and we can't afford the distraction."

It's a blunt statement, but it's also a fact, and they all know it.

Diethard mourns the fact that he will not be able to join them, but unfortunately, he is an intelligence agent, not a soldier, and his role will be different.

Zero confirms this when he turns toward him. "Diethard, we will need to put together a little something to hide our absence. V.V. may expect us to strike in response to his attack. I will speak to Cornelia to make some arrangements and I'll leave you with a registered speech to make it seem like I'm actually here. Kaguya, you'll have to handle administrative matters while I'm absent. Coordinate with Euphie. The absolute first priority is to make it clear that we are still present."

"We understand, Zero," Kaguya says with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Good luck."

"He doesn't need luck, Kaguya," Kururugi says. "He has me."

There's something dark and vengeful in his words, and a shadow in his eyes that didn't seem there before. In fact, looking at Kururugi now... It's strange, but in spite of his white clothes, he looks scarier than before.

Maybe in the past, Kururugi was just doing a better job at hiding his true nature, or maybe he was more affected by the incident than any of them would like to think, but the attack has obviously not left him unscathed.
If Diethard were a compassionate man, he would feel pity for Zero's enemies and everyone who stands in his path. Kururugi will undoubtedly destroy them in a very bloody way, just like he did with the would-be assassin from the day before.

But Diethard isn't a compassionate man, so instead, he congratulates himself for his decision to join Zero and goes on to fulfill his emperor's orders. This is going very well indeed.

****

The entrance to Victor zi Britannia's headquarters is located in the Chinese Federation, in a desert area that makes it very difficult for them to approach using knightmares. Urabe doesn't think he's ever been more apprehensive about an operation, not even when Japan was attacked by Britannian knightmares.

Machines, he can understand. Human experimentation? It's beyond his power of comprehension, and it nauseates him to think Zero suffered through such treatment.

It doesn't help that the news has hit Tohdoh hard. Chiba is visibly worried about him. She's confessed that she believes Zero may have told Tohdoh more than he told them, perhaps due to Inoue and Sugiyama's request for information, and these new revelations may have been bad.

The thought doesn't encourage Urabe.

As planned, they travel there using a smaller transport for knightmares, but bring an extra one, presumably for prisoners they will retrieve. Once they arrive, they meet with a man in a bright orange mask, the same person in the Tianzi's video. "Orange," Zero greets him. "Any sign of V.V.??"

"There's been nothing," the man reports. "It would appear that he is absent."

"Good." He shoots the rest of them a look. "We'll have to leave the introductions for later. Stand by and wait for instructions. This will probably take a while, but keep an eye out."

"We understand, Zero."

The main entrance of the compound is visible in the desert, but Zero, Kururugi, C.C., Rolo and the mysterious Orange enter through an underground supply line. "We used to work here on occasion," Kururugi comments before he disappears inside. "It hasn't changed a bit."

"It never does," C.C. replies.

And just like that, they're gone. Urabe is left with nothing to do but wait in his machine. "I feel so helpless," Asahina says in the coms. "We should be there with them."

"No," Tohdoh replies. "C.C. is right. We'd just get in the way. We have to follow orders and trust that they know what they're doing."

Time passes. The Black Knights grow increasingly nervous, but mercifully, Zero thinks to check in on occasion. Still, Urabe is relieved when he actually sees motion ahead.

It appears that Zero was right to have them watch the exits because some of the members of V.V.'s group have escaped. He immediately contacts Zero.

"Zero, there's a group making their way through the tunnel."

"What are they wearing?" Zero asks.
Urabe describes their clothing. It looks like a doctor outfit, similar to what Lloyd Asplund tends to wear.

"Take them out," Zero says. "They're here willingly."

None of them hesitate. Anyone involved in something so monstrous deserves to die.

Honestly, Urabe doesn't even get to do much, because Kallen pretty much mows them all down before he can step in.

"Good job," Zero tells them after they report in. "We're still not done here. We'll let you know when it's clear."

The frustrating wait resumes. Finally, about four hours after the operation has started, C.C. calls them in. "We've finished. You can come."

The Black Knights enter the compound through the same tunnels their leader used before. The place is empty, but Urabe presumes it must have been well guarded before Zero passed through here.

He spots occasional bodies, usually people dressed the same way as the ones who attempted to make their escape. Others wear a different kind of uniform. Security, perhaps? A lot of them appear to be wearing white, which explains Zero choice of clothing today.

The tunnels lead to something to a massive underground city. Structures that look like apartment blocks are lined up on the side of the streets. It's all the more startling because of the purplish illumination. He can't tell where it's coming from at all.

Zero is waiting for them in the main plaza of the city. He, Suzaku and Rolo are surrounded by a group of quiet children. Rolo is currently kneeling in their midst and talking to them in a low voice. He appears to be... showing them how to make an origami?

They all jolt when the knightmares approach. A child pulls on Zero's jacket. Zero picks her up without comment and shoots her a quick smile.

Urabe stops his knightmare a good distance away from the group. There's no reason to scare the children unnecessarily.

They all leave the machines and approach their waiting leader, at which point Urabe notices some other people in the area, with very different demeanors. C.C. is keeping a close eye on several people about Zero's age. A smaller group is standing to the side, staring blankly at the wall. Zero must have used his Geass on them in a more... decisive manner. Urabe doesn't blame him in the least bit.

Zero focuses on the children and gives them a brief introduction. "Everyone, these are the Black Knights. Don't worry. They won't hurt you. They're here to help you and keep you safe."

The children eye them with some suspicion, but nod. "If you say so, big brother Lelouch."

"Come on," C.C. says. "Time to go. V.V. will have probably figured out what we've done by now. We need to go back to Japan."

The children cluster around her and the three young men they see as their siblings. Urabe and the others go back to their knightmares and escort them outside.

As they exit the compound, they once again meet with Orange. "Everything is ready, My Liege."
"Excellent. Blow it up."

Behind them, the structures explodes with a resounding bang. And Urabe may not have been the one to press the button, but it still feels tremendously satisfying to watch.

Chapter End Notes

If you're confused about what Lelouch did, don't worry. It'll be explained next chapter.
Truth, Lies and Kisses

Chapter Notes

As promised, here is the update! I got distracted by the new story, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten about this one! Do not worry. I definitely want to get it done and not leave it as a WIP like far too many of my works. *sheepish look.

Anyway, as always, my thanks to everyone who commented and kudosed! You guys rock and really feed the muse!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Black Knights' return to Japan is uneventful. C.C., Suzaku, Lelouch and Rolo take the second transport, the one with the children, leaving the Black Knights in the other. It's for two reasons. Despite Lelouch's Geass, the kids are still scared by their changed environment and need to be distracted. Also, it's always nice to not have to endure the company of other people.

Building a genuine rapport with the kids is actually not that difficult. Rolo is personally familiar with them. They do have a relationship with him, and despite him not feeling any particular affection for them, he knows how to deal with them. C.C. is similar. She's seen children raised at the Order before, and she understands them. She's even raised Mao. Suzaku and Lelouch appear to draw on their experience with Nunnally, and the Geass fills in for the familiarity they don't have.

Once the children fall asleep, C.C. leaves Rolo in charge of watching them and pulls Lelouch and Suzaku aside, into the cockpit. The aircraft is on autopilot, but the space here is limited and she needs the privacy.

They all change into different clothes, which is a huge relief, because the straightjacket no longer feels right for C.C. Suzaku visibly feels better once he's back in his Knight of Zero garb and matching Lelouch's Zero suit.

Still, Lelouch looks a little tired, so Suzaku brushes his fingers over his cheek. All signs of fatigue immediately fade away.

"Thanks," Lelouch says. "Looks like I'm not as fit as you both claim."

Suzaku snorts. "You've barely slept and you've been using your Geass like crazy all day. Of course you're tired."

"Well, the important thing is that it worked."

C.C. can't help but offer him a little smile. "And now, you have an incipient army, all very willing to serve you and ready to trust you. Go you."

"Better me than V.V," Lelouch points out. "Besides, last time I killed them. This is a preferrable option, I think."

"Also, the Black Knights absolutely adore you for being kind to children," Suzaku drawls. "That was a nice touch."

"It's not like it was difficult. I just had to make them see us like they do Rolo. The feeling was
already there."

Of course, he also had to make sure the children said nothing about the true purposes and inner workings of the Geass Order, but that was always going to happen. It was part of the reason why they'd needed to go to the Directorate alone to begin with, to make sure none of the Black Knights learned anything that would make them dig a little deeper into the story Lelouch made up.

"V.V. will retaliate," C.C. warns Lelouch.

"Of course he will. But we already knew that. It's like chess, C.C. He's made his move. I've made mine. He tried to take one of my pieces. He failed. I didn't."

"You know, sometimes, I feel like I should be offended that I'm still a chess piece," Suzaku offers.

"At least you have a place on the chess board. Mine is taken by Kallen. To be fair, Lelouch is technically a chess piece too, so there's that."

Lelouch groans. "Ganging up on me again? Give me a break, okay? It's a metaphor."

"Mhmm. Sure it is."

Their arrival at the SAZ is met with much relief. Euphemia and Kaguya have both been warned about the imminent presence of two dozen traumatized children, so arrangements for their housing have already been made. Rolo still goes with them, since the last thing Lelouch needs is to have the children run amok inside the SAZ in search of their new big brothers, especially when Lelouch himself is needed elsewhere.

The whole group reconvenes in the Black Knights part of the SAZ, where Kaguya and Diethard have been holding down the fort.

"Any updates on the V.V. front?"

"There's been nothing, Zero," Diethard reports. "We've been monitoring communications from Europia and Euro-Britannia like you said and keeping in contact with Princess Cornelia, but it's been quiet."

"I'm pretty sure that's not a good thing," Suzaku mumbles.

C.C. agrees. She hasn't felt any disturbances in the world of C, but that doesn't mean V.V. isn't planning anything. She can't afford to underestimate him, not now, not after the incident with Clara Lanfranc.

She knows Lelouch realizes this too, but he hides his apprehension well. He sets the matter aside and chooses to focus on the issue of the children.

"You're probably wondering where we stand with regard to our new... guests," he says.

"Did you manage to break through their brainwashing, Zero?" Senba asks.

Lelouch shakes his head. "Of course not. That's not so easy and I'm not omnipotent. It's just that the children are familiar with us and they haven't been through the same number of procedures. The others... Most are beyond our help. I locked their abilities so they won't be a danger to us. We'll find a place for them until they can receive appropriate medical treatment. Of course... I was not so kind with those who were here willingly."
"What will you do with them, Zero?" Kallen inquires.

"I'm sure I can think of something. They're scientists. I may have them act as Rakshata's assistants at a later date."

Chiba stares at him in disbelief. "And they'll just do that, without question?"

"Yes, of course. That's how it works. They don't need another prison. They're already imprisoned in their own minds."

Pointing this out is a calculated risk on Lelouch's part, but acting like he never used the Geass was never an option. He's still a military leader and someone with a traumatic past with a great power at his fingertips. Such a thing would not be believable. It's better to show the Black Knights some use of the Geass, in a controlled way they can grasp, making them further appreciate the fact that he didn't use it on them.

It is actually working far better than C.C. herself expected. Nobody seems to care much about the fact that Lelouch suspended the consciousness of the individuals in question. If they are disturbed by the concept, they easily shrug it off, too angered about the actions of the Order to dwell on the morality of Lelouch's usage of Geass. Most importantly, they genuinely think that he would never do it to them.

Amusingly enough, it's true. It was true in the past lifetime too, but at the time, they didn't see it. C.C. still cannot understand how they didn't realize they never could have betrayed Lelouch had he used his Geass on them. She supposes it's beside the point now.

Lelouch sits down on the couch and pulls out his tablet. C.C. plops down next to him and leans against his shoulder. Suzaku sits by her side, and C.C. takes his hand. Their contract has given her a link to Suzaku she didn't have before, and she knows he needs the contact.

Suzaku has never been to the Directorate before, but some of the Geass users did try to attack him and he's still recovering after being possessed by Clara. On one hand, fighting back did help him take out some of his aggression, but on the other, it's left him a little... restless, sort of like he used to be after Nunnally's assassination attempts.

After that, the meeting descends into boring talk. Lelouch reviews the general state of affairs in Japan. The martial law has caused some unrest, especially among Britannian citizens. However, Cornelia's cooperation has helped, and mostly, people are too intimidated by the show of force during the battle with the Chinese Federation to do anything.

Kaguya brings up the fact that since the borders of Japan are now closed, trade will become a problem, so they have to worry about the stock of some products that can only be imported. C.C. secretly thinks the comment is merely her trying to keep busy so that she won't have to think about more recent, earth-shattering revelations.

Tamaki is finally the one to bring up the topic, the proverbial elephant in the room. "Zero... We were wondering... About the thing Sugiyama and Inoue mentioned..."

His uncharacteristically hesitant behavior amuses C.C. Tamaki has never been one for tact, and he seems to not know how to handle this entire situation.

Lelouch intervenes before Tamaki can stumble over his own words further. "I've already provided Rakshata with a file. She's aware of the details."

"What? Really? You never said..."
"It's a medical file," Rakshata cuts him off. "It's confidential. Of course I can't discuss it."

Kallen immediately starts to protest. "But wasn't that the whole point..."

"Other than my chest pains, I have a mild eyesight problem which I'm handling through contacts. Rolo suffers from arrhythmia, and C.C. is sterile. Other than that, we may all get migraines or flashbacks due to past... incidents, but physically, we're fine. There's no need to go into further detail."

The Black Knights exchange uncomfortable looks. They can't have missed the 'physically' part, or the fact that Lelouch excluded Suzaku from the explanation. C.C. is actually glad for that. Suzaku's lingering issues are related to mental health, and quite frankly, despite the fact that the Black Knights appear to have reacted well to these new revelations, delving into that topic would feel... wrong.

Tohdoh's dark expression suggests that he's likely to approach them at one point in the near future, but for the moment, he seems to understand Lelouch's point of view. "Zero is right. The medical staff is aware of the possible issues. It's enough."

"We do appreciate the concern," Lelouch adds, "but we have it under control."

Kallen bites her lower lip, apparently unconvinced. Mercifully, both she and the rest of the Black Knights decide not to push.

Lelouch seizes his advantage and decides to change the topic. "In any case, there's something else we needed to discuss. You've undoubtedly noticed the presence of another agent of mine, the man I identified as Orange during today's operation. Perhaps some of you may have guessed, but that man is Jeremiah Gottwald."

Predictably, there's gaping all around. "Jeremiah Gottwald?" Asahina asks. "The Purist Margrave who worked with Ohgi's woman?"

"Yes. Unlike Viletta, his reasons for joining the Purist group were somewhat... different. He was very loyal to the house of vi Britannia. He was part of my mother's guard and he never made his peace with the fact that she died during his service. He thus attempted to find the culprit, and for this reason, he became another target of V.V.'s wrath."

Surprisingly, the Black Knights seem to understand this motivation. Then again, loyalty and honor were always very important to them. It was intrinsic to the Japanese culture, to the code of bushido, something which C.C. now suspects had a serious effect on Suzaku's psyche after he killed his father.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean the Black Knights will like or accept Jeremiah. Lelouch has a little more work to do before that can happen.

"You trust him, Zero?" Kallen asks with visible wariness.

"I do. He's been acting as Nunnally's guard since the beginning of the SAZ. He has, in fact, currently returned to her side."

Kallen's eyes widen at Lelouch's reply. She, more than any other Black Knight, understands what it means how much it means that Lelouch trusts Jeremiah with his sister.

"And he'll work with us, even if we're Japanese?" Chiba inquires in disbelief.

"It doesn't matter to him," C.C. explains. "You could be an alien for all he cares. As long as you're
loyal to Lelouch, that's all that counts."

"But didn't he participate in that whole business with Kururugi's execution?" Asahina protests.

Suzaku waves his hand, dismissing the comment. "Lord Jeremiah and I have settled our differences. I can hardly blame him for what happened then given some of the... unpleasant incidents that occurred during our stay with V.V."

"Unpleasant incidents?" Kallen repeats in confusion. She looks from Suzaku to Lelouch, and realization dawns on her face. "Oh. Oh."

Bingo. As expected, Kallen has made the connection between what C.C. told Rolo to let slip and their current explanation.

The other Black Knights look confused. "I don't get it," Tamaki predictably says.

"It's because V.V. would occasionally use Suzaku against me," Lelouch explains. "Now is not the time to get into the details, but that is also the reason why Rolo showed some resentment to my knight in the past."

The tension in the room grows even thicker at the reminder of V.V.'s actions against them. As expected, nobody seems to blame Suzaku for it. So far so good.

"Either way, as difficult as this is to accept, we cannot afford to have our forces divided any longer," Lelouch continues. "It is likely that, at one point in the near future, you will need to work together, and I will ask you to be prepared for that."

"We understand, Zero," Tohdoh states darkly. He may be unhappy with the prospect of cooperating with the man who almost executed Suzaku, but his focus is clearly on the reason behind that near-execution. "We will work with Margrave Gottwald."

Slowly, the Black Knights start to nod. As hesitant as they may be to accept Jeremiah, they trust Lelouch. It's a huge difference from the past lifetime, and C.C. has to admit it's nice to see. And of course, there's the fact that Jeremiah's actions are presumably motivated by revenge for his liege, which all of them can definitely understand.

When evening rolls in, C.C., Lelouch and Suzaku decide of common accord to not retire. Instead, they have the kitchens send dinner to them and eat together with the Black Knights. Lelouch dedicates himself to a financial report from Kirihara, more or less nibbles on the food and pushes most of it toward Suzaku. C.C. can see where he's coming from—she's concerned for Suzaku too—but Lelouch starving himself won't help them, and the last thing they need right now is for him to fall into his previous self-destructive patterns. He may be doing it subconsciously, but that doesn't make it any less frustrating.

Suzaku seems to agree, because he snatches the tablet from his hand and replaces it with a slice of pizza. "Eat and stop worrying for a minute, will you?"

His jaw is set in that stubborn jut, and C.C. is pretty sure that Suzaku himself will refuse to eat if Lelouch continues to be obtuse.

The Black Knights watch the whole exchange in fascinated silence. C.C. decides there's only so much this awkwardness will help them and explains, "Suzaku needs the nutrients after yesterday. Lelouch is just being... Lelouch."

"Always too busy worrying about others to worry about himself," Kallen mumbles. She does not
seem surprised at this development.

Lelouch groans. "For heaven's sake... I don't know why people keep saying I'm incapable of taking care of myself. There are just other things that are more important than me eating."

That actually sounds... pretty horrible. But then, despite his regular charisma and coherence, Lelouch had moments when he could be remarkably clumsy—such as the notorious joke that caused the SAZ debacle.

C.C. is unimpressed by his logic, but fortunately doesn't have to intervene. Lelouch actually does eat, perhaps acknowledging the fact that resistance is futile and further protests would just be childish.

Satisfied with his compliance, Suzaku proceeds to demolish his own dinner. Using his new Geass so much has taken a toll on him, more than C.C. would have liked. He looks a little less peaky after eating, though. Thank heavens for small mercies.

The dinner is actually pretty awkward. This is not the first time they've shared meals with the Black Knights. They used to do it pretty regularly at the SAZ, and the mood tended to be more relaxed. However, the revelations from the day before have changed the Black Knights' view of Zero entirely, and they don't know how to handle it or how to address him any longer. He's still Zero, but he's also someone who went through a very difficult experience. They also can't ignore the fact that he's only seventeen and a Britannian prince. And then there's Suzaku, who is actual family to Kaguya and was pretty much raised by Tohdoh.

That's the one hole in their 'experiment test subject' plan—the fact that it has the potential of doing damage to the way the Black Knights used to follow Lelouch without question. So far, things have gone tentatively well, but they haven't been in any huge operations yet. If the trust the Black Knights have in their leader is compromised, it could be a serious problem.

"You don't have to walk on eggshells around us now, you know," she says. "Nothing's changed. We're still the same people we used to be."

"Yes, we know," Asahina replies. "It's just been... a little difficult to adjust to everything."

"Well, if it helps, we very much appreciate the support," Lelouch says.

"Also, it's nice to have Lelouch give up the mask on occasion," Suzaku says calmly. He appears to have lost interest in dinner and is now focused on Lelouch. "Not that it didn't have its uses and all, but it's such a shame to hide such a pretty face. And such a pretty mouth."

And just like that, Suzaku leans over and steals a kiss.

It's the very first time Suzaku has made such overt romantic gestures in public. In front of the world, he's always the perfect, respectful knight. When they're with Lelouch's subordinates, he does display affection and something like camaraderie, but never anything sexual. It's both connected to his Japanese upbringing and his marginally closed off personality.

Apparently, he's decided to discard that, just this once.

Lelouch is so surprised he drops the pizza in his lap. Still, he doesn't move away. It's probably impossible for him to ever refuse a kiss from Suzaku, no matter the circumstances where it may be given.

One of these days, she has to explore the possibilities of that. It brings to mind all sorts of kinky ideas they haven't yet explored.
Suzaku doesn't hold back. He buries his hand in Lelouch's hair and delves in deep for a full out French kiss. There's tongue and everything. C.C. finds herself getting a little hot under the collar.

She'll have to drag them away soon for her daily dose of sex. Anything else would be an outrage.

Amusingly, some of the Black Knights are in a similar situation. When Suzaku breaks the kiss, C.C. deigns to look at the others. Kallen's face is as red as her hair, but Kaguya's eyes glint in an almost alarming way. The rest of the Black Knights seem to hover between the two emotions, embarrassment and interest. C.C. can't really blame them. Suzaku and Lelouch really do look hot together.

Lelouch finally recovers and clears his throat. Interestingly, he doesn't apologize for Suzaku's actions. "Right. As we were saying, we're going to be fine. There's no need to worry."

"I believe we can all see that," Kallen mumbles, somewhat sulkily.

For a few seconds, C.C. actually believes that will be that and Suzaku's distraction tactic, as heavy-handed as it may have been, will make the Black Knights relax and drop too difficult topics that would be detrimental to their progress.

As it turns out, Inoue takes a different approach. "Say, Zero, if you're giving out kisses, can I get a one too?" she asks in a completely serious tone.

C.C. doesn't know what made Inoue believe Lelouch will be giving out kisses, but regardless, the comment triggers a deluge of interesting replies.

"Me first, please," Kaguya pipes up. "I'm his Goddess of Victory, you know."

Lelouch looks hunted. "Er..."

"Maybe we can have a Zero kissing booth," Kallen suggests, this new development having apparently snapped her out of her moodiness. "I know all the girls at Ashford would gladly sign up."

Including her, no doubt.

Lelouch gives Kallen a betrayed look. "Q1!"

Hilariously, Diethard ignores Lelouch's plight and seems to take Kallen's suggestion seriously. "It may not be a bad idea. That way we'll never have financial problems for the SAZ. And I'm sure Sir Kururugi would also be popular, especially with Japanese citizens."

Normally, C.C. would take offense at the idea of someone stealing Lelouch and Suzaku from her, but she knows that's never going to happen, so she decides to play along. Sometimes, it's just better to embrace the madness, rather than fight it.

"It would be good for morale too. They're both excellent kissers."

"Among other things, I'm sure," Rakshata drawls, taking a drag out of her pipe.

"Well, as C.C. is bound to tell you, we did have an excellent teacher," Suzaku replies. "And we're nothing if not quick learners."

Just when C.C. thought the situation could not possibly escalate further, Tamaki lifts his hand, like he's in class and he wants to ask a question. "Yes, Tamaki?" C.C. inquires.

"So... Can the men sign up for this kissing Zero list? Because I'm not gonna lie, I'm curious."
Everybody stares at him. His face flushes. Lelouch stares at him in disbelief.

C.C. wonders if there is any way this situation can get more absurd.

Ah, yes. She can see the posters now. Lelouch vi Britannia. Turning young, impressionable men gay since 2017.

Inoue bursts into giggles first, and is promptly followed by Kaguya and Rakshata. Soon, the others join in. Senba, Urabe, Yoshida, Asahina... Even Tohdoh is smiling a little, which seems to cheer up Chiba in turn.

Lelouch is so red he looks like he's going to self-combust. Given that he's kissed a grand total of four people in two lifetimes, C.C. is not surprised. She's not sure Shirley and Kallen even count, since technically, they kissed him, not the other way around.

Still, Lelouch doesn't berate Suzaku for his behavior, nor does he argue against the teasing. "I'm sorry to say that for the moment, there will be no list, for neither men, nor women. My kisses belong to C.C. and Suzaku," he replies, his voice level even if he's a little flushed.

Kaguya zeroes in on the unwise part of Lelouch's comment like a predator would on its dinner. "For the moment?"

Before Lelouch can address that, the sound of a ringtone interrupts the conversation. Lelouch pulls out his phone, scowling. A bad feeling stirs in C.C.'s gut. There aren't a lot of people who have Zero's number, and most of them are already present.

Lelouch takes the call. "Viceroy Cornelia. What can I do for you?"

Instantly, the jocular mood in the Black Knights' HQ dissipates. Suzaku visibly tenses, ready to go back into battle at one word from Lelouch. The other Black Knights seem to be holding their breaths, clearly concerned.

Their apprehension proves to be justified. At the other side of the connection, C.C. can hear the distant sound of Cornelia reply, "Zero. It would appear you were right to be worried about my brother. We need your help."

Chapter End Notes

I admit the chapter got away from me a bit, but I couldn't help but have Suzaku kiss Lelouch in front of the Black Knights. LOL. And yes, I realize this one was a little slower, but needs must. I'm not 100% happy with the title, but it was the best I could come up, so it'll have to do :)
Emperors

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, everyone! I originally had something different in mind for the next chapter, then I reassessed it so I had to go back. Anyway, in reward for your patience, an extra long chapter! I hope you like it!

Thank you to everyone who commented and kudos-ed since my last update. You guys rock!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Earlier that day

On the airstrip in front of the Chinese Federation safehouse, Jeremiah kneels in front of his princess and squeezes her hand lightly. "It is time for me to go, Highness. Do not fear. I will take care of your brother."

"I know you will, Sir Gottwald," she tells him with a gentle smile. She's only been informed that a mission will take place where Jeremiah's skills are needed, and while she's concerned, she hasn't asked for more information. "That doesn't mean I don't worry. Do give him and Rolo my love, and be careful."

"I shall."

Jeremiah gets up and looks at Sayoko. She simply smiles at him and nods. Jeremiah knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that Sayoko will protect the princess with her life in his absence. She is dedicated to chivalry, just like he is. Her presence and efforts are a relief. The safety of the princess Nunnally is always of utmost importance.

However, there is nothing more important to Jeremiah than his emperor's word and plan. Once, he offered his loyalty to Lelouch vi Britannia due to his connection to the late Empress Marianne. Now, it goes way beyond that.

Lelouch vi Britannia is truly a noble soul, truly the emperor this world needs, the only person who can ever lead Britannia and turn it into a force for good. As empress, his sister did a fairly good job, but she was only able to do so due to all the things her brother had left for her. And so, as much as Jeremiah cares for Princess Nunnally, it is always Emperor Lelouch that he will serve.

Jeremiah has long ago realized that his loyalty toward the empress Marianne was misguided, as she was not the person he believed her to believe. That has not changed his devotion to Lelouch in the slightest. He hopes that soon, he will no longer have to hide it.

All that aside, his mission today does bring back strange memories. Returning to the Directorate feels... odd. This is the place where he was remade after almost being killed by Lady C.C. at Kaminejima. He does not truly hate it, despite the experience being less than pleasant. If nothing else, it gave him the tools that allowed him to later return to his emperor's side.

But he does hate the man behind this place, the man who has done so much damage and who is ultimately one of the main reasons for his emperor's suffering. Perhaps it is a paradox, but ultimately,
not something Jeremiah intends to dwell on.

The confrontation with V.V. will probably not happen today, but they will deliver a swift and decisive blow, not in the way they did last time, but just as efficient, if not more so.

Once his transport arrives at the Directorate, he sneaks in closer, just enough to watch the movements of the people inside. He can't risk approaching too much. It would be too dangerous and blow the entire operation. Nevertheless, he needs to make sure V.V. isn't actually here. Should that be the case, his emperor will have to take an entirely different approach.

The members of the Geass Order aren't known for their talkative nature, so Jeremiah can garner no real information from them. However, their demeanor and the general atmosphere suggest that V.V. is indeed not present. So far, so good.

When the Black Knights arrive, he meets with them outside. It is good to see his liege in person, alive and well, looking healthier than he ever did in the previous timeline.

His better relationship with his knight and his empress have apparently worked wonders on both his physical and mental state.

"Orange," his emperor says. "Any sign of V.V.?"

Jeremiah shakes his head. "There's been nothing. It would appear that he is absent."

"Good." Lelouch turns toward the still watching Black Knights. "We'll have to leave the introductions for later. Stand by and wait for instructions. This will probably take a while, but keep an eye out."

"We understand, Zero," Urabe says.

As they head inside, the Knight of Zero comments, "We used to work here on occasion. It hasn't changed a bit."

"It never does," C.C. answers. With the corner of her eye, Jeremiah can see her smiling slightly.

Once they're out of earshot, Lelouch chuckles lightly. "We used to work here, Suzaku? Really?"

Sir Kururugi shrugs. "Some extra details never hurt. For... veracity."

"You're having fun with this," Lelouch whispers.

"Maybe just a little."

Honestly, Jeremiah can't blame Sir Kururugi for taking his enjoyment where he can. In their past lifetime, he was the one to carry the heaviest burden, having to end the life of their liege. It was difficult enough for Jeremiah to simply stand by and watch and he was only able to do so because, first and foremost, he was honor-bound to follow his emperor's wishes. Having to actually thrust the blade into Lelouch's heart... He doesn't know if he could have done it.

After that, the conversation is set aside for the sake of the mission. Lady C.C. still has access codes, since V.V. never thought to change them, perhaps thinking she would never turn on them like this. And like before, all the members of the Order are all too willing to trust her.

She led the Order for much longer than V.V. For some of them, she is a legendary figure. Rolo's presence by her side reinforces her authority.
"Lady C.C.," they greet her with a smile. "You have returned."

"Indeed. It would seem I was missed."

Sir Kururugi, Jeremiah and their emperor stay behind her and go unnoticed. Once she has their attention and they're distracted, Lelouch steps in. He gradually corrals everyone in front of the Thought Elevator using his Geass.

Nobody even thinks to intervene before it's too late.

Like Jeremiah remembered, most of the people present at the Directorate are young, recent contractors. There are a few older members, but they don't put up a fight either. It's almost hilariously easy, if tedious.

Of course, the security personnel are not complete idiots so they soon catch onto the fact that something is wrong. However, C.C. can sense Geass and the Knight of Zero can sense danger. They end up splitting up while they hunt down some of errant members of the Order, with Jeremiah taking Rolo with him, while his emperor moves on with the Knight of Zero and his empress.

Rolo seems quiet and thoughtful. Jeremiah knows that he actively participated in the massacre that happened here last time. He wonders how Rolo feels about this new approach.

"Lady Nunnally sends her regards," he says as they move through a quiet corridor.

The words predictably draw a smile out of Rolo. "Along with her concern, I think."

"Yes, indeed."

They run into some guards, and Rolo quickly activates his Geass. Jeremiah rushes forward, taking them out before they can act.

It is as they start to place explosives around the compound that Rolo resumes their previous conversation, "You know, Sir Gottwald, I wonder what Nunnally would truly think if she knew the truth. About us. About all this."

"It is difficult to say, but I believe she would understand. She and I were not close in the past timeline, but I know for a fact that she wished she could have met you. Even then."

This is something he heard more or less through the grapevine, after one of Her Highness's visits to Japan. He was never really sure if Sir Kururugi was the one to discuss it with her, or if it had been someone else entirely, but Lady C.C. commented on it during one of her visits to the orangery.

Rolo seems surprised at this piece of information. "Oh. That's... That's good to know."

Was it? Jeremiah isn't sure. Perhaps he shouldn't have mentioned it.

They head back the way they'd come, reuniting with their emperor. By now, they've made a fair amount of progress, enough at least, that Lelouch orders them to let some of the medical staff escape.

"I want to see how the Black Knights react to this, and it's better to include them at least in some way."

The result is satisfying. The Black Knights do indeed report a small group managing to make their way to the exit. Minutes later, Kallen briskly announces that she has handled it. Lelouch smirks.

Slowly and surely, they continue their exploration of the underground city. Once they've gathered
everyone in front of the Thought Elevator, it is a simple matter of Jeremiah using his Geass canceler
to remove the previous orders on the members of the Order and Lelouch putting them under a
different command.

The younger members of the Order will now remember having been here with Lelouch and Suzaku
and will see them both as they did Rolo. Jeremiah presumes his emperor may intend to add them to
the Black Knights once they are old enough, but for the moment, what matters is to remove them
from V.V.’s grasp.

Once Lelouch is satisfied that he has matters well in hand, he dispatches Jeremiah to retrieve all the
data present on the Directorate servers. It is not a difficult task to accomplish. V.V. hasn’t bothered
with an extra encryption beyond the security codes, since presumably the Directorate itself should be
a classified location. Jeremiah doesn’t have the time to read any of it, of course, but that is not the
point of this mission. He simply inserts an USB stick in the drive of the main server and waits for the
file to copy.

He notifies his emperor of his success as soon as the screen flashes with Transfer Complete. After
that, he double checks the explosives and makes sure they haven’t missed anything, then makes his
way outside.

"Everything is ready, My Liege."

"Excellent," Lelouch says. "Blow it up."

Destroying the Directorate feels like removing a weight off Jeremiah's soul. It's another step forward
in the path to what needed to come, to his emperor taking his rightful place on the throne of
Britannia.

It is as they get ready to depart that Jeremiah receives some excellent news. His emperor pulls him
aside, with only Kururugi remaining with them as an escort. "Jeremiah, I want you, Sayoko and
Nunnally to get ready to leave the safehouse. I'll speak with the Black Knights. Expect to join us in
Japan soon."

Jeremiah doesn't bother to hide his enthusiasm. "Thank you, My Liege. Princess Nunnally will be
overjoyed."

"I think we will all be happy to be together again. But keep in mind, Jeremiah, that things will be
different from last time. The Black Knights will be aware of your past, at least in some way. There
may be some unpleasantness."

"I understand, Your Majesty. I am certain we will be able to work smoothly together in time."

Lelouch nods, seeming satisfied. It is only after they have already gone their separate ways that it
occurs to Jeremiah he's forgotten to give his emperor the USB stick with the data on V.V.’s servers.

Oh, dear. Perhaps he can manage to skim over it while they wait for further instructions.

As expected, the princess is very happy to hear the news from her brother. He and Sayoko exchange
a fond look as Nunnally insists to start packing at once.

Jeremiah leaves them to it and goes to look over the data. Hours later, he makes the discovery.

Staring at the video files of the younger Rolo on the screen, Jeremiah wonders how in the world he
will tell his emperor the truth about his brother, now of all times.
That evening

Lelouch stalks into the Tokyo Viceroy Palace, Euphie, C.C. and Suzaku trailing after him. A group of guards, led by Kallen, follow. This really isn't what he had in mind for this evening. He would have much preferred retiring with his lovers for some well-deserved rest. Alas, there is apparently something to be said about the old 'no rest for the wicked' proverb, because V.V.'s retaliation has come sooner than he himself expected.

At the gate, they're met by Andreas Darlton and Guilford. "Zero. Thank you for coming so quickly," Guilford says.

"I understand His Majesty was attacked while stationed in St. Petersburg?"

"Yes. The details are classified at this time. I'm sure Viceroy Cornelia will tell you."

Lelouch doesn't ask any further questions. While Guilford trusts him due to the Geass, the same cannot be said for all of his companions. Lelouch will just have to investigate the whys and the hows at a later date. For the moment, he has to figure out how bad Schneizel's situation actually is.

They reach the infirmary in record time. Outside, they find a livid Cornelia talking to a ruffled-looking doctor. Gino Weinberg is leaning against the wall, watching them approach with sharp, curious eyes.

As Lelouch and his group step up, Cornelia turns toward them. Euphie rushes forward, all protocol forgotten. "Cornelia! Oh heavens. Is Schneizel going to be all right?"

Cornelia somehow manages to muster a small smile for their younger sister. "We can only hope. We're doing the best we can, but the doctors have been... unable to do much." Her gaze turns thunderous and she looks at Lelouch. "Zero. Tell me you have some answers for me. I seem to be surrounded by idiots."

"I just may, but I'll need to see His Majesty first."

Cornelia nods. "Come with me."

"Suzaku, C.C., with me. Everyone else, remain here."

Euphie looks like she wants to protest or ask more questions, but perhaps she is aware they don't have time for such things. She remains silent as Cornelia leads Lelouch away.

Inside Schneizel's room, it's quiet except for the beeping of the machines monitoring his heartbeat. Earl Kanon Maldini is seated by Schneizel's bedside, which doesn't surprise Lelouch in the slightest.

Schneizel... doesn't look well. Given that the last time Lelouch saw his brother in person, he had the man brainwashed and tied to an execution pole in rags, that is saying a lot.

By his side, both C.C. and Suzaku tense. Lelouch cannot see whatever they can, but he can draw a few conclusions just from the timing of their situation.

Kanon gets up when they enter the room. Cornelia quickly rushes through a round of introductions. "Kanon, this is Zero, his knight, Sir Suzaku Kururugi, and his... C.C."

C.C.'s lips twist slightly at Cornelia's inability to find the right description for her. Not that it matters
that much. Cornelia goes on without seeming too discomfitted. "This is Earl Kanon Maldini, Schneizel's aide."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Earl Maldini, although the circumstances are not what any of us would have liked," Lelouch says.

"Indeed. Princess Cornelia mentioned that she believes you may have an idea on what happened to His Majesty?"

"Perhaps. Could you tell me how exactly this came to pass?"

Kanon nods. "We were attacked in St. Petersburg. Emperor Schneizel had asked the remnants of the Knights of Euro-Britannia to gather there. The Knight of Three Gino Weinberg, the Knight of Four Dorothea Ernst and the Knight of Twelve Monica Krushevsky were supposed to join us. Sir Andrea Farnese had just reported in when news came that we had finally captured the rebel Shin Hyuga Shaing."

Oh dear. Lelouch doesn't like where this is going.

"His Majesty ordered for him to imprisoned, to be interrogated at a later date, only that never happened. An alarm broke out, and a group led by Shaing and his knight Jean Rowe burst into our meeting. He just looked at His Majesty and told him to die and suddenly..."

"He attempted to commit suicide," Lelouch finishes when Kanon seems unable to.

Kanon nods. "I managed to stop him and knock him out, and we were in luck that Andrea Farnese was there. He and His Majesty's personal guard managed to buy us some time. I attempted to carry His Majesty out, but we were intercepted. Fortunately, Sir Weinberg appeared and helped us. Lady Krushevsky and Lady Ernst covered our retreat. I do not know if they are alive. Probably not."

"It was havoc. People were dying all over the place for no apparent reason, fainting and seizing. Our own soldiers were turning against us. We barely managed to get to a transport to evacuate. The moment His Majesty awoke, he attempted to take his own life again. I sedated him, but this method seems to no longer work."

Kanon's report confirms Lelouch's worst fears. He cannot be sure yet if Shin Hyuga Shaing's attack is a personal initiative or if he's involved with V.V., but the latter option seems more likely. Shaing's Geass can only kill, not take control of other people, and the 'seizing' comment definitely suggests V.V.'s presence.

Either way, he'll have to worry about it once they find a solution to Schneizel's situation. Lelouch looks at C.C. and Suzaku. "What's your take on this?"

"The fact that he's sedated has kept him alive but that won't help him forever," Suzaku reports. "His body is already shutting down."

Lelouch supposes he's the one who can tell best. C.C. can presumably see the Geass, and can see it attacking the mind of the host, but she can't always tell what it does, especially not when the command was not given by one of her contractors. However, Suzaku's Geass makes him aware of biological functions in a way she is not.

"How is that even possible?" Cornelia asks. "Is it related to the subliminal weapon you mentioned, Zero?"

"It's a long and complicated story, and we don't have time for it right now," C.C. answers in his
stead. "In fact, I estimate we don't have much time at all."

She shoots Lelouch a telling glance, and even if she doesn't say a word, Lelouch understand what she isn't saying. Originally, Lelouch intended to contact Jeremiah so that Orange could cancel the Geass on him, but Jeremiah is hours away. If Schneizel's condition is already so serious, they need to act now.

There is only one solution he can come up with, something they could possibly try. Technically, Lelouch could order Schneizel to live. It may override Shaing's command. Lelouch just isn't sure it will work.

"Can you help him?" Cornelia asks.

"There may be something I can do, an experimental procedure," Lelouch says. "It may also kill him on the spot. Earl Maldini, Cornelia, you need to decide. Do you want us to try?"

Technically, Cornelia is the one who could make a medical decision in such a situation, but she's under Geass to trust Lelouch. And even if she weren't, it actually is true that Schneizel always trusted Kanon Maldini more.

Predictably, Cornelia agrees at once, not even questioning why Lelouch asked Kanon too. Kanon gives them a torn look, then nods. "His Majesty would want you to try. He... respects you. He always said that you were the man he loved and feared most. Yes. All right."

The man he loved and feared most. There is no way Schneizel would refer to an apparently random terrorist in such terms. It would appear that Schneizel may have guessed Lelouch's true identity.

Lelouch has no idea how that could have come to pass. It's dangerous, and it would be so easy now, for Lelouch to let Schneizel die.

But if Britannia were too lose its emperor again so quickly, the results would be disastrous. At the very least, if Schneizel survives, they can salvage something, a modicum of order. Lelouch's plans aren't yet complete and he cannot rush forward to take over Britannia like he did in his past life, simply because three quarters of the capital has been eradicated already. They need some consistency and continuity, at least until Lelouch can get rid of V.V.

"All right," he said. "Please wait outside and do not interrupt us."

Cornelia doesn't need to be told twice. She ushers Kanon out, leaving them alone with Schneizel.

Suzaku locks the door behind her and Lelouch takes off his mask. Technically, it's not necessary, but he suspects this will be more difficult than he would like.

"He'll need to be conscious for this to work. C.C., can you override the sedative?"

"I can try to give his consciousness a nudge. Let's hope this works."

"I can help," Suzaku offers.

She approaches the bed and takes Schneizel's hand. It is so odd to see, and a part of Lelouch wants to step in, to keep her from touching him. He still remembers Schneizel as he was in their past lifetime, as his enemy and the man who had no qualms with blowing up Pendragon when Lelouch had been Emperor.

But things are different now and Lelouch has to make some compromises if his plan is going to
Suzaku goes to Schneizel's other side. That makes Lelouch bristle even more, since he knows how close Suzaku came to being Schneizel's knight, not his own.

Focus, damn it. He needs to focus. Schneizel isn't the one who is a threat right now.

He watches carefully as Suzaku activates his Geass and the sigil in the center of C.C.'s forehead starts to glow. Seconds later, Schneizel's eyes snap open.

Lelouch doesn't hesitate for a moment. "Live!" he orders.

At first, the command seems to take, but then, something goes wrong. A strange force snaps out, reaching out for him, and pain erupts in his eyes. He catches sight of Suzaku and C.C. making a grab for him, and then they're all tumbling, reality shifting around them.

Suddenly, they're all in the world of C, surrounded by a field of white. Another figure is there with them. Lelouch recognizes him as Shin Hyuga Shaing, the orchestrator behind the Euro-Britannian coup and the man who imprisoned him and Suzaku the first time Charles wiped his memories.

"Well, well. If it isn't Prince Lelouch vi Britannia. It's such an honor to meet you. I've heard a lot about your... exploits."

"Have you really?" Lelouch asks tightly. "I have to wonder who may have mentioned it."

"A common friend," Shaing replies with a smirk. "But then, if you're here, I expect you must have already known that."

"V.V.," Suzaku hisses.

Shaing claps mockingly. "Oh, bravo. An excellent guess. Although I admit, it wasn't nearly as impressive as you resisting a certain Geass cast on you." He turns his eyes toward Lelouch. "Then again, maybe it's not impressive at all. It's an interesting thing, isn't it... How much a Geass can do. How it can turn a person into someone else entirely."

So V.V. and Shaing assume Suzaku is under Geass to obey Lelouch. He supposes that makes sense.

If V.V. was involved in some way in their escape from the Avalon's blast on the island, as C.C. seemed to think, he would have sensed Lelouch using his Geass on Suzaku and he may not have known the command used was 'Live on'. Given the subsequent change in Suzaku's behavior, he would have assumed Lelouch may have used something more drastic.

Just how much did V.V. figure out anyway? How much did the transference of their spirits disturb the world of C? So far, it doesn't seem like anybody has guessed, but could they be wrong about that?

Either way, Lelouch hides his apprehension and meets Shaing's smirk with a sneer of his own. "And how would you know? The only thing you are able to do with yours is kill. How stagnant and empty."

"Oh, I disagree," Shaing replies. "Death is something all souls aim for." He arches a brow at C.C. "Isn't that right, C.C.?"

C.C. doesn't visibly react, but Lelouch can feel the tension increase in her. Maybe Shaing can sense it as well, because he continues, "You and I are a lot alike, you know. We both crave death."
Suzaku steps in front of C.C., blocking his view of her. "She's nothing like you."

Shaing laughs. "Is that what you think? Is that what she's told you? Or perhaps... Is that what you were forced to believe?"

"My beliefs are my own," Suzaku replies. "Are you sure you are in the same situation?"

"Of course not," C.C. says. "He's a convenient puppet V.V. is using for his own purposes. If you're relying on him to give you what you seek, Shin Hyuga Shaing, you are making a mistake. He's far more likely to turn you into a tool against his enemies, then destroy you to avenge his brother once he has decided he's done with you. And you should know that when it comes to the Order, destruction and punishment don't always mean death."

"And what does it mean, then, in your opinion?"

"Eternal torment."

Shaing narrows his eyes at her. "That is not possible for me."

Does Shaing not know how the code works? Is he not aware of the Ragnarok Connection?

It's unclear. After all, they can hardly trust Shaing is even telling them the truth, beyond the obvious fact that he must indeed be working with V.V.

Something tugs at the back of his mind, and Lelouch knows he cannot stay here any longer. "In any case, this has all been entertaining," he says, "but I truly am needed elsewhere."

"And you think you can chase me away that easily?" Shaing laughs. "If you had, you would not be here to begin with."

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

Suddenly, Shaing begins to dissipate, his body slowly vanishing, the particles being consumed by the whiteness. "You are correct, Shin Hyuga Shaing. A Geass can do many things," Lelouch says. "It's also only as powerful as the person who wields it. And you are not as powerful as me."

Shaing's expression twists into manic rage. His eyes flash red with Geass. Lelouch is faster than him. "Begone!" he shouts.

Shaing vanishes into the ether with an agonized cry. The whole scene is eerily reminiscent of Charles and Marianne's disappearance. Lelouch tries very hard not to let it get to him.

C.C. recovers first. "Well, that was unexpected," she says.

Lelouch sighs. "That's one way of putting it."

"This could end badly, Lelouch," Suzaku tells him. "Without Schneizel in control of the Empire, everything could fall apart on us. There is no telling what Shaing and V.V. will do together."

"I'm aware," Lelouch says, pursing his lips. "We have no choice but to hasten our plans."

He never expected V.V. to recruit Shaing of all people, not when the psychotic bastard was the culprit behind Charles's death. But perhaps, in a way, it does make sense.

For V.V., like for Marianne and Charles, death isn't an ending. Charles's demise may only be a minor inconvenience if the plan of the Sword of Akasha comes to pass, and while Shaing did not
mention the Ragnarok Connection in their conversation, that means absolutely nothing.

"Well, there's no point in talking about it here. Let's go back. The Black Knights are probably waiting for us."

C.C. nods and takes Lelouch's hand again. Somehow, she manages to drag the three of them out of... wherever they had been.

Much to their surprise, as soon as they open their eyes, they find themselves surrounded by an entire group of concerned-looking people.

"Lelouch," Cornelia exclaims. "Oh, thank heavens. We thought you may have been attacked too."

"Attacked?" Lelouch repeats as Suzaku helps him up. "Why would you think that?"

"We heard you screaming," Kallen says. She's pasty white and shaking. "We broke the door to get in, but we couldn't get close for some reason."

"You were out for three hours and Schneizel was staring at the ceiling like he wasn't even mentally present," Euphie says, her eyes red-rimmed. "We thought you were all going to die."

A chill courses over Lelouch's spine. They've lost over three hours without even being aware of it? Lelouch could have sworn the conversation with Shaing lasted five minutes, if that. Despite his claim that his Geass is stronger than Shaing's, how much damage could Shaing do to them if he were actually here in person?

"It would appear... there was a side effect to my intervention to help Schneizel. That doesn't matter right now. We're fine."

"His Majesty will recover as well," Suzaku reports after stealing a look at Schneizel. "He's going to need some regular medical attention, but the issue that kept it from working before is gone."

Lelouch nods to confirm his knight's words, and some of the tension present in the room seems to dissipate at the words. "Thank you, Your Highness," Kanon says to Lelouch, visibly relieved. At this point, he's not even trying to pretend he doesn't know Lelouch's true identity.

"Now sit down before you fall over, you three," Cornelia orders. "Put on your mask, Lelouch. I don't care what you say—I'm having doctors to come see you anyway."

It's mildly alarming that Cornelia can do that despite Lelouch telling her he's all right, but he decides not to press the issue. He sits down on the nearby couch, and C.C. and Suzaku join him, only managing to fit because C.C. is actually in their lap.

As soon as he relaxes on the couch, he realizes he's even more exhausted than he thought. In fact, he hasn't felt this tired since his last days pre-Requiem, and that was when he regularly skipped sleep due to a combination of being overworked and having nightmares. He supposes the situation is similar. Between the nightmare with the attack on Suzaku, them planning and enacting the trip to the Directorate and now this confrontation with Shaing, these past days have been strenuous on all of them. He's probably only been standing because of Suzaku's Geass.

Unfortunately for him, he doesn't get the chance to enjoy the break. Moments later, his phone rings. Mentally groaning, Lelouch extracts it from his jacket. The screen reads Orange.

Did someone mention Schneizel to Jeremiah? No, it must be something different.
Oh, hell. Lelouch completely forgot about the fact that he instructed Orange to procure the data from the Directorate. The last time, they simply burst in and eradicated everything with no regard to the possible information that may have existed inside, but obviously, in this instance, they decided on a different approach.

He must be more tired than he thought if something so important slid out of his mind.

"Zero here. What is it?"

"My Liege, my apologies for the interruption, but there's been a development. I found something that you should address in the files retrieved from the Directorate."

Jeremiah's guarded tone instantly puts Lelouch on alarm. "How urgent is it?"

"Not an immediate danger, but certainly something that has to be addressed at once."

Of course it is. "All right." He steals a look at Schneizel's very still form on the bed and finally makes a decision. "Come to the SAZ. Bring everyone. There's been an attack on Emperor Schneizel, so we can no longer afford to wait. Have the information ready for me then."

"Yes, My Liege. I understand."

By now, doctors have already rushed into the room and are looking over Schneizel. Several of them are hovering nearby, having presumably been told to check up on Zero and his staff. Judging by the fact that they haven't actually approached, either Suzaku or Kallen—who has taken up post next to them—must be giving them a particularly unfriendly look.

He hangs up the phone and pockets it. "Time to go?" C.C. asks.

Lelouch nods and they all get up. Cornelia looks like she wants to stop him, but Lelouch doesn't give her the chance. "Princess Cornelia, do keep us posted on any developments on the condition of His Majesty. Princess Euphemia, you should stay here and be with your brother."

Euphie offers him a shaky smile. "Thank you, Zero."

"Don't mention it." He throws a glance over his shoulder at Kallen. "Come, Q1."

Together, the four of them leave Schneizel's room. The others all look relieved when they see him emerge. "Everything all right, Zero?" Sugiyama asks.

"His Majesty will be fine. We'll discuss the rest once we get to the SAZ."

The walls had ears here and the last thing they need is an information leak right now. For the moment, the Black Knights will have to be content with the fact that he's standing and coherent.

This time, his guards do not disappoint, knowing better than to press for more. Even Kallen remains quiet, even if she is still obviously concerned.

Lelouch would be happier about their trust in him if he was one hundred percent certain he can fulfill the task ahead of him.

Three hours shouldn't mean too much in the big picture, but it does. Shaing is trouble, more trouble than Lelouch originally thought. They have to get rid of him, quickly. But how?
So obviously, the antagonist from the OVAs is becoming more important. Quick recap, for those who haven't seen it, Shin Hyuga Shaing originally received a kill Geass after murdering most of his family. His goal is pretty much... death. That's it. He thinks life is a curse and wants to free the world from it. Jean Rowe is his knight and sort of love interest.

Andreas Farnese is also a character from the OVAs, the Grandmaster of the Knights of St. Raphael. He probably won't have a big role, but I thought I should mention him.

In case you missed it, during the conversation between Shaing and our trio, Shaing says something C.C. originally said to Suzaku, which is why Suzaku steps in and snaps at him. Having not been present for that particular conversation, Lelouch doesn't make a note of it.

Canonically, it is possible to overcome another command with a command. This has been done before in the game CG: Lost Colors, where Rai, the protagonist, can use his Geass to stop Euphie from committing the SAZ massacre.

Feel free to ask any other questions you might have. Enjoy!
Empires

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I am back! Thank you to all the readers who have read, kudos-ed and commented on this story since my last update! Despite my knee jerk reaction to Infinity Wars, I have not forgotten about this story and I really appreciate the interest you've shown in my self-indulgent time-travel AU.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's difficult for Cornelia to just stand by and watch her little brother go, but as much as she hates it, she understands that he does occupy a role and he cannot just leave his underlings unattended. God only knows what those Numbers could be up to if Lelouch is not there to keep an eye on them.

Not to mention that there are other things she needs to worry about. Lelouch can take care of himself. Schneizel and Euphie cannot, and neither can Britannia.

As soon as Lelouch is gone, Cornelia turns toward the doctors. "Well? What's the verdict?"

"His Majesty's condition has stabilized. His internal organs have suffered some damage, but he is no longer beyond our aid."

"So he'll make a complete recovery?"

"It's much too soon to tell. What happened to His Majesty is... unprecedented. But if he doesn't have a relapse of his past condition, that is our estimate. It will, however, take some time."

"Time," Cornelia repeats. "How much time?"

"We're not certain. Weeks. An induced coma of a certain length would be safest to make sure there's no lasting damage."

Weeks. That is a lot, considering the state the empire is in. Still, it's a huge improvement, considering the fact that a few hours before, Schneizel was practically dying.

"All right. Do it."

It's the best possible option at this point. Lelouch and his knight have told her that Schneizel will be all right, and despite the weirdness of the situation, she does believe that.

In the meantime, with Schneizel down, she is the only one left to handle the empire, and she honestly does not know how to do that. For as long as she has been alive, Britannia has had a solid structure, with her father at the helm. Now, he is dead, their forces are scattered and most of her family has fallen.

But she cannot afford to give up, not now.

She will have to talk to Lelouch again soon, but first, she needs to understand the exact gravity of the situation.
As soon as she makes sure Schneizel is in good hands, she meets up with her war council, leaving Euphie to keep Schneizel company. Technically, it's not necessary, but she needs to approach Euphie in private later before her little sister can be included further in her plans.

Her war council is as efficient as always. "Is Euro-Britannia lost to us?" she asks without preamble.

"It would seem so, Your Highness," Darlton replies. "We have received some transmissions from remnants of the Knights of St. Raphael and the Knights of St. Uriel, but all of them say the same thing. They have been retreated from St. Petersburg and are uncertain what is going on. The Knights of St. Gabriel appear to have been completely destroyed."

That was pretty much what Cornelia expected. She will have to regroup and form a proper attack unit in order to take St. Petersburg back. First order of business after this, talk to Lelouch to ask how exactly this strange subliminal weapon works.

Fortunately, the viceroys of the Areas have mostly managed to do damage control in their respective zones, so there haven't been significant uprisings. But that still leaves the two biggest problems for Cornelia to handle.

"Any news from Nonnette? How are things in Pendragon?"

"Stable, for now, but once people learn of His Majesty's situation..."

It would be chaos all over again. Damn it.

As much as she trusts Nonnette Enneagram, the Knight of Nine can only be a temporary replacement to a proper manager for the reconstruction of Pendragon. Schneizel only intended for her to contain the situation while he handled the more immediate problem in Euro-Britannia. Unfortunately, now that things have massively gone sideways, it leaves Cornelia in quite a pickle.

Well, there's nothing for it. Euro-Britannia will have to wait. She will need to go to Pendragon first.

"I'll have to go to Pendragon. We cannot abandon the throne while my brother is ailing. I will leave Euphemia as an acting viceroy in my absence, but suffice to say she will need some help." Technically, Japan isn't an area anymore, but that's not the only factor at play here. "Despite Schneizel's original agreement with Zero, it seems unlikely that we can continue with the original plan of the evacuation of the Britannian citizenry at this time. It's just not safe. We'll have to delay it."

"Will Zero agree to a change in terms, Your Highness?"

"Zero is a reasonable man, and he has no desire to place civilians in the line of fire. He is also aware that Britannia is not his enemy right now. He will work with us. Nevertheless, we must maintain a solid presence in Japan, especially since I am not certain when it will be safe for Schneizel to be moved."

Considering her options, Cornelia looks toward the quiet Knight of Three. Weinberg hasn't said much since his arrival, but then, his input hasn't been required. He is young and brash, schooled in combat, but no so much in politics. Still, she's going to need Darlton and the others with her, so her options on who to leave behind in Area 11 are rather limited. While David has done a good job as Euphie's knight, he doesn't have the same influence as a Rounds.

There's also the fact that Weinberg is a huge part of the reason why Schneizel even lived long enough to get to Japan. He will do nicely to make sure her siblings stay safe.

"Weinberg, you will remain here, assist Euphie and work with Zero to make sure Area... Japan is
safe."

The Knight of Three twitches slightly, as if he didn't expect being addressed. Still, he isn't a knight for no reason, so he quickly hides his surprise. "Yes, Your Highness. Of course, Your Highness."

"I'll introduce you properly to Zero at a later date. I must speak to him and Euphie before any further arrangements are made. But I will be relying on you to make sure both Schneizel and Euphemia are safe."

"Of course, Your Highness. It will be my honor to protect His Imperial Majesty"

Despite Weinberg's agreement, there is still a heavy weight on Cornelia's heart at the thought of leaving. It's the same weight that caused her to bring Euphie along to Area 11 to begin with. She just hates not being able to keep an eye on Euphie. And now there's Lelouch to consider, and possibly Nunnally as well. She hasn't gotten the chance to speak to her youngest remaining sister, but she still worries.

For this reason, when she ends the meeting, she asks Weinberg to stay behind. "Zero is also essential to the future of Britannia," she tells him. "I cannot explain why at this time. You do not need to know.

"The matter at hand is the following. I trust him, but those Numbers he keeps company with, not so much."

"Do you think they would go against Zero's word and attack us, Your Highness?" Weinberg asks.

"It's... unclear," Cornelia says. She isn't actually sure how many of them are aware of Lelouch's true identity. The red-headed woman was obviously among them, but the others may not be in the same situation and they may react badly should they ever learn the truth. "His inner circle, Kururugi and the two women you saw... They wouldn't go against Zero. The others... I'm not so sure about. Be watchful. Befriend the Elevens if you have to. Like Schneizel and Euphie, Zero too must be protected. I am relying on you, Weinberg, to do that."

Weinberg kneels and bows his head, not questioning her in the slightest. "Yes, Your Highness. I understand."

Cornelia smiles. She feels a little better at the knowledge that there will be a Rounds here for her siblings. Kururugi is competent, but she hasn't forgotten the fact that he technically turned on them. He seems dedicated to Lelouch, but that can change.

Satisfied with her progress, Cornelia leaves the room and heads back toward the infirmary. She still needs to speak with Euphie. Then, she'll have to contact Lelouch. So much work to do, so little time.

She hopes like hell that when Lelouch catches their uncle—as he undoubtedly will—he will give her the chance to take out some of her pent-up aggression on him. Yes, that is definitely something to look forward to.

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Xingke stands in front of the quarters of his young empress, suppressing the urge to pace. He trusts Zero with the Tianzi's safety, but he hasn't seen the masked Japanese vigilante since the attempted assassination on him. According to what he's heard, his knight has recovered from the effects of whatever weapon was used on him, but since then, the Black Knights have provided no further information and Kaguya Sumeragi has been vague in her explanations on what they're actually doing.
He has tried to reach Zero earlier this evening, only to be told that Zero was not available due to an emergency meeting with the Britannians. This unsettles him greatly. He doesn't like being in the dark, especially in such a volatile situation.

For this reason, he has sent Xianglin to keep an eye out. As efficient as ever, she comes running as soon as she finds out what he needs to know. "My Lord Xingke. Zero's transport is arriving."

"Excellent. Stay here with the Tianzi. I'll speak with Zero and come back."

"Yes, Sir."

Nobody tries to stop him as he makes his way through the SAZ. Xingke rather appreciates the show of good faith. It's quite impressive, given that just a few days back, they were facing each other on the battlefield.

The hangar bay where Zero's transport landed is not quite so easy to access, of course, but Xingke assumes Zero must be headed to the main HQ of the Black Knights in the SAZ, and he knows where that is.

Security is tighter in this area and he is stopped by a group of Black Knight guards. He isn't delayed for long. They contact someone through their headsets, then wave him forward with a simple, "Zero is waiting for you."

Xingke has no idea where that came from, but he supposes Zero may have been informed even before this that Xingke wanted to talk to him. This fact only serves to unsettle him further.

Zero has given Xingke the impression that the UFN is very important for him. If its importance has fallen so drastically, just how serious is the threat they are facing? Is it something targeting the Empress too? Has something else happened that he isn't aware of?

