Ambiguous

by escapeasy

Summary

Facing a surprise pregnancy is a challenge Lelouch feels he might be able to handle. The real problem is trying to figure out how the hell a male got pregnant in the first place. A baby couldn't possibly derail Lelouch's rebellion, could it? Started as a crack m-preg!

"Underage" because Lelouch and Suzaku are 17... Just one year off (-_-)

*And has fan art!!
Like a Seahorse

Chapter Notes

Not a fan of m-preg, but started writing one for crack/satirical fun -- and then things somehow got serious.  \(\_(_{Yahoo}_)\)/

Contains spoilers.

"Now, just imagine you're weightless, in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by tiny little seahorses." – Deb from Napoleon Dynamite

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Ambiguous

Like a Seahorse

Lelouch's feet shuffle as he walks to his bedroom.

His slight slouch is straightened by a yawn that squirms up his throat and pries his mouth open so it can crawl out with the snaps rattling down his spine. He rubs the traces of tears away from his eyes that the yawn had squeezed out and his shoulders roll back in their own stretch. Once his mouth clamps shut again with a clap of his teeth, his shoulders droop along with his eyes, and he trusts his feet to take him to the appropriate room in which he may retire.

He doesn't want to repeat that macaroni incident again.

Even so, he is so exhausted that he'd sleep anywhere at this point without a care as long as it's silent and dark. He should have known better than try to explain chess to Tamaki when the pawn had asked him to – in a completely inconspicuous move to prove that he's into whatever his favorite buddy is into; which Lelouch would have found creepy if he didn't know Tamaki. Lelouch was a bit surprised that he didn't know anything – anything – about chess, but then he remembered that it's Tamaki and he quickly forgot the thought as fast as it came.

Too bad he didn't take his realization – that it's TAMAKI – as a warning. He would have saved himself a headache that pinched its way to a migraine that pounded so hard around his skull Lelouch almost thought it would crack his mask in half. Luckily, that hadn't happened. Unluckily, his head suffered an explosion after the twentieth time of explaining each pieces' name… Or perhaps that was when a very, very, very, very dusty light bulb lit up over Tamaki's head with the excited exclamation of:

"So that's where the pawn analogy came from!"

No one bothered to correct Tamaki about it being a metaphor, not an analogy. They just shook sympathetic heads at Lelouch – or rather, Zero – mentally thanking whatever God is in heaven that they were not in his shoes.

Lelouch mentally cursed them all to Hell.
He had never thought it was possible, but Lelouch might actually be off chess for a while. Nothing sobers a person up better than headache-inducing stupidity.

Lelouch's dragging feet scoot him into his room where his eyes are blinded by a light – making Lelouch double-take by pinching himself to make sure he hadn't suddenly fallen unconscious… Or that Tamaki's stupidity hadn't killed his brain without his notice, making him a clueless spirit wandering its way home. He doesn't know any other reason why there should suddenly be a bright, white light beckoning him into his bedroom. C.C. has her own bed at the Black Knight's hideout, so there's no reason anything strange should be going on here; moreover, it's about two in the morning.

After a few nail bites split his skin – because he just wants to be absolutely positive his brain isn't dead – with his eyes cowering underneath narrowed eyelids, he sees a timid cast of evergreen eyes sitting on his bed, basking bashfully under the vivid glow.

Speaking of stupidity…Lelouch thinks wryly. But at least Suzaku understands chess even if he isn't close to mediocre at playing it – he wasn't even that hard to teach.

"Suzaku, what are you doing here so late?" Lelouch asks trying to sound casual despite how incriminatingly strange it is for him to be the one stumbling into his room at such a late hour.

Suzaku doesn't seem so concerned about that, however.

Only the stagnant air of the room is Suzaku's reply as Lelouch walks towards the bed, putting his hands in the pockets of his gray pants – his school uniform traded for his favorite set of street clothes. He looks down at Suzaku critically as the seconds of silence add up to minutes and as those minutes, add up to more minutes – would Lelouch really let this drag out all night? Maybe, if he wasn't so tried – in which Suzaku will not connect their eyes.

Obviously, something is wrong.

"Is something wrong?" Lelouch tilts his head and bumps Suzaku's knee with his own, the action looking very much like someone poking a comatose body with a stick.

Suzaku seems to flinch a bit – or twitch like a limp body stirring underneath that stick – and his clasped hands clench, tight.

"I, um… I…" he clears his throat and squares his shoulders but holds his eyes against the floor like the world will implode if he looks away from it. "I have somethi~ng to tell you," he answers with a crack breaking his voice.

Lelouch lifts an eyebrow at the suspicious behavior – suddenly he doesn't feel so incriminated.

"What is it?"

Suzaku fidgets a little and his hands readjust their slick grip on each other.

…Why is Suzaku sweating?

"You should sit down…" the boy murmurs, his shoeless feet shifting around each other.

Lelouch feels a shot of anxiety blow through his chest and his eyebrows knit together.

"Suzaku," Lelouch says with a worry ridden tone, "what is it?"
Suzaku's hands contract hard again, "Just sit down, please." Suzaku's voice is stronger, but the waver halfway through still exposes his insecurity.

Lelouch heeds the awkward air breathing around Suzaku's request and seats himself next to the eye-contact-avoiding teenager. Adding his weight to the mattress seems to relieve Suzaku's shoulders of some of the invisible pressure pushing down on them; he even lets out a shaky sigh as his muscles relax somewhat around his rigid bones.

Lelouch is too impatient and anxious to wait for that imaginary cat to release Suzaku's tongue.

"Did something happen?"

He catches a glimpse of green when Suzaku looks at him with a glance, his shoulders straining again.

"…S-something happened."

"What is it!?" Lelouch demands loudly and confused. Suzaku looks to be fine, physically, so it must be something else… but what?

Suzaku cringes, "Lelouch, it's…" Lelouch can practically see the words jumble around in Suzaku's head as if in hopes that the right ones will just fall out until he suddenly turns his body to face him. After a brief lapse of silence, those elusive emeralds return his stare and the tentative sheen over them fills Lelouch's chest with dread. "Lelouch, I… I'm pregnant."

Suzaku scowls, "Why aren't you saying anything!?!"

Lelouch blinks again, "Hm? I'm waiting for the punch-line."

Suzaku's gives him the same look Lelouch usually gives to Suzaku: you're an idiot.

"…I thought that maybe you forgot it, so I was waiting."

Suzaku growls, "This isn't a joke, Lelouch!" His fingers rough his hair. "I'm serious."
"NO!" Suzaku waves his hands emphatically in front of Lelouch's face. "No more 'silence'! Say something," he implores nervously but eagerly.

Lelouch runs his eyes over Suzaku, as if seeing him for the first time – just like when they were kids, Lelouch's princely eyes are studying but not scrutinizing.

"Impossible," Lelouch announces easily – patronizingly.

Suzaku is still scowling, "It's not impossible. How else do you explain my… situation!?"

Lelouch pauses in thought, actually pauses to consider his answer.

"I think you've been reading too much of that junk Milly calls literature. All those boy-love novels are garbage, Suzaku. How many times have I told you that? Just because a select few of them in those stories got pregnant doesn't mean that it's actually possible," Lelouch mutters blandly. "You didn't get confused between non-fiction and fiction again, did you? I'm sure you only think this because your poor brain—"

"I have the test results to prove it," Suzaku steely cuts in.

Lelouch is taken aback.

That changes everything.

"…Seriously?"

Suzaku's cheeks turn a little pink, and he twists his fingers together like a child stalling his punishment, or embarrassment, looking away from Lelouch's eyes.

"Yes."

"Then let me see it."

S
I
L—

"If I can't be silent than neither can you, Suzaku," Lelouch deadpans. "Show me the results."

Suzaku's foot nudges at the floor diffidently, "I don't have it on me."

Lelouch sighs, "But you saw a doctor, and they did tests and told you that you're pregnant?" Lelouch asks to Suzaku's fleeting gaze, but then he shakes his head. "No, wait. Why did you go to the doctor in the first place? You told me you had military duty tonight." That's why Lelouch suddenly found his afternoon free, because Suzaku flaked on him. He initially didn't have any plans regarding the Black Knights tonight, but with Suzaku running off to play soldier, Lelouch figured he should use his time wisely by sorting some things out that he'd been procrastinating to deal with. The budget issue that Tamaki managed to fumble right out of his hands was on Lelouch's
list – thus leaving him at the mercy of his underling's astounding idiocy.

Yes, Lelouch's brain-heart-attack is Suzaku's fault.

And Milly's. She had been giving Lelouch that Cheshire cat smile that signals the apocalypse during the whole meeting. Safe to say, he fled the student council room like a rat fleeing a sinking ship when the meeting was over.

Suzaku finally looks at him again, "I did, it's just, you know…"

"No, I don't know."

Suzaku sighs at the brick wall that is Lelouch's stubbornness.

"It was a physical. Lloyd makes me have one regularly to make sure his 'precious part' stays in top physical condition, to monitor me. So, I wasn't lying to you. It's like a duty…"

"Alright…" he scratches the back of his head—"Wait! Did you see a medical physician or did that madman conduct the physical?"

Suzaku's brow wrinkles, "Lloyd, why?"

"Because that man is probably just tricking you or he's incompetent. He may have enough medical knowledge to repair a human's anatomy but I'm not so sure humanity as a whole is something he understands."

Suzaku pouts, "Lelouch, that's not nice – even though you're probably right – I'm sure he knows the difference between men and women."

"That's why you're pregnant?"

Suzaku's expression pales before it seems to slide right off his face.

Lelouch feels a sardonic chuckle bubbling out of his throat.

"Suzaku, you're too gullible."

Suzaku glowers, "No, Miss Cecile double checked. I'm pregnant, it's a fact."

Lelouch feels the need to pinch himself again.

"All right, since everyone seem so certain that you've got a bun in the oven, tell me how it happened," he commands in an irritable string of words, crossing his arms.

Suzaku's cheeks mature from pink to red and his eyes sink again, this time swinging like pendulums that are ticking down the seconds left of Lelouch's patience. He holds his fist in front of his mouth and clears his throat again, looking at Lelouch like he needs to plead his innocence to a judge.

Lelouch starts to tap his foot.

"Yeah, um… Well, you see, when a man and a woman—er, man and a man, in this case I guess – love each other very, very much—"

Lelouch can feel that migraine eating his brain again as he is being submitted to more of this cancerous stupidity—
—and if they trust each other just as much, then they, ah… engage in an activity together that, uh… is, um, very intimate and physical, where, ah… they—"

"Suzaku," Lelouch growls – he was almost willing to let Suzaku struggle with that one, but his tolerance threshold is beginning to drain rather rapidly. "I know what sex is. I know how a woman gets pregnant. I know the female body—"

Suzaku dares to giggle at that—

Shutting up instantly like Lelouch's calamitous, blazing eyes snipped his vocal cords—

"I understand how a man impregnates a woman, but how does a man impregnate another man?" He watches a gulp slide down Suzaku's neck as more muted moments sashay between them. "… They didn't tell you?"

"Ah, no, they did, it's just… I can't remember exactly what they said – they were talking really fast and using a lot of words I didn't understand, and…" Suzaku trails off as Lelouch exhales heavily, rubbing his temples with his finger and thumb while closing his eyes.

"You can't remember anything?" Lelouch asks tiredly.

Suzaku's eyebrows crease angrily, "Is this so hard for you to accept, Lelouch?"

Lelouch flicks his eyes up to Suzaku, letting his hand smack his leg, in a condescending gape.

"Yes."

In other words: duh~ you moron!

Now Suzaku crosses his arms stiffly over his chest with a sour face.

"I don't know why. Haven't you ever heard of seahorses?"

"Seahorses?" Lelouch echoes like the word is gibberish despite knowing exactly what the creature is.

"Yes, seahorses. Don't you know that the male is the one who goes through the pregnancy?"

Wait…

Wait for it…

Wait…

Lelouch's lips tremble as laughter falls away from them, flying into the air with light flitters that nibble at Suzaku's pursed face.

"What's so funny?"

Lelouch is holding his stomach, choking on the air fighting to rush in and out of his lungs.

"I'm, I'm sorry Su… Su-Su-Su-Su~!" Lelouch tries, his jovial chortles snuffing out his voice before it can grow.

Laugh—
Laugh—laugh—
Laugh—laugh—laugh—laugh—
Laugh—laugh—
Laugh—
Laugh…

…

Laugh—LAUGH—

[Several spikes of laughter later]

Lelouch is crying and wheezing as his giggles begin to subside, dissolving into each other like seltzer tablets in water. He sighs with a whistle and flicks tears away from his eyes, drying the trails glistening his flushed face.

"...Oh, Suzaku. I haven't laughed"—chuckle—"that hard in a, in a"—snicker—"a while…"

Suzaku is glaring.

Lelouch arcs an eyebrow, "What's with that look?"

"Oh, I don't know, Lelouch. Why don't you fill me in on what's so FUNNY?" he snaps, his face instantly back to normal.

Lelouch has to slap away the smile tempting his lips, quickly composing himself, "Suzaku, you can't compare yourself to seahorses."

"Why not, it's the same case here isn't it? I'm a male, and I'm pregnant."

Quit reminding me.

"Yes, but it's completely different. Are you trying to say that you've suddenly morphed into a seahorse, or something? There's no way that's possible. Besides, male seahorses don't exactly get pregnant. The female lays her eggs in his pouch and then he fertilizes—"

"Well that's just fine, Lelouch! You stupid… stupid smarty-pants!" Suzaku suddenly shouts as he vaults up from the bed, flailing his arms around erratically like a disoriented traffic cop. "You won't even let me have the seahorses, will you!? Why can't I ever have anything!?"

What?

"What?"

Suzaku points at him in a dramatic stance that's too reminiscent of one certain terrorist and it makes Lelouch feel like Suzaku is stealing it from him—err, Zero.

"You never let me have anything," Suzaku says. "You always have to prove me wrong in everything that I say."

"That's because you're always wrong."
"Seahorses, Lelouch. Seahorses. Why can't I just have the seahorses?"

Suzaku's really lost it.

"If it isn't the Seahorse Syndrome"—something Suzaku just made up—"than what can it be?"

Really, really lost it.

"Suzaku, I'm sure you're not some seahorse in a human's body, or a human sharing a seahorse's body… or whatever. You're just—"

"A freak! I'm a freak no matter which way you spin it, right?"—sniff—"What kind of male gets pregnant if he's not some freak of nature?"—sniffle—"Am I a woman in a man's body? Am I suddenly a hermaphrodite or have I always been one without knowing it? Do I have some kind of sickness or mutated gene? Have I exposed myself to some kind of chemical that's given me the power to get pregnant – was it something I ate? Was I abducted by aliens who conducted some strange and twisted experiment on me and then wiped my memory so that I wouldn't be able to remember it…?"—sniiiiiiif—"What other explanation is there?"

Yep, full-blown hysteria.

"Suzaku…" Lelouch calls softly, standing up from the bed as Suzaku's pretty face nests into his palms. "You're not a freak."

And everything else you said is just ridiculously illogical.

"Yes I am!" is his muffled counter. "That's what everyone's been calling me my whole life, so it must be true. Especially now, with-with this."

Disgusted fury churns in Lelouch's belly, swelling his chest with its thick smog so profusely that his eyes turn to slits and his throat tickles. He watches Suzaku's form tremble with stifled sobs through the loathing lenses of his eyes, wondering if it's possible that Suzaku can remember the name of every person that ever belittled him, insulted him, degraded him and if he'd be willing to give those names up. Lelouch's personal hit-list isn't terribly long – depending on which one he is referring to – and he's sure he'd have plenty of time to exterminate all these blasphemers for ever hurting Suzaku when he's done playing super hero.

He gently, lovingly, combs his fingers into Suzaku's hair after an attempt to pull Suzaku's hands away from his face came up fruitless – unless he was trying to remind himself how weak he is, then it was quite a fruitful expense of energy.

"No, Suzaku. They're wrong. They're bigoted degenerates that can't see past the end of their own noses." Lelouch consoles tenderly as he pets brown curls.

"So then what am I if I'm not a freak?" Suzaku blubbers.

Lelouch gathers Suzaku in his arms, pushing the shorter boy's face into the safe solace in the crook of his neck while he rubs Suzaku's back with reassuring strokes.

"You're special."

"Che! Special. That's just another way of saying freak."

Lelouch dips his chin so that his nose nuzzles the chocolate swirls atop Suzaku's head.
"No. It means you're special," he says calmly, never ceasing his soothing motions. "You're in a class all by yourself that only exceptional persons like you are allowed to access." He kisses Suzaku's head, "That's why I lo—" his chokes a bit on that four-letter word "…Why I cherish you."

I am Lelouch Lamperouge, and I approved this message.

Suzaku sniffs again; it's a delicate sound buried in Lelouch's chest.

"…You… really mean that?"

"Of course," Lelouch responds, fully prepared to take his statement and run with it as far as he can, but he decides on a better option. "And you know what else, Suzaku? The seahorses… I think it's something that's still under study, so… you could be right."

As long as Suzaku is pacified it doesn't matter.

It's not like Lelouch wants those seahorses anyway.

He doesn't.

Really.

Suzaku lets out a deep breath, "Thank you, Lelouch. You have no idea how much that means to me." he lifts his head, eyes red and his cheeks stained by tears, but there is a small smile on his lips and it's like seeing a rainbow at the end of a storm.

Too bad the worst has probably yet to come.

"You have no idea how much you mean to me." Lelouch smiles back, pinching Suzaku's cheek affectionately.

Something of a quiet laugh slips out of Suzaku's smile.

"Well, hello, Mr. Romantic. I haven't seen you in a while," he teases but greedily accepts the kiss Lelouch pushes against his lips.

"Tell anyone I dropped by and it's the end for you," Lelouch jokes back, fondly stroking the cheek he pinched with the back of his fingers.

He lets Suzaku laugh out a promise before he kisses the crazy's lips again.

"Listen. It's late and I'm tired, and I'm sure you're tired, so let's just go to sleep. We can continue discussing things tomorrow."

Suzaku nods, looking down at his fingers twiddling with the collar of Lelouch's short, red jacket.

"All right, we do have to get up early for school tomorrow."

Oh yeah, school: that annoying time between sleeping and running a rebellion.

Lelouch yawns, remembering just how drowsy he is.

"No, I think I'll play hooky tomorrow. It's been a long night."

What time is it anyway…?
"Lelouch, you can't skip class," Suzaku chides with another pout shaping his mouth. "Maybe if you hadn't been out so late we could have had this discussion earlier and already be asleep by now. You don't know how long I was waiting for you… Where were you, anyway? I didn't think there would be gambling matches this late."

Lelouch would feel trapped here; he would panic and scramble to form an adequate alibi… If Suzaku wasn't so naïve.

Sweet, sweet naivety. God's way of tricking the credulous into believing anything with the right finagling.

Thank you, God.

A soft hum of chuckles pops Lelouch's chest as he runs his fingers through Suzaku's hair.

"Why wouldn't something illegal take place at the shady hours of night?"

"…I guess you have a point." Suzaku approves easily despite the fretful expression. "But I wish you wouldn't stay out so late. Something could happen…"

Isn't that an understatement?

"You don't need to worry, Suzaku. Nothing happened tonight, right? I wish you wouldn't underestimate me."

Suzaku looks away with a frown, "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm used to it by now," Lelouch says with a shrug although it is a terrible thing to admit out loud; but Suzaku has been successfully swayed and distracted from the topic of Lelouch's absence tomorrow, so it's not a total loss.

It stills hurts, though.

"No, I mean the way I acted tonight. I guess my hormones are just on edge, because… well, you know."

"I don't think you're far enough along to be acting…” Lelouch pauses as a curious thought strikes his mind. "How far along are you, anyway? Did they tell you?"

"Yeah I'm… five weeks."

Five weeks.

That's a little over a month.

Thirty-five days.

Eight hundred forty hours.

Fifty thousand, four hundred minutes.

Three million, twenty-four thousand seconds.

Seems like there should have been some kind of sign during all that time…

"…That's a long time."
"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either. I feel kind of foolish since I didn't notice a change or anything that would have made me suspicious. I mean, I thought you get morning sickness when you're pregnant."

"Not all women get sick. Not everyone or everyone's body is the same. People experience things differently. But you're still pretty early, so you might get sick the longer you're pregnant."

Suzaku looks at Lelouch with a simper, "Of course."

"What?"

Suzaku shakes his head, "Nothing. I'm just happy to have a smarty-pants like you." He leans into Lelouch, nestling his nose into Lelouch's neck as his arms slide around the cage of the raven-haired boy's torso. "I just realized I didn't say it."

"Say what?" Lelouch rewinds his arms around Suzaku's shoulders.

"That I cherish you too."

Lelouch smiles.

"Is that you or the hormones talking?"

"I don't know… I think it's fifty-fifty."

They share the mirth this time along with another kiss, parting to prepare for a rejuvenating slumber.

"…Lelouch?"

"Hm?" Lelouch hums as he slings the jacket over his desk chair.

"Can I sleep here with you tonight?"

Lelouch looks at Suzaku with a sentimental grin, "You don't need to ask, Suzaku."

Suzaku smiles back—

And in an instant he's stripped down to his underwear and cuddling into Lelouch's bed, fast than a bolt of lightning. Lelouch feels a sweat drop slide down the side of his face… So fast. Suzaku just gives him a toothy beam as he lies underneath huddled blankets. Lelouch offers a mirrored version to the inhuman boy, undressing at the speed normal people use.

"So, Lloyd's given you a physical in the past?" Lelouch asks conversationally as he unzips his pants.

"Yeah."

They hit the floor in a soft plop, "…You didn't feel the need to tell me that your boss sees you naked?"

"It's professional, Lelouch. Besides, it is Lloyd we're talking about," Suzaku says flatly.

He gently folds his pants in half—"True, but, your sexy seahorse body is for my eyes only."—and
drops them over his jacket on the chair.

Suzaku laughs, "Yes of course…" he watches that skin-tight, black turtle neck roll up Lelouch's body as it is tugged off, delighting his eyes with the pale chest being exposed to him. "But what about the boys in the locker room? I've showered after gym class, you know."

Lelouch's hair falls around his face when the shirt is pulled away, their tips pointing to the smirk curling his lips.

"I can't take back what's already been done, but I can change the future by keeping you from showering… or just keep you from even going to gym class by making you skip with me." Suzaku throws Lelouch a disapproving look as he flops his shirt over his pants and jacket, still smiling mischievously. "With a baby on the way, you shouldn't be doing strenuous physical activities, anyway."

Suzaku rolls his eyes at the boy walking up to the bed, "It's only strenuous for you, Lelouch. Good thing you're not the pregnant one, I think that the baby would kill you in either pregnancy or birth."

"Like that would ever happen." Lelouch scoffs as he slips into bed.

"Which part? Being pregnant or dying because of it."

"Both, you stupid seahorse. I don't catch, so it's impossible on both fronts," he utters out with a haughty tone, snuggling down in the pocket of warmth next to Suzaku's body.

Suzaku spoons into his side, laying his arm on Lelouch's chest with drumming fingers.

"…If I'm the pregnant seahorse, then wouldn't that make you the female seahorse?"

Lelouch doesn't hesitate to answer, "No. That would mean that I mated with a male seahorse. You change in this metaphor, not me." He stares at the back of his eyelids, putting a hand on Suzaku's to stop the thrumming.

"Hm, I didn't think you'd be into bestiality."

"And I didn't think you could get pregnant." He lob's his other arm over Suzaku's shoulder.

Suzaku laughs again, "Touché."

"I prefer 'checkmate.'" His face turns to the side and kisses the head lying on his shoulder. "Now shut the hell up. I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

"Yeah, yeah…" Suzaku sighs lightly with an adjustment of his body to cuddle closer and he shuts his eyes.

A few breaths fill the air with their soft sounds, but it's the blaring light from above that makes Suzaku's eyes open again.

"...Lelouch, you forgot to turn off the light."

Silence.

"Lelouch?" he cranes his head to look up at—

SNNOOOOOOOOOOORRRRE!
Suzaku's lips twitch into a positive bend and he pushes himself up on an elbow, gazing down at the peacefully firm expression Lelouch wears when he sleeps before he disentangles himself from the comforts the older boy and his bed. He steps lightly to the light switch and flicks it off, skipping back softly through the darkness. He carefully climbs back into place at Lelouch's side, replacing limbs where they were before he removed himself. He presses his lips to Lelouch's cheek, murmuring quietly as he rests his head back on Lelouch's shoulder…

"Good night, daddy."
Abortions and Erections don't Mix

"Wheel of Morality, turn, turn, turn. Tell us the lesson that we should learn." –Yakko from the Animaniacs

Ambiguous

Abortions and Erections Don't Mix

Lelouch is awakened by something hard pressing into his back.

Bump—nudge.

His weary face scrunches as he feels the pull of consciousness win against the slumberous world of his brain. The unpleasant scene of his dream is being corrupted by this rap-tap-tapping on his dreary door. It makes the horrendous chase of devilish equestrian-fish flicker away like a projector running empty film, and it is all thanks to that constant knock hitting him from behind.

It had started in the background, Lelouch realizes, as but a lame touch of reality that pounded behind the stamp-less stampede of glowing eyes and flaring nostrils he was desperately trying to flee from. Perhaps in this case he should be thankful; that place, surrounded by a feral navy of aquatic beasts gaining on him from every direction in the invisible sea he was suspended in was a situation he could not escape. A thick mass surrounded him, hugging his legs heavily and stealing air from his lungs as he felt himself sink faster and faster the harder he thrashed.

Bump—nudge.

On the other hand, this repetitive jab into his tailbone has brought him out of a snooze that, despite being feverish, was very much needed for his fatigued mind and body.

So now Lelouch is currently lying on his side as the relaxation of a sleepy splendor evaporates from his being. He's cozy and warm in the cocoon of his blankets, absentely aware of dead weight around his waist, sensing what seems to be early morning by the way weak light lies across his closed eyes. It's most likely too early to be waking, but that—

Bump—nudge-nudge.

Lelouch finally scowls with a groan, throwing his arm behind him to shove away whatever that bumping thing is. His hand first hits a warm body then it falls in the slim trench between his back and that other form where his hand grabs—

Nudge-nudge.

His eyes slowly split open, eyebrows very tightly knitted together. He squeezes a little at the thing in his hand and it reacts to his action with a thrust and faint moan making the arm sagging over his hip tighten. He sighs, his groggy mind throwing all of his wrong deductions away, and forces as much life as he can into his lethargic limb to shove the nudger away from him. It strikes back with another swift nudge, making Lelouch growl and grab the hungry hip behind him.

"Suzaku!" he complains loudly, pushing on the embodiment of his annoyance this morning.
When he hears a snort and a slurred "Huh?" he knows he's awakened the boy belonging to this horn.

"What is it?" Suzaku mumbles with a sluggish voice.

Lelouch continues to glare at nothing, "Despite popular belief I don't like it when you ram your erection into my ass." He groused as he pushes the boy away again. "Keep your morning-wood to yourself."

Lelouch doesn't need to see the flush of rose-red on Suzaku's face to know it blooms when he hears the boy gasp.

"I-I'm sorry Lelouch!" Suzaku stammers skittishly; his body, erection and all, vanishing from Lelouch's back in clumsy shambles that shake the bed.

"Don't worry about it," he mutters as he closes his eyes and tosses the blanket high over his shoulder, burrowing deeper into his heavenly blankets fully intending to go back to sleep.

Intending is exactly the right word. Leave it to Suzaku to make a problem out of a little excitement.

Actually, Suzaku alone is one big problem.

Rustle-rustle.

The irritated wrinkles previously furrowing Lelouch's brow take root again as Suzaku's shuffling persists on the other side of the bed.

Wiggle-rustle.

Lelouch just tries to dig deeper into his covers as if they'll protect him from the fidgets of restless arousal, his eye twitching.

Squirm-rustle.

He closes his eyes tighter, curling into a ball and nearly humming a tune to himself like a child trying to keep the monsters under his bed at bay.

Fidget-rustle.

"What is your damn problem!?" Lelouch exclaims as he heaves his body up to a sitting position, whirling around to face Suzaku.

Suzaku stares at him like a deer caught in the headlights, his body finally freezing – although it's too late for that now – as if waiting for the oncoming collision to plow into him. Lelouch glares intensely down at him like an irritable old man, watching green eyes shift from time to time before that pink face turns away completely.

"Well?" Lelouch demands, his voice a brittle shard of ice hanging precariously over Suzaku's head. Suzaku glances over at him, sinking under the blanket with only his eyes peeking out above them.

"Are you not going to answer my question?"

"…I'm sorry," Suzaku mumbles out quietly.

"That doesn't answer my question."
Suzaku connects their eyes but remains silent.

Lelouch sighs and rubs his hand over his face, wondering why Suzaku is acting so peculiarly. Perhaps he's being too brusque, but good Lord this is ridiculous. He's acting like a child. Never mind the fact that Lelouch is still very tired and not a morning person.

"Suzaku, what are you doing?" Lelouch asks, trying to soften his tone. "Why don't you just go to the bathroom?"

Suzaku's eyes sweep away again with a muffled mutter.

Lelouch has to remind himself to breathe calmly, to not spook this little critter shivering under his predator stare.

"What did you say?" his words still come out strained, any sweet tones he'd hoped for are far from sticking.

Suzaku shifts slightly, "It's embarrassing."

Is that all?

"Suzaku…" Lelouch starts with another sigh, leaning against his bed rails. "It's not like anyone will be watching you."

"I know that…"

"Then what's the problem?" Lelouch presses again.

Another quick glance is all Lelouch gets before Suzaku suddenly turns over, leaving Lelouch's eyebrow to lift at his back.

"Suzaku?"

"I'm sorry I woke you up. I promise I'll be still now," he says mechanically from inside the soft shell of Lelouch's blanket.

Lelouch stares at the messy bush of brown hair standing above the snowy mound of sheets under which Suzaku is hiding. The boy is keeping his word, not a single jostle animates his human hill, and somehow, in this straggling silence, Lelouch feels guilt nudge into his gut. He shouldn't, it's not like he's done anything wrong; it wouldn't be the first time he's snapped at Suzaku and it's never marred the brunette's sensitivity before, so…

"Whatever," Lelouch mutters with a turn in the other direction, yanking the blanket back up to his neck as he flops onto his side. Lelouch closes his eyes with a tight scowl; it's much too early to be dealing with Suzaku's emotions right now—

"…I guess my hormones are just on edge, because… well, you know."

Lelouch cringes, his mind streaming heavier guilt into his stomach with that pesky memory of his. Not that he could forget last night; even his dreams won't let him escape reality – although, they rarely do.

Lelouch spies over his shoulder, bottom lip curling petulantly at the nagging feeling to flip over and console this seemingly stubborn and introverted Suzaku instead of hunkering down for another hour or so until he has to get up and prepare to skip a full day of school. It isn't that he doesn't care
for Suzaku, because, really, he did give up seahorses just to make him feel better, and that is a gesture not to sneeze at; he's just so damn tired – it doesn't matter that he's planned to skip school today to make up for lost sleep by snoozing up on the roof or in the library…

_Damn it all to Hell…_

Lelouch _knew_ he was going to do this before he even deliberated it, before he rolls over and touches Suzaku's shoulder and murmurs words coated in candy sweetness.

"Suzaku, are you all right?"

Suzaku is unresponsive for a moment, perhaps in hesitation if Lelouch may say so, and then he makes an offhanded shrug that pleads for attention rather than screams for privacy.

Lelouch rubs Suzaku's shoulder over the covers in a fashion that reminds him of his mother—but that is a tangent best avoided at the moment.

"I know something's bothering you. Want to talk about it?" Lelouch leans closer so he can observe the down-cast gaze of Suzaku's eyes. "Hm?"

Suzaku just fidgets again; making a small mewl that reminds Lelouch of children being difficult on purpose. Typically now would be the line where the parent will announce an inability to read minds, at least that's what Lelouch's mother—once again, a train of thought that doesn't need to be boarded right now. Yet, Lelouch happens to be the bearer of such a talent. However, Suzaku's mind is a place best admired from afar, if _admired_ at all.

"Come on, Suzaku." Lelouch coos, slipping closer to said boy and resting his chin on Suzaku's shoulder. "If you don't talk to me I can't help you."

Besides, relationships – _good_ relationships – are maintained with communication.

"It's nothing…" Suzaku insists with a coy glance.

"Nothing," Lelouch repeats skeptically, remembering the shallow pit of his patience as he slips his arm underneath the blanket to drape over Suzaku's side. His fingertips run over the squirmy muscles of Suzaku's abdominal region, making a shiver ripple over Suzaku's body. Lelouch immediately feels the crop of tiny bumps sprout over Suzaku's skin.

"Crap, Lelouch! Your hand is freezing!"

"Is it? I hadn't noticed." Lelouch smirks, raking his fingers farther over Suzaku's stomach.

In all fairness, he really hadn't.

But that doesn't mean he'll stop.

"_Lelouch._"—Suzaku wriggles—"_Stop._"

"You don't want to help me warm them up?" Lelouch teases with a sultry sweetness in Suzaku's ear as he slides his hand lower despite the grip slapped around his wrist. "Your body is so~ warm, Suzaku." he flicks his tongue over Suzaku's ear, watching it turn red like he flipped a switch. "Can't I have some of your warmth?"

"_Nn!_" Suzaku tries to jerk his head away, foiled by the pillow cushioning it. "You're gonna _steal_ all of it—!"Suzaku's complaint is tarnished by a gasp made because of Lelouch's traveling fingers.
Lelouch's smirk digs deeper and wider across his lips, his hand squeezing that familiar thing between Suzaku's legs that's no softer than it was when it knocked him out of his dream.

"My, my, my~! What's this?" Lelouch sings slightly, curiously caressing the hard flesh over a thin pair of underpants.

Suzaku flushes, "Don't." he wriggles his legs.

"Don't?" Lelouch questions mockingly. "You don't want me to take care of this for you?" he caringly rubs his hand along Suzaku's erection, watching his face purse.

"...You'll probably kill it," he whines in a wiggle.

"'Kill it'?" Lelouch repeats resentfully, stopping his hand. "I'm glad to know my touches are suddenly so fatally repulsive."

"You know what I mean, Lelouch."

"Do I?"

"Of course you do! Your hands are damn cold! You know what, uh, cold temperatures do..."

"But don't you want it dead?"

"Not like that!" Suzaku says anxiously.

Lelouch grins sharply, "So then perhaps something more hot and pleasurable would be better to 'kill' this excitement of yours?"

Suzaku doesn't answer but Lelouch can see the gears in his head turning, most likely trying to consider how serious the offer of a morning blow-job to eliminate his morning-wood really is.

Well, that's an easy question to answer.

Lelouch whips the blanket off in a brash motion – ignoring Suzaku's confused howl – and starts pulling at Suzaku's underwear like a starving animal that smells meat buried in a pile of rubbish. Suzaku squirms in a show of an attempt that the notion of having oral sex so early in the morning is absolutely appalling, but his struggles are weak and the appetite for such attention is more than present between his legs. A fog quickly rolls over his eyes as he silences the counterfeit noises of reluctance toppling out of his nose and it makes Lelouch smile over a small victory that probably isn't as big a victory as he believes it to be.

"Well..." Suzaku starts, making a good effort to sound unsure, releasing his hold on the band of his shorts. "I guess I should take advantage of this before I can't anymore."

"What do you mean?" Lelouch quickly makes work of wrenching Suzaku's shorts off his hips.

"In the later months of pregnancy, I'm not allowed to... ya' know..." he answers shyly, cheeks powdered pink at Lelouch who is staring adoringly down at his crouch.

Lelouch's mind skids to a halt and it leaves his expression in a wordless gape for a second or two, his eyes blind to the task he revealed in an easy hoist. He can't say he's exactly surprised, but he didn't expect Suzaku to come up with such a daunting decision all on his own. This is his – their – future, after all.

"So you've already decided?" he tries to ask casually, wondering if an accusatory waver shivers his
voice as he grabs Suzaku's—

"Decided what?"

Lelouch looks up at the doe-eyed gaze, hoping that isn't a foreshadow of a headache that ghosts over Suzaku's words.

"That you're going to keep it."

Suzaku tilts his head, "What do you mean? What else would I do with it? It's not like I can stash it away for later."

"Stash away for—?" Lelouch shakes his head, "No, I know that. I'm talking about... the alternative."

"Alternative?" Suzaku echoes like a child — there seems to be a theme there.

Lelouch really doesn't want to spell it out; he'd rather slap the boy for being so green.

"Getting an abortion."

Nothing follows his statement for a long, painful moment with only Suzaku's empty stare on his face and Suzaku's throbbing—

"An abortion," Suzaku says. "What's that?"

That probably was a premonition of a headache Lelouch heard in Suzaku's words before.

But damn it if he isn't going to flirt with the possible pain.

"...Are you serious?" Lelouch asks incredulously.

But of course his tone couldn't be any clearer: you really ARE an idiot, aren't you?

Suzaku starts to scowl, "I'm sorry I'm not as educated as you are Mr. Genius. Not everyone can know everything like you do."

Lelouch sighs at the brunette's sudden snap, dropping his gaze to get an eyeful of Suzaku's naked— insert euphemism here—and immediately releases it with a twist of his stomach.

Abortion can really kill the mood.

"Suzaku," Lelouch sighs again looking Suzaku in the eye. "I'm not trying to insult you, it just seems like this is something you should know about. It's common knowledge."

Suzaku just glares — apparently that's a step in the wrong direction.

"...It doesn't matter, I guess," Lelouch mutters. "An abortion is a medical procedure that terminates the pregnancy."

Doesn't the word "abort" ring any bells?

"Terminates...?" Suzaku articulates like the word is sour on his tongue. "Well why would I think about that? It sounds awful!"

"I never said it was pleasant. But it's still an option that—"
"No!" Suzaku cuts off heatedly. "I don't want to kill anything!"

"Let me finish!" Lelouch snaps back, brow creased in agitation. "Of course no one wants to abort anything, but you're not thinking about this rationally."

"Excuse~ my emotions Lelouch!" Suzaku shouts, scrambling off the bed – boxers hugging his thighs – and leaping to his feet. "Please do excuse the fact that I'm not a heartless ass like you!"

Lelouch's face contorts angrily, "Wait a second! What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He also jumps to his feet.

"I don't know, Lelouch – genius of the universe – why don't you tell me what that's supposed to mean?"

"How could I possibly—?" Lelouch cuts himself off.

Yes, he knew what Suzaku meant.

No, he isn't going to get distracted by petty name-calling.

"Look," he utters, his voice stretched tight to conceal his annoyance. "We're getting off track." He slaps his hand over Suzaku's mouth when he sees it fly open to no doubt blurt another insulting remark. "You want to call me heartless? You have no idea what you're getting into and being a stubborn ignoramus right now isn't going to help anything."

Suzaku thrashes away from Lelouch's hand, "Don't call me stupid! You're the one being insensitive!"

"Suzaku, you're misunderstanding me!"

Suzaku shakes his head vehemently, "I can't believe you! I can't believe you'd ask me to do something, something so despicable!"

"I'm not asking you to do anything—!"

"Damn strai—!"

"Don't interrupt me! I'm not finished!" Lelouch roars, making Suzaku's mouth clamp shut. "I'm just trying to tell you that you should at least explore your options before you decide on anything. Of course I don't expect you to do anything you don't want to do nor would I force you too." Lelouch sighs exasperatedly, grasping desperately at his own forehead, "Christ, Suzaku. Please try to understand where I'm coming from."

Suzaku just stares at him with a tight frown and sharp eyes, his face flustered by being slapped out of the soft haze of sleep by all this squabbling. Lelouch is still reminding himself to breathe calmly: in, out. In, out. In, out. In, out.

And it is as he casts a glance at Suzaku's stewing stance that he realizes the absurdity of this scene: arguing at the top of his lungs with his very erect, and supposedly pregnant, counter-part about abortion in the creeping hours of morning, both of them standing face to face in their underwear – Suzaku having the decency to pull his back up…

In, out.

In, out.
"So then, help me understand," Suzaku finally mutters.

Lelouch looks at him blankly in the eye, still kneading the start of a headache in his forehead.

Suzaku shrugs, "I can't read your mind, you know."

Lelouch wants to smile at that, but his energy is limited to the heavy drop of his arm to his side.

"I just don't want you to feel like you're forced into doing anything, that's all."

"Trust me, Lelouch; I won't do anything I don't want to do." Suzaku reminds tersely, his bare foot lightly tapping the wood floor as he repositions it. "But that doesn't answer my question."

Isn't that Lelouch's line?

"You're telling me that I'm not prepared and that I need to 'consider' my options. But what you're really saying is that you want me to get an abortion, isn't it?"

"No," Lelouch snaps with a scowl. "I will support whatever decision you make, I just don't think you're carefully assessing which is the better option."

Suzaku is glowering tamely, "All right. What might the 'better option' be?"

Lelouch thought he could certainly turn this argument around, lead it down a road of smiles and kisses that leaves this nasty discussion in the dust.

He's not so sure that's how it will end now.

If anything, he might be the one left in the dust.

"Don't get testy; I'm just trying to help you. I'm your partner, that's what I'm supposed to do, right? I know this is a delicate topic and it's certainly not an easy choice, but you have to look at it from all angles before you know what to do. And sometimes, Suzaku, the less pleasant one is the best one," he says with a slight frown. "Have you thought any of this out or do you think that this'll all just be some glossy chapters of your life and then the baby comes with a happily ever after? There's more to think about then just whether or not a decision is immoral. I don't think I need to stress to you the risks you'll face with this pregnancy — it could be bad for both of you. Not to mention you're in the military fighting in combat and a princess's Knight." Of course Lelouch is going to play that angle, how could he not? "And we're only seventeen-year-old high school students in the midst of all this terrorist activity. Is this a world you want to bring a child into?"

Lelouch ends sucking in a breath, being careful to not tack on his silent thoughts: What about Zero? What will happen to Japan — what will NOT happen to Britannia? What about Nunnally? How can I change anything if I'm stuck at home?

He watches Suzaku's conflicting gaze as no response rears its ugly head out of that boy's frown.

This waiting silence is almost unnerving.

Maybe Suzaku is really taking in his words this time.

Maybe Suzaku will calm down and—

Suzaku snorts, "Right, so all that equals me getting an abortion. Why don't you just admit it?"

IN…
Lelouch is close to throwing in the towel.

Or sitting in a corner and crying until his blood-pressure sinks to a healthy level.

…OUT

"Suzaku, that isn't fair."

"You just don't want this baby, do you?" Suzaku's eyes are glimmering. "Well I'm sorry this happened. Do you think I wanted this?" Really glimmering.

Lelouch's stomach twists with more guilt, "No, that's not what I said."

But that's certainly what it sounded like.

Suzaku shakes his head, "Yes it is. You couldn't have spelled it out any clearer." Tears are wavering in his eyes, like he's trying to hold them back with his weakening voice. "That's why everything you said points to the alternative."

"Suzaku…" Lelouch feels helpless, watching Suzaku's watery eyes look away from him.

He already feels Suzaku walking away from him.

"I'll admit that I'm not ready, and I don't know anything about being a parent, but I had hoped that you would be by my side not telling me to just throw it away. Are you really that selfish?"

Selfish?

"I would find a way to make it work, Lelouch. If that means quitting or taking a leave of absence from the military, then so be it! It doesn't matter what age I am or what the state of the world is or whatever else you said! I am and will be responsible for this, this child and I won't just get rid of it like it's a piece of garbage! Because it's inconvenient!"

"I'm not telling you to throw it away, I'm just—" Lelouch feels his mind tumble to a stop again. Did Suzaku just say what he thinks he did? Suzaku would quit the military? Is that a bluff? Is Suzaku just getting carried away and speaking without thinking? Should Lelouch take advantage of this or would that be… crossing a line?

"Why don't you just punch me in the stomach right now!" Suzaku nearly bawls, reining Lelouch back into the conversation.

"Suzaku, that's…! I'm not…!" Lelouch is taken aback, feeling his skin burn underneath Suzaku's blistering glare with tears running down those angry cheeks. "Be reasonable! I never said I wanted you to do anything! Why aren't you listen—?"

"Quit telling me to be reasonable and rational!" Suzaku shouts, white knuckles spotting the red hands fisted at his sides. "I can't talk to you when you're like this! Why don't you just leave?"

Lelouch gawks.

"You can't talk to me when I'm like this? You're the one being unbelievably difficult – not to mention you're dragging this argument out longer than necessary! It almost feels like you're just trying to waste everyone's time with all this superfluous bickering!" Lelouch hollers in a rage.

"Oh right, Lelouch. Everything is always my fault, isn't it?" Suzaku counters likewise. "It's my fault we're still arguing, it's my fault I'm pregnant! It takes two to freakin' tango, you know!"
"Yes Suzaku, that's exactly what I was saying! Everything is your fault!" Lelouch yells sardonically. "Your very existence is a plague to this Earth!"

"Get out!" Suzaku barks furiously, swinging his pointing hand to the door behind him.

"I'm not leaving! This is my—!"

Lelouch is suddenly scrambling to keep his balance whilst not ramming his face into the wall opposite his bedroom door. His hands slap to the wall, face pale and sweaty as he feels his stomach catch up with him when he hears his bedroom door hiss shut behind him.

How the…?

He whips around so fast his already unsteady footing sways underneath him as he flounders back to his bedroom door with a dizzy head.

"Hey! Open the door!"

"No! Go away!"

Lelouch has officially reached the bottom of the barrel, his patience but a distant memory as he pounds on the door, wondering why the builders didn't put a number pad on the outside of the room too.

"Goddamn it Suzaku! Open the damned door!"

"I said go away!"

"It's my room! You should have stormed out if you wanted to end the conversation not force me out!"

"I don't care! Go away!"

IN, OUT.

IN, OUT.

IN, OUT.

Lelouch's hands are splayed out on either side of his head as he feels his headache pulse against the door, practically welcoming an aneurism to come and save him from this fool he's managed to be reunited and fall in love with despite all the odds.

All those annoying little odds…

They should have tried harder.

"Suzaku," Lelouch begins, hanging his words on the weakest shred of sanity he has. "At least open the door so I can get my uniform."

"No!"

Lelouch hits the door again.

"Come on! I can't go out in just my underwear!"
"Master Lelouch?"

Lelouch nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of his name, grimacing at the sight of Sayoko's concerned and bewildered expression.

How long has she been standing there?

"Is there a problem?" she asks politely but curiously, glancing between him and the door… and his lack of clothing.

It figures that one of the rare times he decides to sleep in his private apparel is when he'll be forced to parade around in it for all to see. It doesn't matter that it's only three other people who will see him, and that two thirds of them don't count because they're either blind or have already seen him naked.

This sight is just not for Sayoko's eyes.

"Ah, Sayoko…" Lelouch tries to chuckle good-naturedly, but the weak resonance of it makes the situation all the more awkward and pathetic.

Regardless, she seems unfazed, "I heard a lot of noise so I came… Is there a problem?"

He leans away from the door, tapping his fingers on its locked surface, wondering just how much she might have heard.

"…Not at all. It's nothing. Have you already started breakfast, or have you woken Nunnally up yet?" Lelouch speaks quickly, hoping she'll take the hint and go on about her business.

"No."

He smiles a strained smile, "Then, could you please?" facing the door again.

She hesitates a moment, "Are you sure there's nothing wrong?"

She's a kind soul, but right now is not the time for her motherly manners.

"It's nothing, really," he reassures calmly, clenching his hand on the door, making a civil knock—

"Mukou ike!"

Lelouch gnashes his teeth, hearing a small gasp come from Sayoko at Suzaku's very unfriendly way of telling Lelouch to screw off – Lelouch has spent enough time with his Japanese terrorists to learn all of their colourful words.

So Suzaku wants to curse in another language? Well, two can play at that game.

"Tu baise de!" Lelouch bellows at the door with one last pound – feeling a bit better in the fact that Suzaku knows absolutely no French –, his skin stinging even as he storms away from the door.

"Master Lelouch…?" Sayoko calls – the poor dear is very confused.

"I'm taking a shower!" he growls out before realizing he's yelling at just an innocent bystander. He looks over his shoulder, speaking through tight lips, "Can you please find me a clean uniform to wear to school today?"

She nods and so he continues to march towards the bathroom.
He wouldn't have thought he would go from nearly pleasuring Suzaku to nearly killing him in one morning…

Then again, it wouldn't be the first time something similar has happened.

••

"You're going to walk me to class today?" Nunnally asks happily, hand searching the air for another.

"That's right," Lelouch replies sweetly, grabbing her hand in reassurance. "It's been a while since I've done that."

She nods, a firm smile on her lips, "Yes, that's true, but you don't have to if it's a bother."

"It isn't a bother at all. How could you say something like that?" he frowns at her statement.

She giggles lightly, squeezing his hand, "Forgive me, big brother. Of course I want you all to myself."

He smiles.

Nunnally is his one purity in this world. There are no quarrels to shove through, there are no passive-aggressive remarks to avoid, no glares or scowls to reflect back, there's no stubbornness to run into… no pregnancies to deal with… (And if he has his way, that's something he'll never need to handle involving her.) She is perfect; his one true, sweet escape.

"And you too, Suzaku," she adds with a cheery ring. "Won't you walk with us today?"

Unlike that stupid seahorse he's managed to get his tail tangled with.

Lelouch passes a curious glance at Suzaku from across the table where he is moodily picking at the food Sayoko promptly prepared for them. Thunderclouds are swelling over his head, sparking out bad vibes and rolling grumbles that just happen to be too quiet for Lelouch to properly hear.

It all feels absurd.

Suzaku wasn't even the one that got kicked out of his own room in only his undershorts.

However, with a single word directed at him by Nunnally's mouth it's like the sun breaking through the gloom and doom of his mood. He smiles brightly, adjusts his voice away from the mumbles that bite at Lelouch's nerves like tiny piranhas.

It makes Lelouch wonder why he's bothered involving himself with this kid in the first place, but then he remembers their good times – which just happen to include many of their more intimate moments – and he understands.

He understands that he's also an idiot, that it is.

After all, it takes one to know one, right?

Suzaku smiles at Nunnally, glaring at Lelouch's glance.

Lelouch glares back.

"I don't know, I wouldn't want to interfere with your, uh, alone time with Lelouch." Suzaku tries to
deny, and here Lelouch is torn. He'd rather not be near Suzaku right now, but with Nunnally's wishes tipping the scales, he never really had a chance in the first place. He just about kicked Suzaku out on his ass – see how he likes being thrown out – but Nunnally was of course exceedingly happy that he was here, and just in time for breakfast too, "...are you going to eat with us Suzaku?"

It was inevitable and they both knew it.

So, the war of glares ensued with some hard kicks under the table at Suzaku's expense. Suzaku wouldn't dare risk hurting Nunnally, so all his retaliations were reduced to bitter scowls and foul hand signals that Lelouch could just look away from.

Lelouch's pretty certain he won this battle.

"You're not interfering at all, right, Lelouch?"

Lelouch's eyes switch between Nunnally's smiling face, bright like a Morning Glory, to Suzaku's frowning face, dark like a dumpster.

"Of course not," he smiles at Suzaku and flips him off. "But if you're too busy, we'll understand."

Yes, he insulted and helped Suzaku at the same time. What of it?

Suzaku's brooding clouds build and Lelouch can see his teeth grit as he pushes himself up from the table with fisted hands.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, but I have to meet with Princess Euphemia this morning, so I should really get going."

Suzaku really has no class, does he? He announces to Lelouch last night that he is, undoubtedly, carrying their child and then runs off to play Knight for his fair princess – the sister of his lover – the following morning?

_Tactless ass._

Nunnally's smile fades a little, but her tone is still pleasant, "That's alright Suzaku. This just means you'll owe me – so be careful!"

Suzaku, having nearly stomped around the table, grasps her hand with a smile.

"It's a date," he kisses her cheek.

Lelouch would kick him in the shin for being "smooth" on Nunnally if it didn't make her giggle in delight.

"Don't forget!" she playfully nags, pointing a finger at him.

He laughs, genuinely, and takes his leave.

"Don't worry, I won't forget." Then his eyes narrow at Lelouch when he adds, "Monday morning, I'm all yours," and he wags a crude hand gesture Lelouch's way.

_Real original you stupid jackass,_ Lelouch mentally scorns as he stands up to bring Nunnally to her class.

Luckily for them both, Nunnally seemed completely ignorant to the ruckus they had made earlier
as she didn't mention it. Or maybe she was just feigning ignorance for their sake. Sayoko had said she could hear them from the kitchen…

Come to think of it, Lelouch isn't even sure if Suzaku can get an abortion.

••

Lelouch felt too restless to lurk around the rooftop all day after he had walked and chatted with Nunnally to her class and soon found himself brushing past Tamaki’s obnoxious calls to lock himself in his private room aboard the Black Knight's Submarine – it was more like he just had to get away from there, feeling too claustrophobic and… trapped. Any other day he might have gotten Rivalz to go gambling with him, but he needed to brood in solitude. Of course, running away to this fortress while dressed up like the proverbial superhero did make him feel very much like a child hiding in their tree-house or in their closet…

Lelouch swallowed that childish feeling and busied himself with checking over the attack plans on Kyushu which they're supposed to be engaging in within a few more days. He began a chess match against himself as his usual method of helping himself think – not that Kyushu is a main concern for him – but so far his focus is as sharp as Tamaki's wit. He's tried to concentrate, but it's hard when the sole subject trying to distract him is the same subject he's supposed to be thinking about.

Seems like Suzaku is always weighing heavily on his mind no matter what, but he has always been one of surprises – and they're never pleasant ones either: first was him being in the Britannian military, then the secret of patricide, then the Lancelot pilot and Euphemia's knight all at once, and now he's pregnant… Lelouch never saw that last one coming, but he'll just have to deal with it all the same.

Except this time he has to walk side by side with Suzaku's bull-headed attitude instead of trying to find a way around it.

The argument this morning has made this whole affair more realistic than when Suzaku nervously spoke the news last night. But their confrontation has also shined a light on other things other than the ugly reality he came home to. Suzaku's adamant reaction should have been predicted, but Lelouch didn't think that he would take it so personally. Maybe Lelouch is being too cold, maybe he's just too ignorant to the emotions pregnancy can bring to a person. He probably should have tried putting himself in Suzaku's shoes before suggesting something so controversial.

Conversely, he was trying to think about Suzaku when he suggested the "despicable" as the boy had called it. Aside from the obvious problems that can occur during his pregnancy, Lelouch doesn't want Suzaku to feel obligated to have this baby – that was the message he tried and failed to get across this morning. While Lelouch will support Suzaku the best he can in any decision he makes, he still wants him to clearly think his choices over before just impulsively picking a path and walking down it without knowing where it will lead.

Lelouch has always been Suzaku's compass but such a tool is useless if it's ignored.

Lelouch should feel relieved by Suzaku's declaration about not doing anything he doesn't want to but Lelouch knows Suzaku is just never one to think anything through. He's not so sure that if he were in Suzaku's place he'd be so resolute about keeping it; maybe that's why he pushed the issue so much.

However, it's not like Lelouch is exactly positive about what to do either. He's probably just as confused and scared as Suzaku – which is why Lelouch has strengthened his resolve to sway Suzaku to his—Zero's side. He'd like to not use trickery or foul play, but sometimes one has to get
their hands dirty if they want to accomplish anything. It's bad enough Lelouch had to unleash his Geass on Suzaku just to keep the idiot from killing himself with that *destroyer-of-all-life* beam—Lelouch's *bastard* of a brother decided to blast upon them—

Lelouch accidentally knocks a black bishop off the chess board in front of him with a frown.

Schneizel – like that *fiasco* that happened just days ago – is best disregarded at the moment lest Lelouch wants to worsen his headache.

Headaches aren't life-threatening, are they?

…*Are* they?

At the moment Lelouch is trying to relax, trying to be as stoic as he can be whenever he pulls Zero's strings, but there's only so much refuge a paranoid prince can find within his own brain. His heavy violet eyes are strategically scanning the chess board in a fight against himself, but they're caught by the effervescent shade of C.C.'s long, thriving hair. She's apparently indulging herself with being a lush in his private quarters – where she currently likes to nest, not that he'll complain – as she lounges carelessly on a sofa opposite him with a stout coffee table between them. He drums his fingers over the dark mask nestled in his lap, chewing his tongue as he ponders whether or not he should tempt a migraine – because, really, isn't this getting a little overplayed? – before he should shove off to make it in time for the Student Council meeting.

Seeking council with C.C. is something of a last resort to help alleviate his worries, but it is more on the base of curiosity than out of hope that she'll be able to give him some of that wisdom gained by "old-age."

They say that curiosity kills the cat, but, why is it that the cat never *stays* dead?

"C.C…. what do you think about abortion?" he asks her as he ducks under the table to retrieve the fallen black piece—

"Abortion?" she asks not bothering to look at him, favoring the ends of her hair as she twiddles with them. "Why, did you get that Shirley girl knocked up?"

—only to tumble more pieces over when his head decides it wants to slam into the table, making black and white fall like hail to the steel floor.

"No way," he snaps, rubbing his head with a slight scowl and sitting upright again.

*Stupid table…*

She grins only in her voice, "I hope she never learns how disgusted you are by the thought alone. So it must be someone else then…?" she drawls in a pondering tone as she continues to tease her hair and Lelouch feels like he might throw up – he's not sure why. It must be a physical reaction to her by now; because he doesn't know what else he'll do if she guesses correctly. "So someone's finally deflowered your si—?"

"Don't you even *dare* finish that sentence," Lelouch threatens with his voice rumbling like an erupting volcano. "Or that beloved pizza chain of yours will tragically become some *accidental* casualties of those terrible terrorist attacks since they *are* an extension of Britannia."

Her eyes dart to him, "…You wouldn't."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Lelouch smirks a little.
She's silent a moment, turbines from the submarine humming in her place with taps from a chess game being reassembled.

"Will you bring me some pizza if I answer you?"

"This isn't a bargain, C.C. There is no worth to your opinion."

"Then why should I even bother if it's so worthless?"

Lelouch clenches his jaw, "Then don't." he slaps the final piece down a bit forcefully.

Of course she would be difficult and twist his words – but really, he should have seen that coming, it wasn't very smart on his part.

Another quiet pause as her golden eyes trail over him like he's a map she cannot decipher.

"Is there something wrong? You seem more irritable than normal."

"I'm surprised you care enough to ask, witch," he derides offhandedly, checking the time—damn, he's already late.

"Don't confuse it with caring, I'm just curious. If it's something life-threatening, then I might care."

"It isn't." Yet. "Just never mind. You are no help as always."

"I try," C.C. says drolly, her catty smirk painting in his mind as he dons his mask.

"Well that's an efficient effort you make, C.C." he says in an easy slide of his voice as he strides to the door. "Shame it doesn't bring you that pizza any faster." Lelouch stalks out feeling like he just wasted the day.

It seems that C.C.'s wisdom is really worthless after all.

Or, rather, it isn't worth more cranial agony.

••

Lelouch stumbles through the door with a grimace, immediately grabbing every eye in the room including one swift and green glower.

"Lulu! You're late!" Milly complains.

Lelouch stares at her with a miserably cloudy expression, "Sorry, I overslept."

"The whole school day!?" Rivalz blurts out. "Didn't you sleep last night?"

Lelouch shuffles to the table and plops down in a chair, a weak chuckle falling out of his mouth.

"I slept, just not very well…" he says at length, realizing the strange look the cast is giving him – minus one Japanese boy. He rubs a hand through his hair with a yawn, relishing how polished his acting skills have become. "Anyway, what have I missed?"

With that cue, Milly drops a folder in front of him, "Just planning the festival – like we've been doing this whole week. Of course you wouldn't know that, what with your constant absences."

Passive-aggressive much?
Lelouch slaps his hand on the folder, "Yeah, you don't need to get parental on me."

Milly smirks, "Well, someone needs to. I think you deserve a spanking from mommy for skipping school today."

Rivalz is oddly heartbroken by her statement – definitely too much information revealed there.

Shirley turns beet red – typical even for an amnesiac Shirley.

Nina is much too involved in her computer to take notice of anything outside of whatever that cyber box shows her – also typical of Nina, nothing that should cause concern and yet something that probably _should_ cause concern.

Suzaku seems to gleam at her in distaste with a blush touching his cheeks – a hint of jealously, no?

Arthur just proceeds to lick himself on the table in front of Suzaku – yes, he's licking _that_ place.

Lelouch just rolls his eyes, flipping the folder open, "Walked right into that one, I suppose."

Milly laughs and then continues to prattle on about something else grossly inappropriate that proceeds to make Shirley and Rivalz squawk in splutters, but all Lelouch observes is Suzaku.

Thankfully Suzaku seems to have calmed down since this morning, not that he looks like he'll become Mr. Snuggle Bear with Lelouch any time soon. Maybe it's because they spent the day apart from each other that he's gotten a chance to cool off. Maybe it's just because Suzaku cannot properly display his emotions to Lelouch while they're surrounded by their peers; that must be why Suzaku is flat-out ignoring him during the Student Council meeting, even sitting at opposite sides of the table to pretend working – at least, Lelouch is pretending to work. Suzaku probably knows better than to let his stewing mood flood the group by associating with Lelouch at all.

It doesn't seem to keep him from glaring, however; especially when he catches a stray look from Lelouch.

Lelouch ignores it, making his body tell the lies of his schoolboy façade: calm, cool, collected, and carelessly lazy.

Whether or not this pisses Suzaku off more doesn't really matter because at this point Lelouch is already in the doghouse; moreover, Lelouch isn't going to bring any attention to himself with being as rigid as a grumpy stump… At any rate, Suzaku's body language speaks volumes and will only get the less desired attention from everyone else around him.

Like from nosey Milly.

At some point, she invites herself to sit next to Lelouch, tapping his shoulder about some financial business, but as he fishes for the papers her murmuring voice sneaks into his ear.

"Do you know what's bothering Suzaku? He's been acting strange all day."

Lelouch glances at the boy in question, seeing that he's wrapped up in trying to pry Arthur off his hand.

Lelouch shrugs, "Why are you asking me?"

Milly stares at him.

"…What?"
"Aren't you his best friend?"

"Aren't you just being nosey?"

"Lulu, how can you say such a thing?" she asks, faking injury.

"Because it's the truth," he answers plainly. "If you wanted to know you would just ask him, wouldn't you? But instead you're asking me because you want to be indirect and add drama to anything you can get your grubby hands on."

"...Actually, I'm asking you because I think it has something to do with you."

Lelouch blinks at her but looks away when he hears Suzaku shout, seeing a swipe of cat claws slashing at Suzaku's other hand with Shirley squealing in the background as Rivalz laughs heartily from the side—

"What makes you think that?" he turns his eyes back to Milly.

She smiles slightly, "The two of you haven't spoken a word to each other since you've gotten here."

—Shirley cries again as Suzaku starts to stumble with Arthur's claws reaching for skin as Rivalz is doubled over laughing—

"Is that strange? We don't always talk during meetings."

—Shirley flees as Suzaku flails around, trying to shake Arthur off like overly sticky tape with a flock of papers emerging around them, she runs blindly into Rivalz—

"It isn't unusual, but Suzaku typically greets everyone, including you even when you're late. He didn't do that today. Not even a chide."

—Rivalz literally chokes on his laughter when Shirley's back collides with him, sending them both to the floor in a frantic heap—

Lelouch hums, looking over as Suzaku desperately staggers around, tripping over his feet and the limbs of his friends—

"He's probably just mad because I skipped today. He's never approved of that and I guess he's fed up."

—Rivalz cries out after Suzaku steps on his hand, making the brunette flounder to keep his balance—

"Well, you shouldn't skip so much, Lelouch. Suzaku isn't the only one that disapproves so just kiss and make up already!"

—But Arthur lunges at his face, forcing Suzaku to lurch away by reflex and so he topples to the floor beside Nina—

Lelouch looks at her from the corner of his eye, reveling in her ignorance to the truth of their private relationship.

—Nina looks down at him, adjusts her glasses, looks at Rivalz and Shirley's flushed scrambles to get away from their embarrassing position, and then she looks back to her computer to continue typing—
"Speaking of kissing and making up…" Milly continues as she watches the others gripe and groan. "When are you and Shirley going to stop fighting? Your 'stranger' situation right now is no fun at all…"

Lelouch looks back down at his paperwork after he briefly connects eyes with Suzaku's red-faced and wide-eyed expression as he straightened his uniform, tugging up on his collar before looking away again.

"Stop meddling in other people's affairs, Madam President," Lelouch says coolly.

Milly smirks at him again, "But it's what I do best, Vice Prez."

•••

Suzaku doesn't make his appearance on the roof until dusk and it's with a slightly tentative scuff of his shoe against the concrete when he finally does.

Lelouch is positively pissed.

How much more time are they going to waste with this infernal conflict?

There was a period of time when Lelouch thought he might have mistook Suzaku's adjustment as a signal, but with such a specific movement and look Lelouch knew he wasn't the one in the wrong. Suzaku's spite isn't often encountered as he tends to let most things roll off his back, but with the upset this morning that apparently let all Hell break loose between them, Lelouch wondered if Suzaku would really bait him out onto the roof just to stand him up. It really became a question as to whether Suzaku would be that immature or if he was really that malicious.

Lelouch had snorted at that, like there was any room for doubt as to which the winner really was. Suzaku and malicious just don't go together – he is the masochist, not the sadist.

However, Lelouch is well acquainted with maliciousness – as the sadist should be.

Whether or not he employs it is completely up to Suzaku.

Lelouch is seated with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the stone balustrade fencing the roof, his countenance also crossed in anger.

Suzaku looks at him, having the nerve to carry a glower as he takes some gritty steps closer.

"Isn't it a good thing I live a life of leisure?" Lelouch starts scathingly to fill Suzaku's stalling. "Otherwise I would be undeniably infuriated by waiting hours after I was called to the rooftop."

Lelouch furrows his brow more tightly, "It's a good thing I'm not the grudge-carrying type, right Suzaku?"

Suzaku's lip-line is tight but there is a glint of remorse in his dark eyes.

"I'll admit that I was intentionally making you wait up here, but…" he trails a little, eyes escaping Lelouch's.

"But?" Lelouch pushes tensely.

Emeralds flick back to him, "But I didn't mean it to be this late."

Lelouch isn't placated, "I should assume you don't know how to operate a telephone?"
"Don't get all high and mighty on me, Lelouch. You're not the only one allowed to be mad around here."

Lelouch huffs. The only upside to this forced wait is that Lelouch's headache was able to dissipate in peace and he, oddly, found himself calming down in the cool breeze wafting over the building.

"I don't want to be late for dinner with Nunnally, so let's just cut to the chase, shall we?" Lelouch gestures to his side perfunctorily. "Are you going to sit down or would distance be more preferable?"

Suzaku eventually shuffles over to Lelouch, as if he feared that Lelouch will ravage him like a feral beast.

Well, Lelouch had nearly ravished him this morning in bed… but that was a bit different.

"I've had time to think," Suzaku says, clasping his hands in his lap, "and I decided that I don't want to force you into something you don't want." Lelouch is already shaking his head. "I shouldn't have acted the way I did this morning, and I won't hold you responsible for anything."

Lelouch can't repress the explosive, exasperated sigh from blowing past his lips.

"Suzaku…" Lelouch rubs his forehead. "I feel like you never listen to a word I say."

Suzaku looks down at his hands, "This isn't what you want?"

Lelouch just wishes that it's possible to literally beat sense into a person. It's possible to do the opposite, isn't it?

"Not at all."

Suzaku looks at him with the same juvenile gleam he did at dawn and Lelouch feels it tug a sad, little smile over his lips.

"I already told you that I would support any decision you make. I wouldn't dream of making you go through this or anything else alone." Suzaku is confused and it's adorable, "But all those things you said…"

Lelouch sighs, more wistfully this time.

"Everything I said… I was just trying to explain to you that I didn't expect you to—no, that I didn't want you to feel obligated to keep the baby for anyone's sake. A lot of people find themselves in this same position and end up making the wrong decision whether they keep it or not and I didn't want us to live our future in regret."

Suzaku seems to understand—finally—if that nod is any indication.

"I was just trying to protect you." Lelouch continues softly. "Not only from regret or guilt but… Well, you're not built for pregnancy, Suzaku. I wouldn't risk your health for anything." Suzaku's giving him some slightly starry eyes so Lelouch knows that all he needs are some more smooth words and tones and he'll be out of the doghouse. "I would rather have you than a little embryo I know nothing about and if that makes me a cold-hearted person then I guess I'm cold-hearted. I just don't want to lose you, Suzaku."

I've already almost lost you TWICE.
Suzaku's fretful face melts away, his eyes twinkling under the sunset coloured sky with a dreamy grin curling his mouth.

"You're not cold-hearted," Suzaku counters affectionately. "You're just… you're just too protective."

Hook, line, and sinker.

This really was too easy, being resolved all in one cha—erm, in one day's time.

Lelouch smirks inwardly but shrugs outwardly, "Is that a crime?"

"No." Suzaku smiles at him. "It just makes me wonder when Lelouch has time to take care of himself."

"What's this? I thought you were my better half. That's your job."

"I think I cause you more trouble than I deflect. If anything you are my better half."

"Don't sell yourself short," Lelouch insists wondering why Suzaku's insecure side seems to always surface when they make up. "In any case, I think the two of us combined can make at least one decent person."

Suzaku laughs quietly and rests his head on Lelouch's shoulder, plopping his hand on Lelouch's leg.

"Give me your hand."

Lelouch looks down at Suzaku's palm, feeling another weight dissolve out of his chest and into the passing breeze as he laces their fingers together.

They sit in silence, enjoying the tranquil quiet surrounding them, breathing in the last rays of light from the sleeping sun. Although there are still things to discuss, right now it's nice to just relax and enjoy the moment. Today, this morning, was stressful enough so everything else can just wait until later. Hopefully there won't be another fight waiting for the two of them then, especially since Suzaku's military career is something that needs to be reconsidered with this baby thrown into the mix.

Lelouch would really rather not repeat last night's and today's formula again tomorrow.

"...I feel like I should apologize for my behavior again from this morning, and probably for any future episodes I might have. Knowing me it might happen again."

"No, you don't have to apologize. You were upset and that's normal. I don't blame you."

"Yeah..." Suzaku snuggles closer to Lelouch's contour. "I was just looking at it from a different perspective than you – which is apparently something that can't be helped."

"And what perspective might that be?"

"It'll probably sound stupid to you, but..." he starts demurely, lifting his head. "To me this is like a miracle... or something. I was terrified at first and really confused, but I liked the idea. I mean, you and me raising a child – something that you and I created and having that something live and grow inside me, having a part of you inside me" Suzaku sighs whimsically, looking away from Lelouch's eyes and up at a daydream that only he can see illustrated in the sky. "I don't know; it felt like
something I should treasure. Something that I shouldn't take for granted – because how often does an opportunity like this come along for people like us? I know this isn't the most ideal situation, like you said, but I can't give this up. I've even considered adoption, but maybe I'm too selfish because I can't imagine giving it away." his eyes fall back to Earth, fixating on Lelouch's uncanny eyes. "It's yours and mine and no one can take that away from us…"

"Is that how you really feel?" Lelouch can't keep himself from asking gently.

Suzaku nods with that very small smile, "Corny, right?" he laughs under his breath, looking elsewhere.

A family…

Lelouch had thought about it, the family life, just not quite in that same light as Suzaku. Perhaps Suzaku was too focused on the positives and Lelouch was too focused on the negatives; but that's how they ground each other – in an extremely annoying manner, but it works for them as sappy as that sounds.

"Corny or not, it sounds nice." Lelouch hears himself saying, somewhat surprised that his words are sincere.

Suzaku's eyes whip back to him, apparently he's also amazed.

Lelouch just smiles, "I just want you to promise me something, Suzaku."

Suzaku, the adorable little boy, holds Lelouch's gaze with anticipation.

"What?"

His smile flat-lines, "If there is any kind of risk or complication with this pregnancy, promise me that you won't go through with it. You don't need to push yourself and I don't want any harm to come to you because of this 'miracle.' Do you understand? I want you to live on even if it's minus our little spawn. Don't forget there are people who care about you and would be devastated to lose you."

Suzaku's eyes get somewhat glassy with the coded command but it's brief and fleeting leaving him to make a slightly spacey nod.

"I promise."

Lelouch's smile returns, "Good."

He kisses Suzaku, taking the brunette a bit off guard. Those clover eyes gleam at him with another lip-curling grin that contradicts his slight glower of disapproval.

Suzaku fiddles with their linked fingers, "So… do you think we can do this?"

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: together you and I can accomplish anything," he rubs his other hand over the back of Suzaku's.

Suzaku laughs, "So you're just as scared shitless as I am?"

Hit the nail right on the head.

Lelouch frowns, "I don't think that's appropriate language for an expecting mother."
Suzaku just laughs again, pointing another smile Lelouch's way – an invitation for a kiss as far as Lelouch is concerned. He leans towards that smile, pressing firmly against lips that pucker back, flaunting his own grin when he pulls away.

"Know what?" Lelouch asks as scoots away from the balustrade.

Suzaku licks his lips, "What?"

"I never got to finish what I started this morning…" Lelouch murmurs, dipping his voice into a lusty tone.

He waits for his own flirtatious curve to mirror across Suzaku's lips before kissing them again, moving to Suzaku's cheek, then Suzaku's neck, letting his free fingers blindly work at Suzaku's pants…

"What about dinner with Nunnally?" Suzaku breathes out, squeezing the hand still in his grasp.

Lelouch halts.

He actually forgot about Nunnally – Hell must be freezing over.

But as perfect and precious as she is she's not Suzaku and, well, she's just not Suzaku – and Lelouch won't be deterred from this mission again.

"Don't worry, I promise we'll come on time for dinner." Lelouch whispers the grammatically incorrect statement silkily in Suzaku's ear, moving his head down as he pulls a zipper in the same direction.

Any objection Suzaku might have made is tangled into a rapturous sound when Lelouch inserts that euphemism into his mouth.
"I believe that whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you... stranger." –The Joker from The Dark Knight

Ambiguous

The Irony, It's Killing Me!

Suzaku is hard again.

Unlike this morning, however, Lelouch is able to appreciate the wonders of the male anatomy knowing that he is the cause, the reason, the catalyst for the growth on Suzaku's pelvis and is quite pleased with himself at how nicely he is shaping the situation. He's not so sure Suzaku is being as appreciative as he should be, but it's his loss for not knowing how to – or allowing himself to – enjoy a show of such wonder when it's presented to him as wondrously as this.

...Ahem.

Anyway, it is Lelouch's personal objective to prove just why Suzaku shouldn't take this effort for granted. He has already successfully streaked a blush across Suzaku's cheeks, though that scowl blistering from his eyes is really spoiling the mood and needs to go. So with the fiendish smirk that's all too friendly with Lelouch's lips, he drags his tongue up and down the dripping length at his fingertips. He relishes the grumpy gleam over Suzaku's eyes that, despite being miffed in that very un-sexy way, cannot look away as Lelouch sensuously licks with his curling tongue and kisses with his puckering lips. He noisily sucks a few spots around the midsection before sweeping up the shaft and gently prods his tongue at the tip, gazing at Suzaku with mischievous desire that finally sends green eyes away in a skittish flutter like a butterfly Lelouch frightened away. Lelouch chuckles very quietly in his throat and watches Suzaku squirm in place as he slinks his tongue around the skinny, red wonder from tip to base and up to the tip again; lapping up all the leaking juices melting down the sides and swallowing them before they can threaten the cleanliness of his fingers.

Lelouch pauses to smirk at Suzaku, catching the brief, chastising glower glanced his way by wide eyes but ignores it – as if Lelouch would concede to something so lame, or at all. He chooses to instead close his lips tightly around the top and suck animatedly again before loosening them only enough to allow the sweating length to slide through them, making sure to keep that eye-contact Suzaku supposedly wants to avoid. Try as the brunet might, though, there's just no escaping Lelouch's lewd loving just like there's no hiding the excitement thriving between Suzaku's legs that's becoming more and more appetizing. Lelouch couldn't have a better feast for his eyes as he circles his tongue around the top and makes another quick, hard suck—

CHOKE-HACK!

COUGH-COUGH-COUGH!

Lelouch's hand clasps to his neck as his seductive act shatters thanks to the few but demoralizing bundle of coughs that rip from his clogged throat. His eyes are wide and watery, but the blockage
that shot to the back of his mouth melts down his esophagus, immediately pulling him from Death's fingertips yet leaving him somewhat surprised that he received not even an attempted rescue – never mind this all happens in a matter of seconds that barely lived.

"Are you alright?" he hears Suzaku ask drawly from his seat across the table.

"Big brother—!"

"I'm fine," Lelouch answers quickly but hoarsely, staring down at the unflattering splat of his decapitated ice-pop on the pavement between his shoes with his hand still clung around his neck.

—So Lelouch was able to relish all of Suzaku… from a distance. Lelouch can only look on for a moment, pallid-faced and dumbstruck – he certainly wasn't expecting that to happen, so he didn't prepare a back-up plan to save him from looking as un-sexy as Suzaku's glower.

He hears Suzaku scoff in a very snide snicker, still idly chewing the stick left behind from his own green – "Sour Apple" – popsicle.

"Brother?"

Lelouch sweeps his eyes over his blind sister seated between him and Suzaku after glimpsing Suzaku starring off "uninterestedly" in another direction to see that she is wearing a puzzled expression.

"Are you sure you're all right? What happened?" Nunnally continues to ask with blue lips from her "Blue Raspberry" ice-pop.

"Lelouch's popsicle broke," Suzaku mutters, giving Lelouch another brief leer – and not the sexy kind of leer.

It appears Lelouch's effort at being wondrous only got him a castrated dessert and his own sour apple.

Not one is more appetizing than the other.

"Broke? You mean you're still eating yours?"

"Ah…" Lelouch makes a nervy smile at her, feeling for the first time this evening that she might have seen his provocative show.

"No, he's too busy playing with it," Suzaku derides lightly and Lelouch cannot believe he'd even dare to suggest hinting about the sexual harassment Lelouch was intentionally engaging in.

Before Nunnally can even ask with her creased, little eyebrows—

"I was just trying to enjoy it – pardon me for taking my time rather than just inhaling it like a barbarian," he gibes plainly but in a haughty tone. "But it's melting too fast. I guess it's warmer out here than I thought."

Nunnally nods – still innocent from her brother's perverted scene.

*Lelouch: one.*

*Suzaku: zero.*

"You're right. I think it's actually a little warmer today than it was yesterday. I can't wait for the
autumn breeze – I wish it would just get here already!"

"I'm sure that's not the only thing you can't wait for autumn to bring, right Nunnally?" Lelouch smiles softly, wiping away his frown as he cleans his mouth with a beige, cloth napkin after turning a blind eye to his "Cherry" flavored failure still bleeding on the ground.

Whatever, Lelouch doesn't care for sweets anyway…

"That's right!" Suzaku exclaims his realization, his popsicle stick getting dumped on the empty plate in front of him. "Your fifteenth birthday is next month – such a scary age, right Lelouch?" Suzaku adds slyly.

Nunnally giggles but Lelouch scowls.

"Not as scary as eighteen," she smiles. "Big brother's birthday is coming soon, too."

"Of course. Can't forget about the Ice Prince's wintery birthday," he laughs lightly, wagging his eyebrows at Lelouch.

"Quit talking like an idiot," Lelouch demands with a cross of his arms.

Suzaku ignores him, "It suits you, Lelouch. You're always so distant and frigid towards others, even with friends and acquaintances sometimes."

"Frigid?" Lelouch echoes objectionably over Nunnally's quiet giggle – perhaps trying to hide her amusement.

"So cold…" Suzaku smirks. "If Nunnally weren't here you'd probably have frozen over by now like some frosty Old Man Winter. But it's strange since you're a fire element aren't you? Though I guess that's where your temper comes in. But you're an A blood type, so maybe that explains it."

"If anyone knows how frosty and fiery I can be it'd certainly be you, wouldn't it Suzaku?" Lelouch smirks in return at the dabs of pink that resurface over Suzaku's cheeks at the understood implications of Lelouch's words. "And I'll have you know that I'm the 'aloof and reserved' type, not 'frigid.' That's just a misinterpretation on your part."

"Yes, of course. His Highness is always right. Pardon my insolence."

"As long as you understand… But you should know that my forgiveness comes at a steep price. I expect lots of groveling and begging and ego-stroking flattery, to start."

Suzaku is about to scoff another playful retort when the fountain of Nunnally's laughter becomes too lively to ignore, sending both violet and green eyes to her in perplexity.

"I'm so happy," Nunnally announces through her chuckles, feeling their empty gapes on her.

Lelouch and Suzaku just continue to look at her quizzically – did they miss something?

Lelouch and Suzaku just continue to look at her quizzically – did they miss something? She sighs her laughter away and smiles for them, "The two of you seemed very angry with each other this morning. I'm glad that you've made up. The two of you shouldn't be fighting."

Lelouch and Suzaku exchange a look that speaks too many words and conveys too many emotions for a measly second to properly hold.

He sees Suzaku open his mouth but cuts him off, knowing that if either of them is going to defend with words it should be Lelouch, the more articulate of the two.
The irony of that is not missed by the undercover rebel.

"We weren't fighting; we were just at odds."

Suzaku gives him a funny look but Lelouch already knows that what he just said is lame – especially for him.

"Of course." Nunnally nods.

Lelouch is almost positive that Nunnally just appeased him for the sake of appeasing him.

Where and who the hell did she pick that up from?

"Nunnally, I think you're getting too mature for Lelouch to handle," Suzaku snickers.

Lelouch glares at him – Suzaku's idiocy must be having negative effects on his adored little sister due to too much exposure.

*Stupid heathen.*

"Well, it's getting late." Lelouch cradles Nunnally's hand, rubbing his thumb tenderly over the back. "You should wash up and get changed for bed. I'll be there to tuck you in… Sayoko, would you mind?"

At first glance, the woman could be easily mistaken for a tomato with hair. She has been seated across from Nunnally all this time, and thus witnessed every second of Lelouch's scandalous way of eating his icy – and coincidentally phallic – treat. But she nods politely and stands with a bow before hurriedly pulling the chair-bound girl from the patio and into the clubhouse.

Sayoko doesn't always dine with them, particularly when their little friend is around, but today the young masters had insisted that she didn't need to scuttle away when the boys finally came for dinner, late – they had looked strange when they had arrived but she didn't question it. Why Lelouch's lips were puffed and why Suzaku's face was a pink daze wasn't any of her business. Sayoko is sure she knows their business now, if she hadn't before.

"I can't believe you," Suzaku chides quietly as they watch the maid's receding back. "In front of Nunnally is really pushing it for you, but at least she's blind. Sayoko had to pretend she was blind to your sleazy, little show."

Lelouch just looks at him smugly from the corner of his eye.

"You're terrible…" Suzaku shakes his head with a sigh and a tired smile, looking away from the empty doorway. "I hope you didn't pull any shenanigans like that on any of your past staff."

"May I remind you I was only ten years of age the last time I had anyone close to Sayoko?"

Suzaku lifts an eyebrow at him, so he smirks.

"And you weren't around then to embarrass, either."