Hopefully, he will get his answers soon.

When he arrives at the Black Knights control room, he finds Zero already in a meeting with the rest of his inner circle. As always, his green-haired mistress—C.C.—and his knight are by his side.

"Xingke," Zero says in welcome. "Welcome. I understand that Kaguya informed you of the basics of what happened yesterday."

"Yes, Zero, but I did have some questions."

"Understandable. Please, come in. I was just about to debrief everyone else on what has been going on."

Xingke walks into the room, eyeing the rest of its occupants. Most of the Black Knights—especially the red-haired pilot, Kallen Kozuki—look concerned. This does not fill him with confidence.

As soon as the door closes behind Xingke, Zero begins to speak. "Yesterday, I was the target of an attempted assassination. It was arranged by Charles zi Britannia's brother, Victor, who used a form of subliminal weaponry to turn Suzaku against me. In our case, he failed. Emperor Schneizel was not so lucky.

"Tonight, we received a report from Princess Cornelia of her older brother having been attacked in Euro-Britannia. We have managed to help stabilize his condition and he is expected to recover. However, I estimate that at this time, Euro-Britannia will probably be in the hands of Victor zi Britannia and this man."
The monitors in the room flare to life and a picture of a Japanese man pops up on the screen. There are instant exclamations of surprise. "Huh? He's one of us?" Tamaki asks.

"Not in the slightest," Zero says, shaking his head. "This is Shin Hyuga Shaing. He's an Honorary Britannian who was adopted by an Euro-Britannian noble family. He served under Michele Manfredi, in the Knights of St. Michael, and was eventually made Manfredi's second in command. Apparently, that wasn't quite enough for him, because he recently, he assassinated his superior. He is the main orchestrator behind the explosion that almost destroyed Pendragon and also the man who attempted to assassinate Schneizel. At this time, we believe him to be working with Victor."

"But why would Victor zi Britannia cooperate with the man who killed his brother?" Tohdoh asks.

"Cooperation is a strong word," C.C. says in Zero's stead. "Victor is only using Shaing for his own purposes. If Shaing is aware, he doesn't care. His sanity is very questionable indeed. Either way, we have no doubt that Victor fully intends to remove Shaing from the equation once he is done with him."

"This brings us to our current situation," Zero adds. "I am not certain on the number of troops Victor has at his disposal. I need to double-check some numbers with Cornelia. However, it would not be out of the question to assume that he may come at the Chinese Federation next."

The image Zero's words paint is dreadful. If someone was powerful enough to deal Britannia such a serious blow, the damage they could inflict on the weakened Chinese Federation could be disastrous.

"Xingke, the Forbidden City has been left without a real leader for too long," Zero says, as if guessing Xingke's thoughts. "With the eunuchs gone, you're going to have to go to take charge and make sure the Federation doesn't fall."

Xingke finds himself torn between two duties. Zero isn't wrong. Hong Gu has been in the Federation these past couple of days, keeping things going. But Hong Gu is not enough if a war is coming their way. "The Empress..."

"She will stay here," Zero cuts him off. "We will turn the SAZ into a safe haven of sorts. My own siblings are here, so believe me when I say we will make every effort to ensure the SAZ is unbreachable. The Tianzi will be far safer here than in the Forbidden City, Xingke."

Xingke knows Zero is right. After all, it was very easy for Zero's subordinates to sneak into the Forbidden City. Zero is the person who is best aware of the threat that they face, and as such, he will know how to make sure the empress is not harmed.

"Insofar as it is possible, I will not leave her side," Kaguya Sumeragi says. "I know the situation has been difficult for her to handle. We will take care of her, you have my word."

"I believe you," Xingke says. "In the end, if you had wanted her harmed, we would not be having this conversation."

"Indeed."

"Now, before you go... We will be outfitting the Black Knights with some equipment that will help protect you against the subliminal weaponry used. The most basic of necessities include visors of a specific thickness and opacity, as often times, the weapon in question targets the eyes. Ideally, some sort of hearing protection should be helpful. Naturally, this will take some time, time we do not have. As I know providing such equipment to all of your troops is an unfeasible idea, replace them with full helmets and goggles. We will probably do the same and request some armor from Cornelia."
"Britannian armor?" Tohdoh's female subordinate asks. "Is that really necessary, Zero?"

"The Britannian combat armor is very technologically advanced," Suzaku Kururugi says. "The helmet incorporates a communicator, a gas mask and a combat sensor suite. It wouldn't render any of us immune to the weapon, but it would definitely help."

Xingke supposes that Kururugi would know. From what he's heard, the Knight of Zero actually wore said armor in the past. He isn't surprised when the Black Knights look uncomfortable at the reminder.

"With the exception of the Lancelot, I've made every attempt to avoid relying on Britannian gear in the past," Zero says, "but we cannot afford to do that any longer. For as long as we share an enemy at least, we cannot spurn the advantage this equipment offers."

Xingke can understand that logic, and the Black Knights must be in a similar situation, because they don't press the matters further. "All right, Zero," Tohdoh says instead, his lips pressed in a very thin line.

The meeting breaks up soon after, with Zero promising he will send all available data. Arrangments are made for Xingke's imminent departure and that of his entourage.

Xingke leaves the Black Knights HQ feeling both reassured and disheartened. He now knows what he must do to keep the Tianzi safe. That doesn't mean he is happy about it.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is a little more fillery, but it's necessary to catch up with what everyone is doing in the background. That's part of why it's so troublesome to write this fic. There are so many people and characters in this universe who are always doing important things and the political fallout of what has been going on is important. Next up, we'll be handling Nunnally :)

First off, thank you to everyone who kudosed and commented since the last update! As I promised, here is the next chapter on The Rise of the Unholy Trinity!

Side note: As I stated in the Men of Miracles note, I realized I fudged the timeline on this one a little bit and the whole thing is supposed to take place in late summer-early autumn, not late spring-early summer as I set it. I may make the change at a later date - I don't know. For the moment, go with it, since while there are a few time-sensitive chapters (Suzaku's birthday, Lulu giving Rolo the locket again), it's not that relevant in the big picture.

As always, all comments appreciated and feed the muse!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Xingke leaves, Lelouch remains for a while longer with the Black Knights. Due to Xingke's presence, he hasn't managed to speak to his subordinates properly, and they still need to address several issues he has pending.

He did consider telling Xingke the truth about Geass, but it seemed far too risky an approach. Xingke trusts him precisely because of Geass, but as the number of people in the know increases, so does the chance of a leak of information. Lelouch can't take the chance.

Technically, Lelouch isn't sure that V.V. has any plans on attacking the Chinese Federation, but there is a good possibility. Despite the fact that Lelouch destroyed his main headquarters, the territory is in itself important due to the other thought elevators present. V.V. may think he needs it for the Sword of Akasha plan.

Most importantly, there is also the fact that Lelouch cannot prolong the current status quo of the lingering Chinese troops in Japan. Instability is the biggest weapon V.V. has at his disposal. That is why he used the first Black Rebellion to get to Nunnally to begin with. They need to band together and tighten borders, and that simply cannot happen with so many people they cannot physically provide resources for.

He removes his mask and sets it aside, a sign of trust toward the people present. "Now that it's just us, let us finish the debrief. I'm sure you're wondering what happened earlier at the palace."

"Yes, Zero," Sugiyama says. "We all heard you scream. Are you all right?"

"We're fine. It was indeed Shin Hyuga Shaing who attacked Schneizel earlier. He possesses an ability like mine. I managed to... counter it, but the backlash had detrimental effects on me, and on Suzaku and C.C. when they tried to help me. Fortunately, we managed to free ourselves, and I estimate that our confrontation may have left Shaing a little worse for the wear. But that doesn't mean we can let our guard down."

C.C. nods. "We need to be more cautious than ever. I have no doubt that this is only the beginning, and Victor will make an attempt to come at us again."

"Due to these developments, I have finally decided to bring my sister Nunnally here," Lelouch says.
"She will be arriving tomorrow. Remember she is not a soldier. Due to our circumstances, she is not as unfamiliar with violence as I would like, but I did make every attempt to protect her. I will trust you to do the same. Inoue, I want a suite of rooms readied for her and our personal guard, Sayoko. Somewhere in the vicinity of my quarters. Orange will also be joining us, so he will need a room as well."

"Of course, Zero. It will be arranged."

"As I mentioned before, Nunnally is blind. However, she does have a particular skill that allows her to get a feel for people. When you meet her, I will ask you to hold her hand and allow her to touch your face so that she will be able to recognize you."

Naturally, the Black Knights assume this ability must be because of the experimentation. Lelouch actually doesn't know the real reason for it. Nunnally's uncanny knack for sensing the truth and feeling certain things that go beyond the senses of a normal human being always confused him slightly. He suspects it may be somewhat of a side-effect of Charles's Geass, a little bit like Suzaku's own use of the "Live on" command, but C.C. has been unable to confirm if this is true or not.

A part of him feels nervous at their imminent reunion. He has yet to remove the Geass on her, although he definitely could have with Jeremiah's help. In his past lifetime, one of the first things he did after reuniting with Orange, during the Requiem Era, was making sure he removed all the traces of the Emperor's Geass from his mind. He has every intention of doing exactly that with Nunnally. There's just one problem with the idea, something he hasn't managed to find a solution for.

Should Jeremiah remove the Geass on Nunnally, she will also presumably remember being Geassed and... everything that came before. To this day, Lelouch isn't sure how his sister came about her traumatic injuries. He assumes V.V. must have specifically hunted her down and mutilated her, but he cannot know for sure, just like he cannot know what remembering these things will do to Nunnally.

He too has lived under the Emperor's Geass. He doesn't remember everything he did as Julius Kingsley—some of it is a blur—but he does know that it affected him deeply. Nunnally's situation is different, of course. As far as he can tell, the emperor only changed one very specific memory, not her whole personality. Still, in his heart, Lelouch remembers that the last time Nunnally opened her eyes, she declared herself his enemy.

There is no reason why Nunnally would feel the same in this timeline, but even if she does not display the same anger toward him, there may be changes to her character. And Lelouch remembers oh too well how much trouble Nunnally had had to adjusting to her new circumstances the first time. He had done his very best to help her, and he suspects Suzaku's friendship—as brief as it had been—had played a part in her recovery, so her anger had drifted into kindness and acceptance.

He doesn't know what will happen now, if the truth is revealed, and he would have dearly preferred to keep the renewed trauma from her. But it is increasingly obvious that Nunnally may not be able to break the Geass herself in this timeline, and she deserves to be able to see. Lelouch cannot deny her that any longer. He will just have to trust his sister's strength. There is no other way.

Of course, considering everything, there is also the fact that he will need to find a proper way to explain Geass to Nunnally. He cannot give her the same story he gave the Black Knights. Knowing Nunnally, she would want the full extent of her memories returned, which of course, he cannot do. Therefore, he's going to have to tell her the truth—or at least a version of it, excluding the whole time travel business.

Shelving those thoughts and concerns for a later date, Lelouch directs his attention to his
subordinates once again. "Any further issues that need to be addressed?"

"There is one thing," Rakshata says. "We managed to retrieve the wreck of the Shen Hu. Will you be returning it to the Chinese Federation?"

Xingke's ruined frame has been the last thing on Lelouch's mind, but he is not surprised by Rakshara's priorities. "To be honest, it did not occur to me. If I'm not mistaken, it was Indian scientists that built it, so do what you want with it, Rakshata."

"Oh, excellent. I did have a few ideas in mind. A more efficient transport vessel would be of use."

"I agree, but I'm not sure we have the time for it now. Focus on improving the Guren. We're going to need it."

Judging by their expressions, the Black Knights are unsurprised by this announcement. "When do you think we will be able to stage an operation against Victor zi Britannia, Zero?" Tohdoh asks.

He probably wants to avenge Suzaku, at least in some way, but Lelouch doesn't have a definitive answer, not yet. "Hopefully soon, but we cannot rush this. Making a mistake because of recklessness would be disastrous at this point. I will be checking over the data we recovered from our operation in the Chinese Federation, and we will proceed with the preparations. I will let you know when the time is right."

Nobody questions him. It's nice, if slightly disconcerting to see.

Lelouch would probably enjoy it more if he weren't still dreading whatever Orange has to tell him.

The meeting doesn't last for much longer. Lelouch has a pounding headache, which is a little alarming, since Suzaku seems to have been constantly taking it away. His confrontation with Shaing has left him a little more battered than he would like to admit.

"Get some sleep," C.C. tells him when they retire. "You need it. Tomorrow you'll see your sister again. Worry about the rest later."

Lelouch wants to protest, but ultimately, he doesn't. He collapses in his bed and closes his eyes. As Suzaku slides in next to him and C.C.'s hand gently passes through his hair, he drifts into slumber, and the pain fades away.

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The day after the attack on the Directorate, Xingke leaves, accompanied by most of the Chinese troops. Mere hours later, Nunnally arrives at the SAZ. C.C. has mixed feelings about this.

While she is aware of how important Nunnally is for Lelouch, she doesn't have the same fond feelings for the princess as Lelouch, or even Suzaku. She doesn't particularly blame Nunnally for trying to kill Suzaku after the Requiem. Gods only knew C.C. once hated Suzaku enough to want to kill him.

But she's had time to think a little about their past life since the beginning of this new timeline, and she finds that she does blame Nunnally for launching a FLEIJA at Lelouch. Lelouch may have set it aside, like he does with most of the things that are too painful to think about, but it's one of those wounds that will probably never truly heal, even if he may not be consciously aware of it.

Thinking back, it's almost amusing to see the parallels between Lelouch and Nunnally's character. Lelouch too killed siblings, first Clovis, who genuinely deserved it, then Euphemia, who by that
point, was beyond their aid. A part of C.C. feels that maybe, in Nunnally's case, her pressing the button of the FLEIJA was also because of that, a mercy kill, to help Lelouch as much as to help everyone else. And because of that, C.C. knows that she should perhaps be fonder of Nunnally than she is.

But whatever reason Nunnally may have had for her actions, C.C. still has trouble accepting them. There is no room left in her heart for anyone except Lelouch and Suzaku, who has at one point managed to wriggle his way in. It doesn't even matter that this is not the Nunnally who pressed the button of the FLEIJA, and she will probably never be that person again. The fact that Lelouch, C.C. and Suzaku's actions are influencing the people around them has never stopped them from still feeling bitter about some things, as evidenced by Ohgi and Viletta's demise. She is still angry on Lelouch's behalf, angry to know that Nunnally's final rejection of him may have been the final nail to his coffin.

This makes C.C. feel somewhat uncomfortable around this version of Nunnally. So far, she has managed to avoid showing it too much, but she suspects things will get more difficult now that Nunnally will become a permanent fixture at Lelouch's side.

Lelouch and Rolo have no such qualms. As Nunnally's plane lands, they go ahead to greet their sister. C.C. lingers behind, with Suzaku next to her.

"I feel like you're not nearly as happy to see Nunnally as Lelouch is," he comments.

"What gave me away?" C.C. asks.

Suzaku shrugs. "Maybe it's just that I know you very well right now. Are you jealous?"

C.C. smiles slightly at him, a small, barely there twist of lips. "As if I would be. Perhaps I'm just worried."

Suzaku nods, watching Lelouch reunite with his sister with a thoughtful expression. Currently, Rolo is the one hugging Nunnally, while Lelouch is talking to Orange. Sayoko hovers nearby, ever the faithful guardian of the vi Britannias.

"I know Lelouch's priority has always been his sister but things are different now," Suzaku muses. "We're not the same people we used to be. It's highly unlikely that Nunnally will ever turn on Lelouch again like she did in the past, which is essential for Lelouch's happiness."

C.C. hums thoughtfully. "You're right. Besides, what we share is deeper than what he has with Nunnally."

If nothing else, that will be her revenge, the fact that she has stolen Lelouch from Nunnally. It's the same as with Euphemia. Lelouch will never tell his sister the truth about the future they changed, because he never wants her to remember the weight of what she did. He may love her, but their bond will never be as close to what C.C., Lelouch and Suzaku have managed to build through their shared pain and guilt.

"Anyway," she says, "it's not like you don't agree with me. That is, after all, why you're wearing your gloves, right?"

It's not that unusual for Suzaku to wear his full uniform—gloves included—around the SAZ, so nobody has noticed, but C.C. can tell the real reason. Suzaku doesn't even try to argue against it.

"I've been around Nunnally plenty since we came back, C.C., and I'm well aware that she's much too perceptive." He laughs, the sound bitter and holding no amusement. "I don't know if the gloves
will do much, but I suppose it's worth a shot, especially now."

Now, when he's still raw after Clara Lanfranc. Now, when it's very difficult for him to pretend to be the person Nunnally once knew.

Not for the first time, C.C. feels angry at herself for not having anticipated or felt Clara sooner. But futile anger has never helped her, and the important thing is that Suzaku is recovering and they're here and together now. And that's exactly the reason why she can't avoid Nunnally forever.

Shaking herself, C.C. makes her way to Lelouch, with Suzaku by her side. By the time the two of them reach the others, Lelouch has already knelt next to his sister and is holding her hand. "Euphie is still with Schneizel," he is currently explaining. "I'll let you know when she's back at the SAZ so you can see her."

"How is big brother Schneizel?" Nunnally asks, visibly concerned.

"Better. He'll recover. It will just take a little time." Lelouch shoots a glance over his shoulder. "Suzaku. C.C. There you are."

"You talk like you didn't know exactly where we were standing, boy," C.C. comments. "We just wanted to give you a few moments with your sister."

Nunnally lifts her head toward them. "I'm sure big brother would have never minded your presence, C.C." she says with a welcoming smile. It's honestly a shame that C.C. can't appreciate it more, having seen Lelouch weep in the dark over his sister's rejection.

Suzaku kneels on Nunnally's other side and takes her hand. "How are you, Nunnally?"

"Very well, now that I'm here," she replies. A strange expression flickers over her face, but goes away quickly. "I've missed you."

"And you have been missed very much," C.C. says. It's true, even if she doesn't necessarily include herself in the statement.

Lelouch meets her gaze, and there is a strange understanding in his eyes. Perhaps he is not as oblivious to her apprehension as he seems.

"Come on," he says after a brief moment of pause. "We should go inside. You're probably tired from the trip and you still have to meet the others."

There are nods all around. Sayoko ushers the wheelchair along, and together, they head into the building.

As planned, the Black Knights are all waiting to meet Zero's sister. C.C. carefully gauges their response. She is not really surprised when she notices more than one person display distress upon seeing Nunnally.

Despite Lelouch telling them of Nunnally's condition and some of them actively remembering her, it's still a bit of a shock and it probably doesn't help the current mental state of the Black Knights. Prior to their most recent revelations, there was an aura of invulnerability around Zero and his inner circle. Now, they know that Lelouch is only seventeen and has seen horrors he never should have—which is true, for all that a large part of the story the Black Knights have been fed is a lie. Then there's Suzaku, whose suffering and vulnerability is a heavy blow for those who knew him best as a child and Rolo, the youngest of the group. Rolo's general demeanor originally kept the Black Knights from questioning his skills too much, but obviously, that's no longer the case.
C.C. knows that Nunnally—who falls so heavily into the vulnerable civilian category that it's staggering—will only add to the problem. Her presence may hinder them or it may help them. It is too soon to tell.

Lelouch finally guides his sister to the waiting group of Black Knights. "Everyone, this is my sister, Nunnally. Nunnally, these are my Black Knights."

"Thank you for taking care of my brothers," Nunnally says to them, and her disarming warmth is so genuine it's nearly impossible to resist.

Nunnally's calming presence is her own gift, much like Lelouch's charisma and intelligence. When she smiles, the Black Knights are quickly taken with the young princess, unaware that she is completely capable of wielding a weapon of mass destruction if it becomes necessary. Hopefully, such a situation will never happen again.

C.C. thinks about a different timeline, when Lelouch so adamantly protected that smile and its meaning.

"Nunnally's smile was her way of expressing gratitude. I will not let you call that a lie. Over my dead body!"

By the end of the Requiem, Nunnally's smile well and truly disappeared. C.C. may still feel resentful of her, but for Lelouch's sake, she will have to do her best to protect it this time. Unfortunately, she suspects it will not be easy.

A part of C.C. always wondered if Lelouch's words that day were in fact wrong. Memories make a person, and much like in the case of Viletta Nu or Lelouch himself, they can completely alter someone's entire mentality. And she knows that Lelouch is doubting the certainty he once had too.

What will Nunnally do if she remembers being hurt and brainwashed by her own family? How will she react to it? That is the thought on all of their minds, and C.C. knows for a fact that it's been haunting Lelouch very much as of late.

For the moment, C.C. remains silent as she watches Nunnally interact with the Black Knights. As Lelouch asked them, the group slowly approach Nunnally and introduce themselves to the princess, allowing her to touch their hands and faces. It's a slow process, but nobody seems to mind, although the expression on several of the Black Knights' faces suggest they may be wondering how anyone could even think to hurt such an innocent, kind being.

Once the introductions are out of the way, they proceed with the original plan, showing Nunnally to her quarters. Lelouch has tentatively decided to talk to her and possibly undo Charles's Geass later, once she isn't tired from the trip, because he supposedly doesn't want to overwhelm her. Secretly, C.C. thinks that he's stalling, but she can't really blame him.

Occasionally, Nunnally throws glances toward Suzaku and Lelouch, and it is obvious that she knows something isn't right. It's just as well that Orange does seem to have something urgent to talk to them about, something he didn't get the chance to tell Lelouch earlier. He is visibly more anxious the more time passes, so as soon as Nunnally is introduced to the Black Knights, they all have an excuse to take a break from one another. "I'll come talk to you again in a bit," Lelouch promises as he hugs his sister. "For the moment, relax, get a feel of your new room. Sayoko will help you."

"I'll stay with her too, big brother," Rolo unexpectedly offers. He must have sensed Nunnally's disquiet as well. His sudden attachment to Nunnally will never stop being amusing to C.C.
"Thank you, Rolo," Lelouch answers his adopted brother.

"Don't worry so much about me," Nunnally pipes up from her wheelchair. "I'll be fine. Whenever you need to talk to me, I'll be here."

Lelouch shoots her a quick, pained smile, and C.C. knows without being told that he's remembering a different time, when he didn't talk to her nearly enough and when she was definitely not there when she should have been. "All right, Nunnally."

Once Nunnally is accommodated in her new room, Lelouch pulls Orange aside and into his office. Suzaku and C.C. follow. Lelouch is still very much troubled by Nunnally's arrival and C.C. has a feeling the worst is yet to come.

As soon as they are behind closed doors, Orange proceeds to explain. "My Liege, I found something in the files we retrieved at the Directorate. Something about Rolo."

"Rolo?" C.C. repeats. That is definitely not what she expected.

"Yes, Lady C.C. It would perhaps be best if I showed you, rather than told you."

He does, and as C.C. watches the data on the screen, she is left dumbstruck, in helpless shock.

Insane anger dances over Lelouch's face as he turns toward her. "C.C.," he hisses. How did you not know about this?"

"I told you, Lelouch. I'm not a god. I wasn't always with Marianne when you were younger. For a good time during that period, I was with Mao. I wasn't in Pendragon when Nunnally and Rolo were born."

It would appear that the two of them were genuinely siblings. Twins. And there is a distinct possibility that Marianne may have willingly given her child away, to be experimented on by the Order.

In hindsight, it should not surprise her as much as it does. She has known for a while that Marianne and Charles loved no one but themselves and they wholeheartedly believed in Ragnarok. That doesn't make this new knowledge any easier to accept.

"Why do this?" Suzaku asks, sounding a little lost. "Why go so far?"

"It's because they didn't trust me to contribute with my code," C.C. replies. She may as well be honest about her sudden epiphany. "Even then, they couldn't have missed the fact that I was always more interested in finding a contractor to take my code than going through with Ragnarok. She never did care one way or another about the success of their plan. All she wanted was to finally die and get the peace she was denied for so long. If Charles and Marianne doubted her because of that, they would have taken steps to fix it.

"But to artificially create a code?" Lelouch inquires. "Is that even possible?" According to the files, that was Rolo's purpose and the aim of the experiment.

"In theory, it wouldn't be impossible. The codes came from somewhere, and the progression from contract to code was always something V.V. showed interest in. It just never occurred to me that this was why."

This was why. Because they planned to use Rolo as a tool in Ragnarok, something to ensure their success should C.C. betray them.
Rolo's Geass—his ability to 'stop time's—makes so much sense now. Created out of an experiment with the Sword of Akasha, not through a direct contract with V.V, it was always something far more dangerous and alien to Rolo's body than regular Geass abilities.

She wonders now if this may be in some way related to Shaing and what the Dimensional Supervisor told her about him. Was Shaing also the result of an experiment? C.C. does not remember him from the Order at all, but that means nothing.

Perhaps Lelouch realizes this too. Perhaps he also understands the weight of what Orange has shown them, as well as the fact that it goes beyond the damage he and his family have suffered. Or perhaps he simply doesn't have the heart to face his siblings right now.

Either way, when he speaks again, he seems to have made a decision. "C.C., we cannot wait any longer," he says. "I believe it's high time I spoke with the Dimensional Supervisor."

C.C. silently nods. In her heart, she also knew this was coming. She can only hope and pray that whatever the Dimensional Supervisor tells them would not confirm her worst fears—the fact that the price for her selfishness has yet to be paid.

Chapter End Notes

It is made clear in the anime that Nunnally was not there when Marianne was shot and V.V. deliberately went after her later. I've since seen posts suggesting that her paralysis was induced by Charles, much like the blindness, but I do not think that is the case. Even assuming all the doctors she had access to completely missed it or were under Geass, she beat the blindness to talk to Lelouch. If she had been able to move her legs even a little, she would have done it when Lelouch took the Damocles key. Rolo being Nunnally's twin probably comes at a surprise to no one, since there is another Rolo in Nightmare of Nunnally who is Lelouch's twin, and the canon Rolo looks like Nunnally a lot. The logic between their separation is different here, but I went in this direction for a reason. If you recall, V.V. actually calls Rolo a failed experiment, and it was never clear why that was. I am also basing Rolo's backstory here a lot on Lelouch's order/request of "Please don't stop the march of time". I doubt it was what the writers intended, but I could not help myself LOL.

C.C.'s comment on Nunnally trying to kill Lelouch. I myself am on the fence about it, since it seems very unlikely that she would deliberately do this, but at the same time, she can't possibly miss the fact that she's throwing nuclear missiles at her brother's army and if I remember well, she does say/think that she will take Lelouch's sins onto herself. I may be wrong about this, as I didn't focus on the detail at the time, but even if my memory is incorrect, it is not completely out of the question that she did in some way intend to absolve Lelouch, much like Lelouch intended to do with Euphie and the Requiem. They always were more alike than Lelouch wanted to admit. Not to mention that the whole thing did feel like the ultimate slap in Lelouch's face. When he finally has his second most important person (Suzaku) by his side—even if for a reason that would ultimately cause his death—the first most important person decides to hate him. Enter protective C.C. and Suzu, because I am completely biased like that.
The Price

Chapter Notes

First off, thank you for the wonderful response to the last chapter. I'm so glad you liked it and my take on Nunnally's character. There will be more of that in a bit, but not just yet.
In the meantime, hope you enjoy this update! Remember all feedback is VERY VERY appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Lelouch stalks out of the office, obviously in a foul mood, the Black Knights are visibly surprised. It makes sense, since Lelouch has made it clear that he looks forward to Nunnally's arrival, and this sudden shift is jarring for their staff.
Their urgency is such that they don't stop to talk to anyone. They have left Orange to field any possible questions from the Black Knights while they go to get their own answered.
The Gawain and the Lancelot are the best method of transportation, and within less than ten minutes of Orange giving them his news, they are in the air and heading toward Kaminejima.
"I still don't know how I feel about this," Lelouch confesses to Suzaku through the coms. "On one hand, it's nice to know that Rolo is my blood sibling, but on the other..."
Suzaku can understand where he is coming from. Even before knowing the truth, ever since turning back time, Lelouch has treated Rolo like a blood sibling. It has a lot to do with the way Rolo died in their past lifetime. The affection between them is genuine and goes beyond bonds of blood. But that doesn't change the fact that originally, Rolo did start out as an assassin who would have easily killed Lelouch on orders, and Lelouch, by his own admission, planned on using and discarding Rolo like a tool, just for replacing Nunnally.
How V.V. must have laughed when he turned the two of them against one another like this.
"It's going to be all right," Suzaku tells Lelouch. Even if he has no way of knowing that, he has to say something. "We're with you all the way, and the Dimensional Supervisor will help us figure this whole thing out."
"I wish I had the faith that you do, Suzaku."
"Come now, Lelouch. I do think you've faced worse," C.C. pipes up. "At least we have the tentative knowledge that the Dimensional Supervisor is on our side."
"That's exactly what I'm worried about, C.C. The fact that the knowledge is tentative."
In the cockpit of the Lancelot, Suzaku flinches. He cannot disagree with that one, nor can he provide any further reassurances. If he tried, they would only be an outright lie.
As far as Suzaku knows, C.C. has only spoken with the Dimensional Supervisor once since they traveled back in time, when she was warned about what occurred in Pendragon. Since then, C.C. has made no attempt to contact the embodiment of the Gods. Suzaku is convinced that this is for a
reason, which is why he never pushed her to try to acquire more information that way. He remembers very well the conversation the three of them had in the future they changed, when C.C. said such interference could imbalance the entire world of C. He isn't actually sure what that means, but he knows it isn't good. At this point, he's probably just as nervous about this whole thing as Lelouch, if not more so.

However, after everything they have learned, about Rolo, about the possibility of manufactured codes and V.V.'s possible plan, they don't have much choice but to confront the mysterious embodiment of the Gods. They've come too far and done too much to shy away from truths they should have faced long ago.

When they arrive to Kaminejima, they find the Thought Elevator silent and unguarded, which is unsurprising, considering recent developments. C.C. activates the gate, the symbol in the center of her forehead glowing slightly as the doors open.

A few seconds later, Suzaku finds himself standing once again, for the third time, on the rocky bridge where Charles zi Britannia and Marianne perished in their first lifetime.

The Dimensional Supervisor is already waiting for them. "I understand that you wished to speak to me, Lelouch vi Britannia."

Lelouch nods. "First of all, I'd like to thank you for all your help. We truly do appreciate this second chance."

"So polite. But that's not why you're here, is it?"

"Indeed not," Lelouch replies, not faltering for a second. "C.C. tells me that you decided to help us because you believed that my loss was a waste for mankind. I don't believe that is true."

Suzaku goes rigid. On Lelouch's other side, C.C. seems to stop breathing.

This was not what Suzaku had in mind when Lelouch mentioned coming here. This was not what triggered his decision to come here at all.

It never occurred to Suzaku that Lelouch would go so far so as to confront the Dimensional Supervisor about her reasons for assisting them. Suzaku himself never particularly gave them much thought, although that was at least in part because he was too grateful to receive his second chance to doubt it.

Logic states that Lelouch would be the same. But then, Lelouch never seemed to have any sense, and he thrived on foolhardy gambits like flying straight at nuclear missiles.

Please, please, please, let Lelouch have a plan, like he did then.

If they get out of this one without being wiped from existence, Suzaku will do something drastic. Like tie Lelouch to a damn chair, confiscate all his clothes and make sure he'll never be able to leave the fucking house.

"It makes no sense that you would turn back time for one person, no matter how remarkable the person in question might be," Lelouch continues, ignoring Suzaku's rising panic. "I understand C.C. and Suzaku's reasoning, but you are not them."

Thankfully, the Dimensional Supervisor doesn't seem to be angry. She simply scans Lelouch's face with an impassive expression. "Perhaps I believed that, given how remarkable you were, you'd be able to do better the second time around. And I was right, wasn't I?"
"Certainly. Except that the risk was too great. C.C. said it could have collapsed the entire world of C. So why do it?"

"What do you believe then, Lelouch vi Britannia?" the Dimensional Supervisor asks.

"The most powerful instinct of every individual is that of self-preservation, and as an amalgamation of individuals, that would be even more powerful in you. I can only assume that, despite our intervention in the original timeline, the Sword of Akasha remained a danger, and it was highly unlikely that another Geass user would show up who could conveniently force it to collapse."

Much to C.C.'s surprise, the Dimensional Supervisor laughs. "Close, but not quite. It is a good guess, though."

Lelouch isn't deterred by her amusement. "But you do want us to destroy it, I presume."

"I suppose that would come in handy. But that still doesn't address the crux of the problem. Why did you come here, Lelouch vi Britannia?"

"I have a question." Lelouch pauses, the first real sign he has shown of the nervousness Suzaku knows he must feel. "How does one go about acquiring a code without taking it from someone who already has it?"

"That's an interesting question," the Dimensional Supervisor comments. "Why do you ask that?"

"The original codes must have appeared from somewhere. They either came from you, or from whoever created the Sword of Akasha. However, we've come across recent information that suggests codes can be... manufactured. That was Rolo's purpose, was it not?"

Technically, they have already found the answer to this question in the files and through C.C.'s take on them, but Suzaku isn't surprised that Lelouch wants to double-check. Despite knowing of the Ragnarok plan, it still seems so shocking that Marianne would be capable of such cruelty toward her own child. Unbelievable, no, but shocking, yes.

Predictably, the Dimensional Supervisor nods. "Yes. Rolo was meant to assist Charles zi Britannia and his brother in their plan, should C.C. have failed to do so. But despite the fact that his Geass did manifest in a somewhat satisfactory manner, it never evolved past incipient stages, much to their disappointment."

Lelouch's brow twitches at the mentioning of what his little brother went through. Still, he manages to keep control of his temper. "I'm aware of that. But that doesn't mean Charles and V.V. were necessarily wrong in assuming codes can be created out of contracts, without the necessity of another code being taken." He faces the otherwordly being in front of him without hesitation. "I do not know if what the purpose of Geass is and why it exists, but I do not believe in fate. I believe in choices. And if we're to do this, if we're to continue this battle, we need three codes, not just two."

Oh.

That's when Suzaku understands. This isn't just about Rolo. Lelouch is just doing what he always does—thinking ahead.

If they're about to start a war against V.V., there is a good chance Lelouch will have to take his code. With both him and C.C. possessing immortality... That would leave Suzaku to age alone.

Suzaku never really thought about that before. It just didn't seem a priority, not when they had so many other things to worry about, not when they've yet to stabilize the world and have Lelouch take
the throne that belongs to him.

He still doesn't think it's a priority now, which he suspects must be the reason why Lelouch didn't share this idea to begin with. He supposes some things never change. Lelouch is always going to be an idiot when it comes to what he perceives as essential to the safety and well being of the people he loves.

Then again, perhaps Lelouch does have a point. Shaing's Geass from the day before knocked them all out for two hours. C.C. is protected from that and was only affected due to her trying to help Lelouch. Obviously, Lelouch is not immune, but he will be once V.V. is dealt with, and they can't do anything about it in the meantime. But again, that leaves Suzaku out in the cold and vulnerable to Geass.

"You're not wrong, Lelouch vi Britannia," the Dimensional Supervisor says, completely expressionless. "That's quite a predicament you're in. And if I say there is no way to accomplish your goal?"

"I'll say that if you were capable of turning back time, you are capable of giving Suzaku a code."

"Always so overbearing. Doesn't your knight get a say in this? He did want to die for the better part of his life."

All eyes turn to him. "Not anymore," Suzaku replies steadily. "I want to stay with Lelouch and C.C., for as long as I can."

"Well, I suppose that's not a big surprise," the Dimensional Supervisor replies. "You wouldn't have come all this way just to leave, would you?"

She eyes Lelouch speculatively. "Ah, what a strange man you are. Why come here now of all times? What are you afraid of, Lelouch vi Britannia?"

"I'm sure you know the answer to that question."

"Do I? Maybe I should reiterate my real inquiry then. If I refuse to help you give your knight a code, what will you do? Do you intend to use your Geass on me?"

"Of course not," Lelouch replies. "I doubt it would work."

"Besides, we don't have to. I have a code," C.C. says. "Lelouch can get one. The Sword of Akasha can still be used... after."

Suzaku stares at C.C. He doesn't know what surprises him more, the fact that she even said those words, or Lelouch's complete and utter lack of surprise.

It's not like Suzaku is unaware C.C. would go to great lengths for the people she loves. He just didn't really process that she would do it for him.

"C.C.?" he asks, a little numb. "Lelouch?"

"I haven't come all this way just to lose people all over again," C.C. says, a strange fire in her voice. "Admittedly, this wasn't exactly how I intended this confrontation to be, but Lelouch had to go and jump the gun again."

"It was best to get it out of the way, witch. By helping Schneizel, I showed V.V. my hand. He's undoubtedly aware of just how much my Geass can do and will be prepared for it. He's lost Charles
and presumably both you and his... contingency plan." His voice shakes a little when he refers to Rolo that way, but he goes on. "If he gets desperate enough, he may try to use the Sword of Akasha with only one code. We have to get moving, or at this rate, we'll completely lose control of the situation. It's no longer safe to wait. Besides, you wouldn't have given Suzaku a Geass he didn't technically need if you hadn't considered this too."

"True," C.C. says, discarding her apparent displeasure with Lelouch with one simple word. Suzaku gets a flash of his days pre-Requiem and wants to weep at their complete lack of self-preservation.

C.C. turns toward Suzaku and arches a brow. "Oh, don't look so shocked, Suzaku. It's not like you and I didn't force matters like this before, when we reseted the Requiem."

"Except for the little thing that at the time, you weren't blackmailing the Dimensional Supervisor to give me a code."

How did he end up the voice of reason in this situation? Lelouch is supposed to be the brain, and Suzaku the one shooting things.

More importantly, is there any way to prevent disaster now that Lelouch has made his threat?

Technically, Lelouch doesn't have V.V.'s code now. It would behoove the Dimensional Supervisor to destroy them all, just for their defiance.

Then again, that would render the whole time travel affair business obsolete. If the goal of the Dimensional Supervisor is self-preservation, as Lelouch guessed, killing them would presumably hinder it. Otherwise she would not have reversed time to bring Lelouch back to begin with.

What a mess.

Lelouch is not deterred by Suzaku's attempt at reasoning with him. "It's not blackmail," he says. "It's a warning. We want the world to continue. But I sacrificed everything once, and it was presumably a mistake. I'm not sure I will be able to do it again."

"That's fair," the Dimensional Supervisor replies. "Although I find it intriguing that you'd ask for immortality for your lover, but not your sister or your brother."

She takes a few steps forward, until she's standing right in front of them. Suzaku instinctively pulls out his sword. He knows very well that there's nothing he can do if she chooses to strike out at them, but the response is automatic.

His Geass isn't screaming at him, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. For all he knows, the Dimensional Supervisor could have nulified that effect.

It doesn't help that her comment is a low blow, especially under such circumstances. Mentioning Nunnally and Rolo's mortality makes Lelouch jerk like he's been shot. "I don't want Nunnally involved with Geass. Not now. Maybe not ever. And Rolo has already suffered enough. I think that, in his heart, he would not want immortality even if he was given the chance to get it. I don't want to lose them, but I think that in the end..."

He trails off, and C.C. continues his train of thought. "Dying is easy. It's living that's difficult. It is a human being's instinct to fear death because they don't understand it and the end of their existence frightens them. But ultimately, the death of an individual is not a tragedy for them, but for the people they leave behind.

"That's why Suzaku and I were selfish when we turned back time. I knew in my heart that Lelouch
was at peace in the world of C. I may not have had my contract with him, but still, I knew. But living with the pain of that loss was too painful. We're all selfish enough to force this burden on each other, but not on any other."

"That is an odd comment to make, C.C.," the Dimensional Supervisor replies. "I thought you were done with your attempts to end your life and you valued it now, that you no longer consider it a burden. Or are you recently taking lessons from Shin Hyuga Shaing?"

"No, it's not like that," Suzaku answers in her stead. "Life is a responsibility, but it is also a gift. We understand that. It is being immortal that is a burden, because we're going to have to watch everyone we know grow old and die, whereas we alone remain unchanged."

That is, assuming he too will be included, and he hopes that he will, if only to spare C.C. and Lelouch the pain of his passing.

C.C. nods. "Yes. That is what I meant. Before, my immortality had become a series of accumulating experiences. Now, I'm actually living again and I have embraced it. But that would not be possible without Lelouch, and without Suzaku. I am confident that together, the three of us can carry the burden of a shared immortality. I do not think others would feel the same."

"Life and death," Lelouch adds, "that is the natural course of things. To be born, grow old, die. That is why when someone dies before their time, it is a tragedy. Because it disrupts the natural course of things. We are meant to live out our lives, to perhaps contribute to the world in some way and then return to the world of C. But that doesn't change the fact that immortality too is a tragedy, if not because it is unnatural, because it's so very lonely."

The Dimensional Supervisor leans in closer to them, so close Suzaku can distinguish every single shade in her beautiful hair and eyes. "You are indeed wise," she says.

Once again, Suzaku is stricken by her similarity to C.C. And there's something else... Those gemstone-like eyes...

The realization dawns on Suzaku like a ton of bricks. "Not possible..."

Her lips twist into a small smile. "Look at that. I didn't expect you to realize it. But then, you always were smarter than most people realized."

Suzaku's hand shakes on his sword. Surely he must be imagining things. Surely, in this place, it wouldn't be difficult to create an avatar that seemed to combine C.C. and Lelouch.

"Suzaku?" Lelouch asks, apparently realizing something is wrong. "What is it?"

The so-called Dimensional Supervisor arches a perfect, black brow. "Do you want to tell them? Or should I? I suppose there's no point in hiding it now."

Suzaku swallows. The words refuse to come out. He just can't fathom how this is possible, how she can exist at all when Lelouch's life ended at Suzaku's own hands before Lelouch could even think about the possible consequences of his relationship with C.C.

Also, where does that leave him? Is this a sign that Lelouch and C.C. were always meant to be together, and Suzaku was just there to make it happen? Is that why she seemed to dislike him so much the first time around? If that is the case, why are they having this conversation to begin with?

The Dimensional Supervisor lets out a heavy, disgruntled sigh. "Please stop being so frantic. If you must know, I was angry with you because you keep blaming yourself for things that aren't always
your fault and you keep making stupid decisions because of it. Also, do you have any idea how
difficult it is to manifest your consciousness independently of the common consciousness of mankind
when you're not technically supposed to exist outside of it?"

She glares at him and C.C. "You were supposed to be this one's knight." She jerks her head toward
Lelouch, then turns toward C.C. "And you were supposed to be his shield, his empress. And you let
him kill himself for no reason."

The sudden change in demeanor is so jarring Suzaku flinches. It's nothing he hasn't told himself, and
he's been aware for years of just how badly he failed Lelouch. Their current relationship and
Lelouch's acceptance of everything he has done has helped him make his peace with it a little. That
doesn't mean he will ever forget the fact that he did indeed kill Lelouch. And the fact that she of all
people is the one to point it out makes the situation even more hurtful, especially if Suzaku has
guessed her identity right.

"Yes, your guess is correct," she says, having obviously caught onto his train of thought. "I'm your
daughter."

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-dun-dun! The return of the evil cliffhanger!
Yes, I know that the chances of the Dimensional Supervisor being their daughter in
canon are not very high, but this is, after all, only a self-indulgent fic and I do what I
want. Or like Lelouch would put it, It wasn't me who was wrong, it was the world!
By the by, for the people who didn't watch Akito... In future chapters, this will probably
verge into Akito territory more than I originally expected, but I think that at this point,
that's not all that surprising.
When Lelouch made the decision to confront the Dimensional Supervisor about her reasons to help him, he didn't think about the possible consequences of his actions much, simply focusing on what he knew had to be accomplished. Keeping his loved ones safe.

Since he never even met the being who called herself the embodiment of the Gods in the other life, he doesn't think he can be blamed for making a gross miscalculation. But at the same time, he suspects that no amount of prior knowledge could have prepared him for this development.

"I'm your daughter. The daughter of the three of you, to be more precise."

Lelouch doesn't know who is more shocked by this, him, Suzaku or C.C. Suzaku, at least, retains his ability of speech, whereas Lelouch himself is still trying to get his brain to work properly.

"You're my daughter too?" Suzaku asks.

"Yes, yours too, Knight of Zero. Incidentally, without you, Mother's pregnancy wouldn't have been possible due to her infertility. So rest at ease, you contributed plenty to my existence. Or rather, you're supposed to. It is a little... complicated, especially now."

Now that she mentions it, there is a little something of Suzaku there too, in the shape of her cheekbones—sharper than Lelouch's and C.C's—in her nose. It's not very visible, but it's there. Or so Lelouch thinks. Maybe he's imagining it. Hell, at this point, he'd be inclined to think he's imagining this whole time travel business, but no matter how creative he can be when he comes up with plans for destroying his enemies, even he would have trouble coming up with something like this.

"That was the reason why I went through with this whole mess to begin with," the so-called Dimensional Supervisor continues. "To be born, and well, because even if I don't physically exist yet, you are my parents."

At that, Lelouch finally manages to make his voice work. "I don't understand," he says. "How could you possibly have helped them with their plan when I... after I...." After I died, during the Requiem, he doesn't say, but they all hear it, regardless.

"The world of C is an amalgamation of all souls," C.C. replies in their daughter's stead. Her voice is shaking, and her demeanor is as startling as her shy and vulnerable behavior during the time she spent as an amnesiac. "Not all of them have gained corporeality. That is, some of the souls that exist belong to people who aren't yet born."

"Precisely. Once I became aware of the... hiccup that kept me from achieving that corporeality, I took steps. Not that it was easy. But that is beside the point right now."
Took steps. Now that was practically a direct quote from C.C. herself. It's pretty much the same explanation the witch gave him when he first asked how this whole time travel business was possible.

"In any case, Father," she continues, turning toward Lelouch, "we have gotten a little off topic. To answer your original question, Dad doesn't need a code. He already has one."

Lelouch clings onto those words like a lifeline, since that is part of the reason why they're here to begin with. To get Suzaku a code, to keep him safe from both Geass and old age. "What? How?"

"Eventually, Dad's Geass will mutate on its own into a code of immortality. That's how the codes first came to be. V.V. and Charles were not wrong in investigating the possibility of creating a code. It's just that a Geass like Dad's is extremely rare. Geasses manifest according to the psyche of an individual, and a healing Geass requires someone with a great degree of selflessness. Or at least, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others."

"Well, Suzaku definitely has that in spades," Lelouch says, still a little gobsmacked.

"Indeed," their daughter replies. "I cannot give Dad a code myself, but you don't have to worry about him dying of old age, just as long as he survives long enough to have his regular Geass evolve into a code."

"That is a little problematic, considering we're going against someone who can order people to die," Lelouch replies.

Their daughter nods, and her neutral expression melts into a glum demeanor. "You are more correct than you know, although at the same time, it is not just Shaing’s Geass that you truly have to worry about. While it is indeed very powerful, it is his contractor that is the actual problem."

"That's right," Suzaku says. "The day Pendragon was attacked, C.C. told us his Geass is an anomaly and he didn't receive it from a regular code bearer. Who did he get it from?"

Their daughter purses her lips, and it makes her look so much like C.C. it's physically painful to see. "Do you know, Dad, that Geass has the power to do just about anything? To create, destroy, alter reality? Anything? I have yet to figure out its source, but I do know its nature is related to the very existence of mankind.

"The problem is that, from the beginning of time, people have lived in a perpetual state of conflict. And that leaves marks. I'm not sure how, but in some way, Geass has caused a representation of the world's hatred to be created. In that sense, Shaing is the symptom of a disease, but its underlying cause is entirely different."

The information shouldn't surprise Lelouch as much as it does. If anything, it makes sense. After all, that was part of why Lelouch created the whole Zero Requiem plan to begin with, because of his awareness of just how much hatred existed into the world.

Hatred. Wait... Could she possibly mean...

The memory of Suzaku stabbing him through the chest as Zero flashes through his mind. By his side, Suzaku goes rigid. Clearly, he is remembering the same thing. "What... What does that mean?" he asks. "If the representation of hatred is our enemy, how can we possibly destroy it?"

Lelouch already knows the answer to that question. The words he once spoke to Suzaku come back to him, like a prophecy and a sentence. All the hatred in the world is gathered on me, as promised. So, all you have to do is to erase my existence, and put an end to this chain of hatred.
"You can't destroy hatred with a weapon, not really," their daughter replies softly. "Only with love. It's part of the reason why Shaing's Geass on you failed after you helped Uncle Schneizel. The strength of Father's Geass did help him defeat Shaing, but Shaing's own may have left a mark had the bond between the three of you been less powerful."

"But that doesn't really change the problem at hand does it?" Lelouch asks.

The Zero Requiem. Would they have to do it all again? The thought doesn't appeal in the slightest.

He doesn't want to be the Demon Emperor again. He doesn't want to put his loved ones through the same pain they experienced during those days. He wants a future, but one he can share with his family.

It doesn't look like he will be able to get it.

"Hatred will always exist," their daughter says, "but the Zero Requiem tempered it enough that its manifestation faded away into the world of C, and it no longer had the power to give anyone a corrupted Geass like it did Shaing. The situation is different now and should the chain of hatred not be broken, the results will be disastrous."

C.C. sits down on the stone floor, visibly drained of strength. Lelouch wants to reach out to her, but no words of comfort come to him.

Suzaku isn't doing any better either. "No," he says, shaking his head and practically vibrating with grief and anger. "There has to be another way. You said it yourself, right? Lelouch has to live. Otherwise, you would never be born. I'm not killing him again. I'll see the whole world burn before I do that."

Hearing Suzaku sound so pained nearly tears Lelouch apart. "Suzaku... Technically, if I have to live just long enough to help with the conception... It's only a delay we're looking at. And, well... I can make someone else do it, maybe Orange..."

Their daughter intervenes before Lelouch can finish his thought. "Stop, Father, please. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying there is no other way except the Requiem. You just have to find it." She arches a brow at Lelouch. "You're Zero, the man of miracles, right? You were the Emperor of Justice before you were ever the Demon Emperor. Maybe that was always what you were meant to be."

"Would that work?" C.C. asks, finally looking up. "Even then, it seemed so unlikely."

"The circumstances were different then, after the civil war with Uncle Schneizel, Father's own admittance to having killed Charles—who was, despite his numerous flaws, popular in the homeland. Between all that and the FLEIJA... As much as it pains me, the Requiem was possibly the most efficient solution. Mind, it could have been done in other ways that would not have involved Father's death, but that's beside the point now."

"Right," Lelouch says, taking a deep breath. "We need to take things one step at a time. If we remove Shaing and V.V. out of the equation, we can work on the rest of it as a long term project."

Their daughter nods. "I can buy you some time and give you some help. Both you and Dad remain vulnerable to Geass, and I can provide you with an extra layer of protection. I may be able to add a little extra something for Mother, to help you in your quest to defeat Shaing."

"We would appreciate that a lot," Lelouch says. He isn't sure he means it.
Something about her smile unsettles him, although he can't tell why. Suzaku must notice it too, and he's the one who asks the question forming in Lelouch's mind. "Wait. This won't harm you, will it?"

She doesn't answer, and all of them go rigid. C.C. finally gets up. "Will it?"

"I have no way of knowing that," their daughter replies. "I am certain it will make me unable to manifest in this form, but... I don't know if it will do something else. It could make the world of C consume me like it did Charles and Marianne, in the other world. If that happens, my soul may disappear entirely."

Lelouch remembers the way his parents were absorbed into the ether on his word and is instantly horrified. While he doesn't particularly care about his parents' fates—in the last timeline, or this one—the same cannot be said about his daughter. "No. No! There has to be another way!"

She shakes her head. "There is none."

"We'll just go up against Shaing and V.V. as we are," Suzaku tries to dissuade her. "Better that, than risking your existence."

"It won't work. The chances of you dying are extremely high. No, it is almost certain. As we speak, Shin Hyuga Shaing's Geass is evolving. You were a match for him when you fought him last time, but things have already changed. Because of how Shaing received his Geass, he was able to make another contract with V.V., one that has reinforced his previous one and made him more powerful. It is of utmost importance that he be stopped, at once."

"None of that matters! I won't have you dying, no, being... destroyed for our sakes!" Suzaku shouts.

"If you die, I won't exist anyway, so it's a moot point," their daughter insists, clenching her jaw in the exact same way Lelouch did when he was being particularly stubborn. "Besides, it's not just for your sakes. It's for the sake of the world."

"So... This is the price we have to pay," C.C. whispers. "For my selfishness."

Their daughter seems to understand their grief. "Mother... My... dissolution is not a complete certainty. I may yet be able to reform. There's a reason why I was able to use the world of C to help you turn back time. We have to believe that I can come back."

"And if you can't?" Lelouch asks.

"That is a risk that we must take. Besides, some things are just more important than others." She faces them unflinchingly, and in her amethyst eyes, Lelouch sees both his own determination and Suzaku's unflinching strength. "I too was selfish. Technically, without you, I would have eventually been born either way, from somebody else. But I wanted my true life, what I was supposed to have, what I was denied, and we must all pay for our choices.

"Sometimes... Being here, having control of the world of C... It is easy to forget that I am not truly God, not a god who wants to be flesh, but a person who is granted power by God... Yes, that is the issue."

"Father, I have power, the power of the Caretaker of Spacetime. It is a power that is embedded in my soul, which is why I can access it here, before I am born. At my level of existence, without having achieved corporeality, I don't even understand it completely. I do know, however, that it is a power that I abused."

"I have actually believed, for a while now, that Geass is not a power humans should have. It is much
too great, and not something we should possess. It did save your life in Shinjuku when you first received it from Mother... But on the other hand, if not for its existence, would Charles zi Britannia have even bothered to start his campaign of world conquest? Even I cannot answer that. In any case, despite all my misgivings, I used this very same power over the world of C, for my own benefit, in a way it was not meant to be used.

"I knew that, by using Leila Malcal to turn back time, we were taking a significant risk. In your first life, she was instrumental in the defeat of Shin Hyuga Shaing. Her Geass, like Dad's, was special. I was well aware of it, as I myself was involved in the incident. It was the only time I dared to interfere in that life, since I sensed that if I did not help in some way, either Shaing or Gene Smilas would have eventually killed you before you could get the chance to leave the cell you were in. Dad may have lived because of your command on him, but you... Yes, you were always so much more vulnerable.

"But of course, that was all made irrelevant without Leila's Geass. Without her contribution, things have escalated to uncontrollable proportions. This is in no small part my responsibility, and I will not deny it. Because first and foremost, no matter what happens, I do not regret what I have done. And I would not mind ceasing to exist, not when it means that you will live and be happy."

"How can we ever be happy, without you?" Lelouch hears himself say.

She doesn't have an answer to that. Perhaps she expects them to just get over it, in time. They will presumably have eternity to do it, after all.

"You never would have told us the truth about you being our daughter had I not realized it, right?" Suzaku asks, and the flat, dead tone of his voice reminds Lelouch far too much of the facade of murderous calm Suzaku put up during that telephone conversation they had after Euphie's death. He's angry, angry at the world, angry at their circumstances, and Lelouch cannot blame him.

"Of course not," their daughter replies. "What would have been the point? It is just causing you unnecessary pain."

The exchange reminds Lelouch of a different one he and C.C. once had in their past lifetime. "Why won't you tell him? Why let him think the worst of you, even now?"

"Because it will make it easier for him to kill me. He'll drive his sword into my heart knowing that he is avenging Euphie, and that will give him comfort. It's the least I can give him now."

This is a punishment. It has to be. For all his lies, all the blood he has shed, all the pain he has caused. The girl standing in front of him is his daughter. It shouldn't have been so easy to see her as such, but he does. Maybe it's precisely because they're in the world of C, a world of souls, but he already feels a connection to her, something that wasn't there before. To know that she has to sacrifice herself for them, for the world... It's almost too much to process.

Unfortunately, he can understand where she is coming from. Yes, he understands her very well, more than he would like.

Once, he was the one standing on this platform, waiting for someone to show up because of a plan he knew was underway. "Did you already know that I was going to come here, Lelouch?" C.C. asked him then.

"And that you'd regained your memories too. It was necessary for this plan, wasn't it?"

Their daughter too must have known that they would come. She waited for them, planned this out.
She probably had a million contingencies to make sure that they did, had the situation with Rolo not pushed Lelouch to act. And if she is pushing them like this, she must truly know that there is no other way.

For a few long minutes, the four of them just stand there, waiting. C.C. is the one who breaks the silence. "We could just leave," C.C. says. "Suzaku, Lelouch and I. We could leave the world to take care of itself, disappear. I've lived hundreds of years under the radar. Shaing will die of old age, and if we destroy the Thought Elevators, V.V. won't be able to use the Sword of Akasha, assuming he's willing to try it with a single code. You would be conceived eventually. We don't have to go through with this."

"Yes, we do," their daughter replies, not unkindly. "Shaing is replaceable, a powerful individual, but ultimately, only a host of mankind's hatred. If or when he is killed, someone else will be chosen to carry his curse. The situation will continue to escalate. V.V. managing to use the Sword of Akasha will be the least of your concerns then. Nowhere will be safe. The whole world will be consumed by hatred, and if we don't act now, we may very well lose our chance."

"What about the other version of the Requiem which you mentioned then?" Suzaku asks. "We can do that."

Their daughter shakes her head. "The circumstances are wildly different. I'm sorry to have to place this burden on you, but there truly is no other way."

C.C. does not look surprised at the answer. There's no expression on her face at all. Perhaps she too understands that, even if all political regimes are transient, there are some things that need to be stopped, no matter what. "I see." A pause. "What's your name?"

"Unborn souls don't have names. It's something you're going to have to decide, if and when the time comes."

"We'll come up with a good one," C.C. promises. She is apparently ignoring the 'if' part and is focusing on the 'when'.

"I have no doubt." Their daughter smiles once again and the world around them blurs. Suddenly, the ruins gain an entirely different look, turning into a library filled with tall bookshelves.

Lelouch's breath catches. "What is this place? I've seen it before." His father showed it to him during their confrontation in the world of C.

"This is where the knowledge of all souls, living and dead, can be accessed. Code users can tap into it, but only up to a certain point."

She pulls out a tome and sets it on the table. "This is the most recent information I've managed to compile on V.V., Shaing and their respective forces. You will probably want to act on it as soon as possible, since it is not self-updating and without me, you will not be able to learn more."

"You know, I'm beginning to feel like a really inadequate dad right now," Suzaku says. The mildly teasing comment doesn't match his tense stance and the tremor in his voice. "We're supposed to take care of you, not the other way around."

Their daughter laughs lightly. "Oh, I'm sure you'll make it up to me eventually."

"We will," Lelouch promises.

It's not an empty promise. As he speaks, something angry and fierce surges inside Lelouch. It is the
same anger that once led him to want to take down a nation for the sake of his dead mother and his crippled sister. She is talking about dying, no, being wiped from existence, for their sakes. That's his job. He is the demon, not her. He should be the one to die, not her. If his soul were to vanish altogether from the world, it wouldn't be that much of a waste. But her? No.

He still doesn't understand how she can be here if none of this has actually happened, but maybe that's the whole point. She has bent the rules for their sakes, altered reality and twisted it to her liking in a way it should have never been bent, and for that, she feels that she must pay. Lelouch can understand that, but that doesn't mean there's nothing he can do about it.

"Look at me, my princess." She does, and their eyes, so very alike, meet. "I won't tell you not to blame yourself for what you have done, because that would be a pointless exercise. I will say this. Once upon a time, I stood on this platform and told your grandfather that forcing his good intentions on others was no different than an evil act. But at the same time, I know and I still believe that sometimes, to defeat an evil, you have to embrace it."

"You can't change the world without getting your hands dirty, isn't that right?" she asks.

"That's right. Talk is cheap if not backed up by action, and to make a change, those actions often have to be drastic. You are a princess. You understand that better than anyone.

"I cannot pretend that I haven't made mistakes. I know better than anyone that I am not a good man and it is perhaps my own arrogance and hypocrisy that have led us to this moment. But nevertheless, you should know that, even if we haven't had much time together, I am so very proud of you. I am sure that you did what you thought was best with the information you had at the time, and that's really the only thing we can ever do, no matter how much power we have."

Tears swell at the corners of their daughter's eyes. She is a messy crier, Lelouch notes, like Suzaku. "Father..."

"Lelouch is right," C.C. says, approaching as well. "The three of us hardly have room to talk about such things, as we have already established how utterly selfish we are. But that's not always a bad thing. It's not a bad thing to want a future and a life for yourself."

"Besides, regardless what your reasons might have been, you can't deny that things did turn out better," Suzaku adds. "Reasons and means don't matter. Only results do."

Their daughter wipes her eyes and laughs. "You realize that's a huge change of tune, don't you, Dad?"

"Yes, well... Things change. I've had time to accept something I knew all along."

She nods. "I don't want to die... I want to stay with you. But this is for the best. I know it." She takes a deep breath. "Now... Are you ready?"

Never, Lelouch wants to say, but that would not help. "How is this supposed to work?"

Their daughter looks at the sword still in Suzaku's hold, and oh... Of course one of them would have to do it.

"I see," Suzaku replies, and just like that, Lelouch knows what he must do.

He will not put this burden on his knight. He would never ask it of his witch. But him... Yes, he can do this.
Lelouch takes one good look at his daughter once again. Leaning forward, he wraps his arms around her and squeezes her tight, just once. Suzaku and C.C. join in on the embrace, and Lelouch knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he will not allow this to be the only hug they share.

He moves away from the three people he loves so very much looks up, bracing himself. Up above them, a planet looms almost ominously, making Lelouch feel small. He isn't deterred.

"God, Collective Unconsciousness!" he calls out. "Hear my plea!"

The world of C lights up around them, a thousand voices seeming to respond to his own.

"I am only a man, but I know in my heart that my daughter is more than me. She would not have been picked to be the Caretaker of Spacetime otherwise. So please! Collective Unconsciousness! Keep my daughter safe!"

Once, Lelouch told Suzaku that Geass was like a wish. Once, he stood here and asked the Collective Unconsciousness to not stop the march of time, as a request, not a command.

At this point, he doesn't know if his 'requests' are any different than his orders, but he doesn't care either. Because it is the wish that matters, and his wishes have always been fierce and burned the world like fire, especially when they were born out of the desire to protect.

This time, it is not different. The planet above them lights up with the bright red mark of Geass. Lelouch's eyes ache with the strength of the power he is exerting over the world of C, but he ignores it. He turns toward his beautiful daughter and pulls his gun out of his jacket. Without a moment of hesitation, he points and shoots, aiming straight for her heart.

Lelouch's level of skill with a sword barely surpasses the level of waving it around looking majestic. He's not liable to drop it on his foot, but he's not good with it either. But a gun? Yes, he's always been good with firearms.

His aim is true this time around too. His daughter's eyes go wide, like she's surprised at the suddenness of his action. It reminds him of Euphie, the day he killed her, but also of C.C. and the countless times she died for him.

A single tear slides down her pale cheek. Suzaku catches her as she falls, and it is like a cue. She smiles, and her hair and C.C.'s start to float, exposing their respective Geass signs.

The world of C starts spinning of its own accord. The planet above them shines even brighter, the Geass sign burning fiercer than ever before. Something inside Lelouch seems to slide into place, and memories begin to flash through his mind. All of a sudden, he's standing on the float in Tokyo again, fully aware that he's going to die in minutes, forced to watch his sister in chains in front of him. This is for the best. The world will be free of hatred. It is necessary. Nunnally, Suzaku, I'm sorry for placing this burden on you. C.C., I'm sorry for not fulfilling your wish. I love you. But there is no other way.

Then, he's on the platform in Sword of Akasha temple and realizing that his whole life has been a lie, that the only thing his mother cared about was Charles's plan and all else was irrelevant. "You, my own parents, you abandoned us!" The anger he felt upon seeing his mother's smug smile, urging him to later banish both her and Charles into nothingness. "Begone!"

He remembers being faced with the betrayal of the people he thought were on his side, only to be rescued by the boy he rejected. His own desperate attempts to tell Rolo to stop using his Geass excessively. Then Rolo's sad, weak smile as he died, still holding onto the few scraps of fake
affection Lelouch once threw his way. Yes, Rolo, your big brother is nothing more than a liar.

That terrible battle in Tokyo, his completely stupid order to Kallen to kill Suzaku. Seeing the pink light engulf the viceroy palace in Tokyo and desperately screaming, "Nunnally!"

Then his confrontation with Suzaku at the shrine. Being faced with the irrevocable proof that friendship only ever betrays you. Suzaku, you were my first and last friend. Goodbye.

Finding Shirley bleeding out and desperately trying to get her to live, like he once did with Suzaku, only to fail. Having his mind repeated torn apart by his father, replaced with fake identities and lies, as the friend he so deeply cared about held him down. Shooting his sister after accidentally using the Geass on her. Goodbye, Euphie. I think perhaps, you were my first love. Standing in the middle of the SAZ, overwhelmed by the consequences of the mistake he made, as he watched scores of Japanese citizens being gunned down by the merciless Britannian knightmares. No, I am not your Messiah!

Struggling with his guilt over the death of Shirley's father. Shooting his own brother. Watching Suzaku collapse in the Shinjuku tunnels.

The invasion and what came before, the loss of Nunnally's legs and sight, and their mother's death. "I swear, Suzaku, I will obliterate Britannia!"

The vow of his own younger self melts away into a different image, that of the icon he created to fulfill his vow. Only, it's no longer him wearing the mask in the memory. It's Suzaku.

In his heart, Lelouch always wondered what truly happened during those years that passed between the Requiem and the time travel plan. He never thought he would get his answers like this, or that they would be so dreadful.

He can feel the bite of Zero's sword digging into his own flesh, see the anger and hatred that burned in C.C.'s golden eyes as she spouted recriminations at Suzaku in front of Lelouch's silent grave. He can see Suzaku bearing the weight of Zero's mask, finding comfort in the increasingly strong Geass, triggered again and again by the assassination attempts arranged by a person he saw a sister. Lelouch. I miss you so much. How did it come to this?

He can see Suzaku standing in front of a terrified crowd, wearing the mask Lelouch himself gave him the night before, dodging bullets from knightmares and jumping onto the float where Lelouch waited for his executioner. He can smell the scent of his own blood as Suzaku remembered it, feel his barely-there weight as he himself collapsed in Suzaku's arms, giving his knight his final orders. This Geass, I do solemnly accept, Suzaku said that day, and he held onto it, held onto that promise, until he couldn't any longer, until C.C. offered him a better option.

Then, the memories take him elsewhere, in the skies of Tokyo, where Suzaku was fighting Kallen in a machine he knew was inferior and mounted with a FLEIJA warhead. The memory of Suzaku shooting the missile isn't there, not from his perspective at least, but the aftermath is—the absolute emptiness, the massive crater he left behind and all the lives he destroyed while under the sway of Lelouch's 'Live on' Geass.

Another flash, another memory. Kneeling in front of the emperor, holding Lelouch down and realizing in horror that Lelouch's father too had Geass, that there was so much he did not know and understand about this story and would likely never get to ask, because Lelouch had just been replaced by a stranger. Knowing all the while that he had no other choice now but to see it through. Torn between hatred, sorrow and a need he didn't want to accept, in Euro-Britannia, while he wrapped his hands around Lelouch's throat and squeezed. The vow he took refuge in when
everything else seemed to make no sense. "I will kill Zero myself."

Then there is the cave, shooting the mask and seeing his worst fears confirmed. "I didn’t want it to be you." And Euphie, dear sweet Euphie. The girl they both loved so much. Her final words to Suzaku as he wept and offered her sweet lies. "The SAZ is a great success," Suzaku said to her, while outside, Lelouch used the blood she shed on his accidental command to start his first Black Rebellion.

Then there is an ancient memory that somehow, after all these years, still lingers, the memory that guided so much of Suzaku's actions in his younger years. Suzaku, murdering his father, burying a blade in the flesh of a loved one, just like he did years after, during the Requiem. Suzaku's very first crime. Done to keep Nunnally safe, as it turns out.

Suzaku's father collapses into shadows of a distant past, and other memories replace the ghost of Genbu Kururugi. This time, they belong to a beautiful ancient witch named Cera.

Seven years that should not have felt like an eternity for an immortal but did. Frantically searching for a solution and failing, over and over again.

Seeing Suzaku slowly wither away into nothing, swallowed by the weight of his own responsibilities and guilt. Hating him and loving him and lashing out, because it was his fault, it was his sword that ended Lelouch's life. He was Lelouch's friend and lover and knight. Why? Why did he do this?

The day she watched Lelouch's lifeless body being swallowed by the ground, and knew she made a terrible mistake.

He should not have died. I should have stopped it. I cannot live like this, not any longer.

Sitting in a chapel crying, the day of the Zero Requiem. Watching Lelouch sleep, in the days before... Wondering, hoping and praying. Will he get Charles's code? Should I really chance it? I can still stop this. I can ask him to keep his promise to me. He'd do it. But do I have the right? No. It is his choice. I can't place that burden on him.

The day of the Ragnarok Connection, realizing that the friendship she thought she had with Marianne was a lie, that the only person who ever truly cared for her in hundreds of years was Lelouch, whom she betrayed for her dream of death.

Soul-crushing loneliness, and a thousand, no a million, memories of painful deaths and tortures. Being crushed, torn apart and brutalized, decapitated, tortured in every possible way. Being burned alive and betrayed by a woman she almost saw as a mother. And before, trying so very badly to survive in a world who thought of her as nothing as a disposable tool and a slave. I just want to be loved.

From that thought, from that wish, another is born, and Lelouch sees something unexpected.

A tired, but smiling C.C., holding a newborn baby in her arms. Himself and Suzaku kneeling next to her bed, making funny faces at the child who can't actually see them.

The little girl falling asleep clutching a Cheese-kun as C.C. tells her a story. C.C. picking her up the first time she falls as she learns how to walk. Suzaku throwing her in the air with ease, making her laugh in delight. The three of them clustered around her high seat while Lelouch makes her breakfast, because of course a princess should only get food cooked by an emperor. Nothing else could ever do.

Then Suzaku teaching her swordplay and martial arts. Lelouch teaching her how to play chess and
cutting her sureally-colored hair. The three of them discarding their roles as royalty and going undercover, to have a simple picnic in the countryside which their daughter could enjoy without the scrutiny of court.

Her growing up from a child into a beautiful young lady. Lelouch dancing with her at glittering balls, then switching places with Suzaku and dancing with his wife instead. The four of them in a knightmare hangar, with their daughter dressed in a beautiful black and crimson pilot suit.

Then their very human daughter turning into a person powerful enough to take control of time itself, growing into the title she was meant to have. C.C. showing her how to deal with Geass, in the way only an immortal witch ever could.

It is the future they could have had, the future of their brave, beautiful, amazing daughter, the daughter who believes she will remain nameless because of their countless mistakes. But Lelouch will not allow that. He will not lose this too, not after everything else he has lost. Even if he has just pushed the trigger of the weapon that killed her, somehow, he will still keep her safe.

Lelouch blinks and suddenly, he's back into the world of C, just in time to see his daughter shatter into a million bright pieces. The remnants of the most precious thing Suzaku, C.C. and Lelouch could ever hope to create float around them, and the whole platform shakes. Up above them, the image of the Collective Unconsciousness is shining so brightly it is almost blinding.

And then, the light dims, and the voices screeching around them are silenced. The light of their daughter's beautiful soul sweeps over them, and the weight of something warm settles over Lelouch's chest. It reminds him a little of Suzaku's smiles, during those first days of the summer they shared as children, of C.C.'s kisses, when they were the only thing that gave him hope, of the realization that Suzaku and C.C. both loved him enough to literally turn back time for him.

Lelouch collapses to the ground, looking up at a ceiling that doesn't really exist and trying to process what just happened. C.C. and Suzaku fall next to him.

There are so many questions on his mind, and so many things he wants to say. Apologies, wishes, hopes, dreams. None of it comes out.

"Did it work?" he asks instead. He thinks it must have, but maybe he's imagining it. With Geass, nothing is certain, and this is uncharted territory.

"It worked," C.C. whispers. "I can feel her, through my code. She's not gone."

Oh, thank God. Literally. Thank you, Collective Unconsciousness.

"You did it, Lelouch," Suzaku says. "You saved her."

That's not exactly how Lelouch would describe what he has just done. He's much too aware that it could have easily backfired on him. But the important thing right now is that it hasn't, that his daughter is temporarily safe and his gamble, no matter how insane, has worked.

A book appears out of nowhere and lands on his chest, reminding him of his daughter's earlier words. Lelouch snaps out of his trance, and finally realizes something he should have never forgotten.

Clutching the book tightly, he gets up. "Suzaku, C.C. Here and now, in the world of C, I will make you a promise. A contract between the three of us. I will be the Demon Emperor or the Emperor of Justice. I will be Zero the Man of Miracles. I will be whatever the world needs. But I will get her back for us. That, I swear."
Suzaku kneels at his feet, like he did once, when he told Lelouch 'I am on my knees before you to honor your resolve. "And I will be by your side, as whatever you need me to be, your sword, your knight, your reaper," he says.

"And I will never leave you, Lelouch," C.C. replies, her voice steady once again as she gets up. "Wherever your path may lead you, we won't ever be separated."

The three of them share a smile. Behind them, the world of C seems to vibrate, as if registering the echoes of their vow.

Holding that decision close to his heart, Lelouch pockets the gun he wants to throw away as far as he can and stalks out of the world of C. Suzaku and C.C. follow. They have work to do, and it's time for Lelouch to end this war once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this answered most of your questions regarding the past chapter. Feel free to ask if there is something on your mind. Non-Akito people, the 'representation of hatred' is the skull that gives Shin the Geass in the OVAs. It was never actually explained, so here I am, making up my own canon.

Also, I honestly don't remember where I saw the "I kneel before your resolve" and it may not be 100% accurate, but it stuck with me and I couldn't help but add it.
Love

Chapter Notes

Oh my! I can't believe this story has finally hit 1000 kudos! You guys are amazing, you know that? Thank you to everyone who kudos-ed and commented! As always, you keep the story going and encourage my writing. Oh, and sorry for the formatting issues last time. My Word decided to rebel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the fact that the Thought Elevator on Kaminejima no longer holds any traps, it still seems to take forever to leave it and return to their knightmares. They are all still dazed and shocked after their experience in the world of C, so much so that the real world seems... unfamiliar.

It certainly doesn't help that the book they were given turns out to be a symbol more than anything else. As soon as they exit the Thought Elevator, it vanishes from Lelouch's arms, and the information inside is transferred into all of their minds.

It comes in handy, and it's certainly more efficient than a regular reading, but it doesn't help C.C.'s mental state.

When they're finally a little better, they stumble away from the cave and make a beeline for the waiting knightmares. C.C. climbs into the Gawain first, more than eager to get off this accursed island. But first, there's one more thing that needs to be done.

Lelouch slides into the seat behind her, ready to operate the weaponry. As C.C. launches the Gawain in the air, he directs the Hadron cannon towards the entrance of the Thought Elevator and blows it up.

In hindsight, they should have perhaps done this sooner, but C.C. was reluctant to go to such extremes, considering her deal with what she then perceived as the embodiment of the gods. That has all changed now. She was never exactly sure how V.V. managed to use the Thought Elevator to transport himself from one place to another, when she herself was unable to, but this is one device he will not be able to use.

Yes, indeed, nobody will be coming and going through there anytime soon.

Once Lelouch is done with his task, it's up to C.C. to take over the Gawain. Perhaps it should bother her, but it doesn't.

The weirdest thing about her relationship with Lelouch is that C.C. never much liked having people depend on her. It was only logical, since if a contractor came to rely on her too much, he or she wasn't very likely to take her code. Mao was like that, which was why C.C. left him.

But Lelouch is different, and on occasion, C.C. even finds his inability to deal with certain things endearing. Such is the case with knightmares. Despite his genius, Lelouch never truly excelled at being a knightmare pilot. To be fair, she suspects that it is in part because he never actually got proper military training. He learned most everything on his own, and for the most part, that education
was all over the place due to him being so single-mindedly focused on Nunnally. He did get better
during his time as the Demon Emperor, so there is that. Still, in this instance, she is grateful that he
allows her to take over, since the distraction of piloting the knightmare anchors her and gives her a
modicum of calm.

She never thought that there was anything left in this world that could cause her so much grief and
shock so quickly as this episode in the world of C has. Even with Lelouch and Suzaku, there was a
build-up. It took them time to break through her defenses, which was probably a bad thing,
especially in Lelouch's case.

But what they have found out today has changed everything, changed C.C. irrevocably. She may not
have given birth or conceived a child with her lovers yet, but somehow, she knows that her daughter
is out there, waiting, and they desperately need to get her back.

Lelouch's Geass on the world of C has kept her soul from dissolving, of that, C.C. is certain.
However, C.C. actually has no clue what the consequences of Lelouch's choice will be for him,
since by now, it's clear to her that he too, like their daughter, has broken a huge amount of rules of
the space-time continuum. For that exact reason, they need to take advantage of the information their
daughter has given them and the gift her sacrifice has granted them, and they need to do it now.

She really should have kept a closer eye on the Order after Marianne's death. Apparently, V.V. made
more modifications than she originally realized. It was never an issue in the first life, because of
Lelouch's decision to wipe the Order out altogether, but things have changed, and the coming battle
will be different. They will need a lot of firepower for this.

Lelouch obviously feels the same because as soon as they start heading back, he contacts Cornelia.
His sister picks up quickly and seems pleased at receiving the call.

"Lelouch, it's good to see you. I was just about to call you, actually. I wanted to speak to you about
what we're going to do, now that Schneizel is out of commission."

"I thought you might," Lelouch says, his voice completely level and showing no sign of the turmoil
C.C. knows he must be experiencing. "But before we focus on the leadership of the empire, we must
focuse on its foes. Cornelia, I won't mince words. Some new information has recently come to my
attention, and I've decided it's finally time. We'll be making our move against our uncle, and I need
you."

C.C. isn't surprised when Cornelia doesn't need too much coaxing. She is the Witch of Britannia,
always more of a warrior than a bureaucrat, and for all her bloodthirsty ways, she always did care for
family. "Of course, Lelouch," Cornelia says. "What do you need?"

"Right now, the Black Knights are primarily a ground oriented force. We do have some transports,
but they're nowhere near as good or as numerous as I would like. I would appreciate some aircrafts
to transport our knightmares, as well as whatever reinforcements you can spare. We need armor—
that infantry armor you use. If you still have people in Euro-Britannia, we'll need them too."

They make a few arrangements, with Lelouch giving Cornelia a rough outline of the information
they have received. Cornelia has some of it, such as the information on the Britannian knightmares
Shin Hyuga Shaing's troops will be using, but the exact numbers, plus the reinforcements from the
Order, are something only Lelouch can provide. "I'll be going over everything in detail once we're
actually headed that way, during a more elaborate debrief with everyone. I want wheels up in two
hours. Can you do that?"

"Naturally. It will be done."
"Make sure you seal the viceroy palace tight, Cornelia. We can't take any chances with Schneizel and Euphie's safety."

The reminder is probably unnecessary, but Lelouch wouldn't be Lelouch if he didn't worry, and Euphemia will always be a sore spot for him. Besides, in this particular case, Lelouch does have ulterior reasons for his words.

"Rest assured that I won't be taking any chances," Cornelia says, her voice holding some bite.

"I'm sure you won't," Lelouch replies calmly, "but you can't blame me for worrying, especially after last time."

"I suppose that's a fair point, although 'I told you so's are beneath you, Lelouch."

"Just as long as it keeps our family safe, nothing is beneath me," Lelouch replies without missing a beat. "One last thing before we go. I need a small favor."

Cornelia listens to Lelouch's plan carefully and is more than eager to comply. C.C. is not surprised. It's not Cornelia they have to worry about when it comes to this decision, especially not now, when Lelouch has made his future plans clear.

"It will all be arranged, Lelouch," she promises.

They end the call on that note, and C.C. almost wants to tease him about it. She doesn't get the chance, because Lelouch is already contacting Tohdoh.

Despite the fact that the debrief is similar, the conversation has an entirely different tone. To his credit, Tohdoh does notice the change in Lelouch's demeanor. It is unsurprising, considering the fact that the day before, Lelouch told the Black Knights that they would take their time with V.V. and showed no immediate inclination to work with Britannia. "Is everything all right, Zero?" he asks.

"As all right as can be expected," Lelouch replies. "I've just received some important intel on V.V. which needs to be acted upon immediately, since the source of the information no longer exists to help us in the future."

It's a very cold way for Lelouch to refer to their daughter, but C.C. understands it. He is keeping his word already. He will be anything and anyone so that he can get her back, and right now, what he needs to be for the Black Knights is Zero, the Man of Miracles, unflinching against impossible odds. For Cornelia, the part he will play is entirely different, but if anyone can manage it, it's Lelouch.

"I've already spoken to Cornelia about providing further transportation, reinforcement and armor. I'll talk to Xingke as well. Start securing the SAZ and begin to prepare for the operation. I'll be arriving in Tokyo shortly."

Tohdoh doesn't question Lelouch further, but C.C. knows better than to think that the man is truly reassured. She isn't too worried about it.

After he ends the conversation with Tohdoh, Lelouch contacts the Chinese Federation. As expected, Xingke promises to gather reinforcements and meet up with them. He's more than eager to assist them once Lelouch explains that once V.V. is removed, they'll be able to slide things back to normal and the Tianzi will no longer have to stay in the SAZ.

Lelouch's sleeper agents are next. Lelouch checks up with Cao, and even if the man can give them no real information beyond what they have, it is best to leave him with a few orders. Then there's Bartley Asperius. He and his team are still under Geass as Lelouch never bothered to kill them after
they stabilized Orange's enhancements, instead choosing to have them work on improvements on Orange's knightmare. "I want you to monitor the borders for any suspicious activity that is directed at Japan. And ready the Siegfried for Jeremiah."

"Yes, Your Highness," Bartley says robotically.

"Then come back to the SAZ and monitor the surrounding area for any Geass agents. Don't be seen. C.C., Suzaku or I will contact you later for further instructions."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Jeremiah will be happy to have the Siegfried back," C.C. comments when Lelouch ends the call. "I suspect he may have been put out when you didn't ask him to join you in the battle against the Federation."

"I had a more important mission for him then. You know that, witch. He has skills that are more important than him being an excellent knightmare pilot."

"Are you going to have him give Nunnally's memories back then?" C.C. asks.

Technically, the two matters are unrelated, but Nunnally and Rolo are the whole reason why they came here to begin with, even if the result of the conversation with the being she once saw as the Dimensional Supervisor was not what she expected.

"Not now," Lelouch replies. "There is far too much I have to talk about to both her and Rolo. At this point, telling them the truth would just upset them unnecessarily. Once we're back from Euro-Britannia and V.V. is dealt with, I'll sit down and discuss matters with them properly."

C.C. agrees. Now is hardly the time for Lelouch to have long, heartfelt conversations with his sister, no matter how necessary those conversations might be.

"I take it you want to go take V.V.'s code today," she says. He's pretty much already said so when they were in the world of C.

"Yes. I actually wanted to talk to you about that. How is it even done if the immortal in question isn't willing?"

"Technically, willingness isn't a necessary factor," C.C. replies. "It just makes it easier and less risky. V.V. hasn't held his code for as long as I have, so he doesn't have the same control over it as I do. With the strength of your Geass, you should encounter no issues."

"Do we need to take him through a Thought Elevator?"

"No." C.C. forces herself to think of the day she herself had been given her code. "Your Geass will tell you what to do. You'll sense his code and you'll be able to reach for it."

At the time, she didn't even understand what she was doing when she took her own contractor's code. She simply acquiesced to a request from the woman she trusted, only to be betrayed later. Her hold on the controls tightens as she remembers what that betrayal entailed. She's very relieved when Lelouch turns the conversation in a different direction.

"I really wish things with Geass were a little less vague," he says. Sighing, he contacts Suzaku through the coms. "Suzaku, if we brought Sir Weinberg on board, do you think he would be ammenable to assisting us?"
Suzaku takes the sudden inquiry in stride. "You want to give him his memories back? Well, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. Would he be useful?"

"At this point, it's obvious that one way or another, I'll have to take the Britannian throne and I'm going to need people I can trust. I'm thinking of also telling Sayoko, Lloyd Asplund and Cecile Croomy, but having the Knight of Three on our side wouldn't hurt."

So all the people involved with the Requiem—except Nina, who is under Geass, and who Lelouch only ever trusted because he needed her to fix the FLEIJA mess. That makes sense.

Weinberg is a good option too. Lelouch will undoubtedly want to fill the Rounds with people faithful to him, and Gino's friendship with Suzaku could help them, as long as it is strong enough to withstand the knowledge of everything they have done.

"Well, I'm not sure about Gino," Suzaku says, "but it may be worth a shot. He was always very loyal to Britannia, and he was angry with me when I suggested killing Emperor Charles. It may be why he decided to take Schneizel's side, even if Schneizel was ultimately the one to give the order. Anyway, I think Gino wasn't crazy about what happened during the Requiem. I can't imagine any other reason why he would've gone back to school, to Ashford, after. And well, if I'm wrong, you can always use Geass to erase the memory and keep him from saying anything. How come you're thinking of this now, though?"

"Now is precisely when we need to think about it," Lelouch replies. "I refuse to accept any alternative for the battle with V.V. except success. But that also means that after said battle, Euro-Britannia will be left leaderless. Cornelia will defer to me. She has no desire to rule an empire and the Geass on her will eliminate any misgivings she might have had. It's an excellent time to establish a foothold. Schneizel will be easy to deal with."

There's now something harsh and thick in his voice, and C.C. is reminded of a different battle, of the first Black Rebellion when Lelouch had forced himself to kill his sister and use the massacre he had accidentally caused to motivate the Japanese.

"Lelouch... You know what happened isn't your fault, right?"

Suzaku quickly catches onto the issue as well. "We don't blame you for shooting her. Whatever happens, remember that."

"It's not," C.C. agrees. "We're all to blame, one way or another. But that doesn't matter. We're selfish people, and we have learned to live with our choices. We'll get through this too. Besides, didn't Suzaku and I tell you in the world of C? You managed to save her."

"I could have easily failed. I hurt her, just like I hurt you."

She knows what he's referring to, of course. He's seen the memories of what she and Suzaku went through after the Requiem, and she isn't surprised that they would be an issue.

"Whatever pain we went through then, Lelouch," Suzaku says, "it was worth it. You said yourself, didn't you? Everything we've done, everything that's happened—it was worth it, because it gave us what we have now."

Lelouch is silent, and C.C. knows she cannot stay out of this. Lelouch's silences are never a good thing. They usually end in either stupid decisions or big explosions. Sometimes both.
She sets the knightmare temporarily on autopilot and leaves her seat. His eyes—still glowing with Geass—zero in on her figure with almost humbling intensity. In such moments, it's so easy to forget that he is much too young to carry such burdens.

She presses their lips together in a brief kiss. "Don't blame yourself," she repeats. "Our choices were our own. We too acknowledged our mistakes. I know it's not ideal, but life isn't perfect. What matters now is the fact that we're here, together, and we have another chance."

"For ourselves, and for her," Suzaku adds through the coms. "And C.C. and I believe in you, Lelouch. There's nothing we can't accomplish when we're together, remember?"

Like Lelouch, he's trying to seem calm, but C.C. knows this has hit him hard too, reminding him far too much of those horrible days when all they had was each other and the memory of the person they both hurt so much.

"You're right," Lelouch whispers against her lips. "I just... I don't want to lose you. To lose anything anymore." He shakes his head, like he's physically pushing away his uncertainty. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be doubting this now of all times. I'll keep my vow to you."

"We'll all keep our vows," Suzaku replies. "We'll beat V.V. and Shaing, and then I'll finally figure out how to use this Geass of mine so I can make C.C. better."

C.C. is honestly not sure how that will even work, since the code has kept her body in the exact state it was when she died the first time. But if their daughter is to be believed, Geass can do anything. She will not doubt it now. Somehow, they will find a way to bring their daughter into being, and into a world of peace, where no one will ever hunt her or hurt her like they did C.C.

In the cockpit of the Gawain, Lelouch wraps his arms around her, like he wants to protect her. "Yes. That's exactly it. That's exactly what we'll do."

There's something deeply intimate about the moment, even if Suzaku isn't even in the knightmare with them. C.C. doesn't know what it is, but it makes her have a sudden realization. She realizes she loves them both so very much.

It's not necessarily an epiphany. She knew it before, of course. It's just that... Love. It's been ages, centuries, since she was in any way comfortable with the word. For so long, she didn't believe it existed at all. She thought she saw something in Marianne, and that didn't end very well, for either of them.

But she believes now. She believes in Lelouch, Suzaku and what they share. That is why she chose to turn back time in this insane gambit to begin with, and her realization of the potential future they may have doesn't change it.

Something warm shines inside C.C., and a niggle of a familiar feeling brushes against the corner of her mind. "Ah," she says as she breaks away from Lelouch.

Lelouch frowns, obviously noticing her change in mood. "C.C.? What is it?"

C.C. meets Lelouch's gaze and smiles at him. "I think I just figured out a weapon our princess gave us in our fight against Shaing."

Lelouch's breath catches as he finally understands. "Well, well. This will fit nicely with my plans. Very nicely indeed."

If there's still something jagged and broken in him when he laughs, C.C. doesn't blame him for it.
She simply sits back down in her chair and makes a mental note to soon show Lelouch and Suzaku how he feels about them.

She doesn't know when and if she can actually utter the word, but like Lelouch said in the world of C, words are cheap anyway. It's actions that count, and for the feelings in her heart, for her warlock and her knight and the beautiful daughter who will one day come to them, there is nothing she isn't willing to do.

After all, if this day goes as expected, Lelouch will have to kill more family than he originally expected. And they will all have to be strong, because as much as she hates to think about it, she and Suzaku will have to face their worst nightmare.

"Lelouch... There's something else," she whispers softly, desperately wishing that she didn't have to say this. "About the code transfer."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Technically... It's not something that happens instantaneously. It's a two step process." She takes a deep breath and finally tells him the truth she has been trying not to think about for months. "To put it bluntly, for a Geass user to take a code bearer's immortality, he or she has to die."

Chapter End Notes

Soon, we'll see Jeremiah in his giant orange of a mech! Aren't you happy?
Requests

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Here is another update, this one in celebration that somehow, this fic has become the most popular CG on the Archive. While I know there aren't that many works of the fandom here, it's still nice to see :D My thanks to my readers! IMPORTANT. To celebrate I am making a brief poll. As I cannot hope to include every CG detail in the main arc - the damn thing is already cluttered as it is - I have tentative plans for a sort of side story, maybe a collection of small fics or something similar. What would you be interested in seeing, other in something like that or in the main arc? Comment for your suggestion, and I will attempt to include it in some way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the knightmare hangars at the SAZ, Kallen Kozuki is fretting over the mysterious departure of Zero and his lovers. Lelouch has changed a lot since the SAZ and tends to be more open with his plans and problems. Technically speaking, one instance during which he has diverged from this pattern shouldn't mean much, but Kallen just has a bad feeling, a feeling that something is wrong.

To make matters worse, Nunnally's arrival has made some of the Black Knights restless, and Kallen fears that they will now start doubting Lelouch due to the visible vulnerability he has recently displayed. She would deem it unlikely, but she herself had temporary doubts when she realized Zero was her classmate. Obviously, she's realized long ago that it was foolish of her, but not everyone has her confidence or knows Lelouch as well.

She is debating the merits of going for a round in the simulators, when Tohdoh finds her. "We've received a communication from Zero."

"What?" Kallen immediately perks up. "What did he say?"

"Not much. Just that we need you to get the Black Knights ready, because we're leaving for Euro-Britannia in two hours, after we make sure the SAZ is secure."

Wait, what?

Where the hell is this coming from? Just yesterday, Lelouch told them they cannot rush, lest they make a mess of everything.

Tohdoh must have noticed her confusion. "I'm sure he will give us a more elaborate debrief when he arrives. He mentioned that he is discussing matters with Cornelia and Xingke, and he'll be back soon."

That makes sense, and well, Kallen has followed Lelouch's orders plenty when she had no idea what he intended, and things turned out just fine. He must have a reason for this change in plans.

Honestly, Kallen is glad, because the idea of having that maniac free to do as he pleases burns her like acid. Oh, how she hopes she will get to have a go of him and blow him up with her Guren.

"Right," she says, a little more cheerful. "We should get things moving then."
Technically, it's Tohdoh who has to do most of the mobilization of the troops in Lelouch's absence, but Kallen has been trying to get more involved in that too, remembering Lelouch's words on her eventual role in the Black Knights. And if nothing else, she's always been good at kicking people's asses if it became necessary.

It's not. Whatever misgivings they may have in other departments, everyone else feels the same as she does and are very eager to fight. Even those outside the core group, who do not know the truth about Lelouch's identity and still believe the story about the 'subliminal weapon', have taken the attack on Zero very personally. He is their leader, the person who freed Japan, and they want the threat to him gone just as much as Kallen does.


"We have all the knightmares and infantry units ready, Zero," Kallen says. He's wearing the mask now, so she can't read him at all, which frustrates her tremendously. "Tohdoh-san has assigned guards to all areas of the SAZ and we're locking everything up as we speak."

"Excellent. Wrap everything up. We'll be holding another meeting shortly."

Despite his words, Kallen wants to ask him what is going on, what has changed since this morning. She doesn't get the chance. Their conversation is interrupted when Rolo walks up to them, appearing out of nowhere, as is his habit. "Big brother. I understand there's going to be an operation against V.V. What position will I be occupying?"

"There will indeed be an operation," Lelouch replies. "If we keep to the schedule, we should be leaving within two hours at most. And the position you will be occupying is that of staying safe, here in the SAZ, with Nunnally."

The shock on Rolo's face is almost hilarious, or it would be if Kallen didn't completely understand how he feels. She too knows the frustration of having an older sibling dismiss one's skills.

"But big brother, I can—"

"Rolo, that was not a suggestion," Lelouch cuts him off. "It was an order. I may be your brother, but I'm also your superior officer, and you will obey me on this. I know you have your own scores to settle to V.V., but it is much to dangerous and I cannot risk your life against him." Rolo says nothing, and Lelouch's harsh voice softens into something a little more gentle. "I understand that you want to help, but V.V. has used people I love against me before. It is best for you to stay out of this one. Besides, I need you here. With most of us gone, the SAZ will be more exposed than I would like. You have knowledge of the Order. You'll be able to keep everyone here safe."

Obviously, the 'everyone' Lelouch is talking about is a reference to his sister and it's more than enough to change Rolo's mind. He straightens his back and nods. "I understand, big brother. I apologize for doubting you."

Lelouch dismisses the comment with a wave. "Think nothing of it." He leans forward and hugs his brother. Kallen feels a little awkward upon witnessing the intimate moment, but it does reassure her a little.

Rolo excuses himself shortly after, and for unknown reasons, Suzaku leaves with him. It would not be the first time Suzaku is assigned additional tasks from Lelouch, but Kallen still wonders what other job he has been given.
The issue is shelved when Lelouch arranges for the meeting he previously mentioned. Everyone gathers in the main briefing room at the SAZ. Even Kaguya and Kirihara are here, which says a lot about the importance of what is about to be revealed.

In a strange development, Suzaku has not yet returned. Instead, Jeremiah Gottwald is now standing by Lelouch's side. Maybe Suzaku is with Diethard? Kallen hasn't seen him either, not since before Lelouch arrived.

Lelouch provides no explanation for this anomaly. "Today, I've received some information that I must impart on all of you," he says instead, taking off his mask. "But first. There's one more thing we must do. Orange, if you please."

Suddenly, there is a flash, and Kallen remembers a different time, a different day, when her classmate approached her at Ashford Academy and asked her questions about her presence in Shinjuku. She doesn't have the time to wonder about how the return of her memories is possible.

Lelouch's voice rings out through the room, heavy and thick, like a sentence. "Follow these commands. You will not ever attempt to physically harm me, Suzaku, C.C., Nunnally, Rolo or Euphemia in any way, or any children we may have, unless C.C., Suzaku and I explicitly state to do it. You will not doubt my devotion to your cause and you will always perceive me as a champion for justice and the liberator of Japan. You will not reveal any information that C.C., Suzaku and I have told you to anyone not already in the know, unless C.C., Suzaku or I give you the permission. You will believe all this is your decision. You will not remember any orders or questions I've ever asked you after placing you under Geass."

As the Geass settles over the Black Knights, Kallen's recently acquired memories fade once again and the new commands are implanted in her subconscious. Meanwhile, Lelouch recalls a different time, when he stood in the hangars of the Ikaruga, with half of these people pointing guns at him. Their relationship is different now, but that doesn't matter. If all goes well, today, he will give up the Geass of Absolute Obedience. He will not be able to ever give anyone absolute commands. And he cannot afford to take chances, not with any of the Black Knights, not even with Kallen, who has proven to be loyal to him in the past.

For the sake of his true family, he will do whatever it takes, and this is only the beginning.

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In the quarters of Princess Nunnally vi Britannia, Shinozaki Sayoko is struggling not to pace. Restlessness is nothing new to her as of late, but her arrival to the SAZ has increased it far beyond its regular levels.

She is currently trying to keep busy by making sure everything is in order in Nunnally-sama's quarters, but the room itself is already in perfect order, as is expected of Lelouch-sama. Nunnally-sama is resting in her bedchambers, and Sayoko is grateful for that, as she knows the princess has been sleeping poorly as of late. As for Sayoko herself, she would not mind having to wait around doing nothing—that sort of thing is natural to a person who is a guard—but today is not a normal day.

A part of her was both pleased and relieved upon finding out the truth about the identity of the leader of the Black Knights. It meant she would not have to worry about divided loyalties. However, since her departure from Tokyo, the fact that Lelouch-sama constantly placed himself in danger worried her more and more. And now this whole business with the 'subliminal weapon.' Whatever that meant.
She expected it to get better once she moved here, but something has been troubling her greatly. Lord Jeremiah has been keeping something important from her—even beyond his regular secretive nature—and Lelouch-sama's earlier behavior still puzzles her greatly. And now, she has heard some kerfuffle outside, about the Black Knights departing for a new operation. Rolo-san has gone to investigate earlier, but he hasn't come back. They've kept it from Nunnally-sama, but that doesn't actually help Sayoko at all. What is going on and how is Sayoko supposed to defend her charges if she does not know what she is up against?

Rolo-san does eventually return, bringing some much needed answers and even more questions.

"Is everything all right?" she asks.

"I'm not sure. Big brother is acting a little strangely," Rolo-san replies. "He said that I'm not allowed to go with him on the mission and I should stay here where I'm protected. He then told me to come back here, that he'd come see us both soon."

"Me as well?"

Rolo-san nods. "I get the feeling he's planning something more than he's told the Black Knights. Kozuki was there, and I think she might not be in on whatever he wants to talk to us about. Big brother whispered a part of his instructions in my ear."

That does sound like something Lelouch-sama would do. He is always planning something that he doesn't share with other people. It is nice to hear that Lelouch-sama may trust her more than she does his Black Knights, but it doesn't reassure her completely, not yet.

Fortunately, it doesn't take much longer for Lelouch-sama to return. When he does, it is with both Lord Jeremiah and C.C.-san by his side.

Their demeanor is not encouraging. As soon as Lelouch-sama removes his mask, Sayoko is seized by the impulse to bundle up in a blanket and hide him somewhere away from the world. She cannot do that, not any longer, not when he has grown past the ten year old boy whom she swore to protect so long ago. So instead, she shoots him a concerned look and reiterates the question she recently asked Rolo-san. "Lelouch-sama? Is everything all right?"

"No," he replies. "It's not. He shakes his head, as if physically chasing away a thought. "I wanted to talk to you about something important."

"Of course, Lelouch-sama. What is it?"

"I'm sure you've been at least somewhat confused about these developments, with me being Zero and the recent attack on Japan."

Sayoko nods. That is putting it lightly. She has an understanding of the general timeframe of events, but still, there are a lot of pieces that don't quite fit. While Lord Jeremiah has given her some information, he was understandably reluctant to reveal too much without his liege's explicit permission, and Sayoko does not blame him for it.

"I would like to make you an offer," Lelouch-sama continues. "It will involve bringing you into the fold of my plan completely. It's a bit selfish on my part, I admit, and it will involve some physical discomfort for you."

"Whatever you need, Lelouch-sama, I am at your disposal."

"Right. You don't need to do anything. Simply brace yourself. C.C will do the rest."
Sayoko doesn't know what to make of the green-haired woman who is so obviously Lelouch-sama's lover, despite him being in a relationship with his childhood friend. She supposes that in some way, she should have expected this development, considering Lelouch-sama's slight... womanizing tendencies, but C.C.-san herself is not like any of Lelouch-sama's school friends. She is so very quiet and strange, and her demeanor sometimes unsettles Sayoko. Nevertheless, Lelouch-sama seems to trust her, so Sayoko will trust her too. She nods again.

C.C. approaches and gently leans toward her. Much to Sayoko's surprise, she presses her lips to Sayoko's temple.

Whatever shock Sayoko may have felt at C.C.'s affectionate gesture vanishes as strange memories assault her mind. She remembers Lelouch-sama's death, how painful it was for her to watch, no, to even acknowledge that it would happen. She remembers just standing by watching as the crowd chanted, "Zero! Zero! Zero!" and knowing how very unfair it all was.

In truth, Sayoko was always against Lelouch-sama's plan, but it was not her place to question it. Once, she actually discussed it with Lord Jeremiah and he admitted to feeling just as uneasy. However, since it was Lelouch-sama's will, it had to be enforced.

Some things about Lelouch-sama were always a mystery to Sayoko, but what was always very clear was that he fought for a better future, for his sister and for the Japanese. That never changed, not even when the world deemed him a monster. And so, she set her misgivings aside and the Zero Requiem happened.

Her hands often ached for her kunais during those first days after his death. But she held back, for Lelouch-sama's sake. It paid off, like Lelouch-sama expected it would. Due to her supposed betrayal during the battle against Prince Schneizel, she was able to have a new life in Japan. She rebuilt the Shinozaki School of Martial Arts and took on pupils of her own. She tried to take comfort in the peace Lelouch-sama's death left behind.

In her heart, what she always truly sought was someone to whom she could tell the true story of the Demon Emperor, someone who could one day clear Lelouch-sama's name, when it was safe and his legacy was not in danger.

She didn't really keep in contact with C.C.-sama or Suzaku. A part of her would have liked to, since she was aware that Suzaku carried the heaviest burden of them all. But it was much too dangerous, when he lived in Britannia and she in Japan, when he carried the mask of Zero and was Suzaku Kururugi no longer.

She never did find that special pupil, but that doesn't matter anymore. If Sayoko isn't imagining things, they have somehow traveled back in time. It seems impossible, but Lelouch-sama has done impossible things before and Sayoko isn't really prone to elaborate flights of fancy.

Despite this knowledge, she's still shaken and lost and feels grateful when Lord Jeremiah helps her up. She doesn't even remember falling, but that is the least of her concerns. "How?" she asks.

"It's complicated, but the gist of it that C.C. came up with a plan to give us another chance," Lelouch-sama replies. "So far, other than the people in this room, the only one in the know is obviously Suzaku. But Sayoko... Things have changed since those days. Nothing comes without a price, and we've started something that never happened before. The battle that we have to fight today is only the beginning. We're going to need you and your loyalty. Will you stay by the side of Emperor Lelouch vi Britannia once again?"

It is the easiest question Sayoko has ever been asked. "I am with you, Lelouch-sama," she replies.
"Always. What must I do?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Kallen fans. Sorry BK fans. Unfortunately, this was always going to happen. And yes, shit is about to go down.
As of late, Cornelia li Britannia hasn’t taken enjoyment in many things. Since the explosion in Pendragon and the attack on Schneizel, even thinking the word has seemed irrelevant. She’s been so busy trying to keep the empire from falling apart that she’s barely had time to spend with Euphie, which always used to cheer her up.

Not to mention that her sister has her own concerns and responsibilities. Cornelia has already spoken to Euphie about the possibility of her having to take over leadership of the Britannian side of the management of the former Area 11, and Euphie has agreed. Cornelia is both proud and pained to see how much her little sister has grown in the months since their arrival here, but she does miss the easier relationship they had before.

In any case, today, things are finally looking up. They are finally taking up arms and she is finally getting a brother back. Oh, yes, she is definitely enjoying this, and she expects it will only get better as Lelouch’s plan unfolds.

As soon as she ends the call with Lelouch, Cornelia begins throwing orders around, making preparations for the imminent battle. It’s even easier than usual. Never have her men been more eager to go into battle. Word has already leaked of the attack on Schneizel, and while panic is slowly spreading, it just make people more excited at the chance to fight back.

She only takes a moment to make it clear to the men that they are not to provoke the Numbers in any way and that in this, Britannia and the Black Knights are allies. As expected, nobody protests, although the rule probably grates on them.

She has everything ready well within the timeframe Lelouch indicated. She readies her own flagship, as well as a good number of additional transports, as specified by her brother. There are also additional flying attack units, knightmares, infantry, and everything and anything she can spare. She uses all the rest to solidify defenses on the palace and places a heavy guard on Euphie and Schneizel.

Once they are as prepared as they can be, Cornelia gets on her flagship, taking Guilford, Darlton, Weinberg and the Glaston Knights with her. All their frames—including Weinberg’s, which has been fixed after the damage it received in Euro-Britannia—are already on board and ready to be used. After making the final verifications, Cornelia orders the troops to depart.
When Cornelia arrives at the SAZ, the Black Knights—Lelouch included—are already waiting for them. Deciding to stick to regular protocol, Cornelia meets with Lelouch outside the flagship. He's dressed in the Zero costume and flanked by his inner circle. There's his knight, of course, his green-haired woman—C.C., if Cornelia remembers well— the redhead from the hospital and Jeremiah Gottwald of all people. He too is wearing a mask, but it only covers half his face, so it's not very difficult to distinguish his identity, especially given the fact that said mask is orange.

Cornelia supposes Gottwald's betrayal makes sense now. He always was very loyal to Marianne, as loyal as she was, and he must have joined Zero when he learned the truth. Cornelia finds that she cannot begrudge him that.

Setting these details aside, Cornelia greets her brother politely—or with as much politeness as would be appropriate under the circumstances. "Zero," she says, "Everything is in order, I take it?"

"Yes," Lelouch replies, his voice perfectly calm. "We have everything prepared for the campaign. We appreciate the provided reinforcements."

"On the contrary, Zero. No thanks are needed. We are allies, in this, are we not?"

They set pleasantries aside after that and between the two of them, coordinate the transfer of all the nightmares on the transports. The Black Knights do have some flying units, but they are not as numerous, or as efficient as what Cornelia has provided.

The Gawain, the Lancelot and the red machine Lelouch has identified as the Guren all end up on Cornelia's flagship, as well as most of the equipment of the core group of the Black Knights. Most Black Knights recruits also end up sharing space with Britannian soldiers on the other transports. Like Cornelia's men, they aren't exactly pleased about it, but they do not protest. Lelouch must have spoken to them in some way beforehand. He still assigns people to each group that is in this situation, presumably to make sure tensions do not escalate too much. Cornelia thinks this is a wise strategy, especially considering Lelouch's following plans.

Directed by Lelouch, the Black Knights are nothing if not efficient, and soon, everything is prepared and the vessels are in the air and headed toward Euro-Britannia. Lelouch, Kururugi, C.C. and the redhead are all on the flagship, together with Tohdoh Kyoshiro and his four... underlings. Oddly, Lloyd Asplund and Cecile Croomy have also joined them, although that could be due to the Lancelot's presence on the flagship.

God only knows Lloyd goes anywhere his machine is taken. That thing is like is baby.

Either way, to say that the situation is awkward would be an understatement, but Cornelia doesn't let it get to her, and neither does Lelouch. "Princess Cornelia, I will be providing the promised debrief now. If you would direct me to appropriate location..."

"Yes, of course, Zero. This way."

Other than Guilford, her own entourage appears to be very confused by her demeanor. Cornelia finds herself being amused at this. It's like she and Lelouch are in on a private joke. Although that's certainly not true, since war is no joke and plenty of people are informed of at least part of the situation, it still reminds her of younger, happier days, when Lelouch was a child and lived at Aries with Nunnally and Lady Marianne.

But those days have passed now, and this is not the time for sentimental musings. As promised, Cornelia leads Lelouch and his companions to the main deck.
"At this time, we'll be discussing the information provided by Zero with our forces," she says. "Connect us to other ships."

The technicians comply, and video feeds that link to the other vessels pop up on the screens in front of them.

Lelouch doesn't hide behind eccentric gestures or elaborate games of wordplay. In fact, he doesn't hide at all.

"Good evening," he says. "My name is Zero, but you may know me under a different name." He reaches for his mask and just like that, takes it off. "Lelouch vi Britannia."

Just hearing her brother acknowledge his true identity in front of so many people fills Cornelia with a sense of visceral satisfaction. Despite the fact that she was extremely happy to find Lelouch alive, it never sat well with her that he chose to keep company with the Numbers, instead of with his own family, where he belongs. She has yet to fully understand what made him turn his weapon on Clovis, but she will ask, once she gets the chance. It was probably related to the influence of the Numbers in some way. In any case, it's clear to her that he has finally accepted that he is and will always be a prince of Britannia and once this is all over, he has to come home.

Granted, she is not fool enough to believe she won't have to accept Kururugi too once this occurs, but she's more than willing to compromise.

For the moment, Cornelia simply watches Lelouch, waiting for the right moment to step in. It may seem like a bad time to dump this on their staff, but when Lelouch suggested it, she agreed it was a good idea.

"People always take shocking things in stride when they have an enemy they can focus on," Lelouch told her during their call. "Revealing my identity may cause some uncertainty within the ranks, but the core of the Black Knights are already aware of the truth, so they'll back me up. They won't be a problem. And with you by my side, the Britannians won't question me, at least, not right now. This will work, Cornelia."

He was right, of course. She may have given her staff instructions to work with Zero and they may be complying out of sheer necessity, but that's only a short-term solution. After all this is over, Lelouch will take his place in the Britannian imperial family once again. He has agreed that, after their uncle is dealt with and until Schneizel is up and about, he will help Cornelia with the management of the empire. But he is still Zero, and he is not willing to abandon that.

Cornelia finds that she cannot blame him for it, not really. It would be easier, in some respects, but what is easy isn't always what is best. Britannians may resent Zero for taking Area 11 from them, but that doesn't mean they don't respect and understand the meaning of that accomplishment.

Should Lelouch hide his background as Zero, he would be forced to pop up on the map as the unknown, exiled, meaningless prince. It is a waste. No, they can use this. They just have to spin it right. Cornelia wouldn't have tried it herself, on her own—she admits that she is nowhere near as good at such things as Lelouch or Schneizel—but her brother will do just fine. He has to, especially in the context of these new developments in Europia that he himself has mentioned.

It's interesting to watch the responses of the people around them. Kururugi and C.C. are predictably unfazed by the sudden announcement. The red-haired woman is not in the same situation. Her visible shock and confusion make Cornelia wonder where the hell she fits in and who is actually Lelouch's lover. C.C.? This redhead? Kururugi? All of them, maybe?
Cornelia certainly hopes Lelouch isn't following their father's example in building a harem, but at this point, she fears anything is possible.

Then again, many of those present—both Cornelia's own staff and Lelouch's people—gape openly at the revelation, so the redhead isn't exactly an exception. By her side, Darlton goes very still. Weinberg's breath catches. Britannians all over the room go pasty white, looking from Lelouch to Cornelia and trying to figure out what to do.

Lloyd is smirking in poorly concealed delight, whereas Cecile looks a little concerned. Clearly, they were aware of this information. Cornelia wonders when they even found out and why they never mentioned it, especially since they were still technically working under Britannian authority.

"Right now, you are all undoubtedly confused," Lelouch says, ignoring all of their reactions. "Perhaps some of you, both Japanese and Britannian, may be feeling betrayed. Why would a Britannian prince be wearing the mask of Zero, you are asking yourselves.

"The answer is quite simple. I have always believed that Britannia is indeed one of the most powerful nations of the planet. But strength is meaningless if it is used to oppress. There's no pride, no honor, no virtue in humiliating and hurting someone weaker than you. No, such strength is not real.

"My father was no different. He was so busy expanding the borders of the empire that he forgot to think about his own citizens. And what is a nation without its citizens? Nothing, only a name empty of meaning. For his arrogance, we have all paid a dire price.

"Countless of people—some of them present—had relatives, friends, loved ones in Pendragon and Euro-Britannia. Innocents, civilians, people who had nothing to do with war. Women and children. All these lives have now been extinguished. Because it is always the innocent who pay for the arrogance of powerful men. He may be dead now as well, but that doesn't bring all those people back, now does it?

"I created Zero and the Black Knights as force for justice, and to that I stand. I believe that Britannia once stood for that too. Most importantly, whatever crimes its leaders have committed, it is unjust for its innocent citizens to be punished for it. To this end, we must now set our differences aside all work together to remove the threat that Charles zi Britannia chose to ignore."

There is something almost hypnotic about the way he speaks, about his gestures and his voice. It would probably look over the top on anyone else, but it suits him, and even the most shocked people are taken with it. Cornelia would be jealous if Lelouch weren't her little brother.

"Of course," he finally says, "now is hardly the time to go into too much detail over resentments and motivations. That's not why we're all here. I promised providing further information on the foe that we face. Here it is. C.C., if you please."

C.C. silently nods and glides to one of the computer panels. She inserts an USB stick in the slot and takes over the work station, with the dumbfounded technician watching her without knowing what to do.

"At this time, what we know is that most of the enemy troops will be using Sutherlands and Gloucesters, specifically a form of knightmare called the Gloucester Swordsman," Lelouch says. "There are several known exceptions. The first is the Vercingetorix, operated by the leader of the Euro-Britannian coup, Shin Hyuga Shaing."

As he speaks, a digital render of the knightmare in question appears on the screens. There are specs
"Then we have an Europia United produced knightmare. The frame in question is an upgraded version of the experimental frame Alexander. It is operated by the mastermind behind the whole attack, who is in fact, the emperor's own brother, Victor."

Lelouch pauses as he waits for the Britannians to process this little tidbit. Cornelia knows without being told that it is certainly working to help distract her men from the fact that Zero is their prince.

The restlessness immediately subsides when Lelouch speaks again. "Perhaps you find this information surprising. You should not. This is simply the natural result of the policy Charles zi Britannia himself has inflicted upon us. But it is something that must stop today. Too much innocent blood has been spilled for anything different to happen.

"Now, Victor may have some other members of his organization with him, all of which use similar knightmares. And finally, we have the Equus and the Aquila, operated by Victor's closest lieutenants."

All of the knightmares are displayed, one after the other. Cornelia is familiar with the look of some of them, but others are completely alien to her. "My knight, Sir Suzaku Kururugi, my second-in-command, C.C. and I will handle these knightmares in person," Lelouch continues, gesturing toward the people in question. Kururugi and C.C. both nod when their names are mentioned, but say nothing beyond that.

Cornelia herself isn't feeling so sanguine. The Gawain and the Lancelot are excellent frames, without a doubt, but there is only two of them. Is it really a good idea to do things this way? She trusts Lelouch, of course, but still... It seems risky.

Lelouch's Number minions look just as displeased, but don't protest, and Cornelia assumes they must have been informed of at least some part of the plan before. Lelouch immediately provides the explanation. "This may seem counterintuitive," he says, "but these four are the only ones prone to using the subliminal weapon that was used during the recent attack in Japan, as well as against Schneizel. For those not in the know, it acts as an advanced form of hypnosis, and is almost impossible to resist. C.C., Suzaku and I possess a degree of immunity to it, due to the fact that an attempt to use it on us has been made before. It is much too dangerous for everyone else."

His gaze sweeps over the main deck, and his voice almost seems to take a physical, heavy quality.

"I will be very clear on this. Britannians and Japanese alike, you see any of these frames, you radio in and retreat. One of us will handle it. We have all already lost enough. We cannot risk losing more."

He doesn't wait for confirmation, instead choosing to continue his debrief. "Additionally, we have reason to believe that Lady Monica Krushevsky, the Knight of Twelve, may still be alive, but has been unwillingly converted to their cause. She pilots the knightmare frame Florence. We will attempt to take her, and anyone who may be in the same situation alive."

When the Florence shows up on screen, Weinberg goes very, very still. Cornelia can understand how he feels. It's understandable that he would want to rescue his fellow Rounds from whatever has been done to her. Cornelia too hopes this can be accomplished, as Monica always was very loyal to Britannia.

There are a few other images shown, the most notable one of them being Andrea Farnese. The absences are just as notable. "Unfortunately, all the other Grandmasters of Euro-Britannia, as well as
Grand Duke Velaines are dead," Lelouch says, as if reading Cornelia's mind. "As far as we know, Lady Dorothea Ernst was killed while evacuating my brother from St. Petersburg."

Not unexpected news, but still unfortunate. Cornelia thinks about Schneizel, only alive because of the sacrifice of so many loyal people and Lelouch's miraculous intervention, and swears that by the time this day is over, she will have her revenge.

"Lady Krushevsky and Sir Farnese are leading groups of their own, and most of their men will likely be in the same situation as them," Lelouch continues, with C.C. still operating the displays. "Then there is Shin Hyuga Shaing's knight, Jean Rowe. She operates the Gracchus, and is his second-in-command. Finally, we have Ashley Ashra. Like Rowe, he is a a member of the Knights of St. Michael, and in Shaing's confidence. They are both traitors to Britannia, but also a powerful fighters. Do not underestimate them. They will be leading squads that formed part of the original coup.

"Once we meet up with Li Xingke's forces in China, he, Cornelia and I will distribute our forces on how each of these threats will be handled. In the meantime, C.C. has uploaded a file that will contain some extra details on what has been discussed here today."

As Lelouch finishes his sentence, the monitors go dark, the images vanishing. Cornelia chooses his moment to provide the backup Lelouch has asked for. She walks up to Lelouch and stands next to him. "Take heart, men. My brother and I stand together against this peril, and for the sake of all our dead, we will win."

Lelouch nods. " Truth, justice, honor and loyalty have always stood at the basis of the Britannian creed. We follow a code of chivalry that has guided us ever since we lost our first homeland. We have just forgotten that—no, we have been forced to forget by arrogant, cruel men.

"Victor zi Britannia and Shaing are enemies to the world, the enemy of all of us. They have created something that perverts the free will of every individual, turning them against their own fellows. For that reason, we must burn this corruption out of Britannia, no matter what dangers we have to face. We will rise again, as a stronger nation. Yes, we will build the future of peace, for every single country and all the innocent and oppressed. Britannian and Japanese alike, today is the day we all unite for a new, better future! Nippon banzai! All hail Britannia!"

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Lelouch ends his speech with a theatrical gesture, and almost instantly everyone on the deck of Cornelia's ship explodes in raucous applause. On other transports, the reaction is similar. Japanese and Britannians alike cheer, and they don't even realize they're doing the same thing until they start chanting different words.

They stop mid-sentence and stare at one another in confusion. Then, they turn and look at the figure on the screen.

The masked terrorist Zero is Lelouch vi Britannia. Zero, the hero of Japan, is a Britannian prince. It is so strange, so inexplicable. But, at the same time... Does it really matter?

Zero may have temporarily sided with the Numbers, Britannians think, but clearly, he is supporting them now, as he would not have removed his mask otherwise. Certainly, some of his actions may be questionable, such as the murder of Prince Clovis, but that's not so unusual in Britannia and not that relevant, considering that the emperor's own brother is apparently behind the whole thing. That particular news is not even as surprising as Zero said it should be, given the amount of murders that happened during the days of Charles zi Britannia's youth. And it's no secret that half the reason Charles took so many wives was to make sure Britannia was never left without competent Britannias
Of course, that foolproof plan has turned out not to be so foolproof, as 99% of the imperial family has now been killed. Emperor Schneizel's survival was an unexpected blessing, which was why the news of the attack on him was a devastating blow.

Now, things seem to be looking up. Another prince has shown up, and if his words are to be believed he stands with them. Yes, this is reassuring, because now, Princess Cornelia's support makes sense. And truly, Zero—no, His Highness, Lelouch—has a point. Countless have died in both Pendragon and Euro-Britannia, and the priority isn't to worry about Zero's identity, but on taking their revenge on the traitors who have caused this disaster. On Shin Hyuga Shaing and Victor zi Britannia.

Yes, Prince Lelouch may be Zero, but he is still ultimately Prince Lelouch. One of them. A Britannian royal who, together with Princess Cornelia, will lead them to victory.

The Japanese not previously in the know are a little befuddled, but ultimately decide to trust their leader. Zero may have removed his mask, but that doesn't change the fact that he remains a knight for justice. This is just like the Lake Kawaguchi incident, except on a grander scale. Certainly, Zero's identity as a Britannian prince is strange, but he will undoubtedly explain further when he has the chance.

Zero has never made a secret of the fact that he is not Japanese, and that he fought for all those who were innocent. Blood and nationality were irrelevant to him. That's still as true as it always has been. Sugiyama, Yoshida and the other core Black Knights seem to have been aware of this secret, so it must not be a big deal.

No matter what Zero's blood is, the fact remains that he is the one who earned Japan's freedom. He stood up for them when nobody else did, when all seemed lost. He protected them from the apparently undefeatable force of the Chinese Federation.

Rumor has it that the plan prior to the assassination attempt was to create an alliance between several nations, something that would hold up against all possible invasions. A future of peace, that is what the Japanese want. The SAZ has been a nice beginning, but ultimately, they do want their country back, and Zero has accomplished that for them.

Yes, Zero may be Lelouch vi Britannia, but he is still Zero, and he is theirs. Nothing will ever change that.

Some hearts still hold doubt, of course. Many have lost comrades and loved ones to each other, not just the foe they are about to face. But for the moment, the priority is to remove the threat that targeted them, to enact revenge and focus on the peaceful future they are trying to build. But Zero—Lelouch vi Britannia—is right. Whatever this subliminal weapon is, it is very dangerous. It has turned the Knight of Twelve against the Empire. It almost made Suzaku Kururugi of all people kill Zero. Just the prospect is terrifying. Its wielder needs to be stopped, at once. The rest can be set aside for later.

All Hail Britannia! Nippon Banzai!
I hope I managed to capture at least 50% of Lelouch's epic. I admit I wrote this and some of the next chapters with All Hail Britannia playing the background. LOL. Obviously, in this chapter and the following ones there will be a ton of references to media outside the original anime. Don't worry about it too much. The biggest issue, I guess, is the knightmare I gave V.V. It is the one Akito uses at the end in the OVAs. Go with it :) The Equus and the Aquila are frames from the game, and their pilots will be addressed in a bit. Same goes for the Europia United stuff. Later. If I've left anything unaddressed or unclear, comment.
Gino stands by Princess Cornelia's side, torn between distress, confusion and relief. On one hand, he finally has clear orders on what he's supposed to do. He's lost fellow Rounds to these people. Dorothea, in St. Petersburg. Anya and Bismarck, in Pendragon. Now, he will finally be avenging them.

The news that Monica, at least, is alive has given him a measure of hope, but it has also filled him with dread. He and Monica were never really as close as he was to Anya, but still, he knows very well how loyal she was to Britannia, to Emperor Charles. To think that something exists that could turn that loyalty around, just like that... It's incomprehensible.