"That's what I thought." Suzaku grins. "But I guess you've learned your lesson. I don't think I've ever seen anyone choke on an ice-pop before – and a broken one at that!"

It is Lelouch's own fault for not noticing how severely he had weakened the tip by sucking on it, but he's still oddly proud of himself for that fact…
Ahem.

Lelouch dismisses the titters tumbling from Suzaku's lips with a half-shrug, "Don't say you didn't enjoy it."

Suzaku's laughter dies from the air as a confessional simper seals his lips.

Lelouch loves that simper.

"Let's just say that I think I'll need to sit here for a while…"

Lelouch doesn't hide the hum of satisfaction as he moves to sit a chair closer to Suzaku.

"Would you like some company?"

"As long as you don't touch me." Suzaku's suspicious eyes draw all over Lelouch as if to highlight his underlying intentions.

"I don't remember hearing you complain when we were on the roof."

Peels of apple-red adorn Suzaku's cheeks again as he bashfully casts his leafy eyes away to the courtyard in front of them – a courtyard that should probably worry Lelouch since this open area left the oral sex he just gave to his dessert vulnerable to any possible roaming eyes, but he isn't concerned. There have been no close passersby and any far away glances wouldn't have revealed much to distant Peeping Toms, unless of course they had some kind of tool to enhance their vision for distant viewing – but that's a needless road of debunked paranoia.

Lelouch knows they will be fine as long as he doesn't act in a more-than-friends way towards Suzaku – just to stay on the safe side.

"You'll never hear me complain," Suzaku murmurs almost to himself.

Lelouch nods, knowing Suzaku's statement is proven true by the past, and chooses to spare Suzaku anymore harassment – but only because he's been such a good sport this evening.

••

Lelouch emerges from Nunnally's room, feeling the success of nurturing her to sleep warming his spirit, just in time to see his lovable idiot treading through the hall towards, presumably, the bathroom, causing the already turning gears in his head to cycle faster.

Apparently Suzaku really did need to sit outside if he's just now getting in…

Lelouch smirks to himself.

*Lelouch: two.  
*Suzaku: zero.

The silence that had joined them after Sayoko and Nunnally left was peaceful and quiet, but too quiet. It gave Lelouch time to think and that can lead to some tremendous travesties in his mind – being left alone with his thoughts is a cruel sentence for him, never having been the type to be able to stay idle for any period of time. It wasn't long before he was rummaging around to occupy himself by cleaning the sticky puddle he'd left on the ground to washing his hands a few times along with the dishes left on the patio table and then giving the kitchen a nice once-over to be sure it was as spotless as it had been before any cooking had transpired – not to imply Sayoko is
inefficient or untidy, she is a maid, but it never hurts to double check. And then, of course, Lelouch had walked into his room to find that it deserved some critical attention as well.

The time spent (re)organizing his (already neat) desk was certainly time well spent.

Soon enough Nunnally was awaiting his presence in her bedroom for their daily bonding moment – incidentally not significant enough to get more than this mention – before he tucked her into bed.

"Suzaku."

Suzaku pulls his eyes up from the floor and smiles genially, "Lelouch."

"What are you up to?"

"Oh, I was just gonna shower and hit the sack. I'm pretty tired today…"

Lelouch could never really sway Suzaku into staying the night like he's often wanted to due to the marauding witch that was casting the spell of infinite-pizza-smell in his room, but since she's been eradicated from his domain it's been a frequent lodging for Suzaku despite his usual discomfort with friendly hospitality…and the strange odor that never quite leaves.

But sooner or later, because of all of this pregnancy business, Lelouch will have to unofficially evict Suzaku from his dorm room across campus – having already decided that his friend will no longer have any choice or say about where he hunkers down at night. Lelouch realizes there is the extreme likelihood that they could be caught "living together" by other students, namely the student council as the general student body is not exactly allowed to loiter aimlessly around or inside the clubhouse, but at that point the fact of the matter might already be obvious.

For now, with the weekend starting tomorrow, no one will really question Suzaku's occupancy around the Lamperouge siblings' makeshift home.

"Ah~" Lelouch says with raised eyebrows, hands in his pockets as they meet at the aforementioned room. "Would you like some more company?"

"But I thought you already showered this morning?"

"Suzaku…" Lelouch can't help but exhale before he grabs the boy's shoulders, "you're such an idiot." He pushes the boy into the bathroom, leading them both with a heated kiss.

••

An unnecessary scene change later finds the bathroom in a haze of steam.

Prestigious uniforms are in shambles on the floor, their empty folds outstretched towards their neglectful owners who are shrouded by the shower curtain that exposes only their combined silhouette. The light above the two boys is so luminous it sparkles in the army of hot-water rivulets cascading down their youthful skin and catches in the flecks of gold brushed over the ocher wall, glowing on the golden fixtures. The touches of their lips and fingertips cannot outrun the light as they skim and press their way over toned muscles and angular shapes—Except, perhaps, the willowy digits of a pearl hand that are sliding down with a sculpting smoothness as they sneak into the crevice between ample cheeks, feeling for the entrance of their hideaway.

The reaction garnered by pressing against the opening is one that carves a carnal smile in Lelouch's lips and makes him smother two of his fingertips over the small gap in pestering persistence to see more of this behavior unfold – like teasing an itch that wants to be scratched.
Suzaku's breath carries a little mewl that's feathery in the air but solid with desire when it lands in Lelouch's ears as his opening flexes in complaint against Lelouch's *un*-intrusive fingers. His body tenses with that unfulfilled anticipation as starchy muscles knot underneath his supple skin pebbled by the pour of water raining on their side, flooding over one of Lelouch's shoulders and down Suzaku's stomach. It constantly rinses their mingled fluids away, washing over the twitch Suzaku's throbbing erection makes in Lelouch's hand as he is touched, causing Lelouch to squeeze their uneven lengths gathered together. Lelouch revels in the way Suzaku shudders in their tangled embrace as he strokes and rubs them together with his hand, nudging with his longer hardness and leaning his weight more heavily between Suzaku's legs.

"*Lelouch*..." Suzaku breathes amorously while his entrance is swabbed by tormenting fingers, tightly threading a hand through moist black hair with his other clamped around Lelouch's upper arm.

*That's right,* Lelouch says inside his prideful head as he starts to bite low on Suzaku's neck, claiming him, *say my name.*

Lelouch gropes their excitement, massaging and rubbing their testicles together in a firm grip that sails another enchantingly drafty moan from Suzaku's mouth and spurs a bump of his hips to insist fingers enter, before Lelouch finally indulges him. It pleases the Britannian how cleanly and rigidly Suzaku's back arcs away from the wall and how keenly his legs try to spread farther apart when he is slowly intruded by a gentle forefinger. Lelouch is so enthralled with Suzaku's response that he doesn't fiddle around with wasting more time on teasing, rather breaching Suzaku's occupied entry with his middle finger right away. Seems Suzaku wasn't expecting another *guest* so soon as his hips quirk and his throat whimpers slightly, but both are quickly thrown away by a louder, desirous moan extending from Suzaku's aroused appetite.

"*Mmm... louch*..."

It isn't long before Suzaku's arms coil around Lelouch's neck, belted as if the strong hold will keep him from launching up through the ceiling as Lelouch's fingers slide in and out of him, casually fondling his squirming insides and his sensitive prostate. He carefully plunge his fingers up into Suzaku's contracting body, the memory of how unbearably tight and hot these muscles clenching around his fingers are searing his erection in painful pulses. Lelouch slinks his hand up their stony shafts to grasp their profusely leaking caps and messily smear the pad of his thumb over them as he watches Suzaku's face practically melt off his skull. Japanese eyes are shutdown in bliss, his skin is sponged a pining red, and his mouth is parted to let controlled sounds of pleasure trickle past his lips. They step louder the more his body writhes in the building enthusiasm of Lelouch's attentive hands – his own zeal feeling inspired by Suzaku's uninhibited reactions. The brunet's legs are open, leaving him so vulnerably exposed that it has Lelouch's fingers increasing to a starved, thrusting pace in order to feed the twinging lurch his erection makes at the thought of being buried in that same hot grip.

It would be exceedingly enjoyable to sheath himself inside Suzaku, undoubtedly, but it's not as though a little *sword-fighting* once in a while will kill Lelouch – this is the only type of recreational sword-play he enjoys, after all. They both want it, Lelouch knows this, but as the situation stands... Suzaku isn't comfortable with the idea and Lelouch will respect that. Entering his little seahorse is a pleasurable privilege, after all, not a right. It's not as though doing this in the shower is always easy, either. There are still other things they can do...

(Not that just a good, senseless fu—*fornication* is terrible, but Lelouch actually rather likes the sentiment of being "exclusive lovers."
Like they only belong to each other and no one else.)

That's why Suzaku's thighs are becoming inexorably inviting to Lelouch with that coating of wet heat thanks to not only the shower, their smooth surface despite the fine wires of copper hair prickling from his skin, and their powerful muscles laced tight underneath like a lean cheetah…

A very sexy, lean cheetah.

It invokes something in Lelouch and has him speaking a sequence of words he never thought he would hear himself say:

"Suzaku, turn around and close you legs." It is a murmur of an order, lustful under Lelouch's panting, but it has Suzaku looking at him bemusedly all the same.

"…What?" Suzaku breathes.

Lelouch flicks his tongue over the tip of Suzaku's nose and pulls a little on flexing insides – an unavoidable, throaty groan whining over clenching muscles – as he removes himself completely from needy body in front of him.

"Just do it," Lelouch murmurs, lightly sweeping his lips over Suzaku's agape mouth as he rests his left hand on Suzaku's leg to usher it closed.

Suzaku is panting and quizzical but compliant as usual, bracing himself against the wall with his forearms.

And Lelouch pets the marred splotch on Suzaku's side where a bullet nearly ended him – something not unnoticed by Suzaku.

Then Lelouch slides his sturdy erection between Suzaku's thighs, being sure to brush it against Suzaku's sac as he slips underneath until his hips tantalizingly meet heated, wet flesh. Suzaku's thighs feel just the way they looked as they awkwardly close on Lelouch; soft, slick, firm, and they compress tightly enough with those brawny muscles on Lelouch's straining flesh to make him groan lightly through his nose. He grips Suzaku's hips, somehow signaling the soldier to looks over his shoulder and their mouths connect in a passionate mesh of slippery lips and tongues before Lelouch starts to experimentally move.

Quickly finding it too enjoyable to moderate himself.

Suzaku appears to like it as well – or maybe that's because of the aggressive thrusting of Lelouch's fingers that reenter with potent strikes to his prostate… Either way, Suzaku's body is spastic and he's trying to hide his sounds in his arms, so that can only mean good things.

Though Lelouch is loath to admit… this easier than their usual union. But it's not as though Lelouch has failed or is fearful of failing to pleasure Suzaku, but he isn't blind to reality. Physically speaking, Suzaku is practically God whereas Lelouch barely qualifies to be amongst the living.

Lelouch doesn't know if he wants to damn or thank the being that created Suzaku's wonderful body…

He grabs Suzaku's erection again with his other hand as his hips heave to-and-fro, stroking Suzaku's blood-bulging flesh as he plows his fingers over Suzaku's prostate in the ungodly pace of his thrusting pelvis. Despite how crude it all sounds Suzaku is a veritable frame of tense gelatin that quivers excitedly as he is pleasured by hands that know the weaknesses of his mold all too well. The fingers rubbing over the tip of his length and the spot in his passage are too unforgiving
in their loving that he feels dizzy in the clouding scent of their musk that's caught in the steam and stealing their oxygen. Suzaku is breathless and gasping as he holds remains steadfastly supported against the slick shower wall, and it makes Lelouch unbelievably complacent. He begins to thrust faster between Suzaku's velvety steel thighs as the boy's hips roll on the fingers plundering his closing walls in time with the hand pumping his glistening length.

It all ends a lot more quickly than Lelouch expects – surprise, surprise – but the burst that drains the life out of him is still too intoxicating for him to feel anything but bliss...

Lelouch groans mindlessly as he sags against Suzaku, pressing him against the wall like when they had started.

"...I don't think...I can stand up...any longer..." Suzaku pants.

"...Me neither." Lelouch puffs.

As if those were magical words of admittance, they slide down the wall in a tired heap on their knees, and they pant to their lungs' content.

"This is why I said...we should have taken...a bath...instead of a shower..."

Agitation wrinkles Lelouch's brow, "I thought you said...I would never...hear you...complain...And I already...told you...that baths...are not sanitary," the royal grouses, sluggishly turning the showerhead off to clean themselves -- and the wall -- of any residue before plugging the drain with the chain stopper so they can relax in clean bath water together.

Suzaku just huffs before moving away from Lelouch and into the tub.

Eventually, once the water has risen to an agreeably level well above their navels, Suzaku shuts the water off and they rest long-ways in the fairly spacious tub, the limp weight of Lelouch's body cozy between his legs as he lies against Suzaku as if he were a pillow.

Lelouch has been relatively unresponsive.

"Hey," Suzaku addresses with a tug on Lelouch's hair, "don't go falling asleep in the bath. I don't want you drowning on me now."

So some time before now would've been acceptable?

Lelouch bats at Suzaku's hand with a mild scowl, "I'm not so exhausted that I'd perish right now."

"Yeah. Need I remind you of a certain macaroni mishap?"

"There's no need for that."

It's not an interesting story, really.

So let's not bring it up again.

"Can't I just sit here with you and relax in peace?" Lelouch questions a bit tartly.

Suzaku sighs to himself, reclining against the bathtub and rests his hand back on top of Lelouch's head. Lelouch lets his body lie boneless against Suzaku with his fingers sifting through the drying threads of his hair in soft, absent strokes in the serenity of the still bathroom. The water is quiet as it ripples from their steady heartbeats and calm breaths of which Lelouch feels pushing his head when Suzaku's chest inflates and deflates in silent relaxation. Lelouch closes his eyes, absorbing
the sheer tranquility of the moment and Suzaku's living, breathing body that's supporting him, letting all his stress and worries decompose from his mind.

He drifts to a soothing, mellow place where there are no impending troubles of war or parenthood that grow more threatening with each breath he takes and every second that passes by. There is no outside world that can seep into this bathroom that's just a bathroom and nothing more as they sit in a bathtub that's just a bathtub. All that exists is the two of them, in the present with no history or future nipping at their heels and toes. He's just Lelouch – not former prince "Lelouch vi Britannia" with a dead mother or the unfulfilling alias "Lelouch Lamperouge" – and Suzaku is just Suzaku – not the pilot of Lancelot or Euphemia's Knight, and most certainly not pregnant.

It's a hard lie to lose himself in when his brain is his own worst enemy, but even if it's true for a second Lelouch knows he's managed to save a part of himself from being squashed underneath all the pressure trying to break him…

Suzaku's twiddling with Lelouch's hair pauses, "...You know I had a meeting with Princess Euphemia today."

Lelouch hums noncommittally – somehow he doesn't like where this is going. He feels Suzaku's voice prying open this insignificant bathroom-world by the seams, allowing all the things Lelouch wanted to escape from to come pouring in slowly through its broken walls.

Suzaku just can't respect the after-glow peace.

Suzaku takes in a quick breath, "Well, I stepped down, I mean, I've renounced my Knighthood. I'm no longer her knight. There'll probably be talk about it on the news, but I thought—"

Lelouch lurches off of Suzaku with water storming up around him in a wet clatter to gape at the suddenly former knight in shock and disconcertment.

He swears Suzaku is the only person ever able to catch him off-guard.

"You what?"

Suzaku's eyes are pulled down by a sullen weight and his fingers find each other underneath the water.

"I thought you'd be happy to hear this."

Lelouch blinks.

Then blinks again.

"Suzaku..." Well, perhaps that's true – Lelouch can't lie and say he isn't, but at the expense of what will Lelouch's happiness come? "I'm surprised. I thought this was important to you. You didn't do this for me, did you?" Lelouch quickly reconsiders, "No, for the baby."

"That wasn't the only reason I did it. It's something I've been thinking about lately, before I knew about this, but I guess you could say that it was a deciding factor."

Lelouch frowns slightly, resting his hand on Suzaku's knee, "Are you sure that's what you wanted?"

Lelouch should be thrilled, but he knows these "reasons" probably stem from some misplaced self-deprecation.
"Or maybe something more impure."

"Yes. But like I said, there were a lot of reasons."

Lelouch nods more to himself, seeing the walls close up in Suzaku's eyes around the things he doesn't want shared – not at this moment. He rubs his hand over Suzaku's damp hair and pulls that brown head close to kiss the small, anxious knot in the (ten-year-old) boy's brow away as he slips from between Suzaku's legs to his side.

"So that's what had you so restless this morning?"

"NO!" Suzaku yells in a panic-stricken shriek, vaulting away from Lelouch, apparently taking his turn to anger the bath water as it spikes violently around them.

Lelouch stares at him, utterly bewildered, until he watches Suzaku's face practically erupt into flames, sparks of defensive nerves and shock flickering in his wide eyes.

That's when Lelouch realizes what he just implied…

**Suzaku + erection = …thoughts of Euphemia?**

Lelouch's mouth shoots open with a start, Suzaku's flush melting his own cheeks as he reaches for the boy as if that will pull him from the _demented_ images of Euphemia on top of Suzaku—

That's right, Euphemia on _top_ of Suzaku.

—with her pink hair jostling in the air like windswept streamers around their sweaty bodies stained pink by arousal while their pink lips outline their loud moans as their _pink parts_—

"It isn't like _that_ – I _swear_!" Suzaku looks like he's just been slapped in the face with the tortuous pictures in Lelouch's head as his face burns brighter, his hands waving and head shaking in the negative to Lelouch's unintentional implication.

"_That_ isn't what I meant!" Lelouch shouts as he shakes Suzaku, mentally pleading for this horrible, _horrible_ scene to end.

They stare at each other as the water dies down from their frantic movements that tried to erase something that can never be undone, gaping wordlessly at the seconds of this scene stringing between them on the coattails of an arrogant elephant sauntering out of the room. Their faces are still brushed the colour of a certain Third Princess's hair – maybe the Second Princess's now, actually – and their eyes are still wide, their hands still grasping each other. Lelouch tightens his grip on Suzaku's shoulders, causing Suzaku's hands to do the same around his elbows, and leans his forehead against Suzaku's with an exasperated sigh – choosing to be the one who closes the door behind that obnoxious elephant.

"What I meant was…" Lelouch restarts, a little strained. "That's why you were so anxious this morning?"

He's not really sure if he likes his choice of rephrasing.

"…Yeah." Suzaku plays along, letting Lelouch recoil into the tub's wall like before – _before_ the appearance of a manic Euphemia riding an arcing Suzaku—

No! _Bad_ brain.
"As long as you think you made the right choice," he tries to soothe, winding his arm around Suzaku's shoulders when the boy slides in next to him. "But you're still Lancelot's pilot, right?"

"Yes, that doesn't change..." Suzaku leans into Lelouch's halfway embrace.

"You know, Suzaku, that should change. Do you think you can continue fighting—?"

"I know," Suzaku interrupts. "I just..."

"No, I don't think you understand." Since Lelouch had been handed this opportunity it has been resting in his palms like an apple waiting to be bitten at the right moment – and while Lelouch is sure there are better moments to pick from that aren't potentially debilitating to his friend, there's nothing like playing the guilt card on Suzaku to make him bend; and it's not as though any of this is untruthful or insincere. Moreover, it's not like Lelouch is above using this to his advantage. After all, he had done something similar as Zero just before they were blown practically to Hell by Schneizel. "The risks you gamble with are bad enough for you alone. You were irate with me when I only suggested you consider getting an abortion, but then you're going to march onto the battlefield as if that's a free pass?"

"I know," Suzaku repeats, clearly unhappy. "I told you I'd do what was necessary; it's just going to take a little time so please be patient. Not everything happens all at once, Lelouch."

"You wouldn't know it by looking..."

"I am patient. But it's hard to practice such a virtue in hostile times."

"It wouldn't be nearly as hostile if Zero and his Black Knights weren't around," Suzaku grumbles. Lelouch feels his chest burn and his jaw clench – not so much because of Suzaku's ill-concealed dislike of Lelouch's own force, but because what he's saying is (only) partly true. But what does that mean? Should Lelouch give it all up just so Suzaku can pursue his foolish ideals, even if Suzaku could continue with a bloated belly? Why does Lelouch have to quit?

No, Lelouch doesn't quit. He solves the puzzle and moves forward.

This case will be no different.

"I'm sure the same could be said the other way around."

If there was no Britannia, at least on Japanese soil, there would be a pleasant veil of peace, and they both know it.

Suzaku doesn't respond right away but his body tenses and the isolated aurora that Lelouch was previously trying to believe was real is very suddenly the opposite – never mind the whole Euphemia thing that practically killed his mind and possibly his soul – as the comforting water begins to turn cold.

"...Anyway, I still have to talk to Lloyd. I'm just not sure how to handle him. I have a feeling he might try to convince me none of this is real just so I'll continue to complete his beloved Lancelot."

"Just be firm with him," Lelouch advises. "Use all that stubbornness of yours and stand your ground. I'm quite positive you're capable of doing that."
More positive than Suzaku will ever know.

Suzaku smiles faintly, a wry and sheepish curve of his lips.

"Just remember, Suzaku, sometimes it's acceptable to be selfish. Don't let your compassion or guilt get in the way."

"Alright I'll try to remember that," Suzaku mumbles dryly.

"Do or do not. There is no try."

Suzaku rolls his eyes.

"I'm serious." Lelouch defends with a soft smile, raking his hands up through the frizzy, damp curls of Suzaku's hair.

"I know you are. That's why I rolled my eyes."

Lelouch only replies with a flat hum and a possessive kiss that's far from fleeting, stealing Suzaku's lips as he holds his brunet in place in the cage of his steely fingers. Suzaku is an accommodating and willing receiver as always, opening his mouth and unfurling his tongue like a red carpet to welcome Lelouch's serpentine intrusion.

A pleasant noise seeps out of Suzaku's throat at this sudden ravishment as they sink deeper in their motions and it spurs Lelouch's carnal appetite, but Lelouch doesn't want to be pulled under again just yet. He pulls back before he's in over his head with obstinate lust, scraping his teeth over a bottom lip just the way Suzaku likes.

"How about tomorrow we have a nice day out, a little date to relieve our stress and just enjoy ourselves? Just you, me,"—Lelouch caresses Suzaku's abdomen—"and the small fry here. We haven't done anything alone and outside of school together in a while. How does that sound to you?"

Technically, they've never had a proper date. With all their time consumed by school and after school activities there hasn't been much spare time for them, and even when they are together it's always in the privacy of Lelouch's bedroom or on the roof (except there was that one time in the Student Council room…) and they're usually doing some form of the nasty…

"That sounds like a plan. But," Suzaku gives him a silly grin, "'small fry'?"

"Yeah, you know, fry: a baby fish – or a baby seahorse, in this case."

Suzaku is still grinning at Lelouch like he's being ridiculous – as if Suzaku is one to judge – but his hand drapes over the one still resting on his flat stomach nonetheless.

"I hope you don't plan on choosing that for a name."

Lelouch's eyebrows lifts a little with intrigue, "I wasn't considering it." Of course he hasn't even thought about considering names yet, either. "But now I think I might."

"Don't."

"You can't tell me what to do. If I want the name Fry, I'll choose it."

"Over my dead body will my child's name be 'Fry,'" Suzaku quips breezily.
Lelouch makes a tiny, wry smile wishing Suzaku had picked a better dramatic expression for his case; leaning over Suzaku to kiss those lips again, softer and more tenderly than before. Suzaku squeezes Lelouch's hand as he returns the gesture, a light sigh passing through his nose.

"Lelouch…" Suzaku murmurs between their lips and when Lelouch withdraws Suzaku gives him a small smile touched by shyness, "Thank you."

Lelouch doesn't voice a response. He just resumes kissing Suzaku with firmer lips.

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Suzaku huffs when another book is mounted atop the climbing column in his arms. He gives Lelouch a nasty eye but those trained plums are already busy searching the shelves for more material. He sighs heavily as he watches Lelouch's attention wander over book spines, attempting to gently juggle the weight of knowledge in his hands. When his not-so-subtle exhale of distress is ignored, he groans.

"Come on~ Lelouch. Don't you think this is enough? I can barely see where I'm going!"

"Don't be so dramatic."

"Look who's talking," Suzaku mutters. "I don't think we really need a mountain of books – and why am I carrying all of them? I thought I wasn't supposed to be doing anything 'strenuous,' remember?"

"You're not helpless," Lelouch glances at him briefly, "and you do need to keep your strength."

Suzaku scoffs.

"Besides, I didn't think carrying a few books constituted as something strenuous for you, but if you can't handle it…" Lelouch trails with a sly grin, reaching for yet another book.

"That's not the point!" Suzaku blurts, immediately getting several shushes shot his way.

Lelouch chuckles quietly as he thumbs through a bright yellow book.

"You're terrible." Suzaku furrows his brow at the very unwanted attention. "And I thought this was supposed to be a 'nice day out,' but we've been in this bookstore since we got here hours ago."

"Terrible would be abandoning you to take care of this on your own instead of sticking with you and doing this together. There's no such thing as being over-prepared," he bites tonelessly not bothering to look at the pained expression that flutters across Suzaku's face.

Lelouch knows Suzaku was only being facetious and that he didn't need to snap at him, but he isn't about to take such a remark even in a jest. Aside from that, Suzaku's complaining, though rare, is like listening to a child whine and while Lelouch believes pregnancy hormones – or lack thereof – aren't enough to throw Suzaku off his typical emotional imbalance, Suzaku might let his mind rule over matter. Simply put, Suzaku will become a real pain in the neck if Lelouch gives him too much freedom.

Or at least that's what Lelouch thinks.

He's probably still a little grouchy about yesterday morning, too – it's not as though Lelouch is one to forgive easily.
Sayoko saw him in his underwear for crying out loud!

"Can't we at least sit down for a while? My arms are getting tired," Suzaku pleads whilst bumbling with the books in his hold.

Says Mr. Stamina.

"I suppose." Lelouch turns to him and displays the book in his hands like a showcase model, "I did find you the perfect book, after all."

Lelouch watches a glower fall over Suzaku's face when his eyes translate the title in his brain, smiling at his seahorse when that plain stare is aimed at him.

"Pregnancy for Dummies. You think you're real funny, don't you?"

Lelouch shrugs with a tightening smile: yes, yes I do.

"It's actually a very practical book that even us non-dummies can appreciate." Lelouch gestures for Suzaku to follow him as he walks down the aisle. "Come. I think it's time for some refreshments."

He's certain Suzaku rolls his eyes once his back is turned, but he smiles to himself anyway as he weaves through the aisles to the connected café nook at the far end of the store.

"I don't want anything. I'll just—"

"I didn't ask you if you wanted anything," Lelouch interjects coolly. "I know you need something. So if you'd like to make a request I suggest you make it now." Lelouch stops and turns towards Suzaku as they stand amidst the pepper of mahogany chairs and tables on the café's tiled floor, the service counter just ahead of them.

Suzaku stares at Lelouch for a moment, his eyes slightly unfocused as if he's determining in his head how much he can really fight Lelouch on this – or if he really should.

He can't and shouldn't, obviously.

"Whatever you think is best, I don't care." Suzaku concedes with a little shrug and a cast off of his eyes.

Lelouch smiles broadly, "Good answer." – No, correct answer. "Go find a table and relax while I buy some sustenance," Lelouch says with a dry air, walking towards the counter – already having decided exactly what he'll order.

He knows Suzaku either rolls his eyes or shakes his head behind his back again, but that is the intended reaction.

Lelouch stands in the short line consisting of two bodies, watching Suzaku shuffle over to a table right next to the elongated window and gently sets the stack of books down – reminding Lelouch that he's still holding the same one. Suzaku takes a seat, the chairs arranged to be parallel with the window, and appears to almost shrink into his long, steel blue coat as he sits alone – separated from the other few, Britannian, customers on the other end of the café like a deserted island – and gazes through the glass at the main hall of this shopping mall.

The sight sews a thin frown into Lelouch's lips and he looks away to browse through the book while he waits for his turn to order.
Lelouch knows Suzaku's unease isn't just from the confusing – very, very, very confusing – phenomenon taking place inside his body, but also from his surroundings. He's in a Britannian mall with a Britannian friend – though not if anyone should ask – and he's surrounded by Britannians and their Britannian culture in a place that was once Japanese in every way. Suzaku may not be bothered so much by the fact that he, an Honorary Britannian, is submerged in the purest of the pure but by the fact that he doesn't belong simply because it's not "his place" to be here. Whether or not this is because Suzaku truly believes he isn't their equal or because they truly believe he is not their equal… sometimes it's hard to discern.

Lelouch hates that.

This attitude of Suzaku's, whichever it may be, will have to change if they're to raise a child together in this crooked world. Not as a Britannian and a Japanese, but as two human beings. If anything, the fact that they're both male might distract from their difference in race anyway – especially if anyone were to learn that no woman was needed for their pregnancy.

...Lord, Lelouch really needs to get to the bottom of this.

If only Suzaku's bottom wasn't more tempting...

"Milk – sweetened with honey – for you," Lelouch places the clear, plastic cup down on the table in front of Suzaku and then a small, paper plate beside it, "along with a fiber-rich, bran muffin."

Suzaku looks down at the two items with faint surprise, reflecting that same expression onto Lelouch – more importantly, his hands – as the older gent seats himself on the other side of the table.

"You didn't get anything?"

"I don't want anything."

Suzaku eyes his snack with mild distaste, "So I have to eat but you don't? And why do I have milk sweetened with honey?"

"Because you should avoid caffeine whenever possible and you need lots of calcium. This being a café, it's either cups of caffeine or milk – I didn't think you'd appreciate plain milk so I had it sweetened with honey." Lelouch says plainly.

Suzaku looks back down at the milk and muffin, something like amazed annoyance glimmering in his eyes – of course probably having noticed that Lelouch didn't bother to answer his first question – at how Lelouch is already using some of the knowledge he has absorbed today.

"So, I saw something in here about pregnancy myths..." Lelouch starts casually, carefully flipping the pages of the book still in his hands. "I think that would be a more familiar and entertaining place to start."

If Lelouch needs anything right now it's definitely familiarity and practicality, never mind everything else.

"Fine by me," Suzaku chimes in amiably, sipping his honey milk through the straw. "Are you going to read them to me, daddy~?"

Lelouch can feel his eye twitch.

If Suzaku is uncomfortable about anything now he's good at hiding it.
Or maybe he's forgotten his discomfort already.

"Don't do that."

"But that's what you are."

"I know that and you know that, there's no need to say it out loud."

"Why Lelouch," Suzaku starts in an obvious tease with crumbs from the muffin littering his lips, "if I didn't know any better I'd say you're embarrassed of being a parent."

Embarrassed? That's preposterous.

Lelouch doesn't get embarrassed.

That's a fact.

"Let's see…" Lelouch ignores Suzaku, skimming for something interesting—"Oh… Suzaku you're wrong."

"Wrong about what? Your—" Suzaku starts cattily.

"About having sex during pregnancy."

That shut him up.

"It says here," Lelouch continues, "that as long as the pregnancy is 'normal' or 'low risk' for complications like miscarriage or pre-term labor, it's possible to have sex up until birth. In other words, it won't induce labor or harm the baby – given that parents are careful, of course."

"What's a low risk pregnancy?"

"Generally a healthy one…" Lelouch answers as he scans for more information. "We'd really have to consult a doctor to learn if ours is 'normal' enough for sex. But I think it might be too risky to tempt, though. Even if we can doesn't necessarily mean we'll want to. It all just depends…"

Suzaku visibly deflates a little but still peers at the book in natural curiosity.

"What does it say there?" he asks, pointing to a special note about one certain act.

Lelouch quickly reads the text following Suzaku's finger, "Hm…"

"What?"

"Apparently, when giving you oral sex I need to be sure that I don't blow any air into your vagina."

Suzaku's face: BL—US!

"I'll have to remember that," Lelouch notes casually, starting to fold the corner of the page down for show.

"You don't have to remember that!" Suzaku's red face protests, once again getting shushed for his outcry. Suzaku scowls at the other patrons like a pouting child and Lelouch laughs quietly.

"All right, all right. I won't mark it." Lelouch smooths the paper. "I don't need to anyway; I've already saved the information in my archive."
"You're not funny."

Lelouch shrugs, "Depends on your point of view."

"I don't know, Lelouch. Your ego is so big that it blocks my view."

Lelouch's eyebrows raise and he looks at Suzaku.

Then he smiles.

"Well, now, I'm too proud of you for making that remark that I can't feel insulted."

Suzaku offhandedly tosses his eyes away from Lelouch as he takes another large bite of the muffin.

*Lelouch: three.*

*Suzaku: zero.*

Lelouch is smirking when he notices a conspicuous mop of blond hair accompanied by blue and orange trying to obscure themselves behind the green foliage of a topiary in the median of the main hall.

He has to resist the urge to roll his eyes – it's almost like they're trying to get caught.

"Don't look now but the Spy Council is watching us," Lelouch murmurs to Suzaku, carefully moving his eyes away from the crowd outside the shop.

Suzaku's eyes pull back to him, "Who?"

"Milly and her two faithful followers are outside, hiding behind that bush."

"Really?" Suzaku looks skeptical – the fool.

"Really. They must have been watching us the whole time..." he tiredly flips through the book to make himself look busy and unsuspecting – if this wasn't important, he might not ignore them so easily.

"Why would they do that?"

"Because Milly isn't satisfied just living her own life," Lelouch answers with slight scorn dragging his voice. "And she seems to have it out for me. I'm not sure why."

Suzaku's stare falls into the cup of milk nestled inside the curve of his thumb, watching the liquid swirl as he moves it in tight circles.

"Would it really be so bad?" Suzaku asks quietly.

"Would what be so bad?"

"If they knew about us."

Lelouch flicks his eyes up to Suzaku's but they are still diving to the bottom of the whirlpool in his cup.

"I'm..." green eyes slowly ascend to meet violet. "This condition that I'm in, you know, I won't be able to hide it forever."
"That's true," Lelouch starts cautiously. "But I don't want to jump the gun and I don't mean to bring you down when I say this, but, we're not sure how everything will pan out yet. We don't know if there won't be any complications that might force our fry to…"—Suzaku's eyes start to look heavy and it weighs on Lelouch's voice—"not become a seahorse. We should definitely wait until we have our situation handled before we let it loose," he finishes as delicately as he can.

Suzaku just nods and looks down at his drink again.

Lelouch wants to expel this dreadful weight in his chest with a deep sigh but he feels like it might have a negative effect on Suzaku so he refrains, instead looking down at the book that's currently informing him about "nesting."

"So you don't want them knowing unless it's absolutely necessary?"

Their eyes lock together again.

Lelouch is aware of what Suzaku is implying: fear, shame, frustration, hatred, and resentment towards those who deny them and their union. Their easy, student façade of a life would come crashing down in an instant.

"It's not that…" Lelouch leans back in his seat, his repressed sigh leaking thinly through his nose. "I value my privacy, Suzaku. You know that."

_But to honestly answer your question: yes._

In Lelouch's experience, it's usually safer to hide behind secrets.

But with a safety like that, typically comes unbridled stress.

"You don't think we can trust them?" Suzaku candidly bites his muffin.

"Milly is included in the 'them,' right?"

Suzaku chidingly tilts his head, "Lelouch."

"Don't 'Lelouch' me; you know _exactly_ what I'm talking about. Do you have any idea how we'll be treated if our secret get's out? And I'm not talking about prejudice or racism, but the sheer glee Miss Presidential Pain will get from harassing me – who _already_ loves to harass me, if I need to remind you. I would _hope_ that she'd realize the sensitivity of our relationship in this environment to not make the news as public as possible, but even amongst the Student Council we're not safe. We'll never be left alone and there will be numerous jokes at our expense, among many other terrible things I'm sure. So thanks, but no thanks. I'm completely comfortable with her knowing absolutely _nothing._"

"Alright, I get it!" Suzaku smiles at Lelouch's rant and it drains some of the pressure clotting Lelouch's chest.

"Good, then it's agreed – after all, my _Highness_ is always right, isn't it?"

Suzaku laughs a little and sips his drink again, "So… we shouldn't tell anyone, anything?"

"Well, of everyone, I think we can trust Arthur the most. You can tell him all about if you so desire."

Suzaku's lips curl at that, "I think I do so desire, but I can't speak on Arthur's behalf."
Lelouch's shoulders shimmy with noiseless chuckles—

"What about Nunnally?"

—and they quickly cease. His eyes draw sharp lines over Suzaku's face, but he's not sure if it's for intimidation or disapproval.

Either way, Suzaku is ostensibly unsettled by it.

"What about her?"—that didn't exactly carry an inquisitive inflection; rather, it bared threatening fangs.

Suzaku's eyes are firm, "You know what I'm talking about. I've told you how I feel about it more than once."

"..."

"What, are you ignoring me?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Lelouch sighs, his eyes landing on the book once more, "I don't think it's an issue..."

"You don't?" Suzaku's voice is bland. "Don't you think she deserves to know?"

"Looks to me like she's already caught wind of us."

Suzaku's hand fists on the table, "That isn't the point."

Why is it always "the point" with you? Lelouch internally grumbles, resting his head in the claw of his hand, eyes far from meeting Suzaku's.

"Do you want to tell her now because of small fry or because you think she just deserves to know?"

"...Both."

"Hm."

"Lelouch... I know you take great care in keeping her bubble world intact and flawless, but this isn't really a threat to her innocence, is it?"

"I never said it was."

"Then why is it so important that she not know?"

"It isn't that it's important for her to remain unaware, it's just..." Lelouch's mouth stays open, but the words on the tip of his tongue are suddenly struck with stage-fright. He looks at Suzaku, a careful observance to give those words courage, but instead they only lose more of it.

The answer is really rather simple: Nunnally is and always has been his entire world, and in a sense she always will be – but therein lies the problem – "in a sense." It's a twisted, jealous insecurity that prevents him from coming clean, professing his love for Suzaku to Nunnally, because she is supposed to be the only receiver of his affections. There was never supposed to be another. Sure, she's likely to be very happy and supportive for them, as accepting as the angel she is, but that
means a portion of his heart has essentially been dissected from her "bubble world," as Suzaku had called it.

To be precise, it would feel like Lelouch is failing her in some way, even if that is an irrational, illogical notion.

And Lelouch cannot accept failure.

"Just what?" Suzaku asks, calling an end to Lelouch's pause.

"I'll think about it," is all he offers in response.

Suzaku conducts his own survey of Lelouch as said boy returns to leafing through his trusty, new handbook, ignoring Suzaku's study as he studies himself.

"Right," Suzaku deadpans.

Apparently Suzaku discovered he's reached the end of this discussion and knows better than to pursue an alternate route around Lelouch's stubbornness.

"It really wouldn't kill you to open up a little more to me, would it?"

Or maybe Lelouch gives Suzaku too much credit.

"I think it might, yes," Lelouch answers simply, angling the book closer to his face – huh, he noticed in the shower last night that Suzaku's nipples looked darker than usual…

"Ice Prince," Suzaku spurns under his breath before sucking the straw in his cup again.

Lelouch's eyebrow lifts.

Was that a challenge he just heard?

He glances at Suzaku and decides that, yes, it was a challenge.

"Say what you will Suzaku, but you know – regardless that we really shouldn't be in this position – we wouldn't be in this position because I would have worn a condom if you hadn't said you like the way it feels when I cu—"

Suzaku scrambles to cover Lelouch's mouth like the following words will destroy the world with his cheeks rusting a delightful planetary red.

"Sh-Shut up!" he stutters, glancing around to make sure no distant ears were tainted by Lelouch's incomplete statement; which is hard to discern with all the befuddled, curious stares trying to assess Suzaku's sudden burst of action. "...And what are you trying to say? That this is my fault?" he asks quietly, still noticeably uncomfortable and wary as he seats himself.

"Well~."

"Oh, come on!" Suzaku indignantly objects in a hoarse whisper. "You can't be serious!"

Lelouch smiles.

"I'm just kidding. Of course this is as much my responsibility as it is yours." He mollifies, smiling charmingly at Suzaku who releases a breath and visibly relaxes back into his chair. "I'm just saying..."
"Lelouch!" Suzaku squawks again, bristling like a cat that's had its tail stepped on, and Lelouch laughs.

"Don't be so sensitive, it's just a joke."

No it isn't.

This is Suzaku's fault.

Suzaku gives him a firm lower-lip, "I don't think this is something you should joke about Lelouch – Mister-I'm-So-Serious-All-The-Time. You really pick bad moments to be funny."

"Oh, I apologize. I didn't realize I was talking to a professional comedian who knows everything about comedy and when the appropriate time to deliver a joke would be." Lelouch's rebuttal is so dry it puts salt to shame.

And it wasn't a bad moment for humor in Lelouch's opinion; it was supposed to lighten the mood and offer a distraction like proper comic relief should.

His joke did both, so:

**Lelouch: four.**

**Suzaku: zero.**

Suzaku sighs, unwilling to play this game of sarcasm, and looks elsewhere—

That's when the disquieting alert of an incoming call steals Suzaku away…

••

Sadly, their nice day out doesn't continue as planned because the outside world always interferes – though this time Kyushu can take the blame rather than Zero…

Of course Lelouch knew this matter would impede on their private matters because it is a part of Zero's matters, but Suzaku doesn't know that Lelouch and Zero are the same so he doesn't know that Lelouch knows Zero's matters or that those certain matters will interfere with their matters… or something along those lines. If nothing else, the act of committing to plans with Suzaku should testify for Lelouch's innocence regardless of whatever other matters choose to do. Lelouch can't say he suspects that anyone is suspicious of him, per se, but there's no such thing as being too cautious or prepared.