It's just as mind-boggling to learn that Zero was secretly Prince Lelouch vi Britannia all along and that the man behind the coup was Emperor Charles's own brother. In fact, it blows everything Gino thought he knew out of the water. Of course, it also explains Princess Cornelia's reasons for approaching him back in Area 11, but that doesn't make it any less surprising or confusing.

This is why Gino is very relieved when, after Zero finishes his speech, Suzaku Kururugi pulls him aside. "Sir Weinberg, if you would come with me. I wanted to have a word. Someplace private? With no cameras?"

"Of course."

This is Gino's chance, a chance to get some answers. He isn't sure what Sir Kururugi wants to discuss, but he too wants to ask his questions, and he's simply not comfortable asking anyone else. Who can he turn to? Princess Cornelia? It would not be appropriate. Prince Lelouch? No way. Other Britannians? They're just as lost as he is. But Sir Kururugi... Yes, he must know. In some way, he must understand.

Sir Kururugi is a knight too, the knight of a Britannian royal. The Knight of Zero, they call him. Maybe it's a bit of a tongue-in-cheek reference of Prince Lelouch to the Rounds, but still, it makes Gino find some sort of kinship here, even if he doesn't know Sir Kururugi in the slightest.

Plus there is the fact that without Sir Kururugi's work on the Lancelot, Gino may not have his Tristan, and without that, he would not have been able to cover His Majesty, Emperor's Schneizel's retreat from St. Petersburg.

Yes, this will work.

Nobody stops them when they leave the main deck, at which point Gino is left in a bit of a pickle. Privacy is in short supply on a military vessel like this one. Princess Cornelia in particular is very dedicated to safety, and she tends to err on the side of caution. There are cameras everywhere except for in private spaces like the living quarters of the staff.

Thankfully, Sir Kururugi himself provides the solution. "Perhaps a storage unit nearby?"

Since Gino can't come up with any other idea, he agrees and leads Sir Kururugi to a storage room where spare weaponry is held on this floor. If he were on different terms with Sir Kururugi, he would probably be making a joke about them being in the equivalent of a closet together. But he isn't, so instead, he decides to focus on what actually matters—the information he hopes he will find.
out.

Of course, things turn out to be a little more complicated than he expected. As they enter the room, Sir Kururugi closes the door behind him and leans against the wall. Silence falls between them. It's very strange, considering that Sir Kururugi himself was the one to approach Gino. Gino clears his throat, feeling somewhat awkward. "What did you want to discuss, Sir Kururugi?"

"Actually, it's a bit of a long story, and I'd rather wait for His Highness to come. It will be better that we explain everything together. It's a matter of... delicacy.

"As you can probably imagine, His Highness did leave some things out during his explanation, but you are a Rounds, so he'll make an exception in your case. I'm not at liberty to say much of anything until he gets here."

That makes sense, and it does explain why Sir Kururugi pulled him aside before. Had Zero done so, it would have drawn the eye and looked weird.

Questions still burn on the tip of Gino's tongue, like why this information wasn't brought up in a debrief with Princess Cornelia. Then again, Princess Cornelia always surrounds herself with the Glaston Knights, and while their loyalty cannot be placed in question, they don't have the same attributions or clearance as a Rounds.

Either way, he respects Sir Kururugi's position and decides not to pry. "How will he know where we've gone?" he asks instead.

"Don't worry about that." Sir Kururugi smiles mysteriously. "We tend to know such things."

He doesn't seem inclined to provide further explanations, so Gino lets the matter slide. Perhaps Sir Kururugi is wearing a tracker or something. It would not be that unusual.

Fortunately, it doesn't take long for Zero to show up. He is once again with his second-in-command, the beautiful woman he introduced as C.C., and he has yet to put his mask back on. He doesn't seem put out at their choice of location, but then again, he probably has experience with secretive conversations in less than ideal spaces. "Ah, Sir Weinberg. I take it Suzaku has explained some of the situation?"

"Your Highness. He's merely said that you wanted to share some additional information with me due to my position as a Rounds."

"Something like that, yes. C.C."

At first, Gino thinks that maybe His Highness has some sort of file to give him, something his second-in-command may have been holding onto. This is not the case in the slightest. Instead, C.C. suddenly approaches him and presses her lips to his forehead.

It's so surprising that Gino doesn't even have the time to move or try to push her away. And then, memories from a different life explode in his brain, and C.C. becomes the least of his concerns.

He remembers meeting a different Suzaku Kururugi, one who lost his princess—Princess Euphemia, then the Massacre Princess—to Zero. He remembers being intrigued by the strange Honorary Britannian and wanting to help him in some way, if only because Luciano was being such a dick to him.

At first, Suzaku was always so cold, to the point that half the time, Gino wondered if he was being a nuisance by his insistence to befriend him. Suzaku never smiled, and the most human thing Gino
ever saw in him was his odd relationship with his cat. But despite all that, Suzaku never actually turned Gino away, and eventually, he ended up sharing things with him and Anya. It may not have been the whole truth, but it was something. And of course, there was the time they spent together at Ashford Academy. While they were always aware of the true purpose of their presence in Japan, it didn't change the fact that the environment did make them closer. In later years, Gino would look back to those days and miss them so very fiercely.

Because then, there was the FLEIJA in Tokyo, an act that Gino always found very, very questionable. The FLEIJA shot by Suzaku, on orders, yes, but nevertheless, shot, and resulting in the deaths of millions of Britannian civilians. Then, Suzaku's sudden decision to push Prince Schneizel into a coup d'etat. While Schneizel himself agreed it was warranted, Gino saw it as a dishonorable act and not something a knight of Britannia should do.

After that, everything became so confusing. Bismarck seemed to believe the emperor was dead, but Suzaku never returned to confirm it. No further explanations were given. Prince Schneizel mysteriously departed, leaving Gino with the sole option to turn to his fellow Rounds.

And then, Suzaku chose to suddenly switch sides and join Lelouch. This was incomprehensible to Gino. Suzaku never trusted Lelouch. Lelouch, who was Zero, and who killed Euphemia. Why would he suddenly change his mind?

Gino went into battle against Suzaku still preserving a shred of hope that perhaps his friend could still see reason. This hope was in part confirmed by the fact that Suzaku could have easily killed him at least three times, and if he didn't, it could have only been because Suzaku too still acknowledged the companionship between them. But ultimately, Gino was forced to make a choice, and he could not compromise everything he always believed in, not even for his friend.

Nevertheless, watching the Lancelot explode hurt Gino more than he ever told Kallen or any of the others. He never blamed her for it, not when she too was trying to do the right thing, but that didn't change the end result.

And then there was the day of the execution, the moment he saw Zero run toward the float where the Demon Emperor awaited. It didn't take a genius to realize his friend was clearly alive, and the situation was nothing like what Gino had thought it. No, the answer was much simpler, and one Gino should have perhaps guessed sooner. It was all a plan, undoubtedly hatched by Lelouch, with Suzaku's cooperation. Gino should have seen it all along, should have known Suzaku was still trying to do the right thing, but he didn't, and there was no way to change that.

He never spoke about that realization with anyone, although Kallen too was obviously aware of it. He avoided the Suzaku wearing the mask of Zero, at a time when he wanted to ask so many questions, but knew he never could. He left Britannia and returned to Ashford, hoping that time away would give some clarity. After he finished highschool, he distanced himself from the Black Knights completely, choosing to offer his services to the Tianzi instead and always wondering if he could have done anything to change the outcome of the events.

Now here he is again, with Suzaku standing in front of him, dressed in an uniform that is almost identical to the one he wore as the Knight of Zero and with the actual Zero next to him.

"What the fuck, Suzaku?"

It's not really in his character to curse, but he thinks that just this one time, it's understandable. How is this even possible? Is he going insane or what?

He is not really surprised when his friend shows no reaction to it. It's Lelouch who answers Gino's
questions... sort of. "Yes, we've gone back in time. Yes, I'm still alive. I do apologize for Lady Alstreim's death, but there was nothing we could do about it. Now, we have other priorities."

Priorities? Oh. "Do you mean to take the throne then, Your Highness?" He still has problems reconciling his memories of Lelouch, with what he has experienced in this timeline, and he finds that he can use no other address.

"Of course, Sir Weinberg. Things did not work out as they should have the first time around."

Lelouch presses his lips together, clearly displeased. "As you can probably imagine, it was never my desire to have to force matters the way that I did, but we saw no other option."

"I don't understand, Your Highness," Gino replies. "I mean... How did this all happen? What is this... the subliminal weapon you've been talking about? What did you all... actually do?"

Lelouch sighs. "Sir Weinberg, Suzaku has vouched for your character, and as such, I will give you a chance I haven't given other people. I will tell you the truth about Geass."

Gino listens. He is told the story of the young Lelouch who sought vengeance for his dead mother and crippled sister, of his meeting with a young Suzaku, before Japan became an Area. He is told of their separation and of their reunion, of the mysterious power he received from the immortal green-haired witch C.C. He is told how everything went wrong so very badly, when the Geass went astray at the S.A.Z. Apparently, it was that incident, that unfortunate accident that caused the permanent rift between Lelouch and Suzaku, then Euphemia's knight, and eventually led to Suzaku taking Lelouch to the emperor and receiving the position of Knight of Seven in exchange.

Lelouch then reveals that Charles zi Britannia too had a Geass, one he could use to alter memories. He explains that through that power, he was turned into a shade of his former self, a trap for C.C. He would later regain his memories through C.C.'s intervention, at which point he would proceed to retake Zero's mask.

As Lelouch speaks, a lot of things that never made sense to Gino finally begin to fall into place. It also horrifies him to hear how much things escalated from what Lelouch actually intended, through simple miscalculations or unexpected circumstances. Apparently, such was the case of the FLEIJA. Suzaku did indeed shoot it, but only due to the influence of the Geass—a Geass to 'Live on', cast by Lelouch to keep his friend safe.

"Nunnally was thought to have been killed in the FLEIJA," Lelouch says. "I was crushed. Shortly after, Schneizel came to see the Black Knights and they sold me to him after being promised Japan's freedom in return."

Whoa. That is news to Gino. Kallen never shared that part with him. But then, it would appear Kallen never told him a lot of things.

"I only managed to escape due to Rolo sacrificing his life for mine, and the only thing I had left was my desire for revenge against the emperor," Lelouch continues. "That is how Suzaku and I met up once again.

"It turns out, Sir Weinberg, that my father intended to use Geass to pretty much destroy the world. It's a rather complicated affair, and we don't have time to go into detail now, but suffice to say, it didn't work out for him. I killed him and stopped his plan. But that still left Suzaku and I with a world that was badly ruined due to the consequences of our actions. Thus, the Zero Requiem. Me, turning myself into the enemy of the world, and Suzaku removing my existence later, to wipe out the world's hatred."
C.C. takes over the conversation from there, presumably because Lelouch doesn't actually know what happened after his death. "As you may recall," she continues, "it worked perfectly. But I was never happy with it, and to be frank, I never cared as much about world peace as Lelouch did. Thus, after a great deal of effort and with Suzaku's assistance, we managed to turn back time, to buy us another chance. But it did not come without a cost, as evidenced by these new events that happened due to our intervention."

"Gino, Lelouch didn't lie earlier," Suzaku adds. "Shaing and Victor zi Britannia do indeed use Geass, Geass which they used to enslave Monica and everyone else mentioned before. They also don't have the same good intentions we do. But I know that good intentions were never enough for you, not enough to compensate for the things we've done and will have to do in the future. I believe I don't have to explain what I'm referring to."

Of course he doesn't. This is just like the time Suzaku offered to assassinate Emperor Charles. There is only one way Lelouch can become emperor now, and that is through the removal of Prince Schneizel.

"Despite that," Lelouch finally says, "I would like to make you an offer. To be my Knight of Three, when the time comes. I wish to build a Britannia that stands for true progress, one made not at the expense of its own citizens, but for their sakes. Will you join me, join us, in this?"

The answer should be more difficult than it is. But after everything he has been told, Gino finally sees, finally understands everything he never knew. He understands what he is supposed to do. What seems like an eternity ago, Suzaku told him that he had no choice but to embrace his destiny of death, and that the end justify the means. As much as it angered Gino at the time, he cannot say the same now. Because the fact remains that no matter what the world thought about it, Lelouch vi Britannia gave his life for the good of mankind, and through his sacrifice and that of his knight, he ushered in a new era of peace.

Rulers sometimes have to make difficult decisions. Lelouch's approach may have been extreme, but Gino cannot fault him for it. No, he can understand the logic, and for that exact reason, he knows that Lelouch is indeed an emperor he can follow with all his heart, without being conflicted.

He doesn't hesitate. Instead, he kneels in front of Lelouch and makes his pledge. "It would be my honor, Your Highness. I, Gino Weinberg, thus vow, to defend and obey Emperor Lelouch vi Britannia until death take me, to be his sword and shield, to uphold his will and to honor the code of the Knights of Rounds, as is it is written by our ancestors."

"This vow, I accept," Lelouch says. "Rise, Sir Weinberg."

Gino does, and Lelouch shoots him a small smile. "Oh, and by the way. You don't need to be so formal when we're in private. We were classmates, after all."

That is a little surprising, but Gino takes it in stride.

"Excellent," he replies with a grin. "Because now that you mention it, I do have a question. What's up with you and Suzaku? You know, I may have actually made a move at Ashford if I didn't think Suzaku would eviscerate me slowly for moving in on his turf." Or if Lelouch hadn't been a suspected terrorist, but he doesn't say that.

Suzaku stares at him. "Gino."

Gino laughs and drapes himself over his friend's back. "Oh, relax. You can't blame me for having
eyes, you know."

Lelouch watches the exchange with a slightly befuddled expression. "Err... I appreciate the compliment. But yes, Suzaku and I are involved, and we're also in a relationship with C.C."

"Polyamory? That's great news! Is this an exclusive club or do you take applicants?"

Suzaku elbows him in the stomach, and Gino oomphs. "I guess an exclusive club it is." He doesn't really mind it, mostly because he doesn't actually mean the offer. Suzaku seems to know that, but then, Suzaku was always very good at seeing through Gino's most inappropriate jokes.

Lelouch clears his throat. "In any case, Gino... I believe I don't have to tell you this is all a secret. The only ones in the know, other than the people here, are Orange, Sayoko and Rolo."

Gino sobers at the switch in demeanor. "I completely understand, Your Highness. I won't say a word."

"Good. We'll let you know of further developments. Is there anything else on your mind? Other than my sexuality, that is?"

Gino hesitates. He thinks about Kallen, about the strange friendship the two of them had at Ashford. Back then, he almost thought that they could maybe have more, but he never pursued it. It was much too clear that she was still in love with Lelouch, and he had no desire to compete with a ghost.

Kallen has not been mentioned at all in this conversation. That's probably for a good reason.

It's just as well. Kallen is and will always be Japanese, and Gino is and will always be Britannian. He doesn't know if at any point, His Highness intends to stand against the Black Knights, but he has made his oath, and he will stand to it, no matter whom he has to fight.

He shakes his head. "No, Your Highness. You've answered all of them, and I appreciate the trust you've placed in me."

Even the stoic C.C. smiles at him at that, and just like that, Gino knows he has made the right choice.

Chapter End Notes

Don't you just love the GinoZaku broship? I do. I couldn't resist dedicating a chapter to these two, before the shit really hits the fan. Which will be next chapter BTW. Side note: It's never made clear in the anime if Gino knows about Geass or not. I actually wrote two versions of this chapter, but eventually decided to go with him not knowing, since it doesn't seem likely that anyone would've bothered to tell him the truth about Lelouch's mysterious superpower.
The confrontation between Zero's hastily gathered army and that of Shin Hyuga Shaing takes place in the middle of the Russian wilderness, in a mysterious locale the strange child sometimes seen around Shaing has apparently deemed important.

Zero's troops seem to come out of nowhere. One moment, everything is peaceful, and the next, they are under attack.

Honestly, at first Ashley Ashra does not even realize his attackers are part of the Japanese paramilitary organization that against all odds, earned the independence of their country from Britannia. Lord Shaing called them irrelevant anyway. He's told Ashley and the other Knights of St. Michael that it was all a ruse, and Emperor Schneizel only ever meant it as a delay, to buy time to take out the coup in Euro-Britannia.

But the emperor is no longer a problem, and Euro-Britannia is in their hands now, like it was supposed to be. Duke Velaines and all those other snivelling cowards are dead or out of the way. Lord Shaing will lead Euro-Britannia to glory.

Or so things are supposed to be. Apparently, it's not going to be so easy.

A group of black knightmares seem to manifest out of the ether and come hard and fast at him. He doesn't recognize the models of the mechs, but he is not afraid. Luck is on his side, and battle has always been the place where he always felt most at home.

"Like I'm going to be defeated by an idiotic rebel," he shouts. "Die!"

Unfortunately for Ashley Ashra, what he doesn't realize is that he isn't up against just anyone. He is up against Tohdoh Kyoshiro and the Four Holy Swords.

For Tohdoh, this battle is not just about Japan. It is for the world, and it is for the young boy whom he failed so very badly. They cannot afford to lose.

Tohdoh pulls out his sword and attacks. Around him, the Four Holy Swords spread out like one single entity. The Ashra squad doesn't have a chance. They try to defend their leader, but abysmally fail. When Ashley's knightmare goes down, he doesn't get the chance to eject. He's speared straight through by the merciless Tohdoh, and as he dies, he is not even aware that his luck has finally run out.

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Jean Rowe is sitting in her knightmare, tensely clutching the controls. She isn't happy with the way things have been going as of late. She's only ever wanted to protect Lord Shaing, but she has a feeling that he may have gotten himself into a mess she cannot protect him from.

She knows for a fact that Lord Shaing cared about their superior officer, Michele Manfredi, and doesn't really understand why he chose to assassinate the man. She didn't question it then, just like she didn't question his decision to put together a coup d'état and deploy their forces in Europia.

She followed his orders to the letter when he asked her to use a weapon the Europians had built.

Secretly, Jean thinks that it may not have been the best idea, as the damage they did to Pendragon was incommensurable.

Even still, she followed him through that, through everything. Because she is his knight, she is willing to whatever it takes, whatever he orders her to.

But things have gotten increasingly complicated since the appearance of the odd child who ambushed her and Lord Shaing when they were on their way back to St. Petersburg. Jean doesn't remember much about the incident. One moment, the child was there, and the next, she was waking up in Lord Shaing's arms, with him claiming that they've just found a new ally that would help them achieve their purposes.

Maybe Jean should have questioned it, but at the time, she was a little too distracted by his warmth. And then, there was their new attack on St. Petersburg, them chasing off the new emperor and Lord Shaing's sudden... bout of sickness.

It happened so suddenly. They were in a meeting together, organizing the takeover of the city, when he collapsed next to her with a loud scream. She tried to help, but he was unresponsive, and before she could summon medics, she was promptly ushered out by the child.

She saw Lord Shaing again shortly after, and he seemed completely recovered. At the time, Jean rejoiced, but now, she fears that his recovery may have come at a price, as the traces of the man she swore fealty to—the man she loves with all her heart—are slowly vanishing.

She can no longer fool herself. He is a mad man, she sees that now. Does that make her a mad woman for following him still? Maybe it does. Or maybe it just makes her a coward.

But what else can she do? The alternative is just... unthinkable.

The thought is set aside when a flash of red on her monitors draws her attention. A massive crimson knightmare lands in front of her. It only takes Jean a moment to identify it.

They have received enough information on the Black Knights to realize this is most likely the Guren. The huge glowing claw can belong to no other known frame. It is known to have done quite some damage during the battle between the Black Knights and the Chinese Federation.

It's certainly a powerful machine, but so is the Gracchus, and unlike Jean, the Guren's pilot has no reinforcements. Setting all of her misgivings aside, Jean throws herself into battle. She will win this, for Lord Shaing's sake.

She doesn't.

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Elsewhere, Gino Weinberg is fighting side by side with the remnants of the Knights of St. Uriel.
They are engaging regular Gloucesters, but he has a different job. He is supposed to defeat the Florence, since he knows Monica's fighting style and is most likely to be able to incapacitate her without killing her.

According to Lelouch, the brainwashing can be undone with the aid of Jeremiah Gottwald, although this too is something they are keeping from most people. Lelouch intends to handle it, but only after the leaders of the coup are taken care of, as their presence and the things they may possibly say would make others look a little too close into Lelouch's own abilities and the exact meaning of Geass. It's not ideal, but Gino understands and has every intention of doing his part—which means keeping Monica safe until Lelouch can intervene.

Technically, Suzaku would be able to subdue Monica too, and it would likely be easier for him than it is for Gino. Even without the Albion which he used during their fight in their first life, he is a superior pilot. But Suzaku has a different job, and so it's up to Gino to protect Monica from encountering the same fate she did before.

The Florence is a powerful frame. Built from the remnants of an Alexander drone, it's fast and sleek, unlike most Britannian knightmares. This makes it a huge challenge.

Fortunately, Gino's own Tristan is fast and mobile enough to avoid most of Monica's attacks, but he takes more blows than he would like. Unlike him, she is not hindered by the desire to not kill him, and it shows.

It's more of a stroke of good fortune than anything else that makes him deal the decisive strike. He sacrifices an arm of the Tristan, but manages to stab the Florence through its midsection, avoiding the cockpit, but targeting the Core Luminous that feeds the knightmare. As expected, the Florence is damaged enough to force the automatic eject of the pilot.

It's much too difficult to track the trajectory of the ejection seat through his Factosphere, but he's not alone in this. Within seconds, Lelouch contacts him and tells him where he needs to go.

Gino follows the orders without questioning them. He has no clue how Lelouch knows and guesses these things, but he doesn't particularly care either. What matters is that Monica will still be alive after today, and Shaing and Victor zi Britannia will be punished. After that, the new emperor he has sworn his sword to will build a new, better Britannia. Yes, this is a cause Gino Weinberg can certainly fight, and die for, should it ever be necessary.

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Pollux rui Britannia is feeling rather bored. He knows it's a little unreasonable of him, since they've waited far longer without doing nothing when they were still in the Chinese Federation. But recent events have made him impatient in a way he never was before.

He was never very attached to his family in Pendragon. The political games at court irritated him, since it was all so pointless. Fortunately, he had Castor, because otherwise, he would have probably gone insane due to the sheer exasperation at the stupidity and absurd behavior of three quarters of the people he was surrounded by.

The world needed to be fixed, he knew, so when his uncle came to Pendragon and offered him and Castor the chance to join the Geass Order, it was the ideal solution. The only downside? They were forced to leave their mother behind.

Maybe they shouldn't have left her. Pollox was the one to push Castor into taking Geass and joining the Order, and he doesn't really regret it, but at the same time, maybe they should have done
"You can't blame yourself, Pollux," Castor tells him using his Geass-induced telepathy. "You couldn't have known what would happen. We thought she would be safe."

"I know," Pollux replies, his tension starting to fade at the familiar feel of his brother's mental touch in his mind. "I just wish we could do more."

"We will. Once everything is in place, Uncle will surely send us after Lelouch. It's too dangerous now. You know how things ended with Clara."

Yes, Pollux does know. Clara was one of their best agents, and yet, she was apparently eliminated with ease. Not to mention the damage their half-brother did to the Directorate base in the Chinese Federation.

Worse, he has somehow managed to turn C.C. of all people against them. Pollux and Castor have never actually met her, but they have heard stories, and know the fact that she led the Order for hundreds of years.

This is all Lelouch's fault, and he will be removed.

His coms flare to life before he can tell his brother anything else. "Enemy sighted," a panicked voice shouts. "We're under attack. Agh!"

Pollux immediately responds to the transmission. "This is the Equus! Report! What is going on?"

"There's too many of them... It's... It's the Black Knights!"

The Black Knights? The fight has come to them then! Excellent. He may not be able to use his Geass to command them to do his bidding, but he doesn't need it. He will simply destroy them the old fashioned way.

Pollux's bloodthirsty joy doesn't last for long. Just as he directs his knightmare and his troops forward, a bright orange knight giga frame rolls toward them from the sky.

The Equus is a fast frame, but the mysterious mech is faster. The last word Pollux utters is his brother's name, and then everything goes black.

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The backlash from the destruction of his connection with his brother sends Castor rui Britannia reeling. For a few precious seconds, he can do nothing but sit in his pilot seat, clutching his controls convulsively in impotent pain and grief.

Those moments quickly pass, and the grief is replaced by anger. He doesn't know how he missed the approach of the orange frame, but he will not allow this to go unpunished.

From up above, Castor can get a far too graphic view at the damage the unknown mech has done. It has rolled into Pollux's forces and made mincemeat out of most of the machines, its spikes wrecking everything in its path. There's practically nothing left of the Equus, nothing left of Castor's twin.

Snarling, Castor dives down, already directing his weapons at the orange machine. He's so focused on avenging his brother he completely misses the approach of the white knightmare coming at him from behind.
The swords of the Lancelot go straight through the cockpit of the Aquila, effectively ending the life and the misery of its pilot. Inside his machine, Suzaku Kururugi watches the Aquila explode, half wishing he could have prolonged this battle.

But he cannot prolong anything anymore, and he has his orders. He has someone more important than Castor and Pollux to hunt down.

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V.V. is not happy with the way things have been going for him as of late. First, Charles was unexpectedly killed. V.V. has managed to deal with it by throwing himself into the Sword of Akasha plan, and shockingly, Charles's killer has proven to be a wonderful tool. V.V. even has hopes that his incipient experiments on Shaing will work better than the ones on that useless Rolo.

But Lelouch is as always, a thorn in his side. He should have eliminated the filthy brat when he had the chance, but he never thought Marianne's son would be that much of an issue.

Lelouch's original rebellion in Japan was barely a blip on V.V.'s radar, a source of amusement more than anything else. V.V. even made tentative plans to find a moment to go to Ashford Academy and take Lelouch's sister from him, just to see him writhe.

But the situation has drastically escalated since then. Lelouch has turned out to be a far more competent leader than V.V. expected. Worse still, C.C. has completely thrown in her lot with him, to the point that she revealed the location of the Directorate to him.

And now, here they are, with the Black Knights daring to challenge him on his own turf. To make matters worse, he's been gradually losing touch with all of his people—including his best tool.

Ensconced in his Alexander, V.V. eyes the line that Cornelia has formed, considering his options. Around him, a small group of members of the Geass Order cluster like the mindless minions they are.

"Lord V.V., give us your commands."

His commands? It is difficult to say. A diversion perhaps? Or a retreat? The Alexanders they are using are faster than Cornelia's frames, and while the members of the Geass Order aren't the most skilled pilots, they could stall long enough for V.V. to make his escape.

Long enough for him to make his way to the Thought Elevator. Through it, he will be able to transport himself out of here, to whatever Thought Elevator remains intact. Perhaps in the future, he can even activate the Sword of Akasha on his own.

Doing so with only one code is not an ideal solution, but it does seem to provide the highest chances of success considering his current circumstances. If he's lost Shaing, Rolo and C.C., his options in the immediate future are limited.

Alternately, he can attempt to remove Lelouch through other means once things quiet down. Should Lelouch be dead, C.C. will eventually see reason and once again come back to the Order.

Yes, this is what he will do. He must retreat for now.

"We shall make our way to the Thought Elevator," he says. "Should anyone attempt to attack me or the Elevator, destroy them at all costs."

"Yes, Lord V.V.," his men reply.
The Alexanders switch into insect mode and make their way across the battlefield. On occasion, they see pockets of groups fighting, but they don't stop. V.V. has no desire to engage the red Guren that is currently blowing up most of Shaing's underlings, or any of the other Black Knights for that matter.

The distinctive feel of a Geass user is the only warning he gets before the Lancelot sweeps down on them like a lethal bird of prey. Several of the Alexanders with him are destroyed within seconds.

V.V. manages to avoid any damage, but he realizes in a panic that he may have run into a big problem here. The Lancelot.

V.V. is an experienced enough knightmare pilot, but he also isn't an idiot. He's always been more focused on his studies on the Sword of Akasha, rather than on recent developments in technology.

Being an immortal did teach him the necessity of being prepared for every eventuality, but his field of expertise doesn't lie in this area. Like most of the members of the Order, he can take the regular knightmare pilot well enough, but the enemy is facing now is an entirely different matter.

He did have the foresight to have his technicians modify his current frame to fit his small body, but that will not help him against the Lancelot. He isn't sure, but he can only guess that at this point, it's probably the best knightmare in the world. And to top it off, its pilot is Lelouch's mind slave, Suzaku Kururugi. V.V. has heard enough about Kururugi to realize he is at a distinct disadvantage here.

He doesn't know when Kururugi even acquired Geass, but it only adds to V.V.'s predicament. V.V. really should have gotten rid of both Kururugi and Lelouch when he had the chance, on the island. But no, he had to go and transport them to Kaminejima instead. Damn it.

Well, it's too late for regrets. Damage control is necessary, and V.V. doesn't have to think twice about what he needs to do now. The Thought Elevator is indeed the only option left.

Dodging around the still ongoing battle—or better said, the carnage Kururugi is leaving behind in his wake—V.V. speeds toward the Thought Elevator. He's not very far now. Just a little further, and he can go through with his plan.

He never reaches his destination.

The swords of the Lancelot shear right through the fleeing Alexander, severing both the metal, and the body of its pilot. V.V. screams as his legs are amputated by the relentless strength of the knightmare.

He's never felt such excruciating pain before. He's died plenty of times, but it was never like this. He's torn apart and has his injuries cauterized at the same time, and he isn't in any way grateful for the fact that he will not be bleeding out, or for the code's ability to keep him alive.

Amputations take quite some time to heal from. If he had his limbs and was able to reattach them, it would be faster, since the flesh would knit back up. However, this is not the case, as the head of the Alexander has just exploded under the attack of the Lancelot, and presumably, V.V.'s legs have been destroyed with it.

Alas, that is the least of V.V.'s problems. The Lancelot fishes his broken body from the Alexander and takes off with him in its grip. Despite the pain he is still in, V.V. somehow knows the worst is yet to come.

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Shin Hyuga Shaing wildly rides the Vercingetorix through the battlefield. He's furious. The Black
Knights have attacked out of nowhere and taken them by surprise. He's lost touch with most of his lieutenants, including Jean and Ashley. To make matters worse, the enemy's forces seem to be avoiding him.

He isn't sure if they know about Geass or if they still believe the ridiculous 'subliminal weapon' story Lelouch vi Britannia has come up with, but it hardly matters. He needs to take charge of the situation, quickly.

The brainwashed Andrea Farneas finally manages to reach him and provide him with some news. "It appears that a contingent of troops from Britannia and the Chinese Federation have formed a perimeter around the area and are blocking all escape routes. We are attempting to break through the encirclement, but so far, we haven't encountered any success."


"Yes, My Lord," Andrea answers.

Technically, Andrea and the men he commands are under the sway of Pollux's Geass, but they are bound to Shin's orders too. Shin does not particularly care about this. Escape can't be further from his mind. He needs to kill, to end the curse of life on all mankind, and he will start here.

Fortunately, the Vercingetorix is a very fast frame, and some of his opponents aren't swift enough to retreat. Monica Krushevsky's last known coordinates are closest, and Shin finds a group of Knights of St. Uriel there.

He lunges toward them, already sweeping his massive axe through the air. A few of them make a valiant attempt to dodge, and actually succeed, but that doesn't buy them much time. As three knightmares explode in front of him, Shin turns toward the remaining ones and reaches out to his Geass.

"Die!"

Within seconds, the command processes in the minds of his foes. As expected, they self-destruct, and it's beautiful to see. Inside the Vercingetorix, Shin laughs.

It would be a little more satisfying to physically remove these people, if only because they dared to stand in his way. They do not even deserve the gift Shin has just granted them. Still, just this once, he can compromise. Besides, he has many others to hunt down.

He doesn't get the chance to go through with his plan. A beam of red energy strikes the ground right in front of him. Shin looks up, only to see the Gawain descend toward him from the sky.

Shin's coms alert him to an incoming transmission. Shin takes it, and he is not really surprised to see Zero on his screen. "We meet again, Lord Shaing," Lelouch vi Britannia says, removing his mask. "But then, it's not unexpected. You chose the wrong side."

"Did I really? I think you're the one who made the wrong choice, Lelouch vi Britannia."

Using Zero's arrogance against him holds a degree of poetic irony. Clearly, Lelouch thinks Shin's Geass can't hurt him while they are in their knightmares, and that his own ability is stronger than Shin's. That would have been the case before Shin made his contract with V.V., but no longer.

Once again, Shin activates his Geass. "Die now!"

Like before, the command travels to its intended target... only this time, it doesn't have the intended

Suddenly, he can see the image of the witch C.C. flaring in his mind. The Geass in the center of her forehead is glowing... but so are her eyes. "You know, Shin Hyuga Shaing, that love is more powerful than hate. Remember then, what love truly is."

Shin's Geass clashes impotently against C.C.'s code, but her own power also reaches him. Shin screams. All of a sudden, he can see them all, every single person he's ever loved, most of whom he has already killed.

His birth family... how it all started, the moment he took the decision to embrace his destiny of death.

Then, the Shaings, his adoptive family. His loving mother, who took him in despite him being a strange, antisocial child. And Alice, little Alice, who loved her big brother so much. Himself, casting a Geass to die on both of them.

Michele Manfredi. The man who trusted an Honorary Britannian to be his second-in-command, who called him 'younger brother' seconds before Shin placed him under the command that would end his life.

Akito. His own little brother. The two of them together, on a bright autumn day, Shin carrying Akito on his shoulders. A younger Akito, confused and reaching out to him even as they stood together in a room full of dead bodies. Himself, ordering Akito to die. An older Akito, facing off against him, years later, as a pilot for Europia United. His scream as he held the dead body of the woman he apparently loved. The final blank look on his face as he took his own life, succumbing to Shin's command.

And finally Jean. His Jeanne, his knight, the one who stood by his side through everything. Is she dead too? He doesn't know.

He wants her... he wants her to live. Her existence has been a blessing to him. That is why he never had the courage to end it, even when he had every chance, even when he knows she would never stop him. Jeanne...

In the cockpit of the Vercingetorix, Shin screams and screams, phantoms of the past dancing his vision and in his mind. He blindly reaches for his sword, his desire to join his loved ones now impossible to control. He never gets the chance to go through with his plan. The Gawain lunges at him. Pain erupts over Shin, and then blissful darkness swallows him whole.

Chapter End Notes

I chose this format because I felt it would maybe depict the battle better. Castor and Pollux are twins, characters from the Nintendo game. I've never played it, so I took significant liberties with their characters, because I needed V.V. to have some extra people around. Obviously, everyone else is from the Akito OVAs. Any further questions, leave a comment.
"That went well," C.C. comments as Lelouch quickly and efficiently tears the Vercingetorix apart.

"Better than I expected, really," he replies. He rips the cockpit open and extracts the pilot from inside. Shaing is unconscious, which is probably a good thing, since at one point he seems to have taken hold of his sword, perhaps planning to commit suicide. That would have been most unfortunate, as Lelouch still needs him.

Lelouch sets Shaing down in front of the Gawain, then opens the cockpit of his knightmare. When he exits the machine, C.C. follows without being asked.

It's only when they kneel next to Shaing that Lelouch realizes they may have a small problem. Shaing's state may not be just because of C.C.'s use of Geass, but also because he seems to have hit his head at one point during Lelouch's attack.

"Can you wake him up?" he asks C.C.

C.C. eyes Shaing dubiously and shakes her head. "If Geass had been the only problem, yes, but given the head injury..."

It's not a surprising answer. Fortunately, the solution to their small problem shows up before they even need to track it down. With impeccable timing, the Lancelot sweeps down from the sky and lands right next to the Gawain, carrying a badly injured V.V.

"Oh, my," C.C. says to Suzaku when she sees V.V. "You made quite a mess. Well done."

Lelouch couldn't have said it better himself. He'll have to remember to reward Suzaku for his approach later. "Indeed. Set him here and come out. We need your help with something."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Suzaku answers.

As soon as he is placed down, V.V. tries to crawl away. It's a futile effort, of course, but it's vaguely amusing to watch.

Without a word, Lelouch pulls out his gun and shoots him in the head. He's tempted to empty the clip in V.V.'s body, just out of spite, but C.C. is standing next to him, and he doesn't want to bring back bad memories of the episode with Mao.

C.C. shoots him a small, crooked smile, like she knows exactly what he's thinking. "You worry too much, you know that? I'd never blame you for wanting to punish V.V. for what he's done to Rolo and Nunnally."

"Nevertheless, that's no reason for you to have to revisit the experience." There will be enough
unpleasantness ahead without C.C. having that on her plate as well.

Suzaku walks up to them, looking confused. "What experience?"

"Remember Mao?" C.C. asks. "That man who came after Nunnally at Ashford, who was another contractor of mine? I mentioned him to you before."

This is news to Lelouch, but he supposes it makes sense that she and Suzaku would have had conversations he wasn't privy to. "I remember," Suzaku says. "What about him?"

"Our relationship was not exactly... healthy," C.C. explains. "He came after me prior to the incident of the school and shot me several times."

Suzaku's expression goes dark. "Ah."

C.C. rolls her eyes at him. "Don't worry. He's dead now, remember? Lelouch just doesn't want to make me feel uncomfortable by doing the same to V.V."

"Well, if the gun is the problem, that's easily fixed," Suzaku points out. "I'm your sword, as always, Lelouch. I'd be happy to handle this too."

The offer isn't really surprising, since Suzaku is even less happy with C.C.'s recent revelations than Lelouch is. Still, as much as he would like to let his knight exorcise some of his tension, now is not the time. "Maybe once we're done with this. Make sure he doesn't get away for now. Feel free to be creative."

Suzaku understands, because of course he does. He takes his own sword and spears V.V. through his midsection. The sword embeds itself into the ground, effectively pinning V.V. to the ground like he's an insect.

V.V. makes a pained noise, which suggests the fact that he may have already recovered from the gunshot. Well, the sword will keep him where he is while Lelouch wraps things up with Shaing.

"Right," he tells Suzaku. "I'm sorry about this, Suzaku, but I need you to wake him up."

Suzaku tilts his head in Shaing's direction. "Yeah, I see the problem. It's not a big deal."

He takes a deep breath and kneels next to Shaing. C.C. waits by their side, ready to intervene if it becomes necessary.

It's not. As soon as Suzaku absorbs Shaing's injury, the man cracks his eyes open. His eyes fly from Suzaku, to C.C. and finally go to Lelouch. "Kill me," he says simply.

"Not yet," Lelouch replies.

In this situation, it would perhaps be more merciful to do exactly that, but Lelouch isn't feeling very merciful. Besides, he supposes the fate he has in mind for Shaing is close enough to count.

In the big picture, his dispute with Shaing is minor. Shaing is a means to an end, and that is what he will remain, until Lelouch is satisfied that his purpose is fulfilled.

He meets Shaing's eyes and activates his Geass. "Lelouch vi Britannia commands you. From this day henceforth, you are my slave and that of C.C. and Suzaku."

Instantly, a blank look settles on Shaing's face. "Yes, Your Highness."
Well, that takes care of that. Lelouch still has some orders to give to Shaing, but for the moment, he's harmless and already serving the main purpose he is meant for. He will contain the cursed code until Lelouch can complete his plan and build the safe world he promised to his daughter.

Now for V.V.

Lelouch walks up to the still trapped child-looking immortal. On the ground, V.V. flails, still trying to get away. "Don't bother. You're not going anywhere."

Through some sort of miracle, V.V. manages to glare at him over his shoulder. "You'll regret this."

"I highly doubt that," Lelouch says. "I'm already enjoying it too much to ever regret it."

It's not exactly true, but Lelouch won't give V.V. the satisfaction to realize it. He cannot show weakness, not even when V.V. is like this, harmless and captive.

V.V.'s eyes fly to C.C. "C.C... Why are you doing this? What about your wish?"

"I've changed my mind," C.C. replies, her voice level. "I find I quite like being immortal when I have someone to be immortal with."

V.V. obviously understands what that means. The flailing intensifies, to the point that he almost manages to dislodge Suzaku's sword. In the process, he just hurts himself more, and Lelouch very much enjoys seeing it.

It is fitting indeed that V.V. be robbed of his legs, just like Nunnally was robbed of her mobility. He will not have to live with a handicap, or with the trauma of being turned into a tool like Rolo, but it's better than nothing.

Out of sheer spite, Lelouch shoves the blade lower down. He doesn't have Suzaku's strength, but he still does damage. V.V. cries out, shaking with pain. "Hurts, does it? You deserve far more for what you did to my brother and sister.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find out and you wouldn't pay the price?" Lelouch sneers. "You should have known... uncle, that not even Geass can keep the people who cross me safe."

Unfortunately, Lelouch doesn't really have the time to let out all of his anger with V.V. Recent developments are reminding him far too much of the Requiem, and he can hardly afford to let his own desire for revenge turn everything into more of a mess than it already is. He needs to get retrieving the code out of the way, so that he can go ahead and tell Orange to break the brainwashing on Andreas's people. The more he delays that, the more likely it is that people Lelouch might need in the future will get killed. Not that he doesn't trust Cornelia to take care of herself, but better to be safe than sorry.

He thinks back at C.C.'s advice and kneels next to V.V. Grabbing hold of V.V.'s hair, he forces their eyes to meet, properly.

His Geass buzzes at the back of his mind, and just like that, Lelouch knows. He doesn't even have to order the Geass to do anything. It almost reaches out on his own, sensing his will and his intent.

V.V. fights him, clinging to his immortality to the very end. But Lelouch is stronger, and he has lost and been through too much to stop now.

His Geass strains against V.V.'s code and rejection, but ultimately wins out. Lelouch's eyes burn, but it is only for a moment. As the fire dies out, he senses something else that has anchored itself inside
him.

Now for the truly hard part.

The strange thing is that Lelouch isn't particularly afraid of dying. He's done that once before, and that, in itself, wasn't so bad.

What he is afraid of is what him dying may mean.

He knows this particular death won't stick and he will come back to life, just like his father did after Lelouch himself killed him. But that doesn't mean he isn't worried. There is still the possibility that something may go drastically wrong, and Lelouch isn't feeling very optimistic, not when he recently ordered God to keep his daughter safe.

Suzaku and C.C. obviously feel the same. "Lelouch, maybe we should wait," Suzaku says. "Technically, there's no hurry. We can just have Shaing remove V.V., take him someplace safe and imprison him."

"I don't know about you, Suzaku, but I'm not really inclined to turn into Clovis," Lelouch replies.

"I would happily allow it," C.C. replies, "if that was your wish and if it kept you safe. Suzaku is right, Lelouch. There's no rush."

Technically, they're right. He could leave dying for a different day.

But on the other hand, leaving V.V. as a loose end could result in the destruction of everything they've worked so hard for.

He has to take V.V.'s code, because with him dead, no one but them and those loyal to them will ever know the truth about Geass--with a minor exception that will hopefully be dealt with soon.

After today, Shaing, V.V. and the so-called subliminal weapon will have been turned into the enemy, an enemy they were destroying. Granted, it won't be as efficient and theatric as the Requiem, but neither will it cause as much bloodshed, and it will give Lelouch a nice starting point for the rest of his plan, which is the only thing he needs, really.

But for that to happen, he has to take the final step. For good or ill, he has to die today.

"Suzaku. C.C. You know... You must know how grateful I am for everything you have done. For coming back here, to give us another chance. And you must know that I hate to do this to you again. But we have no choice. This is the way things must be."

A part of him wants to cling to them, to maybe kiss them one more time. But he has to believe that this will work, that he will come back to them, and dramatic goodbyes won't help them further.

He places the gun he used to shoot V.V., as well as his own daughter, against his heart, and presses the trigger.

The world of C itself shakes at the death of the man capable of enforcing his own will upon that of mankind itself. Thousands of miles away, the emperor of Britannia opens his eyes and screams.

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It is a strange fate, but the thing that hurt the most always happen like this, as fast as lightning—faster than even Suzaku can run. Euphie's death was like that. The Requiem was like that. This is no different.
Suzaku catches Lelouch in his arms as he falls. His emperor slumps against his chest, so very still, his life extinguished just like that, with a single gunshot.

Suzaku's head starts to spin. He wants to throw up. Suddenly, he can hear Lelouch's voice whispering commands in his ear again. That last order he took refuge in. The last promise, the last caress. "The punishment for what you've done shall be this, then. You will live on, always wearing that mask and serving as a knight for justice and truth. You will no longer live your life as Suzaku Kururugi. You shall sacrifice the ordinary pleasures of your life, for the benefit of the world, for eternity."

It was the Geass Suzaku accepted of his own will and ultimately went against when he and C.C. chose to turn back time.

He screams and clutches Lelouch's body like he couldn't that day, when he had to pretend to be the stalwart hero in order to preserve Lelouch's legacy. He cannot pretend anymore, not when reality seems to be blurring around him, not when he's tasting blood in his mouth, not when he's falling apart all over again.

Something warm reaches out to him and pulls him out of his fugue. Suzaku follows the familiar feeling, instinctively trusting it, even if he isn't sure why.

When his vision clears, the first thing he sees is C.C.'s golden eyes, staring down at him in visible concern. "Are you all right?" she asks.

Suzaku opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. He's lying on the ground, his head hurts, and he feels like he's taken a bad blow to the solar plexus—but even without that, he won't ever be all right as long as Lelouch isn't.

It is at that point that Suzaku realizes he isn't holding onto Lelouch any longer. He frantically looks around, only to realize that at some point, C.C. seems to have pulled Lelouch away from him. Why? What has happened? He isn't sure.

"Your Geass tried to reach out to heal him," C.C. says, as if guessing his thoughts. "It didn't work, but you would have probably killed yourself if not for the 'live on' command. I had to remove him from your hold to keep you from hurting yourself further."

Oh. That... sounds about right.

"It didn't interfere with... the transfer, did it?"

God, if he messed things up for Lelouch, he will never forgive himself.

C.C. shakes her head. "He was already gone."

The words should be comforting, but they really aren't. Just the concept of Lelouch being gone in the way that C.C. means it reminds Suzaku of a hidden grave with next to no identifier. He grits his teeth and forces himself to focus on C.C., on her warm and familiar presence. She anchored him many times before, in front of the grave in question. Today is no different. They just have to stick together, to endure this for a little while longer, and they will be fine.

The thought brings a question to his lips which he never got the chance to ask before. "How long does this usually take?"

"Not long," C.C. replies. "But it may take a little longer the first time, while the body adjusts to the transfer of the code."
That's much too vague for Suzaku's liking, but there's nothing he can do about it. He just feels so very helpless. He and C.C. have promised to be Lelouch's sword and shield, but they keep getting thwarted. It's like a grand cosmic joke.

"Are you angry with me, for not mentioning all this before?" C.C. asks.

"No, of course not." How can he be, when he understands her reasoning far too well? "I'm just... Angry at the world, I suppose. Angry that things keep getting away from us like this."

C.C. nods. "It's going to be okay, Suzaku," she says again. "He'll be fine. He's too stubborn to die for good, after everything we've done."

They end up lying together on the ground, with C.C. leaning against Suzaku as she holds Lelouch's head in her lap. All the while, her free fingers are entwined with Suzaku's own, keeping him from reaching for Lelouch.

"If this doesn't work," Suzaku hears himself say, "if we ever fail... if we can't keep our promise to him... and to her... I'll take your code, C.C. I promise."

"That's not going to happen. And even if it did... I won't leave you alone to suffer. I may be selfish, but I'm not that selfish."

Her voice is soft and quiet and Suzaku buries his face in her hair and inhales deeply, just so that he won't have to take in the scent of Lelouch's blood. God, how he hates this. He hates that he's never enough, that no matter what he does, he can never protect Lelouch, not when it counts, not when Lelouch needs him the most.

"It's not your fault, you know," C.C. whispers. "We always knew that Lelouch has his own burdens to bear, and he wouldn't be Lelouch if he allowed us to shield him from all of it."

Yes, Suzaku knows that, but still, this doesn't feel right. "I'm not much of a knight if I can't even protect my liege from dying."

"You're a great knight, Suzaku," C.C. answers. "It's just the circumstances that are extreme. But things will get better, you'll see."

"It's funny, but I never pegged you for an optimist."

"Don't be ridiculous, White Reaper. Of course I'm an optimist. Or at least, I am now." She caresses his hand gently. "Lelouch gave me back feelings that I thought lost and forgotten. You gave me back hope when I thought everything was lost, that nobody would ever understand. Anything can happen in life, and sometimes, you just have to believe."

Her words help, and he forces himself to believe, just like she has said. It's just as well, because a few seconds later, his Geass jolts, and within it, he feels Lelouch's heart start again. "Welcome back, Lelouch," C.C. says.

Her voice shakes slightly, despite her own previous statements. Suzaku can't really blame her for it. No matter how optimistic C.C. claims to be, she's lived through too much to not be aware that anything that can go wrong generally does.

Fortunately, this is one case that proves to be the exception to the rule. Mere seconds later, Lelouch opens his eyes. He shoots them a quick smile as he gets up from C.C.'s lap. "Thanks. Was I gone long?"
"Too long," Suzaku can't help but say. He immediately regrets it, because Lelouch's expression turns haunted.

"I'm sorry," he replies softly.

"I told you, you never need to apologize to me again." Just because he can, Suzaku reaches out and touches Lelouch's cheek. He's so warm, so alive, so there. If he touched Lelouch's dead body earlier, he's glad he can't remember it.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine. A little discombobulated, I guess, but otherwise, I don't feel any different."

C.C. does not seem surprised at this. "You'll experience some confusion and shock at first whenever this sort of thing happens. It depends a lot on the manner of your death. Given that in your case, it was instantaneous, you'll recover without too many issues, although you will carry that scar for as long as you live."

"I'm not too worried about my scar now, C.C.," Lelouch drawls. "Come on. Time to go."

The three of them get up, ready to head to their respective knightmares. As they do so, Suzaku catches sight of something he has forgotten altogether. Or rather someone.

V.V. is still speared through, pinned to the ground by Suzaku's sword. The blank-faced Shaing stands by his side, still pressing him down even if it's no longer necessary. Lelouch arches a brow in their general direction and C.C. shrugs. "V.V. was still struggling. I had our new friend keep an eye on him, for as long as it took for the unavoidable to occur."

By this, she is of course referring to the fact that V.V. is now very, very dead. The utter ruin and destruction of the child-like body would be a little unnerving if Suzaku weren't very aware of how much evil truly hid behind that facade. Instead, it's both unsatisfying and not, since it does feel like V.V. maybe got off too lightly.

Well, it hardly matters anymore. As Suzaku takes in the sight, its meaning finally processes.

This is it. Lelouch is safe. Sure, there are still technically people who can take the code from him and C.C., but they're all pretty much harmless and already under Lelouch's sway.

Lelouch is now immortal. C.C.'s plan has come with great risks, but they already have the first reward.

It's probably a little too optimistic to expect that he would not have a bad reaction should something happen to Lelouch in the future, but it's not his own reaction that is relevant. It's the end result, and so far, all signs point to Lelouch's survival.

C.C. must be having similar thoughts, because she adds, "They're not important right now anyway. We should be celebrating your miraculous resurrection. And you should start by getting naked."

Perhaps the comment should surprise them, but at this point, both Lelouch and Suzaku are used to C.C.'s generally irreverent nature. "I promise there will be plenty of celebrating later," Lelouch says instead. "Although getting naked would probably be preferable, considering."

Considering the fact that he's still covered in blood. Yes, Suzaku would prefer that too. At least C.C. is already doing all of them a favor and getting rid of the white, blood-stained neckerchief. Despite the knowledge that Lelouch is now alive and well, the sight is still somewhat panic inducing.
Technically, Suzaku's own suit and C.C.'s clothes haven't gotten away unscathed due to them holding onto Lelouch, but they don't have time to worry further about fashion. Lelouch directs his attention to more pressing matters. He tosses Shaing a phone, which the Geassed man automatically catches. "Shaing, Suzaku will help you get to the Thought Elevator. You will wait there for further instructions."

"Yes, Your Highness," comes the predictable response.

Suzaku really has no desire to carry Shaing to safety, especially not when he'd much rather stay at his emperor's side, but it can't be helped. For now, Shaing is useful, but no one except their inner circle can know that he remains alive. It's up to Suzaku to make sure that happens.

"Be careful on your way to the Thought Elevator," Lelouch instructs him. "I'll contact Orange to start removing the brainwashing, so make sure to stay out of his range, just in case. Report back to me when you're done."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

His words are almost identical to Shaing's, but that doesn't bother Suzaku in the slightest. Unlike in Shaing's case, his own loyalty is true, and he believes in what he, Lelouch and C.C. are doing with every single inch of his being.

And because of that, because they are far more than knight, emperor and witch, he breaks protocol and steals the kiss he has wanted ever since Lelouch opened his eyes again. "And later the celebration, yeah?"

"Absolutely," Lelouch replies, and Suzaku is gratified to note that he sounds a little breathless.

"Go on," C.C. urges him. "The sooner we get this done, the faster we can get back to what really matters. Us."

Suzaku salutes and jogs to his knightmare. Just a little while longer, and this battle, at least, will be over. And they will be able to sleep, touch and kiss without constantly having the threat of V.V. looking over their heads. That is a nice reward.

Sure, if Lelouch's plans come to fruition, there will be other battles and other threats, but Suzaku is ready for that. After all, that was what he always wanted, to be the sword and the protector of Emperor Lelouch vi Britannia.

As the Lancelot takes off, Suzaku catches sight of the Gawain starting to move as well. Seconds later, both the Vercingetorix and V.V.'s remains vanish within the beam of the Hadron.

Theoretically, it's just Lelouch eliminating the evidence of what they have done, but it still feels satisfying. It just confirms what Suzaku has always known and hoped for—that nothing and no one will stand in the way of their shared dream, and anyone who tries will be destroyed.

That is their vow, their contract and their promise to one another, and Suzaku will do anything it takes to make sure it is fulfilled.

Chapter End Notes

I giggled a bit when I realized that everyone thought I'd killed Shin. Obviously, it was
not the case. Also, I wish I could have spent more time on V.V., but it would've been counterproductive. Hope you're not too disappointed with this result.
Chapter Summary

Not as long as some of the previous chapters, but I had it done after I finished the one-shot, so I figured I should post it. Enjoy! All comments and kudos are amazing and feed the muse!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cornelia vi Britannia is irritated. Since the battle has begun, she's been forced to fight people she respected. That in itself would not be a problem, but the fact that she has to hold back in order to make sure at least some of them survive what has been done to them has been creating issues she normally doesn't have to deal with.

They have for the most part managed to prevent receiving too much damage. Li Xingke's troops have been very useful, and her own Glaston Knights have managed to mostly just incapacitate the nightmares and leave the pilots unharmed.

That doesn't mean there aren't fatalities on both sides, and each and every one of them grates on her like a personal failure.

It certainly doesn't help that her little brother is out there somewhere, confronting the madman who started all this. Lelouch has said that he is perfectly capable of handling Victor and his forces, and he does have some of his closest associates with him, but Cornelia can't help but feel that she should be there too.

They have already lost so much. What if her uncle will claim her last remaining little brother with his insanity? Damn it all to hell.

The thought makes her snarl in helpless fury. She grips the controls of her knightmare tighter and lunges at the unwise individual currently trying to hold his or her own against her. She wishes the person inside the other machine really was a traitor, if only because executing someone would help exorcise some of her tension.

Instead, she blocks a shot of the other person's Slash Harkens with her spear and then runs the machine straight through, avoiding the cockpit and triggering the ejection seat.

Her coms flare to life seconds after the threat has been handled. Cornelia is pleased to note the person contacting her is her brother. "Cornelia, Shaing and Victor have been dealt with," Lelouch says. "Unfortunately, I was unable to take them alive, but we are in the clear regarding the subliminal weapon."

"Well, that is good news, although I admit I would have preferred having a crack at that bastard," Cornelia replies. The sheer scope of the damage their uncle and Shaing have done makes her wish she could have killed them personally, and as slowly and painfully as possible, but at this point, she'll take the immediate elimination of the threat over her own vengeful gratification.
"I understand Sir Weinberg has managed to subdue Lady Krushevsky. We'll continue on the same line. Hopefully, we'll manage to break the conditioning on at least some of them."

Cornelia wants to ask Lelouch how he plans to accomplish that, because he never actually explained how he helped Schneizel to begin with. She doesn't get the chance. Another knightmare comes at her from behind. Cornelia catches a glimpse of it through the corner of her eye. She turns, but as fast as she may be in a knightmare frame, it's not nearly fast enough to avoid whatever attack is coming her way.

As it turns out, she doesn't have to, because Guilford is there, watching her back as he always does. He is now fighting a knightmare that looks even more ornate than the ones Cornelia has been taking out her anger on.

Cornelia isn't all that familiar with the Euro-Britannians, but she did visit St. Petersburg a few times, and she remembers enough to recognize the machine as belonging to Andrea Farnese, the Grandmaster of the Knights of St. Raphael.

It's almost surreal to acknowledge that. Cornelia's experience with Farnese always made her feel that he is an honorable, loyal man, worthy of his title and position. Having him as an opponent seems unfathomable. Still, Cornelia is prepared for this, and she's been trying to pinpoint Farnese's location for a while now, since he is their strongest opponent on this side of the battlefield.

She would be feeling more triumphant at finally having lured him to her, but she is suddenly very aware that Guilford's knightmare is likely inferior to Farnese's. Despite her knight being a very talented pilot, he is in real danger here.

She doesn't wait to be proven right or wrong. Instead, she joins her knight in combat, fully intending to remove Farnese from the equation. She should have never gotten distracted by her conversation with Lelouch to begin with, but she won't make the same mistake twice.

Farnese sees her coming and backs away before she can reach him. Around him, a few more knights of St. Raphael converge. Behind Cornelia, several Glaston knights provide backup.

The confrontation seems imminent, but it never happens. When Cornelia moves forward again, the Knights of St. Raphael start to scatter in an uncoordinated pattern.

At first, Cornelia thinks it's only a strategy meant to confuse her, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Frantic transmissions suddenly start assaulting open coms—including one from Farnese himself.

"This is Andrea Farnese, Grandmaster of the Knights of St. Raphael. In my own name and that of my men, I offer my surrender and request an audience with Princess Cornelia to clarify the reasons for my actions."

True to his words, he remains where he is, not making any attempt to escape. "I will grant you this audience," Cornelia responds, a little wary, but hopeful.

Could it be that Lelouch's destruction of the subliminal weapon somehow managed to remove the conditioning, as they planned? Is this what Lelouch intended all along?

She doesn't know, but Lelouch must have realized what is happening, because he broadcasts a message through open coms. "This is Zero. Everyone who surrenders now will be given the opportunity to explain the situation, as we are already aware that most of you are not truly at fault. Come quietly and you will not be harmed."

The Knights of St. Raphael comply. It's just as well, because Cornelia has just spotted Jeremiah
Gottwald's massive orange frame hovering above them. Due to the rather unique nature of his knightmare, Gottwald was dispatched as a main attack unit against the Knights of St. Michael, like the rest of the Black Knights. Lelouch must be almost done with their true opponents too if he has sent Gottwald back.

After that, the battle ends rather quickly. The rest of their opponents gradually surrender and willingly leave their knightmares when asked.

Cornelia supervises the process, while Xingke maintains the perimeter to make sure everything is in order and Lelouch wraps up everything on his side.

She should have known everything was going a little too well.

Ten minutes after Lelouch's 'cease and desist' transmission, another call comes in, this time to the G1 mobile base. Surprisingly, it's Euphie, and the news she gives Cornelia is not welcome.

God help her, will this disaster ever end?

****

Since she moved to Japan upon the request of her sister, Euphie has been through a great deal of experiences. Some of it good, a lot of it... not so much.

She's always been proud of everything that has been accomplished, happy that she's found Lelouch and Nunnally alive and that she's befriended Suzaku. For a while, the realization that she and Suzaku would only ever be that—friends—stung a bit, but once she processed the reason, she was happy for it too. How can she not be, when she's seen how Lelouch, Suzaku and even the stoic C.C. are together?

That doesn't mean that at times, she doesn't feel inadequate, small and helpless. Today is one of those days. Lelouch and Cornelia have both left to Euro-Britannia, to deal with their crazed uncle. Euphie knows that she's supposed to be handling organizational matters in Japan in their absence, just like she has been since the SAZ's incipience, but she still wishes she could be by their side, supporting them in some other, more palpable way.

That's not possible, though, so she stays with one other sibling who needs her, Schneizel. He's already been placed in an induced coma, so it's not like her presence here is helping him any, but it makes her feel better to know that at least he's in a stable condition. And if nothing else, their guards—lesser in number now that Cornelia is gone—aren't forced to divide their attention on two different locations. Besides, Earl Maldini seems grateful for her company.

It's actually rather strange to realize that the two of them haven't talked much until now. Kanon was always by Schneizel's side, so whenever Euphie saw them in the past, she usually just talked to her brother and not Kanon. She feels a little guilty for it now, since it's as obvious as the stars in the sky that his devotion to her brother goes beyond simple loyalty.

"Schneizel is one of the strongest men I know," she tells him. "He'll recover."

"If anyone can do it, it's probably His Majesty," Kanon replies. "And it does seem that he has help. I admit that I wasn't certain His Highness, Prince Lelouch, would assist us."

Euphie opens her mouth to argue that Lelouch would never let Schneizel die, but the words don't come out. It stands to reason that Kanon would doubt Lelouch. Lelouch did kill Clovis, and Schneizel tried to kill Lelouch in turn, almost killing Suzaku in the process too.
Thinking of it like that, Euphie marvels at how their family hasn't imploded sooner.

She shakes off the thought and focuses on Kanon again. "Lelouch and Schneizel have their political differences, it's true. But I know for a fact that Lelouch was relieved when Schneizel survived the Pendragon explosion."

She remembers the conversation she had with him then, and Lelouch's own skepticism about being able to get along with Schneizel, but she doesn't mention it.

"There are so few of us left now, Earl Maldini. Despite past disputes, we have to learn how to get along. Lelouch knows that." She smiles at Kanon. "Besides, Lelouch and Schneizel were close when we were younger. It's not too late to get that back."

Kanon nods. "That's what His Majesty thought too. Ever since he started to suspect Zero's true identity, he had the tentative hope that he would be able to somehow reach out to his brother. It just didn't seem like a feasible plan at the time, all things considered. And there were so many other things to worry about..."

"I know. But things will get better. Lelouch and Cornelia will deal with the man who did this, and afterwards, we can all start anew."

"Let us hope that you are correct, Princess Euphemia," Kanon answers.

The two of them subside into silence after that. Euphie retrieves her tablet, deciding to do some work while she's at it. Kanon has his own tablet nearby, but doesn't seem inclined to reach for it anytime soon. Euphie doesn't blame him in the slightest.

Time passes as Euphie sinks herself into the SAZ reports. As necessary as it is, the work is nevertheless tedious, so it's really not that surprising when, at one point, she dozes off. Of course, she only realizes this much later, when she wakes up to the sound of screaming.

For a few seconds, Euphie isn't even sure what is happening. Sure enough, she can see that Schneizel is awake and he is the source of the shouts, but she has no idea how it is possible.

Kanon is already by Schneizel's bedside, trying to keep Schneizel from hurting himself. Euphie snaps out of her trance and joins him, making a grab for Schneizel's arm.

She doesn't expect to be much help, but oddly, Schneizel stops screaming when he catches a glimpse of her. "Euphie... What... No... You're dead..."

Dead? What?

Does he somehow think their uncle has killed her too? Just how much damage did the man do before Lelouch intervened?

"No, Schneizel," she tries to soothe him. "I'm all right."

Schneizel shakes his head adamantly, as if trying to clear. "This is... This isn't right... Zero... Lelouch... I have to... obey... I have to..."

His words become incomprehensible babble after that, a mix of languages Euphie doesn't understand. Maybe Kanon does, more than her, at least, because he quickly intervenes. "Your Majesty, you're perfectly safe. We are in Japan, under the care of Britannian medics. Your brother isn't here at this time, but I'm sure..."
"No!" Schneizel cuts Kanon off. "I... We musn't... Kanon, please... Just..."

Before Schneizel can finish his sentence, doctors rush in, clearly alerted that there is a problem. Kanon takes a step back, presumably to give the medical staff room to work.

Unfortunately, Schneizel isn't very receptive to their attentions. He actually shoves one of them aside. "No. Leave me be. I..."

"Your Majesty, please," the doctor begs, "remain calm."

"Allow us to approach," another says.

Schneizel says nothing. His breathing is increasingly labored, and he's shaking, like he's struggling against an unseen foe.

Kanon intervenes before the situation can escalate further. "Your Majesty, you're unwell and hurting yourself. I'm begging you. Let them help."

Schneizel looks up at his aide. "Kanon, I... I... I'm so sorry. I should have never..."

His words die and he suddenly goes very still. His eyes glaze, taking on a vacant expression.

"Don't just stand there!" Euphie shouts at the doctors. "Do something!"

It's pointless. Nothing the staff tries can snap Schneizel out of whatever trance he is in. Ultimately, Schneizel is rushed into the emergency room, and Euphie and Kanon can do nothing but stand by and watch in utter helplessness.

Kanon collapses on a nearby bench, looking well and truly defeated. "His Highness, Prince Lelouch, said that the method he used to help His Majesty has a 50/50 chance of helping him... but that it could also backfire badly," he murmurs.

Euphie remembers what Lelouch told them once about his gift. "People tend to interpret orders creatively. Everything comes with a price."

It's possible that this could indeed be a side-effect of that. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe it's related to the original attack. After all, Schneizel's reactions remind Euphie a lot of the time Suzaku was almost forced to kill Lelouch.

Either way, it's clear to her she has to tell her brother about this. If he's helped once, he will help again.

"We'll talk to Lelouch," she tells Kanon. "He may be able to tell us something."

Kanon nods. "His Majesty did ask for him. If there is someone who can help, it is His Highness."

She reaches for her phone and speed-dials Lelouch's number. A chill runs over her spine when he doesn't answer.

Lelouch always has his phone on him, and he's never failed to answer her calls. It's been like that ever since he provided her with the untraceable phone, before the SAZ was put into place.

Struggling not to panic, she tries Suzaku next, but he doesn't answer either. Only then does it occur to her that they must still be engaged in battle. They may ignore their regular calls if they are in their knightmares.
Biting her lower lip, Euphie considers what she should do next. She doesn't want to distract her siblings during combat, or she would try Cornelia too. Should she just wait until the doctors come out and give them more information? No, she can't just sit on this information and do nothing. Besides, chances are that Lelouch would have some knowledge of what could have gone wrong, like he did the first time. What to do?

"You can't reach His Highness?" Kanon asks by her side.

Euphie shakes her head. "He's probably fighting, and unable to take my calls."

"Maybe we could contact the mobile base in Euro-Britannia," Kanon suggests. "There will be people there not actively involved in combat."

That's a good idea, and that's exactly what Euphie ends up doing. She can't connect to the mobile base in Euro-Britannia from her personal phone, or Kanon's, but they find a communication's terminal with ease, and within minutes, they make the call. Surprisingly, the person who takes it is Cornelia.

"Euphie? What's wrong?"

Just seeing her big sister's face on the vid screen makes Euphie feel a little better. "It's Schneizel, Cornelia. He's awake, but he's very ill."

She explains everything that has been happening, from Schneizel's incomprehensible babbling, to him going almost catatonic. "I've been unable to contact Lelouch," she adds when she's finished. "I was hoping he would have an idea on what could be wrong."

Cornelia is visibly troubled by the information, but still, manages to provide a somewhat encouraging response. "I spoke with Lelouch just a little while ago. He said that he'd handled the matter with our uncle. Both he and Shaing are dead. He may have been busy doing that when you tried calling him, but the battle is all but over now. I'll speak with him shortly."

Euphie opens her mouth to thank her sister, but Kanon steps in before she can speak again. "Your Highness... Please hurry. His Majesty's demeanor and words were... not encouraging, but he did seem to think that he needed to speak to Prince Lelouch. If we do not make haste, it may be too late."

Cornelia doesn't chastise Kanon for speaking out of turn. "Very well, Earl Maldini. I will discuss the issue with my brother. In the meantime, stay there and keep me posted. Contact us again if there is further information from the medical staff." She turns toward Euphie. "And don't go anywhere without your guard. We may have eliminated Victor and Shin Hyuga Shaing, but that doesn't mean all of his agents are also gone."

"Yes, Cornelia. I understand."

After all, how can she not? She's already lost so much since as of late. And, despite the fact that Cornelia has said their uncle has been dealt with, she can't help but think that their problems are only just beginning.

Chapter End Notes

More on what happened to Schneizel in future chapters. Hope you liked the tiny bit of
Euphie POV I managed to sneak in :)

Refrain and Results

Chapter Notes

I'm shocked. 1200 kudos! You guys are amazing. Thanks! And special thank yous to everyone who is commenting and giving me feedback! With your encouragement, I may actually finish this one :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earlier that day

The news of the imminent campaign against the usurpers in Euro-Britannia fill Diethard with joy. He is less pleased when, shortly after his return, Suzaku Kururugi pulls him aside, while Zero and C.C. depart on their own. "We need to talk. With me."

Diethard has never actually seen Sir Kururugi take charge in this way. Although he does coordinate troops in the SAZ and he is clearly a capable enough leader, he usually lets Zero do all the talking and remains a silent guard by his side.

Clearly, something has changed, something that warrants a different approach.

At first, Diethard is somewhat put out at not being able to speak to Zero, but it doesn't take him long to realize his mistake. In fact, a minutes later, he and Sir Kururugi are standing in Zero's office and discussing what probably amounts to committing treason—at least for him. Not that he particularly cares. He's done it once before, when he did not even know Zero's true identity. This is nothing. In fact, it answers a few questions Diethard has been asking himself lately.

"As you've been told by Lelouch and C.C., Lelouch's goal was never to become a simple freedom fighter," Sir Kururugi says. "While he may not have caused recent circumstances, we will be taking advantage of them to pursue the original plan."

"For him to become the emperor of the world," Diethard says, already excited.

"Yes. There is only one major obstacle. Schneizel el Britannia. You're aware by now that Lelouch used his Geass to save Schneizel's life after Shin Hyuga Shaing attempted to kill him through a similar method."

Diethard nods. Yes, His Highness did explain that much to all the Black Knights. Since then, Diethard has wondered why Zero didn't just let the emperor die, but he is at least 99% certain it must be related to him wanting to encourage the perception of being a 'knight of justice'.

"Obviously," Sir Kururugi continues, "it had nothing to do with familial sentiment or anything like that. He was concerned about the further instability Schneizel's death would cause, but mostly, he wanted to display a level of cooperation with the Britannians. However, that leaves us with a small problem.

"We are told that Schneizel will be recovering in a few weeks. That isn't nearly enough time for Lelouch to establish a proper foothold and take over as the next emperor in a proper transition. Cornelia will work with him, but Schneizel will not defer to him just like that, not without Lelouch
using Geass. Therefore, he needs to be removed, in a manner that will not be eye-catching."

"An assassination then?" Diethard asks. "Would that work now?"

Sir Kururugi shakes his head. "It would look too suspicious. Instead, Rolo and Sayoko are to infiltrate the viceroy palace while most of the security is away and... do some permanent damage. After all, nobody will want a brain damaged emperor."

Of course. The emperor is in a coma now, and presumably attempted to kill himself before on the bidding of his foe. It would not be that surprising for him to wake up... not right.

"And how will he accomplish that?"

"Refrain," Sir Kururugi replies simply.

Diethard stares at him in disbelief. He certainly didn't expect that. "Refrain?"

"Yes. Acquiring a non-detectable, appropriate poison would have been impossible on a short notice, but according to Lelouch, the basic components of Refrain are similar to what Britannian doctors are already using to keep Schneizel in an induced coma. At most, if they notice something wrong, they will think someone accidentally gave him an overdose.

"Refrain is also fairly easy to procure for us. It's not common knowledge, but Britannians actually keep it in stock to serve as a truth serum. They never destroy the drugs they confiscate from their drug busts. They simply save it for future use."

Sometimes, Diethard really does love working for Zero. Cancel that. He always loves working for Zero. Joining the Black Knights is officially the best decision of his life.

"With Cornelia gathering most of her troops for our military campaign in Euro-Britannia, the security on non-essentials will be insignificant and the warehouses where such items are kept easily accessible," Kururugi continues. "Which brings us to your part.

"Rolo and Sayoko can can sneak past security personnel easily enough and we have security codes that can help them get inside, but the cameras will be a problem. It's very important that nobody even suspects foul play. Can you use the Omega line you created for Lelouch to hack into the camera feed?"

Diethard considers the question. Technically, the cameras in the viceroy palace are in a closed circuit, so it should not be possible, but they already have a link to the Britannian database since Sir Kururugi first changed loyalties. If he makes use of that... "It's certainly possible."

"Get on it. We don't have much time at our disposal. Coordinate with Rolo and Sayoko for everything that you need."

Diethard doesn't need to be told twice. He throws himself into his work, checking to see what needs to be tweaked in order for this plan to go as His Highness intends.

Sir Kururugi leaves him to it and departs, presumably having other tasks on his agenda. He comes back an hour or so later, this time with His Highness and C.C. by his side. Zero is wearing his full costume, but C.C. has changed into her knightmare pilot suit. Clearly, departure is imminent.

"Well, Diethard? What is the verdict? Can you do it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Diethard replies. "It is doable, although it would be safer and easier if I had
another direct link to the feed."

"Yes, I imagined that would be an issue. Sayoko will be helping you with that. But you need to be quick and efficient about this. I don't want her and Rolo away from the SAZ for too long."

"I'm almost done with the tweaks," Diethard replies. "If Sayoko can get me a direct link, it will be quick and easy from there."

Zero nods. "Very good. Be aware that you also need to cover for their absence at the SAZ. This is an affair that needs to remain a secret, for obvious reasons."

"Yes. I understand completely." Of course he does. If this got out, it would be more than a little disastrous.

"I expected that you would. That being said, there's one more thing we need to take care of before I go."

The slot from the Zero mask opens. Diethard is not aware of the following instructions he receives, and neither does he have the knowledge of the command that is implanted in his subconscious. When Zero leaves, he simply continues with his work, just as excited as he was before.

It's already past midnight when everything is ready. Rolo is already waiting for him in a nondescript van, and Sayoko arrives shortly after. "Everything all right with Nunnally?" Rolo asks.

Sayoko nods. "She is asleep and the Black Knights are watching over her. They know to keep her safe."

Rolo grimaces. "We have to hurry. Even with big brother's Geass, I don't really trust them to do a good job."

"It could not be helped, and it is only for a few hours. This is necessary too."

"She's only just arrived," Diethard pipes up. "The chances of anyone knowing she is even here are minimal. The SAZ is in complete lockdown. It's highly unlikely that an enemy agent would be able to reach her."

"Never say never," Rolo says, somewhat darkly.

Regardless of his words, he must trust the precautions Zero has taken, because he makes no further comment on the risk they are taking. He takes the wheel and starts the van.

Diethard isn't exactly sure how exactly they get to their destination. The drive seems much faster than it should be, and it's rather strange that none of the remaining Tokyo patrols seem to notice them.

The explanation comes to him when they stop in front of the viceroy palace. He catches sight of Rolo's face. The boy looks visibly tired. His hands shake slightly on the wheel and he's breathless, panting.

"Are you all right, Rolo-san?" Sayoko asks.

"Fine," Rolo explains. "It's just fatigue, from the Geass. Just give me a moment."

Diethard remembers his emperor mentioning his little brother having an ability of 'suspending the perception of time'. It must tire him out in some way. Since Rolo doesn't seem inclined to elaborate, he says nothing, and just starts setting up his work station.
It doesn't take long for Rolo to recover and, as previously established, the two of them disappear inside. The most difficult part of this whole enterprise is Sayoko sneaking in to find a security terminal without being spotted. Fortunately, she manages to do this with little trouble, apparently making her way to an already identified spot through the vents.

Once the remote link is set up, it is easy enough for Diethard to sneak in and hack the cameras, guaranteeing that security will not see the intruders approach.

He is of course, luckier than them, and he finds himself watching as Rolo slowly advances through the facility, with the guards seeming oblivious to his and Sayoko's presence. At first, the reason for this is unclear, until they run into a person that is doing rounds. The man freezes like he's been hit by some sort of spell, and only when Rolo and Sayoko are gone does he recover, completely unaware of what has happened.

This process continues until the two reach the infirmary, where the emperor is resting. Princess Euphemia and Earl Kanon Maldini are there too, but it makes no difference. Rolo injects the Refrain into the IV tube that is supposed to keep Emperor Schneizel into an induced coma. He and Sayoko are in and out within minutes.

Then, the process is repeated in reverse, and Rolo and Sayoko head back the way they came. Diethard uses this time to make sure everything is in order and no traces of their presence will remain. By the time Sayoko removes the USB stick from the security terminal, he is satisfied that he will be able to report complete success to Zero.

A few hours after their departure from the SAZ, the three of them arrive back, still unseen. Sayoko and Rolo go back to the princess Nunnally's quarters, and Diethard wraps up the rest of the mission —making sure their brief absence remained a secret.

As instructed, he contacts Zero once everything is complete and provides him with the full report. "Well done, Diethard," his emperor tells him, smirking. "I knew I could rely on you."

"You honor me, Your Majesty."

As odd as it may seem, that is actually true. It is a point of pride for Diethard that he is the only Black Knight in the know about most, if not all of Zero's machinations. Sayoko Shinozaki and Jeremiah Gottwald don't count, as they've apparently known Lelouch vi Britannia for years. C.C. and Kururugi are his lovers, and Rolo is practically family.

Diethard knows better than to believe Zero has told him the complete truth, but that doesn't matter to him. What matters is that he has clearly earned his emperor's trust.

He doesn't sleep at all that night, too excited about the possible results of Zero's plans. He hopes his emperor will give him another mission soon, because being part of the remaking of the world is a dream come true.

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*Hours later, Euro-Britannia*

"Say again? Schneizel is awake and thinks Euphie was dead?"

Lelouch stares at Cornelia uncomprehendingly. He cannot even begin to process what his sister is telling him.

It's almost surreal. Cornelia has pulled him, C.C. and Suzaku into a meeting on the topic as soon as
he returned from the field, and he knows she would not joke about this, but that doesn't make it any less shocking.

The fact that Schneizel has woken up from his coma is hard enough to believe, especially considering what Diethard has reported. If anything, the Refrain should have kept Schneizel under for longer than the coma-inducing drugs.

But if Cornelia is correct, Schneizel is not only conscious, but also in possession of his memories from their old life. Could the Refrain have caused it? No, that's impossible. The drug simply doesn't have that kind of effect.

Something did, however, as evidenced by Cornelia's following words. "Euphie didn't understand everything Schneizel told her, but his shock at seeing her alive came through quite clearly. Earl Maldini also mentioned Schneizel wanting to speak with you. Of course, it doesn't matter much now, considering that he is in a comatose state."

Lelouch’s mind furiously works as he processes this information. He is unsure where this leaves him. On the one hand, it does leave Schneizel's reign over Britannia on very shaky ground, just like he wanted. On the other, it's much too soon, and it draws unwanted attention to what he's been doing.

He hasn't had the time yet to capitalize on his victory over V.V. Also, despite the fact that he has Cornelia and Guilford Geassed to trust him, other Britannians are not in that situation and he cannot forever expect to stall them with that vague explanation of a subliminal weapon, not when they're well aware he did something to help Schneizel the first time they came back from Euro-Britannia.

Confirming his guess, Darlton adresses the proverbial elephant in the room. "Your Highness, could you assist His Majesty like you did the first time?"

Lelouch sets his mask aside, knowing his Zero persona will not help him during this conversation. "I'm... not certain," he replies. "You see, I haven't been completely honest with you concerning the subliminal weapon my uncle used. It wasn't actually a weapon at all, but rather... a form of superpower."

The Glaston Knights stare at him in disbelief. Cornelia is predictably not so skeptical, but Lelouch doesn't give her the chance to display her induced trust in him. Instead, he proceeds to give them all the story he once told the Black Knights.

Predictably, Cornelia doesn't take it well. "Dear God..." she whispers halfway through his explanation. "You and Nunnally... Human experimentation?"

"Yes. And it gets worse, sister. We weren't the only ones who suffered from this treatment. Nunnally had a twin brother, whom Victor had kidnapped at birth, and whose existence I was completely unaware of."

"We have another brother?" Cornelia asks, her breath catching. "And he's been... with our uncle all these years?"

"Yes." Lelouch grits his teeth, not bothering to disguise the anger he still feels on Rolo's behalf. "His name is Rolo and he was indeed a test subject for the better part of his life. I managed to get him out shortly before the SAZ project started. He participated in the operation against the Chinese Federation, but I deemed it too dangerous for him to go against our uncle. He is currently at the SAZ. with Nunnally.

"And Victor's obsession didn't stop there. Jeremiah Gottwald was targetted because of his loyalty to
the vi Britannia line. Then there was Suzaku, who was my friend, and paid the price for it. And of course, there were others, not related to me in any way. C.C., for example, was with him far longer than we were. Incidentally, she was also the subject of most of Clovis's experiments. Yes, he was involved in it too."

Cornelia twitches in visible fury. She must undoubtedly be assuming this is the reason why he killed Clovis, which is just the way Lelouch likes it.

"In any case, we don't have time to go into every single detail over what happened then. The issue at hand is that V.V. did the same to Shin Hyuga Shaing, both out of vengeance for my father's demise, and due to him needing some extra tools in the battle against us.

"Different people received different abilities from the experiments. Shaing's ability was the power to order people to die. One command from him, and people would kill themselves. It was so powerful that when he used it on Schneizel, his body started to shut down on its own, despite the fact that he was kept unconscious.

"I managed to help Schneizel due to my own ability, but I knew even then that it was a long shot. Now... Without even knowing the true causes of the incident... I cannot even begin to state what effect it would have."

"This new episode could be in some way related to Shaing and Victor's death," C.C. muses. "There was obviously a side-effect to our victory we did not expect, in that the people who were brainwashed were snapped out of their trances after Suzaku handled Victor's lieutenants. Perhaps it worked differently in the case of Shaing and Emperor Schneizel. It would not be the first time it's happened."

"How so?" Guilford asks, visibly shaken.

"That's what happened to me, Sir Guilford, when I was given the command to kill His Highness," Suzaku answers. "I killed the culprit, if you recall, but I almost died due to the brain damage I received in the process. My own abilities saved my life."

"I always did wonder how it was possible for you to recover so quickly when you had obviously been hurt..." Guilford murmurs.

Cornelia seems too angry to even speak at this point. She clenches and unclenches her fists, then lets out a slow breath. "Then there is no way to help Schneizel again."

Lelouch doesn't reply. Even if he were interested in helping his brother—which is not the case—he would not be able to use Geass on him again. Nevertheless, the situation needs to be investigated, at once.

Lelouch has not forgotten the nature of the Geass he used on his brother. He told Schneizel to 'live on', like he once did Suzaku. What effect did the Geass have on him, considering all the other factors at play? Does Schneizel truly remember the events in the past timeline, or is Lelouch just jumping at shadows?

He has so many questions, and only one certainty. He cannot leave the matter unattended.

C.C. must guess what he is thinking, because she manages to reply before anyone can deem his silence suspicious. "We don't know. We'll have to see him first to be sure."

"Can you handle matters here, Cornelia, while I go back to Japan to deal with this?" Lelouch asks. "I'll leave the Black Knights here. You'll have to coordinate with Tohdoh."
"Of course, Lelouch," Cornelia replies. "It won't be a problem."

Lelouch expected she would say that. Leaving now is not ideal, as he would prefer to dig his claws into Euro-Britannia a little deeper, to at least speak with Farnese and some of the other newly freed Euro-Britannians. But there will be time enough for that later, and making sure Schneizel is not a danger for his plan takes priority.

"Thank you, sister," he says. "I'll go speak to the Black Knights, and then I'll be leaving. Contact me at once if there is any issues arise, from anyone."

Cornelia narrows her eyes at him, and Lelouch quickly realizes the issue. Deciding to forestall possible problem, he adds, "Cornelia, I am sorry for keeping this from you in the past, but I think I don't have to tell you how complicated this whole situation is. In fact, the things I've said here today must remain a complete secret. Should it become public knowledge, it could result in a disaster for Britannia."

"I understand, Lelouch," Cornelia answers, "but I do expect to be told the whole story once you come back." She looks at Lelouch's jacket, and arches a brow. "With details on how you took care of our uncle."

For the first time, Lelouch realizes that, in the rush of finding out Cornelia's news, he, C.C. and Suzaku have completely forgotten to change out of their bloodstained clothes. Fortunately, no one seems to find it suspicious, despite the fact that most of the battle took place in knightmares. Lelouch has a feeling that Cornelia suspects he may have had his fun with their uncle a bit before he ended it, and she doesn't blame for it. She likely would have very much liked to show V.V. her "appreciation" for his actions, and she may be pissed that he didn't give her the chance.

Also, it would appear that appear that his Geass of 'trust' has his limits, and she has not missed the fact that he was vague on the exact nature of his abilities. He's grateful that she's chosen to prioritize, since he doesn't have time to explain everything, especially not in front of the Glaston Knights.

"When I return," he promises.

He doesn't bother to put his mask back on. At this point, it would hinder him more than it would help.

"Good luck, Lelouch," Cornelia says.

"And to you, Princess Cornelia," he replies. "Keep me posted."

Darlton and the other Glaston Knights salute, and as he departs, Lelouch wonders what effect this new development will truly have on Britannia.

If he keeps spinning this tale for more people, he's going to have to be very careful, lest his delicate web of deception fall apart completely.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, at this point, Diethard is very, very unlikely to do anything against Lelouch. But Lelouch isn't taking chances anyway. The Geass on Diethard is merely a safety net, because Lelouch hasn't actually forgotten Diethard did hold him at gunpoint.
The Black Knights aren't thrilled to have their leader depart so quickly after the battle, but neither do they question it as they would have in the past. Lelouch explains there's been an incident in the Britannian section of Japan and he needs to handle it personally, and nobody questions the necessity.

"Should we accompany you, Zero?" Kallen asks.

Lelouch shakes his head. "Thank you, Q1, but no. I'll take Suzaku, C.C. and Jeremiah with me. Unfortunately, it's not a matter in which you yourself can help me, and you're still needed here.

"Tohdoh, coordinate with Cornelia and Xingke for post-battle operations. I hope I won't be gone long, but we need to make sure we haven't missed anything."

"Of course, Zero," Tohdoh replies, as expected. C.C. makes a mental note to check up with Shaing as soon as they can. It wouldn't do for someone overzealous to run into the supposedly dead instigator of the Euro-Britannian coup.

Lelouch has the same idea, because on their way out, he sends Shaing a discreet message. The location of the Thought Elevator is well hidden, but it is better for Shaing to be forewarned, just in case someone stumbles upon it.

Finally, they stop to speak to Gino, making sure the Knight of Three is informed of the details of this new development. "Keep a close eye on the Euro-Britannians," Lelouch says. "We don't want any trouble. And speak to Lady Krushevsky once she has recovered."

"Of course, Your Highness," Gino says. He doesn't ask questions on why Lelouch has suddenly decided to go to Japan in aid of Schneizel. C.C. approves.

They take the fastest transport available, leaving Orange to pilot. Once they make sure they're completely safe, Lelouch asks, "What do you think caused this, C.C.?"

"I can't be certain," C.C. responds, "but it must be related to what happened when you first helped Schneizel."

"That's right," Lelouch replies. "All three of us were transported into his mindscape."

C.C nods. "Without seeing him in person, I'd say my assistance during that first confrontation with Shaing must have awakened his memories in some way."

She didn't intend it at the time, but a lot of things have been happening that she did not intend, so perhaps it's not that surprising.

Even after hundreds of years of carrying the code, the true extents of its power remain a mystery to her. While she would not have normally lost her hold on her power, this isn't a normal situation in any shape or form.

"I expect that you taking the code must have had an effect on him due to what happened then."

Lelouch lets out a slow breath. "Of course it did. Because things can't ever be easy."
"I wonder..." Suzaku muses.

He doesn't finish the phrase, but his thoughtful tone draws both Lelouch and C.C.'s attention. "What is it, Suzaku?" Lelouch inquires.

"When we were brought into the past, I preserved my Geass. I mean, the Geass you cast on me. Do you suppose it's the same for Schneizel?"

This isn't something C.C. has thought too much about, but the answer comes easy to her regardless. "Most likely, yes," she answers in Lelouch's stead. "Your case is, of course, special, but in general, getting one's memories back would reimprint the previously existing Geass into the mind of an individual. This may be problematic in Schneizel's case, since Lelouch has already cast a Geass on him in this timeline, so we don't know what further effects the original one would have had on him. It could have completely destroyed him... Or it could have boosted the 'Live on' command and turned it into a tool."

Lelouch's breath catches. "Like Suzaku's?"

"I wouldn't have deemed it possible a few years ago, but now..." Suzaku grimaces. "Well, if I can manipulate a 'Live on' command, I expect Prince Schneizel can too."

C.C. actually thinks that's pretty unlikely. Manipulating Geass isn't really about IQ, but about strength, determination, willpower. Despite his genius, Schneizel never did have the same willpower as Lelouch—a willpower that was mirrored in his knight.

But she doesn't say that, since she's made such statements before, and they've proven to be overly optimistic or outright false. "At this point, anything is possible. We'll know for sure once we're in Japan."

Lelouch looks like he wants to discuss the issue further, but C.C. drags both him and Suzaku to bed. They've had a rough day, and she suspects it won't get any easier. A break wouldn't hurt.

Since C.C. and Lelouch both have code, and Suzaku has his Geass ability, they don't actually need to sleep as much as normal people. But even if physical exhaustion doesn't get to them, mental exhaustion is an entirely different matter.

And really, C.C. just wants to spend a few hours enjoying the fact that Lelouch is not dead and he is not likely to die anytime soon. Is that really so much to ask?

They don't fall asleep, but it's still comforting to sit together in bed and simply not think for a while. It's comforting to feel the buzz of Lelouch's new code at the back of her mind, entwining with her contract with Suzaku. It reassures her, tells her that despite all the possible things that can still go wrong, they're headed in the right direction. They don't even need to have sex. Although C.C. wouldn't have said 'no' to it, she finds that simply holding onto one another and focusing onto their shared presence is enough.

By the time they're in Japan, they're all a little calmer. Orange lands the transport in front of the viceroy palace, and the three of them flank Lelouch as he exits the ship.

It's the first time Lelouch has actually been here while not wearing the mask, but Lelouch has already decided it's not only pointless, but completely counterproductive to use it now. Of course, with the situation being so grave, the Britannian staff members are nowhere near as shocked at seeing the unmasked Zero as they should be. If anything, they look tentatively hopeful.
C.C. would find this shocking, but it's probably in some way related to Euphemia. She is already waiting for them, looking pale, but determined, and she always was more convincing than anyone so idealistically naive should have been.

Paying very little heed to protocol, Euphemia launches herself at Lelouch. "Lelouch. Thank God."

Lelouch hugs his half-sister, patting her back. "Euphie. I came as quickly as I could."

"It's so horrible," Euphie says. "The doctors say it's hopeless and there's nothing than they can do for Schneizel."

C.C. shares a look with Suzaku. It would appear that Schneizel was not in fact able to use the 'Live on' Geass as they originally feared.

Lelouch doesn't make his sister any promises. "We'll take a look. Lead the way."

Euphemia does exactly that, and within minutes, they are back in the medical wing, in Schneizel's quarters. Much like the last time they were here, Earl Maldini is seated by his side. The hopelessness on his face speaks volumes of the seriousness of the situation.

Not that C.C. wouldn't have realized it even without Earl Maldini's reaction. The two Geasses cast on Schneizel are so twisted up in knots that it's a miracle the man isn't completely brain dead. Lelouch can obviously see it too, and even Suzaku winces as he takes in Schneizel's condition, likely sensing it through his Geass.

Against all odds, though, as soon as Lelouch enters the room, Schneizel twitches. It's a very slight motion, but it's there, and Kanon instantly sees it. "Your Majesty!"

In that moment, C.C. finally understands. She almost wants to laugh, because the situation is too sweetly ironic. Miraculously, she manages to hold back her amusement.

Lelouch remains calmly composed as well. "Earl Maldini. Would you give us a moment with my brother?"

"But... We should call for the doctors."

Lelouch shakes his head. "They can't help him now. You don't have to take me up on my word, but you know I'm telling the truth."

Kanon hesitates, looking between Lelouch's determined face and the emperor's still trembling figure. Finally, he seems to make a decision. "Very well."

"Orange, escort them out, will you?"

"Yes, My Lord," Orange replies. He understands the underlining message and will wait outside, just in case he is needed later.

In the meantime, he, Euphemia and Kanon depart, leaving C.C., Suzaku and Lelouch alone with the man who was quite possibly one of their most dangerous foes in the past lifetime.

Lelouch walks up to the bed, his previously stoic expression twisted into a small smirk. "Well, big brother. It would seem that things have changed since we've last seen one another. You aren't so willing to die, are you?"

No, he isn't and he is likely well aware that Lelouch has no intention of perpetuating the threat he
represents. Without a doubt, the 'Live on' Geass is telling him exactly how much a threat Lelouch is. The more C.C. thinks about it, the more hilarious she finds it.

"It doesn't really matter," she says. "He won't be moving from that bed anytime soon."

Lelouch nods. "We couldn't fix this even if we wanted to."

"Technically..." Suzaku pipes up, "I could... Through my Geass."

C.C. doesn't know who is more surprised by his words, her, or Lelouch. "What?" Lelouch snaps, his smirk instantly fading as he turns toward his knight. "No!"

C.C. glowers at Suzaku, her own amusement dissipating like smoke in the mind. "Why would you even want to, idiot? You're talking about absorbing brain damage when you yourself are healing from a brain injury. And for Schneizel?"

Sometimes, she wonders what could have possibly possessed her to come to care about Suzaku. Then again, the same thing happened to her with Lelouch. You'd think that someone her age would know better, but apparently not.

It's so frustrating to love people who are stupidly self-sacrificing for all the wrong reasons. Not to mention that they've spoken about the necessity of eliminating Schneizel countless times in the past. Lelouch is, at least in part, the one responsible for Schneizel's predicament. C.C. can't be sure how much the Refrain contributed to Schneizel's current state, but it certainly couldn't have helped.

"It's not that I'm particularly keen on it," Suzaku defends himself snappishly. "I'm just saying... If you wanted to, I'd do it. That it's a possibility."

On the bed, Schneizel is still trembling. C.C. wonders what his command is telling him, whom he truly acknowledges as Zero. Suzaku, the Zero whose orders he obeyed for seven years, or Lelouch, who placed the Geass on him to begin with?

"Even if you did heal him of the current brain damage, the two Geasses would still continue to hurt him," Lelouch replies, practically vibrating with tension. "We'd have to cancel them using Jeremiah for it to stick, and that's much too dangerous."

"Believe me, I'm aware," Suzaku answers between gritted teeth. "I'm very aware of just how dangerous he is."

There's a quiet tension in his voice, the same kind that usually shows up before Suzaku does something very violent. He looks at Schneizel's figure on the bed.

"I hated him, you know. For repeatedly trying to kill you. For encouraging the research on the FLEIJA, but also... For sending Kanon after me, that day, at the shrine. Things may have ended differently if he hadn't." He glances between Schneizel and Lelouch, then takes a deep breath. "But I think now, that even if you'd taken my hand that day... I was too blinded and stubborn then to see the truth. Maybe it truly was for the best."

"Because it brought us to what we have now," Lelouch muses.

He's right. Prior to the Requiem, C.C.'s relationship with Suzaku was practically non-existent, with C.C. mostly marveling at how badly Suzaku managed to screw up Lelouch's plans, sometimes just by existing. But the huge numbers of mistakes they made ultimately led her to see past that, to see Suzaku as an individual, and the two of them to have this new beginning.
But while that's all well and good, it should not be enough for Suzaku to bring up the topic of potentially healing Schneizel.

C.C. narrows her eyes at Suzaku. It's rather strange that he would say this now of all times, after he's watched Lelouch die. If anything, Suzaku has proven to be even more protective of Lelouch after watching such episodes, and his demeanor toward Schneizel doesn't seem friendly at all.

Why then would he make the offer?

"Suzaku? What is the matter?"

"I'm not sure," Suzaku replies. "I just keep getting this feeling... That maybe we're missing something. Maybe it's just that, once I eventually heal Nunnally, people will start asking questions on why I didn't do it to Schneizel."

"I've already thought of that, Suzaku," Lelouch replies. "Nunnally's injury will be tackled in time, and I'll find a medical way to explain it off. Perhaps claim that the paralysis too was induced by the Geass. But that can wait until you've learned to deal with your Geass better. I'm not going to risk you crippling yourself, and I'm definitely not going expose you to every single person that suddenly wants to have their health problems dealt with. Not even for Nunnally's sake."

It's actually rather startling that Lelouch would make that comment, that he would prioritize Suzaku's wellbeing over Nunnally's ability to walk. But then, perhaps it should not be. C.C. still remembers that day on the Avalon, when Lelouch confessed that he would be willing to go as far as it took for the sake of the Requiem—even if it meant ending the life of his sister.

In any case, that is beside the point right now, and Nunnally is not the issue.

"I think we've all had a rough couple of days," she says. "The last thing we need is to make hasty decisions. We'll find a better solution for Nunnally's situation at a later date, but in the meantime, Schneizel has to be removed."

With Schneizel on the throne, Lelouch cannot occupy it. That is a fact, and Lelouch becoming the emperor is a prerequisite to the new world they need to build for their daughter.

"You're right, C.C.," Suzaku answers. He looks at Schneizel one more time and smiles self-deprecatingly. "I apologize. I don't know what came over me."

"You wouldn't be yourself if you weren't foolishly self-sacrificing," Lelouch jokes. "It is of no matter. We'll stick to the plan. Euphie and Cornelia will be upset, but that was always..."

All of a sudden, a pale hand shoots out from the bed, grabbing Lelouch's wrist. Lelouch's eyes widen and he clutches his chest, gasping.

His code flares around him, flashing in bright flares of alarming white, and C.C. knows that they were right to be concerned. Once again, Lelouch's plan has gotten out of hand.

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Contrary to popular belief, Schneizel is not a man afraid to own up to his own mistakes. In fact, he's always believed that being able to learn from one's past is a key part of leadership. It was part of the reason why he never much cared for his father's approach regarding conquest and preferred diplomacy.

History has long ago made it clear that empires built on unsteady grounds are never meant to last,
and there is only so long people are willing to take oppression until they snap. Sooner or later, dictatorial regimes collapse under their own weight, and it was something he sought to stop during his time as Prime Minister.

Of course, it was more uncomplicated to simply remove the people who were bothersome with the snap of his fingers and the push of a button, but the uncomplicated approach isn't always the best one.

Unfortunately, having the FLEIJA at his fingertips made him forget that. It made him arrogant. It made him underestimate his little brother and lose sight of the big picture. He paid a dire price for it.

He's never been afraid to die for his goals, but that wasn't the fate his brother chose for him. And that moment, the moment when he realized just how badly he'd miscalculated would probably always be branded in Schneizel's memory.

"You shall serve Zero."

Such a simple command, four little words, but they kept Schneizel entombed in his own mind for years, a slave to Suzaku Kururugi's whims.

He almost wishes he wouldn't remember it, but he's always been stubborn. And he always tried so very hard to beat that command. It even worked on occasion. Kururugi's insistence to poke into the past reminded Schneizel that Kururugi was not actually Zero, only a pale imitation of the man who had originally worn the mask.

But unfortunately, Kururugi's moments of curiosity and weakness were few and far in between, and most of the time, he was impeccable and steadfast in his role. And despite himself, Schneizel could not force his own consciousness into not acknowledging the fact that no matter who or what he may have been before, Suzaku Kururugi did indeed become Zero, most likely by Lelouch's own will.

Today, Schneizel estimates that he must've been conscious for maybe two weeks during the unknown numbers of years he was under the thrall of Lelouch's Geass.

Long enough to witness the results of Lelouch's plan and of his own mistakes.

Long enough to understand the true extent of his brother's sacrifice, but most importantly, long enough to see Kanon slowly wither away and die inside as Schneizel became more and more unable to even speak to him.

He tried a few times to tell Kanon to leave, to start over in some other country. The existence of the UFN made it possible, as evidenced by Sir Weinberg's departure. Kururugi would have allowed it, so Schneizel even managed to say the words once. "Go. Be free."

The result was not the desired one, because his plea had apparently given Kanon hope. And he never left, remaining as trapped by Lelouch's Geass as Schneizel himself.

It is Schneizel's greatest failure, but thinking back, he now realizes Kanon must have realized Schneizel's mistake sooner than he himself did. He never did care for the FLEIJA, to the point of even speaking out against it after Pendragon. But he stayed faithful regardless, and he paid for it.

It's ironic that Schneizel would remember all of this now, when he is once again trapped in his own mind. But he knows that he must, just like he knows he has to fight.

For whatever reason, they are apparently back in time in some way. That much has been made clear since his strange awakening.
While in some ways, his mind is still a blur, he has managed to put the pieces together and sort the information in a comprehensible way. He doesn't completely understand how this sort of thing is possible, but the only other explanation is the fact that he's gone completely insane, and he really doesn't see why he would start hallucinating Euphie of all people, or Shin Hyuga Shaing, with whom he was barely acquainted with the first time around.

No, this is real, and what makes this even clearer is the fact that Lelouch has given him another command. A command to 'Live', similar to the one he once gave Kururugi, causing his erratic behavior on Kaminejima, but also making him impossible to kill.

But Schneizel is not Suzaku Kururugi, so the command is not enough. Lelouch will remove him, because he occupies the throne Lelouch wants.

Unfortunately for Schneizel, he has no real way out of his predicament. He isn't sure what actually gave him the jolt that awoke him from his induced coma, but whatever it was is not capable of healing him.

He's too badly hurt to go anywhere. If he tries, he's going to kill himself in the attempt. The brain damage is too severe for him to actually be able to leave. Kanon himself has said it, so it must be true.

On the other hand, the damage is not severe enough to keep him from processing what Lelouch and companions are saying. Perhaps the command can compensate for it, in some way.

"We couldn't fix this even if we wanted to."

"Technically I could, through my Geass."

"You're talking about absorbing brain damage when you yourself are healing from a brain injury."

"Even if you did heal him of the current brain damage, the two Geasses would still continue to hurt him. We'd have to cancel them using Jeremiah for it to stick and that's much too dangerous."

"I'm very aware of how dangerous he is."

"We'll stick to the plan."

He doesn't grasp all of it, but the crux of it comes through. They have a way of helping him, but they won't do it, because Lelouch sees him as a threat.

He's not beyond hope. He has to live... He hasn't failed yet. Not again. But his chance, his last chance lies in the hands of the brother who enslaved him, and of Sir Kururugi, who by his own admission, hates him.

What will happen to Kanon if he is stuck in this in-between once again? No, he cannot allow it.

Live. Live.

It should have been impossible, but somehow, it isn't. Somehow, Schneizel manages to force his body to move and makes a grab for his brother's arm.

Instantly, his awareness of the outside world vanishes. At first, everything is a blur, but then the simple nothingness that used to be his prison melts away into a field of undefined white. His own figure manifests out of the ether, and is promptly followed by Lelouch's.
Normally, Schneizel would be a little unnerved by the fact that they're both naked, but he has actually witnessed this before, during Lelouch's confrontation with Shin Hyuga Shaing. Similarly, Lelouch takes it in stride. "Schneizel," he drawls slowly. "Well, this is a surprise."

"I do think that's my line, little brother," Schneizel replies, very much aware that he is at a disadvantage, but knowing better than to show the full extent of his dread. "How did you manage all this? Time travel, is it?"

"I'm afraid I can't take the credit. It was all C.C. and Suzaku."

As if beckoned by Lelouch's words, the two individuals appear by his side. Despite Kururugi's more sedate, if vitriolic earlier words, he doesn't seem inclined toward such generosity now. If anything, he looks like he wants to rip Schneizel's throat out with his teeth. The woman's gaze is just as dark, her golden eyes glowing with malicious light and power.

The likelihood of Schneizel surviving this little attempt has just drastically decreased. But Schneizel has never been one to give up that easily, and he's never been particularly intimidated by Lelouch's attack dog. "Sir Kururugi. We meet again. And I don't think I've ever officially met your lady. C.C., is it?"

"Yes," she replies. "I'd say it's a pleasure, but it really isn't."

"If anything, it's a huge mistake," Kururugi adds. "On your part."

Schneizel smiles slightly. "Now, that is rather unfair, considering your earlier words."

"I'm not known for my sanity these days, so we'll chalk that one up to a particularly bad moment," Kururugi replies.

"While watching the two of you bicker is interesting and all that," Lelouch intervenes, "I'm sure that's not why you decided to pull this little stunt."

That's right. Kururugi and the woman are hardly relevant in the big picture. It is Lelouch who makes the decisions. That doesn't fill Schneizel with too much confidence, but he refuses to lose without even trying.

"Lelouch, I will not claim that I didn't want the throne, because we both know that would be a lie. However, I am man enough to admit when I am beaten, and it is not the throne that I desire now. I am not a threat to you."

"Considering the last time we actually spoke, you expressed your dearest desire to have me buried in the ocean in the Damocles, forgive me if I find that hard to believe."

Technically, the last time he and Lelouch spoke was shortly before the confrontation with the Chinese Federation, when they established the treaty between Japan and Britannia. But Schneizel doesn't think pointing that out would help him, not when he understands exactly what Lelouch is referring to.

"To be fair, little brother, you can hardly blame me for wanting to remove the threat."

"Indeed." Lelouch smirks. "I do believe you and I are alike, in that respect at least. We both understand the necessity of removing a threat, at all costs."

"Except it didn't work out very well for me, did it?"
"Not for lack of trying." Lelouch waves a hand. "It doesn't matter anymore. Leaving aside personal resentments over what happened in the past, the fact remains that you are an obstacle for me, and you need to be removed."

It really is as easy as that, and Schneizel finds that he cannot fault his brother for his cold logic. He would have likely done the same if he'd been in Lelouch's shoes.

But while that is all well and good, it still leaves Schneizel with his previous problem. He is steps away from a checkmate, and simply cannot see a way to reset the board.

What can he use?

A memory of a young, angry Lelouch flashes through his mind. Lelouch has always been very intelligent, but he also tends to act on his temper, more so than Schneizel, as evidenced by their chess match in the Chinese Federation. And he always had some very distinctive sore spots, with his mother and Nunnally being the clearest ones.

"Lelouch, do you know that I was the one who had your mother's body removed when she died?"

Lelouch's expression of shock is actually satisfying. Perhaps it shouldn't be, considering the huge chance Schneizel is taking in approaching this topic, but Schneizel can admit, to himself at least, that he does enjoy getting a rise out of his little brother.

"What?" Lelouch asks.

"You may not be aware of this, Lelouch," Schneizel continues, pursuing his advantage, "but even then, I knew something wasn't right with our father. I was only twenty, but I could see the way our father's esoteric preocupations pulled him away from the throne. Sometimes, his political decisions made no sense. He would send troops to conquer useless locations, spend resources for reasons that were never explained.

"Father was the one to order me to safeguard the body, but his behavior was odd. He was angered by her death, but he denied Cornelia's request to continue the investigation. And then, to send you and Nunnally and Japan of all things... You may have made a mistake in defying him, but to go so far...

"Something was not right."

All of them knew it. Cornelia was too angered by the loss to dig into it, and others like Guinevere and Odysseus either did not care enough to take the chance, or were too afraid. But Clovis insisted on becoming the governor of Japan after it turned into an Area and Schneizel himself decided to look more closely into his father's activities.

They both believed that Lelouch and Nunnally might still be alive. Schneizel now suspects that Clovis may have found something at one point, but his brother never did tell him anything, becoming more and more secretive as the years passed.

"After the invasion, whenever I could spare a moment, I'd look into it deeper. And you know what I found? That it was not that unusual for children from our family to die and disappear. Most people at court simply disregarded this pattern, or even appeared to forget about it altogether. It was considered an unwritten rule of succession. And I would have been inclined to believe it too, and even accept it, if not for our father's strange behavior."

"That doesn't matter anymore," C.C. snaps, interrupting him. "We already know what happened with Marianne, and we're well aware of what was making Charles act the way he did."
That isn't surprising, since Schneizel has already assumed the whole incident had something to do with Geass. "Yes... Father's vision." He curls his lip at the memory of his conversation with Bismarck. The Knight of One never did share the exact details of what that 'vision' entailed, but whatever it was never did fill Schneizel with much confidence. Either way, Lelouch and his... companions probably know more about it than Schneizel himself does, so it is not something he can use. "I have to tell you, Lelouch, I was most pleased when you made sure he failed. But the Lady C.C. is right. We are getting off topic.

"Regardless of the oddity of the situation, the fact remains that throughout his life, Father sustained and expanded the Empire. With him gone, we are on shaky grounds, but I imagine you'd want to do the same. I do not know to which extent you want to use your Geass to accomplish this, but I do know you will need help. And before you argue with me, little brother, you must know that I am not the biggest threat to Britannia right now. It's only a matter of time until Europia takes advantage of our instability and attacks us."

It is a risky move to point this out, but Lelouch can't have missed it. If anything, he's probably more informed than Schneizel.

Schneizel's decision to bring up old memories may have briefly thrown Lelouch off his game, but that's not a solution. It's only a tool. Schneizel knows better than to believe Lelouch would allow himself to be so easily manipulated in the long run. No, the key point here is to point out that he can be of use—which is easier said than done.

While his skills have always been handy for Britannia, it's very unlikely that Lelouch would trust him in a position of power. Besides, he has his woman and his knight for that, just like he did during his time as emperor, before the disaster with the Damocles. It's fairly obvious that Lelouch will likely want to use a similar structure for his new, imminent regime as he did then, although obviously, not as dictatorial. Cornelia will likely have some kind of role, perhaps even Euphemia. But the two of them are not a threat to Lelouch politically, not like Schneizel is.

However, Schneizel has dealt with Europia before. He's been involved with negotiations with more than one individual state, and knows the situation better than anyone.

It is very likely that, following this disaster in Pendragon, a new conflict will explode, one that Schneizel will not be able to stabilize simply by sending two Rounds to the front. Lelouch knows this. But will it be enough?

"Schneizel, give me one reason why I should trust you. For all I know, I could help you, only to have you run to the Europeans."

Schneizel grimaces. "Please. We both know how that would turn out. We're Britannians, little brother. Sir Kururugi aside, we can never deny or change who we are. You tried, and we all know how that ended."

In the complete and utter betrayal of the Black Knights. Manipulated by Schneizel though they may have been, the fact remains that the group sold their own leader for their own benefit.

That never would have happened had Lelouch not been a Britannian prince. It certainly would not have happened in the Britannian army. Most Britannians would rather saw their own arms off than commit treason that way.

He half-expects Kururugi to take offense in some way, but he doesn't. If anything, he seems like he begrudgingly agrees.
"That's fair, but it also leaves us with the possibility of another civil war waiting in the wings," Lelouch replies. "Honestly, Schneizel, I see no reason why I should take the chance."

Why indeed.

Why is Lelouch even here? Why hasn't he left, when he most certainly could have, perhaps banished Schneizel's consciousness like he did Shin Hyuga Shaing's?

"Because I'm your brother, and I don't mean you any harm," he finally says.

It shouldn't matter. It hasn't mattered much in the past, not for Lelouch, and not for Schneizel. But it has to, just this once. It has to, because other than their familial bond, Schneizel has no other card up his sleeve.

Silence falls. Lelouch and his two lovers watch Schneizel, perhaps considering his words.

It is the woman who speaks first. "Ah," she says. "I see now. This is about Earl Maldini."

"That does make sense." Kururugi smiles a little, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I seem to remember him having some trouble dealing with your less-than-ideal existence in our past lifetime."

His brother's gaze sharpens. Schneizel's blood turns to the ice at the realization that he may have drawn Lelouch's attention onto Kanon in a way it wasn't before.

He wants to lie and say Kanon has nothing to do with it, but he never gets the chance. "I see," Lelouch finally says. "That does make sense. You would not bother to make such requests if you didn't have a secondary motive." He tilts his head and looks at Schneizel like he's a particularly interesting specimen of insect. "I will consider your proposition."

And just like that, Lelouch vanishes. There is no warning or transition. He's just gone, and seconds later, so are C.C. and Kururugi.

Schneizel is once again left trapped in his mind, tasting desperation. Staring out into the shapeless darkness, he wishes not for the first time that he'd never heard of Nina Einstein and the FLEIJA missile.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked my take on Schneizel. I always thought that his character arc was intriguing. In R1, he was visibly horrified by the SAZ massacre, but in R2, he has no qualms about using the FLEIJA against the citizens of Pendragon, including his own siblings. I think he's definitely the type of person to do whatever it takes to achieve his purposes, but on the other hand, he always seemed to prefer more discreet, diplomatic methods. The FLEIJA truly did make him arrogant, which was ultimately his downfall, since by his own admission, he did not expect Lelouch to have a counter for it. Maybe making Kanon his main motivation to ask for Lelouch's help is stretching it a bit, but I do ship those two and I could not help myself LOL. Besides, being a brainwashed slave for 7 years really does change one's perspective on priorities, right?
"Well, that was interesting," Lelouch comments as soon as they're free of Schneizel's mindscape. "I never would have expected Schneizel of all people to go for sentiment."

That does seem strange to Suzaku, considering the fact that the man destroyed Pendragon with the FLEIJA with no regard to the fact that he was killing over one hundred of his siblings—among countless other innocent Britannians.

"I think he must remember more than he should," he says. "Otherwise, he would not have known about Kanon's state after the Requiem."

"Well, that's not really a big surprise," C.C. drawls. "Lelouch always did say there was a danger that Schneizel would one day force himself to not acknowledge you as Zero. The question is... Does it really matter? Will you agree to his request, Lelouch?"

Lelouch sits down on the couch and crosses his legs. "The last thing I want right now is to put Suzaku through brain trauma for Schneizel's sake. But on the other hand... It's true that he may come in handy at a later date, and we still have Europia to worry about. I suppose we could use Earl Maldini as a card against him should he ever want to step out of line. Although of course, we'd still have to make sure he gives me the throne."

"I don't think that latter issue would be a problem," Suzaku points out. He eyes Schneizel's form warily. "I'm honestly not sure I could heal him completely even if I tried."

"And let's not forget there's the Geass, which is an uncontrollable added element," C.C. points out. "We definitely need to remove that. If we don't remove him, that is."

Yes, the Geass. Apparently, despite being all twisted up, Lelouch's twin commands did manage to give Schneizel the strength to recover, just enough to make a grab for Lelouch.

That in itself is dangerous and unsettling, and if they don't get rid of Schneizel now, they need to fix it.

Lelouch seems on the fence with regard to what to do with his brother. He's definitely considering their words carefully, which is more than he did in the past, before his conversation with Schneizel.

"Is it worth it, do you think?" he finally asks. "C.C.? Suzaku?"

C.C. sits down next to Lelouch and leans against his shoulder. "I'm not sure what to tell you, Lelouch. He's not the same man you remember, certainly, but that doesn't make him any less dangerous."
"But making rash choices about my siblings has never really worked out for me in the past either," Lelouch muses.

Instantly, Suzaku knows what Lelouch is thinking about. Euphie, and the way he originally decided to deal with the SAZ, in their first lifetime.

"Schneizel isn't Euphy, Lelouch," he points out. The words come out with striking ease, considering the fact that it was the SAZ disaster that tore him and Lelouch apart the first time. He's just as uncertain as his two lovers, but the last thing he wants is for Lelouch to fall into previous patterns of self-blame. That didn't work out too well for them either.

"No, he isn't," Lelouch replies, "but I think we've already established that we can't make the same mistakes we made before."

"And things have been repeating themselves, in one way or another..." C.C. adds.

Maybe that's it. That's what is truly making Suzaku uneasy about the situation. While leaving Schneizel to die does seem like the logical thing to do right now, he once thought many other things were logical. The Requiem too had been logical. And while Suzaku never questioned its efficiency, the whole reason why they're here is to find another way.

If they don't act to assist Schneizel, will their inaction blow up in their faces in the future? Suzaku is unsure. A part of him wishes Schneizel had just died in the first attack on St. Petersburg and removed the necessity for this whole debate to begin with.

"Maybe I could stabilize his condition and we'll decide on what to do on the rest of it at a later date?" he suggests.

"That should work," C.C. comments. "We still have to be careful about the Geass, but technically, we may not have to remove it at once. Schneizel is not Suzaku. If his condition is not life-endangering, the 'live-on' Geass may not have an effect at all."

"And if that happens, we could theoretically leave him under my original Absolute Obedience Geass, and have Earl Maldini as a backup plan." Lelouch sighs. "Fine."

His deep purple eyes fix on Suzaku. "Be careful, Suzaku, and don't strain yourself if you run into any hurdles. I'd rather put a bullet through Schneizel's skull than truly risk your life in any way."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I understand."

Suzaku carefully approaches the bed and takes Schneizel's hand. The contact feels unpleasant, and his Geass is already screaming, letting him know the amount of damage there is to fix.

Technically, he doesn't have the medical knowledge to understand everything that is wrong with Schneizel. The Geass compensates for his lack of information, but it's still far more complicated than anything he's tried in the past.

The brain is the most delicate organ in the body. All those synapses and neurons... All those connections... He should not even be making the attempt.

But if he doesn't, Schneizel is beyond the aid of regular medicine anyway. Besides, Suzaku trusts his contract with C.C., and he's been using the command given to him by Lelouch for years. That has to count for something.

Taking a deep breath, Suzaku reaches for Schneizel's injury with his Geass. It all happens so
suddenly. There's a jolt, and explosion of pain, and the world goes blurry.

He doesn't black out, but it's a close call. He's distantly aware of a pair of arms catching him and dragging him away from Schneizel, and on some level, manages to wonder who it is that is actually helping him.

A memory of Lelouch exercising in the SAZ flashes through his mind. He would pant, glare and sweat buckets even as he forced himself through the gym routine they had prepared for him. "You're both utter tyrants," he'd say to both Suzaku and C.C.

"You're the one to point fingers," C.C. would drawl.

Suzaku would laugh and act as the supportive knight/boyfriend he was and take advantage of it when he could. Apparently, Lelouch found it easier to do sit ups if Suzaku kissed him after every single one. C.C. being C.C., she actively encouraged this tendency, and more than one gym session had ended with all of them sweaty and dirty for reasons other than regular exercising.

The memory steadies him, and his vision clears. He finds himself seated on the couch, with his head in C.C.'s lap, and Lelouch kneeling next to them both. "Ugh. That was tougher than expected," Suzaku says.

"I suppose it does make sense," Lelouch says, grimacing and holding Suzaku's hand in an almost painfully tight grip. "The Geass command is probably activated by the cerebral cortex in some way, so you couldn't have supported both your Geass, and the damage it was absorbing for long."

C.C.'s slender fingers rub his temples, and the heat of her palms chases away the lingering pain, much like it did to his out of control Geass haze, during those days when Nunnally was trying to kill him. "Just rest for a moment. Catch your breath."

Suzaku does, taking comfort in both of their touches. It's strange, but when he closes his eyes, he thinks that he can feel both her code and Lelouch's.

"Did I manage to help?" he asks after a long silence.

"I think so," Lelouch replies, his thumb rubbing comforting circles over Suzaku's wrist. "But I'm not sure, and I'm not very eager for you to make a repeat attempt."

Suzaku lifts his head and steals a glance at Schneizel over Lelouch's shoulder. Instantly, he can tell the man is better. Nowhere near where he should be, but not so close to brain dead, at least.

"I'd say he's stable," he decides, slumping back down, "but it would probably be a good idea to get doctors in here to check."

Lelouch nods. "Just stay there with C.C.," he says as he heads to the door. "I'll take care of the rest of it."

Suzaku isn't very happy with the idea of letting Lelouch go anywhere on his own, but he knows that between the code Lelouch now has and Orange's presence, they're fairly safe. Fortunately, Lelouch isn't gone for long. In fact, he comes back mere seconds later, with Euphie and Kanon in tow.

"Your Highness, how... How is His Majesty?" Kanon asks shakily.

"We've managed to stabilize him, but the situation is still serious," Lelouch says.

Kanon only has eyes for Schneizel, but Euphie instantly notices the strangeness of Suzaku's position.
How could she not? He hasn't bothered to move, and C.C. is still massaging his temples. "Lelouch?" Euphie asks. "What exactly is going on?"

"I myself had no way of helping Schneizel, so Suzaku had to do it," Lelouch replies.

"Sir Kururugi?" Earl Maldini asks. "But... How? I don't understand."

Lelouch launches himself in a brief explanation of their situation, sticking to their made up story about them being kidnapped by the Order. He mentions Rolo's past, and the fact that he was actually Nunnally's twin, but for the most part, he chooses to heavily emphasize the purpose of the organization and both the advantages and the downsides of the supposed experimentation. He's vague with regard to his own skills and C.C. and focuses on Suzaku's instead. "Suzaku's abilities allow him to take the injury of a wounded person within himself, but obviously they have limits. As you know, he was recently injured, so he wasn't not at 100% either, so it was impossible for him to do too much. At this time, we are not certain he can do more. I'd advise for further medical testing on Schneizel, to see where our attempt has taken him."

Euphie is visibly horrified upon learning the truth about Rolo, so much so that she is rendered mute. Kanon, on the other hand, takes a more practical approach. While he definitely appears to be dumbfounded, there is no denying that Schneizel does look better. So whatever else Kanon may think of the story, he settles on expressing his gratitude. "Thank you, Your Highness. And thank you, Sir Kururugi. I am truly sorry for everything that you have suffered, and I will do my utmost to assist you in whatever way that I can."

It's rather interesting that Kanon would even think to thank Suzaku at all, but maybe he realizes, more than anyone else, the kind of compromise Lelouch is making here. Not that Suzaku is fooling himself. Kanon's promise is conditional on Lelouch truly being Schneizel's ally.

Still, it's something, and it may come in handy at a later date, considering the unexpected influence Kanon has had on Schneizel.

Nevertheless, he's not sure what kind of reply he should provide, so instead he just says nothing. By now, the pain has pretty much vanished altogether under C.C.'s ministrations, but he isn't above milking it for all it is worth.

"We appreciate your words, Earl Maldini," Lelouch says. "Despite our differences, Schneizel is my brother and I do hope that we can work together in the future. That being said... We can't stay for much longer. We still have a lot to do. Euphie, I know that I've dumped a lot on you once again, but I need a favor."

"Of course, Lelouch," Euphie says without even waiting for him to finish. She straightens her back, visibly forcing herself to remain calm after these new revelations. "What do you need?"

"Since my identity as Zero is now revealed, I want to relocate Nunnally and Rolo. As far as we can tell, we've managed to eradicate Victor's forces, but if anyone escaped, they may target those of us who are left. We also don't know what the long-term reaction of the Japanese will be now that they know the truth, so until things have completely settled down, it is better for everyone to stay together here. I'll leave Orange and Sayoko to supplement your guard, but I need you to accommodate Nunnally and Rolo at the palace."

"Naturally, Lelouch. You don't even have to ask." Euphie shoots him a concerned look. "But do you really think the Japanese would be angry with you, or with Nunnally and Rolo?"