Contrarily, he'd rather not think about Zero's role in Suzaku's pregnancy and vice versa, but he knows he'd better formulate something and fast. Right now Suzaku has not only the little fry growing inside him but Lloyd Asplund and the Lancelot to worry about – thanks to Zero and his Black Knights, ironically enough – to spare a thought about Lelouch's meandering outside of school. Lelouch can keep up the gambling act with words but he knows that eventually he'll need to produce some money one way or another. Later on, though, when Suzaku is ballooned like a different type of fish and lounging around the clubhouse, he's going to wonder where Lelouch is running off to – "As if gambling is more important than his family!" Lelouch can already imagine Suzaku thinking, if not grumbling.

Gambling isn't more important than his family, but fighting to protect them against a super-evolved-locust nation like Britannia is.
If only Suzaku wasn't a bumbling idiot in their swarm…

To say that Lelouch has coped with the incident on Shikinejima Island wouldn't be entirely true, and it seems that Suzaku is still carrying some weight of that day as well.

Lelouch just knows his hands are dirty with Suzaku's guilt from that debacle.

Lelouch had really underestimated Suzaku's foolishness, and in any other circumstance it might have been a harmless slipup on Lelouch's part that he could have easily recovered from, but… Trapped by his (technically, was-presently pregnant) boyfriend in a cockpit that would have essentially served as their casket, Lelouch knew the way out and had to take it. There were so many reasons not to do it, but the single pro that countered weighed heavier than all of the cons combined.

Lelouch did curse his luck, but, not one to believe in luck, realized that he probably doomed himself somewhere along the way. Maybe it started when he denied his father, maybe it started when he befriended Suzaku, maybe he shouldn't have entered that contract with C.C., maybe he shouldn't have stood so close to Suzaku with his pistol—erm… maybe he shouldn't have counted Schneizel out — but he didn't expect the man to make his cameo just yet in order to eliminate Zero from Britannia's nuisance list, but he should have known better (and was a bit proud that Schneizel was the one who needed to come in a clean the mess himself). Or maybe he should have tried harder to not be conceived in his mother's womb so that he would never have been born and suffer all this madness that tried to bring him to an early grave.

There was an irony there, somewhere, that had nearly killed Lelouch.

(It's bad enough that it slaps him upside the head now every time he begins to wonder why he never bothered to wear a condom during sex with Suzaku – his male paramour.

It almost feels as if the universe is doing all of this to him on purpose.)

Lelouch remembers how angrily he grit his teeth, his left eye burning in anticipation with the knowledge that Geass was the last card he had to play as all of his others had been swiped from his hands. If only Schneizel hadn't literally popped out of nowhere in that flying… ordering Suzaku to…

No…as easy and tempting as it is to blame Schneizel, he can only order Suzaku to do something but cannot physically make him do it (unlike like Lelouch himself). Ultimately, it was Suzaku's decision to comply and that bothered Lelouch more than his son-of-a-bitch brother foiling him once again.

Suzaku was just going to let it happen. As if nothing else mattered. As if that was all he aspired to.

Despite everything, despite all the people who love and care about him (Nunnally, the student council, Lelouch…) and those who depend or need him (Nunnally, Euphemia… Lelouch (Lloyd doesn't quite count)), and despite everything he'd worked for and everything that he had changed, Suzaku was just going to let his story cut short in an anticlimactic end that resolved nothing. Lelouch had been brimming with anger and desperation when the slit in his mask flew open as he yelled at Suzaku with all of the strength of emotion he could channel through his vocal-cords, ordering the empty-headed buffoon to do the very thing he wished against—

Because if irony was going to kill Lelouch it would protect Suzaku.

Lelouch wasn't and isn't going to let Suzaku get away so easily. After all, Lelouch hasn't been
protecting Suzaku up until now for no reason. It just appears that now he needs to protect more than just Suzaku.

Universe and all of its irony – and Schneizel – be damned.

••

"I order you to love me!"

The words play like a broken record in Suzaku's head in a nauseating echo that has stripped them of their syllables, the six words slurring together in a mutated sound that has no meaning. This repetition stretches like suffocating rubber around him for meager seconds that pulse in his ears like lifetimes with his heartbeat – why is it so loud? – and he can't seem to shut his mouth or blink his eyes.

There's no way she just said that…

There's no way she just ordered that!

"And in return, I will love you!"

"Princess Euphemia..." Suzaku manages. Suddenly the rain of enemy fire falling around him doesn't feel as pressing as he guides Lancelot haphazardly yet skillfully through the lacerating shots aimed to kill. The shrinking level of Lancelot's energy has also slipped under the radar of his ever-alert battle-mode, if for a moment.

"I'll love your honest face and sad eyes, your kindness, your stubbornness, your clumsiness, and even how you're awkward with cats. All of you! So, please don't hate yourself!"

Suzaku feels frozen, almost; those words piercing him like an arrow through the heart, leaving him speechless – not for a lack of words, but too many to state.

"...Suzaku? Are you alright, can you hear me?"

"Y-yes, Your Highness." Suzaku stalls, feeling hot nerves sweat through his pores. What is he to say? "I'm sorry… I've made you worry. I'm so conceited, aren't I?" Suzaku glances at her uneasily during any second he can spare from the fight against him – he's severely outnumbered here. Before that might have made him feel anticipation if anything at all, but now, for once, he's apprehensive and afraid. There is too much at stake here for his atonement to intervene now…

Confusion crosses her face, "What do you mean?"

Suzaku's breath quivers past his teeth as he blindly disables enemy Knightmare after enemy Knightmare in this one-sided battle royal he's dancing through – Lancelot won't fare much longer…

"I'm sorry. You're a wonderful person with a big heart and your spontaneity is charming, but…" He rubs his lips together, glancing at her soft face now smiling at him affectionately, and swallows. He's never had to so this before. "I can't…"

He sees Euphemia shake her head emphatically from his peripheral after he looks away from her.

"No, don't ever say you 'can't.' I believe in you, Suzaku."

"Princess, I…" Suzaku feels his jaw clamp tight, his palms moist inside his pilot gloves as he grips
the controls with aching hands.

"Accede, Suzaku." Euphemia chimes in for him, offering the words his mouth should muster. "Say you'll continue being my Knight."

"I'm tremendously flattered… but I can't follow that order."

"Suzaku…?"

Suzaku refuses to look up to her small voice.

"It's… I'm kind of already involved with someone…"

Lancelot finally dies around him, lights and sounds dimming from existence, allowing Euphemia's muteness to chill the sweat on his skin.

"…So, you have someone to live for?"

Suzaku realizes his eyes are watering – he's finally met his end and he doesn't want it, not when another life solely depends on him.

*Not yet, not NOW.*

"Then you don't have a choice, you have to live for them." Euphemia's intrepid tone is hollowed with despondence but it doesn't make her words any less sincere. "You have to live for them!"

He clenches the controls, "I'm sorry… I've"—*failed*—"run out of energy…" Something Suzaku expects should be his life flashing before his eyes is really only a stained memory of glassy eyes on the face of his father, a figurehead – a martyr? – that lies like a beached whale in a shore of crimson that burns his hands, a proud nation bullied into ruin, the smug smile of a prince – the same lips that had damned it all, vowed to destroy the destroyers—

"No, Suzaku! You have to live!" Euphemia's cry is so desperate, desolate, and raw that it ices the marrow in his bones just before an abstractly familiar blackness begins to envelop him in a numb void—

When volatile, malicious beams circle him in a roaring perimeter that destroys the pack of Knightmares that had him surrounded like wolves.

For once, Suzaku is glad to have Zero make his appearance if only because it reels him from the holes in his soul and distracts him from the heart he sees breaking in his Princess's blue eyes…

••

As if Lelouch doesn't already have enough reason to detest Schneizel and want him eliminated in *every* sense of the word, he has now climbed to a whole new level of hatred. Although Lelouch doesn't know for a fact that this little strategy was devised by his brother, it reeks too much of Schneizel for Lelouch to assume it was Cornelia's or any other's doing.

This is the second time Schneizel has tried to erase Suzaku – the second obviously paying for the treacherous escape of the first.

But this is also the second time the *Second* Prince has been thwarted.

And third time will not be the charm for Schneizel because Lelouch will *not* give him the chance.
It is this train of thought that has him steamrolling down his express route to the submarine's bay where his shuttle is waiting for him to climb in so it can deploy under the safety of the wrinkled blanket of opaque water. The rebels that are shuffling through the corridors in their brisk uniforms might misconstrue his steps as being his typical, stout march rather than anything else – anything *emotionally* driven – as they scatter from the path of their fearless leader like flocks of black sheep. Lelouch is more than willing to let them believe that as he sets course for home, ignoring the critical, golden eyes that have been shadowing him unnervingly since he boarded.

Of course tailing him isn't a new pastime for that witch, but this time it's strange; the way her silence breathes the air around him makes it feel as though she has something to say – and if so, why hasn't she said anything yet? If it's a private matter then why didn't she speak when they were secluded in the Gawain? He should probably be relieved that she's tailing him rather than causing trouble for any of the crew—she doesn't want to come to the surface with him, does she?

In the end, she doesn't speak and he doesn't ask – even if his mind wasn't elsewhere he still most likely wouldn't.

He just hopes that won't come back to bite him in the ass later…

•••

"I'll be firm and resolute and won't back down. It's time to put my stubbornness to good use, even if it's a selfish request it's not really *only* just for me—"

"What on *Earth* are you babbling about?" Lloyd calls in a drawl, pushing his spectacles up his narrow nose.

"Ah!" Suzaku jumps, meeting Lloyd's cold gaze that's much closer than he remembers—

Well, that's because Suzaku had been walking up to the man when he had delved into his head for a mental pep-rally to motivate himself – which is practically like visiting a ghost town considering how rarely Suzaku hosts such events in his head, for *himself* – and last he checked Lloyd was—

"Boy, what is *wrong* with you?" Lloyd queries loudly into Suzaku's face. "Don't tell me my devicer is malfunctioning."

"I think it's debatable whether or not he was ever 'functioning' in the first place"—Suzaku can hear Lelouch mock in his head.

"Uh, well, nothing. But I wanted to talk to you about something…"

"Hm~?" Lloyd lifts a thin eyebrow at him. "So something *is* wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Cécile tacks onto the conversation with a fretful ensemble on her features to match her voice.

"Um…" Suzaku starts, eyes darting between the two once Lloyd finally cranes away from his personal space.

"If it's about the Lancelot…?" Cécile trails off, her question suggesting the battle that had just transpired – the one where he not only lost of all of his energy, but the float system too…

Suzaku rubs his arm, "Ah, sort of…"

…In
"You are going to enlighten us sometime this millennium, right Suzaku?"

"What's the matter?" for once Cécile is too worried to spare her energy on reprimanding Lloyd – that's right, she had probably heard his conversation with the Princess…

Suzaku's eyes dart between them again like he's watching a tennis match, and then heaves a big sigh from his gut as if his favored side just lost the game.

"I need a hiatus from piloting the Lancelot."

There, he said it.

The ball's in their court now…

Cécile's head cocks to the side and just when she opens her mouth—

"This isn't about that pregnancy thing is it?" Lloyd blurts out in a tawdry tone. "Because I should think that it would only improve your performance. You would be fighting for two, after all – what motivation is better than that? So I think it would be a waste to stop now when—Ouch!"

"Pardon his inhumanity," She pleads formally as her arm lowers to her side.

"Like always," Suzaku responds uneasily – she doesn't typically physically abuse him, but maybe it's a long time coming…?

"Bloody Hell, what was that for?"

"Suzaku,"—Lloyd has totally just been ignored—"if you need some time, I think that can be arranged, but… You know the instability of the situation here."

"I know, but I can't keep doing this, especially after today." If not for ZERO, I would have—"It's too irresponsible for me to continue."

She nods solemnly, "Yes, this is a quite a problem. Even so, we only go out on demand, so maybe…"

"Perhaps we could plead for a truce with Zero," Lloyd jeers mildly, still coddling his wound.

Cécile glowers at him.

"Don't give me that look. You know I don't care for much else than my Lancelot and even in a time of peace I could still borrow Suzaku from his new family for tests and such, right Suzaku old boy? As long as the two of you are never parted, I think I can live a contented life – though it wouldn't be the same, of course. Maybe I can still convince you otherwise…"
"Do you want me to hit you again?"

Suzaku laughs nervously and starts making random gestures with his hands to distract harm away from Lloyd.

"Alright, we've had a long evening, so let's just sleep on it, alright? The problem will still be here in the morning, and who knows, maybe a solution will be here as well?"

"As if the real world works that way…" Lloyd ridicules as he walks away – either agreeing with Suzaku regardless of his words or trying to avoid Cécile's unnaturally lively scorn.

"You're right Suzaku; it has been a long evening. Why don't you head off and get some rest?" She glances quickly over her shoulder to Lloyd who is tapping away at the computer he'd abandoned to interrupt Suzaku's blathering. "Don't worry about Lloyd, he's like a bratty child but he knows what he can't have at the end of the day. I promise you that we can work this out somehow."

Suzaku smiles, "Thanks, but don't hurt him again, alright? I don't want to have to babysit him if you do."

Cécile's eyes gleam in a way Suzaku has never seen but the smile on her lips is still as tender as always.

"Off you go," she starts to shoo him with her hands. "Tonight has been especially stressful for you, so rest well. I'll phone you if there's anything you need to know."

Suzaku smiles affably, letting her turn him to face the open door, "Fine, fine. But don't worry if you have trouble reaching me during the week after school hours because I'll be busy with student council business. There's a festival at the end of the week and we still have a lot of things to take care of."

"A festival?"

He nods, "Yeah, it'll be an open campus, so we really have to prepare for the possible crowd surplus."

"That sounds pleasant, but don't work yourself too much Suzaku. If you feel tired then rest." She places a light, comforting hand on his back as they walk with a gentle smile on her lips for his eyes to see.

"Don't worry so much – I'm not that reckless." He tries to laugh only to have it die before it materializes into sound.

There's a faint scoff from Lloyd's direction.

Suzaku can't resist: "You know, Lloyd, since the school will be accepting visitors, you should visit Milly. You're only going to be marrying her."

Lloyd barely bothers to mumble a retort before Cécile sends Suzaku on his way again with another warm parting and a soft-spoken resolution to help resolve the matter of his situation. He walks through the door and into the shadowy hallway—

Finding a single person is lingering nearby, caught in the fading light stretching from the lab.

His stomach practically hits the floor, "Princess Euphemia?"
"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to eavesdrop! I just wanted to see how you were doing! But then I heard you talking, and...!" her voice storms Suzaku in such a rush of words that he almost doesn't notice the blush creeping to her cheeks—

Did she just say *eavesdrop*?

All he can do is gape like a faceless portrait when she abashedly approaches him, her hands clutching the white bell of her dress.

"I'm sorry." She peers at him timorously. "I hope you can forgive—"

"No," his mouth utters and her eyes grow wide. "W-wait! I-I-I meant it's not a problem! You were just worried, I am grateful for that."

She nods and looks down at her fingers as they fiddle with her skirt.

"...So, you are all right, then?" her powder blue irises are on his face again, particularly his lips when he speaks.

"Oh, yes. Thank you for asking. And you, Princess? Are you all right?"

She nods, eyes swooping away from his again as if literally watching Silence enter their conversation.

This really couldn't be more awkward.

It's like bumping into an ex where things didn't quite end well—or so Suzaku imagines.

Even crickets wouldn't chirp if they were in this hallway. Perhaps it'd be better if Suzaku knew what to say…

"To be honest Suzaku, I'm surprised. I guess I thought you were more responsible than this."

"Imagine how I feel," he mutters wryly. "But, at least give me some credit. It's not like I thought *this* could happen to me."

Her eyes shift into a critical shade, something disapproving twisting on her face.

"Surprises come in all forms, I guess." He looks down at his shoes. "I still can't really believe it, but… Well, if I had known it was even remotely possible for something like this to happen I would have made sure he used protection, but—"

"He?"

Suzaku looks up, "Pardon?"

"You... said 'he.'"

Before Suzaku can question her further, he sees the dawn of realization colour her face—

"Y-you mean *you're* the one who's...?"

Suzaku feels hot nerves wriggling in his stomach, "What do you mean, that you didn't know? I thought you said you overheard—!"

That's right, even though they spoke of the subject the words "Suzaku is pregnant" were never said
directly, most of their conversation pretty much stepping around them, so, naturally, Euphemia would just assume…

Strange how Suzaku can be so careless about what he says as well as what was and wasn't said about him yet at the same time be so careful to not mention the exiled and believed-to-be deceased prince's name.

Suzaku gawks at her with a slack jaw and a stomach shriveling under the stuffy discomfiture of the moment, trying to find a reasonable chain of words to save this situation from falling from his control as he watches her face scuff with vermilion, a nervous hand covering her mouth.

He is unlucky in his search.

Shit…

••

Lelouch is roused by the frenetic ruffling of cloth that might as well be a riot breaking out in the stark silence of the room, causing a sleepy jolt to twitch his body and open his eyes; revealing not only that he had fallen asleep at his desk – neglected schoolwork still waiting to be completed by his intelligence – but that he is no longer alone in the room. In either brief alarm or a learned instinct from napping during class, Lelouch bolts upright in his chair with a drowsy cloak hanging over his features, causing that sound of fussing fabric to instantly cease. The silence is a bit tense though still calm as Lelouch turns in his chair to find the origin of the noisemaker whilst rubbing his eyes, coming face to face to with Suzaku's apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

The room is still bright, well lit by the ceiling light uncovering most of the room from the shroud of night (including Lelouch's ignored homework). Suzaku's face looks a tad rosy, his cheeks tinged like they've been brushed by cold weather, and his eyes are heavy, hard, and polished like marble.

"It's fine…” Lelouch murmurs, still trying to rid his eyes from the mask of sleep.

"I was even gonna try to carry you to bed."

Lelouch's wit isn't too lethargic to miss that.

"In that case I'm glad you woke me up," he mutters very dryly, hearing Suzaku breathe a quiet sound of appreciation for the comedic comment over the continued scuffle of clothing. He looks Suzaku over again, picking up the grim disposition of his friend as a burnt-orange military uniform is quietly disassembled from his person – strange since Suzaku had left in his civilian clothes.

"You're back late."

Lelouch of course had hurried home, wanting to get back as early as possible to wait for his impregnated companion, thereafter trying – and failing – to busy himself with schoolwork. He didn't have to beat Suzaku here but he figured it would be for the best considering a night ago he'd stumbled in late and Suzaku wasn't pleased—not that Lelouch is afraid of Suzaku or his nagging, he's just covering his terrorist ass. Lelouch only wants to cause as much suspicion as he can get away with before he finds his free time inhibited by the very things he's trying to protect. It would be very bad for Suzaku's all around health to accumulate an abundant amount of stress because of Lelouch – meaning now is the worst possible time for Suzaku to be figuring out any secrets that lead to Zero results.

So, just to be clear: Lelouch is not intimidated.
Lelouch doesn't get intimidated.

This is all for concern – the greater good.

(It almost makes Lelouch wonder why he said "back late" instead of "home late.")

"Yeah…” Suzaku nods – too gravely for Lelouch's taste – pulling the last leg out of his pants and resting them next to his jacket already sprawled out on the couch behind Lelouch's desk. He is clad in only his white, button-down shirt, green tie dangling from his neck, and his snug, gray boxers when he plops down heavily on the bed – Lelouch has to focus to draw his attention away from the informal position of Suzaku's open legs. "I was going to stay in my dorm, but…” he leans his elbows on his knees, "I don't feel like being alone tonight.” It's after a halfhearted shrug that Suzaku removes his socks – his shoes are undoubtedly resting by the bedroom door.

Lelouch feels his eyebrows crease, "Long night?"

Suzaku just nods, tossing his socks on the couch where his tie soon joins them.

"Did you take care of that business with Asplund?"

Suzaku nods again.

Lelouch purses his lips.

Seems Suzaku isn't in the mood for conversation.

"Please, spare me the details," Lelouch says drolly.

Suzaku looks up at him with weary eyes, "I'm sorry Lelouch. I'm just…” his eyes drift away again as a deep sigh claims his lips.

"You are…?"

"…I'm beginning to wonder if I'm making the right decision. I feel like every one that I make turns out to be a bad one."

Not the answer Lelouch wants to hear, but not the answer that surprises him, either.

"You keep telling me that you'll support me in whatever I do, as long as I do what I feel is right… I know I fought for this, but…” Suzaku's eyes are clear and firm for the first moment since Lelouch has looked into them upon waking. "Lelouch, I want to know how you feel and what you want. You have yet to tell me anything about what's going on inside that head of yours."

Lelouch holds that gaze, that clarity shining in emerald eyes now that those walls have lowered, and then breathes in steadily through his nose.

"First of all, I think that you can't know if something is the 'right' decision when you make it. In hindsight, everything's twenty-twenty."

"But you've always seemed so sure of yourself, never worrying or stressing about your decisions." Suzaku's lips break into a sardonic smile, "Lelouch, you always have all the answers."

"That's not true."

Suzaku blinks at the sudden, solemn slump in Lelouch's tone.
"It's not true that I don't worry or stress – I stress and worry so much it's a wonder my hair hasn't turned gray yet or that I haven't had a heart-attack." Lelouch rubs his face. "I seem confident because I am confident, and I like to think I have all the answers, but I know I can only control so much around me. And sometimes, Suzaku, the bigger picture is a whole lot bigger than you think it is."

"But…"

"For instance," Lelouch stands up, gesturing with his hand to Suzaku, "you being pregnant has surprised me greatly. There's no honest way that I could have known this would happen – could I have prevented it if I had known? Certainly. But there's no changing my past ignorance, I just have to forge ahead and find my way on this new path." He gently sits down next to Suzaku. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that one can only be as prepared as they are observant. If there's something beyond your knowledge of course you can't predict it, but the trick is adapting and knowing how to handle whatever the universe throws at you." He lays his hand on Suzaku's back, "Right and wrong is shrouded in gray, only farther down the road will you know if you've done the best you could."

Suzaku's eyes stare at him a moment in silence as if he's absorbing everything Lelouch has just said, then rests his head on Lelouch's shoulder, nestling close to the warm body. Lelouch rubs Suzaku's back, turning towards the boy to let him nuzzle deeper into the comfort of his form. Lelouch isn't sure if he was just trying to comfort Suzaku, if that's what Suzaku wanted – though it felt like it – and he doesn't know if Suzaku has been consoled by his words of wisdom, but the atmosphere is lighter than before. The ghostly tension feels to have dissipated from the air—

"Right, but you still haven't told me how you feel about the baby."

—And there it is again.

"…I'm sure I've answered this question before."

"No," Suzaku pushes himself up, "you haven't. All you've said is that you'd be supportive."

"Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Lelouch. This is important. It's not like we're painting the walls a different colour – this is a baby, our baby – another life we're talking about."

Lelouch sighs.

Feelings: not something Lelouch is exactly adept in expressing… with words, anyway – actions do speak louder. But Suzaku needs to be told these things, needs to hear these things sometimes, otherwise they're left up to his assumptions and those prove to be incorrect quite frequently; particularly when interpreting Lelouch's feelings. Naturally, Lelouch's emotions are something that are supposed to be buried, never unearthed by anyone other than himself, yet sometimes he wishes Suzaku could see them as clearly as he feels them despite the thick veneer he wears so tightly, so cautiously, so protectively to keep them hidden, if only so he wouldn't have say them out loud.

How dreadfully ironic…

"I can't."

"What?" Judging by Suzaku's tone that is not an answer he wants to hear.
"Rather, I couldn't." He leans his forehead against Suzaku's and spins his voice from his throat like he's turning it into luxury silk, "If I had to be in this situation with anyone, I'm glad it's with you – I wouldn't want to do this with anyone else, nor could I. You are the only one for me and the only mother I would want for my child." If Lelouch's voice isn't tender enough, he seals his words with a lingering kiss over Suzaku's lips and a light grasp of Suzaku's chin to tilt his head just slightly.

When their lips part with a quiet noise Suzaku's eyes look deep and clouded but there's a light shining through his mystification from somewhere in his mind like a lighthouse flashing through thick fog, and the soft smile that bends his lips relieves the room of more invisible tension.

"You always know what to say, don't you?" he says with a calm gleam over his shamrock eyes.

"That's right." Lelouch smiles back.

It helps to have a collection of romance flicks under his belt to reference, too. If they've taught him anything it's that sap is a must – and their said sappy dialogue is more or less the same which enables him to apply them to whatever bitter situation that needs to be sweetened.

…Not that he was trying to learn anything or that he willingly subjected himself to them.

Nunnally is found of them, is all!

"You smooth talking demon…" Suzaku murmurs, moving his sassy smile centimeters from Lelouch's lips. "What have you done with Lelouch?"

Instead of lifting an eyebrow like his first impulse tells him to, his lips steal Suzaku's words to stretch into a hellish crescent like a wicked horn.

"Didn't you know?"—a smoldering breath against Suzaku's lips, a fingertip pointing his chin upward—"I am a demon."

Suzaku's saucy lips shrivel into a puckering cushion for the bedeviling kiss Lelouch places against them with a fervor burning in his lips.

Actions always taste better than words.

Lelouch doesn't mean for the exchange to be long despite his force as he's still quite tired, not to mention he has a case of cotton-mouth due to his napping. He just wants to end the moment with a nice press of lips, maybe a sweep of tongues, and then conclude the night by flopping down on his bed and getting some – hopefully – undisturbed beauty sleep.

Seems Suzaku has other ideas.

His mouth is open and his voice is leaking out alluring sounds that are deceptively soft as his hands reach to trap Lelouch's head when it tries to drift away with strong fingers cutting through stalks of black licorice hair. Lelouch's finger is still pointed against Suzaku's chin, and after a moment of consideration – that perhaps a little make-out session before bed wouldn't hurt – it skims up Suzaku's jaw where a hand cups Suzaku's face, fingers fussing the curled brush of brown hair. Lelouch is pulled down in this intrigue with Suzaku's hands, nestling him in the limbs of his muscular mate like a nest in a tree. Suzaku's arms are as warm and sturdy around his shoulders as Lelouch remembers – as they always are – but there's something peculiar teeming in their embrace that's spreading all through Suzaku's body in an odd language Lelouch knows he recognizes but can't quite place. Something about Suzaku just feels off from the way his knees pin Lelouch's waist against his hips to how unusually persuasive his tongue is behaving as it anxiously slithers around.
Even so, it's not entirely unpleasant, whatever this feeling with which Suzaku is clinging to him. It almost makes Lelouch feel… important – and that's certainly destined to get Lelouch going one way or another. The hot thriving crawling from his loins is a sensation that, incidentally, his pants cannot appreciate as he swivels his head to the side in a kiss growing sloppier with hasty lust. Lelouch can't speak for Suzaku's rushing but lack of air is something that has Lelouch gripping the excess of shirt on Suzaku's sides in mercy. One of Suzaku's hands is still pillaging the locks of Lelouch's hair when he moves his head again, the burning in his chest far more unpleasant than a little constriction of his pants, but with an uncivilized grunt Lelouch is able to scare that rough hand away and break for air.

Pink is rolled across Suzaku's cheeks and desire is steaming his eyes when Lelouch looks down at him, panting and flushed with a wild thicket of hair thanks to Suzaku's rather ardent groping.

"Sorry…" Suzaku says quietly – why isn't he out of breath too? – and caresses Lelouch's cheeks with his fingertips – and is that pity? – while holding firmly to Lelouch's arm with his other hand.

Lelouch furrows mildly irritated eyebrows and lies, "It's fine."

What's with him…?

Lelouch leans down again, his hair being swept away from his face by Suzaku's hands as he descends and grazes his lips over Suzaku's before kissing beside that thirsty mouth instead. A nasally noise of yearning is cast out from Suzaku's impatience as Lelouch nips away towards his neck, hands tugging on the loose-knit, cotton sweater decorating Lelouch's torso. Lelouch smirks at the sound and bites harder on the spot he had stained with his teeth last night as he shifts his hips over Suzaku's—

Instantly met with the rigid spring of a healthy erection.

Suzaku's face and expression have ripened to a bashful red when Lelouch's amazed eyes stumble up to his.

"I-I'm sorry!"

"Why are you apologizing?" Lelouch barely suppresses a laugh and Suzaku's mouth presses into a tight line. "It is a little surprising to see you so excited this quickly, but…" Lelouch holds his impish stare over Suzaku's face, his black hair a tattered curtain around their faces, "I'm no less satisfied." He nudges their crotches together again getting a sharp grimace from Suzaku. "In fact, I'm rather pleased. So there's no need to apologize." Lelouch brushes his soft smirk over Suzaku's lips, kissing them fully again when seahorse opens welcomingly opens his mouth.

Lelouch combs the fingers of his left hand through chocolate waves, lifting his hips as his right hand descends between their bodies in search of a button and zipper. He fumbles slightly, trying to unfasten his pants quickly as the feeling and the sight of Suzaku's bold excitement shoots something through his body, zapping the tip of his stirring flesh that cannot wait to cut loose and greet Suzaku. It pushes from Lelouch's fly with a giddy jerk and the relief his cramped cock feels as it is released from fitted, charcoal slacks leaks from Lelouch's mouth in a light sound, one that Suzaku mimics when their hard lengths are pressed together.

"…Looks like you're just as excited as I am," Suzaku murmurs cheekily when their lips part.

"Only because I willed myself to be," Lelouch defends indignantly, pushing up on his elbow for better leverage.
Of course, that is a lie.

But he can't let Suzaku think otherwise.

Lelouch doesn't even give him the chance to speak. He starts grinding down roughly on Suzaku's hips and smoothes the off-guard outbursts of pleasure Suzaku makes with a harsh kiss. Suzaku clutches at Lelouch's back as his muffled moans are absorbed by a tenacious tongue, carelessly stretching the back of Lelouch's sweater, much to the older boy's dismay – it's flattering that Suzaku is mangling his clothing out of gripping pleasure, really, but at this rate he's going to ruin it! It's with a bite on a plumping lip and coarser thrusts over Suzaku that Lelouch tries to get the brunet's attention to stop stretching his sweater, but what he gets in response surprises him somewhat:

"Lelouch," Suzaku gasps, a solid longing in his voice. "I want to feel your skin…"—a distressed tug—"Off…"

Lelouch pauses to look down at Suzaku, into his lustily laden, forest depths. At the desperate plea breathing around his words.

He smirks.

_Need my Highness that badly?_

With some trained effort, Lelouch tugs the layers of his ebony sweater and the sharply collared, vibrant aqua dress-shirt underneath off over his head, more than happy to deposit them in the safety of the couch next to Suzaku's uniform, far from Suzaku's reach. There's a smug tilt of his head and crook of his lips when Suzaku's hands quickly coat his fair skin and he circles his fingers around Suzaku's wrists when palms caress his chest, causing the boy to look up at him with big, misty eyes.

"Likewise," Lelouch says, his voice wrapped in a soft husk and his smile sharp just before he presses his lips against Suzaku's.

In an instant, Suzaku's shirt is pushed up, he is pushed down, and Lelouch is comfortably grinding their clothed erections together again as he pecks his lips to one of Suzaku's brittle nipples. The corners of Lelouch's mouth lift in a prideful grin when it appears to bristle even more at his attention and he lets his tongue peek past his lofty lips to teasingly flick the lusty nub. Suzaku gasps at that with a twitch of his chest, a breathier moan fleeing his mouth when Lelouch liberally slathers his wet tip around the pointed nub before closing it in his mouth. He sucks on it gently and toughly as he whirls his slimy organ around the excited bump, rubbing and stroking with his tongue as he continues to grind his solid length over Suzaku's rocking hips. Suzaku's body shudders as Lelouch laps at his sensitive breast, his hands ranking through Lelouch's hair – though more tamely than before – with his attention lost in Lelouch's ravenous mouth and the heated nerves mounting his body as Lelouch humps his crotch. He merely wriggles and gasps when Lelouch's tongue slides across his heaving chest where he nibbles and suckles at the other budding nipple, maintaining the vivaciously vigorous lunges of his hips—

"Put it in!"

Lelouch halts.

He doesn't quite try to restrain his shock but he doesn't quite openly display it to Suzaku, either.

Suzaku is looking up at him with glazed, hooded eyes and a beautiful blush splashed over his face
– an expression that virtually says "take me now!" in Lelouch's opinion.

Suzaku almost sounds defensive when he answers Lelouch's gape with a light voice wavering from his throat, but it mostly sounds suffocated in desperation…

Or something similar.

"I want you, Lelouch… I want to feel you… inside…"

Lelouch swallows, absent to the saliva smeared around his mouth from its previous engagement.

Such embarrassing things Suzaku is saying.

Who actually says stuff like that in real life?

Suzaku, apparently.

"Are you sure? We don't have to…"

Suzaku nods, quickly and pointedly pulling off his soiled, gray shorts. "It's not so much I want than I need," he says, dropping his underwear on the floor.

So Suzaku really does need Lelouch's Highness that badly after all…

"Is that so…?" Lelouch grins devilishly down at Suzaku, lying against him again.

Suzaku inclines his chin to touch his lips against Lelouch's as they sink closer—

And closer—

"In that case," Lelouch sits up with a smirk at Suzaku's denied-a-kiss expression, reaching for the drawer of his desk closest to the bed, "I'm glad I bought these today."

Suzaku's eyes blink at the rather (unexpectedly) large box of condoms in Lelouch's fingers.

"…Why so many?"

"Need you ask?" Lelouch says through his same grin.

Suzaku sighs at him playfully only to cringe moments later when the chilly sticks of Lelouch's lubricated fingers begin to paint around his entrance, but he still pulls his knees back to give his lover easier access. They gingerly slip inside for preparation, stroking Suzaku's passage carefully, gently, as Lelouch stares down at Suzaku's pursed face – it's been some time since they've been together this way. The night of Suzaku's congratulatory party for becoming Euphemia's knight was the last time and Lelouch was perhaps a tad too forceful to take Suzaku (to childishly remind him who he really belongs to) but it had seemed that the Honorary Britannian was fully aware of that symbolism…

Suzaku's mouth flies open in a gasp and then a suffocated moan curling in his throat as a covered Lelouch enters him to the hilt in a smooth motion. His body steels and his eyes are squinting so intensely his emerald gems are reduced to slivers. Suzaku's tense legs are linked tightly at their ankles around Lelouch as he leans forward, hovering above Suzaku's creased face as it begins to pant as if to relieve the pressure filling his body. He pecks small kisses against Suzaku's lips with fingers that caress a sacrificial scar.

"You can… you can move," Suzaku says quietly in a faintly frantic push of air after sufficiently
adjusting to girth inside him, his eyes still a glossy pair of evergreen spindles.

For a fleeting moment Lelouch feels his joints solidify in some empathetic hesitation from the look in Suzaku's eyes. He leans on his elbow and combs his hand through Suzaku's hair just as he had previously, only instead of reaching for his zipper this time, he touches his lips to Suzaku's in the softest, most loving kiss he can muster. Suzaku folds his hands over Lelouch's shoulders as he returns the kiss with equal endearment, trapping his own moan inside the older lad's mouth when his hips move in the first shallow thrust. Suzaku's body closes around Lelouch with hunger when he moves again in a deeper heave with legs wringing the thin waist in their grip and short fingernails scoring red frowns into Lelouch's skin. He tells himself he is immune to the sting of Suzaku's nails as he moves faster still into the tight heat trying to pull him in deeper the faster he drives, breathing in the hot air of Suzaku's stifled sounds that have never so anxiously wanted to be louder.

Lelouch has never been much of a moaner or a noisemaker himself, but it's always exhilarating to hear Suzaku – particularly when he's trying to keep quiet. Lelouch knows he's doing his absolute best when Suzaku's teeth are threatening to chew through his lips or hands in order to keep his voice down, much like it he's doing right now. Lelouch offers a groan here and there along with the occasional grunt (that's far more occasional than he'd like) so Suzaku can hear his partner's satisfaction and can get the same excited feeling, but still strictly prefers to hear Suzaku—

SNI~FF!

Speaking of sounds.

Lelouch takes a closer look into Suzaku's eyes after hearing the sniffle, seeing a thick glaze swimming over his green irises.

That's strange… is Suzaku tearing up?

Maybe this is hurting him? Should he stop—?

Suzaku's arms lasso around Lelouch's neck, wrangling him down for a crushing kiss that harbors a sea of rolling emotions Lelouch was not prepared to feel surge from his seahorse.

"Lelouch..." Suzaku chokes, holding the vigilante close in the ropes of his arms, their faces so close Lelouch's hair sweeps against the damp rouge on his face. The brunet's limbs encircle in an embrace that's so secure yet insecure at the same time; it's almost as if...

Ah, so that's what this is.

Suzaku's seeking more than to just quench his horny hunger and lose himself in physical comfort. This is...

"...I love you, Lelouch. So much."

...an honest-to-God consummation.

It couldn't be about his mission today, could it...?

It is this moment of concentrated, living passion encompassing them that helps Lelouch to understand a little of what and how parents-to-be might feel about their offspring, why they treasure those little creations with their all – because those little creations are the very tangible, personified form of their love. It's so romantically maudlin Lelouch thinks it might cause something to burst—
That something has apparently been decided by his libido.

*Lousy stamina.*

They haven't even been at it that long!

"*Suzaku,*" Lelouch grunts – a warning of the flashflood soon to come.

…Ahem.

"W…wait…!" Suzaku grasps Lelouch's shoulder. "Just… a little longer…!"

"Hurry up!" Lelouch commands as he tries to slow the rapid pace of his thrusting hips and swiftly jerk Suzaku's erection in order to win the race against himself.

…Hold on.

Did Lelouch just demand that Suzaku's *orgasm* *catch up* to his own?

Yeah, that happened…

He really is no match for Suzaku's sexy cheetah body.

White soaks over the knuckles of Lelouch's hand grappling to the bar of his bed rail as he rocks his hips into Suzaku's body, feeling him convulse around his covered flesh when it drives over the internal pill of ecstasy. Suzaku moves with the thrusts, his legs anchored around Lelouch and constricting tighter with each hit to his prostate, his teeth clamped down so hard on his lips Lelouch almost expects to see them pierce right through. But even with his mouth locked up to stay quiet, his attempt at quietness doesn't keep his pleasure from escaping through his nose in little mewls that gain weight with every deep lunge into his body, their pitch increasing the more he tries to silence them.

Lelouch can taste the tide of air that bursts out of Suzaku's mouth in a cry he couldn't quite contain as if it's squeezed from his lungs like the water out of his eyes. A clothed arm is quick to bridge over those leaking greens, prompting Lelouch to take his hand off the bar and close his fingers around the clenching fist to tenderly coax it open. He entwines their fingers together when that palm unrolls and they clasp tightly after Lelouch pushes the arm above Suzaku's head, away from his face, kissing him deeply until the wells of his eyes dry up. Lelouch can't stop from feeling that holding hands during sex is really cheesy, but it does the job of consoling Suzaku just before he barrels through his limit and over his peak with Suzaku's body still a racing rhythm to follow suit. Lelouch continues thrusting as he rides down his slope in an effort to speed Suzaku along, sliding his hand diligently around Suzaku's slick, heated shaft.

It all instantly falls apart when Suzaku's *orgasm* snaps his taut muscles and wets their skin, leaving their bodies to turn to goo as it turns their heads to weightless balloons, and for a very long stretch of senseless time there's just:
That is, of course, until Suzaku has to go and ruin it with his talking.

"You outdid yourself Lelouch," Suzaku mocks with an even breath. "Two minutes this time."

"Two minutes in heaven is better than one minute in heaven," Lelouch says with a puff, smirking when he lifts his head from Suzaku's shoulder to see rolling eyes – that's right, no one can argue with this logic.

"I think you're just lucky I'm fast enough to keep up with you."

"Well, if it's a race then I think I've finally found one that I can win against you, but you should feel proud that you can at least keep up." Lelouch plops his head back down. "I'm glad you can put that speediness of yours to good use."

"Strange way to twist the situation just to make yourself feel better."

"It's all about adapting, my little cheetah," Lelouch prattles pleasantly.

"Cheetah?"

"Mm. Now be quiet, you're ruining my buzz."

Suzaku shifts under his weight, "As much as I like lying here with you like this, I don't think you should be pressing on my stomach."

Lelouch flinches, lifting off of Suzaku's body, "Right…" rolling over to lie on his back next to the brunet with a flop. His chest bobs like rocky ocean waves as he feels himself melt into the mattress cradling his exhausted body. He glances at Suzaku, feeling irritation gnaw on his pride at the sight of the calmer waters of his seahorse's chest, but the feeling dissolves as his eyes pour over the rest of Suzaku's body…

Violets follow the sheen of sweat lying over Suzaku's torso below the muddled fabric still hitched up his chest just above his duskier nipples. They are still stiff under the film of perspiration that makes the skin over Suzaku's softly toned abdomen glisten as he pants tamely for air; getting thicker the closer it gets to his bare crotch. His thighs are still spread open and slick from traces of sweat and lotion smearing from his behind and the coating on his flaccid length is drying along with his spattered on his stomach. His hairline is moist and his face is still glowing pink like most of his skin… Lelouch feels it's all probably enough to get him a little hard again.

He peels the condom off at the thought – he's too worn-out to be tempted, tossing it in the trash bin he had placed between his bed and nightstand just for this purpose. After cleaning them both off with the tissues he keeps in his drawer, and tucking himself back into his clothes, Suzaku tugs his shirt down so that it falls over his hips and shuffles closer to spoon against Lelouch on his side – yet Lelouch can't help but wonder why the boy didn't just take it off instead. Regardless, Lelouch welcomes Suzaku's snuggling with a quiet sigh of contentment, both of which lead the peaceful
thoughts of his imaginary world of solitude. It begins to build up around his mind, shutting out the stresses and such from his daily life—

Suzaku's fingers doodle over Lelouch's collarbone, "…Um, hypothetically speaking—"

What was that? Did Lelouch just hear a crack splinter the foundation of his solace?