"I doubt it, but it is better to be safe than sorry." Lelouch gives her a quick smile. "Don't worry,
Euphie. Yes, we've lost and suffered a lot, but we won't let it be for nothing. Peace will come. We just have to be extra careful until that happens.

Euphie's eyes fill with tears again and she hugs Lelouch tightly, clearly taking comfort in his proximity. As he watches them embrace, Suzaku finally gets up. C.C. joins him and threads their fingers together. And even if Suzaku still isn't sure how he feels about this new development with Schneizel, he decides he does not fear it.

In the end, Schneizel may be the emperor now, but even he has realized that the only one worthy of the Britannian throne is Lelouch. And that is what is going to happen, no matter what other complications appear in their path.

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Meanwhile, Euro-Britannia

The first thing Monica Krushevsky becomes aware of is the distinctive sound of beeping. It's a very familiar, steady sound, but it's not comforting in the slightest.

Groaning, she cracks her eyes open and is greeted by the predictable sight of a white ceiling. A hospital, obviously, as she expected.

"Welcome back," a familiar, male voice says by her side.

Monica turns and finds herself facing her fellow Rounds, Gino Weinberg. His presence is both shocking and reassuring. "Gino? What... What happened?"

"It's a really long story," Gino says. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Monica forces herself to push past her headache and just like that, the memories come back to her. She remembers accompanying His Majesty to St. Petersburg to investigate the source of the coup that led to the disaster in Pendragon. She remembers the then-unexplainable attack on the palace, the way their own people had turned against them. She had deemed them traitors at the time... until she herself had been targetted.

"I... I betrayed Britannia," she says, in a daze.

"No, you didn't," Gino replies. "It wasn't your fault."

The story he tells her would be too fantastical to be believed if she wasn't just coming off a brainwashing attack that caused her to turn against the Empire. The idea that Britannia has been involved with human experimentation disgusts her deeply, but on some level, she can't say she deems out of the realm of possibility. She is realistic enough to understand that not every single Britannian is scrupulous or has her good intentions. But to think that the royal family would have done it, and not on just anyone, but their own children... That does fill her with horror.

"Due to what was done to him, His Highness, Prince Lelouch, was more informed than others on the threat Britannia was facing. So he put together a strike force to eliminate it."

"The Black Knights, Her Highness's Princess Cornelia's troops, and reinforcements from the Chinese Federation, right?" Monica asks. She remembers that part from the battle, and from the instructions she received when she was forced to fight for the wrong side.

"Yes." Gino nods. "Obviously, we won, and His Highness killed the culprits behind your brainwashing. Whatever sway they had on you and the others broke at that time. Prince Lelouch had
already told us to try to mitigate the damage we did and avoid fatalities, so for the most part, we haven't suffered too many losses. And of course, you won't be blamed for your past actions."

Monica nods, but inside, she still isn't sure how she feels about it. She isn't sure she deserves that forgiveness. "I should have been able to fight it," she says, clenching her fists. "I should have been stronger."

"Monica, it doesn't work like that," Gino explains, not unkindly. "It's not something you can stop, no matter how strong you are. There are countless people in your situation. Hell, even His Imperial Majesty was a victim of it."

Monica blinks at Gino. "Truly?"

The attack on His Majesty had gone so quickly, and she herself wasn't present when it actually started. She, Dorothea and Gino had been making their way to give their report when the mayhem had exploded, and they'd run into Kanon Maldini, who had been desperately trying to control the actions of the apparently irrational emperor. Gino had taken over and led them away, while Monica and Dorothea had tried to cover their escape.

Dorothea had not survived it, but they had bought Gino enough time to save the emperor's life. Or so she thinks, at least. During her time working as a brainwashed slave, her 'superiors' seemed convinced that Emperor Schneizel would die anyway, no matter where he was hiding. Either way, neither Shaing, nor any of the others ever explained what was done to the emperor, and she was not aware enough of herself to question them.

Gino is apparently in a far better situation than her. "As I understand it, the subliminal weapon almost forced him to... die, in some way," he explains. "Prince Lelouch has been helping him, but we don't know if or when he will recover completely. There was a lot of brain damage."

Monica's breath catches. What in the world are they supposed to do now? This is the second emperor they've lost in a very short amount of time. Where will the Empire be headed after this?

Gino almost seems to read her mind. "Princess Cornelia has taken over operations here in Euro-Britannia. Prince Lelouch supports us. He's already said that he's most likely leave his position as Zero and that he and Princess Cornelia will work together to help Britannia rebuild."


Slowly, Monica's thoughts begin to rearrange.

Maybe at a different time, she would have hated Prince Lelouch for turning to terrorism and taking the side of the Empire's enemies. Even now, Prince Clovis's death reminds her far too much of her own losses. But on the other hand, knowing what she does, can she really blame him for his actions, for wanting to protect the innocent after being used as a test subject for almost half of his life? No, she cannot. If anything, she realizes now that she owes him a lot.

Still, she's so uncertain. As far as she knows, the areas are not completely unstable, but that may change, depending on how the situation goes. Then there's the state of affairs in the EU, which has been growing worse and worse since the Pendragon bombing.

Emperor Charles is gone. Emperor Schneizel is presumably too ill, and will probably have to step down.

The throne will go either to Princess Cornelia or to Prince Lelouch. All of her conclusions are mere speculation. Where is the Empire truly headed?
Who can she ask? Bismarck is gone. So is Dorothea. Nonnette is in Pendragon, and likely has even less information than Monica.

But Gino is right there.

The two of them were never truly friends. He was a more recent addition to the Rounds, and he was closer to Anya than he ever was to her. She never fully understood his decision to turn his back on his family, when the loss of her own father still burned her so fiercely, even after all this time.

But on the other hand, they do have something in common. Both of them have been left with next to nothing. The only support they’ve had, for some time now, has been their duty to Britannia.

Monica may have her doubts about Gino in some respects, but she trusts him to do the right thing for Britannia as a whole.

She hasn't missed the fact that Gino has mentioned Prince Lelouch several times, and he has been open and straightforward enough with her so far. What else does Gino know that she doesn't?

"Gino... Tell me the truth. What are we supposed to do now? Who are we supposed to support? What is going to happen?"

"I'm not sure about anything, Monica," Gino replies. His blue eyes lack their usual cheerful sparkle. "I don't have all the answers. But we have to face facts. There isn't a real rule that the throne cannot be occupied by a woman, but that's never happened... ever. Besides, you know Princess Cornelia. She's a warrior, not a politician. My take? If things don't take a drastic turn and His Majesty doesn't recover—which quite frankly, seems very unlikely now—Prince Lelouch will be the next emperor. I'm pretty sure Princess Cornelia will support that approach. And I don't know about you, but when that happens, I'll do the same."

Monica considers Gino's words, and weirdly, a weight seems to fall off her shoulders. She has no certainties either, but she does know this.

Without Prince Lelouch, she may have remained a captive in her own mind, an unwilling traitor to the Empire. Without him, Shin Hyuga Shaing may have won and the Empire would have crumbled altogether.

She knows next to nothing about the strange masked man who challenged the Empire on its own turf, but she does know this. He has set aside his own misgivings about Britannia to help them all, and that means something. He is not just a terrorist, no. He is so much more than that; a Britannian prince and knight for justice. That is something and someone Monica can believe in.

Naturally, it is much too soon for her to truly make a decision, but the course of action she must take right now is clear. "You'll just have to introduce him to me then," she tells Gino, already throwing the blanket off herself. "I can hardly be the Knight of Twelve to someone I haven't even met."

Gino smirks, and it's only then that Monica realizes she's practically naked underneath, wearing only a very flimsy hospital gown. She gives him an unimpressed look and throws a pillow as his head. "Stop standing there and leering, idiot. Get me a change of uniform. And an audience with our future emperor."

Gino laughs and quickly rushes out of the room. "Yeah, yeah. I'm on it, Lady Krushevsky."

He flees before she can find something else to throw at him. As she plops back down onto the bed, she thinks about all the other questions she has, and wonders if indeed, Prince Lelouch vi Britannia could hold the answer to them.
And there we have it. Schneizel is... somewhat safe, at least for now. Unless he becomes a pest. And I have managed to sneak in a Monica segment, because I have a strange love for her and deeply regret that she wasn't given any screen time. Shame on you, Suzu my love, for killing her off like that. I don't know how on point my portrayal of her is, as I have not actually read Oz the Reflection, but go with it, yeah?
Healing Part 2

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the chapter that a lot of people have probably been waiting for. Nunnally's!
As always, comments are love and feed the muse!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nunnally is in her new room, sitting in her bed with Rolo by her side. He's only left her quarters very briefly since Lelouch's departure for Euro-Britannia, when she was resting, and Nunnally is grateful for his presence. She doesn't think she would have been able to withstand the wait without him around.

But as comforting as their time together has been, it doesn't really chase away the shadow lingering at the back of Nunnally's mind.

Neither Lord Jeremiah, nor Lelouch or Rolo have hinted to an imminent confrontation in Euro-Britannia before. It probably has something to do with the attack on Schneizel, but that too, is so very confusing and scary. She isn't even actually sure what happened to him, as Rolo and Sayoko have only told her that he was badly hurt and transferred to Tokyo in an attempt to save his life. And while she herself was never as close to Schneizel as Lelouch was, to have him attacked as well, after the Pendragon explosion... It's terrifying.

Things are happening so quickly. Her family has fallen apart and is being taken out, one by one. Then there's still the mysterious and slightly suspicious way Lord Jeremiah was acting before their arrival at the SAZ. She still has no idea what to make of that.

"Big brother Rolo?" she asks, taking Rolo's hand. "Do you know what Lord Jeremiah wanted to talk about with Lelouch before he left?"

"I have an idea," Rolo replies, his voice somewhat hesitant. He usually sounds like that when she asks a question she isn't supposed to know the answer to. Nunnally doesn't really blame him, or Lelouch for trying to protect her, but she hopes that they will soon realize it's not necessary. She's just relieved that, despite his reluctance, Rolo doesn't pull away from her.

"Tell me what you can then," she replies. "You don't have to force yourself if you're not sure."

"There was an operation against one of big brother's enemies, shortly before you arrived," Rolo explains. "We retrieved some information from his HQ, but big brother never got the chance to go over it because of what's been recently happening here. I know Lord Jeremiah looked over it, but he didn't actually tell me what he found."

He's anxious about it, Nunnally can tell. She understands perfectly. She too worries that Lelouch places too much of a burden on himself. He's done that for as long as she can remember, ever since their mother died.

"Maybe they're trying to protect you too. That does sound like something Lelouch would do."

"Maybe," Rolo answers, although the statement rings false. "I suppose it does make sense that Lord
Jeremiah would want to report to big brother first. Lelouch will probably inform us later."

They'll probably tell Rolo, but Nunnally will not be so lucky. She wants to ask Rolo how to make Lelouch trust her more, but at the same time, she doesn't want to be a burden. It will be better to wait. Lelouch has trusted her with his identity as Zero. He will tell her whatever troubles him in his own time.

The concept doesn't ease her mind as much as she would like. "You don't suppose... What happened to big brother Schneizel..."

She doesn't have to fully explain her fears, because he understands her with almost automatic ease. "Emperor Schneizel did not have Sir Kururugi and C.C. with him. No one can bypass them, I am sure of it. And the Euro-Britannians are no match for him. It's only a matter of time now until we're together again, like we promised."

The thought draws a small smile out of Nunnally. She cannot blame her brother for prioritizing his work as Zero for now, but Rolo is right. It won't be forever. And yes, Suzaku and C.C. will keep Lelouch safe. She must trust in them now.

A knock sounds at her door, interrupting the conversation between her and Rolo. "Yes?" Nunnally calls out.

The door opens, and Nunnally instantly knows who has come in even if she can't see him. "Lelouch, you're back!" she exclaims.

"Hello, Nunnally, Rolo," Lelouch greets them softly.

Rolo gets up, clearly just as happy as Nunnally to have Lelouch here. Still, when he speaks, his voice holds a dose of concern. "Big brother. Is the operation in Euro-Britannia over already?"

Now that Rolo mentions it, it does seem odd that Lelouch would already be back. She doesn't really know much about such things, but the distance between the two locations alone is significant. Between that, the battle itself and whatever else was needed to do after... It should have taken him longer.

It's also rather strange that he hasn't contacted them before this sudden visit. Something is wrong, she is sure of it.

"An issue of importance came up here in Japan, and I wanted to check up on you while I was at it."

A chair creaks by Nunnally's side and Lelouch's warm familiar hand settles on Nunnally's own. "How have you been, Nunnally? I've left you on your own far too long these days. We didn't get the chance to speak properly when you arrived."

"I'm fine, big brother," Nunnally rushes to assure him. "I told you, there's no need to worry about me."

She reaches for his hand and holds it between her two, smaller ones. Something is on his mind, she can tell. "Lelouch, what is it? Did the battle not go well?"

"No, that's not it," Lelouch replies. He lets out a slow breath. "The battle went fine. But to be perfectly honest, Nunnally... I wanted to talk to you and Rolo about something important. I'm just not sure this is the best time."

Other people have entered the room now. She can feel C.C.'s distinctive presence, and she's fairly certain she's heard Lord Jeremiah's gait. There may be others, but she isn't sure.
"Does it concern the information you received from Lord Jeremiah?" she asks. She wants to tell him that he doesn't have to hide anything from her, but she isn't sure it would help. Lelouch has always been protective of her, to the point that she thinks it's a minor miracle he even told her he is Zero.

"Among other things, yes."

Silence falls, and Nunnally waits as her brother takes a moment to gather his thoughts. "I've been keeping a lot of things from you," he finally says. "Rolo knows some of it, but we've recently found out some other things that... that are relevant. Some of it may sound a little outlandish, but believe me when I say it's the absolute truth."

"Of course, big brother. Just tell me."

"Right." Lelouch lets out a low breath. "I don't even know where to start."

"Perhaps chronologically, Lelouch?" Suzaku offers. So he's here too then. That makes Nunnally happy. Suzaku's presence always gives her big brother strength, and this seems like it will be a tough conversation.

"Yes. Maybe... That would be best," Lelouch says. "Remember when I told you that Rolo was not our brother by blood? It appears... It appears that wasn't true. We were lied to. He's your twin brother."

The very air seems to freeze in the room. "Not... Not possible," Rolo breathes out next to her bed. Nunnally instinctively knows Lelouch is telling the truth, but it still seems so befuddling. "But how? Why did we never know?"

"It was a ploy," Lelouch explained. "Rolo was taken from our family and handed to an organization that dealt with human experimentation."

"Human experimentation?" Nunnally breathes out. "No..."

"I'm afraid it's true, Nunnally. It's the same organization that we've been fighting recently. That is actually how we found out, from the files we procured during the attack on their headquarters."

"Oh..." Rolo says simply. He seems unable to say anything beyond that. Nunnally cannot blame him at all.

"Nunnally, what happens is that our father was working with an organization composed of people with various superhuman abilities," Lelouch continues. "It was led by his brother, Victor and they had a plan that would have allowed them to enslave the whole world. Father's military campaign and his constant endeavor to take over the 'areas' was only the first step. However, Victor became convinced Mother was distracting Father from this plan, which led to him attacking her that night... at the Aries Villa."

Nunnally can't understand anything anymore. "So... we weren't attacked by terrorists? I didn't know we even had an uncle."

"Unfortunately, we do. And yes, it was him. Also... You and Mother weren't actually shot at the same time. Victor needed a witness, so he went after you separately and... hurt you."

Nunnally doesn't actually remember anything from what happened that night. She only knows what Lelouch and others have told her, that she was caught in the machine gun fire and her mother covered her with her own body to save her life. "But you said..."
"That was because of Father. He too had a supernatural ability, and his was to alter memories. He modified both mine and yours. He was also the one who induced your blindness."

Nunnally nods, feeling dazed. This is a little too much. Her blindness was induced by someone else? By her father? It seems... unreal.

"I know this is scary, Nunnally, but these abilities are not unique to the people who can hurt us. I myself gained one, through a rather convoluted turn of events. In fact, everyone here, except you and Sayoko, have individual skills of their own, and we've been using it in our work to free the world from oppression."

"It's true, Nunnally," Rolo whispers. "I'm sorry for keeping it a secret for so long, but we didn't want to burden you with something so difficult to explain."

Nunnally's first instinct is to say that she understands their reasoning, but she doesn't get the chance to utter the sentence. "I want you to know," Lelouch says, "that I realize this must be very shocking for you. And I hate to dump everything on you so suddenly. But there is one piece of good news that comes with this. We have a method that can fix your blindness."

"Lady Nunnally, I have an ability that nulifies the effect of others," Lord Jeremiah explains. "It will return to you your memories and heal your sight. It is perfectly safe, as His Majesty Lelouch will attest. However, you will get a shock. Take a moment and let me know how you wish to proceed at this time."

Nunnally doesn't immediately reply. A straw nudges her lips and she gratefully takes a sip of water. As the seconds pass, her brother's words slide into place a little more.

Her siblings have superhuman abilities. Her father was involved in human experimentation. Lelouch's quest as Zero is now taking an entirely different form.

She still isn't sure what to make of it, but she trusts Lelouch, and if Lelouch is telling her these things, they must be true. And if there is a chance that she can have her sight back, she will absolutely take it, no matter what.

"Thank you, Lord Jeremiah. Please remove it now."

"Of course, Your Highness."

She feels a jolt, and all of a sudden, something in her mind shifts. It's like a veil has lifted, and flashes of the past she has forgotten assault her mind.

Nunnally is jolted awake in the middle of the night by a strange loud sound. It scares her, and she hides under the covers. When the doors open, she isn't really surprised. She emerges from the covers, expecting to see Lelouch there. Lelouch has a knack of always knowing when she needs him, and he always chases the nightmares away.

It's not Lelouch.

A group of men drag her kicking and screaming out of her bed. When they turn their weapons on her, everything explodes into blood, pain and fear. Everything hurts. She cries out for her mother and her brother, but nobody comes. It hurts so much... The pain is so intense she can't even begin to process it.

The next thing she knows, she's opening her eyes in the hospital, and a massive figure is looming next to her bed. It is her father, with whom Nunnally is more familiar from television broadcasts
than from visits to the villa.

He barely says anything to her at all. His unflinching gaze fixes on her and she knows he finds her inferior and wanting in every possible way. She opens her mouth to say something, anything at all, but for the first time, she becomes aware that she can't move her legs. She panics and no sound comes out.

He looks directly at her, and his mind breaks into her own, rearranging things according to his own desire. Just like that, Nunnally's world goes dark.

A voice snaps through the haze in Nunnally's mind, reaching out to her through the chaos, pain and confusion. "Nunnally! Nunnally!"

She knows that voice. She knows it so well.

For the first time in seven years, Nunnally opens her eyes, and all of a sudden, he is there. Lelouch, her beloved big brother, who has always been by her side, no matter what.

His face is different now. He's no longer the child from Nunnally's memories, but of course, Nunnally already knew that. Many times, she tried to imagine how he must have changed, how he looked like now. So often, she's fallen asleep on a wet pillow knowing she would forever be denied actually finding out.

"Big brother..." she whispers, half in relief that she can finally see, half because of the reason she hasn't seen him until now. "Big brother..."

"Shh. It's all right. I'm here. You're safe now."

A smaller hand lands on her own. Nunnally briefly breaks away from Lelouch's embrace to see a brown-haired boy now sitting by the side, looking uncertain of his place or his welcome. Rolo, her twin, who was denied far more than she ever was.

"Big brother Rolo."

Lelouch pulls him close too and the three of them embrace. It's warm, familiar and comfortable, and Nunnally cries, because why were they ever robbed of this?

"It's all right," he repeats. "Nobody will ever hurt you again. Either of you."

Rolo says nothing, but his grip on her is very tight, like he expects her to disappear. She doesn't have Lelouch's strength, but she does her best to hold onto both of them regardless.

Ultimately, it is that strength's—Lelouch's—that calms her. It anchors her to the present and chases away the shadows of the past. She doesn't know how long it takes her, but her panic and horror slowly fades away, settling into something more distant.

Lelouch slowly releases her, but doesn't move away. Instead, she and Rolo end up leaning against him, she against his left shoulder, Rolo on his other side.

Now, that she's a little calmer, Nunnally allows herself to look around the room. First, she sees a Japanese young man dressed in a military uniform with a mildly Britannian feel. His forest green eyes meet her own. A shadow lingers over his face, but he still smiles with disarming kindness. Suzaku.

Unlike in Lelouch's case, Nunnally has never actually seen Suzaku's face at all. He means so much
to them, and that first summer, when the three of them met, is still one of her fondest memories. She may not have had her sight at the time, but that doesn't matter, because she found something more important. Friendship, comfort, steadiness. Suzaku, who is her dearest friend and her brother's lover and protector. He has suffered so much too.

"Hello, Nunnally," he says simply.

Next to Suzaku is a green-haired woman who is leaning against his shoulder and holding his hand, dressed in a gown that matches Suzaku's own clothes. Obviously, it's C.C. She's always been impossible to read, even for Nunnally. That hasn't changed at all now. Her face is completely expressionless and her eyes blank and flat.

C.C. doesn't speak, but that's not very surprising, since she always has been quieter than the rest of Lelouch's friends.

Then, there's Jeremiah. He's wearing a black uniform that's slightly less ornate than Suzaku and C.C.'s. He's taken a step back, presumably to give Lelouch, Rolo and Nunnally room, but he still stands guard over them protectively. Next to him is Sayoko, their longtime loyal guardian. She's always been so much more than a maid, and Nunnally is so very happy to finally see her face and the kind smile she always knew was there.

Both of them are quick to offer their service to her. "I apologize for the discomfort, Lady Nunnally," Jeremiah says.

"Nunnally-sama, how do you feel?" Sayoko asks. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, it's fine, Sayoko," Nunnally says weakly. The only thing she needs is her brothers.

C.C. almost seems to read her mind, because she says, "I think we should give Nunnally, Lelouch and Rolo a few moments alone. We'll wait outside, okay?"

"Yes, all right," Lelouch replies. "Thank you, C.C."

As everyone else departs, Lelouch and Rolo settle closer to Nunnally on the bed. "I'm so very sorry," Lelouch finally says, after a long pause. "I haven't been a very good brother, to either of you. Nunnally, I should have removed your blindness sooner, but I always hoped there would be some other way, another way that would not force you to go through the experience again. And Rolo... I cannot even begin to express my regret for all the ways in which I've failed you."

"It's all right," Rolo answers. "The important thing is that we're here now, together. To keep our promise."

Nunnally nods. "I know that everything you did was out of concern for me. There's nothing to apologize for. You're the best big brother anyone could hope to ask for."

"I'm not sure if I believe that." Lelouch sighs. "To be perfectly honest, Nunnally, a part of me wishes I could hide you both in the Chinese Federation, in the safehouse, like you were before. But unfortunately, that's no longer an option."

Lelouch's soft voice turns a little more decisive. "I know this is difficult and a lot to process, but I must ask both of you to be brave. There is much to do still. My campaign in Euro-Britannia was successful and our uncle is dead. But that doesn't mean our problems are over.

"Schneizel is still very sick. As you may have already realized, the person who attacked him possessed a superhuman skill, and it's left Schneizel almost beyond the reach of regular medicine.
We have been attempting to help, but not everything is within our means. Losing a second emperor so quickly will leave Britannia vulnerable. I have reason to believe that we will soon be attacked by Europia United. That means I'm going to have to go help Cornelia, not as Zero, but as Lelouch vi Britannia.

"Things will be getting more and more complicated, what with the Japanese learning my true identity. I've told the Black Knights bits and pieces about our past, but to be perfectly honest, I wasn't comfortable sharing everything with them. It's not that they're not good people, but at the end of the day, we are still Britannian royalty, so I cannot take any chances.

"Similarly, Cornelia and Euphie are aware of a part of the story, but I just didn't have the time to explain every single thing. I'll sit down with them and discuss it eventually, but in the meantime, keep it under wraps."

Nunnally nods. This isn't anything new to her. She's been keeping secrets from loved ones for years. Their friends at Ashford never once learned about their true identities, and she never had a problem with it, because she understood the necessity.

This is no different. If anything, it's familiar territory. "I understand, Lelouch."

"I knew that you would," Lelouch replies with a small smile. "Now, everyone you've seen here today is trustworthy, and there is one more person I want you to meet later whom I have faith in. His name is Gino Weinberg, and he is the Knight of Three. He is currently supervising operations in Euro-Britannia in my absence.

"But that is for later. For now, we need to take all possible precautions. I have decided that it would be best if both of you relocated to the viceroy palace, here in Tokyo, at least for now. You'll have Sayoko and Jeremiah with you, like before, but we'll remain in contact at all times."

Rolo straightens his back, suddenly looking very determined, "You don't need to worry, big brother. I'll keep Nunnally safe."

Nunnally believes him. Not that she felt unsafe before, but for some reason, it's different now. Now that she knows Rolo is her twin, this bond that she's felt growing between them makes so much sense. She's more than a little grateful for it, considering the fact that she isn't nearly as recovered from the return of her memories as she would like.

The knowledge that the man who maimed her can no longer hurt them helps, but she's still having trouble trying to process all the information she has been given, all those new memories that feel both alien and not. Even so, she refuses to be a burden for Lelouch and cling to him when she knows that he has duties elsewhere.

"We'll be fine," she says. "I won't pretend that I'm completely... over what happened. But I'm grateful that neither our father, nor our... uncle are a threat now, and I understand that you need to prioritize."

Lelouch cups her cheek gently, and his hand shakes slightly as he touches her. "Some days, you humble me."

Nunnally thinks that should be her line, since her brother has clearly been carrying far too much on his shoulders. Even if he has help from Suzaku, C.C. and the Black Knights, it can't have been easy.

But she doesn't say this, because she knows her brother is not the type to ever complain about the burdens he has to bear. Instead, she chooses to hug him once again. "I'm so happy, Lelouch. That I
can see you again. And that I can see Rolo."

For a second time, Rolo joins in on their hug. Nunnally takes comfort in their proximity. It's much too soon that they are forced to break the embrace.

Lelouch kisses her forehead softly, then pulls away. "I'm sorry, but as much as I would like, I can't stay longer. I'll send Sayoko in, so she can help you get changed and pack."

"Are you leaving already?" Nunnally can't help but ask. Almost instantly, she regrets it. She feels selfish for just making the inquiry, but she can't help herself.

"Not just yet, but soon," Lelouch replies. "Once you're accommodated in the viceroy palace, with Euphie. Rolo, come with me."

"Okay, big brother," Rolo replies. He hugs her one last time and then follows Lelouch.

Despite their words, they seem hesitant to leave her, so Nunnally shoots them both a quick smile. For the first time, she can get a good look at the Zero suit she's only ever felt, not seen, and it intrigues her just enough that she can keep putting on a brave face. "I'll be fine, remember? And I have the utmost faith in you. Go."

"All right, Nunnally," Lelouch says softly. "I love you."

With that, he turns away and leaves the room, the cape of his costume flaring behind him. Rolo gives her another quick, uncertain look. "It's okay," Nunnally mouths, and he nods, understanding everything she isn't saying too.

He exits the room after Lelouch and closes the door behind him. As the two of them depart, the warmth in Nunnally's heart starts to drift away. She is more aware than ever of how truly helpless she is. She wants to scream and rage at the unfairness, because she too could be doing something to help, like Rolo is.

Instead, she's stuck in this bed, always kept at a distance. Lelouch may be making an effort to include her more now, but she's still just as useless as she used to be.

Why? Why did things have to be this way? Why was the world so cruel? She doesn't understand it, and she doesn't think she ever would.

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When Rolo leaves Nunnally's room, it's with a heavy heart and a mind burning with questions. He knows for a fact that his brother has kept a lot of things from Nunnally, which makes sense considering the fact that she's already dealing with enough and couldn't possibly face the full extent of their situation. And he aches for her, for the trauma she has been forced to go through once again. But he also needs to truly know, to truly understand everything his big brother has left out for Nunnally's safety.

He feels a little awkward approaching the topic with everyone else present, but fortunately, Sayoko is needed in Nunnally's room. Meanwhile, Lelouch sends Lord Jeremiah to find Diethard and check on the rest of the situation at the SAZ. They don't have much time at their disposal, and Lelouch is clearly making the most of it.

Once Sayoko and Jeremiah are gone, it's just Rolo, Lelouch, C.C. and Sir Kururugi. By now, Rolo has grown used to the idea of his brother's two lovers always sticking to his side, so he speaks out with as much confidence as he can muster under the circumstances.
"Big brother, what you said to Nunnally..."

"Is true, for the most part. You are our blood sibling and Nunnally's twin. Our mother gave you to the Order, as a form of test subject for a special project of V.V.'s."

The story Lelouch tells him leaves him reeling in horror. Apparently, he was intended to be his parents' backup plan for the Sword of Akasha weapon, to artificially create a code, in case C.C. didn't cooperate.

"No wonder V.V. always called me a failed experiment," he murmurs brokenly. To think that his mother... His own mother was the one to give him away. Why? Why would she do such a thing?

Did she see something in him that made her believe he was more of a weapon than he was a child? Was he always inferior on some level and he just didn't know it?

Lelouch takes hold of his shoulders and squeezes them, the hold so tight it's almost painful. "You're not," he says. "You're so much more than that, Rolo. You know that you are. You are my brother, and you always were, even before I found this information."

Just like that, Rolo snaps out of his trance. He's being foolish. He knows that Marianne's priorities never lay with her children. For heaven's sake, she and Charles abandoned Lelouch and Nunnally to die in a war zone.

No, all she cared about was the Ragnarok Connection, so her actions regarding Rolo make sense and are clearly unconnected to him, as a person.

If anything, this new piece of information just makes it clearer that Rolo made the right choice the first time around. And V.V. may have tried to turn him against his brother, but he didn't succeed, not completely.

Lelouch came back for him, even before he knew all this. Nunnally welcomed him in their little family, despite not knowing they were twins. V.V. has lost, in more than one way, and so did the parents who discarded him. He just has to focus on that and he will be fine.

"Yes, you're right, big brother," he says. "I'm sorry for... not taking this well."

"Don't be ridiculous, Rolo. You are dealing with this very well. Both you and Nunnally are, and I'm so very proud of you.

"That being said, I do have something else I needed to talk to you about. A secondary mission, so to speak."

Rolo immediately perks up. This, he knows how to deal with. He loves it when his brother gives him missions.

"Of course, big brother. What am I to do? Prince Schneizel again?" He feels a little bad knowing that his actions against Schneizel caused Nunnally pain, but he also knows that it is necessary, for the sake of their future and their promise.

Lelouch shakes his head. "The situation with Schneizel is actually very complicated."

He seems displeased at even having to say the words, and Rolo gets the feeling that he's missing something big. His guess is confirmed moments later, when C.C. explains, "A lot has changed when we were Euro-Britannia. Lelouch has V.V.'s code now, which is a good thing, of course. But the moment he took it, something happened, and it appears to have triggered the return of Schneizel's
memories, from the past lifetime."

Oh no. Considering everything Lord Jeremiah has told Rolo about the Britannian civil war, that could be bad. Lelouch is immortal now—and that takes a huge weight off Rolo's shoulders—but that doesn't mean he's invincible, or that their enemies aren't dangerous for him. "So what does that mean for us?"

"We've tentatively decided to stabilize his condition through my Geass," Sir Kururugi replies, "although at this time, I haven't been as successful at using it as I would like. Considering the incoming war with Europia, he may come in handy. But obviously, we don't trust him."

"That's where you come in, Rolo," Lelouch continues, "You, Sayoko and Jeremiah will keep an eye on his condition and make sure he doesn't stir up trouble in any way. I don't actually think anyone would attack the SAZ at this point, but I need you in the viceroy palace, to keep an eye on the situation for me.

"For the moment, having his memories back means that his Geass—the Geass I placed on him in our past life—has returned. However, this makes his health unstable, and I may be forced to have Orange remove it at some point. If that happens, we're going to have to be even more careful, and you'll have a new, very important target. Earl Kanon Maldini. He's Schneizel's one weakness, and I'm sure we can use that in the future."

Rolo nods. While he never personally met Prince Schneizel's aide in his past life, he's familiar with him from files and video footage. He should have no problem approaching the man, in whatever capacity Lelouch needs him to. "I perfectly understand, big brother. I won't fail you."

Between him, Sir Jeremiah and Sayoko, he can easily juggle this new mission and the necessity to protect Nunnally. It won't be a problem at all.

Lelouch smiles at him. "Excellent. I knew I could rely on you. And there's one other thing I need you to do for me, while I'm away."

Later, as Lelouch, Rolo and Suzaku all stand in front of a group of children who were once part of the Order, Rolo finds his misgivings slowly dissipating. He thinks about Sir Kururugi's promise to deal with his arrythmia and the silent implication that Nunnally's paralysis may be healed in the future as well. He watches hesitant smiles shine on the faces of the children he killed in his previous life. He looks at his big brother and knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that the code will keep him safe.

And despite the lingering traces of a sorrow he can't completely understand, he also feels pleased. He, Nunnally and Lelouch have a second chance now, and they will use it. And he will spite V.V., Marianne and Charles by using it well, and making sure everything they ever wanted doesn't come to pass.

Chapter End Notes

More vi Britannia sibling feels! I hope I didn't rush through it, but unfortunately, Lelouch really does have a ton of stuff on his plate, and there's only so long he can spend holding his sister while she cries, no matter how much might hate it. Don't worry, though. Rolo will be there for poor Nunna.
Generals

Chapter Notes

Here we go. The update I promised in Men of Miracles! Extra long, since I made you guys wait. And it didn't even have Suzaku tied up in chains. Aren't you proud of me? (Or not LOL). Comments and kudos are love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

St. Petersburg is a beautiful city. Full of ancient palaces built by long-dead tsars, it teems with vibrant color, something Britannian occupation has not managed to change.

Suzaku has never been able to appreciate it, not the first time he visited, and definitely not now. He never got the chance to come here again as Zero, which is perhaps for the best, but he still remembers his days as the Knight of Seven.

He remembers acting as a guard for the brainwashed Lelouch, who would alternate between being a strategic genius in public, and a desperate, confused man, begging for water and clutching his jeweled eyepatch in private.

They're not pleasant memories, but he buries them deep inside. Lelouch’s presence by his side helps. This time, it is different. This time, he occupies the position he always should have had. And with C.C. there, they won't ever fall into past patterns and mistakes.

They're all very different people now. In their past lives, prior to the his days as an emperor, Lelouch would have probably been crippled by the mere sight of Nunnally in pain. He himself would have handled it poorly.

But that too is something they've had to accept as a necessity. And truthfully... After seeing Lelouch die twice—once, at his own hands, and once to take the code—he's nowhere near as affected by these things as he would have been in the past.

Unlike the first time, they aren't forced to take the train. The weather this time of the year is not bad enough to warrant it. They fly their transport to an airstrip located at the military base of the Knights of St. Uriel. From here, a car is supposed to pick them up and take them to the main palace, where Lelouch has to meet with Cornelia.

Gino is already waiting for them at the airport, which is not that surprising. What is a little shocking is that Monica is by his side. It would appear their assessment of her reaction to the news has been correct.

Monica's loyalty was always first and foremost to Emperor Charles, so when Suzaku joined Lelouch in the past lifetime, he knew that most likely, he would have to kill her. He didn't shy away from it, the same way Lelouch did not shy away from the rest of the damage they did during the time before the Zero Requiem. But things have changed now, and if she can be relied on to support Lelouch's rise to power, she can be useful.

There are still so many things that can go wrong, especially considering their new, tentative idea to let Schneizel live. Lelouch is still undecided on where he will go with that, if anywhere, but for the
moment, they are content with the fact that Rolo, Sayoko and Orange are keeping an eye on him.

For the moment, though, they have other concerns, as evidenced by Monica and Gino's presence. They kneel in front of Lelouch, which is actually both strange and somewhat satisfying.

"Welcome back, Your Highness," Gino says, in full Knight of Rounds mode.

"Thank you, Sir Weinberg," Lelouch replies.

His voice is smooth and calm, the turmoil he experienced during his visit at the SAZ chased away by cool determination. He throws a glance toward Monica and arches a brow. Gino takes his cue. "I'd like to introduce to you the Lady Monica Krushevsky, the Honorable Knight of Twelve."

"Lady Krushevsky, it's a pleasure," Lelouch tells Monica. "I've heard a great deal about your exploits in the service of the empire."

"You honor me, Your Highness," Monica answers. "I apologize for appearing before you without prior permission, but I wished to express my gratitude for the assistance you provided in acquiring my freedom from the rebel Shin Hyuga Shaing."

"No thanks are necessary," Lelouch replies. "I was merely doing what was right, for everyone. But I am pleased to see that you are well. Britannia has need of loyal, just people, such as yourself."

Much to Suzaku's amusement, Monica blushes a little. She recovers quickly, though, and replies, "Thank you, Your Highness. You are most generous."


Suzaku himself suppresses a snicker. Both of them know very well that Monica is no threat to their relationship. It's just that Lelouch has a way to naturally draw people in, and now that he isn't even wearing his mask, he's impossibly even more charming than before.

Between that, and the fact that technically speaking, Lelouch did save Monica from a fate of being a mind slave to Shaing, the Knight of Twelve probably never had a chance.

For the most part, Lelouch seems oblivious to this effect. "Let me make a quick introduction as well," he adds. "This is my knight, Suzaku Kururugi, and my second-in-command, C.C. Suzaku, C.C., the Lady Monica Krushevsky."

Suzaku takes a step forward and acknowledges her with a curt, but polite bow. "It's truly an honor. Your reputation preceeds you."

"Welcome aboard," C.C. adds. Unlike him, she makes no attempt to physically approach Monica. Instead, she hooks her arm through Lelouch's in her regular, possessive stance.

As expected, Monica takes this in stride. "Thank you, Sir Kururugi, Lady C.C. It will be my pleasure to work with you." Incipient crush on Lelouch or not, she's as proffessional as always, and Suzaku is completely unsurprised.

Once the pleasantries are dealt with, Lelouch begins to lead them away, with the four of them flanking him. A group of Knights of St. Uriel joins them, and all of them salute once they see Lelouch. It's actually nice to see, especially since in this instance, these people are giving Lelouch their allegiance and respect freely.
Of course, Suzaku rather suspects that the whole thing may also have a lot to do with Lelouch's royal blood. Cornelia has clearly not been idle, and everyone who may not have originally been in the know about Zero's true identity is obviously very much aware now.

In fact, judging by how they are treating the whole thing, Cornelia is going out of her way to point out Lelouch's place in the imperial family of Britannia. There are several cars already waiting, one obviously meant for Lelouch and the others acting as escort. Gino gets behind the wheel of the most ornate vehicle, whereas the rest of them get in the back.

Suzaku is used to the pomp Britannian royalty throws around, so it's not really a big surprise. If anything, it's useful and quite interesting that Cornelia has chosen this route. She may be doing it just to emphasize the fact that Lelouch belongs to Britannia, not to the Numbers, but either way, it will come in handy.

It's also a little ironic, considering that Lelouch's Julius Kingsley persona once protested being greeted by one sole noble, and claimed that during his next visit, the streets would be full of citizens excited to shout his name. They're not quite there, but it's close enough to count.

C.C. is visibly amused by this development and unashamedly helps herself to the liquors that come with the vehicle. Lelouch makes no note of it. "How have things been in my absence, Sir Weinberg?" he asks. "I haven't had the chance to discuss it too much in detail with Cornelia."

"As I understand it, the reorganization of our forces is being a bit of a challenge," Gino answers as he starts the car. "People are still very confused due to the side-effects of the brainwashing, and there's some degree of restlessness even if they are mostly recovering."

That is unsurprising, if not ideal. While Suzaku himself has never been under an enslavement Geass, he remembers very well how disconcerted he felt during those first days after Lelouch used the 'Live on' command on him. The Knights of Euro-Britannia would've been hit far worse.

"And the Black Knights?" Lelouch asks. "I'm surprised they haven't sent someone to greet me."

Lelouch did contact Tohdoh from Japan, shortly after speaking to Nunnally, and Tohdoh reported the damage taken by the Black Knights in the battle was not serious. Nevertheless, a real meeting with them is in order.

"We may have... not notified them of your arrival," Gino admits slowly.

Suzaku narrowly manages to suppress a snort. He knows very well that despite his tendency to be casual and carefree, Gino can hold grudges and tends to be very dangerous when he's set on a certain course of action. He wonders if Gino is feeling sore about the fact that Kallen told him next to nothing about what actually happened with Lelouch and the Black Knights in their past lifetime.

He knows better than to point this out, of course. Besides, he highly doubts Gino would allow simple pettiness to influence his actions if something more wasn't going on.

Lelouch seems to think the same. "I take it there was a confidential matter you wanted to discuss with me that you could not speak about in their presence?"

He doesn't seem to mind it, but then, he's never been particularly inclined to giving explanations to his underlings. The only reason why he's shown a degree of openness now is to achieve his ultimate goal, but the Black Knights will soon become superfluous, so their presence doesn't matter that much.

"That is more or less my fault, Your Highness," Monica replies. If she were anyone else, she would
probably be fidgeting. Instead, her voice is steady and calm. "A lot has been happening that has been very confusing. Gino has told me a few bits and pieces, but I admit to still being... lost regarding on the direction the empire will take. I realize it is presumptuous..."

"Not at all, Lady Krushevsky. It is understandable, and you are a Rounds and thus entitled to making this request. Of any of us who are left, really.

"As Sir Weinberg may have told you and you yourself must have realized, my brother is very ill. The rebel Shin Hyuga Shaing used an ability very similar to the one that enslaved you to force him to die, for lack of a better word. Despite our best efforts, we haven't managed to help nearly enough as I would have liked. I believe I don't have to tell you that this is disastrous for the empire as a whole. He is highly unlikely to recover anytime soon, if at all."

Monica nods, looking glum. This information is, after all, not new, as Gino has told her a few things, following Lelouch's instructions. There is no point in sticking to the 'subliminal weapon' story with a Rounds who may have an important position in Lelouch's new regime. "Considering that," Lelouch continues, "we have to assume that the war with Europia will worsen. You of all people are perhaps most aware of what that means.

"At this time, we have been fortunate enough in that the nations of Europia United have not been particularly... united. They've always been divisive when it comes to fighting together against Britannian armed forces, and this has not been unrelated to Schneizel's own diplomatic efforts. However, our vulnerability at this time is such that they may set aside their own misgivings with one another and truly come together as one unit. Which would obviously be a big problem for us."

By the time Lelouch has finished his sentence, Monica has grown pale. She, like most members of the Britannian army, has never considered the deeper entanglements of Britannian foreign policy. While a capable leader in her own right, she never had to face political realities that were only discussed behind closed doors.

Of course, she has no idea of the true extent of the problem. There's more than one reason why Gene Smilas has to be removed, posthaste, and it's not just because of his political ambitions.

"Don't look so upset, Lady Krushevsky," Lelouch continues, undaunted. "I've faced worse odds and I am confident that we can keep Euro-Britannia. It will take some work, and we will have to make sure the areas remain stable. But there is no doubt in my mind that we can accomplish anything we set our minds to. Considering the fact that we currently have a tentative alliance with the Chinese Federation, through me, the EU may yet fold, but even if they do not, you must remember we weren't always an empire with outstanding armies at our disposal. Our strength has always lied in our determination, and we haven't lost that. We've fought and won plenty of battles when we were at a disadvantage."

"Of course, Your Highness. Forgive me for my lapse."

"It's not a problem," Lelouch says, waving his free hand. "In any case, if things go the way I expect, you will probably be required to go to the front at one point in the future. I'll have to discuss the actual situation with Cornelia first, and of course, it depends a lot on the moves the EU chooses to make. Either way, your service will be required."

"You can count on me, Your Highness. Always."

"Wonderful. In the meantime, any other questions?"

Monica hesitates, and Suzaku knows there are still plenty of things on her mind. How could there not
be? After all, she wouldn't have asked for an audience with Lelouch and gone to all this trouble just to discuss the future campaigns of Britannia.

But neither can she express her true doubts and questions, more than she already has, at least. It would be very inappropriate.

Lelouch ends the awkwardness by taking the initiative. "I suppose you are wondering if I want to take the throne, yes?"

Monica flushes, but doesn't deny it. "The thought did cross my mind, Your Highness."

"Well, the answer to that is rather complicated, Lady Krushevsky. It's certainly not something I planned on, considering my past experiences with Britannia. However... Recent events have made me reassess my approach.

"While I was Zero, I knew my father couldn't be reasoned with. My tentative plan was to lead of union of states that would balance Britannia as a world power and prevent its corruption from spreading. After Pendragon... Well, I hoped Schneizel and I could reach an agreement. He was always more open to peace talks and did not have the same mentality as most Britannians. Unfortunately, with Schneizel gone, I am left in a quandary. I love Cornelia dearly, but she is very much a product of her upbringing, and she sees Numbers as inferior. I fear that her taking the throne may cause us to eventually fall into the same self-destructive patterns. Because there is no doubt in my mind that without the bigotry and hateful rhetoric spouted by most of the Britannian upper class, we would have seen this coming and prevented it.

"In other words, it is not what I want that matters, it is what I must do. And there truly is no other option, if we want Britannia to persevere."

"Do you truly think equality can be accomplished then, Your Highness?" Monica asks.

"Absolute equality is a myth. It is not possible. But equality of chances... Yes, that is possible. It will take effort, but first and foremost, we need to understand that no one, not one citizen of Britannia—Honorary or not—is inferior. Of course, that is a long-term project, for after we've dealt with the external threat. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Don't get me wrong, Lady Krushevsky. Things will probably get worse before they get better. But Britannia will survive this too. I will allow for no other outcome."

Lelouch's rather eloquent speech is interrupted when the car finally slows down, then stops. One brief look out the window confirms the fact that they have reached their destination.

"Well, it looks like we must cut this conversation short, Lady Krushevsky, at least for now," Lelouch says, "Cornelia is waiting. But do join us at the meeting. I imagine that whatever Cornelia has to say will be of relevance to you as well."

"Thank you for your faith in me, Your Highness."

Hiding a smile, Suzaku opens the car door and exits first. Monica follows his example and they check the area for threats like good knights.

A few moments later, Lelouch comes out, with C.C. in his wake. Gino brings up the rear. The rest of their escort joins them shortly after.
"I feel like this is going to get old really quickly," C.C. says softly in Japanese.

"Get used to it," Lelouch replies. "You're going to be empress one day."

Despite his words, he waves off their accompanying knights with the casual ease of a born royal. "That will be all. Thank you. Return to your previously assigned posts."

It is actually a bit of a mystery what these previous posts are, but that is one of the things Lelouch needs to discuss with Cornelia. Among a million others, some of which make Suzaku want to turn into the White Reaper again, just for the sake of expedience.

But he can't, not yet at least, so he sticks to his emperor's side and puts up as pleasant of a facade as he can muster these days. He wonders now how long their quest to achieve a peaceful world will actually take, and what else will spin out of their control.

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"There's been no sign of any remaining forces from Victor zi Britannia or Shin Hyuga Shaing. The front has been quiet, and our garrison reports no real movements from the Europeans."

Cornelia hums thoughtfully at Darlton's report. She would very much like to believe that it's a good thing, but she knows it's the silence before the storm.

"And the Chinese? Any trouble from them?"

On the screen in front of her, Darlton shakes his head. "General Li Xingke has been cooperative, although it does seem that he expects his departure to happen soon."

"Of course he does. It's not like he's wrong."

The Chinese do not belong in Euro-Britannia. Their only interest in the matter was removing the threat Victor and Shaing posed, a threat which placed the tentative alliance with Japan on shaky ground and possibly endangered their empress.

Now that Victor and Shaing are no longer an issue, they will naturally want to return to the Vermillion Forbidden City, although Cornelia has no idea if Xingke plans on retrieving the Tianzi from Japan. She can't imagine how Lelouch even managed to arrange that to begin with, but she has bigger concerns.

She turns toward the person waiting in the second video call window. "Lady Enneagram, report," she tells the Knight of Nine.

"We are making progress, Your Highness," Nonnette answers. "All the bodies have been retrieved and are in the process of being identified. We'll have a complete report for you in a couple of days."

Cornelia presses her lips together. As much as she hates it, her priority does not lay with the dead right now, but with the living. "And the citizenry?"

"Rumor has now reached them of Emperor Schneizel's injury. We're going to need a clear, official statement soon. I've let it leak that you are engaged in a campaign to deal with the threat in Euro-Britannia, but that'll only help us so far. On the whole, there's a great deal of restlessness, but they aren't likely to rebel, not at this time."

No, of course they wouldn't. Their dynasty tended to be popular in the homeland, and while this tragedy could have changed their minds, the populace is not unaware that the imperial family has
received a serious blow as well.

It's the areas that are more problematic. Reports from the viceroy have mostly shown promise, in that local forces have managed to hold back incipient terrorist activity. But the more recently conquered areas, where Britannian presence hasn't been well-established, are almost on the brink of collapse.

That leaves them in a very tenuous position, stretched thin and without real reinforcements here in Europia.

A knock sounds at the door of her recently acquired office. It is Guilford and he brings excellent news. "His Highness has just arrived."

"Well, then, Guilford, it looks like it's time to talk to my brother." She gives Darlton and Nonnette one more look. "Keep me posted, Darlton, Lady Enneagram. If anything else comes up, you have my personal frequency."

"Yes, Your Highness."

By the time Cornelia has ended the two video calls, Lelouch has made his way to her office. As always, his knight and his second-in-command are with him. The Knight of Three and the Knight of Twelve are a new, but welcome addition.

"Princess Cornelia. It's good to see you."

Technically, they've just seen each other, a few hours ago, when Lelouch called her from Japan to give her a few details on Schneizel's state and set up this meeting. But Cornelia can't blame him for wanting to respect protocol, especially not after the large escort she sent after him.

Well, she doesn't have the time to observe such matters now, not when they're not in front the public, at least.

"Save it, Lelouch. Just tell me. What the hell happened with Schneizel? You were very mysterious when we spoke."

"It's not something that could be discussed over comlinks, even when we deem the frequency secure," Lelouch explains. "As for what happened... As I said, the brain damage Schneizel suffered was very severe. Suzaku has managed to stabilize him, but I'm still not sure if he will wake."

"I'm sorry? Sir Kururugi?"

"I possess a skill that allows me to... draw someone injury into myself. Unfortunately, it is limited, and I could not do much for His Majesty, since it would appear that the area in his brain that suffered most damage is the same that I use to command this skill."

Cornelia doesn't even know what to say to that. She has not forgotten her frustration with Lelouch's secret keeping, and in a strange way, this both adds to it and explains Lelouch's reluctance to go into detail over the mysterious results of the experimentation.

"I see," she says. "I imagine you don't want this information to be leaked to the public in any way."

"Naturally, Cornelia. I have no desire to see my knight assaulted by the sick in the streets."

"I can understand that. But Lelouch, you have to keep me informed on these things. Both your knight's skills, and those of the rest of your... entourage. They need to be taken into account for
future strategies."

"I'm aware. And I do apologize for keeping you in the dark in some respects. But there simply hasn't been enough time for much of anything since the explosion in Pendragon.

"When it comes to myself and C.C., our own skills are fairly straightforward. We possess a high degree of physical immunity to injury, as well as a form of limited telepathy. But with so much of the war hinging on knightmare combat, I'd obviously prefer to not have to heavily rely on it."

That was understandable. Besides, as convenient as Cornelia would have found it to have her brother come up with a superpower that would magically erase all of her problems, she knows reality doesn't work like that.

"I can't say I disagree. However, we are in a difficult situation, Lelouch. We're drawn in too many different directions."

"That was always going to happen. It was happening already, before Schneizel was attacked."

"Yes, I'm aware," Cornelia replies. "Nonnette tells me that news has reached the homeland of Schneizel's injury. We're going to have to make a statement of some kind. And a decision on succession. It's much too soon for anyone else to take the throne, but considering what she's heard about Schneizel's condition, it's something they'll have to consider in the future. And they'll have to come up with a temporary arrangement on leadership as well. Damn Shaing.

Shaking off her frustration, Cornelia finishes her previous train of thought, "The situation is worsening in some of the areas. Area 18 is particularly unstable."

"Yes, I suppose it would be." Lelouch grimaces. "Europia wouldn't be the only one who'd want to take advantage of the situation. The Middle Eastern Federation might not have Gene Smilas's ambitions, but that doesn't mean they don't want their country back."

"That's all well and good, Lelouch, but we've already lost Japan. Losing another area would just make matters worse and the Numbers more violent."

Lelouch doesn't seem surprised at this, nor does he argue with her. Despite his more... radical views on Numbers, he was probably already thinking the same thing himself. "That only leaves us with one option then."

"I'm going to have to go," Cornelia says. She already knew it, ever since she read the reports, but it's still difficult to say the words.

"Yes," Lelouch replies. "You beat them the first time. You shouldn't have too much trouble now. They're mostly rabble, and the only reason why they're a problem is because our own people are panicking. Then, you'll have to help Lady Enneagram in Pendragon. I think, eventually, you should recruit Euphie for it, once things are a little more stable. In the meantime, I'll stay here and deal with Europia."

"On your own?"

Lelouch arches a brow at her, like he's silently saying, "You do know who you're talking to, right?"

Cornelia cannot argue with that. She knows her brother is a military genius. But on the other hand... "You won't have too many troops at your disposal. Especially not if Xingke's people and yours leave."
The situation of the Black Knights is for the most part, a guess, as Lelouch has not discussed it with her. But she very much doubts he will want to have them here, embroiled in a battle that is not their own. They don't belong here any more than Xingke does.

He doesn't deny her assumption, but neither does he seem concerned. "I'll have enough. It's not always the quantity of the people that matters, but their quality. Besides, I have a tentative plan that will turn the tide of this war for us and settle things between Britannia and Europia once and for all."

"Turn the tide? What do you mean?"

Lelouch's lips twist in a small, wicked smirk. "All of the greatest empires have weak points. Britannia was no different... But neither is the EU. The only thing we need to do is to exploit that weak point."

The plan he reveals to her leaves her—and everyone except Kururugi and C.C.—gaping in astonishment. She'd almost call it insane... except this is Lelouch, and he seems to thrive on gambles like this.

Can they risk it? Britannia is unstable now. If they lose Lelouch as well, Area 18 will be the least of their concerns.

But on the other hand, this is truly a chance, one they cannot afford to squander. "All right, Lelouch," she says. "I'm with you, always. What do you need?"

"I'm glad you asked, Cornelia. I'm glad you asked."

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Paris, France, Capital of Europia United

In the Grand Chamber of the Council of Fourty, Gene Smilas watches each member of the assembly with keen eyes. This is a defining moment in his plan. It is his chance to make a decisive move. But he has to do it now, when Britannia is still weak. When he is no longer feeling his every movement watched from the shadows by purple, ageless eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we can no longer rely on vague promises and past hopes. Britannia has been a plague on the world for decades, and they will never stop their campaign of conquest. You know this as well as I. We have to act now and make sure they are stopped."

"I'm not sure it is wise," a diplomat from Denmark states. Gene notes his name and tentatively marks him as a target for future elimination. "At this time," the man continues, "Britannia has a treaty with both the Chinese Federation and Japan. And then there's Zero."

Anxious murmurs explode in the chamber at the mentioning of the masked terrorist. Despite himself, Gene reluctantly agrees with their agitation. But how can he not?

He's lost touch with his contact in Euro-Britannia since the Pendragon bombing and the subsequent loss of Castle Weisswolf, so his information on what is happening in that area is now sketchy. But he always knew that Shin Hyuga Shiang was not all that reliable and only kept in touch with Gene distantly for his own interests, so it's not a surprise.

What is a surprise is that Zero, one man from a country with a pretty small army has managed such incredible feats. Rumors of the crushing defeat the Chinese Federation has suffered at his hands already marked him as someone to watch, and that was before he deployed his forces to assist Cornelia in Euro-Britannia. The stories of his military genius and successes have left traces, traces
Gene cannot ignore. Traces that, in the big picture, are quite alarming, especially for a man who knows what he does.

"Zero's primary priority is Japan, and Britannia has always been his enemy," he says, not showing his disquiet. "If he decided to ally himself with them, it was because the Chinese Federation made the first move. But I have no doubt that he would turn on Britannia should we give him enough incentive."

He's not completely convinced of his own words, but fortunately, his fellows don't see through his mask.

"Before his attempted assassination, there were rumors that he planned on setting up a union of nations of some kind," a British representative says, pursing her lips. "He's not unlikely to want to do the same, and that mindset is not compatible with Britannian imperialism."

Ah, yes, the famous attempted assassination. One of the numerous riddles surrounding the mystery that is Zero. Gene doubts very much that Zero's knight, Suzaku Kururugi, was the target of a subliminal weapon that day.

No, he was the target of Geass. Gene is sure of it. An envoy of Lord Shaing? He cannot be sure. He never really knew if Lord Shaing was in some way related to Geass, but it would certainly explain some of the man's odder quirks and choices, as well as his quick rise to power.

That makes Gene ask himself a very simple question. Why did everyone wave off the strange incident as a scientifically explainable fact? Who provided that explanation? Was it just to help Suzaku Kururugi—who Gene suspects may have done something after the cameras stopped rolling—or was there something else going on?

Does Zero have Geass? Is that the real reason for his miraculous successes?

The representatives have no knowledge of these aspects of course, but the official story does trouble them. "Speaking of which, whatever happened to that subliminal weapon that was rumored to be used in Japan?" the Netherlands representative asks. "Did the Euro-Britannian rebels still have it? If so, it must've fallen into Cornelia's hands after their most recent battle. If we risk escalating matters now, we may have to face it."

He's not wrong, in that it is alarming that Cornelia and her allies managed to defeat Lord Shaing's forces. But if Gene is correct in that Zero too has Geass, that makes it all the more important for Gene to step in now, when European military superiority can compensate.

"My sources tell me there never was a subliminal weapon. It was just a story concocted due to the fact that Zero's knight is mentally unstable."

There is gaping all around. "Truly, General Smilas?" the German representative asks.

Gene nods. "Suzaku Kururugi was originally an Honorary Britannian, and the son of the prime minister of Japan. His treatment at the hands of Britannia was very poor. I imagine Zero must've been trying to protect him in some way, through this outlandish tale."

"General Smilas is correct," the British representative says. "If such a weapon had existed, they would've long ago used it against us. They are bluffing."

Gene suppresses the urge to smile. He has them now. "Indeed," he says calmly. "You have to remember, things have drastically changed from where they were before, ladies and gentlemen. Britannia is not the country it was mere months ago. It has lost Emperor Charles in the bombing, and
my sources tell me the Euro-Britannian coup may have killed Emperor Schneizel as well. The only one left to take the lead is Cornelia, and while she is dangerous, she is just one person. She cannot hope to hold the reins of the empire on her own. Just the fact that she is relying on outsider for help, the same man who killed Clovis, no less, speaks volumes of the extent of her problems.

"Granted, we cannot believe Zero doesn't pose a threat. That would be naive in the extreme. But it is also why we must act now, and squash this threat in its incipience.

"The war with Britannia will not end unless we end it, ladies and gentlemen. Now is the time to truly unite our armies and take a stand. If we do not, if we lose this chance, we may as well sign our own death warrants. We must act now."

The assembly is, of course, not easily convinced. There are too many people who have always preferred a more sedate approach to the conflict with Britannia. It's a shame he didn't manage to go through with his plan to use Leila, but at this point, it is useless to add her death to the equation. Hopefully, he will manage to convince the representatives without having to rely on unpredictable emotional manipulations.

He does. The whole business with the subliminal weapon has managed to plant the certainty of Britannia's weakness in many of the representatives' minds. After a few hours of arguing, when Gene calls for a vote, the result is in his favor. Europia United will finally bring all armed forces under his authority, granting him the power he needs to take control and take what is his.

He is no longer being haunted by the specter of the woman who called herself the Caretaker of Spacetime. He only ever truly saw her once, but once was enough, and he never forgot. That feeling, the silent pressure of her watchful presence, has followed him for years, and while she never truly interfered with any of his actions, he always knew that if he stepped one toe out of line, she would do it.

He doesn't know what has changed, but he cannot deny it. Somehow, she is no longer there. And perhaps it is not too late to look into the potential of that odd mechanism once again.

After all, if he becomes the Emperor of Europe, he may as well go all the way and take the whole world. And to do that, the first enemy he needs to eliminate is Britannia. If Zero stands in his way, he too will fall. Geass or no Geass, Gene will allow for no other result.

Chapter End Notes

For reference, the Middle Eastern Federation is the region Cornelia is seen conquering at the beginning of R1. For the end bit and General Smilas. Non-Akito readers may be a bit confused. Smilas is shown to have knowledge of Geass in the Akito OVAs, where the Caretaker of Spacetime/Dimensional Supervisor says he "conspired against us" and asks him to kill Shin as penance. For the purpose of this fic, I have concluded that this exchange means he has some knowledge of the Sword of Akasha, but not as much as Charles. Nor does he have Geass or a code. He just knows it's some kind of device that can grant him power, but the method still eludes him.

Admittedly, the CoS also says in the OVAs that she doesn't care if he becomes the emperor of the world, but in this fic, I am starting from the premise that this is false. She merely considered the events that led to Lelouch's rise to power as set in stone - since she was meant to exist as Lelouch, C.C. and Suzaku's daughter - and stepped in to make
sure these events happened when she helped the now dead Ashley Ashra kill Smilas. Obviously, the CoS is no longer able to manifest as much as she did before due to helping our trinity, so they're on their own.
For any other questions that were not addressed, do comment.
Knights

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left feedback on the last chapter! Will not prolong the notes further. Enjoy and any questions, feel free to ask!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Former HQ of the Knights of St. Michael, St. Petersburg, Euro-Britannia

"Gah! This is so annoying! Why are we just waiting here, twiddling our thumbs? We should be with Zero!"