"—what if someone found out I am, ah, with child?"

Lelouch props himself up on an elbow and pines his eyes on Suzaku, locked like missiles on a target.

"Who knows?" he demands sternly.

"Uh…" Suzaku hesitates briefly. "Well, you know just, I didn't go out of my way, I mean, it's not like… It's no one that—"

"Who did you tell?" Lelouch snaps.

Suzaku visibly gulps, "Princess Euphemia?"

There's a sudden rush of something cold in Lelouch's body that boils up through his skin – his thoughts racing in a blur from his mother and her soft blue eyes, to Nunnally and her smile, to Zero, to his father and his callous, violet eyes.

"Why would you tell her?"

"Well…" Suzaku fidgets. "It's not like I meant to! She overheard my conversation with Lloyd. What was I supposed to do? Deny it? Lie?"

Suzaku could have at least put one of his many theories to use on Euphemia – if there was ever a time for a genetically-mutated-virus-infected-hermaphrodite-impregnated-by-an-alien-seahorse story, it would have been then.

Who knows, she might have bought it.

"Did you tell her who the father is?"

Suzaku shakes his head and Lelouch releases his panicked breath as he grasps his forehead, combing his fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry, Lelouch."

"No, it's… don't worry about it. I know she can be trusted with a secret and as long as she doesn't know it's me, we'll be just fine." Lelouch removes his hand, locks of raven fluttering back over his face. "What was her reaction, her response?"

"She was so shocked she was speechless…"

"…Yes, I suppose anyone would be," Lelouch says quietly, trying to relax into his mattress like he had in the bathtub last night.

"I'm sorry." Suzaku's voice is so small, so familiar with those two words, that he might as well have said nothing at all.

It's as though apologizing is the only thing Suzaku knows how to do.
It's so damn infuriating.

"I said don't worry about it," Lelouch reminds tersely, his eyes closing as an annoyed scowl shades his face.

He feels Suzaku physically cringe like a frail sprig ambushed by winter's icy breath, but still remains near the shelter of Lelouch's body. The bantering words Suzaku had spoken to him yesterday and today replay in Lelouch's ears, lifting the dark drape over his eyes to show him the crestfallen eyes of his meek little boyfriend. The view makes Lelouch feel like his stomach is trying to eat his heart and it folds his brow together with pensive creases.

*Ice Prince indeed…*

Lelouch slides his arm around Suzaku with his fingertips delicately skating up his spine over the ghost-white shirt he's hiding in, cradling Suzaku in an embrace that he hopes will warm them both. Suzaku's head ducks a little under Lelouch's chin, closer towards Lelouch's chest as the fingers tunneling through his earthy mane reel him in with a tender kiss pressed against his forehead; Lelouch inhaling Suzaku's scent as he buries his nose in Suzaku's hair.

"Don't worry," Lelouch murmurs in his silky-spun voice again. "We'll figure this out, together. I promise."

The moist petals of warm breathing patting Lelouch's bare chest are accompanied by the light touch of Suzaku's fingertips as he roots himself deeper into the embrace in reply. Lelouch of course pets Suzaku's hair in return, letting the fickle mood of the night quietly fade into the background so that all that remains is just the two of them, on this bed, and nothing else. Lelouch feels lighter on the breeze of this state of mind as he reaches to switch his lamp off, feeling Suzaku loosely entangle their legs with his breathing quickly steadying to the slow pattern of slumber. When they are swathed in the ink of night he nuzzles his face into Suzaku's hair once he is settled in bed again, waiting for sleep to overpower his mind and its thoughts.

So Euphemia knows Suzaku is pregnant, what's the worst that could happen?

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**Chapter End Notes**

This chapter is sponsored by the following notes:

1- Pregnancy for Dummies is indeed a real book :B

2- I borrowed that "two minutes in heaven is better than one minute in heaven" bit from the song Business Time by Flight of the Conchords.
In which Denial Gets Denied and the Seahorse Syndrome Prevails

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Your eggo is preggo, no doubt about it." – Rollo from Juno.

Ambiguous

In which Denial Gets Denied and the Seahorse Syndrome Prevails

An unfriendly limp begins Suzaku's Monday.

When the auspicious arrival of Nunnally's wheelchair was within Suzaku's grasp he mentally patted himself on the back for offering to walk her to class today, but his self-praise was almost immediately erased once he realized how selfish a thought that was. No matter how well Nunnally's handicap serves as a crude cane for the obvious hitch in his step, that isn't something he should be happy about or enjoy. The fact that Nunnally is oblivious makes him feel worse as her chipper comments about the weather coast through the humid morning air – almost unheard by his ears as he concentrates on walking more smoothly with his waddle.

Suzaku can't nor does he intend to pass the blame for this internal inflammation onto Lelouch since daddy was just complying with the horny wishes of a moody mommy after offering to keep their bumping uglies to strictly bumping… Suzaku can really only blame his soreness on his own selfishness and perhaps the gaps of time they spend apart that help his body to stay resilient against their lovemaking.

Sex two nights in a row might be something that makes Lelouch feel proud of himself but it makes Suzaku feel a pain in his backside.

"Suzaku," Nunnally addresses with a touch of her hand over his accompanied by her voice, which surprises him despite how they're both as soft as the slight breeze shuffling alongside students through Ashford's campus.

The fizzling heat of remembered lust lashes Suzaku's face into a flourishing flush of embarrassment once he realizes that his thoughts were treading indecent lands while in the presence of Princess Purity herself. He tries to push something out of his mouth, but her instincts are too quick for his reflexes.

"You're not listening, are you?" Nunnally states as more of a fact than a downtrodden accusation at being ignored.

Knowing that he's just been cornered by the truth, a guilt-ridden sigh flops from his lips – free of charge.

"I'm sorry, Nunnally, I'm just really tired. ...I didn't sleep very well this weekend," he tacks on sheepishly at the end, feeling dirty for the implication he sends right over her head.

She nods gently in understanding as they roll smoothly yet slowly through the polite openings of fellow students.
"I suppose you would be if you spent a good portion of it… bonding with my brother."

Only a few steps after Nunnally's cool utterance does Suzaku's body harden with the guilty, embarrassed flurry of nerves that gush from his stomach like a geyser when his brain realizes what she actually just uttered.

It's sheer physics that keep Suzaku's head from exploding right on the spot.

Yet, he still feels like a robot malfunctioning from a logical paradox – because Princess Purity doesn't make impure quips!

"Y-you mean you heard us last night?" somewhere in the short circuiting of Suzaku's mind he manages to find his voice, it's just a shame that he can't find better words to say.

"No…"—Nunnally pauses in an undeniable moment of realization about what was happening last night. Her silent recognition clogs the fizzy burst of nerves in Suzaku's stomach like a cork and an angry Lelouch starts to flicker hotly behind his eyes because of it—"Actually, I was talking about Saturday night…"

"…Oh," is all Suzaku manages to say in an oddly robotic voice, recognizing the heavy dread sinking into his gut – sensing the end of his life once his princely other half finds out about his slip of tongue—

Because God knows he will.

—And here it is; a tiny heart-attack that's too small and happens too quickly for Suzaku to be sure if it really even happens.

"Oh, man, this is really awkward…" Suzaku says in an obvious struggle, an onslaught of Lelouch's dour disapproval thrashing cantankerously inside his skull. "I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"How could I not? You heard me and… we…" he falls ignorant to everything around him, slapping a hand to his forehead as if to stave off Lelouch's inevitable wrath. "Oh man."

"Suzaku, really, it's fine," Nunnally insists with another light touch of her hand, sensing the attention of her fellow classmates on them growing. "There's no need to dwell on it. I've already known about the two of you for a while, and it's only been the few times I couldn't sleep that I've heard you."

Nunnally means well, but her words aren't comforting in the least.

If anything, he'd be better off not knowing that much.

"Please don't become upset," Nunnally presses. "You didn't do anything wrong."

That's not what Lelouch will think.

"Maybe not… But I am sorry you weren't told. You shouldn't find out, uh, that way." Suzaku scrounges the words from his brain lamely – trying to imagine just what kind of noises she must have heard – and begins to cautiously push Nunnally once again along the outdoor path.

She is silent at that for a moment, her hands having folded together back in her lap, and it makes Suzaku more on edge – like maybe he said something wrong.
"Listen," Nunnally starts in a mild-mannered, lecturing tone that resonates much too closely to the boy who raised her, "I know my brother well, probably better than he thinks I do. I know he has his reasons for the secrets he keeps and the way he treats me. For example, he might think I'd feel left out or neglected if I knew the two of you were closer than just friends. He would have told me, I'm positive of that, just when he was ready. That's why I think you and I should just keep this our little secret, so Lelouch doesn't feel like he's lost some control."

Suzaku is stunned silent – not just by her maturity but her willingness for secrecy in order to protect that frightened little boy inside Lelouch that he tries his best to hide.

"Sure," he says to her with an uneasy grin – like there's a chance in Hell he'd be the one to tell Lelouch that Nunnally, his precious and unsoiled little sister, has heard them having sex, more than once. He just makes the mental note to police the volume of their love-fest soundtrack in the future – if he can even muster up the nerves to fool around in that room ever again – and hope Lelouch won't notice to the point of suspicion. "You know, saying something like that makes you sound just like Lelouch."

She giggles very softly through her nose, "Like brother, like sister?"

Suzaku smiles; the slight undertones of mischievousness in her voice eroding away some of the horrified tension rusting his body and the tirade of a feuding Lelouch in his mind.

"Can I ask you something, then?"

"Anything," Nunnally answers as they close the distance to her first period classroom.

"You don't feel neglected or anything, do you?"

There's the slightest of a pause on her end but Suzaku still notices it before she places her nimble fingertips on his rough knuckles with a smile aiming at him over her shoulder.

"Not at all. I'm happy for both of you. It's good that he has someone other than me that he can feel safe and be comfortable around – same for you. Anyway, it's not like I've lost my big brother, you know!" She playfully notes as if to ease the moment and Suzaku's mind completely of any awkward stress.

And she's right; she hasn't lost Lelouch and she never will.

Nunnally will always be in that reserved section of Lelouch's heart no matter what.

Suzaku laughs softly in his chest in agreement before a blonde girl he's met briefly before pops up and steals most of Nunnally's attention. It's a nostalgic feeling and somewhat surprising to watch Nunnally socialize with this other girl, Alice, so familiarly and happily; somehow reminding him of his beginning with Lelouch during those months that seemed both long and short…

Yet it seems many things are reminding him of Lelouch these days.

After a friendly farewell, assuring Nunnally is left in the good hands of her dear friend, Suzaku sets off for his own class, trying to compile a convincing explanation (other than the truth) for the miserable stagger in his step.

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Lelouch always sleeps like a baby after sex. (Which he realizes is somehow ironic…) Unfortunately, that doesn't always mean he sleeps for very long. Stress is quick to recover in
Lelouch's mind and it's far superior to any form of post-sex dormancy. His nights are often bumpy, this past weekend being no exception. So today the rooftop was calling him with its secluded silence and brisk breezes, and even though Suzaku's nagging about not skipping class was a little louder it was much easier to ignore—

Until it personifies into the pair of fingers that are pinching his nose closed, causing him to snort and choke awake like a cat hacking up a hairball.

Since when did Suzaku employ himself to be Lelouch's personal alarm clock?

"Don't give me that look," Suzaku says with an irritated grin to Lelouch's lion-like leer. "You weren't supposed to skip today, but seeing how I'm just so nice I decided to let you because you seemed so tired this morning."

"Then why are you disturbing my hibernation from school?" Lelouch grouses, sitting upright from the ground while rubbing his eyes.

"Aw~," Suzaku croons insincerely with hands on his hips, "Is poor papa bear still tired? Tell me it wasn't due to visiting heaven two nights in a row."

"If you want papa bear to take you on more trips in the future you'll watch your tone," Lelouch deadpans. "Now tell me why mama bear is bothering me."

Suzaku releases a jaded sigh as he sits down next to Lelouch, "I just thought it would be better for me to wake you rather than, say, Milly."

Lelouch cringes for a lot more credit than he'd like to give that blue-eyed devil.

"Don't say that name here, Suzaku. The roof is a happy place."

Suzaku laughs and lightly bumps Lelouch's shoulder with his own.

"Come on. I let you sleep through the entire school day, even lunch. Going to the Student Council meeting is the least you can do."

The least Lelouch can do is go back to sleep.

"No, thanks. I don't feel like going today." Lelouch easily declines as he moves to lie down on his side. "Hearing the President's name has given me cold feet."

"Lelouch~" Suzaku wines, tugging Lelouch's arm to keep him from falling into dreamland again. "Can't you go for me?"

Lelouch looks at the innate big-eyed, puppy-look Suzaku seems to possess that just oozes with a victimizing-inducing pheromone and does what any person who has a heart would do:

"No."

Erm, let it be known that Lelouch has a heart.

He just doesn't always use it…

"Lelouch!" Suzaku yanks on the boy's noodle-arm with his nostrils flaring.

Lelouch smiles almost crookedly, seeing a grand opportunity and grabbing it without mercy.
"I'll go for a kiss."

Now Suzaku deadpans.

"Why should I kiss you? I already told you that I let you skip today, didn't I?"

"So? I didn't ask you to,"—like Lelouch needs Suzaku's permission, anyway—"but I am asking you for this…" Lelouch leans closer to Suzaku's lips, keenly aware of how dehydrated and stale sleep has made his mouth.

A small, unbecoming sigh seeps from Suzaku's equally dry, but no less tempting, lips.

"You promise you'll go? If I kiss you?"

"Promise."

Another incredibly enticing breath of reluctance leaves Suzaku's mouth and he concedes with an extremely attractive voice of indifference.

Suzaku is really putting the lust in lackluster.

But a kiss is a kiss to Lelouch no matter how initially unwilling because he has always been very good at persuading—

Convincing—

Seducing.

It doesn't matter that all of his "seducing magic" is used on Suzaku who can't seem to truly deny Lelouch to save his life.

Suzaku must have thought that Lelouch was armed with a harmless peck (poor, naïve Suzaku) because his passive lips are completely unprepared for the brash bomb of a smooch with which Lelouch strikes him. It would explain the muffled peep of surprise that pops from Suzaku's throat as Lelouch deepens their kiss almost instantly – mostly because it's just too much fun to catch Suzaku unprepared. He revels in this taste of obligation in Suzaku's mouth, licking at the waning breath of the small, distressed noise he made as his firm hands press against his friend's chest in some hopeless form of Lelouch-prevention. Of course, it is only hopeless because all of his brainless brawn is just that: brainless. Suzaku is prone to thinking with his body rather than his head and Lelouch is quite prone to using that against Suzaku during little moments like these.

Behold the glory that is Lelouch's seducing magic.

It certainly seems Lelouch's delusion holds some water since Suzaku is becoming decreasingly disinclined as he sinks into the noisy binding of their mouths. Lelouch is of course very pleased with himself, coiling his arm around Suzaku with the subtleness of a snake to keep things from deteriorating as their tongues wiggle and worm against each other. He can taste that little bud of desire in the way his dunce—er, mummy-to-be begins to return the fervor with sucking lips and hands fisting clothing, shelling the undesired bits of his aforementioned apathy.

Is the magic of Lelouch's seducing magic being beheld?

Because it just worked.

However, like most of Lelouch's physical finesse (—all of his so-called 'physical finesse,' who is
he kidding?) it cannot be abused or else he'll experience malfunctioning of his equipment. To avoid overusing his gift (or before Suzaku has the chance to reject him) Lelouch will quit while he's ahead in order to let his batteries recharge and let Suzaku's senses simmer in the pure sexiness of what just happened.

Lelouch slows the kiss, powering down as he slides his tongue from Suzaku's mouth to trace his lower lip the way the brunet likes before slipping away from them.

"So how are you feeling today?" Lelouch asks in an angel-soft tone, lightly rubbing Suzaku's stomach for specification and kissing his lips once more before allowing him to answer.

Suzaku doesn't appear to be overly amused with the teasing, as the flat line of his lips indicates.

"Just sore. No thanks to you."

Lelouch merely grins wickedly at the sharpness Suzaku's tone is beginning to bear, as if the seahorse is stomping a warning.

But such a warning is meaningless, seeing how seahorses don't have feet to stomp.

"I don't remember hearing you object during…" Lelouch murmurs, tightening his hold around Suzaku as he takes another kiss.

"You always say that," Suzaku meekly mutters into Lelouch's pecking lips, "And just… because… you don't… remember it… doesn't… mean… it… didn't… happen."

Lelouch smirks again into Suzaku's lips at the boy's rare display of shrewdness but is still unrelenting with his speckling kisses and close embrace as if Suzaku will never notice.

What can Lelouch say?

He's just in an affectionate mood today.

…Is that a crime?

"I know what you're trying to do," Suzaku's tone is a cool rejection against Lelouch's lips, his hands a strong decline in their push against Lelouch's chest.

So the boy caught on to Lelouch's ploy of distraction?

Good job.

"Is it that obvious?" he smiles cheekily, loosening the belt of his arm from around Suzaku's body.

Suzaku just flicks a knowing look at him that isn't at all inclined to playing coy as he begins to stand.

"What happened to your sweet naivety?"

"It sours with age." Suzaku finally smirks at him. "Now get up, Lelouch. Or we'll be late."

The feared rebel leader exhales a bit resignedly at the demand (—not command) but gets to his feet nonetheless.

"Yes, mother." Lelouch arcs his back, yawning as he stretches out the kinks in his spine. "I suppose I can use this time to wake up before our date."
Suzaku blinks – another ploy playing before his eyes that he'll never see coming.

"We're going on a date?"

Lelouch nods with a suspicious grin, "I'm taking you to a special place after the meeting today…"

••

"Why do I feel like I shouldn't be disappointed in you for bringing me here?"

Lelouch smirks, "Because you know what to expect from me by now."

Suzaku isn't at all amused, "You said you were taking me somewhere special."

"This is a special place."

"Lelouch, I don't think a clinic counts as special. And this isn't exactly what I had in mind…" Suzaku mutters, frowning at the sterile examination room closed around them.

"It's not my fault you assumed something different." Lelouch half-shrugs. "And this is a special clinic."

"Regardless, why did you bring me here?" Suzaku says in an irritated breath, glancing uncomfortably around at the charts and diagrams on the walls that are all very much female.

Lelouch lifts a slightly surprised eyebrow, "Have you forgotten about small fry already?"

Suzaku's cheeks flare up a little as he whips his eyes to Lelouch.

"What's that supposed to mean?"—a double take filled with annoyance—"And stop calling it that!"

Lelouch dismisses Suzaku's outburst: they're becoming far too common.

Pregnancy doesn't equal emotional turmoil.

But Lelouch seems to forget that Suzaku does.

"Just relax. I need some answers you aren't able to provide."

"Like what?"

"The obvious, first of all; you said you were told how this pregnancy was possible. If you can explain that to me, then I'll have one less question."

"I did tell you. It's the seahorse syndrome!"

So Suzaku's sticking with that one? Honestly?

For God's sake…

"Right… I must have forgotten about your imaginary diagnosis," he retorts, reaching for a pamphlet in a small shelf beside the door. "Second, how is it possible to learn if you're pregnant through a physical? Maybe if you were a woman it'd make more sense, but you're still a male last time I checked."

"They discovered it through my urine."
"Your urine?"

Lelouch can't look away from the overly feminine leaflet fast enough to scare an explanation out of Suzaku with his confoundedly aghast face.

"It was a drug test," Suzaku explains emphatically like Lelouch is the one being inappropriate, "That's part of the physical!"

"Sure, I'll give you that, but if that's the case then why wasn't small fry discovered earlier?" Lelouch responds reasonably, nonchalantly flipping a glossy page he isn't even reading. "And you told me you were around five weeks pregnant. How can you determine that from urine analysis?"

"The drug test is random and I haven't had one in a while."—peculiar how Suzaku seems to have all the answers—"And there are pregnancy tests you can take that tell you approximately how far along you are, if you're pregnant. Where do you think that technology comes from? It's pure science, Lelouch!"

So, in other words, Suzaku doesn't actually know.

And what does that actually mean, anyway?

Did that screwy scientist make Suzaku urinate on a pregnancy stick?

Lelouch isn't sure he really wants to know.

"Whatever you say. I still need to see things for myself." Lelouch sits in the chair next to the paper-covered bed Suzaku is perched on, crossing one leg over the other. "You don't expect me to just waltz right into a Britannian military base and demand to speak to your superior, do you?"

Suzaku fidgets in the metaphorical corner Lelouch forced him into, "No…"

"Alright then," Lelouch says with a huff, a tug of haughtiness straightening his spine after he replaces the pamphlet. "Now behave and maybe you'll get a lollipop."

Suzaku scoffs at him and crosses his arms but Lelouch isn't bothered. 

He isn't the one who got cornered.

The only thing cornering Lelouch is this whole conundrum of a pregnancy.

When the tall woman with long dark hair pulled up into a pony tail and clad in a white coat from before enters their room, Lelouch stands with contentment – while Suzaku avoids her gaze – knowing this educated and probably saner professional holds only the truth and bare facts for his rationality.

Is he still holding out hope that maybe this seahorse syndrome is nothing more than a miscalculation, one big misunderstanding?

Yes he is.

It took a lot of Lelouch's magical convincing powers and flattery to keep her from kicking them out of this prestigious establishment on their asses, so there's no way he'll let Suzaku try to wriggle free now.

Lelouch would have just used his Geass on her, but with Suzaku in such close proximity and the natural limit of his power, he decided against it – there's a better way to use it on her once the time
"So, I'm Doctor Sanica, and I'll be taking care of you," she flashes a quick and tight smile as she shakes their hands and takes their names before getting right to business – so forward, Lelouch likes that. "Normally we might do a transvaginal sonogram to detect early pregnancies like you claim to have, but that requires a vagina for insertion and since I'm not really sure where and what exactly the probe would be scanning, nor do I know of any other way to accurately test this, we'll just do this the easy way..." she bluntly iterates as she attends to the machinery at Suzaku's right which looks similar to a pedestrian computer, grinning at the pale veil her words dropped over their faces when she turns to them again, "Please lie back, Suzaku, and lift up your shirt."

The brunet does as he is asked after swallowing the thought of being probed, trying to relax against the paper and raise the thin garment she made him change into (he's still wearing his underwear, of course) as she dims the lights and grabs a clear, gel-filled bottle. His hands tremble with nerves as he moves, one latching to Lelouch's hand like a steel clamp once the cold substance is dispensed on his naked abdomen.

"Sorry, it's a little cold," Doctor Sanica says in a moot warning and seats herself in a rolling chair in front of the ultrasound equipment, replacing the bottle for the probe in her hand. "If there's anything in here, we should see it..."

Lelouch pats Suzaku's crushing grip with a deep grimace, watching his friend and partner take in nervous breaths that shudder through his lips and in his chest as the doctor begins to smear the a device over him. It's hard to concentrate on anything other than the possible fracture Suzaku just cracked through Lelouch's hand, but as soon as the ultrasound screen begins to convulse with the contents of his idiot's belly, a numbing suspense envelops his mind.

For a split second in their shared silence, Lelouch almost expects to see a pouch full of eggs like the male seahorse Suzaku thinks he is.

"...I... I don't believe it," the nonplussed doctor declares like her discovery has left her lungs empty, "I think I see it."

"See what?" Suzaku asks anxiously. "I don't see anything."

"Right here, see that?" one of her long fingers points to the monitor, specifically circling a small, black, oval shape rimmed in white on the screen, "That's a gestational sac, inside which the baby forms just like a bird egg. You can't see the embryo now, it's too soon... but... In any case this doesn't look like a molar – or fake – pregnancy, not that it would be any easier to explain..."

"So you're certain?" Lelouch redirects her with caution so thick in his tone it leaves her no room to ignore him.

"I don't want to say it, but I think whatever led you to believe Suzaku is pregnant wasn't pulling your leg, either. You appear to be at around five weeks, too. How uncanny..."

Lelouch's hand finds some terror in her perplexed-coated words as they both confirm the outrageous and cause Suzaku's clasp to tighten like the jaws of a predator around its prey when it tries to escape.

"And you don't think it's anything more serious?" Suzaku asks worriedly.

Doctor Sanica offers him a kind smile, "No, it looks normal to me – or I guess as normal as it can
be. I'd still like to run some blood work just to be sure. I've been doing this for a long time but it never hurts to double check."

Yeah, the only thing it hurts is Lelouch's sanity.

"...Is it too early to tell if it'll be twins?"

Lelouch is pretty positive Suzaku just made his heart claw up to his skull where it forces his brain out to plunge to its very gruesome death, and the only thing keeping him from planting his face to the floor is their conjoined hands.

"Yes, quite a lot too soon." She answers in an almost apologetic tone.

"Oh, I was just curious," Suzaku bashfully replies, his cheeks growing pink as he releases Lelouch's hand.

Of course the poor weakling—erm, sable-haired boy quickly coddles said appendage, trying to nurse it back to life as he gives Suzaku a withering glare.

_Damn straight you're only curious._

"Would you like a printout of the sonogram?" she asks them politely – quite the one-eighty from her initial skepticism – as she wipes Suzaku's stomach clean.

"Um..." Suzaku glances at Lelouch as if for permission but the lad is too concerned with reviving his hand to give it. "Sure, why not?"

The physician nods and activates the attached printer once Suzaku is clean.

"Do you have any other questions?"

"Yes, I do," Lelouch voices gravely – his vocal cords shifting towards something _imperial_ – while Suzaku corrects his shirt. "It's about your privacy policy."

"We follow patient-doctor confidentiality. That's a legal promise to keep anything that happens between us a secret that _stays_ between us."

"Of course, but what about your staff? Will you be sharing this with your colleagues? Because I'll have a real problem with that..."

For some reason his left is beginning to heat before he even focuses enough to trigger his Geass; like it's more responsive and strong than usual—

"Lelouch," Suzaku chides with a tug of his companion's arm, snuffing the flicker in Lelouch's eye. "She said it's confidential, don't be rude."

Doctor Sanica lifts an eyebrow at them, something close to a smirk trying to capture her lips.

"You have my word that I won't tell anyone, not even my assistant. I know this must be a very sensitive issue for you two and I will honor your trust." She hands over the printout of their baby to Suzaku who takes it as if he believes the _entire world_ is sitting on that paper.

That might not even be a far-fetched idea.

This baby is going to reshape more than just Suzaku's figure, it will reshape Lelouch's rebellion...
"All right then, I have another question." Lelouch smiles slyly, resting a hand on Suzaku's shoulder, "Would it be possible for you to write him a note that will exempt him from P.E.?

••

Turns out, no, the doctor won't – not can't – give Suzaku a note to excuse him from gym class because "exercise is important for everyone, even pregnant mothers" so long as Suzaku doesn't overwork himself.

Lelouch would have to disagree: exercise is for idiots who need to compensate for not being able to use their brains.

But if Suzaku wants to waste his time with such trivial and arduous activities, then Lelouch has no choice but to accompany the little dope and supervise him to insure he doesn't overstep his boundary.

At least that was the plan until half a jog later leaves Lelouch way beyond his own personal limits and sprawled out on the track, suffering from what he believes to be cardiac arrest.

He spends the duration of the period in the infirmary, but at least he managed to make Suzaku be the one to accompany him…

Mission accomplished.

…For the most part.

••

Only Nina is in the Student Council room when Suzaku arrives for the meeting, sitting in the corner with the room relatively quiet over the light rapping of her fingers over the keyboard – which he notices falters when he enters.

"Good afternoon, Nina," he addresses her, his tone floating on an affable air as he moves to sit at the table. "You're certainly here early."

She doesn't spare him a glance or greeting, only stiffens at his words as if they were ice-cubes that slide down her spine. She quickly resumes typing in obvious rejection, her actions sounding faster – uneasy – and her rigid posture screams discomfort in a silence he's oddly grateful to hear. Too many times have his ears been seared by racial vulgarities from every rank of Britannia's fighters, making the absent sound of her misguided fear and distrust somewhat pleasant despite the reality.

Suzaku presses his lips firmly together and sits in a vacant chair, pulling out some homework from his bag to do while he waits for the other members to turn up so the meeting can start – and he has to wonder if Kallen will make her appearance today, or ever again. He hopes she does. But in the meantime, the lack of communication between him and Nina is awkward and dense like her phobia is sucking the oxygen from the room—

The sudden buzzing of his phone strikes through his senses like a bite from Arthur's teeth and causes him to flinch as if the muffled humming from his pocket has bit him.

Suzaku has never been so happy to receive a phone call.
"Hello?" he answers once he's out in the hall and instantly Cécile's refreshing voice fills his ear. "Suzaku, are you busy right now? I know you have your club…"

"No, it hasn't started yet," he says as he walks through the clubhouse, surveying to make sure he won't be overheard, "so I'm free for the moment."

"Good. I hope you're doing well?"

"Checking up on me?" Suzaku grins. "Of course – didn't expect to hear from Lloyd, did you?"

He laughs lightly at that, "Not to worry, I'm doing well." he hesitates to continue, checking once again to make no one is within earshot of his conversation – he swears Lelouch's paranoia is rubbing off on him, "Or so the doctor thinks."

"Doctor?"

"Yeah… My boyfriend"—strange how that word is a little hard to get out yet fun to say—"took me to see a doctor the other day and everything seems normal so far."

"Oh? Were they able to shed light on anything?"

"No. She's just as confused as we are, but she says she'll take care of me." Suzaku's eyes continue to shift around like security cameras as he reminds himself to keep his voice low as a precaution.

"That sounds like good news, then. As long as you both are healthy I guess there's no cause for concern."

"Yeah. Let's hope it stays that way," he says mentally recalling the test results he's still waiting to hear.

"Suzaku, I do have some information for you."

"Oh," Suzaku falls quiet, realizing the main point of her call as he sits on the front stoop outside. "What can you tell me?"

"I've been researching since we talked, and it seems so far that the only way you can legally take a medical leave is if you have an illness or injury that compromises your performance. An illness would be your best bet in getting medical relief, but being dishonest – no matter what Lloyd says – isn't a good idea and I know it would make you uncomfortable. There is a medical clause about maternity leave that would allow expecting mothers a time off from duty. However, you're a male, so that generates some problems. Not only is it…" she pauses for the right word, "unique, but it would attract a lot of unwanted attention, especially since the public is familiar with you – not to mention that could lead to exposing your partner."

"I see…" is all Suzaku can seem to say. None of that was good news, not that he was expecting for there to be any benefits for pregnant males in Britannian military health care – or any kind of health care, for that matter.

And the last thing Suzaku wants is for Lelouch to be exposed.

"I'm sorry I don't have better news…" she murmurs uncertainly into his silence. "No, it's fine," he tries to reassure her with a tone that isn't as easy as it was when he used (wasted)
it on Nina earlier. "I'm grateful for your effort and I'm sure we can figure out something... So don't worry."

Even before Cécile speaks he gets the feeling she isn't swayed by his forced mollification, "... Alright, but please take care, Suzaku. If I learn of anything else I'll let you know."

"Yes, thank you Miss Cécile."

Suzaku ends the call with a sigh, not knowing what he's going tell Lelouch— if he should even tell him anything yet. Probably not, Suzaku's better judgment tells him, he should wait a little longer and give his hopeful optimism another chance to catch something before he worries Lelouch with more stress.

The jolly chatter of Shirley and Rivalz approaches him from across the lawn, their jovial banter a perfect paring to the bright and sunny afternoon— something he knows his disposition isn't matching. Suzaku tries to shake off of all his anxiety and smile for them as they attack him with happy hellos; but it's only later once he sees Lelouch lazily stroll into the Student Council room that the upward curve of his lips is effortless and natural.

And happy.

When Lelouch returns the gesture, a smile soft and discreet underneath the boisterous Milly but comfortable and warm over Nina's consistent neglect, Suzaku feels his unsettled emotions shirk into the corners of his mind. He feels lucky, fortunate, to have Lelouch by his side and confident that no matter what, they'll get through this together just like the former prince had promised.

•-

The suggestion of autumn that Nunnally had wanted in the wind nearly a week ago is beginning to nibble now, tingling Lelouch's cheeks as he loiters on the rooftop— his makeshift lair, as far as Zero's affairs are concerned.

The check-up phone call on the Black Knight agenda ended long ago, well before the last bell rang to let students stampede out of their florescent cages and into the fresh air of anticipation about the festivities tomorrow that stole an entire school day from their heavily academic lives. Lelouch watched them swarm over the school grounds to their respective clubs in disinterest, ignoring the excited haze of babbling that filled the empty air between him and them.

He had more important things to do than waste time with some peripheral fair or biased education— even if one of his teachers had vehemently lectured him (and Suzaku) to not coast by on his class ranking. But Lelouch simply doesn't care; not when there are bigger things out there that need his attention more than some glorified romp through Britannian history— he's making history, damn it.

Still, he knows he should be herding himself to his own club obligation like everyone else for the sake of it, if nothing else, and if he leaves now he'll be fashionably late at best.

Blame it on Milly or his general distaste for playing pretend, or maybe something else entirely, but Lelouch just can't seem to get his feet to move from where they've cemented during his talk of rebellion.

Maybe that's why Suzaku is suddenly standing next to him with a half-smile.

"Thought you might be up here. I went by the clubhouse and saw you weren't there yet. I hope
"You know me too well..." Lelouch replies lazily, flattening his palms on the cold balustrade. Suzaku tips his head in silent agreement, facing the schoolyard with a fully-formed grin. "Maybe... but you don't really make it difficult to find you around campus. You're always up here."

"I like it here," Lelouch says a bit defensively and it makes Suzaku look at him in silent amusement – as if that much wasn't obvious already, but that doesn't make his statement any less true.

Even though Lelouch has his own room for when he seeks solitude, it isn't so much a sanctuary as it is a place to sleep (or not, in Lelouch's case) and store his things. He has privacy despite being in a clubhouse that many other organizations share, but there's nothing quite like soaking under a wide-open sky where it's sometimes hard to dwell on all the negatives. The rooftop breathes a mental freedom that his bedroom smothers with all of its subliminal reminders of the past.

It's usually even better up here when Suzaku decides to join him.

"Well, I came up here to be the bad guy and make sure you don't get too 'lost' on your way to the meeting," Suzaku says wryly as he turns towards the exit, ensnaring Lelouch's arm with his hand.

Lelouch acknowledges Suzaku, his gesture and its silent warning, and throws it right off the rooftop.

"I don't know why you insist on policing me so much," he complains languidly, not budging a tiny bit from his spot – almost daring Suzaku to literally drag him kicking and screaming all the way to the Council room.

A laugh bubbles in Suzaku's chest as he looks between Lelouch and the door.

"I don't know, maybe I just like spending time with you. With how busy we are the Student Council offers a prime opportunity to do that."

Lelouch looks into those grassy eyes, sensing an opportunity arising right this second.

"In that case," the taller boy begins, shifting into the bedeviling shade of himself as he entwines the willowy arm not in Suzaku's clutch around said-boy like ivy, connecting their hips while wearing lecherous lips, "you can just stay up here with me so we can spend quality time together, alone."

Suzaku's mouth supports another lopsided smile that's more on the dry side this time, but he still welcomes the kiss Lelouch presses to his lips.

"Unlike you I uphold my responsibilities, wanted or not," Suzaku admonishes with that mild smirk, squeezing Lelouch's arm when he tries to land another kiss. "And I don't think I need to tell you that it isn't smart to get into this here and now."

Suzaku is of course not only hinting at the chance that another club member might come searching for Lelouch up here, but also the fact that if anyone were to look up right now they'd see something they really shouldn't.

Lelouch thought of that already – if anyone ever bothered to look up here Lelouch would have been caught skipping by now – which does make Suzaku's statement redundant in his mind.
"So come on, *lover boy*, before we're later than we are now."

Sigh…

If he must, he must.

Lelouch goes with a grin, Suzaku trading an arm for a hand in his grasp as they head towards the stairs which earns him another glance from that *very* kissable smile – a temptation that goes unresisted yet again.

They would descend the stairs *a lot* faster if Lelouch could refuse the impulse to kiss that strikes every other step…

Still, Suzaku should be proud that he is one of *few* beings who can make Lelouch *voluntarily* leave his happy place.

•-•

"Tardiness is something I've come to expect from Lelouch, but it is truly a shame to see his bad behavior is influencing you, Suzaku." Milly's snarky voice greets Lelouch and Suzaku as they walk through the door, right into the chaotic debris of festival preparations.

Lelouch can't help noticing how Shirley immediately looks up from the clipboard in Nina's hands, causing the bespectacled girl to glance over her lenses after scratching her pen over the paper. He quickly averts his eyes to Rivalz who is totting a medium-sized looking brown box from the closet to the table where a large flock is currently perching. The boy's face is already glowing with scarlet blooms, no doubt overworking himself to please the girl taking advantage of him because she knows *exactly* what he's doing – *talk about bad behavioral influence*…

"Sorry we're late," Suzaku apologizes with a small duck of his head, dipping into a faint blush.

Lelouch is sorry, too.

Sorry he couldn't be in a different club that's far away from the succubus that likes to call itself Milly Ashford.

The President seems to be genuinely frazzled at the moment, but her frayed nerves still struggle to dull the excited shine in her eyes.

"If you'd like to make it up to me~" the she-demon begins to openly flirt as she saunters closer to the two boys – sounding like a siren ready to sink a ship, in Lelouch's opinion. "We're having a bit of a box crisis in the storage building – something about things not going back to their appropriate place, or some such nonsense – and for some reason we have the lot of these here." Milly sweetly conveys, gesturing with a sway of her arm at all the card-box swamping their council table, "So~ I need all these boxes on the table here to be moved to the storage room, and I could certainly use *your* able arms, Suzaku." she practically *giggles* in his ear as she *playfully* pinches one of his biceps.

*Damned succubus.*

Suzaku is about to accept her seemingly innocent task being the brainless sailor that he is, trapped in the *friendly* arm of their president, but Lelouch *will not* have the *mother of his* child doing any physical labor.

Unless it's sex.
Because the only one who actually labors in that situation is Lelouch.

As much as he hates to admit it...

"Sure thing," Lelouch says coolly, puffing his chest as he walks over to the table. "I think I can take care of this. Let Suzaku help you with something else."

"Lelouch, I said I need a pair of able arms," Milly mocks with a nefarious crook in one corner of her lips.

Lelouch ignores her comment and the slicing snickers from his peers with an indignant lift of his nose.

He is well aware of his own shortcoming, there's no need to bring vocal attention to it.

Lelouch doesn't get nearly the amount of respect he deserves.

"Suzaku isn't feeling well. I can—"

"He isn't? He looks fine to me." Milly's blue eyes swoop to Suzaku, hunting for any sign of illness. "You're not feeling well?"

Only after a glance at the warning glare from Lelouch does Suzaku make a small nod of his head to silently confirm the fib.

"Will you still be able to help us with the pizza? You know, piloting Ganymede?" Milly asks.

"That won't be a problem," Suzaku quickly appeases, trying to ignore the set of vexed violets that are scalding him.

Milly raises an eyebrow but otherwise shows no suspicion before offhandedly shrugging with a wave of her hand as she walks across the room to join the other girls.

Lelouch hasn't missed that Kallen is still absent.

"Whatever. We just need to get these boxes moved, I don't care who moves them."

Lelouch brushes the offending moment off his shoulders and wraps his arms around one stiff box —

But he never really stood a chance.

Lelouch manages to douse a grunt from sparking up his throat as he lifts – using his legs, not his back – the deceptive package from the table, but it's the coordination of hauling the box and moving his feet that proves to be a challenge.

A very demoralizing challenge.

Lelouch is Zero, for crying out loud! He won't be defeated by a damned inanimate object—!

He knew to lift with his legs (bravo, Lelouch, bra-vo), but he doesn't know how to shift his balance, how to accommodate the added weight so that his string-bean body doesn't become top-heavy. To his credit, Lelouch doesn't topple right over like a decrepit tower and that would count for something if he wasn't slowly sinking to the floor like a stubborn battleship that won't give up without a gurgle.
All in attendance watched S.S. Lamperouge fail miserably to keep himself afloat with disloyal amusement twitching in their lips.

Not one of them sent him an aide.

The *traitors*.

Lelouch slumps to the floor alone, becoming a hopeless mass of pants and sweat.

"...But, Madam President," Shirley starts as she takes disconcerted yet *concerned* steps closer to Lelouch, peeking inside the cardboard cube containing his doom, "I thought you said these boxes are *empty*." 

Milly smirks, "They *are*." 

Lelouch groans out a wheezy sound of exasperation and sags almost completely flush to the floor like a deflated balloon.

"Oh *man*, Lelouch!" Rivalz guffaws, "This is why you shouldn't skip P.E.!

Lelouch grumbles under his pathetic gasping.

"Alright, people, these boxes aren't going to move themselves. No matter *how* entertaining Lelouch is, you need to get going," Milly announces without concealing her relishing smile as she struts right by her broken-down Vice President and towards the door. "I want all the boxes gone by the time I'm finished with my *very* important phone call~!"

The others follow suit, grabbing boxes or pushing carts and marching out of the door with Rivalz chuckling closely behind Milly.

Everyone exits except for Suzaku, who stays behind to make sure Lelouch doesn't huff and puff his way into heart failure.

"That was really sweet of you, Lelouch, but unnecessary," Suzaku endearingly pacifies as he crouches down, reaching to hold the hand of his gasping partner.

Lelouch merely grunts.

"I need *papa bear* to keep up his strength just as much as you need me to, so you shouldn't be doing anything outside of your limits either."

Lelouch yanks his hand away and flips his face in the opposite direction of Suzaku in a defiant snub.

"You... shouldn't... kick... a man... while... he's down."

Case in point.

Suzaku smiles and hoists the box up from Lelouch's hands without difficulty.

*Showoff...*

"I'll be waiting for you above the table once you're done swallowing your pride."

"...Don't hold your breath," Lelouch wryly mutters.
Suzaku just laughs.

Bastard...

••

"I've thought about possible names for the baby," Suzaku states in an easy voice as he climbs into bed next to Lelouch, fresh from the bathroom with mint on his breath. "...If you want to hear them, that is," he adds timidly when he sees how his announcement stunned Lelouch's expression.

He's just surprised Suzaku would pick names so quickly – should he feel guilty about not choosing any yet?

Then again, who knows if this is only the first of many name suggestions to come...?

"Of course I do," he says warmly, using his finger as a placeholder on the page in the pregnancy book he's reading (which of course he is tagging and marking as a guide for Suzaku) to give the other boy his undivided attention. "I'm just surprised you have them so soon."

Suzaku smiles a bit abashedly to himself.

"Yeah, well, ever since we talked about it in the bath Saturday night it's been on my mind."

"Ah. So you're just trying to undermine Fry as soon as possible, are you?" Lelouch jokes.

Suzaku doesn't quite roll his eyes, but he does bump his elbow against Lelouch's arm with a light, good-natured laugh.

"Don't be so paranoid."—A glimmer of something coy yet impish gleams in Suzaku's eyes—"But I think you might like these names better..."

Lelouch smirks in a faint glow of confidence, "Alright then, spill it."

"I was thinking..." Suzaku's eyes fixate to his fingers as they toy with the white blanket draped over his lap, "if it's a girl, we could name it after your mother and if it's a boy... my father..." Green eyes glance at Lelouch only once, but even as they peer at the fabric twisting in his fingers Lelouch knows they're not focusing on that action.

Once again Suzaku's words have marched right out of the blue and into Lelouch's skull, obliterating any words he was trying to construct.

Could it be that this is Suzaku's way of grieving, coping or more properly channeling his guilt for killing his father—?

("To me this is like a miracle... it felt like something I should treasure. Something that I shouldn't take for granted... I can't give this up...")

—Has this baby become his new atonement? Is he using this strange twist of fate to make up for a life he took away by giving back another...?

(What right does anyone have to interfere with that?)

Lelouch is silent for one beat too many and it causes Suzaku's eyes to slowly slide up to those big violets like a chastised child.

"...You don't like it."
"No, I do," Lelouch hastily relays. "I… think that's a good idea." He shapes his lips into a smile that's as warm as the summer they spent together seven years ago. "I must admit that I'm little touched."

Relief blossoms on Suzaku's face with a returned beam and a quiet release of breath. "I'm glad."

Their sunny lips meet in a few sweet kisses when the disowned prince leans to his right, sharing the moment as per his usual pecking fashion.

"Marianne Kururugi does sound a bit strange," Lelouch muses as he leans away, "but it's certainly unique."

"You don't want the last name to be Lamperouge?"

Lelouch shakes his head, "No, the baby can have yours. Aside from the fact that it would be safer if it didn't have my name, you were an only child. Our son or daughter should carry on your family name."

"Oh… right." Suzaku nods solemnly. "That makes sense."

Lelouch doesn't like the sudden strike of somberness on Suzaku's face or the shift in tone that comes with it—

Marriage is such a discouraging thought, to know there's yet another level of inequality they have to overcome due to the Emperor's infectious preaching of Darwinism – because what purpose does same-sex coupling serve for human survival if no offspring is produced? – but that will change someday… Lelouch can't say he knows how the Japanese feel about homosexuality, but if Zero has anything to do with it, change will definitely be sooner rather than later.

—but tart titters tumble from Suzaku's lips, effectively reversing the sharp decline of their mood.

"That's such a logical response, I don't know why I'm surprised," Suzaku teases.

Lelouch pulls on his classic smirk and leans in close towards Suzaku, very intent on keeping the lighter air of Suzaku's amusement from rolling right off the bed.

"And I suppose this officially means Fry is out of the running?"

Suzaku laughs again, "Just like you in a foot-race, Fry never stood a chance."

Lelouch's expression flattens but his voice is still bloated with mirth, "There's no need to get nasty about it."

The insult is certainly uncalled for and any other time Lelouch likely would have returned the serve, but tonight it's just nice to hear Suzaku laugh and see him smile like old times – like the happy and carefree boy he fell in love with under the summer sun.

For this sake, Lelouch is willing to take one for the team.

•••

Despite all the physical exertion during the meeting today, Lelouch is still finding himself awake hours after they retired to bed.

Somehow the small fry is becoming too real for Lelouch to handle. It must be the doctor visit along with Suzaku's sudden name revelation that has done him in; solidifying the reality in his
brain to the point that he's struggling to let his panicking cerebrum relax into the cushion of sleep that's trying to coax him into a dark peace. Sleep has never really been an easy thing for Lelouch to catch, granted, but lately…

Before now, this pregnancy was all an eerie dream filled with talk and fluff, not visual and solid proof that proved somehow, somewhere, someone was right and now he can't stop staring at his surreal circumstance like it's a dizzying painting of surrealism where the truth is hidden in plain view.

If there is even a truth to find anyway…

Whatever it is, it's certainly wrapped up tight in a baby's body, camouflaged as a "miracle" that leaves Lelouch juggling much more than he'd like too.

Perhaps the one respite that tackles Lelouch's distress every other thought is that he isn't the only one who sees the mystery of it all, that the doctor doesn't buy whatever fairytale magic planted and fertilized Lelouch's seed inside Suzaku's body. Aside from that one shred affirming his sanity, there's not much relief fighting to coddle him in a calming embrace. Even some of the nervous excitement about being a father that's started to thread through his apprehension isn't thick enough to unravel the quilt of anxiety cocooned around him.

All his status as "father" does is remind him just how real his situation really is – maybe too real for him to properly face. Lelouch wants to protect Suzaku at any cost now more than ever before.

(Why else would he have acted like an undignified ass during the Student Council meeting?)

Lelouch has always been overprotective, yes, but it feels strange this time.

Like the maternal feelings he has for Nunnally have been twisted and multiplied, making the ambition he welds for destroying Britannia hotter than the flames of Hell. That monster nation has always been a threat and Lelouch will be damned if he lets it interfere with his potential to have a real and happy home life.

In fact, it makes Lelouch wonder how his father was able to be so callous towards his own son – a son who was only speaking out of emotional distress from losing his mother and nearly losing his sister (his entire world) – by banishing him with frightening ease. What kind of father doesn't care about his children? What kind of man—

No; what kind of human being treats their child with such heartless flippancy? It's absurd how someone so god damned complacent could throw away his own flesh and blood—

Golden blonde hair framing a conceited but warm face with sharp blue eyes stutters behind Lelouch's eyes like a sticky slide show as he remembers how specifically artist hands and fingers controlled chess pieces and art media alike. Over those many checkered boards and blank canvases drips the sound of a slightly snooty voice into Lelouch's ears with a sickeningly sincere smile flashing on an overconfident face before all that genuine affection is scratched off like an undesired sketch by a single gunshot.

Clowis…

The feeling of squeezing that trigger is still vivid, imprinted into Lelouch's palm as is the taste and smell of fresh blood that invaded his senses before he could flee – after he saw how easily the clear, critical eyes of an artist fell flat and unseeing for the first time.

Lelouch had done away with Clovis almost as easily as his father had with him and Nunnally,
hadn't he?

(Even though he wants to believe that Clovis' death wasn't meaningless.)

Does that mean Lelouch is only becoming—?

*No good…*

Can't think about *that* now or he'll definitely be up all night.

Lelouch lies in bed with tired eyes, wishing they could close on the endless streams of thoughts that smoother the somnolence of his body yet nurse the restlessness of his mind. He's irritably aware of the slumbering idiot next to him who's flaunting all the rejuvenating sleep he's getting with his steady breathing and calm body and it nurtures an urge within Lelouch's grumpy, jealous delirium to elbow Suzaku right in the side.

Of course he won't do that.

He just looks to his right, at Suzaku, with a melting gaze in lieu of malicious treatment.

*Jerk…*

Still, there's something serene with a napping Suzaku in itself; it's one of the very few times he looks so at ease, at peace – the other times being whenever Nunnally is able to make him relax with her contagiously light-hearted nature or peppered moments in bed, particularly on the ride down from his climax. Sleeping next to Suzaku is comforting, his warm body becoming a luxury Lelouch has already spoiled himself with (God knows C.C. can't compare, damned bed-hog), which is one reason the boy is tucked into his bed a night out of schedule – earlier than the safer night of tomorrow.

Lelouch turns onto his side, watching Suzaku dream on his back in a stillness he must have picked up as a habit from the grueling nights of bunking in the cramped quarters of Britannia's military rejects. Ignoring the wrathful path of that thought, Lelouch reroutes his mind as he stares at the shadowy profile of Suzaku's face, at the way his eyes roll over whatever imaginary movies are playing inside his head. He wonders if Suzaku ever has nightmares about his father when he sleeps alone, about that bright afternoon that stretched into seven dark years, and if they ever throw him into a sweaty state upon waking—

But all this *wandering* does is lead Lelouch right back to the issues he wants to avoid: Britannia, his father, his sleepless nights…

Lelouch lightly touches the side of Suzaku's face with the back of his fingers, skimming down a soft cheek he wouldn't mind kissing right now.

In fact, a hesitant thought later and he does, leaning over carefully for a dry peck on warm skin. Suzaku doesn't stir, not even a tiny bit, and Lelouch isn't sure if he's pleased about that or not. He runs his fingertips down the other side of Suzaku's face with a feather touch in an effort to comfort himself, wishing he could steal some of Suzaku's sleep with his gentle touch. But seeing how soundly the seahorse is sleeping, Lelouch is glad he hasn't disturbed him.

A mother *does* need to get as much rest as possible…

Lelouch's eyes drift lower with his sliding palm, settling on an unfathomably pregnant belly that's rising and falling with a breathing chest underneath his thin blanket. Violet eyes gaze intently on that flowing motion, flicking tentative lashes at that comatose face before deciding to indulge
another urge – this odd compulsion to nest himself closely not only to Suzaku, but their unborn child. And there is something placating about laying his head on the arc of Suzaku's ribcage where a heartbeat can drum in his ear as his hand caresses their miracle through layers of fabric and flesh. The fondness for this newfound tranquility shapes Lelouch's lips into a faint and tiredly affectionate smile that's too weak to display itself as proudly as his arrogant smirks, but the emotion is there.

*I'm going to be a father…*

The thought still doesn't feel like his own no matter how many times it crosses his mind – it feels as if someone else is talking inside his head… But as unreal as it all feels and as much as Lelouch cannot seem to really accept it, he still feels… happy.

The kind of happy he hasn't experienced since he could feel his mother's warm hugs.

Conversely, all this newly-gained perspective as a father brings Lelouch are his thoughts full circle, continuing through their vicious cycle:

He wonders how much it must have hurt Lady Gabriella to lose her precious son…

If her pain will ever heal…

If the Emperor ever regrets his decision about throwing away his two children…

If they are missed by that man…

If that man ever even loved them…

How could his father not love them…?

…*Why* didn't their father love them?

So tense and frustrated are Lelouch's thoughts that they hitch through his body, twisting his muscles extraneously tight like a screwdriver recklessly close to stripping a screw and shaving off all of his lethargy. Those meek slivers of sleep that managed to meld together are shredding into dust and if he could focus on this draining feeling, he'd realize the hollow iciness seething in his heart is spreading like frostbite through his veins. Yet it is this crystallizing cold that locks his mind in brooding with their arctic mosaic of gloomy thoughts about abandonment.

How many times has Lelouch fallen asleep with the same restless thoughts?

Far too many times to properly count.

It is a sickness that ripens in his mind with age, with the prolonged arrival of answers he might not ever actually gain—

But a spark of heat is all it takes to crack his frigid depression…

A hand as warm and soft as a blanket drapes over Lelouch's head with fingers slowly starting to weave through his hair, prickling through his skull like the sharp shatter across a frozen slate of water. Through these fissures fall his barren thoughts, collapsing into this lulling, tonic touch of what Lelouch realizes is Suzaku's hand as it pets his head, tenderly tousling the ribbons of his onyx hair. It's a constant motion like the current of the sea and Lelouch melts even faster when another hand curves around his arm, slinking down to cup his own hand that he lovingly rested on Suzaku's stomach. He realizes his hand was starting to clench into a fist when his pregnant partner begins to
rub over it, effectively halting the action by liquefying Lelouch completely and cleansing him of all the restlessness and forsakenness from his body.

Wrapped so securely in Suzaku's arms like this with the soothing movement of his stroking hands, Lelouch...

Soon enough Lelouch is eased to sleep under the care of Suzaku's sensitive hands, unaware of the soft, contented smile on Suzaku's lips as he listens to the older boy's breathing become deep and heavy in an untroubled slumber.

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Lelouch wants to think that the festival has been going smoothly but he knows better than to tempt the Universe into any painful punch-lines, so he just tries to enjoy the calm while it lasts.

And yet, perhaps just by thinking he shouldn't tempt the universe he has.

Sure, the press has invaded his home – so that was Milly's important phone call? – but it isn't anything he couldn't handle for now—

As he stood on the rooftop, surveying the hectic school grounds like a king would from his ivory tower, Lelouch was tending to his Black Knights' matters – namely, the coup d'état he threw into the works earlier this week under Suzaku's very pregnant nose. It was the person belonging to that very snout that made Lelouch realize he needs to move faster. He needs to be the black king he constantly sends into battle ahead of its own infantry on their fictional battlefields and sucker-punch the Emperor right in the side before he knows what hit him.

Lelouch needs to pounce while the time is right, and he needs to do it quickly to keep Suzaku – and their baby – away from the fringes of a bloodier Hell.

—But no, the Universe seems to serve to only screw Lelouch at every turn, for as Lelouch is concluding his phone call, Milly comes frolicking towards him with "big trouble" on her lips.

Even though he was sent to do more of the President's bidding for the festival – which is technically his job, anyway – he was at least able to witness something good, for a change. A truce between Suzaku and Kallen blossomed right before his eyes as he was checking up on the green-eyed seahorse, and the pact appears to have confined their rivalry to the battlefield thanks to the generous obstinacy of Suzaku's idealistic character. That alone cut tense knots loose from Lelouch's muscles, and it helped his steps to become a bit lighter as he camped outside – hiding in plain sight – to begrudgingly take care of his festival responsibilities—

But when the Universe gives, the Universe takes.

Here he sits on a bench, doing his damned job, where he is apparently rewarded with a hammer landing square on his head.

On his head!

When he isn't even slacking off!

And it only gets better… It's some stiff from the Britannian military who has assaulted him, no less!
Sure, the woman apologizes – Cécile Croomy, Lelouch's memory reminds him, and she seems to recognize him as well – but the absolute last straw is when Lelouch hears that wretched voice from that wretched woman demanding for that wretched food at such a wretched time!

(Karma is such a bitch…)

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"Please tell me you're not jeopardizing our safety for circular junk food!" Lelouch barks as he shoves C.C. into the closest get-away, the storage building.

She doesn't particularly resist him, and her compliance is oddly annoying.

Like Lelouch is the one being the ass.

As if.

"It wasn't the reason I came, but it is the reason to stay." –of course her cool voice does nothing to chill his heated temper.

"No. You're not staying, not when this place is crawling with Britannian military and the media," Lelouch declares without compunction or any of his schoolboy composure. "If there's something important you need to tell me you know what number to dial."

"Who's pregnant?" C.C. asks abruptly, her bland words yanking Lelouch's austere scold right out from under him and slapping him the face with it.

"What are talking about?"

"Abortion. You asked me about it a week ago…"

"I remember…" Lelouch furrows his eyebrows and crosses his arms over his chest, letting his irritation retie the stressful knots in his body.

C.C. stares at him for a moment; something in her eyes is demanding yet yielding like a white flag of surrender.

"So, I want to know who it is."

The prince of Calm, Cool and Composed himself exhales through his nose like a bull ready to charge.

"Tell me you're not here for something as irrelevant as that. I don't have time to—"

"I want to know."

"Nothing like that is happening."

"Don't bother acting. I know you better than that."

"Do you?" Lelouch counters curtly, his arrogant air nearly aromatic.

"I know you're not one for small talk. If you bring up a subject that means it's important no matter how subtle. Even if you were to chat you wouldn't pick something like abortion just to pass the time."
No argument there, but that doesn't mean Lelouch won't try…

"You assume too much. It could have been schoolwork related for all you know. I do have health class."

C.C. isn't buying it.

Perhaps if he had peppered his words on a slice of steaming hot pizza she would scarf them down without a second thought.

"Please, Lelouch, if there's one thing you don't need help with it's your academic career."

Lelouch is beyond annoyed and he's very certain that the pain he's beginning to feel in his left arm is the ticking time-bomb of another heart-attack.

Or maybe a stroke.

"Why are you so adamant about this?"

"Why are you so adamant about avoiding this?" C.C. tosses back at him, still sounding as emotionally charged as stone. "You know it only makes you seem more suspicious."

"Maybe, but I still don't understand why you care."

There's a slight pause on her end wherein another flicker of something peculiar shivers in her eyes —

"I don't want anything interfering with our contract. I don't want you to forget about fulfilling my wish."

*Showing your true colours, are you?*

So self-serving of her – just goes to show who is more self-centered around here than Lelouch.

"I could evade confictions with your wish if you would just tell me what it is," he fires at the witch, almost wishing she would just burst into flames—

Then she could bake her own damn pizza!

"If you don't tell me I'll just start guessing again."

Lelouch wants to strangle her, and he nearly lets his thoughtless impulse take control of his body before the sound of other voices slaughter his ill-conceived notion of asphyxiating an *immortal*—

He isn't happy to see intruders – never mind that the storage building isn't *his* property – and he is *less* happy to see that it's not only Kallen but Ohgi and some *other* woman too—

He is *even less happy* when C.C. barbs him about using his Geass too much.

Damned immortal witch should learn to watch her mouth!

She's *immortal*, not *invincible*.

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Suzaku knows he probably shouldn't, but he's enjoying himself.
Despite spending most of the festival working backstage he's still having more fun than he's had since he was a child, before guilt-driven masochism could wipe away that inner reflection as if it never existed. Perhaps he has earned himself a little fun – although he wouldn't go so far as to say he deserves it, as Arthur's bite seems to remind him. The work is even carefree, if not a little menial, and the spirited students frolicking about are a boost to his optimism about Britannia, that it can create good if given the chance.

Maybe even Nina will come around eventually…

He was even able to settle something with Kallen. He gambled on her wanting to maintain her lie of a life but he figured his odds were good if she's anything like Lelouch who trudges through every day as a liar to protect himself and Nunnally…

And perhaps just like Kallen, Lelouch really is willing to risk everything for change…

He's certainly made it clear who he favors to win, and isn't his father—

But Suzaku hardly has time to let his mind float away on uplifting or sinking thoughts as he embarks on creating the world's largest pizza inside the antique model frame, Ganymede. The controls aren't difficult, just simpler and a little jerkier than the refined, modern Lancelot model he's used to operating. Aside from the obvious value of this knightmare, Suzaku was told by Milly that Lady Marianne, Lelouch's mother – or The Flash, as Milly had said she was commonly known as – also once piloted it, which squeezed his gut with even more pressure and responsibility. He understood it was a priceless piece of history, he just didn't realize such history was so close to home. Suzaku is confident in his skills, but he needs more than that to perform to the best of his abilities.

He needs respect for everything Ganymede has done, what it represents to both history and the Lamperouge siblings—

However, somewhere between his obsessive trepidation about piloting and saving Princess Euphemia from being squished into oblivion by the massive mob of people, Suzaku forgets to honor the pizza. It spirals from Ganymede's hands and onto the spear of a nearby tree, rendering it inedible and disqualified.

(This of course leaves one hungry witch very disappointed.)

The news crew seems to have forgotten it as well as they scramble to circle the Princess long before she requests their attention from the safety of Suzaku's protection, all of them so excited to be the first to report The Sub-Viceroy's announcement of—

"...The Special Administrated Zone of Japan! In this Special Administrated Zone of Japan, Elevens will return to their name 'Japanese.' The discrimination between Elevens and Britannians will not exist in this special zone! Be it Britannian or Eleven, everyone will be equal! Can you hear me, Zero? I will not ask about your past or the truth behind your mask. So, please join the Special Administrated Zone! Zero, let us create a new future in Britannia!"

As if her unprecedented declaration wasn't enough, the crowd begins to chant her name – chanting her name in encouragement, support, approval of what she's just unveiled to all of them. Cheering the step forward she is proposing and as if they're all ready to take it with her. Suzaku hasn't been this shocked since he learned he was pregnant and he can feel his heart swell in his throat with all his mixed emotions and astonishment – he knew he was right to trust her, to believe in her… There's no good left in Britannia, Lelouch says, but he seems to have forgotten about his own sister.
So Suzaku has to wonder even through the effects of her bombshell what Zero is feeling and thinking right now, how he'll react and what his decision will be.

And in practically the same thought he wonders the exact same thing about Lelouch.

Chapter End Notes

A couple things:

1-I know the timing in this story isn't identical to canon, as you might have noticed, and that's for um reasons...

2-two new characters popped up in this chapter, Alice and Sanica, who you may recognize from the Nightmare of Nunnally manga. They will not be adhering to their canon roles, so no worries for anyone who hasn't read the story.
"An ancestor of mine maintained that when you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." – Spock from Star Trek VI (and 2009)

A Tale of True Love Filled with Super Sperm

Milly is basking in her festival success.

Sure, the pizza turned into a disaster due to Princess Euphemia stealing the show, but it could have been worse, all things considered. The students, and even outsiders, got to enjoy themselves for at least an afternoon and take their mind off of all the complicated matters framing their lives before it came marching right back into the picture, and that's really all Milly could ask for from these impromptu festivities. She needs to strive for these things now since she won't be president for much longer or as free and independent once this ball and chain called a marriage shackles her to a life she doesn't want and she is forced into something she never wanted to be.

Speaking of her buzz-kill of a fiancé; he just had to make his rare appearance at a time when she was trying to not think about him or their arrangement – who even invited him, anyway? Lloyd spent most of his time apart from her, though, so it wasn't a real issue until he tactlessly revealed his intentions behind the proposal without a hint of shame or apology – but even she has learned to not expect so much of him by now.

If only she could marry a different, distinguished man of nobility who was also too smart for his own good…

Like a prince…

A prince she would already happened to know quite well—

"Where's Lelouch?" Shirley inelegantly bursts Milly's mental bubble with the very name on her mind.

If only Lelouch was still a prince, all of Milly's problems would be solved.

"Aw, jeez, Shirley! When are you going to start calling Lelouch 'Lulu' again?" Rivalz complains in the background, still shuffling around the student council room with tasks of club business – in this case, paperwork – Milly delegated to him that she was too lazy to do, like with everyone else who's off doing her dirty work.

Shirley blinks, "Lulu? I used to call him that?"

"You're still up to that?" he counters tiredly, a frown muddling his brow.

"Huh?"

"This little act of yours," Milly inserts herself into the conversation – not like she has any work to do, might as well harass Shirley. "Don't you think it's been long enough? I have to admire your commitment, but there must be better things to commit to than this."
"...This?" Shirley is still looking at them as if they're speaking a different language.

"It's no use." Rivals breathes a hearty sigh of disappointment. "I guess Shirley can be just as stubborn as Lelouch."

"But there must be hope for her yet, Rivalz. She is looking for our charming Vice President, isn't she?" Milly zealously utters as she stands with a flourish to grab the orange-haired girl with this very vigor. "Do you know where he is?"

Rivalz simpers at how easily his best friend's nemesis is getting swept away with her meddlesome plans.

"'Fraid not," he supplies to her on a level of his own discontent (he does have a duty to protect his buddy, but he can't keep from wondering about how she might repay his betrayal). "I haven't seen him since the festival. Maybe he's with Nunnally?"

Milly's shoulders sag somewhat at that but her vibrant varnish isn't wiped off completely. If her persistence in annoying Lelouch has gained her anything, it's knowing his personality and obsessive-protective nature, particularly involving little Nunnally. After today's scare with Princess Euphemia and the press – whom he never even wanted on campus in the first place – it is very plausible that he tucked Nunnally and himself away for safety like some elusive and ferocious wild animal protecting their young.

Too bad for Lelouch, Milly happens to like the thrill of the chase.

"...Um, Madam President?" the captive girl chirps a mild plea soaked in confusion at the prolonged hold of her shoulders.

"Off to Nunnally!" Milly suddenly proclaims with a dramatic point in some vague direction that isn't even close to Nunnally or Lelouch's room, startling her peer. "I can't sit idly by while these two lovebirds fly farther and farther apart! I'll help you two patch things up before it's too late! Rivalz, you watch the homestead in case Lelouch shows up."

Before Shirley can manage a peep of surprise or Rivalz can question what Milly means by "homestead," she has the other girl in her abominable clutches as she sets off to hunt down Lelouch. (There is a small part of Milly that wants to live out her desire of dating Lelouch through Shirley, but mainly she just wants to see her friend happy and ruffle the ex-prince's feathers in the process if she can.)

Milly is of course ignoring the fact that Shirley seeking Lelouch could already mean that she wishes to make amends, but Milly can't let this grand opportunity pass by her and who knows what that romantically-challenged fool will say without proper guidance.

The poor boy will never know what hit him.

Exactly how Milly likes it.

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The sky is melting into a warm sunset as Lelouch broods on the rooftop.

It's absurd how swiftly everything he labored to achieve has been thwarted in one announcement. It's obvious that regardless which path he chooses, acceptance or rejection, it will mean that the Black Knights are in an unfavorable position. Should they join Euphemia and her Zone it would be equal to admitting defeat and should they refuse her it would be equal to denying peace.
Are Zero, the Black Knights, their rebellion, really that insignificant to be undone so easily?

Or is Euphemia really that lucky?

Her notion alone is nothing more than a pipe dream, a utopia that looks good on paper but fails in reality.

And yet, either way, Lelouch is screwed by this simple ideal.

It seems that the best strategy would be to travel a different path, one not offered and one he must discover. He needs to bypass Euphemia's proposal while sparing Suzaku at the same time… but where can such a path be found?

(But is he just being too selfish to not take her up on this offer? His personal plans are important, but should this baby be more important than revenge? Even if he is able to get around this Zone, would it still be too risky for Suzaku? Lelouch has thought about capturing the Lancelot before, but how much time would that really buy him? How long could Lelouch realistically keep it in the Black Knight's possession and what of Suzaku in the meantime? He's much too stubborn to simply call it quits.

Like Lelouch.

At the end of the day, would everyone be better off with the Zone…?)

Oh how the Universe must be laughing at Lelouch and all his pious gains and for thinking he could ever control anything – he can almost hear it as a maddening contraction in his mind as the rumbling embodiment of his father claiming him dead where he stands, nothing more than a worthless, lifeless—

"You really are becoming too predictable."

—the light sound of a teasing voice sends Lelouch into a flinch and right into a pair of green eyes and an amused grin.

Suzaku lifts an eyebrow, "...Did I scare you?"

"No, I was just..." Lelouch rubs at the taunting echo in his head and the thin sheen of sweat on his brow, "it's nothing."

Suzaku hums a bit and leans against the railing in a heavy sigh with his back to the aftermath of the festival.

"I'm actually glad you're up here – I can talk to you alone," he says in a shaded tone.

"Oh? About what?"

"The obvious."

"Which obvious...?" Lelouch mutters.

Suzaku smiles with a silent chuckle, "Are there that many?"

Lelouch stares at Suzaku.

Something doesn't smell right.
The seahorse doesn't smell right.

What kind of question is that?

"So I guess this is about Euphie, then." Lelouch accurately assumes, his voice and expression like gray clouds rolling across the sky

"It's pretty shocking, isn't it?" Suzaku says with a small smile to oppose Lelouch's mood. "She wants me to assist her and I want to do it."

That's not a surprise.

"Why wouldn't you?"

Suzaku shrugs, "I think some people will have a problem with it…"

"There's always going to be a person to object no matter what." Lelouch adds a bit bitterly, "That's the point of freedom, isn't it?"

"…You think Zero is one of those people? Who will object?"

Lelouch doesn't look at Suzaku, his eyes hardening in a familiar frost.

He doesn't like where this is headed…

Is this what the suspicious scent he sniffed was?

"Who knows?" Lelouch shrugs, maintaining his blasé exterior. "It's certainly put him in a tough position."

"Say he opposes… which side would you choose?"

Lelouch sighs through his nose, a hissing leak from his internal brooding.

"Is this what you're fishing for, Suzaku?"

Suzaku looks uneasy but doesn't quite squirm in his stance, "I know how you feel about all of this. I think it's a fair question."

"Do you think it's fair to put all of your hopes into this? You really think something like this will work?"

Suzaku frowns, "How will we know until we give it a try? Don't be so cynical."

Lelouch tries not to scoff, but a weak puff of it leaks anyway, his indifferent composure decomposing like a corpse.

Like the corpse of his mother.

"It isn't cynicism," Lelouch says, "it's logic."

"So logic dictates that people can't work together?"

Somehow… this conversation doesn't feel right.

What are they talking about, exactly?
"Logic dictates that this idea is a hopeful mask for the real problem," Lelouch counters calmly – he still believes in some semblance of unity, the problem is that Britannia doesn't. "You don't think this will really solve everything, do you?"

"Where's your faith in humanity?" Suzaku is becoming upset – the last thing Lelouch wants is to get into a heated discussion (or an argument, as he refuses to put it) but he doesn't want Suzaku to get excited about what could be a sinking ship, regardless of his personal perspectives about Britannia and politics.

"Humanity?" Lelouch repeats disgustedly as if the word is a revolting regurgitation. "Britannia has proven that they have no humanity left to have faith in."

Suzaku is taken aback, gaping at Lelouch as if he rose from the grave. (Or as if he is seeing Lelouch for the first time.)

"How can you say that? Does Nunnally have no humanity? Euphemia? Or the Student Council? Or you?" The appalled flash over Suzaku's face quickly fades into antagonism. "In case you've forgotten, you're Britannian no matter how much you wish you weren't and I don't see you spitting in the face of peace – no, you think only radical actions can welcome it."

Lelouch has a hard time swallowing Suzaku's words because, for once, they're all true – especially wishing he was never born Britannian, not even a prince… Perhaps Lelouch's own words were a bit extreme, but most of the Britannians in power are the ones of despicable character. As in most cases, those pure at heart with the best of intentions are the ones with no way of making their dreams a reality.

Except Euphemia.

Still, she's the rare exception…

"You don't understand, Suzaku," Lelouch tries to speak evenly, realizing Suzaku is taking this personally when he really shouldn't. "Britannia is like a rotten tree, and what do you do with rotten trees?" he looks at Suzaku intently, already seeing the comprehension of his point twist the younger boy's features. "You destroy it all the way to the roots, otherwise it will just decay and die and keep new, better life from growing in its place. Mere pruning won't save it, you know that, and trying to disguise it with other plants won't change the fact that it's dead and useless."

Suzaku doesn't respond right away, only drops his eyes from Lelouch's as they are surrounded by a tense silence that bakes on their skin. There is a distant call of laughter from students strolling across the grass but the sprightly sound suffocates when it breaches their muted moment up on the roof.

"…So, that's how you really feel," Suzaku finally says, not breaking his gaze from his shoes, and Lelouch realizes from the boy's tone that he said too much, revealed something he shouldn't have. For this reason Lelouch does not respond – a heavy assumption swathed in a cape and mask is standing on the edge of Suzaku's words – because no matter how silence is interpreted, it's only a conjecture and nothing more.

This is exactly what Lelouch didn't want to have happen, but he just had to go and speak his mind.

And Suzaku says he wants Lelouch to open up to him? Why, when he never likes what Lelouch has to say? What does he expect will come out of Lelouch's mouth? Rainbows and butterflies? Rainbow coloured butterflies?
Oh, no, it must be rainbow coloured seahorses!

Suzaku seems to huff a little when he shoves off the railing, a bitter flavor to the morose bite of his voice, "I came up here to tell you that I'll be leaving with Princess Euphemia, so don't wait up for me tonight or expect to see me for the next few days, maybe the week. In fact, I'm leaving now."

Lelouch can't let Suzaku go like this, let this rift between them grow like an eroding canyon, so he tries to mollify the situation to keep things from going too far south.

The smart and sensitive thing to do would be to give Suzaku some space, to let him go mellow alone, but Lelouch doesn't understand that – he's usually just as aggravated as Suzaku in these situations, so there's typically a mutual parting for a while. All Lelouch understands right now is the need to recover as if a strategic move failed or backfired, and since emotions don't belong in combat they don't sync to this moment. Their relationship isn't a battlefield – no matter how many times they've fought – and sometimes Lelouch forgets that what with living most of his life in a defensive shell.

It doesn't help that Lelouch is much too prideful to just apologize for being so crass – or just simply apologize.

"I'll walk you," Lelouch says amiably as Suzaku begins to drift from him. "Considering I won't be seeing much of you for a few days, I better make the most of this."—what an ominous thing to say at a time like this, but maybe it isn't so unintentional—"Will you be in school at all?"

Suzaku doesn't appear to particularly want Lelouch's attention – not when he's trying to gracefully exit the scene unlike that one pitiable morning – but something respectable, or perhaps a determination to not have their relationship fall apart before the small fry is even born, keeps him from pushing Lelouch away completely.

"I don't know." Of course, his speech is clipped and strained, probably even annoyed at Lelouch's disregard for personal space at the moment.

"I hope you are – won't enjoy the day without you," Lelouch tries to compliment, hoping his uncommon admittance of... well, just an admittance will somehow reverse the damage or at least somehow lessen the tension.

"There won't be anyone here to keep you from skipping, so just enjoy that."

Naturally Lelouch's attempt is just thrown back at him in passive-aggressive smack.

Suzaku has mastered keeping his temper and aggression in check in fear of repeating a past mistake, making these scarce verbal stabs all the more potent.

"It's no fun unless it annoys someone," Lelouch tries to play back in a dry return, but the veneer is stretched too tight to fool either of them and it only leaves his humor as out of place as it is graceless.

When Suzaku merely hums in a bitter reply, Lelouch rubs his hand over the small of Suzaku's back and wrangles his waist when they step through the stairwell door. The flat look of an expired tolerance speaks volumes in Suzaku's eyes, but he doesn't try to stop Lelouch from his pathetic pacification as he leans in for a kiss, which is rigidly obliged by impassive lips.

"Be careful," Lelouch murmurs to him gently, hoping his words aren't taken as a subtle threat. "Be mindful of your situation."
Suzaku's eyes dart away from Lelouch upon hearing this as if watching his mental words of annoyance ghost through the air because he won't gladly bark them. Lelouch knows Suzaku doesn't want to be constantly reminded to not push himself like he used to do but Lelouch doesn't know how to not be over-protective. He would be making the same demands even if Suzaku wasn't pregnant.

Although the pregnant fact does make Lelouch more fretful than his usual strength.

Lelouch tries for another kiss, gently nudging Suzaku towards the inner railing of the stairwell in a practiced motion but instead of exuding his lustful intentions through a sultry smirk his body moves with an awkward desperation of rusty machinery. Suzaku still allows himself to be caged like lazy water as Lelouch connects their lips but almost once the contact is made Suzaku breaks the dam, pushing Lelouch away before this ungainly moment can amount to anything more uncomfortable, and forced.

"I have to go," he says quietly with a turned face, seeming to step deeper into his dejection as he walks down the stairs, alone.

Lelouch lets him leave because he knows he's failed and that pushing more than he already has would be foolish.

Once again, failure churns Lelouch's stomach.

So much so, he can taste it in his mouth.

He could chase after Suzaku, but he already knows the boy won't listen to anything he has to say unless he could apologize sincerely, which he can't. False apologies are not for Suzaku, or anyone that truly matters to Lelouch, nor does he regret what he said – only the timing. Ruining the moment with Suzaku isn't a first time offense for Lelouch, and one would think this smooth prince would have figured everything out by now, but in a way it's actually a compliment. There isn't anyone else Lelouch would feel comfortable enough around to vocalize such strong opinions to except Suzaku because his best friend is one person who understands him at his core. Lelouch might not say much about what's on his mind or what's in his heart, but he says more to Suzaku than to anyone else, even Nunnally.

So the problem is getting Suzaku to understand that without telling him because it is too much of a difficult thing to say out loud – because, duh, confessions aren't his strong point.

At the same time, though, if Lelouch should be learning how to be more romantic than Suzaku should be learning how to better read between the lines.

Lelouch miserably leans against the railing with a heavy heart as he listens to the sound of Suzaku's steady steps slowly spiral into silence, realizing it's a cruel metaphor for their conversation. What he would give to have ended their rooftop talk like they had for most of this week; full of kisses and smiles and zero hard feelings…

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Lelouch proved to be a more elusive prey than Milly previously thought – although she probably should have known better, considering his history. He wasn't with Nunnally; the precious little sister having no leads to follow, simply saying that he had stepped out – off campus or just out of the clubhouse? Who really knows…? Milly didn't want to stray too far from the nest, knowing Lelouch's return was inevitable, so she set off to wait – snoop – in Lelouch's bedroom only to find the door to be locked (odd, considering she went through the trouble of removing the outer number
pad before he moved into the clubhouse – when did he have another installed…?).

But there was another miscalculation Milly made: Shirley.

She kept blabbing about how it wasn't urgent that she see Lelouch, that it could wait and blah, blah, blah…

As if Milly cared about the details.

In the end, they were caught red-handed – namely Milly as her hands were all over Lelouch's lock as if it was Lelouch himself – by none other than the stealthy maid caring for the Lamperouge siblings. Shirley had jumped as high as her voice squeaked which Milly found rather amusing as she merely looked over her shoulder. Sayoko is her former maid, after all; she had plenty of time to become acquainted with the sneaky style of the Japanese woman when she was still growing into her own spy shoes. Milly did at least have the decency to play coy, slapping her hands to her sides as if they weren't fondling a keypad while smiling an innocent smile Sayoko knew better than to trust.

…Which is why they're trudging back into the Student Council room like wounded soldiers – or at least Milly is, Shirley is all too relieved to have failed the mission.

Where is that girl's spirit?

"Back already?" Rivalz greets them, lounging at the table alone. "What's the matter? He wasn't there?"

"No…" Milly says with a defeated sigh, sweeping her eyes around the room while Shirley scuttles passed her. "Where is everyone?"

"Kallen went home early, said she didn't feel very good." Rivalz shrugs, folding his hands behind his head, "Dunno about everyone else."

"Strange that Nina isn't here, she practically never leaves this place."

"Maybe she had something to do – she was in a really good mood about something earlier today," he says with a bit of a yawn.

Milly purses her lips, wondering just what it is that could have her little computer mole straying away from the burrow.

"I guess it doesn't matter." Milly leans against the table next to Rivalz, glancing briefly at a napping Arthur curled up on the couch. "Today was tiring, and we did already get everything cleaned up for the most part, right?"

"Yes Ma'am," the blue-haired boy salutes with two fingers.

"Is this someone's…?" Shirley starts on the other side of the table, holding a relatively thick and yellow book in her hand before turning a strange colour. Her eyes swing from the book and back to them, a redness finally bleeding on her cheeks.

"Someone's what?" Rivalz asks.

"…Book?" she peeps.

Milly's eyebrow lifts and she walks over to the girl, relieving her once again of some mental burden
But once Milly's eyes feats upon the title, she realizes that this is far better than sneaking into Lelouch's room while he's away from home.

"…What is it?" Rivalz questions from his chair, now leaning forward a bit with his hands pressed on the table and a curious frown – both interested about the object of attention and bracing himself against Milly's diabolical smirk.

Of course it's only the juiciest piece of game she's yet to catch.

Now begins the real hunt!

"Who do you think this could belong to…?" Milly asks to no one in particular with her sleuthing senses going wild, slapping another question to Shirley before she even hears an answer to the first, "Where did you find this?"

"Just un-under the table." Shirley eyes the salivating of Milly's mouth in an understandable state of alarm, at first unsure which question to answer, but quickly chose the one directed at her as if hoping that will bait the rabid gaze somewhere else or just plain leave her invulnerable to it. "I saw it when I was tightening my shoe strap…"

"Thank God for your loose shoe, my dear!" Milly excitedly exclaims through her deranged frothing.

"What are you talking about?" Rivalz demands as he marches to their side of the table. "It's just a book."

He must not be a boy who believes knowledge is power.

Milly shakes a chiding finger at him, "Ah-ah-ah~! It's no ordinary book! See for yourself."

"Pregnancy for Dummies…" he reads out loud in a bland voice but his face promptly matches Shirley's; a dreadful fear pulling his eyes open wide. "Don't tell me you think this belongs to one of us?"

"Of course!" Milly nods with a wink, very pleased the boy is at least able to follow her train of thought. "No one else uses this room but the Student Council!"

"Yeah, but, people come in here sometimes," Rivalz tries to argue. "It could belong to anyone! Especially with the festival today – who knows who could've been in here today or how long that book's even been sitting there."

What a rational statement to spoil her mood.

He's beginning to sound like Lelouch!

She taps her lip, "You do bring up a good point, my good chap, and there doesn't appear to be a name or anything in here except highlights and tabs… I suppose there's really only one way to know who it belongs to for sure!"

Milly holds a long, dramatic pause here, clearly telling them to ask her about her plan.

And really, why wouldn't they want to know?

So they do, in unison, with a slightly frightened pitch to their voices, perhaps expecting they'll
unleash certain doom with the password: "…How?"