Tamaki's frustrated shout echoes through the room, vocalizing what most everyone is thinking. Kallen agrees with him too, but Lelouch's orders were clear. They were supposed to stand by and work with Cornelia—which is exactly what they did. After a preliminary check-up of the battlefield, they followed the Britannian princess to St. Petersburg, leaving Xingke and a squadron of Britannian knights to do the rest of the cleanup.

The problem is they are technically not needed here, so now they're stuck staring at the ornate walls. They're comfortable enough, they've gotten some much-needed sleep and have managed to put together the reports Lelouch will undoubtedly want upon his arrival, but now, the wait is grating on them. Throughout these past months, they've always had something to do, so they're not dealing well with inactivity.

It certainly doesn't help that they're not sure what will actually happen now that Lelouch has told his true identity to the Britannians. Kallen is very uneasy about it. She knows something is different. Something has pushed Lelouch's hand into hastening things. And a part of her dreads what will come next.

Still, she doesn't say anything about it to the other Black Knights. Instead, she tries her best to reassure them. "He'll be back soon. It wouldn't have been practical for us to follow him around wherever he went. And besides, it's not like we did it before."

"Before, we were in Japan, and he was wearing a mask," Sugiyama mumbles.

"He has Kururugi and C.C. with him," Tohdoh says, "and we've spoken recently. We need to remain calm and wait for further orders."

Kallen wonders how Tohdoh actually feels about this whole thing. Whatever Lelouch told him about what Britannia actually did to him—and well, to Suzaku—really upset him. She doesn't know Tohdoh that well, but even she could see it, and could see Chiba's concern.

For the most part, Tohdoh seems calmer now that the threat is gone, but is it really enough to make up for everything that's happened? And will it truly stop here? Somehow, Kallen thinks it won't be that easy.

Fortunately, Lelouch contacts them shortly after that to tell them he's landed in St. Petersburg and is making his way to them. "I'll probably be arriving there within half an hour, give or take. Prepare for
"Yes, Zero," Kallen happily agrees. She's never been happier for a meeting in her life.

Lelouch arrives roughly twenty minutes later, with Suzaku and C.C. in tow. He's still dressed in his Zero suit, but he has discarded his mask.

"Hello, everyone. Status report? Any news since we last spoke?"

"No, Zero," Tohdoh replies. "As stated, we've lost twelve knightmare units, but fortunately, the pilots managed to eject. There were no fatalities."

"Excellent. I did not get the chance to say this properly before I left, but congratulations everyone. Well done. We've scored a great victory, and I am truly proud of what we have achieved."

Kallen is just as proud, but that doesn't make her any less anxious. If anything, the bad feeling she has increases more and more. "What now, Zero?"

Lelouch presses his lips together in a visibly displeased expression. "Now... I'm afraid we have another war on our hands."

"Another war?" Inoue repeats, her eyes going wide.

Lelouch nods, not chastising her for her intervention. "I've spoken with Cornelia, and it would appear that our worst fears have been confirmed. The EU seem to be preparing for a renewed attack as we speak. Britannia is weak, and Europia United will try to take advantage of that. Unfortunately... I cannot allow that to happen."

"More than anyone else, everyone here knows how much of a problem I've always had with Britannia. But the fact remains that were the Empire to fall at this time, another tyrant would just take my father's place. Gene Smilas, who is currently at the lead of the European armies."

"So what do we do then, Zero?" Kallen asks, her voice shaking, despite herself. This was not at all what she expected.

Lelouch shoots her a small, sad smile. "Q1, you do nothing. I cannot ask you to take up arms in the service of a country who has enslaved the Japanese. In this... The Black Knights have to step aside."

"But we can't just leave you!" Kallen explodes, finally understanding where this is headed. "I mean... You're our leader. We can't... just go back to Japan and abandon you."

"C.C. and I will stay with him," Suzaku pipes up. "He won't be alone. Not ever."

Kallen knows that, but at the same time, it doesn't really matter, not to her. Suzaku and C.C. may be useful, but even considering their special abilities, are they really capable of handling this on their own?

"The world has changed," C.C. says calmly. "The enemies we have to face have changed. We must change with them. There is no other way."

"Zero, I understand your point of view," Tohdoh says, "but I respectfully ask that you understand ours. It is precisely because we know what Britannia is that we do not feel very inclined to leave you to them."

"After everything they have done, Lelouch..." Kallen's voice cracks as she speaks. "To you, to your
siblings and everyone... How can you still want to help them?"

"Who will, if I don't?" Lelouch asks. "Schneizel isn't going to wake up anytime soon, and Cornelia is just one person. I can't let my own hangups with my father affect my actions. Ultimately... Ultimately, what the Black Knights stand for is not revenge, but justice, and if I don't take action now, innocent Britannian citizens would suffer the consequences, just like the Japanese have suffered in the past. That is unacceptable.

"That being said, I have no plans to stop being Zero. Japan still needs the Black Knights. There is much rebuilding to do, and frankly, Britannia is in no state to receive the citizens we originally intended to evacuate. And we still need to go through with the original plan for the UFN. For now, I am needed here, but that doesn't mean I will abandon our previous plans. On the contrary, now, more than at any other time, we will have to be well-coordinated, in case things do go wrong and Britannia does fall."

"How likely is that to happen, Zero?" Chiba asks.

"I'm uncertain at this time," Lelouch says. "Everything depends on Smilas's actions. The Europeans do not have a coherent strike force like Britannia, which was always their main weakness in the past. I'm not sure if and when they'll manage to surpass this.

"I do have a tentative plan that will hopefully eliminate the threat before it can become a real issue. But it is always a good idea to be prepared for all eventualities, and I will not have Japan exposed to another war so soon, should Smilas decide to come after its sakuradite at a later date."

The damn sakuradite. Kallen sometimes wishes she could just transport Mount Fuji to Australia and be done with it, so that everyone would just leave them alone.

"For the moment, I will need you to go back to Japan and tighten borders. I've already spoken to Euphie and Kaguya. I'll speak to Xingke once he comes back, so he can reorganize his troops and perhaps take the Tianzi home.

"Q1. In my absence, I want you to take over my position. We'll keep in touch, of course, and Tohdoh will help you, but I won't be able to coordinate every single thing like before, so I'll leave that to you.

"I know it's not exactly what we both had in mind when I spoke to you in the past about it, but we must adjust to this too."

Kallen remembers the conversation they had before the forming of the SAZ. It's hard to believe only a few months have passed since then. So much has changed in her life and perception that she aches inside.

A part of her wants to offer to stay by his side again. She may even have the possibility. She could discard the name of Kozuki, and take up Stadtfeld.

But on the other hand... Japan still needs her. And Lelouch needs her to lead the Black Knights in his stead.

And so, despite the fact that her heart and selfishness are pulling her in a different direction, Kallen says, "I understand, Zero. I won't fail you."

Lelouch smiles at her, and it's warm and kind in a way very few of his smiles are. "Thank you, Kallen. I know you won't."
The way he says her name almost makes her take back her promise. She opens her mouth to do exactly that.

And then, C.C. attaches herself to Lelouch's arm, drawing his attention. She whispers something in his ear, and just like that, he's distracted.

In that moment, despite the knowledge of how useful C.C. is and how much she means to Lelouch, Kallen doesn't think she's ever hated anyone more.

He nods at whatever she's saying and then turns toward them again. "I still have a lot of conversations pending. I promised Cornelia I would speak with the rest of the Euro-Britannian knights, to reassure them in some way. In the meantime, start making arrangements for your departure. Oh, and Rakshata. I need a word with you."

"Of course, Zero," she replies.

When Lelouch and his companions leaves, Rakshata follows. Kallen watches them go, her heart still heavy with the weight of her decision.

"You okay, Kallen?" Sugiyama asks.

"What? Yes, of course." She pauses, then reassess her words. "I mean, I'm not happy about it, but I understand that Zero is needed here."

"It's more than that," Tohdoh points out. "There's a conflict of interest. He said it himself. The Black Knights are ultimately a Japanese force, and the Japanese were enslaved by Britannia. There's only so long he can juggle being our leader and being a Britannian prince for their sakes. He'd be pulled in two different directions."

"Are you saying we're in the way?" Tamaki shouted. "But we just want to help! And Zero was ours first."

"He was Lelouch vi Britannia before he was ever Zero," Senba replies. "Not that it matters that much."

Urabe nods. "Zero always stood for justice, and he can't just let them die, Britannian or not."

"Not to mention that we're needed at home," Asahina adds. "With both us and Cornelia gone, Japan is exposed."

They're right, and they're also going around in circles. No matter how much they look at the problem, the result is still the same.

The Black Knights can't stay and Lelouch can't go.

"We'll just have to trust Zero," Kallen finally says. "He knows what he's doing, and he's always had Japan's well-being at heart. We have to believe in him."

"Yes, Kozuki, you're right," Tohdoh says. He sounds even less happy about it than she is, but what can they do?

Hopefully, this war with Europia will be over soon, and Zero will come back to Japan, where he belongs.

****
Andrea waits in the main hall of the Grand Duke's palace in St. Petersburg, doing his best to not show his nervousness. The last time he was here, he and his unit fell victim to the strange brainwashing weapon Shaing and his accomplices used, and failed to protect Emperor Schneizel. Princess Cornelia doesn't seem to blame him for it, but Prince Lelouch is a wild card.

Andrea doesn't know much about Prince Lelouch at all. The other Euro-Britannian knights informed him that His Highness was the one hiding under the mask of Zero, but Zero was never much of a factor for Andrea before the bombing of Pendragon.

Now, things have drastically changed, and he isn't sure what path he will have to take. But he has to remain steadfast regardless and not show the true extent of his fears. His men—the few who have survived—are relying on him, and he is the only Grandmaster left who can help rebuild things here in Euro-Britannia. He cannot afford to show weakness.

For this meeting, most of the superior ranks of the Euro-Britannian knights have been summoned in front of the throne Duke Velaines occupied before his death. There aren't as many of them as Andrea would like. Most of the members of inner circles of each individual Grandmaster were killed with their leaders, leaving only those in lower positions available to fight. But there's nothing for it, and Andrea is grateful that they even have that. Rank or no rank, these are good men, and dependable soldiers.

Prince Lelouch arrives roughly ten minutes after the appointed meeting time. His knight and his second-in-command are with him, as well as the Knight of Three and the Knight of Twelve.

He's dressed as Zero—sans the mask—but the moment he enters the room and comes to stand in front of the throne, everybody still kneels. It's an automatic response. There's just something about this man that emanates authority, and it's not just his royal blood.

"Rise, Knights of Euro-Britannia," he says, his voice calm and aloof—and they do, like one unit.

"I am Lelouch vi Britannia, son of Emperor Charles and Empress Marianne. Some of you may know me as Zero. Until further notice, I will be acting as Grand Duke over Euro-Britannian regions and co-regent over Britannia with my sister, Cornelia."

That is both surprising and not. Britannia has never had this type of rulership, but then again, never has their country been hit by such a disaster. It makes sense that the two remaining military commanders would act together to deal with the problems Britannia currently has.

"You all have questions about what happened," His Highness continues. "First of all, let me reassure you that the weapon that turned you all against the Empire is no longer an issue. I made sure of that. There should be no lasting side-effects, but if you find yourselves experiencing headaches or memory blanks, tell a doctor at once and it will be dealt with.

"Most importantly, you cannot blame yourselves for the actions that you were forced to commit while under the sway of the traitor Shaing. It was not your fault, in any way. You could not have resisted it, no matter how loyal or strong your determination might have been."

The words take a weight off Andrea's heart, something he himself didn't really want to acknowledge. Despite the reassurances of everyone around him—including Princess Cornelia herself—he has been plagued by the exact same thoughts His Highness has now mentioned.

The prince doesn't dwell further on the topic. "I hate to have to thrust you into battle so soon, but we have no choice," he says instead. "Britannia is in a tenuous position right now, so we will be
preparing for war once again. My sister will be needed to deal with matters in Pendragon and make
sure the rest of the areas don't run amok, so I will be staying here to handle Europia United. I expect
to be obeyed without question. We have no room for error, as hesitation could spell disaster for Euro-
Britannia as a whole.

"This is my knight, Suzaku Kururugi, and my second-in-command, C.C." As he speaks, he turns
toward the two people in question, and they nod when their respective names are mentioned, even if
the introduction itself is not really necessary. "In my absence, you will treat their word as you would
my own. No exceptions."

The prince's voice turns harder and sterner at the latter words, and Andrea believes him, even if he
isn't happy about it. He isn't very comfortable taking orders from an Honorary Britannian, especially
a former Eleven. He isn't bigoted, but his only past experience with Honoraries of the Eleven variety
has been Shaing.

Surprisingly, Prince Lelouch seems to be aware of this. "I understand you may experience a degree
of natural... reluctance due to past circumstances. However, we must see Shin Hyuga Shaing for
what he was, an anomaly that has been dealt with, and move on. The enemy lies elsewhere now.

"At present, we will be working on outfitting for the imminent conflict and preparing ourselves to
move out into the border garrisons. It is unlikely that Europia will attempt to attack us while the
Chinese Federation troops remain here, but that will only provide us with a small delay. We will
have to depart for the front within the next two days. Questions so far?"

"Yes, Your Highness," one of the knights of St. Uriel hesitantly pipes up. "Who will take charge of
the Holy Orders?"

"Ah yes. Until another Grandmaster can be picked, the Knights of St. Uriel will be working under
Sir Weinberg, and the Knights of St. Gabriel will be led by the Lady Krushevsky. Sir Farnese, as the
final remaining Grandmaster, I will be awaiting your suggestions for possible people to take over the
roles of Sir du Villon and Sir du Saint-Giles. It is not a priority, but look into it when you have a
moment."

"I understand, Your Highness," Andrea dutifully replies.

"As I've stated in the past, we, as a country, as a nation, have made some serious mistakes. But it is
not too late to fix those mistakes. And I have no doubt that we can win this war."

"But how, Your Highness?" someone in the crowd explodes. "If it is true that Europia will come at
us at full strength, we do not have the manpower or the facilities to face them, not in our weakened
state."

Much to Andrea's surprise, His Highness doesn't chastise the unwise knight for speaking out of turn.
"You're wrong. Britannia's greatest strength has always been its people, and their determination. As
paradoxical as it might seem, we are far more united that Europia can ever claim to be."

Andrea doesn't understand His Highness's meaning in the least bit. Britannia has never been united.
Leaving aside the other areas, Euro-Britannia itself has always been a satellite state, and prior to the
explosion in Pendragon, there were always voices that clamored for a separation between the two.
Andrea himself was never keen on this, and he knows it's out of the question now, but that doesn't
make Prince Lelouch's claim any less outlandish.

"Not all wars are the same," His Highness adds. "Not all battles are fought through similar methods.
A new strategy is being prepared as we speak, and you will all receive further instructions upon our
He doesn't offer any further explanation, and nobody asks again. However, Andrea's own confusion must have been noticeable, because after His Highness dismisses the rest of the knights, he asks Andrea to stay behind. Once they are in private—only with His Highness's inner circle as company—Prince Lelouch comments, "You have questions. Doubts."

Andrea doesn't bother denying it. He may not have been comfortable questioning his superior officer in public, like the knight who spoke out earlier, but this is an entirely different matter.

"Yes, Your Highness. I simply don't understand what you have in mind for this war with Europia. I can't say I agree with you when it comes to us being particularly united."

He half-expects Prince Lelouch to be displeased at the latter comment, but His Highness just laughs. "Of course we are. Not as united as we could be, but more united than them, most definitely. But I do see your point. In any case, you need not worry. It's not just our military strength that will help us beat them."

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

To his surprise, it's Suzaku Kururugi who elaborates. "Don't you know, Sir Farnese?" he asks. "There are ghettos full of Elevens in Paris."

It's the first time he's actually heard the man speak, and his voice holds a strange tonality. It's not quite a threat. It's more like... an awareness, that Suzaku Kururugi is very dangerous, and anyone who will stand in his way will be dealt with swiftly and efficiently.

"And the commoners have never liked the ruling class," the Lady C.C. adds. Her face is blank and emotionless, like she's a beautiful statue and not a person at all.

"The French have a history of turning against their own leaders," Prince Lelouch finishes. "All we need to do... is give them a little push."

As he listens to them speak, Andrea finally understands. He finally understands why Zero managed to lead the Japanese to victory against impossible odds.

He understands the true meaning of determination.

Once, Shin Hyuga Shaing made them all promises of bringing the Knights of St. Michael to renewed glory. But that was a dirty lie and a skillful deception, crafted by dishonorable murderer.

Prince Lelouch's ideas are bold as well, but nothing he does is truly for power or for glory. It is to protect their homeland, the country they are so close to losing. That, Andrea can respect. He can respect the extent to which His Highness is willing to go, for the sake of their people.

It is true that, up to a point, Andrea is uneasy. He is well aware of what this will mean, of the consequences of their actions. But he knows that His Highness is aware of them too.

"Before creation, there must always be destruction," His Highness says. His lips twist into a small, bitter smile. "I slew my own brother once, for justice. What will be forced to do now, is, perhaps, not be the same, but we cannot let that stop us."

Andrea nods. "I understand, Your Highness."

And he does, because like the rest of the knights have said, they simply do not have the military
strength to hold Europia at bay in any other manner. For Euro-Britannia, he too will do whatever it takes.

"Good," His Highness answers. "Know that I would not ask you to compromise your principles if it was not a necessity, but these are the times we live in now, and we must all adapt if we are to lift ourselves from the pit my father and my uncle's madness have thrust us into.

"That being said," he continues, "this information will not be common knowledge. Only a select few will be informed, until we are completely prepared for it. If even the slightest rumor of what I have in mind reaches the Europeans' ears, disaster could strike."

"Of course, Your Highness. I will not betray your trust."

"Wonderful. Because there's something else I need you to do for me."

The next day, both the Black Knights and Li Xingke depart for Japan. Later, Princess Cornelia departs for Area 18.

Panzer Hummels, aircrafts, tanks and scores of soldiers are already making their way to the current frontline between Europia and Britannia.

The newly regrouped Holy Orders of Euro-Britannia do the same.

A new war has begun.

Chapter End Notes

Gaudefroy du Villon and Raymond du Saint-Gilles are the other two Grandmasters of the Holy Orders of Euro-Britannian Knights (Knights of St. Gabriel and Knights and St. Uriel, respectively). The co-regency is something Lelouch arranged with Cornelia in the 'fade to black', during the last chapter. I think other than that, everything else is straightforward.
When the King Leads, His Subordinates Follow

Chapter Notes

I am happy! This story has hit 1400 kudos! Thank you all! To celebrate, I made an effort for an early update. Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Days later, Paris, France

Her name is Catherine Lowenthal-Bosch, and she is a widow. She has black hair that is as dark as her mood, and likes to listen to classical music.

She is French by birth, but her husband had been German. He had died in Slonim, and she'd ultimately come to Paris to escape both the Britannians, and the memories.

Sometimes, when Anne drops by Catherine's apartment, she finds her staring out the window, tapping her fingers over the bracelet around her wrist in the tempo of the piano solo.

"Do you want to tell me about him?" Anne asks during one of her visits, when she finds Catherine more open to conversation. "What was he like?"

"Nico was... so different. We didn't get on at all at first. I think maybe... I first fell in love with his eyes. He had green eyes. So green, like the forest.

"He was a soldier, so he always seemed cold and aloof to everyone. But he was there for me at a very difficult time in my life, and slowly... We got closer.

"He liked... He liked to play chess. It was his thing. And he'd be so fastidious with the craziest things. I was never much of a cook, so he cooked for me instead. He was a wonderful pianist, although he didn't get the chance to play as much as he would've liked. I think he lost his love for the music, later on, because of the army, but... I sort of wanted to give it back to him.

"We were planning to start a family. I lost the baby too, when... When he died."

Catherine falls silent, and Anne doesn't know what to say in response to the confession. She wants to comfort Catherine, but words would be useless when faced with that kind of loss.

So she brings Catherine homecooked meals and newspapers, and is grateful to see her new neighbor slowly coming out of her shell. Anne is ecstatic to find a fellow history buff in the young woman, and between conversations on their reading, Catherine even asks for ideas for the best places to visit in Paris.

"I can't visit them with Nico any longer, but I think he would've wanted me to see them like this."

Anne is happy to help. She's lived in Paris most of her life and knows it all like the back of her hand. And Catherine truly is so kind. If this can help distract her from her loss, it's the least she can do.

She provides Catherine with both instructions and maps, although she also warns her to not get too close to the Eleven ghettos. The last thing Anne wants is for some random Eleven to grab the
Catherine seems disbelieving at her words. "But what could they possibly do? The Ile de la Cite is under close watch, right?"

"Well, yes. The area is segregated and guarded. But the truth is some of the Elevens still manage to get out well enough. Plus there's the underground tunnels."

"Underground tunnels?" Catherine repeats. "You mean from the old section of the city? I thought those would've been blocked by now."

"Most of them are well-preserved. I haven't been there in ages, but when I was in my teens, we used to dare one another at school to go exploring. They're very extensive and some of them open to the catacombs, which is particularly creepy."

She regrets the words instantly, as she realizes Catherine is probably not very interested in anything remotely related to funerals or death. To her surprise, she is proven wrong. "Maybe I'll go too. Maybe it's time... It's time to face my fears, at least a little."

Anne doesn't think that's a good idea. The whole reason why she mentioned it to begin with was to keep Catherine away from the Elevens. "Rumor has it some of the Elevens lurk in the area, dear. It may not be a good idea."

"I'll be all right. If there had been anything to the rumor, I'm sure the guards would've handled it. And well... I've been through worse."

She's so brave Anne almost tears up. Against her own better judgment, she lets Catherine go, knowing that in these things, her neighbor needs to get her own answers.

Little does Anne Amendola know that Catherine Lowenthal-Bosch has long ago gotten her answers and established her goals. She is a witch, and the same woman who lost a husband and a child, but turned time back in the hope of a second chance before she even realized the true extent of her loss.

She'd feel bad that the second chance in question has to come at the expense of innocent civilians like Anne Amendola, but there's only so much room left in her immortal heart, and it's all filled up. Soon, she won't have to wait, hide or suffer. Soon, she'll have what she's been waiting for. Just a little while longer, and this world too shall fall to the Demon Emperor and his knight... even if in this instance, they will be wearing different masks.

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_Ile de la Cite, Parisian Japanese ghettos_

His name is Watanabe Takahiro and he is a young orphaned Eleven who's lived in France since the fall of Japan. He's heard the rumors, read the headlines on all the newspapers, and is wondering what he should do now that Japan is tentatively free. He has a bad limp and he wears dark-lensed glasses that shield his eyes at all times, but he's good with his hands and smiles often.

What little food he finds, he shares with the others. Sometimes, he even shares with the stray animals that wander around the ghettos. He appears to be particularly fond of cats, even though the affection doesn't seem to go both ways.

He's impossible not to like, and Yukana fears for him. The young and idealistic never last long here.

She had liked Ayano too. She'd always thought that poor girl should've never left with those two
reckless idiots. They'd probably gotten her killed.

"We had a small group of would-be rebels," she warns Takahiro. "Left one day. Never came back. Never even knew what happened to them."

"I'm no rebel," Takahiro replies. "I wouldn't even know where to start... rebelling. But anyway, that's beside the point. Don't you want to go home, one day? To Japan?"

The way he says the latter word is almost worshipful, and Yukana aches for him. "Maybe." She curls into the ragged blanket, protecting her body from the night air. "It's just been so long, and this whole Zero business doesn't fill me with too much confidence."

"Yeah," Jun says, taking a deep drag of his cigarette. "I mean... He seemed happy enough to ally himself with Britannia. Nearly got himself killed over it too."

"Does it really matter?" Sayaka asks. "Any chance would be better than no chance, and there's no future for us here."

She's not wrong. The Europeans are no better than the Britannians, as evidenced by the fate of Ayano and her friends. But on the other hand... Will the truce with Britannia even hold?

Yukana is too old to hope, and too old to not realize that in this new war, Europia has the advantage. She never thought she would think something like this, but she fears that Britannia will lose. And if that happens, it is likely that that the frail truce currently protecting Japan will collapse and Zero will not be enough to protect their recovering nation.

She doesn't say this, though. It would be unnecessarily hurtful, and the young people—Takahiro included—aren't going anywhere, not yet. For now, Japan is out of their reach, and she has other concerns.

She pulls Takahiro aside when she sees him limp away. "You should be careful, boy. I don't know where you steal from, but if the Europeans catch you, they'll kill you."

"I'll be fine, Yukana-san. I just want to help."

"I know that, Takahiro. But you won't help us by getting yourself killed."

He smiles a little, like he knows something she doesn't. "I didn't die when Japan was invaded," he says. "I won't die now."

Yukana doesn't think it works that way, but she can't do anything to stop him. "Fine. Just don't be stupid about it."

"I won't. Besides, Jun-san has shown me all the best ways in and out. Nobody will see me."

He leaves without another word, wrapped up in a jacket that seems much too big for him. He comes back the next morning, with his pockets full of cold croissants. He distributes them all among the people and takes nothing for himself.

Yukana bites down on a croissant, tears stinging her eyes as she watches young Takahiro curl up in a corner alone. He clutches a triangular pendant that hangs from his neck and leans against the wall, presumably to get some sleep. The pendant is the only thing he has left from his family, she knows, and every time she sees him hanging onto it like that, she hates the world a little more.

Sayaka covers him with a blanket and tiptoes away, leaving him to sleep. Jun watches them with
shadowed eyes. "I had my doubts about that boy at first, you know. I thought he'd be just like
Naruse and Sayama. That he'd get himself killed, and maybe drag us down with him. But he's not, is
he?"

"No, he really isn't," Yukana says.

As the two Japanese refugees walk away, the so-called Takahiro smiles bitterly. He really isn't like
the people they mentioned. He's so much worse. But he's long ago stopped caring.

He fights only for his emperor, his empress, the future they will share and the daughter they will
have. And he's spilled rivers of blood for peace before. He'll do it again, if he has to. No matter the
cost.

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His name is Thierry Perino, and he plays the piano in a smoky bar in one of the lesser
arrondissements of Paris. He's almost completely blind, but he makes do and never complains. He's
happy to work for what little money Manuel can afford to pay him and the chance to live in the small
room above the bar. During the day, he occasionally goes busking, since he has a very good singing
voice as well.

He's always sweet to the girls in an effortless way that somehow manages to not be in the least bit
flirtatious. Half the time, he seems oblivious to their advances, which is kind of adorable, but also
makes the girls drool over him even more. The boys are torn between mimicking their behavior, and
feeling jealous. Even if it is kind of petty to be jealous of a near-blind man.

At first, Manuel himself finds it a little funny. He's always heard that redheads tend to have fiery
temper, but when it comes to Thierry, the rule doesn't seem to apply.

Of course, he soon realizes that this isn't the case at all. It's not that Thierry doesn't have fire by
nature. The world has simply been doing a good job at squashing it.

It's Thierry's strange reaction to pizza that triggers his epiphany. One of Manuel's waiters, Konrad,
has to go and pry, and Thierry simply smiles softly and says, "My fiancee used to love pizza."

"Used to?" Konrad repeats, always eager for more gossip. Manuel sort of wants to hit him, because
he already knows how this story going to end.

"I lost her," Thierry predictably explains. "Same accident where I almost lost my sight."

Nobody asks again, not even Konrad, and nobody feels jealous after that.

In any case, Manuel is happy to have Thierry as an employee. He's a bit of a distraction from the
renewal of the hostilities with Britannia. He's never been very politically minded, but he has a feeling
that it's bad news.

The thing is, the EU has been at war with Britannia for as long as Manuel can remember. These new
developments are not that big of a change. Like most everyone, he's lost friends to the ongoing
conflict, and he knows Britannia will never stop fighting them, not really. There's too much historical
baggage, and the Britannians are nothing if not good at keeping grudges, even if the people they hate
are long dead. The most the EU and Britannia can ever manage is an uneasy truce, which will only
ever be temporary.

Still, this time, it's different. This time, there's an additional feeling of tension in the air, something
that makes them all jumpy.
The bar is always blaring with rumors, and Manuel is not deaf to them. He can't blame the people for being restless. When the aristocrats decide on something, it's usually the poorer people who have to pay for their mistakes. And the aristocrats make a lot of mistakes.

Manuel has seen the writing on the wall as clearly as he's seen the cars bearing the flags of foreign nations drive past. And up to a point, he can see the sense in the idea of striking the iron while it's hot.

But on the other hand, this is Britannia they're talking about. They've always been fierce and terrible, and this incident in Pendragon wouldn't have changed that. If anything, the opposite may be the case.

Animals are always at their most dangerous when they are wounded. Manuel can't help but think that some countries may be the same.

It is Thierry who listens to his doubts and fears. He has a sense of quiet wisdom that can only come from pain, and he's patient, even when Manuel gets frustrated.

Regardless, on one particular occasion, Manuel finds himself apologizing for dumping all his concerns on the pianist.

"Oh, I don't mind it," Thierry says. "And the truth is... I think I agree with you. Rash decisions are never a good plan." He frowns a little, rubbing his wrist, where a black bracelet is resting. Manuel wonders if it's a gift from his deceased fiancee. "But I guess we're not the ones who can make the call."

"I guess not," Manuel agrees with a sigh. "I just hope they won't start forcibly enlisting people again."

"Well, there's one advantage to being half-blind. At least our beloved leaders won't throw me at the Britannians."

Manuel grimaces. "Don't remind me. Us commoners always get the shit equipment." Manuel himself had only gone through basic, years back, but he doubted things had changed much since then.

A nearby customer overhears them and joins in on the conversation. "Tell me about it. The aristocrats will probably get all the new, flashy knightmares, and everyone else will be left with scrap metal."

"Really?" Thierry asks. "It's that bad? Don't they have a knightmare facility here in Paris?"

The man—obviously a soldier of some kind—takes another drink. "Yeah, there are two bases, and there's a factory not fifteen kilometers from here. You'd think with all that, we'd be better off, but somehow, that never happens. I tell you, if the war gets worse, the poor will be the first to die."

"You haven't been asked to deploy yet, then?"

The soldier shakes his head. "Not yet, thank goodness. I guess maybe they're not desperate. But who knows? I'm thinking it's going to happen. Any day now. Play a song for me will you?"

It's depressing to realize that the man doesn't expect to come back from this war, but Manuel cannot do much to reassure him. Instead, he pours the soldier another drink, on the house, then goes to serve another customer.

He doesn't see his pianist smile silently at his back, nor does he realize that, for said pianist, all the conditions have now been cleared.
Later that day, the so-called Thierry meets with a dark-haired man in a dark, damp chamber in the Paris catacombs. His agent—as blank-faced as ever—accepts his instructions as easily as he always does. But then, despite his madness, Shin Hyuga Shaing has always been good at what he does, and perpetual enslavement hasn't changed that.

It's going to be soon. The true battle for the world will start soon, and there is only one way it can end.

It's a little humorous really. Gene Smilas is prepared for both Britannia's strength of arms, and presumably, the power of Geass. But there is one thing he isn't prepared for. The power of the people.

It is a power that Charles zi Britannia always underestimated, and up to a point, Lelouch cannot blame him for that. Because it is so very easy to sway the minds of the masses. He's done it so many times before, and this time will be no different.

Once Shaing is prepared for his new task, Lelouch leaves the catacombs, once again donning the mask of Thierry Perino. Nobody will ever realize who their favorite, harmless pianist truly is until it is much too late. Gene Smilas will never know what hit him.

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Elsewhere

Monica stares at the panels in front of her and feels the sudden urge to cry. If she doesn't, it's because she's much too aware of the seriousness and necessity of the task that has been given to her.

She can do this. She's always been an adaptable pilot, and it's not like she actually needs to use His Highness's frame to its full capacity.

She's still a little jealous of Andrea Farnese, since all he has to do is actually pilot. She'll have to use weaponry, which is tougher.

But then again, that's an honor too, since the weapons were His Highness's field of expertise, while his lady, C.C., was the one to pilot the Gawain.

"Well, then, this will be an experience," Gino says through the coms. "Never thought there'd come a day when I'd pilot the Lancelot."

"Worried, Sir Weinberg?" she asks.

"Not really," Gino answers. "I mean, I'll never be Sir Kururugi, but the Tristan is a fast frame too. And really, we don't need to be as good as them. We just have to make the Europeans think His Highness is still here."

That's not exactly accurate, since the Lancelot and the Gawain are much too powerful to be relegated to mere decoration. That is why His Highness picked the three best pilots he knew to pilot the frames in his absence and that of his knight and his lady.

"It's quite an unusual strategy," Sir Farnese comments, somewhat sedately. He's too good of a soldier to actually question His Highness's decision outright, but he's still taken aback by the approach, even days after their conversation.

"I hear he's always been hands on when it comes to leadership," Gino replies. "And really, considering what we've heard of Zero, is it so out of character?"
"I suppose not," Sir Farnese agrees. Monica suspects that, like her, he is more than ready to prove where his true loyalties lie. "How did they even bypass the blockade at the front?"

"I don't actually know," Monica replies. That's not precisely true. She suspects it has something to do with the strange abilities His Highness, Sir Kururugi and the lady C.C. have been granted by the human experimentation they were subjected to. But Andrea doesn't know that part of the story, and she has no intention of enlightening him. "I expect he has experience with this sort of situation. He must've had to do similar things when he led the Black Knights, as Zero."

The conversation dies as the dots signaling their approaching enemies appear on the electronic map. _Here we go_, Monica thinks to herself.

In the seat in front of her, Sir Farnese launches the Gawain forward. Monica doesn't allow herself to doubt any longer. Instead, she clutches the controls of the powerful knightmare and focuses on the battle alone.

She is not His Highness and cannot hope to use the Druid Systems of the Gawain, but the other weaponry? Yes, she can do that, and so much more.

The Europeans have amassed an impressive amount of forces in the little time they've had at their disposal, but the aircrafts are sitting ducks to the Hadron Cannon. The powerful beam sweeps over the skies like a blade of pure, vengeful fire.

On the other side of the battlefield, Gino Weinberg is already engaged in combat, having already destroyed a fair amount of Panzer Hummels. Idly, he thinks that Suzaku would've probably gone through far more by now, but he's long ago surpassed any feeling of inferiority complex he may have had when comparing himself to his friend.

Most importantly, he thinks he's doing a fairly good job, even if the Lancelot feels alien to him. This version isn't actually as fast as future versions he's fought, which is a good thing, because if it had been, he would probably have far more trouble with it. They'll win this one, and the Europeans will be none the wiser as to the fact that the true enemy is hiding within their midst.

It's not perfect, he knows. They don't have nearly enough troops to truly hold back the Europeans on all the sides of the front. But they don't have to. All they have to do is stall, long enough for His Highness to succeed in his mission.

It's funny, he thinks as he blows up another tank, how things keep repeating themselves. Once upon a time, Lelouch used this kind of strategy to challenge a FLEIJA missile and take over Damocles. Now, it is the EU he is facing.

He won then, at a time when Gino stood on the opposing side and nearly got Suzaku killed. Gino refuses to accept this second battle will end in anything other than victory. They've come too far to be thwarted by Europia United.

In Japan, Rolo vi Britannia hugs his twin sister goodbye and mounts the transport that will lead him to his brother. Orange gives Sayoko her last instructions. Diethard is already on board, more than ready for his next mission.

The Black Knights watch the departing vessel with a heavy heart. They do not actually know what Zero has in mind, but whatever it is, they suspect it is much too dangerous for their leader to face without them.

They should have never left.
The 'would-be rebels' mentioned in 'Takahiro's part are basically the main characters in the OVAs, Naruse Yukiya, Kosaka Ayano and Sayama Ryou. I'm sorry, but they are, in fact, deceased. Canonically, Lelouch does in fact know how to play the piano. Him having a good singing voice is sort of based on his English voice actor also being a singer. All the names of both the aliases and the OCs are inspired from the various seiyuuus and voice actors of Lelouch, Suzaku and C.C. They will probably never read this (which I think may be a good thing LOL), but here is my nod to: Suzaku actors: Takahiro Sakurai (JP adult), Akeno Watanabe (JP child), Yuri Lowenthal (ENG), Davide Perino (IT), Konrad Bosherz (GER) Lelouch: Jun Fukuyama (JP adult), Sayaka Ohara (JP child), Johnny Yong Bosch (ENG), Thierry Bourdon (FR), Manuel Meli (IT), Nico Slabik (GER) C.C.: Yukana Nogami (JP), Kate Higgins (ENG), Alessia Amendola (IT), Antje von der Ahe (GER) Thank you for bringing these characters to life in all of their versions! Thank you to everyone who was not included as well!
Chapter Notes

Happy Ao3 birthday to me! My account is officially three years old (or will be in a few hours)! Thank you to everyone who's left comments, kudos etc. on any of my works so far.
That being said - some important notes for this chapter. PLEASE READ!
TRIGGER WARNING: Anyone with a negative, personal experience regarding terrorist activities may be uncomfortable with content depicted here. For more specific, slightly spoilery warnings, scroll down to the end. If you are unsure, do check.
Also note, next chapter will probably be somewhat similar in tone. I will be posting a summary of the two once I wrap up the whole thing, for the benefit of the people who choose to skip them.
And finally, author is not Lelouch. I took plenty of liberties in terms of strategy and the like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two weeks later

Evening has fallen over Paris. C.C. sits in a little bistro in front of her apartment block taking a sip of her coffee, a barely touched cake in front of her.

She's not really looking forward to much of what will happen tonight, but she understands why it is necessary. All of them understand, and they understand that sacrifices need to be made so that their plan, the world they want to build, can rise up from the ashes of the old one.

Anne Amendola is currently telling her a story about one of the historical buildings located in their neighborhood. C.C. listens with half an ear and nods in the appropriate places. She doesn't really need the information, not anymore, not now that everything is in place, but she has to keep up the facade until the right moment.

"We should perhaps head back," C.C. says once the woman finishes her tale. "It's fairly late, and I have an early morning tomorrow."

"Yes, of course, dear," Anne says. "Still thinking of looking into a job?"

"Yes, actually. I have a few prospects. I don't actually need the money, but having an occupation would be nice."

They pay for their coffees and snacks and head back. C.C. still weaving a tale about the supposed jobs she wants to look into. It's all a lie, of course. While at this point in her life, she's qualified to do most anything, all of the jobs she mentioned are beneath her, and only one role is suited to her future. That of Britannian empress.

Secretly, C.C. smiles. She's starting to sound like Lelouch. How amusing.

As if responding by her words, the advertisement on the massive screen on a nearby building dies in a crackle of static. Seconds later, a new image takes its place. It is the very familiar image of the
terrorist Zero—although there is one significant difference.

"Citizens of the United Republic of Europia," Lelouch says from the video, "I am Zero."

It's a proclamation very similar to the one Lelouch made upon his return to Area 11, when she was the one wearing the costume in his stead. This is not Japan, but the name still draws just as much attention.

Everybody stops to stare at the screen. "Zero? What the hell?"

"How could he be transmitting here?"

"I thought he was in Japan, wasn't he?"

"Wait... He's not wearing his helmet! Why?"

For the purpose of this conversation, Lelouch has indeed discarded his helmet. He's still wearing the Zero suit, but his face is in shadow. They have decided on this approach for the very simple reason of making sure Lelouch's disguise here in Paris doesn't fall before it has to.

It's always been a little amusing to C.C. that nobody ever realized Zero was Lelouch, considering the fact that the helmet didn't have a voice modifier. But Lelouch has always been good at modulating his voice, to the point of sounding like an entirely different person in and out of the mask.

It is why he can afford to walk around as Thierry Perino as Lelouch vi Britannia gives his speech. Nobody will ever make the connection between the soft-spoken pianist and the overwhelmingly powerful Britannian prince. This time, it will be no different.

Either way, mask or no mask, the simple introduction has already grabbed the attention of the French, as C.C. already knew it would. "Most of you may have heard of me," Lelouch continues. "Perhaps, you may identify me as a terrorist. But that is not what I am.

"I am a freedom fighter. My goal has always been the true liberation of people from oppression. For this purpose, I took up arms against Britannia at a time when it was led by the corrupt. But now, thing have changed.

"Now, when Britannia is rebuilding, when we finally have a chance to return to our former glory, our great nation is being attacked by your foolish, selfish leaders. I will not allow it."

By now, the Parisian citizens are increasingly confused. Anne is no different.

"Why would Zero truly care about what happens to Britannia?" she asks. "They're allies now, but this seems... a little much."

C.C. shrugs. "Maybe he's worried about what will happen if Britannia loses the war. I'm sure he'll explain."

He does. "Perhaps you find this hypocritical," Lelouch says. "I assure you it is not. As much as Japan is my adopted country, Britannia too is my home, and I fully intend to protect it, as is my prerogative, that of Lelouch vi Britannia."

By C.C. side, Anne is gaping. "Lelouch vi Britannia? A Britannian prince? I didn't know there was anyone left except Cornelia, Euphemia and Schneizel."

"Apparently, we were wrong," C.C. says. "But... Come to think of it... There was a Lelouch, years
back. He was said to have died in the invasion of Japan."

"That's right. I remember now. The commoner empress's son. He must've been in hiding all these years."

It's very useful that Anne is so good at history. This way, C.C. herself won't have to say everything outright, which might plant some kind of suspicion in the minds of the civilians.

She isn't exactly sure if her conversation with Anne really has any effect, but it doesn't matter. Comments are already flying left and right about what Lelouch is saying.

"Wait, what? Zero is a Britannian prince? No way!"

"It has to be a lie!"

"Zero worked against Britannia!"

"But he was their ally after the attack in Pendragon!"

"What is going on?"

Lelouch has already anticipated all the questions, as he has most of the events that will happen tonight. "As Zero, and as Prince Lelouch vi Britannia, I am here to deliver a warning," he says. "I will not allow the borders of my homeland to be trespassed upon. I will not allow innocent Britannians citizens to suffer any further. And I will enact punishment onto anyone who attempts this."

The sound of a distant explosion makes everybody cry out. In the video, Lelouch makes an extravagant gesture with his hand. "Do you hear that? It is the beginning of our retaliation. The knightmare factory located fifteen kilometers from Paris has just gone up in flames."

On the video, his image is replaced by that of a burning building. The knightmare factory. It really is kind of funny how easy it was for such a facility to be infiltrated when the right people are involved.

The video flashes back to Lelouch. "Be advised, this is only the beginning. Should your leaders not desist in their foolish attempt at attacking Britannia, the next target will be Paris itself."

Just like that, the crowd erupts in a panic.

"Paris? You've got to be kidding me."

"He can't possibly mean it, can he?"

"The Britannians can't reach us here, right?"

"He destroyed the knightmare factory! That's already here!"

"Mommy, I'm scared!"

Lelouch's own voice rings out above all of them, as powerful and intimidating as thunder. "Do you hear me, General Smilas? I know your corrupt heart and your ambition. But Britannia stands as strong as it has ever been. Repent, or I will make you pay the price. In blood. You have ten minutes."

The video ends with that terrifying comment. As soon as Lelouch's image vanishes, C.C. grabs Anne's arm and pulls her toward their building. "Catherine, what do we do?" the woman asks as
they rush through the crowded streets.

"We need to run. That man is serious, I can tell. Britannia never makes idle threats. The city isn't safe."

Technically, it would be more sensible for civilians to take cover indoors as such a time. But apartment buildings don't provide much help against rioting or bombs. Anne seems to know this, because as soon as she and C.C. reach their destination, she rushes to alert the others. In her own apartment, C.C. grabs her previously prepared bag, pulls on a pair of more practical shoes—she will need them—and makes sure her wig is in place and will not fall off.

Like Lelouch said, this is only the beginning.

In their past lifetime, Lelouch's—or better said, Julius Kingsley's—approach started out somewhat similarly. It amounted to a bluff—the supposed existence of the Ark Fleet—that triggered a rebellion in Paris through the faked destruction of a powerplant in the North Sea. In the gathering chaos, the European front fell apart, and Julius ordered for Euro-Britannian forces to push forward.

Ironically, at the time, Shin Hyuga Shaing happily supported Julius's idea, while all the other Grandmasters of Euro-Britannia openly rejected it. But of course, that was because said plan would've caused a huge amount of civilian casualties, something that suited Shaing perfectly well.

In the end, none of it truly came to fruition. Julius's whole personality hinged on two things—obeying a man Lelouch despised and forgetting Nunnally and Marianne. As such, Lelouch broke through Charles's conditioning, although not completely. Later, Lelouch and Suzaku were captured by Shaing, who'd taken over Euro-Britannia. Leila Malcal helped calm down the Parisian citizens. In the aftermath, Shaing was killed, and reinforcements from the homeland made sure the situation was stabilized.

This time, the status quo is drastically different. Now, Britannia is at its weakest. Shaing has already done far more damage than he did in the past lifetime. Euro-Britannia doesn't benefit from the same forces Julius had at his disposal during their first lifetime.

As such, a simple bluff would not suffice to call back the armies of Europia and stall Gene Smilas's ambitions. It would not be enough to make sure Britannia remains safe from invasion, and definitely not enough to iron Lelouch's name in the hearts and minds of the whole world.

Outside, screaming has already started. By the time the ten minutes have passed, the chaos is already beginning to spread.

C.C. and her neighbors burst out of the building just as the screen flares to life for a second time. "I see your general refuses to listen," Lelouch proclaims. "So be it."

At the same time, both military bases in the city are struck by bombs identical to the one that destroyed the knightmare factory. It's not enough to cripple Paris's defenses completely, but it was as much as they could manage, in the short time they had at their disposal.

Elsewhere, explosions rock the Pantheon, sending the beautiful structure up in flames and destroying hundreds of years of culture in an instant. The capital city of Europia United is under siege, and all bets are off.

"I am not without compassion," Lelouch says in the video. "I will give you some time to consider your options. The next attack will be within twenty minutes."

The panic that erupts after that is unprecedented. People are going crazy. Rumors are already flying,
claiming that the aristocrats are leaving the city and abandoning the citizens to die at Britannia's hands.

C.C. knows for a fact that these rumors are no coincidence.

Fires erupt all over the arrondissements. This time, they aren't even caused by Lelouch, but by the French themselves.

The French authorities have started to dispatch the riot police. At this point, they will probably be attempting to use non-lethal means to attempt to calm the crowd. But between the escalating panic and the damage already done to the military still in the city, it's very likely that the riot police will soon start feeling overwhelmed. So far, so good.

"We have to take cover somewhere!" C.C. shouts at her neighbors. "The catacombs! The Britannians won't think to attack us, and we can make our way there through the sewers."

Anne nods. "That's a good idea, Catherine." She's trying to seem calm, but her eyes are wide with dread. "Let's go."

Of course, that's a little easier said than done, since C.C.'s group isn't exactly full of incredibly athletic people. There are children and plenty of elderly, and even the younger people have no experience with any kind of conflict. Some others join them as they pass.

They follow C.C. like sheep, without realizing where she is actually leading them.

Truth be told, she is in fact heading toward an entrance to the sewers and going around the fires that have already started. But she also has another plan, and she is also guided by something entirely different.

Her code speaks to her and tells her exactly where she has to go. She and the others veer onto a smaller street, and a group of French policemen appear in their path.

One of them steps forward, already bringing up his pistol. "Stop!" he shouts in French. "Put your hands up!"

His accent is impeccable, no sign of his Japanese ancestry in his voice. Those years he spent as Zero are coming in handy after all.

C.C. complies with the request, lifting her arms in a sign of harmlessness. "We're not armed! Please, let us pass."

His hands are shaking on the gun and C.C. suspects that, at least, is completely genuine. But they've come too far, and she trusts him to do the right thing and keep his promise, just like Lelouch trusted him the first time around, during the Requiem she still hated.

"We're only trying to find shelter," she adds.

His colleagues are watching the scene, but as expected, they do nothing to stop it. They probably don't think that one of their own would use lethal force against an unarmed civilian.

They are wrong.

C.C. takes a step forward. "Please," she says again, "we—"

She never manages to finish the phrase. "Stop!" the man shouts again, and presses the trigger, aiming
straight for her heart.
The world goes black, and C.C. knows no more.

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As soon as the dark-haired woman goes down, dead, the crowd explodes in a frenzy.

"He's killed her! He's killed Catherine!"

"Bastard! Traitor!"

By Suzaku's side, one of the true members of the riot police makes a grab for him. "What are you doing, man?"

Suzaku hits him with the butt of his pistol and dashes to the side. The others have no time to grab him. He's too fast, and the civilians are already rushing forward, furious.

Of course, the civilians are also at a wild disadvantage, since they're in no way equipped for street combat. But they don't have to be. Everything and anything can become a weapon. And truthfully, Suzaku's goal in this instance is not to have the civilians win any kind of battle.

He makes his escape from the scene, still feeling nauseated and dizzy at what he was just forced to do. He knows it was necessary, and he knows C.C. will be all right, but that doesn't make it any better.

He stops briefly to discard his uniform and change into his Takahiro disguise. As he does so, he can't help but steal a look at his pendant.

Rakshata has modified it since the last time he's had it. It now contains two sets of coordinates and heartbeats. It was mostly insurance. The code keeps both C.C. and Lelouch safe.

But in an unstable situation like this, anything can go wrong, and it's not entirely out of the question for C.C. and Lelouch to get stuck somewhere. They don't have his physical strength, so if something goes wrong, he's supposed to extract them.

So far, it seems unnecessary. C.C.'s heart has already restarted and she's on the move, and Lelouch's pulse is steady. No problems then.

The pendant anchors him, and Suzaku's head stops spinning. He berates himself for the moment of weakness and focuses on the plan. He still has a lot to do.

Now completely focused, Suzaku heads back toward the ghettos, jumping through fire escapes and over roof tops. He reaches his destination in record time. Almost instantly, he is intercepted by Yukana, Sayaka and Jun. "Where have you been, boy?" Yukana asks in a chastising tone. "We thought you were caught in the riot."

"I managed to stay out of it. But it's bad, Yukana-san. I hear the French are killing their own."

All the color drains out of Sayaka's face. "Do you suppose... They'd come here?"

"I don't know," Suzaku replies. "I'm not sure." A huge lie, but it's not the first, or the last he will say.

"Is it true then?" Jun asks. "Is this... the Britannians? Zero?" Apparently, news has reached them of what is happening, but they may not have witnessed everything personally.
Suzaku nods. "I saw the transmission myself. This is a retaliation against the Europeans currently attacking Britannia." He pauses, as if considering the situation. "I don't think he'd attack the ghettos, though. He's on our side, right? So maybe we should just barricade ourselves here and stay out of it. And just in case, make sure the women and children can evacuate."

This is an approach the refugees embrace. But of course, Suzaku thinks as he watches them attempt to secure what little they have left, it is not one that is meant to last.

Less than ten minutes after his arrival, groups of armed French riot police converge upon the ghettos. After all, if Lelouch vi Britannia is Zero, where else could he be hiding except here? Who else could he have used as his tools but the Elevens?

Fortunately, the Japanese are not wholly without resources. As it turns out, Naruse Yukiya was a bit of an explosives enthusiast, and Jun still has access to some of the things Naruse left behind.

It's really not very difficult for Suzaku to extract himself from his group. "I'll buy time for you to escape," he says.

"We can't just leave you!" Sayaka tells him, her eyes swimming in tears.

"Don't be stupid. I'm not fast enough." He points to his leg, which is presumably maimed from a previous injury. "I'll slow you down."

Sayaka sobs, but doesn't deny this. Yukana hugs Suzaku and kisses his forehead. "Stupid boy. I'll miss you."

Suzaku says nothing back. He breaks the embrace and nods at Jun. "Take care of them, Jun-san. Go."

Jun seems in physical pain as he accepts this, obviously realizing that he has no choice. He guides them toward the side exit that leads into the sewers, leaving the young Takahiro to his fate.

As they depart, Suzaku smirks. His head is already clearing from his earlier episode and his Geass command flares at the back of his mind. It is time to do some real damage.

****

"The riot police is shooting at civilians!"

"Bastards! Kill them, kill them all!"

In front of the bar where Lelouch works, the anger has reached such extents Lelouch doesn't even have to fuel it further. Apparently, it didn't take long at all for Suzaku's actions to have an effect, and Paris has practically exploded with the righteous fury of its betrayed citizens.

As expected, nobody has made the connection between him and the Britannian prince who just threatened their lives, but then, how could they? His arrival may have been fairly recent, but he's managed to ingratiate himself into their midst well enough.

Lelouch joins in, because presumably, as soft-spoken as he might be, he still feels grief over the loss of his fiancée. "We can't let them get away with this. We have to make them pay."

He doesn't have to say much more or hold elaborate speeches. A huge crowd has already amassed around him, and they are already furious. Slowly, but surely, they make their way through the city. Few of them have firearms, but those who do take up the lead and do not hesitate to press the trigger,
which, naturally, just escalates the matter.

So far, there have been attempts at calming the crowd with gas, but with the civilians resorting to such weaponry, it's really unsurprising that the riot police quickly turns harsher as well.

In the chaos, Lelouch steals a look at his clock when no one is paying attention. Just ten more seconds until the twenty minutes deadline. Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four... Three... Two... One.

The video with his own image appears again on numerous screens across the city. "Twenty minutes have passed. Your leaders have shown no sign of yielding to my demands. I, in turn, am forced to show no mercy."

In the distance, the Basilica of the Sacre-Coeur explodes.

In Lelouch's group, the panic and fury blazes even brighter. "What do we do?" Konrad asks, his voice strangled. "They won't stop! He won't stop!"

"We have to get the aristocrats!" someone else shouts. "Drag them out of their hiding, give them to the Britannians. Maybe it'll help!"

Look at that. Lelouch didn't even have to make that suggestion himself. He loves it when he's right.

Of course, his theory goes more along the line of the Britannian ranks folding due to the very simple fact that many of Smilas's superior ranks will probably have family, wives and children here. They will naturally want to protect them. But anyway, whatever reasoning works for these people works for him.

There's only one problem with that—the rumor he himself has spread that the aristocrats are leaving the city.

"Are they even still here?" he asks. "Maybe we should go for the embassies instead. The other states will want to protect their own people, and they wouldn't have had time to leave yet."

The idea seems to make sense to the rest of the group, and they all happily embrace having a target.

In the end, it's the security of the German embassy that kills Thierry Perino. He dies while trying to protect his former boss, Manuel, from gunfire. By the time he wakes up, the street around him is already littered with bodies.

Shielded by the smoke and hidden by the debris, he makes his way out of the street, into a nearby alley. That's where C.C. finds him, minutes later. "Lelouch?"

"Here. Everything go okay?"

"Yes. Suzaku was perfect. Although obviously not happy with it."

Lelouch grimaces. That was unfortunate, but to be expected. "We'll make it up to him."

"Mhmm. I keep saying I want a vacation to Australia, but it doesn't look like we'll get it anytime soon."

"Eventually, witch. Eventually."

As they chat, both he and C.C. change into the more inconspicuous clothing she prepared beforehand. Suzaku finds them shortly after that. He's breathing hard and covered in blood, but
otherwise unscathed. C.C. wipes his face and presses a brief kiss to his lips. "Good job."

"Thanks," Suzaku says with a smile. "I have to say, blowing up Frenchmen was far more enjoyable than that first bit."

Lelouch smiles bitterly. He understands Suzaku very well. This is bringing back some unpleasant memories for him too. He remembers a different time, when he made a similar plan, intended to motivate not the French, but the Japanese. The first Black Rebellion cost him Euphie, Suzaku, Nunnally, and his mind, his memories.

Even so, it was a good plan, in its own way. Maybe, if he had stuck to his first option, if he'd commanded Euphie to shoot him like he originally planned, he wouldn't have stumbled into the SAZ massacre to begin with.

In any case, he had encountered success during the Black Rebellion battles itself, and later, in his work as Julius Kingsley. At this point, he is not beneath taking advantage of past experience to make sure everything goes as planned. Of course, civilian casualties are to be expected, but Lelouch has no desire for it to turn into an identical reenactment of the past either, so they will be doing some damage control. Excessive casualties among the civilians would look very bad, and it would damage his image as Zero.

Yes, for this to work, he will have to destroy and create all over again, be both a destroyer and a Mesiah. Somehow, he will manage it. He must, if he wants to keep his new vow.

For the moment, whatever else happens, the blow to the Europeans will be devastating, and it will be worth the sacrifices Lelouch has to make for them. Besides, he's done far worse during the Requiem. One city is nothing compared to the rivers of blood he and Suzaku spilled in the first timeline.

C.C. passes Suzaku a change of clothes, and as Suzaku gets undressed, Lelouch decides to contact his Britannian subordinates. The Knight of Twelve reports things are going as expected on the front. "Keep to pattern Sigma-Alpha-Delta, Lady Krushevsky," Lelouch tells her. "They're not liable to give up just yet."

"I understand, Your Highness."

He checks up with Rolo, Orange and Shaing, who all report that are in position and everything is in order. Satisfied, Lelouch turns his attention back to Paris.

By now, the situation has escalated to almost epic proportions. When the tanks start to spill into the streets, Lelouch isn't surprised in the slightest. It probably only took them as long as it did because of Lelouch's earlier attack on the military bases.

He can't see any helicopters or other kinds of air transports, but they will undoubtedly follow. And the very first target will undoubtedly be the Japanese ghettos, where the fighting still appears to be going strong.

It is time for the three of them to intervene once again.

The tanks are slow, if scary, and it's not exactly easy to direct one through the streets of Paris. He, C.C. and Suzaku make their way toward the most easily accessible one. Lelouch presses his hand to the metal and forces his code to work, much like C.C. once did to Suzaku in Narita.

The method is wildly successful. Inside the machine, the pilots flail and start to scream. They lose control of the powerful guns, and the projectiles fly straight into the tank in front of them.
Elsewhere, C.C. repeats the process on a different group.

The unharmed pilots don't know what to do and don't understand why their own people are shooting at them. The only thing they can distinguish through the coms is incoherent screaming.

In one particular tank, the French soldiers are so distracted they are completely taken by surprise when the hatch of their vehicle is forced open. A figure clad in a uniform very similar to theirs slides into the tank. Within seconds, said figure has appropriated the tank for his own purposes. There is nothing Suzaku Kururugi cannot pilot. A French tank is not an exception.

A half an hour has almost passed since the last explosion. Soon, the moment will come for the next blow on Gene Smilas. In the meantime, it's time to make sure the Japanese citizens of Paris are safe— and with them, Zero's name and reputation.

Chapter End Notes

CONTENT IN THIS CHAPTER includes: destruction of iconic monuments, civilian death, explosions, rioting, massive destruction involving the city of Paris. I know this has unpleasant connotations, but it could not be helped. This is, after all, a CG story, and despite all the memes, CG is indeed a show about terrorism. The anime never went into specific detail on everything Lelouch actually did in the Requiem period, but this level of violence was, at the very least, needed, and I had to include it.
Checkmate

Chapter Notes

You guys are amazing! When I started writing this, I did not expect it to hit 1500 kudos. Of course, I also did not expect for it to be so long - but well, that's also in part because you guys are amazing! *tackle hugs fans. Here - have a nice and long chapter as a reward!
That being said:
As in the previous chapter: TRIGGER WARNING for activities involving terrorism, violence etc. I will post of summary of both this chapter and the last one for those who have bad experiences and chose to skip them. Stay safe and have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On the frontlines, Gene Smilas is watching the developments in Paris in disbelief. He cannot understand what is happening. How could Lelouch vi Britannia be in Paris, if he has been fighting him and his knight for the past two weeks?

Is this the power of Geass? But if so, how is he supposed to stop it?

Lelouch vi Britannia has mostly stuck to bombing military installations and touristic buildings, but that doesn’t help them much. Gene has been receiving reports of the furious Parisian mob heading toward the Elysee Palace, and the embassies have been under siege for a while now. Somehow, the rioters have already managed to break into the Netherlands embassy, and it can only get worse from here.

Predictably, his so-called superiors are panicking. Gene is almost grateful that the footage on his video link with them is grainy due to whatever technology Lelouch vi Britannia is using to transmit his message. At the very least, it means these idiotic policians may not realize how much he despises them for their cowardice.

"Smilas!" the first president barks at him. "Do something! Stop this disaster."

He's long since left Paris, ever since the first bombings started, but like Gene, he knows this is very bad. Unfortunately, he has no useful ideas to add to the debate.

"And what do you suggest?" Gene asks. "Bending to the whims of the Britannian prince? That's unacceptable."

"Nothing on how he could be accomplishing this?" the Minister of Foreign Affairs asks.

Normally, Gene would have appreciate Gandolfi's question. At least making the inquiry is more productive than outright panic. Unfortunately, in this instance, it just makes matters worse.

"Parisian security has failed to track down his collaborators," he replies. "They've targeted the Eleven ghettos, but they're encountering resistance."

Stupid sheep. Who the hell even came up with the idea of allowing Elevens in Paris?

"How does that even help us?" the second president asks, frowning fiercely. "It's the rioters who are
the problem, and your own security, who is apparently killing them."

Gene has a possible explanation for that. There is no way French riot police would've randomly
started killing civilians. Even under such conditions, they would be more inclined to use other, kinder
methods.

He very much suspects Geass is in some way involved. But he can't exactly tell these idiots that.
They'd just think he is crazy.

"At this time, it is impossible to address that. We will certainly find the reason why the civilians were
targeted at a later date, but only after order has been reestablished can we hope to accomplish this."

"Accomplish something then!" the third president snaps at him. "This cannot go on. At this rate, the
whole city will come down."

"I understand. There is only one thing we can do now. Retaliate in turn."

They aren't happy with that approach, but neither do they have another solution. As such, they do
nothing when he gives the order to push forward onto the Euro-Britannian front and to deploy
stronger measures against the Elevens.

Let Zero counter that, if he can.

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"Nippon banzai!"