Milly Ashford grins deviously, bathing in the dark aura slashed with lightning that clouds up around her, making the other two believe they're going to witness their fear come to life—

"We wait." Her words don't sound nearly as sinister as her voice and they're not nearly as sinister as the way she clutches the book close to her chest as she hunches slightly like a mad scientist—

Hm, maybe Lloyd is rubbing off on her in some trivial way…

—but it's sinister, all right; and after another inviting pause where she forces one of them to inquire again it's Shirley, surprisingly, who takes her bait.

"Wait?"

"That's right!" Milly beams, all of the ominous air dispersing in a flash of the dazzling smile that Sayoko is right to distrust. "Whoever lost this book will likely be coming back in here to find it, and that's when we'll have our answer!"

Rivalz and Shirley exchange a look, neither really wanting to comply but also not able to object, and so they unwittingly become her accomplices, whether they like it or not.

Which they obviously don't.

But Milly is too caught up in her chase that she doesn't notice the difference.

"And then if the person comes alone, all we'll have to do after that is figure out who they're involved with and the case will be closed!" and then all Milly has to do is figure out how to use the information…

May the Universe have mercy on them.

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Lelouch never honestly thought he'd see the day when Shirley would ditch him. The Universe has never been so kind to him but he really expected more from Shirley – she calls and asks to meet him downtown only to become a no-show? It isn't like her to be inconsiderate. Then again, she can be flaky if the occasion calls for it…

It would be nice to entertain the idea that maybe this is just some playful revenge for when he was late to that concert, but that's just too delusional a notion to cherish.

It's still a nice thought, though.

To have Shirley sore enough at him to play a practical joke for leaving her out in the rain – where she wasn't distraught because he inadvertently killed her father and many others in a literal landslide victory (until the Lancelot appeared, of course), tears indistinguishable from the downpour. No, at that time she would've reprimanded him in all seriousness without the fury because she'd be appeased by the simple fact that he even came – she wouldn't have lunged at him in an impulsive thirst for consolation that only he could provide at that moment…

There was a tiny voice that told him he shouldn't return her kiss for scattered reasons (namely,
Suzaku), but her lips were cold and her body was shaking, it didn’t seem right to reject her when she was so emotionally vulnerable and upset – and when it was all his fault. Shirley clung to him with a grief he’s experienced first-hand, a feeling he tries to forget with every passing day, and it was as if she hacked into that part of his heart and punched the hidden bruise. In a split-second decision, closing his arms tightly around her, to cradle her as he firmly kissed her quivering lips, was all he could do to quell the undesired feelings drudging up from the darkest places inside both of them.

Lelouch was never good at properly – healthily – handling his own emotions, so what was he to do for someone else? He honestly cares for Shirley, he always has, and if it wasn’t for Suzaku, C.C. or Mao… well, who knows how their relationship could’ve developed.

Naturally, Lelouch never told Suzaku. There wasn’t a need to. No need for more guilt. He doesn’t suspect that Suzaku would be jealous as he’s far from the jealous type, in fact he probably would have understood, but there wasn’t a real reason to bother or worry Suzaku more than he needed to be – especially when things with Shirley took a turn for the worst. Lelouch relates the kiss to a hug, and there’s nothing wrong or unfaithful about giving a hug, so there wasn’t any reason to "confess." It was an act of condolence and nothing more.

But all of this is besides the point as these events don’t even exist in Shirley’s Geass-controlled-brain, so he isn’t sure what prompted her to abandon their plans this afternoon without so much as a texted apology – she never did fail to nag him in the past…

Could it be the growing frenzy of the Zone that spooked her? Lelouch doesn’t think it likely. She’s much more open-minded and rational than her clumsy naiveté lets shine, so she wouldn’t let a few bad attitudes spoil her own. Well, whatever the case, Lelouch is still left to skulk the city alone for the afternoon, breathing in the fear and bigotry of his fellow citizens as the Zone ceremony looms on the horizon. Lelouch can’t say he’s anymore pleased about this development than they are, but for vastly different reasons (although a certain baby has begun to make him question his standing). Lelouch was even lucky enough to personally witness one deplorable denizen in particular, and if it wasn’t for Rivalz that nobleman would be taking a long walk off a short pier, so to speak – and Rivalz almost joined him.

Another curious strength of Lelouch’s Geass happened again today but Lelouch dismisses it quickly as just a matter of timing (because he only needed to close his eye to prevent the command from being conceived because it was mid-order, not because his power is simply evolving). Perhaps if he wasn’t so distracted, like he had been at the clinic, too, he would be more alarmed. Lelouch hardly has the cranial capacity to spare as he pondered his way through the mall and did the important errand of getting Nunnally’s birthday present. It’s as he sits for a rest on the elevated patio of a relatively barren bistro that he is confronted by his ever-persistent shadow with a fast-fading smile as it joins him across the small table.

"How long have you been following me?" Lelouch interrogates sharply, staring down the pair of golden eyes that always seem to follow him wherever he goes. He is neither pleased nor amused by the fact that she’s roaming freely through the city behind him, but she’s here, so he might as well face her. Then maybe he can get her to disappear again.

C.C. looks at him plainly, either ignoring the challenge in his voice or too indifferent to even notice it.

"Long enough to know you’ve been stood up," she answers lazily.

He would like to believe that she didn't surface just to stalk him for an infantile reason, but he knows better.
"I suppose you're still searching for the same enlightenment," Lelouch grouses, sipping his black coffee with vexed verve. "You are incredibly annoying."

She only stares at his surly remark like a porcelain cat; Lelouch can almost feel those amber irises scratching at the inside of his skull.

He never quite gets used to that feeling.

But a jaded breath blows from his lips as he's well aware that it's only a matter of time before she'll learn the truth with or without him.

"Fine, you're right. I admit it. Are you happy now?"

"Normally I would be."

"...But?" being the one wound so tight, he glares at her apathy.

C.C. shrugs, "This is different, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Lelouch slings his eyes to the thin clutter of traffic below them, "It's different alright."

"Who is it?"

Lelouch gives her a nasty look but it doesn't last long. As infuriating as it is to be asked the same thing repeatedly, he's never been so tired and confused and all this baby business has him feeling a specific hallow – one that never sealed but one he learned to ignore with the aid of Nunnally's love. Becoming a father has forced him to face this hole once again, and within it is the aching desire for some maternal support.

Simply: Lelouch really misses his mommy.

Seems he'll have to settle for C.C.

"Suzaku," Lelouch reveals in a weary breath, not even caring how she'll react.

"...What about Suzaku?"

"No," Lelouch shakes his head, looking to her once again, "he's the one. He's... pregnant."

C.C. really has mastered the art of playing statue.

However, this time there's something concretely condescending in her eyes.

"...I know you're stressed, Lelouch, but that's a very bad joke. Even for you."

Lelouch's lips curl, thankful he isn't the only one who thought this a bad joke.

"I know what it sounds like, believe me I know how utterly preposterous it sounds, but it's the truth. I saw an ultrasound and everything. The baby is real and inside Suzaku. I have no idea how it happened, but it doesn't matter."

"Maybe it was your Geass." C.C. offers without hesitation – she has always been quick to digest a situation.

Now Lelouch gets to play condescending statue, "...What?"
"Geass is the only thing that sets you apart from Suzaku, correct?"

Lelouch shakes his head vehemently – no, he doesn't even want to go there.

Not with her.

"Are you trying to tell me that Geass has impregnated Suzaku?"

"No. I'm saying you are probably the cause. If you are both otherwise normal and healthy teenage boys, perhaps your Geass is the culprit. You are the reason for the pregnancy, not Suzaku. He's merely the receiver of your—"

"Stop," Lelouch interrupts with a scowl. "What does that mean? That I have contaminated DNA or something?"

"Probably more like… contaminated sperm."

Lelouch would sputter if he could take back his voice from the skeptical bewilderment that stole it.

"Oh, well, that's just great," he grumbles, making the tableware clink as he loudly drops his hand down on the table. "I have superhuman sperm."

C.C. grins, "Super sperm – I don't think there's anything human about having contaminated reproductive specimen."

"This isn't the time for jokes!"

She shrugs again, "You've got to learn to laugh sometimes, Lelouch. One day it will save you a lot of stress and probably your blood pressure."

He can think of one thing that would save him a lot of stress right now.

But he still needs C.C. around, so her demise will have to wait.

Unfortunately…

"You don't think that's really possible, do you?" Lelouch won't admit that he's pleading here, but he really is hoping for a shred of sanity to tie to the enigma inside Suzaku's pregnant tummy.

"It can't be impossible," she says so nonchalantly that he begins to wonder if she's just yanking his chain or being sincere. "And I take it that having an abortion isn't a part of the plan?"

"No… We're having the baby." Lelouch starts to laugh a little, a troubling sound as some of his internal crazy escapes his grip. "I have no idea how, but we're having it come Hell or high water."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Lelouch shakes his head slightly but doesn't really answer her question, steering the conversation in a different direction.

"C.C…. is there, any chance that my Geass will affect the baby?"

"Hard to say. I've never known a contractor that reared children…" she pauses, her eyes falling a bit flat before she speaks with a distant wind to her voice, "Well, there was one couple."

"And?" Lelouch's eyes draw to her like moths to a flame, visibly anxious to hear
something *useful* crawl out of the pizza-hole in her face.

She looks uneasy about divulging the information, a crack in her statuesque disposition, as if listening to a voice in her *head* that's demanding she stay silent, but C.C.'s never been good about following orders.

"...Inconclusive."

"*Incon—?!*" Lelouch seethes.

"Even so..." she continues, "Geass is like a tattoo or a scar and those are not inheritable traits."

"No, but everyone has a birthmark of some sort..." Lelouch shakes his head after a thoughtful moment – even if it isn't Lelouch's fault, Suzaku has also been under Geass for some time and also subjected to C.C.'s own mysterious powers. That couldn't possibly affect Suzaku or the baby... could it? And what about the mark on C.C.'s forehead...? Is Lelouch being paranoid or justifiably concerned about this possible connection? "I don't know. I guess I can only wait and see what happens."

Not a fond move for Lelouch.

He hates to be oblivious and underprepared.

But so goes the way of the Universe...

"If something occurs," C.C. asks him carefully – with a hint of sensitivity in her tone? – "you'll tell Suzaku about your Geass?"

Lelouch looks at her with heavy eyes, "I'm not sure I'll have a choice."

Trying to explain any of this to Suzaku... Lelouch hadn't thought about it, not even once. He isn't sure he'd even know where to begin in order to help Suzaku understand, or if Suzaku would be appalled by it. As far as Lelouch sees it, if there's nothing to worry about then there's no reason to tell Suzaku. It might not be honest, but isn't dishonest either.

If their baby is involved, however, it might be a different story. Lelouch would rather not think about it – the last thing he would want in the world is for his child to contract anything strange or harmful – but *not* thinking about it isn't going to solve anything.

He'll need to devise yet another plan.

Or maybe several.

Just to be safe.

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Suzaku isn't used to having good days.

Most of his life everyday has been the same, just another date to cross off the calendar while wondering if tomorrow would (finally) be the last.

Lately he hasn't lived through that routine.
Lately he's been having good days.

He is even learning to adjust – *welcome* – this pleasant change as it greets him more brightly each day.

He has even realized that he looks forward to *living* each day rather than, well…

Today is one of those good days.

Not only was he informed by Doctor Sanica that all of his test results were nothing to fear, but he's standing beside Princess Euphemia as they usher the unveiling of the Special Administered Zone, witnessing the surprising flood of civilians lining up to join. Suzaku feels some positive emotions filling his gut with light and fuzzy energy – happiness, pride, confidence… something else? He can't quite place it, but he knows that hope and inspiration are buzzing around inside him. Maybe there's even some admiration in there, too. Suzaku doesn't know how to begin to fully appreciate Her Highness's effort with this Zone except for vowing that he'd be here every step of the way no matter how taxing they may become.

Not like he hasn't been through worse.

Considering everything Euphemia has done for this… he isn't sure that his services will be enough thanks.

She had admitted to appearing at the festival because she had over-heard him say it would be an open-campus and that she came specifically to inform him about her idea. Euphemia didn't mention how or why this idea came to her and Suzaku didn't want to be intrusive. He wouldn't dare to think she'd do so much for just him – yet in a way, this if for *everyone*, too – but she's made it clear that she honestly would go to great lengths for him—

("*More than two-hundred thousand citizens have applied for the S.A.Z. of Japan, and it doesn't show any signs of slowing,* Euphemia says. "*It's all thanks to you."")

"What?" Suzaku looks at her curiously confused.

"They trust our venture because they have you to represent the Japanese interest."

He smiles softly, "No, it's because you announced this yourself."—Ever the modest soldier—"I am truly grateful to you."

"As am I to you," the princess returns instantly and gently genuine. "I hope you can continue to help me with all of this."

"Yes, Your Highness—!" Suzaku moves in an automated fashion, preparing to bow as he crosses his arm over his chest, but she stops him with a reminder to drop the formalities, like always. "... Right." He says a bit awkwardly and she chuckles softly, reminding him of Nunnally.

"You know, pretty soon you won't be able to address me with titles like 'Princess' or 'Your Highness.' Constructing the Special Zone didn't come without sacrifices." When Suzaku only stares at her, obviously not able to catch her drift, she gladly takes the invitation to spell it out for him with a warm smile, "I have given up my right to the throne, and the title that comes with it. I'm no longer a princess of Britannia, just Euphie – so you better get comfortable with the informalities!"

Suzaku gawks at her, "But—!"

She shakes her head at him, never losing her smile for a second.
"Don't worry yourself with this, Suzaku. I've thought a lot about it and in the end I realized that I'm not giving up anything that's truly important to me. Everybody wins in this scenario, even me!"

—Her sweet nature is almost enough to distract him from Lelouch's bitter nature…

But here he goes thinking about Lelouch again.

He is ecstatic about the way things are going, to say the least, and the reality that Euphemia isn't harboring any animosity about his unruly rejection of her order has him walking on higher clouds. Yet, despite all the optimism surrounding him, his mind never fails to remind him of all the troubling matters he's trying to leave in the dark for just a little longer.

It isn't that Suzaku doesn't understand Lelouch's hostility, he just wishes that Lelouch could let go enough in order to trust Euphemia – he should know his sister better than anyone – just as Lelouch wanted Suzaku to forget about his death-wish. Lelouch always wants everything to go his way with unyielding stubbornness, and he's usually able to force his victories in the end, but this time things are different. Suzaku doesn't know if this attitude stems from his childhood in royalty or not, but he has a hard time imagining that Lelouch would be any different had the boy been a commoner. The stories Nunnally and Euphemia have shared with Suzaku virtually painted Lelouch in the same light as a child to who he's become, not to mention the shades of Suzaku's personal experiences. Even if the past is a fading memory, the hues of his history aren't distorted completely; he was still an arrogant know-it-all who held a high opinion of himself and was protective of Nunnally.

However, there is one aspect of Lelouch's character that isn't coloured quite the same way from his past. The playful kid described to Suzaku from fond reminiscences was innocent and carefree as he wasted days filled with flowers and laughter. He wasn't the aloof castaway painstakingly trying to rebuild his and his sister's future one lonely day at a time in a neglected corner of the Kururugi property and he wasn't the resentful young man scorched by distrust and blistering with abhorrence for the blood in his veins.

Suzaku realized at that time before they met, they were the same: unbroken.

Although they eventually became friends, after Suzaku learned there was a soft, gooey center inside this snarky block of ice, it didn't change his view of the older boy. He didn't know the side of Lelouch that was a bright-eyed boy who knew little of suffering thanks to living a life in his mother's bubble (and Suzaku wonders if Lelouch is repeating history intentionally or not by doing the same thing with Nunnally). Only years later, after piecing together these small bits of the past has Suzaku understood that Lelouch is more driven by his rage than his despair. He understands that Lelouch isn't a person who will simply forgive and forget.

Suzaku would be lying if he said he wasn't curious about the details leading up to Lelouch's and Nunnally's expulsion but he never dared to ask, not wanting to reopen any wounds or stall their healing anymore than time already has. Of course Lelouch has never spoken a word about it – of course, Lelouch doesn't speak about his past, period – and Nunnally was spared the wicked truths at the time, and even Euphemia doesn't seem to be too keen on talking about it, either. Suzaku didn't pry but the topic crept up on them and all Euphemia she said was that at the time she didn't understand or know all of the details and that whenever she asked Cornelia and Schneizel they didn't do more than frown and simply tell her that Lelouch and Nunnally were sent somewhere far away – little did she, all of them, know they'd never return. (How badly he wanted to reassure her then, to let her know that Lelouch and Nunnally are very much alive, but he couldn't…)

Afterward, Euphemia described a life where Nunnally and Lelouch were forgotten like yesterday's garbage and it pained her deeply to walk through a callous palace where her brother and sister seemed to vanish from reality like they never existed (that was why Clovis had recreated Lady
Marianne's garden at the Government Building, she said, when he came to Japan as a sentimental move to be closer to his lost siblings… Suzaku often wondered what Lelouch would think about that, but he gets the feeling that the discarded prince wouldn't see it in the same positive light that Euphemia does.)

But where does all of this lead? What place do any of these musings have in the present?

Suzaku doesn't want to think it, but it's much too late for that. He held strongly to denial, that he was just imagining things or that the idea was ridiculous, alas all these connected dots drew a picture of Lelouch as a terrorist instead of smiling, little boy. The former prince has proven himself intelligent and vindictive enough with radical politics that lead him to supporting the Black Knights, but is there any way Lelouch could take a life so easily, let alone hundreds? Is Lelouch's inner child so blackened by his father that he would send innocents to the grave because of his anger? Doesn't he realize he still has people who love him? He wanted Suzaku to understand this same truth but does he believe it himself? That he doesn't need to fight anymore…?

That he doesn't need Zero.

Maybe Suzaku is wrong about this, and he desperately hopes he is, never has he wished so hard to be wrong, and maybe it isn't too late for Lelouch to move forward or be rescued.

If it wasn't too late for Suzaku, then it isn't too late for Lelouch.

It can't be too late…

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"You're being awfully cautious," Euphemia notes as Lelouch tampers with the security panel in the control room. "I've had all the cameras turned off."

"I've had to hide most of my life thanks to a certain empire," Lelouch says rather solemnly, thinking of the weapon concealed in his cape with a clenching fist and of the surrounding Black Knights awaiting his commands. "I don't think I have to tell you what a difficult position you've put me in with this Zone."

Her eyebrows knit together, "What do you mean?"

Lelouch throws a quick glare at her for the nerve, but her naïve nature wipes his eyes clean in an instant.

"What did you expect to accomplish with this?"

His question purses a picture of puzzlement on her face.

"Accomplish? Well…" her eyes sway away from his, searching for the right way to phrase her thoughts. "I guess to put it simply: to make everyone happy."

Lelouch holds his tongue.

"This way we can be together like before while at the same time everyone else can benefit." She reconnects their gaze, "This way—"

"You honestly think things can go back to the way they were before?" Lelouch can't keep from
spitting spitefully at her. "Things can never be the same! Not after everything that's happened! I'm not—!" the same person anymore... "It just isn't that simple!"

"I know it won't be exactly the same, but..." Euphemia's entire shine darkens before his eyes with the weighted droop of her voice. "Did you think that you weren't missed at all? When I discovered you were alive, it made me so happy I... I wanted to do something about the situation here in Japan, to help everyone and stop the bloodshed. I figured if I can't help you then I don't deserve to be a part of your life."

But by trying to help all she did was force Lelouch into a corner.

And yet, the small fry would probably thank her for it.

Damn, now even the baby is against Lelouch.

"I've worked too hard to have your delusions interfere now," his scathing tongue continues to lash, not sure he likes how this exchange is softening his heart. "It was a noble but vain effort—!"

A striking pain in Lelouch's left eye grabs and drags him to his knees as if a flaming hook pierced the soft muscle and yanked him down as it incinerates his socket. His hand flies up to the agonizing fire searing his nerves as his mind is splashed by panic (...What is this? Why now...?) while hiring all of his energy and focus to just make it STOP—

"Lelouch?" Euphemia rushes to his side—

"Stop it! Don't cast you pity onto me!" Lelouch swats at her aide, scurrying away from her as if she's the cause for his anguish, his hand concealing the fading fire in his eye. "I don't need your charity! I will make this happen on my own! I don't expect Euphemia li Britannia to understand—!"

"I have relinquished that name!" said girl exclaims with uncharacteristic force, stunning Lelouch where he stands like a bolt of lightning. "I expect the mainland will announce it shortly, but I have given up my right to succeed the throne."

"Why?" Lelouch asks his pink-haired sister as if it pains him – she'd give up everything for...? – as his hand sinks to his side. "Because you've accepted Zero into your heart?"

"I made you participate in my little endeavor," she smiles, "so surely you expect something in return."

Lelouch thought Suzaku was the only one to ever truly astound him.

He was wrong.

He forgot about a simple girl named Euphemia.

"...You gave it up so easily. Did you do it for me?"

Euphemia giggles at him – an almost absurd sound as it lights up the dark control room, "As conceited as you ever were, but no. I did it for Nunnally and Suzaku."

He blinks at her a bit dazedly, seeming to miss the light jab at his character.

She smiles sweetly, "She told me that if she could be with her brother, that was all she needed."

"That's why?"
"That's what made up my mind," Euphemia answers as she gives him a brighter smile. "I asked myself what is really important in this world. Lelouch, I haven't given up anything that I really, truly treasured. And you don't have to worry, I haven't told anyone about you."

"…And what about Suzaku?" Lelouch has a feeling he already knows how Suzaku is involved in this, but he wants to hear a confirmation.

"I said I haven't told anyone. Not even—"

"No, not about that."—thank the Universe for that, though—"You said you did this for Suzaku, too."

Euphemia's cheeks are brushed pink as she turns a bashful gaze away from him, and somehow Lelouch is reminded of a certain island incident, a specific conversation striking his mind like a bullet—

(He is lying by a campfire which was his only accomplishment after his attempt at hunting and trapping failed miserably – there probably aren't any animals worth eating to catch, anyway – where he's bitterly nibbling at some of the fruits Euphemia had gathered for them when she brought up a curious topic.

"Lelouch?"

Lelouch hums around the sour taste of fruity failure in his mouth.

"You're friends with Suzaku, aren't you?"

Lelouch starts to choke – isn't there a rule about not eating while lying down?

"What?" he rasps.

"I'm not really sure how it came up, but Suzaku told me about living with you and Nunnally when you were children." She smiles, "He told me about how the three of you became friends."

Lelouch swallows, now sitting upright with his hand around his neck, face pale with death ghosting through him.

"…Oh, yeah. We were friends."

Her pink eyebrows crease lightly, the shadows from the fire stretching haunting shapes over her soft features.

"You're not still friends?"

Seems Suzaku took the precautions to not inform his fair princess about her siblings' whereabouts and welfare and that he has frequent contact with them – not that Lelouch expects he did or would.

Lelouch grins ironically, "I guess I should hope we still are."

If only she really knew…

"…But you knew each other really well, didn't you? He said you were both each other's first best—well, real friends."

He nods, picking at the large, premature berry, "Yeah, we were pretty close. I never had a relationship like that with anyone before."
Lelouch's fingers falter when he reconsiders what he just said...

"I see..." is all she says before the fire fusses next to them, splintering the quiet with a hot static of cracks and hisses for several moments.

Fizzle-pop.

Pop-crackle.

Sizzle-pop.

"Say, Lelouch...?"

"What?" He asks, biting into more of this mocking sustenance.

"You wouldn't know what type of girls he likes, would you?"

Lelouch chokes again, this time alarmingly enough to make Euphemia scuttle closer to him and smack his back – which, incidentally, is a very counterproductive act.

"WHAT?" He finally coughs after the fruity flesh dislodged from his throat – he needs to be more careful about when he takes his bites around Euphemia's chatty mouth!

"I'm just wondering..." She twists her dress skirt timidly.

Lelouch, blue from a second scare of suffocation and red from, well not from embarrassment, considers his answer.

Obviously the only way to answer this question is with honesty.

"No, I don't know what type of girl he likes."

Technically, that's not a lie. Girls are never a strong topic of discussion between him and Suzaku, at least never in that sense.

"Oh..." she says with downcast eyes...)

—Ah, so that's it. Lelouch must have been denser than he thought, but he must be improving in order to piece it all together without it being explained to him.

"Suzaku has become a dear friend. I don't want anything to happen to him if I can help it..." she meekly presents her case but Lelouch is way ahead of her.

Euphemia has feelings for Suzaku – it's so obvious!

This Special Zone is more than an olive branch; it's a safe haven where Euphemia can protect those she loves while at the same time helping others – her knowledge of Suzaku's pregnancy has also undoubtedly given her extra determination. While Lelouch was trying to drive the threat out of his nest, Euphemia used it to her advantage to build a new one right in Britannia's own backyard. It is a very clever move on her part – risky, but clever – yet it doesn't mean that their lives or relationships can be mended to what they were before everything was ripped apart and there's no telling how smoothly this whole affair will come to life.

...Well, if there's one thing Lelouch knows how to do, it's how to make things work, and with his intelligence and striking charisma he's confident he can make everything fall nicely into place. This Special Zone may even serve Lelouch's plans more than he initially thought, or at least provide
some shelter until he can adjust to this drastic weather change on the battle field.

But it's going to take a lot of work…

A prideful laugh bubbles from Lelouch's mouth, "And Cornelia?"

"It's not like we'll never see each other," Euphemia says, trying to sound rational and sturdy in spite of the undertone of discontent flattening her voice.

Lelouch grins at her naïve devotion despite knowing that he's left Nunnally alone many a night to further his Zero goals.

"You're such an idiot," he says. "A total moron."

Kind of like another person he knows…

Her powder-blue eyes waver, "Well, I've never been able to beat you at study or at play, but…"

Lelouch glances at her and then leers at himself, "It's not how I envisioned it, but I really will have gotten all I want. When I think about it, you were Euphie long before you were Sub-Viceroy or the Third Princess."

"If I'm just regular, old Euphie, will you help me?" she asks, adopting a very serious tone that isn't much like her and extends a hand to him.

His violet eyes slide over her hand, holding a pause as if waiting for anything to crash into the room and stop him from what he's about to do.

But nothing does.

(What? No Orange-Boy?)

"You were my most worthy opponent," he admits to her in sincerity as he grasps her hand. "And in your usual, rash Euphie fashion, you've beaten me. You win."

The ex-princess stares at the ex-prince with starry eyes glittering in astonishment.

"We'll figure out a way to make this Special Administrated Zone or yours work. But I'm not going to be your subordinate."

"Of course not!" she laughs again.

Lelouch smiles at her earnest eyes, feeling both lighter and heavier with this Special Administrated Zone sitting on his shoulders.

"There is an audience awaiting us," he says as he fetches his mask.

Euphemia nods ecstatically, "Shall we go then, partner?"

"No… I, think I need a moment. Go ahead without me."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't it be better if we walked out on stage together?"

"Never underestimate the power of suspense," Lelouch cockily replies. "Zero is partial to dramatic entrances, you see…"
She giggles quietly at him one more time.

"Oh, fine. But don't take too long. Japan is waiting for you!"

His smug half-smile watches her leave while his lungs heave a heavy sigh once she's gone. One swampy, glove-clad hand flattens on the console as he takes a moment to breathe while the beginning of perspiration on his hairline chills as hasty thoughts pummel his brain.

What has he just done?

Did he just make an empty sacrifice?

…But won't Suzaku be happy? And safe?

And Nunnally? And the baby?

Was this really the right thing to do?

Lelouch glances at his mask, at the way Zero's faceless surface is gleaming at him as if judging him, but he sees himself in that dark reflection, at the violet-eyed boy who always stares back at him, and somehow the oxygen he inhales doesn't feel so thick.

He doesn't have the liberty of time to stress and regret right now – Japan is waiting for him.

Not Area Eleven.

*Japan.*

(His *home*.)

Lelouch makes the quick order for his surrounding troops to fall back for the time being while pulling in a select few to join him once the stage ceremony is finished and then hides inside Zero's mask as he strides to reunite with his sister. He pushes all the impending stress to the back of his mind, including whatever the *hell* just happened with his eye and if he should finally bother C.C. about it, and if she'll bother to actually *enlighten* him.

•••

The Special Administrated Zone went off without a hitch (or a bang) with Zero and Princess Euphemia as equals and colleagues, setting the example for the change they want to see in the world. It was a significant moment in history and a day that many will likely retell to younger generations for years to come…

Which is all well and good, but there's still one giddy part of Milly's brain that cannot be distracted from the trap under the table as the club watches the news huddled together in the student council room. Perhaps if something had gone awry her attention would be undivided on the disaster at hand, but she's had the great fortune to make sparing her energy unnecessary.

One's great fortune is another's tragedy, as the law of the Universe goes.

The suspense is bottling up inside her, though, as she can't help but grow impatient—

*Who lost the book and when are they going to hurry up and come get it!*

—but Milly knows that hunting takes a cool head, so she will wait as *patiently as possible* no matter how long it takes.
...But it better happen soon, damn it!

**•-•**

An unmasked Zero is tending to the fainted witch in the private quarters granted to him as co-collaborator in this utopia. The room is dark as he dabs a damp, cool cloth over her forehead, over the mark on her skin that he's only inspected up close once before, in a dank cave where he spoke her true name for the first and only time... Even though he doesn't think he should, he feels a bit guilty about studying the shimmering brand, typically concealed by the lock of her electric green hair, without her consent or knowledge, almost as if he's trying to catch her naked.

That is why he is slightly startled when she stirs under his tender hand.

C.C.'s eyes peer up at him as cleanly and crisply as ever, staring at him like she knows something he doesn't – which is all too true – and Lelouch is sure to mirror that gaze if only because of his pride.

"You were passed out on the ground alongside Suzaku and the other guards," Lelouch says coolly if a bit gravely as he continues to press the cloth to her forehead. "I don't know what happened, but considering the circumstances, I don't think we'll be in any real trouble. I still suggest you stay away from Suzaku as much as possible and that goes double for—"

"You didn't need to do this," the dull blade of her voice cuts him off, her warm hand curving around his. "You seem to have forgotten that I don't require medical attention."

*Typical.*

Both interrupting him and changing the subject.

Lelouch knows he isn't much better, however, so he lets it slide for now. There will be plenty of time to order her around later and have her not listen.

So very typical.

"I know," he says in a slight huff, draping the cloth across her forehead. "You seem to have forgotten kindness."

A tiny twist of that peculiar something twitches over her features again – a faint flicker of wry amusement this time? Lelouch can't be sure, but it's as suspicious as it is brief and the next thing he knows she's suddenly touching his face with fingertips that are too gentle and sensitive for her character and his personal comfort (eerily reminding him of mother's touch, but maybe that's just the stress and his yearning that's getting to him...). They trace softly around his left eye behind the curtain of his hair while she wears the usual mask of her plain expression once again.

"...Good job," there's a light note of pride striking her otherwise mild tone. "You kept your Geass from consuming you for the time being even with your distraction."

*For the time being...?*

"Is that what happened?" Lelouch lets out a quiet and shallow sigh, raising his head from her touch. "You should have warned me. Who knows what disaster could have been created if I wasn't able to control it."

She doesn't look the least bit sorry, and she doesn't sound it, either, "I have warned you."
Lelouch can already feel his eye screaming to twitch.

"I mean specifically. You really are useless, aren't you?" he spits at her darkly, trying to distance himself from the abnormal encounter of vulnerability he feels creeping hotly through his blood, aroused by her touch.

"Perhaps..." a corner of C.C.'s lips quirk in a weak grin, as if trying to mock him or herself; either way, Lelouch isn't amused and ignores it with a cross of his arms.

"Is something like this going to happen again?" Lelouch is thinking of Mao, how his Geass not only overwhelmed him but spread to his other eye. Can the same be true to a person who conquers their Geass? By growing more powerful, does that mean it will still spread...?

Her grin broadens before she removes the cloth form her head and sits up on the couch in an overly casual stretch of time that ends with an offhanded shrug.

"You're the first contractor I've had who hasn't become corrupted or hasn't failed me in some way before this point."

Lelouch narrows his eyes.

All her practiced avoidance to give him a cut and dry answer tells him is that there's something she's not telling him, he's certain – especially with that "for the time being" bit. Maybe she isn't lying exactly, but it's doubtful that she wouldn't know something this important and he can't imagine why she wouldn't reveal it to him. Luckily for her the hour of night is fast approaching, leaving him strapped for time and he's already too drained from battling his Geass and Euphemia to tempt a headache. He of course informs her of this as he stands, returning his chair to the desk—

"So you decided to play along with the little princess." C.C.'s voice is breezy but there's no mistaking the taste of a question in her voice to hear his explanation.

Lelouch grabs his mask from the table, looking at the dark reflection of himself he always find there, choosing to leave her voice a stranded sound like she often does to his.

"It's because of the pregnancy, isn't it? And Nunnally?" In the end, however, she reads him well enough to make his responses redundant – or maybe it all really is just that obvious. "What about the vendetta against your father? Your mother? Surely you're not giving up your little quest so easily."

"You're certainly asking a lot of questions," he serenely neglects to properly answer her, rather enjoying being on this side of the conversation for once. "And you sound a little disappointed. Or am I wrong?" he pulls the collar of his turtleneck up over the smirk laced to his lips.

C.C.'s lips curve up slightly too, acknowledging his tongue-in-cheek.

"There's never a dull moment around you, that's for sure. Don't know what I'd do if your story goes stale."

"Stale?" Lelouch adorns Zero's mask with a sarcastic, merry tip of his head, "I don't think you'll have to worry about that for a while. And it will be especially exciting for you if you don't watch your toes around the Britannian military. We may be under a truce in this Zone but that doesn't mean they're to be trusted – no doubt they assume the same about us. And the last thing I need is for any of them to recognize you."

"Don't worry," C.C. stands, languidly falling into step behind him as he walks to the door, "I won't
bother your little boyfriend or anyone else. It's much more fun to bother you."

Lelouch represses a sigh, stopping at the door.

What is it with women wanting to harass him?

Whether it was in Pendragon or here in Tokyo, these pesky females are inescapable.

"C.C., I'm serious. What's it worth to keep you hidden at our head quarters?"

She lifts an eyebrow at him – but he already knows the price.

"All the pizza I want – and none of that frozen stuff. It's only good fresh."

"Perhaps you'd like it if I hired a private chef to satisfy your pizza lust."

"Oh my, Lelouch. You really know how to talk a girl, don't you?"

Lelouch smirks—

"Which is surprising, considering your apparent preference for the Y chromosome."

—Lelouch's eye twitches.

_Rotten females…_

•-

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An annoying alarm clock tears Lelouch from sleep—

Which is odd considering he didn't set it—

Odder yet, he isn't the one who silences it.

Lelouch is facing the wall, drowsily aware of the body groaning quietly from behind him as it shifts.

The sound is distinctly Suzaku.

Lelouch looks over his shoulder at the brown-haired bed-head yawning and stretching in the morning light, who returns the stare with an annoyingly pleasant expression.

_Morning people…_

Lelouch rubs his eyes, "What time did you come home?"

"Oh, late last night," Suzaku replies quietly in respect for Lelouch's slow-waking nature. "You were asleep."

"Yeah…" Lelouch sluggishly flops over to face Suzaku. "You said you'd be with Euphie for the long haul. I expected you would still be with her last night."

"Normally I would be, but I'm not in a position to test my limits anymore." Suzaku gestures to his stomach, a chummy grin on his lips that's much too chummy for the hour. "So, Euphemia—I mean, Euphie, sent me home to get 'proper rest' because crashing on an office couch or in the
barracks for another night didn't count to her."

Lelouch tiredly smirks, "So she's keeping an eye on you, then?"

"That's one way of putting it," Suzaku dryly leers. "She's practically as naggy as you are! It must be a family gene."

Lelouch chuckles lightly, "I'm glad to hear it. At least I know I can count on her to nag you in the right direction."

Green eyes roll with a jaded sigh.

"Yeah, just great. All I needed was another over-dramatic mother hen clucking at me like I'm made of glass or something. I'm promise I'm not going to shatter at the slightest hint of pressure."

Lelouch is more than amused by Suzaku's pouting—

In fact, it's downright adorable.

Adorable enough to corrupt.

Lelouch caresses Suzaku's cheek with his fingertips, his lips touching a close relative to a smirk as he pulls the crabby boy over to obtain something he had been denied after their rooftop dispute. Suzaku sinks willingly into the kiss and Lelouch's control, sharing their morning-breath in a cloud of ignorant desire dusted with sleep and groggy perceptions as he slinks fingers through messy chocolate hair. Lelouch fists his hand in frizzy, brown curls, half wondering why Suzaku is complying so easily.

Only half-wondering because, obviously, his seducing magic is at work.

"I know I don't have to tell you that I appreciate it," Lelouch murmurs sincerely into Suzaku's lips, to which the brunet makes another eye-roll, to which Lelouch smiles. "It has been days since I last saw you."

Suzaku sort of moans and if he were standing Lelouch imagines he'd be staring right at his fidgeting feet.

"And?" he tries on a grin of repression over the various shades of guilt clouding his eyes but it's still obvious to both of them that he's avoiding the subject of their last confrontation. "Were you getting lonely?"

"That's one way of putting it."—Lelouch's lips bend up deviously—"Another way of putting it would be going into seahorse withdrawals…"

Suzaku's mouth drops the forced act for a sincere smile full of teeth that are ajar to let out the happy hops of quiet laughter as Lelouch descends on his neck; kissing, lapping, and nibbling at Japanese flesh that doesn't taste the least bit fishy.

"It's good to know you love me for my body," jokes the younger boy in a roll of chuckles as his fingers weave through the threads of ebony hair.

Lelouch pauses, looking at Suzaku with a seriously lifted eyebrow, "You mean you didn't know that already?"

Suzaku doesn't miss a beat, tugging on Lelouch's hair and trying to look offended with jaw-dropped
expression that doesn't stop him from being pushed onto his back by the Britannian boy who kisses him deeply again.

The obnoxious, demanding reminder from a diligent alarm clock disrupts their mushy exchange, but Lelouch merely slaps at the evil appliance until it's switched off this time (because if Lelouch has one masochistic tendency, it would be the snooze button) without unlocking from Suzaku's lips – he'll get up when he's damn well ready to! Soft snickers seep from Suzaku's mouth at the stubbornness Lelouch operates with before his brief amusement is silenced as swiftly as the wailing alarm clock, but with a tongue instead of a hand.

"You're in a very good mood, even for a morning person," Lelouch says as he pulls away from Suzaku's lips, being sure to leave the rest of his thought one that stays in his head: considering the last time we spoke…

"Things went well yesterday," Suzaku replies simply, his leafy eyes fluttering to Lelouch's ever-fascinating white blanket that's lying over them.

"So I heard," he murmurs wryly as he rubs his thumb against Suzaku's cheek, wondering if the smooth course of Zero's actions serve as an apology or if it simply cleansed Suzaku's mind of the whole ordeal.

"I'm…" a fingertip slides to and fro on Lelouch's clothed arm in a timid gesture, "I'm glad Zero joined us."

A self-satisfied line shapes Lelouch's lips into an understated smile.

For the first time in Zero's short life, he's managed to please Suzaku. What a feat.

Lelouch will interpret this as an accepted apology.

"That so?" Lelouch asks casually, keeping his voice as dry of his overflowing conceit as he can. "I thought you didn't like or trust him."

Suzaku shrugs, eyes now entertained by the collar of Lelouch's blue pajama shirt.

"Euphie seems to trust him—" he shakes his head, perhaps perceiving the trap he nearly bumbled right into. "That doesn't matter now. Since he joined us that means we can get more accomplished together than we did apart and there shouldn't be any more fighting. I said that I would stay by Euphie's side through all of this and I intend to honor my word."

Which also means Suzaku should be safe for awhile.

Unless some other overconfident fat-cat (Schneizel) should want to borrow him or if something more inconvenient happens.

Lelouch is looking at you, Chinese Federation.

"So I suppose that means you'll steer clear of the battlefield for now?" Lelouch chooses to ask, wishing Suzaku could promise as much but he isn't gullible enough to believe that possible – and with Euphemia no longer being a princess of Britannia, Suzaku is no longer a knight, which means he can't rely on her authority to protect him any longer.

Lelouch wonders if Suzaku knows about her situation yet…
"I've been assigned to overseeing the Zone as my top priority. So As long as nothing prompts Lancelot into battle, I should be out of action."

In other words: as long as Zero doesn't try anything.

This isn't enough to please Lelouch or really assure much of anything, but it's a start.

After all, from his point of view, he holds Suzaku's safety in his own hands.

Lelouch nods, growing tired of this kind of talk at this ungodly hour, so he decides to change the subject.

As abruptly as possible.

"You know, if you count back six weeks, roughly, that would mean our small fry was conceived the first time we had sex."

Suzaku takes a moment to consider Lelouch's words, obviously not having thought about this yet or trying to catch up the topic change.

Lelouch is going to guess it's both.

"…Yeah, I guess you're right. What do you think that means?"

"Means?" Lelouch asks with a curious eyebrow.

"I'm saying that maybe small fry was conceived through the power of love."

Lelouch stares and waits for a punch-line that never comes.

Seems he'll have to take the bait this time since it's clear Suzaku is not making a joke.

Wouldn't want to repeat the same mistake – Suzaku wasn't pleased about that the first time.

"…You're telling me you think our consummation of love was so epic that you became pregnant as a result?"

"They say true love is a powerful force..." a bashful shrug lifts Suzaku's shoulders as a sheepish grin tugs his lips, "Is that so unreasonable?"

As unreasonable as the seahorse syndrome or super sperm.

To think all that time Suzaku wasted in the military could have been spent on his education...

It's good to know that Britannian soldiers are as dumb as they are strong.

Really, it's somehow comforting.