Jun lunges at one of the Frenchmen who've converged upon the ghettoes. He's armed with only a
pocketknife, but his goal here is not to survive. Like Takahiro—that poor boy—he must buy enough
time for the others to escape.

Parts of the ghettoes open into the sewers, which the women and children can use to make their
escape. But running wouldn't help them any if the trained troops of the French came after them. Yes,
Jun has to buy time, so that at least some of them can survive.

"Filthy Eleven!" the Frenchman in front of him shouts. He points his gun at Jun, ready to shoot. Jun
is faster. He manages to shove his way past the soldier's guard, push his weapon aside and bury his
blade in the man's gut.

The body armor the Frenchman is wearing takes the brunt of the blow, but it's still enough to distract
him, allowing Jun to disarm him. After that, it's easy for Jun to blow the Frenchman's brains out with
his own rifle.

It doesn't help much. There are more soldiers converging upon him, and he's forced to duck behind a
piece of debris to avoid the same fate he delivered onto the first Frenchman. Around him, people he's
known for years are being killed, doing their best to fight back, but wildly at a disadvantage.

It's like the invasion of Japan all over again, when the knightmares streamed in, mowing down
everything its path. And the worst thing is that it's not just Britannia at fault. It is also Zero, who was
apparently a Britannian prince all along.

Despite not knowing him, Jun did previously believe that Zero's intentions were good regarding
Japan, that he meant to protect them. But he is no fool, and he knows very well that if Zero had no
identified himself using that moniker in the video that he has transmitted through the city, the
Japanese wouldn't have been targeted.
As far as Jun is concerned, Zero has betrayed them. If he ever gets out of this one alive, Jun will save a special bullet, just for Lelouch vi Britannia. Of course, it doesn't seem like he has much of a chance to accomplish that. The French have brought more than foot soldiers. They've brought armored trucks and all kinds of weaponized vehicles that Jun can't hope to reach. And now, they are bringing tanks.

One of said vehicles is only few feet away from him. Jun sees it much too late to attempt to take cover.

A projectile strikes the tank before it can attempt to target Jun, and Jun finds himself gaping in awe as a second tank destroys the very first.

As Jun watches, a dark-clad figure emerges from inside. "Go back!" he shouts in Japanese. "Go back into the ghettos."

He's very young, and unfamiliar to Jun. He doesn't really look Japanese, but Jun can't really tell from the distance. A half maybe? It doesn't matter, because there's something about him that Jun cannot help but trust.

Still, he isn't sure how to accomplish the request from the dark-haired young man, since the way into the ghettos is blocked. On the other hand, the tide of the battle seems to have turned. Around him, the screaming escalates. The French are dying in spades. Jun gets a single glimpse of someone driving a sword into the back of a Frenchman, straight through his body armor, but he almost thinks he has imagined it, because the mysterious attacker vanishes mere seconds later.

Out of nowhere, a woman appears by Jun's side. "Come on. Come with me."

She's dressed in dark clothes, and is wearing a hat in a valiant attempt to hide her surreally colored green hair. Despite the circumstances, Jun cannot help but think that she is the most beautiful woman he's seen in his life.

Just as he thinks this, Lelouch vi Britannia's voice echoes through the streets, like a sentence. "How disgraceful. You have chosen to not only ignore my demands, but turn against your own people. Truly, your lust for power knows no bounds. To make matters worse, you've dared to target innocent Japanese citizens. I will not let this trespass go unpunished."

The sound of yet another massive explosion rocks the city. Jun is lucky enough to be facing the right direction and see its effect.

Several powerful explosions rock the Eiffel Tower. The iconic metal structure creaks in protest, then comes crashing down like a castle of cards.

There is a moment in which everyone can only watch in horrified fascination. Even Jun, for whom the tower holds no special emotional significance, is shocked. Is this really happening?

"You will command all military forces to withdraw out of Paris and cease hostilities on the civilians," Lelouch vi Britannia says. At this point, Jun isn't even sure how he is managing to transmit his message. "Otherwise, the consequences will be far more extreme."

The French panic, the sight of the falling tower discombobulating them to such an extent that they cannot continue their attack on the ghettos. "Retreat! Retreat, now!" Jun hears them shout.

The riot police scatters in every direction, some in cars, others on foot. Meanwhile, a group of tanks
plant themselves in front of the ghettos. The young man from before reappears. "Go back inside," he says once again. "You have my word that no one will harm you again."

That is when Jun recognizes him. He didn't know how he missed the similarity between the two voices before. It's him. It's Lelouch vi Britannia. "Zero?"

Every single one of the surviving Japanese all turn to stare at the Britannian prince. "Yes," the young man says, his voice perfectly level. "It's me. I am Zero, Prince Lelouch vi Britannia."

"But..." someone else stammers. "The video... The explosions... How are you here?"

"I've been in the city all night. You didn't think I'd abandon you to the French, did you?"

Something inside Jun snaps at the comment. "The French would've never targeted us if you hadn't practically painted a target on our backs!" he shouts.

He's already lifting his gun, furious. Before he can attempt to shoot, someone else steps in. Another young man relieves him of his gun and says, "Jun-san. Don't."

Jun doesn't have time to be angry at having lost his weapon. He's too shocked upon recognizing the voice. "Takahiro?"

"Yes and no," the young man replies, fixing Jun with striking green eyes. "My name is Suzaku Kururugi. The Knight of Zero. But yes, you did know me as Takahiro in past weeks."

Jun almost cannot bring himself to believe it. There seems to be very little resemblance between the bold, fit knight in front of him and the maimed Eleven who brought them all cold croissants.

But appearances can sometimes be deceiving, and if Jun forces himself to remove the surface details, he can see it. "Why?" he can't help but ask.

"I apologize for the deception, but the whole point of my presence in the ghettos was to make sure the Japanese here didn't suffer because of the French. Unfortunately, there is only so much that even we can do. We did not expect them to attack their own people, or to be quite so vicious."

Zero had sent his own knight to act as their guard? Why? What was the point of all this?

Jun looks away from Takahiro—or rather, from Suzaku Kururugi—back to Zero. The young man is still facing him unflinchingly. "Jun-san," Lelouch says, "believe it or not, I understand your pain and your anger. Better than anyone. I too have lost family to useless wars. But in spite of that, no, because of that, we must always keep in our minds and in our hearts the goals that we truly fight for. Freedom. Peace.

"What has happened here in Paris tonight isn't truly an attack on Paris itself. It is one directed at the rulers of Europia United. Had I not told them I was Zero, they would not have understood my logic and my threat, or taken it seriously."

"Hate me if you must, but I will do what is necessary to make sure the world is safe. And for the moment, that starts with you getting inside those ghettos and starting to head out to safety."

There's a quiet sort of grief in his eyes, eyes that are too old for someone his age. It is only in that moment that Jun has a dawning realization. To him, Britannia has always been a distant enemy and a threat. For that reason, the explosion in Pendragon only mattered to him insofar as it affected relations between Europia and Japan.
But as he looks at the young man in front of him, the one who raised the banners of revolution when Japan had nothing, he realizes that in Pendragon, Lelouch vi Britannia would've lost countless family and friends.

He can't think of anything to say at his realization, but fortunately, Zero makes it unnecessary. "C.C. will go with you," he adds. "She is my second-in-command and a nurse. She'll help give medical attention to the wounded while Suzaku and I deal with everything else."

The green-haired woman steps up to Jun once again. Jun wonders how he didn't recognize her before. He's seen her in the international broadcasts from Japan, always by Zero's side.

"It's going to be all right," she says softly. Her gold eyes seem to glow, and Jun believes her.

As the woman leads the group of confused Japanese refugees inside, Lelouch vi Britannia and his knight remain outside the ghettoes. Countless have already died, and the night is not yet over.

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The Eiffel Tower has fallen. The building that is the heart and soul of their city has been destroyed, just like that.

Gene stands among his panicking men, furious. It's not out of any kind of patriotism, not really. He knows what Lelouch vi Britannia is doing. He can see it so very clearly, and he hates that it's working so well.

"Remain calm!" he bellows at his subordinates. "We cannot yield to this kind of strategy. That is exactly what they expect us to do."

"But Sir," one of his subordinates protests. "If we continue the battle, the Britannian prince could destroy the whole city."

It's the same argument the third president used before, and it doesn't help in the least bit. Gene grabs the lapel of the man's jacket and glowers at him. "You have your orders," he snaps. "We will fight."

It is not that easy. Until recently, Britannian forces seemed to have been fighting a losing battle. The Gawain and the Lancelot managed to put up a good resistance, but in the end, could not compensate for the inferior numbers of the Britannians. They had too much ground to cover, and were ultimately forced to go their separate ways due to the advancement of reinforcements from the Germans and the British. Even the Swiss—traditionally neutral—had become involved, Europia rallying against Britannia like it never has in the past.

Because of this, before today, Gene was so close to victory he could taste it. But in one single night, all that has gone out the window. Paris is burning and Gene's ranks are falling apart.

If he falters now, if he backs out in front of Lelouch vi Britannia's demands, he will lose everything. He must continue. If he breaks through the Britannian front, the cosmetic damage Lelouch vi Britannia is doing to Paris will not matter.

"You will command all military forces to withdraw out of Paris and cease hostilities on the civilians," Lelouch vi Britannia says. "Otherwise, the consequences will be far more extreme."

Gene refuses to believe him. After all, what could possibly be more extreme than this?

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On the Euro-Britannian front, the fighting has intensified. Monica clutches the controls of the Gawain fiercely, knowing that tonight, the true battle for Britannia, for their future, is being fought.

Things have become increasingly difficult in the past couple of days. She's kept in constant contact with His Highness, communicating the movements of the European troops to him, and his sheer military genius has been shining through in that he's managed to help them despite his physical absence.

But they are stretched thin, and they all know it. Tonight is the night when everything will be decided.

She feels completely unafraid. She knows that if His Highness's plan fails, she will die here, but she doesn't have a problem with that. Besides, she trusts him. She knows that somehow, he will pull through for them.

It starts just as His Highness said it would. The attacks in Paris make the Europeans on the front even more virulent, desperate. Monica holds her own, limiting the use of the Hadron to make sure they have enough energy to last until His Highness needs them to.

Andrea Farnese is proving to be of great help. They've learned to work well together, and his piloting skills guarantee the fact that they won't get hit, even if she is forced to resort to the less flashy weaponry in the Gawain.

They don't speak. Too much is at stake to waste time on conversation.

His Highness contacts them only once, making sure everything is going as planned. Monica is happy to confirm that this is indeed the case.

She is even happier when the transmission of the Eiffel Tower hits the soundwaves.

She doesn't see it, not immediately, of course, but the technicians in the G1 base do, and they blast it all over the comlinks. "My God. The Eiffel Tower is falling."

Some kind of well-meaning soul comes up with the idea to send them the feed into their knightmares. It should be a distraction. It's really not.

A strange feeling of giddiness bubbles inside Monica as she watches the tower fall. It shouldn't mean as much as it does. It's only a building. But... For her, for everyone who is seeing this, it's much more.

Ever since her father died in Area 14, her whole life has been Britannia. The explosion in Pendragon and her subsequent, if unwilling, betrayal of her homeland has shaken so much of her belief.

His Highness gave some of it back, when he freed her from Shin Hyuga Shaing. And now, he has given them this.

The French were the ones to rob them of their original home. They were the ones who sent their ancestors into exile, forcing them to live into the colonies. The bitter taste of that humiliation is something none of them have forgotten. Even if Monica wasn't alive at the time, that knowledge, that anger, remains, hammered into her with the decision to never allow such a thing to happen again.

It is something that is ingrained into their very being, down to the marrow of their bones. It is an anger that still stands at the basis of their fight for domination. They have sworn an oath, to never again to be forced to bow down to the might of another the way they were forced to in the past. And this oath came very close to being broken. Because of them.
After all, the weapon that was used to destroy Pendragon belonged to the Europeans. Despite the fact that Shaing was the one to actually use it, it is still, in part, the fault of the EU.

Yes, the story has come so close to repeating itself. Monica and her people have come so close to losing everything they've had, their lives, their dignity, but also the pride of their ancestors. In one single night, His Highness has fixed it. In one single night, he has done what no emperor ever could, and has brought the French to their knees.

It is so clear to Monica now. Gino was right during their conversation. Prince Lelouch is the only emperor they can ever serve. His Highness will keep them safe, like he has promised, and together they will prosper.

Britannia is a great nation. Even wounded as they are, they have not been defeated. They never will be, not as long as Lelouch is with them.

"All Hail Britannia! All hail Lelouch!" she roars, and countless voices echo her through the coms.

The panicked European forces cannot hope to fight back against the vicious counterattack of the encouraged Britannians. It is almost too easy.

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Gene grits his teeth in fury as reports fly in of increasing numbers of casualties in several areas of the front. Lelouch and his knight have launched a vicious counter-attack, and Gene's people are falling like flies.

He has only one hope now. The Eastern European front. The Britannians have been unable to completely shield that area. With Cornelia in Africa and Lelouch and Suzaku Kururugi monitoring the borders of what was once Russia, some newer territories of Britannia have been left vulnerable.

He sends word to troops to force their way through the fragile blockade in Belarus. One concentrated effort. He's already been planning to take Slonim back and slowly advancing in the area. Scoring a victory there could turn the tide of this disaster.

All the while, he tries to contact the French riot police, to bring some semblance of order into the capital. He really should have known better than to think Zero would not have another scheme up his sleeve.

In Paris, Lelouch and Suzaku sit together, monitoring the reports they receive. The streets around the ghettos are oddly quiet, but the sound of distant shouting and fighting still reaches them even here. Lelouch mentally adjusts his chessboard and guides his next pieces forward.

His intervention is no longer needed in the Paris rioting. He has other moves to make. Yes, it won't be long now, not long until Europia will fold.

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In Slonim, Jeremiah waits. His Majesty has given him specific instructions on how will things will come to pass, and what he is supposed to do. It's only a matter of time until the Europeans launch their misguided attempt to break through the front.

His men don't feel particularly emboldened by His Majesty's honored name and deeds, but they don't have to be. They are all members of the Code R unit and the Geass Order, all people whom Lelouch placed under his Geass at one point in the past. His Majesty briefly considered bringing the dormant agents from the Chinese Federation as well, but ultimately decided to leave them be, as their presence
would have caused suspicion. This will have to suffice as reinforcements to the existing garrison.

It does. As the European troops start to move in an attempt to push their way through the front lines, Jeremiah shouts, "For my loyalty!" and launches his counter attack. The Siegfried practically shatters every single approaching Panzer Hummel. Behind him, the rest of his troops rally, converging upon the enemy.

No one will be breaking into Euro-Britannia through here. The Knight of Orange will not allow it.

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Rolo hides in the shadowy corner of an alley, carefully monitoring the traffic and the rumors already flying in the busy capital of Austria. He's been in Vienna for roughly a week, ever since he helped smuggle the sakuradite bombs into Europia United. It's been easy to stay under the radar so far, but tonight, he needs to be extra careful. Tonight, his big brother will start changing the world and shape it in his image.

In some ways, he has mixed feelings about being here. He's worried about Nunnally and didn't really want to leave her on her own with only Sayoko—who, while loyal, is not family—and Euphemia, who can never understand. But he doesn't have a choice, and the job he's been given by Lelouch must take precedence.

The Vienna State Opera looms in front of him, the beautiful statues adorning it a reminder of the glorious past of the Austrian nation. It's been very easy to plant the explosives in a location previously indicated to him by Lelouch.

Security is now running right and left, making sure the citizens in Vienna are both safe and unlikely to rebel in case Lelouch vi Britannia chooses to come here. There have been attacks on embassies in Paris, and that only makes everybody nervous.

Fortunately, Vienna is much too big for it to be efficiently searched for explosives in the little amount of time the authorities have at their disposal, and the opera house is nothing if not a good place to hide things that aren't supposed to be there.

While he waits, he keeps an eye on developments from Paris. There is an advertisement screen merely twenty feet away from the Opera. It has been displaying the transmissions from the capital city of the EU and news bulletins ever since the beginning of the attack. Amusingly, his big brother didn't even have to hack into their feed to accomplish this. "The wonders of free press," as Lelouch himself said.

For this reason, Rolo sees the moment when the Eiffel Tower falls. There's something almost poetically beautiful about it. He's always been a tool, a pawn, not a strategist, but even he can see the meaningful nature of the sight.

Around him, the police forces of Vienna tighten ranks. "Be watchful, men," one of the captains shouts. "It doesn't look like the Council is going to fall back anytime soon. If Zero tries the same thing here as he is in Paris, we'll rip him apart."

Good luck with that, Rolo thinks darkly. He's protected his big brother once before from the people who betrayed him. He will very much enjoy demolishing anyone who is his enemy now, in this timeline that is their second chance.

In the end, he doesn't have to intervene using his own, more hands-on skills, as he finally gets the call he's been expecting. "Rolo. You're up."
Rolo doesn't need to be told twice. "Yes, big brother."

He presses the trigger, and just like that the Vienna State Opera goes up in flames. He feels a degree of visceral satisfaction when the same officers who were talking before cry out in dismay.

Elsewhere, Shin Hyuga Shaing receives a similar call and follows Lelouch's commands just as efficiently as Rolo.

Had he still possessed any kind of individual consciousness, he would have probably enjoyed watching the Berlin cathedral burn.

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The panic in Gene's ranks has reached unprecedented proportions. The rioting in Paris is increasing in intensity, all attempts to stop it having proven to be inefficent. At this point, the French themselves have done more damage to their own city than Lelouch vi Britannia has.

Two other bombs have struck Vienna and Berlin. The threat is clear. Paris is only the beginning. There is nothing and no one that is beyond Zero's reach.

Another video is blasted over the hacked frequencies of Europia. It's Lelouch vi Britannia once again. "How sad. Even now, you refuse to admit your defeat."

"I will give you one final chance. No more blood needs to be spilled. Surrender and withdraw your forces." He steps forward, and his face is finally exposed to the light. He is young, but his amethyst eyes are so cold it's terrifying. "You cannot beat me. You cannot stop me. Britannia will never fall to you. Surrender, stop your assault on the Parisian citizens, or I will force you."

In the end, it is Gene's own subordinates that make the choice in his stead. The young lieutenant standing by his side pulls out his pistol and presses it to Gene's temple. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I have family. They may yet be alive, and if there's something I can do to at least give them a chance, I will do it. If I'm arrested for treason later, so be it, but I won't let any more people die."

No one in the control room argues with him. No one tries to stop him. If anything, they agree. "The Britannian prince is right," someone else says. "This is unacceptable."

"Don't be a fool," Gene snaps at his underling. "Surrendering is the last thing we need to do now. Especially not in Paris. If anything, the rebels need to be put down. Send aircrafts. Knightmares. Everything we have."

It's just his bad luck that much of the remaining equipment in the city is not really designed for street combat. The collateral damage of bringing such methods out will be extreme. But he has no choice. Any other alternative will mean leaving Paris to its rioting citizens or to the Britannians, a disaster of unprecedented proportions.

Unfortunately, his plan doesn't go over well with the very jumpy, very angry soldier next to him. Gene doesn't even have time to realize that he pretty much just advocated for the massacre of the Parisian citizens.

His own lieutenant presses the trigger and Gene dies before he can realize his mistake.

It is, perhaps, an anticlimactic ending for someone with ambitions of taking over the world. But Smilas's staff barely spare the body a glance.

Instead, they rush to contact the Britannians, happily agreeing to Lelouch vi Britannia's recent offer.
"We surrender. We'll retreat. General Smilas is dead. Just stop. Stop this."

Lelouch vi Britannia welcomes their agreement. He also later accepts the offer the panicked representatives of the Council of Forty manage to come up with and even offers his assistance in stopping the riots in Paris, all the while emphasizing that he has no intention to turn any of his troops into an occupational force.

Left with no alternative and facing the dramatic rise of the death toll in the capital city, the European Parliament agree. It feels an awful lot like making a deal with the devil, but most of them have already acknowledged the extent of their massive mistake. It is now clear to them that none of them are truly safe from Zero if he wishes it. Their only hope is that Zero's intentions truly are as good as he claims they are, and that he will be able to stop the rioting in a way Parisian officials were unable to.

Maybe if they blame it all on the recently deceased Gene Smilas, they can still find a way to get out of this one unscathed and with a nice and shiny truce with Britannia.

In the early hours of the morning, a new transmission to Paris rings out through the bloodied streets of the once beautiful city. "All hostilities between the EU and Britannia have currently stopped.

"These incidents are truly regrettable, and I am aware that far too many of the people watching this transmission have lost much this night. I will not apologize for those losses, as words are meaningless. Instead, I vow that the culprits behind the needless deaths will be found, tried and punished for their misdeeds.

"That being said, I will not allow for hostilities to continue. Britannia will provide assistance to all wounded civilians, with no exceptions, but until that happens, I will not permit for any more blood to be uselessly spilled. Return to your homes. The war is over."

There is a strange finality in the prince's words that reaches out to the even angriest of hearts. But the speech, while convincing, would've probably not have had the same affect had the Lancelot and the Gawain not appeared in the skies over the European capital.

Twelve hours after the first bomb detonated in the Parisian knightmare facility, Britannian forces are already entering the city—and most people are still not sure how this was accomplished.

Chapter End Notes

Gandolfi is mentioned by Schneizel in the anime as the EU's MFA. More on the exact details of Lelouch's arrangement with the EU - next chapter.
Chapter Notes

Happy birthday Lelouch and happy birthday, Rise of the Unholy Trinity! Can you believe it? One year ago, I first started posting this fic. Thank you to everyone who's left comments and kudos since then! It certainly wouldn't have grown into the mammoth it is now without your encouragement.

Anyway! To celebrate this dual birthday, I will be updating not only Trinity but also Men of Miracles and Once Upon a Time in Britannia. I actually haven't had a lot of time for fanfic lately, but I made an effort for Lelouch, so I hope you like it and celebrate with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning

From her office, Cornelia watches the final transmission Lelouch sent to the French in disbelief. After removing the rebels threatening the safety of Area 18, she's focused on securing the front and was gratified to note that Smilas showed little interest in pushing his way into the African territories of Britannia. For this reason, she hasn't exactly had the chance to monitor what her brother has been doing every single second of today. However, she did get to see the brunt of it and honestly... It is beautiful.

Cornelia has never considered herself as a person who clung to Britannia's past. She followed orders and believed that Britannia needed to advance to the future, as a nation. But despite that, no one—not one Britannian aristocrat—can ever be truly free of the deeply ingrained resentment they still feel over the defeat of their ancestors at the hands of the French, and she is no different.

This new war has left her even angrier. She's aware of the involvement of the Europeans in the explosion in Pendragon. Had they not pushed, she'd have let it go—she's too practical to not see that, as Lelouch pointed out, the real problem is within their own ranks, and it is there that they need to start in order to fix things.

But the Europeans had to go and try to stop even that. It appears that sacking Lelouch on them was precisely the right thing to do.

For once, she is not angry with Lelouch for keeping a lot of his plans a secret. If anything, she finds this unexpected development welcome, like opening a Christmas present. She kind of wishes she were in Paris, just to be able to witness it in person. Undoubtedly, it's quite a sight.

Yes, she thinks as Lelouch speaks, Britannia stands strong. Britannia will not fall. Not now. Not ever. It is their home, and they will return it to glory once more—make it better than it ever was during the reign of their foolish father.

The certainty takes a burden off her shoulders, and for the first time since the disaster in Pendragon, Cornelia finds herself bursting into laughter. The chuckles must have been out of character, because Guilford is alarmed and rushes by her side.
"Your Highness? Is everything all right?"

Upon seeing him, Cornelia makes an instantaneous decision. "Guilford! You know, I've never been better."

She grabs the lapel of her knight's jacket and pulls him close, pressing her body against his. "Although I find that perhaps, I have need of your services."

He's shocked when she crushes their mouths together, which is perhaps unsurprising. They've never been lovers, even if the underlining feeling was always there. But today, Cornelia cannot deny herself. She feels the absurd need to celebrate, and she wants this.

Within seconds, Guilford's shock vanishes, replaced by a far different emotion. He is only too happy to comply.

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On a vessel hovering over European territories, Diethard monitors all frequencies and suppresses the urge to burst into cackling. This... This is precisely what he hoped for when he joined the Black Knights. This perfection is what he saw in Zero, that first night, when Zero freed Suzaku Kururugi.

Everything has been calculated down to the last detail. Zero himself is still in Paris, making sure everything goes as planned. Due to the nature of Zero's intervention in Paris, all the bombs in the French capital are timed, as it was not within their ability to have someone monitor them. However, Zero prepared contingencies for every eventuality—including the discovery of the explosives—and Diethard's job has been to make sure the show runs as smoothly as expected.

He's pulled it off quite well if he does say so himself. There have been attempts from the Europeans at blocking the signal that transmits the video of His Majesty's messages, but Diethard has managed to counter it.

And now, here they are, with Europia United bringing out the white flag of surrender after one sole night. Ah... It's good to be alive.

Zero contacts him shortly after the last transmission. "Well done, Diethard. Everything was timed perfectly."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. It was my pleasure to provide you with assistance. Do you wish for me to land the airship in Paris?"

"No. Monica and Gino will be bringing me backup. In the meantime, I need you to speak with the Black Knights for me."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I've spoken with them a few times already, but have not informed them about your presence in Paris."

"You can go ahead and do that. Let them know about what we discussed beforehand. And tell them I will contact them personally when I get a moment. Unfortunately, I don't have time right now."

It's honestly not very surprising that Zero doesn't have the time or the patience to deal with the Black Knights. He's too busy causing world-changing chaos for that. And since Zero, his knight and C.C. are all out of reach, as are Rolo and Jeremiah, Diethard has to handle the task.

He contacts them as soon as Zero ends the call with him. Kallen Kozuki is the one to appear on his screen first. Other faces are visible around her. Clearly, most of the members of the Black Knights
have been following the events in Paris with interest. "Diethard!" Kallen exclaims. "We were just about to contact you. What is going on? Where is Le... Zero?"

Diethard ignores the mild slip up. "He is currently in Paris, together with C.C. and Sir Kururugi."

"In Paris?" Kallen repeats. "But the rioting... The bombs..."

"I imagine it's not much different from his experience in Japan."

"That is highly inaccurate, Diethard," Tohdoh says. "Even at its peak, our conflict with Britannia, under Zero, never quite reached those levels of uncontrolled violence."

That was true. It was always the Japanese rebels against the Britannian occupational force, and all the battles usually involved knightmares and soldiers—people who tended to follow orders and whose actions could be anticipated at least to some point—not angry mobs.

In any case, it's beside the point. "I can understand your concern, but I can assure you Zero is unharmed. I've just spoken with him and he's assured me that he will contact you once he has more time at his disposal."

"What exactly is he doing now, Diethard?" Kirihara asks.

"He is in the Parisian Japanese ghettos, making sure the refugees there are safe, of course. At present, I'm told that things have settled down, and damage to the area is, for the most part, limited. However, in future days, he wishes to arrange for transports that would take the refugees home."

As expected, the Black Knights latch onto the suggestion with open hands. "That's a wonderful idea," Kaguya says. "As expected of Zero-sama. I take it we need to make further preparations on our side?"

"Yes, but I'm not exactly certain on the terms. There will probably be some sort of agreement with the Europeans involved, and Zero will let you know when it is time. Still, it would be a good idea to start preparing beforehand. It might be a difficult relocation, as it is my understanding that at least several hundred thousand refugees are located in Paris and Amsterdam alone."

"That will be difficult to accommodate, but it will be handled," Kirihara said. "If nothing else, the influx of people is bound to bring in more qualified personnel, which can only help at a later date."

That is probably an optimistic assessment, but Diethard can agree with the fact that, if nothing else, at least some of the refugees may want to join the lower ranks of the Black Knights, freeing some of their existing forces to deal with other jobs. In the end, it's not really his business to worry about that.

"I'm sure Zero will provide more information when it is available," he says. "For now, I'll leave you to it. I still have some work to do on my side, to make sure everything goes smoothly."

The Black Knights don't press him for further answers, which is just as well, because Diethard wouldn't have provided them with anything anyway. He's still relieved when he ends the call. His simple excuse is, for once, actually true and he needs to continue monitoring the European frequencies. He wouldn't want anything to go wrong at this point because he was foolishly careless.

One thing is certain, though. Even if it's exhausting to work around the clock like this, Diethard has never felt more alive, and has never welcomed the effort more. He looks forward to whatever else Zero has in mind—and especially to the moment when Zero—or rather, Lelouch vi Britannia becomes the emperor he was born to be.
The conversation with Diethard leaves the Black Knights both discombobulated and mildly hopeful. He's been fairly straightforward with them and assured them that Zero will speak with them soon, but that doesn't mean they aren't confused.

Tohdoh himself has mixed feelings about it. He is aware of just how difficult this must've been to pull off. He also knows that there would've been civilian casualties because of it, and Lelouch couldn't have missed that, even as he made his plan, just like he obviously didn't miss the danger to the Japanese ghettos. This new arrangement to relocate the Japanese refugees is encouraging, but that doesn't mean there wouldn't have still been deaths throughout the night.

And yet, despite all that, he can see the sense of it, why Lelouch has chosen to go through with it, regardless of the consequences on the populace. He's essentially cut off the head of the snake and ended the war in one, single heavy blow. No matter what other effects his plan had, it was certainly efficient and will likely keep Japan safe from further conflicts.

The bigger picture aside, other members of the group are not exactly over the details of Zero's plan. "Why didn't he tell us about it?" Tamaki asks. "We could have helped! Gone with him."

"We've been over this before, Tamaki," Yoshida tells him. "It's because of the conflict of interest."

"And yet, he introduced himself as Zero," Kirihara muses. "That is... unexpected."

"I don't think that it is," Kallen says. "I mean... Lelouch did say that he had no intention of giving up on being Zero, so it makes sense that he would identify himself as such, right?"

"He must've anticipated some backlash against the Japanese in the ghettos because of it," Kirihara muses, echoing Tohdoh's earlier thoughts. He doesn't seem to blame Zero for it either, but then again, he's always been very practical.

"Which is why he went there to do damage control, like Diethard says," Kaguya points out. She's eyeing Kirihara with suspicion, obviously not happy with anyone even making any sort of insinuation about Lelouch's character.

"In any case," Rakshata intervenes, "whatever his plan may have been, it worked out. That is what matters right now. With the EU no longer a danger, we'll probably be able to move forward with the UFN treaty."

And it certainly makes sense that she'd want that, since it will finally lead to acknowledging India's independence, something Lelouch has promised to get involved in, but has not had the time to deal with.

As Rakshata speaks, Tohdoh cannot help but notice that she doesn't seem as surprised as them by all this. "You're taking this very calmly. Did you know about his plans?"

"I had an idea," Rakshata replies, taking a draw out of her pipe. "Zero asked me to make a modification on the locator device that allows his knight to keep track of him. For safety purposes."

"And why didn't you say anything before?" Kallen explodes at her. "We could've done something! Helped in some way!"

It would be amusing that her comment is so similar to Tamaki's earlier words, but it's really not. Because the fact remains that, leaving aside the bigger picture, they cannot deny the high risks Lelouch has just taken, for this insane gamble.
Tohdoh supposes that in some ways, Diethard has a point. No matter what Tohdoh himself said, this isn't so different from Shinjuku and all the other times Zero was running around with only C.C. to watch his back, before the Black Knights even knew he was just a teenager with a willpower like iron and a grudge the size of a mountain. And it's definitely not the first time Zero has blown up things to make a statement or get rid of an obstacle.

But on the other hand... Tohdoh remembers the folder he's been given, full of details on what was done to each and every one of them. Their abilities come in handy, yes. Suzaku's speed and reflexes and C.C.'s invulnerability would've definitely helped Lelouch in an unstable area. But everything comes with a price, and Tohdoh still remembers the effect the assassin's attack had on Suzaku's psyche.

Has he even recovered enough to be in the middle of a war zone like this? He knows it's not his place to truly question Zero's decisions, and that Suzaku has to make his own choices, but at the same time, he cannot help but be concerned.

He will have to speak to Suzaku, as soon as possible, make sure he is all right. At this point, he owes the boy that much at least, after having abandoned him for so many years.

In the meantime, there's nothing he can do until Lelouch himself contacts them.

Kaguya seems to have the same idea. "What matters now is that he's won. I'm sure he had his reasons on why he wasn't more transparent. Maybe it was precisely because he thought we would try to step in, and he feared for our safety.

"Talking about it now will help nothing. We will make preparations to receive the Japanese who have been away from home for so many years, as Zero-sama said. Once he returns to Japan, we can discuss the UFN, and everything else, further."

Kirihara nods. "This is a good thing. It will cement the alliance between Britannia and Japan, which will keep us safe in the long run."

With that, at least, everyone can agree, although Tohdoh silently thinks that, soon, the price for that alliance will have to be paid, and it may very well be steeper than they would like.

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It's always a little surprising to Suzaku to find how peaceful things can become after great battles. It shouldn't be. At this point, he's been a soldier for the better part of his life, and he can understand the palpable fear and disbelief, the strange sensation that if you make one wrong movement, your whole world will be torn apart yet again.

He remembers standing in front of a crater he himself had created with the FLEIJA for hours on end, staring at the hole that had been a city and finally bursting into laughter when he'd realized that he'd become what he'd most dreaded and despised. Countless others had experienced the same shock, if not for the same reason.

Then, he remembers the day of the Requiem, the way he had wept behind his mask as he took up position as Zero, on the float that had held the Demon Emperor's throne. The crowd had cheered around him, but Nunnally had mourned over Lelouch's dead body, and neither Suzaku himself nor C.C. had never gotten over Lelouch's death at all.

In some ways, their not quite invasion of Paris reminds him of both these things, more than it does of his past experience with Euro-Britannia. After Lelouch's final announcement streams in, the crowd
sort of withdraws, too panicked that this strange prince who came out of nowhere would change his mind and keep bombing them. Meanwhile, the sentiments of the Britannians are of an entirely different nature.

Monica and Gino arrive first. They track down Lelouch, Suzaku and C.C. in front of the ghettos—as directed by Lelouch. As soon as they land, both mechs kneel in front of Lelouch. "Your Majesty," Monica says from inside the Lancelot. "Please allow us to escort you to a more secure location."

Suzaku doesn't bother to point out he and C.C. have been doing a perfectly adequate job at keeping Lelouch safe. That is beside the point.

"Thank you, Lady Krushevsky, but at this time, that won't be necessary," Lelouch replies. "We will be establishing a humanitarian assistance point here, and I'll be coordinating all of our teams from this location. In the meantime, I'll require a more elaborate report from you on the state of affairs on the front."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Of course."

Following Lelouch's command, the two Rounds come out of their knightmares. As soon as their feet hit the ground, they kneel once again, as people. "Please, rise," Lelouch tells them magnanimously. "There really is no need for that as such a time."

Despite Lelouch's words, Suzaku thinks that Lelouch kind of enjoys seeing people bowing in front of him. After all, there's a reason why he received the 'Absolute Obedience' Geass, and he hasn't precisely gotten any less bossy since the first time he was emperor.

But he doesn't mind it, not in the slightest. If anything, he finds it suitable, because things are supposed to be this way. That's why he and C.C. turned back time to begin with, so that Lelouch could occupy the role he was always meant for—and so that the two of them could be by his side as he did so.

It does wonders for Suzaku's own mood, and some of his lingering tension starts to fade as he watches Gino and Monica provide the answers Lelouch requested.

"At this time, the situation on the front is stable," Monica explains. "Sir Farnese has stayed behind with the Knights of St. Raphael to monitor further developments and make sure no stragglers attempt to doublecross us, but it seems unlikely that such a thing will happen."

"Definitely not," Lelouch answers. "The last thing they want is for us to turn on the other cities we've targeted. How badly were we hit by Smilas's last stand?"

"We weathered it fine, Your Majesty," Gino replies. "There were some losses, but it was well within acceptable limits."

Lelouch had already had an idea on these things, but what he wanted to discuss with the two Rounds was actually unrelated.

"Sir Weinberg, Lady Krushevsky... As you might realize, this attack on Paris changes more than our relationship with Europia. Everything I've done in the past month has been building up to something I can no longer put off."

"The first step we must take is to make sure St. Petersburg is completely secure. It is time for Britannia and Japan to go their separate ways, and for that to happen, we need a safe place to relocate my siblings. It will take time for Pendragon to be as safe as it used to be, so until further notice, we'll have to use St. Petersburg as our base."
"I'll still be tied up here for a while, and then possibly in Japan, wrapping up loose ends, and I don't know when Cornelia will return from her trip. Once we receive reinforcements, I want you to go handle this issue in our stead, so that we can hasten the move along.

"Once I make arrangements with the Europeans, we'll also need civilian planes that can take all these people from the ghettos. For the most part, I trust Sir Farnese to deal with it, but he is only one man, and there's only so much he can do."

Lelouch doesn't have to go into detail over what else this new order will mean. Suzaku can see the knowledge in Gino's silent determination and the glow of Monica's eyes.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Monica says. "It will be handled. We will not fail you."

Ironically, Suzaku believes her. Her loyalty to Charles has well and truly been transferred to Lelouch, and that will be very handy in the future.

It's a shame he can't trust everyone else's loyalty just as much.

Will the Geass Lelouch has placed on the Black Knights suffice to make them go along with this? There is so much that is still uncertain, so much that can still go wrong.

Once again, Suzaku stares at the smoking ruins around him, at the ghettos and the debris they have created. He feels no regret over the damage he's done to the city. The only thing he fears is the consequences that might show up, further along the line.

As if guessing his thoughts, C.C. entwines her fingers with his own. She leans against his shoulder, and Suzaku feels her code pulsing through their contract. He takes solace in it, in the knowledge that she and Lelouch are both all right, in front of him.

Despite her presence and despite their success, a doubt lingers at the back of his mind. What if this is not enough? What if once again, he is not enough, and he will fail to protect the people he most loves?

The fear haunts him, but he does his best not to show it. Letting himself be crippled by it will not help them. For now, he just has to follow orders and make sure no one takes it upon themselves to attack them.

After that... He doesn't know what will happen, but he can only trust that Lelouch does.

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It's late that evening that Lelouch finally manages to get some real privacy for himself, Suzaku and C.C. They've been running around to and fro all day, managing the arrival of Britannian humanitarian forces and their escorts, making sure supplies were distributed to the civilians in need, keeping an eye on the ghettos to make sure the Japanese didn't decide Zero was their enemy after all. They only stopped to grab a bite from the rations identical to the ones they distributed to the Japanese refugees, and after eating, went back to work for hours on end.

Lelouch is exhausted, but he's not really unaccustomed to spending a long time without sleep. More importantly, he's worried about Suzaku.

He knows Suzaku had trouble with shooting C.C. He actually tried to find a way to do it himself, as much as it pained him, but it had been impossible for him to get to C.C. in time from his—or rather, Thierry's—location. Not to mention that he couldn't have escaped the chaos that followed C.C.'s apparent death like Suzaku did. Suzaku had been the obvious choice.
The problem is that Suzaku is clearly not dealing with it well, which naturally means he and C.C. have to find a way to fix it.

They finally find refuge on a transport vessel that came in shortly after Monica and Gino's arrival. While filled to the brim with medical staff, supplies and a small contingent of military personnel, it also provides them with an actual place to sleep in that is in no way associated to the French.

He and C.C. drag Suzaku to their previously prepared room. There is a small dinner waiting for them. Someone appears to have taken the initiative and had, through miraculous means, prepared something hot for them. It's not pizza, but it's certainly better than rations.

Between two tired code users and one Geass users with an accelerated metabolism, the food is devoured in no time, at which point Lelouch can finally focus on his main concern. "Suzaku, I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry that you had to go through all that because of my selfishness."

Suzaku blinks, apparently surprised by the comment. "Selfishness?" he repeats. "What do you mean?"

"He means making you kill me, of course," C.C. said, as blunt as always.

Suzaku tenses up at her words. "You don't need to apologize. I understand why it was necessary."

Of course he does. It was why Lelouch once trusted him to thrust a blade through his chest, even when he knew Suzaku didn't actually want to go through with it.

But they've gone past now, and so, Lelouch makes an executive decision.

If he was selfish before in forcing Suzaku into something that repulsed him, he's going to be selfish again, for Suzaku's sake. "Just lie down and let us take care of you, my knight."

In another life, C.C. had told him something almost identical, when she and Suzaku had first become his lovers. He isn't sure if Suzaku remembers, but the lone tear that flows down Suzaku's cheek, he probably does.

"What happened then won't happen again," C.C. says, hugging Suzaku's back. "We're almost done. We're almost free."

"Free," Suzaku repeats, even as he obeys Lelouch, lying down on the bed. "Free."

He sounds a little shocked, almost as if the concept is alien to him. Lelouch can understand that. Freedom was never really an option, for any of them. They've been trapped in roles they were either given or created themselves for as far as Lelouch can remember. Prince Lelouch, the exiled Britannia royal, the man who had first taken up the mask of Zero, only to later become of the Demon Emperor, the enemy of the world. Suzaku Kururugi, the last heir of the Kururugi family, Honorary Britannian, Knight of Seven turned Knight of Zero, who died in the Demon Emperor's service only to come back wearing Lelouch's own mask. C.C. A slave girl. An immortal witch. She had been a mentor, a mother, a lover, a friend, an accomplice, and countless other things, for each of her individual contractors, all in an attempt to get rid of her curse. For Lelouch's sake, she had set aside her own desire, to help him.

They've always had their options curtailed by the shackles of their own pasts, their guilt, sorrows and individual burdens. But no longer.

"Yes, my knight. Free. It's time to let go, Suzaku. It's time to really start over. One way or another, I will claim the Britannian throne as my own, and when that happens, the world will bend to my word.
You and C.C. will be my consorts. We will shape the future in the image we promised our daughter, for the vow that we made."

As he speaks, C.C.—who had been busying herself with extracting Suzaku from his uniform—stops from her very useful self-appointed task and turns toward him. "You know, Lelouch, that's probably the least romantic proposal in the history of time. I at least expected pizza to be involved in some way."

Lelouch blanches at the sudden comment. Why does C.C. always enjoy putting him on the spot like this?

Knowing her, she really does want pizza to be involved in whatever marriage proposal he comes up with. Damn. He should have formulated his words a little better.

"There will be pizza," he promises. "Eventually."

Suzaku smirks up at him, the shadows on his face chased away by simple mirth. "I don't know," Suzaku says. "It feels an awful lot like we're being taken for granted, C.C."

"Not you too, Suzaku!" Lelouch protests.

His heart really isn't into it, though. It's nice to see Suzaku smile, especially after the hard day they've had. Maybe in this instance, C.C.'s request wasn't about the pizza at all.

"Well, anyway," C.C. says, "for the moment, I'll be satisfied with the second best option. Sex. Come on, boy. Forget about the speeches and get naked."

Future emperor or no, Lelouch knows better than to go against that order. In fact, it sounds like an amazing idea. He did, after all, say that he would take care of Suzaku, and actions speak louder than words anyway.

Nobody interrupts them that night, and for the next couple of hours, the trio set all their doubts and fears aside to focus solely on one another. They have started another Requiem, spilled rivers of blood once again and slayed another demon. But this time, their story will not end like it did in the past. This time, it is not desperation that guides them, but hope.

Lelouch tastes that hope in the kisses they share and feels it in the heat of Suzaku's body as Lelouch slides into him. He smells it in the scent of C.C.'s hair and that of the sweat on their bodies. He sees it in C.C.'s golden eyes and Suzaku's emerald ones and senses it pulsing at the back of his mind, in his code.

Finally, what seems like hours later, he hears it. When they collapse together on the bed, breathing hard, C.C. finally says, "You don't need to get me pizza. Of course I'll marry you, boy."

"Count me in," Suzaku adds. "I'll be happy to be your consort, just as long as I can still be your knight."

"I think that can be arranged," Lelouch replies.

He closes his eyes to C.C.'s soft smile and Suzaku's laugh. The last thought he has before he falls asleep is that he feels far more satisfaction at sharing a simple moment like this with them than he did when he made Europia kneel.
I have no idea how many Japanese refugees there are in the EU, so I pretty much wrote in an estimate. Also, I know this chapter is slower, but it was necessary to wrap up everything from previous ones.
So I'm finally updating! Go me! Incredible, I managed to finish the chapter before the release of the new movie.

IMPORTANT! PLEASE READ! Since everyone has been so supportive of this fic and that is in part the reason why it reached this length, I am turning to you to help me with something. I am looking for REVIEWERS for my original published fiction. This would involve the reviewer receiving a copy of my ebook and posting a review of it on a certain website. I cannot say more about the story, site etc. since AO3 frowns heavily on promoting original fiction through our fics, but I will say that this will require no expense on your part, just reading a book and dropping a comment. If you are interested in helping me with this, PM me at my FF.net account, under the same name (I would need your email address and I imagine you wouldn't want to post it in a comment here where everyone can see). If the email thing is not an issue, by all means, drop it in a comment.

Please note: If you cannot do it or aren't interested, I completely understand. I won't get mad or anything. It won't affect my updates in any way. But I would still appreciate it if you did join my little project as it would help me actually earn a living through my writing.

That being said, hope you enjoy the chapter!

Over the next couple of days, things quiet down in the Parisian capital. As promised, Britannian forces have arrived with humanitarian assistance. Zero has made it clear that the city is in no way under Britannian occupation, and the only knightmares that are actually here are his own, and that of his knight. Beyond that, the Britannians have only sent medical personnel, and an escort meant to ensure tensions don't rise again.

When Richard Gandolfi arrives, the civilians almost explode in a fury again. They've yet to receive answers on why the police force started shooting at them. Zero quiets them down with a renewed promise that the culprits will be weeded out and found.

Richard simply watches the man speak and wants to cry. He wishes the three presidents hadn't dumped this on his lap, but he knows that, with the situation so unstable, they couldn't have returned to Paris so quickly.

He is much more expendable than them, and so, here he is, about to enter an official discussion with Lelouch vi Britannia.

They've spoken with him before, of course, but that was only to establish a tentative truce heavily based on the fact that their soldiers had been panicking so much they'd ended up killing General Smilas. Richard doesn't really blame any of them. If anything, he wishes someone had done it sooner, so that they wouldn't have followed his idiotic suggestion that placed them in this situation to begin with.
But it's too late to have regrets over that, and the most he can do is damage control. Which starts right here, today.

The diplomatic meeting is held in the mildly damaged Elysee Palace. Lelouch vi Britannia arrives accompanied by the two people who always seem by his side, his omnipresent green-haired female companion, and his Eleven knight, Suzaku Kururugi.

Richard bows, as is appropriate according to their respective stations. "Your Highness, it is an honor. Thank you for agreeing to see me so quickly."

It grates on him to add that last part, but he is very much aware that he is at a disadvantage and the Britannians are nothing if not prideful. The prince offers him a small, meaningless smile, like he knows exactly what Richard is doing. "No thanks are needed, Mr. Gandalfi. On the contrary, I am pleased to see the Council of Forty is as invested in the peace between our nations as I am."

Richard honestly cannot read the man at all. His rhetoric sounds genuine, but Richard has met a lot of politicians who advocate for the rights and good of the people. Of course, none of them were princes turned terrorists turned princes again, but that's an entirely different matter.

The deal that is on the table is fairly straightforward. All conflict between Europia and Britannia will cease, as will all attempts from either of the countries to acquire more territory from each other. Arrangements will be made for the Japanese citizens currently living in Paris and Amsterdam to return home—something that Richard cannot care less about. They both agree that the culprits behind the shooting need to be found, although for the most part, the prince seems to put a lot of the blame on Gene's shoulders. Richard happily encourages this.

On the more unfortunate side, Lelouch vi Britannia has apparently decided to press for some financial penalties for the EU.

"The tragedy that has recently struck our capital is in no small part due to Europia," he explains. "Additionally, both in Paris and in Amsterdam, innocent Japanese citizens have been living in what amounts to servitude for years. This cannot be allowed to stand."

"With respect, Your Highness, I doubt the treatment they received was any worse than what they would've been subjected to in their homeland."

The prince arches a dark brow at him. "Oh, I'm aware of that. There is a reason why I became Zero, after all. But that is an internal political matter of Britannia that I will address myself, at a later date, and not a subject for discussion between us. The two issues are separate. Britannia didn't force you to mistreat the refugees who came here looking for aid. You did that on your own."

Richard cannot argue with that logic, he hates that in everything he brings to the table, the prince has the upper hand. The only concession he manages to wriggle out is to subtract the direct damage the prince himself did to Paris, Berlin and Vienna from the total sum Europia would have to pay. He still feels like it's nowhere near enough, but honestly, it's a miracle he even gets that, considering how unnerving he finds the silent, watchful presences of the prince's two companions.

The woman by his side has been staring unblinkingly at Richard the whole time, and the Eleven has been eyeing him like a predator would its prey. Richard looks at the three of them standing side by side and suddenly knows that they are even more dangerous than the rest of the EU has already deemed them.

Considering that, he's extremely relieved when Lelouch vi Britannia declares the meeting over. He's scrupulously polite to the end, shaking Richard's hand like he didn't blow up half his city just two
"Thank you for your open-mindedness and dedication to peace," he says with a polite little smile. "I trust that our two nations will be able to cooperate in the future for the benefit of all."

"In the name of Europia United, I extend the same sentiments," Richard replies, although the words taste bitter on his tongue.

The prince's smile widens, as if he can guess exactly what Richard is thinking. Given the skill Zero has shown so far in anticipating their moves, that's actually a pretty good bet. "Please offer my greetings to the three presidents. I look forward to finalizing the agreement between our lands, as soon as these final details we have been handling are complete."

"As do we, Your Highness."

That, at least, Richard can say honestly, because it means he'll be able to dump the responsibility of dealing with Lelouch vi Britannia onto someone else. He really doesn't get paid enough for this shit.

"Fuck you, Smilas," he thinks as the prince finally departs. "What the hell could've possessed you to think we could possibly handle him?"

Lelouch's stay in Europia takes longer than Kallen expected. As promised, he calls to speak with them several times, and Kallen can't help but notice that he looks tired and stressed every single time they speak. Many times, she finds herself wishing she could go to his side, but Lelouch makes it clear that it is not necessary, and the arrangements in the EU are almost complete.

"It's really just politics at this point," he explains. "The EU have been cooperative, for the most part, but moving a large number of people in such little time does come with challenges. I'm relying on you, Kaguya and the rest of the Black Knights to prepare Japan for their return home."

Everyone sees the sense in Lelouch's approach, but that doesn't mean they're not relieved when the day of Zero's return finally arrives.

Two weeks after the attack on Paris, transports of Japanese citizens begin to stream in above the skies of Tokyo, heading toward the SAZ. A Britannian military escort flanks them. It's almost eerie to see, as it reminds many of the invasion that once took their freedom. But the ships are no longer there to rain fire and destruction upon them. Things have changed, because against all odds, the man leading this fleet is the same one who led the rebellion against Britannia.

As the ships land in the SAZ, throngs of people are led outside by Britannian staff. Black Knights are already on standby, ready to take over and prevent panic and confusion.

When Lelouch emerges from his own vessel, he is, as always, flanked by Suzaku and C.C. His mask is off, and for some reason, that strikes Kallen as meaningful.

His siblings rush to greet him first, with Euphemia in the lead and Rolo following, pushing along Nunnally's wheelchair. "Lelouch, welcome back!" Euphemia says with a smile, somehow managing to maintain a degree of composure and decorum. It's actually pretty remarkable, since Kallen knows the princess has been as worried about Lelouch as the Black Knights.

Nunnally and Rolo are just as happy about his arrival. Nunnally is nowhere near as successful as Euphemia in keeping her calm and she tears up as Lelouch hugs her. "Oh, big brother. I was so worried when I heard what was going on in Paris."
"I know, Nunnally," Lelouch answers softly. "I'm sorry about putting you through that. But it's all over now. We have a tentative truce with Europia, and we hope to place the basis of a more long-lasting peace together."

When Lelouch releases her from their embrace, Nunnally wipes her eyes and gives him a shaky smile. "No, please don't apologize. I understand completely. I just wish I could have helped more, like Rolo did."

Ironically, Kallen finds that she can empathize with that. She wishes that she'd had the time and courage to ask Rolo where exactly Lelouch had sent him and what mission he had fulfilled that she herself could not have handled. But it is too late for that now. It is too late for a lot of things.

"You'll be able to help me later," Lelouch promises, "when it's safer." He shoots Euphemia a questioning look. "In the meantime, I trust everything has been well in my absence."

"Yes, Lelouch," Euphemia replies. "We've been working on making all the arrangements for the people, like we spoke on the phone. Most everything is ready."

Taking her cue, Kaguya finally decides to approach. Kallen shuffles after her, feeling awkward and uncertain for reasons she doesn't really want to analyze. "Zero-sama," Kaguya says. "Welcome home. As Princess Euphemia has explained, we have almost everything prepared for the transfer of the people you have rescued."

"It is a pleasure to be here again, Kaguya-dono," Lelouch replies. A shadow sweeps over his face, his smiling fading into something dark and glum. "As always your efforts are appreciated, although I wish more of the Japanese could have managed to return to their homes."

C.C. presses her hand to his shoulder in silent comfort, and just like that, the moment passes. "But we will have time to discuss that later," Lelouch finishes. "For the moment, let us make sure the people are safe."

For the better part of the day, that is exactly what they do. Lelouch monitors the process of the accommodation of the refugees from Europia himself, working smoothly with both Kaguya and Euphemia. Kallen hovers nearby, but never finds a moment to approach him, not when C.C. and Suzaku are always with him.

Something has been bugging her for ages, a knowledge that has been nudging at the back of her mind for more than she'd have liked to admit. She wants to believe that she's jumping at shadows, but the fact that Lelouch separated himself from them during this operation already says a lot.

She is his ace. She should have been by his side. Conflict of interest or not, Lelouch shouldn't have sent her back to Japan. The Guren should've been right there, on the front, with the Knight of Rounds, helping Lelouch in his plan. But she wasn't.

On the other hand, he's already stated that he still intends to be Zero, and he has acknowledged this identity to the whole of Britannia. Just where is this whole thing headed?

She isn't sure she wants to know the answer to that question, but she has to ask.

Several of the other Black Knights have been showing the same restlessness. Tohdoh and the Four Holy Swords in particular have seemed thoughtful, almost speculative, and while Kallen would've been inclined to blame it on Tohdoh's tendency to take Suzaku-related things personally these days, she knows it is more than that.

Fortunately, Lelouch must have noticed the situation, because as soon as things quiet down a little,
he summons a meeting with the core group of the Black Knights. As soon as they're ensconced in their control room, Lelouch approaches the matter at hand with almost uncharacteristic frankness.

"I believe you all have questions for me, on why exactly I chose this course of action and why I didn't reveal what I was going to do. I can't blame you for that. There simply hasn't been enough time to handle everything, not in the context of the operation that I needed to run in Paris."

"We understand that, Zero-sama," Kaguya says, somewhat predictably. "We would never hold your priorities against you."

"It is however true that we would like to know what you have in mind for the future of the Black Knights," Tohdoh says. "Their current association with the Britannian throne is somewhat... unusual."

"I take it we will still be pursuing the UFN plan?" Rakshata asks.

"I fully intend to support the UFN in every way that is at my disposal. In fact, I will do just that, but not only as Zero, but as the future emperor of Britannia."

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It's always amusing for C.C. to watch the chaos Lelouch's new plans wreaks upon the ranks of the Black Knights. A small—all right, maybe not that small—part of her has not forgotten their betrayal, the fact that they turned on him at a time when she could do nothing to help him. Maybe it's not really her place to point fingers, considering her own faults, but she's never pretended to be any fairer or less of a hypocrite than Lelouch and Suzaku.

Today's episode ranks pretty high on the list of excellent experiences in this century, things she can actually enjoy, not just accumulate. The look on their faces alone is so gratifying that she barely manages to keep up her regular stoic facade.

On Lelouch's other side, Suzaku is doing a pretty good job at hiding his own satisfaction. She knows for a fact that he looks forward to being Emperor Lelouch's knight once again. He once confessed to her that even in their first lifetime, when their whole arrangement had been based on the plan of Lelouch's ultimate death, that knighthood had felt right in a way nothing ever had. C.C. understands that very well, because the reasons for that are identical to those for her own decision to disregard her quest for death.

It is Tamaki who breaks the thick silence that had fallen over the room. "T-The future emperor of Britannia?" he stammers. "But, Zero... Why? You're my best bud!"

It's actually a small miracle that he can even be so coherent, since eloquence has never been among Tamaki's few gifts. On the other hand, he did at least manage to say something, unlike the others, who are still staring.

"It's precisely because I care about Japan and about everyone here that I must do this," Lelouch says, "and because I care about what happens to the people in Britannia. Britannia might have won the war with the EU, but right now, the tentative truce that exists between our two nations is heavily influenced by the panic I managed to stir among them. If I am not there, it'll all fall apart, which could lead to disaster, for everyone.

"And to tell you the truth... There is no one else who could take up the reins of the empire. Schneizel is too ill, and not expected to recover anytime soon. And Cornelia... She is my sister, but they call her the Witch of Britannia for a reason. I am not confident that she can build a Britannia that is better
"So you mean then to build a Britannia that is just?" Kallen asks.

She sounds a little disbelieving, and C.C. cannot blame her for that. Still, she also suspects that Kallen's doubts have more to do with the fact that Lelouch is planning to leave Japan—and incidentally, her—behind, than the concept of a just Britannia itself.

"Countries and regimes change all the time," she drawls. "While it would have normally been far more difficult to drastically modify the Britannian political system, the current void of power will make it easier for Lelouch to step up and truly make a difference."

Kirihaara nods, having obviously understood what Lelouch was going for. Perhaps the cunning old man even saw this coming. "I personally agree with you, Zero. It is a good idea and Japan could definitely benefit from having Britannia as an ally."

Tohdoh seems to agree with him. "We understand Zero," he says. "We will support your decision."

His gaze shoots to Suzaku, but he doesn't ask anything about his former student's future. Any questions in that regard would have been useless anyway. Suzaku is Lelouch's knight, and of course, he will go wherever Lelouch does.

"Are you planning something in particular, Zero-sama?" Kaguya inquires. C.C. is not surprised at the question. Despite her age, Kaguya always was very politically astute, and she would want to be prepared for whatever Lelouch has in mind.

"Right now, I want to prioritize rebuilding Pendragon above all else. So much has happened that has unsettled the people. After the situation has normalized a little, yes, I do have a more elaborate plan for the future of the empire."

"But you already knew that, Kaguya," Suzaku teases his cousin. "Lelouch always has a plan, even when he's not pretending to be a forest demon."

Kaguya's face flames, while the Black Knights share confused looks. C.C. hides a small smile. The reference to the childhood moments Kaguya shared with Lelouch might have seemed out of place, but sometimes, this kind of obfuscation is very useful. The Geass on the Black Knights guarantees that they will always still see Lelouch as Zero, the hero of Japan, but it would be better if it did not activate at all, and the mild levity in Suzaku's comment will help with that.

Kaguya decides against saying anything about it, and Lelouch goes on to address some of the lingering concerns the Black Knights still unavoidably have. "In any case, this is not a transfer that will happen overnight. I will stay in Japan for the reminder of the month and make sure everything is in order with our defences, and with the situation of the refugees from Europia. We will make sure everything is stable here, and that we have a system in place to eventually transport Britannian citizens out to their eventual new homes as well."

"You're still planning to do that, Zero?" Senba asks.

"Yes, of course. Once we rebuild Pendragon, I will relocate everyone there. For the moment, the move is not possible, as the damage was extreme, and we haven't had the resources and manpower to focus on anything except providing aid to the surviving population. But as I said, Pendragon is my main priority, and it will be handled, hopefully within the next six months."

Lelouch has already actually prepared a tentative timeframe on how he hopes the Britannian capital will be rebuilt, but his plan does rely on the cooperation of his forces—on both the Britannian and
Japanese side. So far, it doesn't seem like there will be an issue.

"While I am still here, we will continue with our UFN treaty project. We haven't gotten the chance to discuss everything due to the rather unfortunate incident that interrupted the original signing. Once the situation with the refugees is a little clearer, we will have to contact the Tianzi and Xingke again to make further arrangements.

"Once again, I know that these changes are unsettling, but I have only the utmost confidence in the Black Knights and everything we have built together. We have managed to win the battle for the freedom of Japan. We can do this too."

There are nods all around, with the group looking a little more cheerful. It's almost like a Pavlovian response. All Lelouch has to do is say the words 'the freedom of Japan', and the Black Knights light up like the screens of an activated knightmare.

That is not to say that they've completely set aside all their misgivings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Tohdoh who brings up a topic no one else dared to really acknowledge. "If I may Zero... Since you have stated that you will be leaving Japan in the near future, I take it you will want to pass tentative leadership onto someone else? Someone who will stand in for you while you are not here?"

"Yes, of course. We will set up the final staff diagram following the general structure of what we used in the SAZ. I had planned for Kallen to take up the helm, with your assistance and Kaguya's, of course."

This is the ideal solution, since Kallen trusts Lelouch and Lelouch has actually spoken to her about the potential of him giving her a more important position in the past. Unfortunately, it would appear that nothing in their life can ever go smoothly.

Kallen presses her lips together and straightens her back, like she's just made a decision. "I'm honored by your trust in me, Zero," she replies quietly, "but I was hoping that we could make a different arrangement. If Japan is free, then I am not truly needed here anymore. I would like to offer my services to Emperor Lelouch vi Britannia, as Kallen Stadfelt."

Well, shit.

Chapter End Notes

LOL. So that happened. I didn't originally plan on including Kallen in Lelouch's future, but she just refused to go down without a fight. Damn these characters, they always do what they want to, not what I actually plan for them.

Richard is for the most part an OC. No idea what his first name is in canon, although he does exist.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!