For a moment, Lelouch isn't sure if he should dignify that with a response.

He remembers that night well, of course. It was the first time Lelouch has ever… felt things and was driven by a… desire that he couldn't fully comprehend or even knew he had. Lelouch succumbed to something that felt too primal and impulsive for his own comfort – never in all his life has Lelouch relied on using his body or let it steer over his brain. Emotions Lelouch didn't entirely understand threaded through his blood and before he knew it Suzaku was… they were...
Their first time together is something worth treasuring because it was their coming together (...), the first time their bodies did all the talking as decidedly sappy passion swept them away to the relationship they now have. It was more than just sex, definitely, but what Suzaku is implying is just so... so stupid! Even for Suzaku!

At least the seahorse thing tried to make sense!

"It is," Lelouch decides to respond, not even bothering to argue the absurdity of male pregnancy through true love because he doesn't want to fight with Suzaku about something stupid again – because then who is the real fool in that situation? Instead Lelouch will take an entirely different path with this golden nugget from Suzaku's fantastical mind: "Especially if you lied to me about being a virgin."

It takes a fair amount of time before Lelouch's brash comment sinks into Suzaku's thick skull, but when it does he begins to sputter like an ancient automobile struggling to start and the expression that contorts his face is too funny for words.

"J-j-just wh-what are you-you implying?"

Lelouch strokes his mockingly chin, "Or maybe you're like the Virgin Mary... but with aliens instead of God, right?"

"That isn't funny!"

"I wonder what kind of prodigy you'll unleash upon the world. Or maybe I should fear the possibility of an anti-Christ?"

"Lelouch!"

"Either way," papa bear says as he continues to ignore mama bear, "I hope it doesn't burst from your chest because then I'm stuck raising the little spawn all alone. Although, if it's not mine, I guess I don't have any real obligation to take responsibility."

"Lelouch!" Suzaku adamantly howls, arming himself with a pillow.

Lelouch just laughs—

laughs—

laughs—

Through Suzaku's mild tantrum of unintelligible sounds and weak pillow attacks, content that he's scared the darkness away from Suzaku's face once again. He watches the stormy features of his best friend light up in a playful retaliation before grabbing the soldier's waist and forcing him to surrender by capturing him with a deep, encompassing kiss. This luminous joy might have been at the expense of Zero and his Black Knights, their cause, but Lelouch will take one for the team to keep Suzaku, and Nunnally, happy in the end if he must.

Who knows, maybe this detour in his rebellion will lead to a better place.

A better tomorrow.
"No one will dance with me. I think it's this dress. I told them white would make me look fat."
Senator Kevin Keeley [in drag] from The Birdcage

Costume Play

Suzaku is trying his best to fight temptation.

No matter how hard he applies his concentration to the list of math problems in front of him he is incapable of maintaining any focus whatsoever thanks to the bored boy beside him. All Suzaku wanted to do was start digging himself out of all the schoolwork that's been piling up around him due to his non-scholastic duties and he thought that a study-date, of sorts, with Lelouch was a great idea – he'd be able to spend time with Lelouch and also have access to all that brilliance.

Looking back, Suzaku wishes he could kick himself out of that gullibility.

He should have known something was amiss when the lad was the one to (suspiciously) suggest this activity in the first place.

Lelouch obviously never had any intention of studying or doing work.

(Or maybe Suzaku is too thick-headed to see Lelouch's invitation for a grope-fest when it's offered.)

So here they are well into the night on Lelouch's bed, Suzaku leaning against the bed rail with his knees up while Lelouch lies on his stomach, dressed in their bedtime clothes – or in Suzaku's case, a white t-shirt and his boxers – as the workload tapers less and less with each passing minute.

Lelouch isn't even trying to pretend he's working anymore, his open book and papers abandoned so severely that they've migrated precariously close to the edge of the bed while he entertains himself with Suzaku's thigh. His fingers have been skating up and down the underside of the soldier's leg for a good while now; albeit moderately enough at first for Suzaku to not really mind, rather fond of the seemingly idle caress. However, once he pulled up his knees as a makeshift desk for his book, those dangerous digits snatched the chance to be more adventurous. They've gone from absent affection to determined desire as they attempted to sneakily but shamelessly infiltrate his underwear from both the front and the rear. Countless times Suzaku has purged the invasion, burning through his playful patience from sly smiles to rigid rejections to the point that he no longer finds Lelouch's persistence cute or endearing.

"Would you cut it out?" Suzaku finally fusses, swatting at Lelouch's hand. "I'm trying to get some work done – and you should too!"

"Suzaku," Lelouch says with a growing half-smirk, "I don't do my schoolwork in the first place for a reason."

Suzaku huffs, cheeks indirectly pinched red by lewd fingers, "Well I'm not going to neglect my
assignments so at least leave me alone."

"But you'll neglect me?" the older boy asks with a wilting expression that's an obvious ticket for a guilt-trip Suzaku isn't going to take.

"That's right," he answers offhandedly as he scribbles on his math homework—

"You can't mean that," Lelouch insists like a snake with an apple as he slithers his fingers fully over Suzaku's thigh.

"I do."

It's a long shot, but maybe ignoring the problem will just make it disappear.

He can't say it's worked in the past, but it's not like fighting with Lelouch – in any situation – has ever gotten him anywhere, anyway.

When it comes to Lelouch, taking the path of least resistance is always a wise idea.

"So cruel." Lelouch continues to smother his touch over Suzaku's skin with a carnivorous curve carving his lips, "Or are you trying to play hard to get?"

Suzaku clenches his jaw – he's already lost count of how many times he's had to read this word problem – and ignores, among other things, the burning on his face that wants to travel south.

"If that's your game, you're succeeding," Lelouch murmurs flirtatiously as he begins to press light kisses to the muscled appendage in his grasp.

"It's not a game!" Suzaku spouts with a push of his leg. "I just want to do my class work!"

Never to be deterred, Lelouch grips Suzaku's leg with both hands as he kisses teasingly again, one of them prowling the underside to attempt, not for the first time, igniting a fire in the soldier's shorts.

"Well, don't you think you've earned a break?"

"No breaks!" Suzaku tries to keep his voice from growling like his stomach after eating Cécile's culinary failures, once again wrenching a hand out of his shorts. "There's too much to do."

"Come on…" the sable-haired boy returns to his silky tone, using that serpent voice that nearly wraps right around Suzaku—

But Nunnally is in her room.

"No."

"Just for a little—"

"No."

"Not even—?"

"No."

"What about—?"
"No."

"But—"

"No!" Suzaku nearly yells, tearing himself completely away from Lelouch's clingy clutches by swinging his legs over the side of the bed to turn his back on the insistent teen. "How many times do I have to say it?"

Lelouch huffs with a furrow of his brow and a glimmer in his eye as he props up on one hand, "What's your problem?"

Suzaku casts a flat look over his shoulder at Lelouch's insensitive inquisition.

Real nice.

"No means no," the brunet utters tersely. "If I say 'no,' you back off."

Lelouch stares for a heated second – those viper violets don't need fangs to bite.

But it isn't like Suzaku should feel guilty.

…Even so, Suzaku can't stand that almost-glare.

"You know that's not what I meant." Lelouch's words practically melt from his molten mouth. "What's keeping you from me?"

Suzaku can't help but think that is a strange way to word the situation, yet it's also rather… sweet.

For Lelouch.

He looks away with a shy shrug, "I just don't want to do it tonight, that's all."

"I'm not asking to 'do it' with you." Lelouch laughs slightly under his breath, his boiling temper evaporating as if it never existed, and tugs at the bottom of Suzaku's shirt. "But now I know what's really on your mind…"

Suzaku throws his eyes back at Lelouch sharply, ignoring the rouge roasting his cheeks.

"You and I both know we'll only end up having… uh…" —Suzaku's mind trips over the thought of Nunnally's accidental eavesdropping again and wants to avoid any keywords (as if she wouldn't know a code-word when she hears one)—"relations – it always happens."

The older boy is wearing an amused grin, "What's the matter? All the sudden you can't say 'sex'?"

"I hate talking to you," he mutters as he slaps his book closed – not like he's getting any work done.

"We don't always end up having relations," Lelouch continues, edging closer to Suzaku and snaking a hand around his waist to his stomach. "It's been a while since the last time we've done anything at all." His words caress the skin of Suzaku's neck like a hot current that feeds the warmth on his cheeks and taunts the lust in his loins, his nerves being teased by a scatter plot of light kisses.

"I know…" Suzaku breathes, a weakness to his partner's touch hollowing his resolve – he never knew he could be so susceptible, controlled, by this physical craving – and he is well aware that if Lelouch ever connects their lips, he'll be a goner.
Suzaku knows just as well as Lelouch that there hasn't been any *real* time for their physical relationship — the last time they made love was the weekend before Euphemia announced the Zone, which was almost three weeks ago. That wouldn't be so bad if every minute wasn't booked between them with nowhere to meet half way. It's worse now that the Zone wants to dominate everything within its reach, and if Suzaku isn't meeting various, often bureaucratic, demands there it's Ashford that's impatiently awaiting his attention back here, and of course Lelouch isn't far behind. (As it stands, he's been spending *more* time with the aloof Zero than the over-bearing Lelouch, and while Suzaku is slowly growing accustomed to the terrorist's presence, he much prefers his best friend – even when he's too horny to take no for an answer – which is honestly surprising. Suzaku wouldn't have thought that Lelouch could be so... sexually inclined.) With rushing off right after the student council meeting and coming home too late to spend any decent time with Lelouch, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to just indulge *a little* while they have the spare time…

"Let's just fool around a little..." Suzaku's head is already lolling back into the creeping scent of toothpaste that grows stronger the closer Lelouch's lips peck to his jaw, a pleading desire sparking under his skin and flickering desperately towards the hands roaming his body. They're dedicated to sweeping Suzaku out to sea as they coast over his abdomen and chest, causing a light ripple of fuzzy excitement to drown his nerves. The touch bleeds through Suzaku's clothes as the heated yearning to feel bare hands palm his body and spread his legs begins to pool in his groin like boiling water pouring from a teapot. Suzaku doesn't want to let himself be washed away so easily, but the steel of his reluctance is rusting as a warm body leans against him with promise—"And if it progresses to something *more*..."—and fingertips trickle over his crotch—

Suzaku's eyes snap open and he vaults up from the bed—

Causing Lelouch to fall over the side, face first into the wood flooring that's as hard as it is cold... like Suzaku's rejection.

"*Nothing* should be *progressing anywhere!*" Suzaku adamantly reminds, turning around to watch Lelouch painstakingly collect himself from his spill, a red splash brandishing his furiously wrinkled forehead.

"I'm beginning to get the *impression*"—he rubs at his wounded head, and maybe his pride—"that there's a *specific* reason for your disinterest."

Oh, sure. Just because Suzaku declines the *honor* of sleeping with *Almighty Himself*, it must mean there's a *reason* and not that Suzaku simply *isn't* in the mood.

...All right, so there *is* a reason...

And, sure, if it wasn't for Nunnally (not to say Suzaku is *blaming* her) Suzaku would most likely be naked and breathless underneath Lelouch by now—

But Lelouch doesn't have to be *so conceited* about it!

Suzaku proceeds to place his book on Lelouch's desk — it's late, and he's tired, and pregnant, perhaps it's time to call it a night.

"Listen, I'm just not feeling up to it tonight." Right, so, it *is* true that if these walls were sound-proof there wouldn't be much standing between Suzaku and him getting thoroughly ravished (except maybe Lelouch's stamina), but *because* these walls are not sound-proof and a very precious person is slumbering nearby, it dampens Suzaku's desire. The last thing he wants is to be thinking of *Nunnally* while *her brother* makes it his mission to boldly go where no man has gone before,
until they reach infinity and beyond.

Not only is that unromantic, it's plain disturbing.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Suzaku says with a soft, and what he hopes is, reassuring smile. "I'm just tired. I want to rest."

Lelouch doesn't look like he buys the story Suzaku is selling – probably still hung up on the possibility that Suzaku could be sick and lying about it – but he accepts it with a faint nod and begins to shuffle his deserted schoolwork together to clear the bed.

"I'm sorry." Suzaku takes Lelouch's book and papers for him, adding them to the pile on his desk before slipping under the covers. "I know things have been, uh, stagnant between us lately."

"You don't need to apologize, Suzaku. It's not like I don't understand." That pale face is shaped by a kind smile as hands drape blankets over the both of them. "Some other time."

Who knows when that could be, Suzaku thinks guiltily, his lips deflating a bit from their soft edge to a droopy remorse at the thought that he might be letting the only chance they'll have for a while slip through his fingers.

"Maybe we can just… lay here, together?" Suzaku suggests coyly as he turns away from Lelouch, trying to lift his lips again with a quirk of one corner.

"…You want to lie together?" Lelouch makes it sound like Suzaku just asked to pour applesauce down the front of his cotton pajama pants.

"Yeah, you know, close to each other under the covers and touching… until we fall asleep…"

Lelouch stares as blankly as Suzaku has ever seen the intelligent boy stare and he simpers. Lelouch isn't getting it.

It's adorable in a way, but he'd never voice this to Lelouch.

Suzaku rather likes having his head connected to the rest of his body – better yet, he rather likes it when Lelouch connects their bodies and wouldn't want to risk losing that.

The Nunnally matter aside…

"So you want to just go to sleep?" Lelouch asks with a quizzical knot between his dark eyebrows – Suzaku can virtually see that Britannian brain scrambling to solve this riddle.

He smiles a bit more pityingly than he knows Lelouch would tolerate if he wasn't so baffled by the request.

"I'm asking you to cuddle."

What he's really asking for is to be held.

Lelouch blinks a few times before the light comes on in his head and shines through his eyes. "…Oh."

"Is that alright with you?" the younger boy starts to settle into the bed, nestling against his prince.
charming before an answer is heard – he doesn't expect Lelouch will reject him as he has yet to do so. He's too willing to please, to make Suzaku happy, and cuddling is one small request that Lelouch will never admit he enjoys fulfilling.

Those clairvoyant eyes quickly flick over Suzaku's movements and the moment like amethyst gems tumbling from a jewel case and he rests a hand on his friend's hip.

"Sure. If that's what you want."

Suzaku nods slightly, "Good night." kissing Lelouch's befuddled lips before reaching to switch off the bedside lamp and snuggling down in the dark against Lelouch's befuddled body like a pair of spoons in a drawer.

He can hear Lelouch smirk as a thin, warm body presses against his back and that willowy arm winds around him in a cuddling coil.

"I cuddle with you now, you owe me later."

•-•

When Lelouch said Suzaku would be in debt for cuddling he suspected it would be something repayable only in bed.

He was wrong.

So very wrong.

"I know I agreed to this, but…" Suzaku's voice fades into the mirror as his eyes unwillingly feast upon the unappetizing… spectacle of his reflection.

He doesn't have anything against the colours olive green and white, or frills of ornate lace, polka-dots, pantyhose and ladies shoes. He doesn't have anything against flowing blond wigs that look like a fountain of sun-rays, nor does he have anything against dark, eyeglass frames the shapes of cat eyes…

"But what?" Lelouch asks at Suzaku's disgruntled expression.

…Suzaku does, however, have something against combining them… on his body… in an awful olive green dress fluffed with all that white lace (a matching sash around his waist, of course) and spattered with those white polka-dots. As if the dress wasn't bad enough on its own, he's got this unflattering white pantyhose clinging to his legs like an unwanted second skin with shoes that look exactly like the issued pair for Ashford's girls except they're green, to match. The same-shade green is tied in bows on both sides of the platinum blond wig and the glasses with their very feminine flair only complete the absurd look, making him look like an overgrown toddler – Suzaku isn't even going to acknowledge the bloomers hiding underneath his dress.

The notion of wearing this disaster in public was daunting, and then Lelouch made it worse by adding the purse.

"I don't know about this." Suzaku tentatively tugs at the knee-length skirt of his lace-trimmed dress – did he mention it has puffy shoulders, too?

"What's wrong with the outfit?"
For Lelouch to ask that question... it makes Suzaku want to ask if the boy has gone blind.

He's turned Suzaku into a loud mess! He should at least be able to hear what's wrong with it!

But if Lelouch can't see the aesthetic abominations maybe he'll see the practical problems...

"First of all: the pantyhose is uncomfortable—"

"The price you pay for beauty," Lelouch interrupts with that smug smirk. "And there's no point in dressing as a girl if you're not going to commit one hundred percent. You need to cover your legs, unless you want to start shaving them. Girls don't have hairy legs so you can't walk around as a girl in a dress with those hairy things exposed. The white actually hides your legs better than I thought it would..."

Sh-shaving—?

Th-those hairy things?

What kind of obscene logic is that?

"Why can't I just wear pants?" there's a small scrap of annoyance clipped to Suzaku's tone. "Girls wear pants."

"I don't know why you're being difficult about this." Lelouch crosses his arms, that offending purse hanging from his wrist by a spaghetti strap. "You've said before that you're fond of wearing dresses."

"Only once!" Suzaku counters with fisted hands and stiff shoulders, whirling around in an olive tornado of frills and artificial hair. "And that was just for fun!"

"This isn't fun?" the other boy questions innocently – Suzaku isn't sure if that's a fake tone or not.

"No. I feel and look ridiculous."

Lelouch's countenance purses into something chiding and disapproving as he places his hands gently on Suzaku's hips, turning them so that he faces the horrid sight of himself again.

"I think you look cute," he amends as softly as his fingers skim Suzaku's cheek, seeming to brush a springy lock of flaxen hair from the boy's face. "It's a bit Lolita, I'll admit, but it's a fashionable thing to do at the moment. You'll blend right in."

The fingers on his skin are like a stricken match to Suzaku, forcing his sharp senses to focus on nothing else as it heats a miserable arousal in the pit of his gut that still wants more. Those violet eyes burning through him leave him trapped as that slightly husky voice lingers in his ear like a haunting echo—

He can't believe how easily he's being affected by such little attention.

(How easily it's making him forget about his appearance.)

He darts his emerald eyes as far away from Lelouch's reflection as he can, trying to suppress a familiar sensation from colouring his cheeks and wondering if Lelouch is doing this to him on purpose.

"How did you even find a dress that fits me?" Suzaku inquires as a distraction, fiddling with the satin sash slung around him.
Better yet, *where* and *when* did Lelouch even *buy* all of this stuff?

"I'm familiar enough with your body to know you're measurements," Lelouch sensibly says as if Suzaku is *dumb* for asking the question, looking over his creation with critical eyes as he steps back – appearing to not notice the red flood that engulfs his subject's face. "Still, this dress doesn't look quite like I imagined it would, but it's too late to do anything about it now. We need to get to that doctor appointment *lest* we be late." Lelouch grins at him through the mirror as he suspends the oval, ivory bag next to him, the large pearl-clasp at the center staring right into Suzaku's soul, "Let's not doddle, *Suzuka*.

Suzaku ignores the purse in favor of the strange name, "Suzuka?"

"Well, you can't go by 'Suzaku Kururugi' because then what's the point of the disguise? Although maybe it should be something less… ethnic."

Suzaku isn't even sure of how to respond to that.

"I think something similar in sound to your name would be best, something to trigger your natural response. How about *Susan* or *Suzanna*, or just *Sue*…?" Lelouch muses aloud as if Suzaku *isn't* in the room, springing a sudden and complacent smile on him through the mirror. "Or, no, how about sweet, little *Suzie Q*?"

"You're enjoying this too much," Suzaku grumbles lightly with a frown drooping underneath his rosy cheeks.

Lelouch smiles at him pleasantly and pats his head, "Whatever you say, *Suzu*.

Said red shade on Suzaku's face turns into an irritated steam wafting from his head, "Just pick a name and stick with it!"

••

"It's good to see the two of you again"—Doctor Sanica's neutral expression is marred only by the faint lift of one eyebrow—"…boys. How are you feeling, Suzaku?"

Said reluctant boy is sitting on the paper bed again, back hunched slightly and arms folded over his flat chest as his feet dangle – the shoes having been removed along with his dress to wear a thin cloth robe that's open in the front, as per the nurse's instructions – marginally appeased that he wasn't forced into slinging that absurd purse over his shoulder. However, his pouting has made him the spitting image of a sulking, little girl and so far his glaring attempts to burn the stark-white pantyhose right off his legs have been unsuccessful.

"Like an idiot."

"Isn't that the norm, *Suzie*?" Lelouch teases, tugging at the end of his robe.

And that's right.

Lelouch went with *Suzie Q* (because it's oh-so adorable).

"Aside from that," she redirects tonelessly and unfazed by the scene in front of her, "have you been experiencing any pain or discomfort?"

Suzaku shifts a little, "No. I don't think so."
The doctor nods, adjusting her white, rubber gloves with unsavory snaps.

"What about nausea? Or constipation? Are you experiencing either of those yet?"

"...No, not yet."

"And your appetite is normal?" she continues to ask attentively as she prepares the ultrasound machine.

"Yes, I guess it is. Um..." Suzaku begins to mumble, catching her sharp eyes.

"What is it? Is there something bothering you?" Immediately the heat of acute attention shoves him under the microscope of Sanica's and Lelouch's eyes at the hint of a threat. "You know that as your doctor I can't help you unless you're completely open and honest with me. You don't need to be embarrassed. I'm a doctor." She adds that last remark as if that should cure all of his humiliated ailments.

Of course it doesn't.

But he appreciates the sentiment.

"Well..." Suzaku shifts again, gripping the side of the bed as his feet swing like they'll kick away the unwanted stares. "I'm just wondering why you haven't asked about the dress. And why am I wearing this robe thing?"

Lelouch releases his bated breath and rubs at his forehead with the threat being a false alarm whereas Doctor Sanica just stares with her unwavering eyes.

"I don't believe that the way you dress, or why you dress a certain way, matters or is any of my business," she says pragmatically enough to make Suzaku feel foolish for asking. "I only need to care for you and the baby's wellbeing. As to your second point, wearing the gown makes it easier to examine you rather than the dress - didn't the nurse tell you that?"

Suzaku's mind was too narrowed on his appearance to pay much attention to anything else...

(If he looked as obvious as he felt about cross-dressing.)

And he was deliberating if it would be worth it to trip Lelouch as they walked towards the exam room.

He decided it wasn't.

The mental image alone sufficed.

"Are you going to take another ultrasound?" Lelouch asks.

"Yes. I want to watch this pregnancy as close as possible and I still think it's the best way to do so."

Sanica's eyes slide over Suzaku a bit too devilishly for his liking. "Unless Suzaku would be willing to allow some experimental exploration."

Suzaku instantly thinks of the probing notion she mentioned before and it pries his eyes wide open while a certain other part of his body clenches as tightly closed as it possibly can.

She turns away from him with a grin a crook too close to something he's seen shape Milly's lips before – and he's learned to fear that grin, even if not to the same amount as Lelouch.
"Don't worry, Suzie." Lelouch pats his shoulder. "She was just joking."

"I never joke," corrects the doctor in a languid tone as she faces Suzaku. "Before we get to that, I'd like to give you another check-up. We'll start by taking your weight. Would you step on the scale for me?" she asks politely, gesturing to the electric box beside the door.

In a considerably awkward moment of pale silence, even Lelouch's smug attitude is snuffed out by the probing prospect once again – if only because it brings the fear that this notion will grow stronger with every mention…

He obediently obliges her, scuttling over and stepping onto the scale, inexplicably curious to what she would do if he disobeyed her. Suzaku won't do that, of course. He plays compliant patient as he undergoes the check-up routine he's been through dozens of times before – anything to make this go smoothly and, more importantly, quickly.

It's amazing how uncomfortable pantyhose can be.

He doesn't understand how or why women do it!

The only difference with this check-up is that his stomach is measured – despite thinking it should be more prominent, Doctor Sanica doesn't say anything about his flat tummy, although she does feel the area gently with her hands.

"Just one more item and we can get to the best part of the visit," the Doctor notes with a small smile. "I need to give you a breast exam, so lie back and put—"

"But I don't have any!" Suzaku cuts her off with wide eyes, clasping his gown closed with one hand to hide what he claims to be lacking.

"You do, they're just not pronounced." Her smile doesn't waver – or maybe that's her patience. "And every mother undergoes this exam. Should I treat you differently because you're a male?"

He doesn't have a rebuttal for that.

"Males are also capable of having breast cancer, isn't that right?" Lelouch's voice is gratingly upbeat, considering his words – almost like he's trying to make this more uncomfortable for Suzaku.

So with his logic, maybe Lelouch should have an exam, too!

"You are correct," Sanica amiably praises like she's in on the attack as well. "But the risk of breast cancer in teens is low. Regardless, it needs to be done."

"Fine," Suzaku mutters with a slight frown. "Let's just get it over with."

"Then lie back with your arms over your head, please."

As if adding that please is going to ease anything.

Suzaku leans back with an unsteady sigh, hand still clutching the robe as he catches himself in Lelouch's eyes.

"Your robe needs to be open for this," the doctor coolly tries to coax him.

"Yeah… Lelouch, I don't want you to look."
Violet eyes bug-out so quickly Suzaku almost expects to see them fall from their sockets, "What?"
"I don't want you to look," Suzaku meagerly argues like a whiny toddler.

"Why?"

"Because it's weirder with you just standing there, watching!"

His mouth drops open, "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Just turn around!"

"I will not!"

"Lelouch," the professional in the room calmly intervenes, "you need to respect your partner's wishes and not just because you don't want to upset a pregnant mother."

The expression Lelouch makes when he loses is not one often seen by Suzaku – actually, so rarely seen, he thought it a mere myth or fantasy like unicorns. But it's real and it's sweeter than any piece of candy Suzaku has ever eaten as if he is literally tasting victory. Perhaps now he understands why Lelouch is always so pleased with himself…

With a not-so mature sigh and roll of his majestic eyes, Lelouch turns his back to them and crosses his arms in another huff.

That's right.

Lelouch isn't the only one who can abuse the Doctor's authority.

Suzaku is smirking triumphantly until the doctor reminds him to peel open his robe and raise his arms. The fleeting moment of victory on his tongue is swallowed like a gulp of bitter medicine when she proceeds to examine him. Sanica being a doctor doesn't make this any less uncomfortable. Fortunately Lelouch's hand easily provides much needed comfort when he silently gropes for it - even if it won't erase the flush on his face.

"All right, the worst is over. You're doing just fine, Suzaku," she says, turning to the ultrasound machine.

"Suzie." Lelouch corrects, sounding like it's his only function as rotates in place.

"Yes, sorry. Suzie is doing well." She faces said boy again with that familiar bottle of gel and hands him a white, papery sheet. "Let's take another look at your baby."

Suzaku mutely lies back as his physician heads for the light switch, feeling his stomach squirm as he makes sure his private bits are safe from wandering eyes underneath the bottom of his gown – next time he's definitely wearing pants! Who even wears cotton bloomers nowadays?

(Apparently enough people to make them available for purchase...)

He clutches for Lelouch's hand once the room goes dark, lit only by the dim ultrasound screen. Suzaku is almost surprised his nerves don't show up on the monitor as Doctor Sanica moves the probe over his abdomen, but the chilling fear is heated to excitement when the blurry, distorted shape of the small fry forms on the screen.

"If there was any room for doubt, it's definitely gone now," she comments, just a voice in the darkness as Suzaku's eyes glue to the image.
It doesn't quite look like a baby yet, but the buds of limbs are beginning to show… looking like some sort of balloon animal once she gets a still image and points out approximately just which bubble is what. He feels his heart flutter against his chest as he stares at the screen, awash with so much euphoria he thinks he might cry… Suzaku never would have thought that being a parent could mean the world to him.

"So far so good." Sanica praises, clicking on the screen with a mouse to measure the embryo. "Your baby is growing at a healthy, normal rate with no adverse effects to mommy. Even so, I want Suzaku—"

"Suzie," Lelouch corrects.

Her dark eyes flick to Lelouch briefly, "To come in more frequently so I can better monitor and observe him more closely."

"Is there something wrong with the baby?" Suzaku asks, making a worried clench of his hand around Lelouch's.

"No, the two of you appear to be doing just fine, like I said. I just want to make sure it stays that way and intercept any possible problems before they cause harm. You are a special case that needs special attention." In spite of the pleasant sound of her words and her softer expression, it causes Suzaku's heart to fill with heavy dread and sink into his stomach.

"I see…"

Sonica smiles at him and pats his shoulder before busying herself with cleaning Suzaku's stomach so he can sit up and then she and Lelouch converse, but their voices warp and drift from his ears like he's listening to them under water – submerged in the sudden melancholic mix tainting his overjoyed rush. Suzaku doesn't know what he would do if something kept him from meeting the precious package he's carrying, even if it's only been a short while… That would be more than unfair.

It would be cruel.

"…Do the two of you have any questions or concerns?" Suzaku hears the doctor ask, plucking him from his glum stupor.

"Oh yes, I have a question," Lelouch alerts with a lift of one finger. "Would it be permissible for us to continue having sex?"

••

"I can't believe you asked her that!" Suzaku storms out of the clinic with Lelouch at his heels and an embarrassed burn on his face, wondering when this mess of an outfit he's wearing will come to life and eat him whole – to spare him, if nothing else.

(Even though Lelouch effectively distracted Suzaku from his gloomy thoughts, it's still no excuse!)

Is Lelouch going to be like this for every visit?

"I don't see the problem," Lelouch says coolly, his pace oddly fluid as he strides beside his stampeding seahorse, a folder containing their baby's image tucked securely under his arm. "She's a doctor. I'm supposed to be able to ask her those kinds of questions."
"You just don't get it!" Suzaku growls the obvious, his hands clawing up into fists that shake at the sky. "And the way you asked it…! 'Permissible'? Only you would say something like that! For an articulate person, you're an oaf when it comes to sensitive issues!"

"Oaf?" Lelouch sadly echoes, his hands cradled casually in his pockets.

"It's bad enough that we're in this situation at our age already!" the fuming fake-blond continues to fume. "Do you have any idea how that question makes us look?"

"Age is just a number. And since when do you care about what other people think?" the mild-mannered boy asks, looking at his companion from the corner of his eye, but Suzaku isn't listening.

"I'm just relieved she remained stone-faced like she always is, otherwise I think I might have died then and there."

"I still think you're over-reacting, but I am sorry that you're upset." It might be a backhanded apology, but Suzaku knows this is as good as it's going to get from Lelouch and, at any rate, it is a sincere confession of remorse. "It was an important question and now we know we're safe for sex at least until the baby gets bigger and we don't use any particularly straining positions."

*Is that all you care about?*

"She even told us about that informational website and even gave us some literature…" Lelouch reaches for the pamphlets from the breast pocket of his jacket—

"I saw it!" Suzaku flags his hands widely at Lelouch's chest. "You don't need to take it out!" – understandably, those few words get quite the strange look from those around them.

Lelouch just grins at him.

"You should record yourself when you talk sometimes so you can hear what comes out of your mouth."

"I always know exactly what I'm going to say before I say it. I don't just blurt out the first thing that comes to mind like some people I know," Lelouch boasts with a light shoulder bump against Suzaku who sighs irritably. "Therefore there's no need to 'record myself.' It would be redundant."

"I think that both you and that doctor need to work on your bedside manner," Suzaku grumbles, his pace finally slowing as his emotions cool. "She especially makes me feel uncomfortable."

Lelouch is smiling at him, "I like her."

"You would."

A light but deep chuckle rumbles beside Suzaku, almost snuffed out by the weekend traffic buzzing around them. This is the first weekend Suzaku hasn't worked alongside Euphemia, as were her orders. Government business isn't typically conducted on the weekends, but the Zone is an exception while at its early stage. Suzaku was overjoyed to have the time off with Lelouch, but now…

"And I still can't believe I let you talk me into dressing like a little girl!" he starts to gripe again, his temper rising to another crest. "I feel completely ridiculous! Next time we need to try for something more modest and mature."

Is it just odd or should it be flattering to Lelouch that Suzaku is complaining so much?
He doesn't usually…

"I think you look cute," Lelouch says.

"You keep saying that like it's going to change my mind."

"It should, because it's the truth."

Suzaku huffs in a bout of stubbornness at his *equally* stubborn boyfriend (from whom he picked up this blasted huffing), returning his arms to the folded position he's favored since he donned this apparel.

"Besides, no one is even looking at you," Lelouch notes casually. "You're too concerned with your own insecurity to realize everyone else is the exact same way."

Suzaku glances around at all the pairs of eyes that are pinned to the end of their own paths and their own lives, so stuck in their tunnel-vision that not a single person spares Suzaku a second look. It doesn't stop the cross-dressing boy from seething, however, now too busy loathing the fact that Lelouch is *right.*

Like always.

Why does he have to be *so right* about everything all the damn time?

(Suzaku just needs to remember in these moments that if he were to suddenly start sprinting, not only would Lelouch fail to keep up, he'd die trying.)

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I wasn't wearing a *blond* wig," he lamely grouses. "It makes me feel like an obvious phony."

"Blond is the farthest from your natural colour, thus making it harder to distinguish you. Not to mention, blond hair is a common Britannian feature."

"So are blue eyes," Suzaku counters heatedly – where does Lelouch *get off* by stuffing Suzaku into a mold? "Why didn't you give me coloured contacts to wear, too? Then I'd be *nothing* like myself."

There's a brief moment of silence that teases Suzaku with another taste of victory over Lelouch—

"Do you know why I chose this colour dress for you?"

—but once that creamy voice spreads gently over his eardrums, he realizes it's actually a thoughtful pause, not an admittance of defeat.

(Because Lelouch is *never* defeated.)

Suzaku doesn't speak, just looks over at the other boy who bears a faint grin that matches his tone as his ethereal eyes gaze at the path ahead of them.

"Because it brings out your eyes, accentuating them even when obscured by those glasses."

Suzaku's heart flutters at that before it drops to his stomach and he has to peel his astonished eyes away from Lelouch, feeling a little silly for letting something this trivial upset him.

"Olive green also goes very well with your skin tone – although all the white kind of clashes, but it's hard to find olive shades in clothing…"
An endearing expression shapes Suzaku's face as he smiles softly to himself. Lelouch is a lot more thoughtful than most people probably realize. …He's also a lot more fashion-savvy than most people probably realize. (At least he is in Suzaku's eyes.) "And there's a perk to you dressing this way in public. It means I can do this to you without drawing attention."

Suzaku looks at Lelouch with knotted eyebrows, "…Do what?"

That doom-reeking smirk twists handsomely on Lelouch's lips before he stops mid-step to grab Suzaku by the waist and plant a big, fat, wet kiss on Suzaku's unsuspecting mouth. But, really, he walked right into that one…

Sweet, little Suzie sputters, pushing on narrow shoulders as puckering lips light the fuse leading to the red explosion on his cheeks. "Le-louch," he hisses, breaking the one-sided kiss before he goes up in smoke. "Relax," the cool-cat says in a cool tone, helping himself to getting more comfortable with Suzaku in his arms as they wrap snugly around an olive green waist. "No one is staring at us."

Once again, green eyes scan the crowd to find not a single gawk – maybe a few humored grins passing by, but nothing more. It's because… they think he's a girl.

Even disregarding their genders, Suzaku is still somewhat triggered by conditioning from the social etiquette of Japan that modesty is an absolute must in public, which means displays of affection are restricted to the privacy of home…

"The wig and glasses also make it harder to tell from a distance that you're not Britannian like most everyone around here," Lelouch notes quietly, brushing the tip of his nose against Suzaku's once the boy's face is aimed at him again. "I'm not saying it's right, but we should take advantage of the disguise and their ignorance…"

Another kiss is pressed sweetly against Suzaku's lips – one he is actually able to return. …Not like this is Japan anymore.

"It does seem wrong…" Suzaku feels the need to say a little sheepishly as he toys with the collar of Lelouch's moody red jacket in a similar manner.

"It isn't us who are wrong, Suzaku, it's the world."

Suzaku is only able to blink at Lelouch's words before his lips are claimed again, a hand effectively pulling away his thoughts as it sneaks up the back of his neck to cradle him. He quickly becomes absorbed in the action like water in a sponge as Lelouch kisses him slowly and deeply right in the middle of bustling bodies that march by without paying them much mind. Suzaku isn't thinking of them, either, as he curls his arms around Lelouch's neck to draw the moment out even longer with his heart thudding in his chest and bleeding a healthy flush through his cheeks.
"Well…” Suzaku speaks with a swooning tone and giddy grin, "alright. But don't think I'll be dressing like this all the time from now on just to please you."

"Of course not. Just doctor visits." Lelouch grins back at him, "How about on special occasions, too?"

Suzaku gives him a playful push as they start walking again, finding his arm naturally looping through Lelouch's.

"Don't get greedy."

"You needn't worry about that," he says pleasantly. "There's a reason I caught a male seahorse, after all."

Suzaku blames his pathetic blushing on the dress – there's no other excuse for why he would blush so easily.

It must be this drafty feeling between his legs…

"So then," Suzaku clasps his hands together over Lelouch's arm as he adopts a purposely perky new attitude, "where are you taking me?"

"That depends. Where do you want to go?"

Suzaku arcs an incredulous eyebrow, "You mean you didn't plan out every, single, little detail?"

Lelouch shrugs with one shoulder, "I've decided to spoil you this afternoon by taking you wherever you want."

"Oh! You mean it?" Suzaku beams at him. "Really?"

"That's right." Lelouch's ego is glowing as a result. "Anywhere you want."

"Aren't you just the greatest boyfriend ever?" Suzaku exclaims with glittering eyes. "I mean, to let little old me pick the destination for once!"

"…"

"I'm not even sure I can pick a place now, I'm so excited! You don't know what you do to me, do you?"

"Suzaku…"

"You're just so swell I think my heart—!"

"Alright, Suzaku, I get it." Lelouch covers Suzaku's mouth with very flat eyes. "Stop talking like that."

Suzaku is grinning widely once Lelouch's hand drops from his face.

"Since you asked so nicely…” he teases.

"Do you want to go somewhere or not?" Lelouch brusquely demands to know – but his harsh voice can't crumble the humor from Suzaku's face.

"Maybe…” Suzaku begins to contemplate if he should just get out of these clothes and back to the
academy, but, he has to admit that being able to spend time with Lelouch, on a date, out in public, and not cooped up in Lelouch's room or other secret spot, is too wonderful a chance to pass over because of a stupid dress. ...And the dress isn't really that bad, anyway... "Somewhere to shop for clothes? I don't think Suzie will appreciate having only one outfit to wear."

"Fine by me. Is there a clothing store you like?"

"Cross-dressing isn't a hobby, Lelouch. I don't know anything about women's clothes."

"Idiot. A store you like to shop at for your own clothes will probably have similar styles for girls."

Lelouch might have a point there – Suzaku really wouldn't know.

Clothes have never been a priority for Suzaku, not even as a child as he was a rambunctious kid who had a tendency to inadvertently ruin clothing during playtime (the memory of his father sternly eyeing the careless holes and fresh dirt smeared all over him is a vivid one), and once he became an honorary Britannian, the military provided his uniform which was all he felt he needed – it isn't as though he ever had a spare weekend to himself, and even if he did it was always spent alone... Ashford being a uniform school meant he didn't need to go out and by a slew of clothes just to attend, either. Sure, he has a few casual articles out of necessity but nothing more than he needs.

Lelouch has had more freedom to create and cultivate a taste for fashionable clothes for whatever occasion, and he does look very attractive in his carefully crafted outfits, but that's just Lelouch. He is always gorgeous, even when he's rising from bed in the morning like a decrepit zombie from the grave. Even all of his pajamas are match sets, rather than old clothes and underwear, like Suzaku. Still, clothes just aren't Suzaku's interest or forte and he has no idea where to even begin when sifting through stores in order to build a girl's wardrobe. It all seems so complicated but he isn't sure he wants to rely on Lelouch – it's not as if Suzaku wants to start looking like Nunnally.

Not that she doesn't look nice...

Suzaku's eyes catch on a store window with a curious assortment of mannequins dressed in ghastly get-ups, surrounded by carved pumpkins and hanging bats in front of a spooky, forest backdrop.

"Is this a costume shop?" he asks, stopping to observe the witchy woman with her dark, tattered clothes and pointed hat.

"Looks that way. A few specialty shops always pop up for Halloween."

Instantly Suzaku's mind is brought to the Halloween event the student council have begun planning and organizing for the entire school, like they have every year, he's been told; how costumes aren't exactly optional being a council member, and how he has yet to get one.

"...Let's go in there!" Suzaku utters excitedly, tugging Lelouch towards the entrance—

"What? Why?" Lelouch tries to resist, leaning away from the random outburst. "What about Suzie?"

"Well, I don't know about Suzie," the fake blond continues to pull her black-haired companion, "but Suzaku doesn't have a costume for Halloween yet."

So a Halloween costume isn't necessarily necessary, but Suzaku isn't like Lelouch with all of his rational purchases and balanced checkbook.
Besides, it's perfect date material.

He hears Lelouch sigh and the weak weight of his resistance falls into the flow as they walk through the door, a bell ringing happily as they enter. The store itself is strangely lacking customers.

"Fine," Lelouch lackadaisically agrees, following Suzaku with a lagging step and looking to one proud figure standing tall on one of the many shelves. "I suppose we can find you a sexy nurse costume."

"You wish," Suzaku tosses back at him as he makes his way down an empty aisle with a smirk that Lelouch shares. "And what was that about catching a male seahorse for a reason?"

"Can't a guy have a fantasy?"

"Is that your fantasy?" Suzaku lifts an amused eyebrow as he passes by the pre-packaged sets that are all too generic for his liking.

"What if I said that you are my fantasy?" he devilishly murmurs, curling his hands around the cross-dressed boy's waist.

"I'd ask who you are and what you did with Lelouch," Suzaku answers without missing a beat—Lelouch has his moments, but something that… whatever that is couldn't have been his own idea.

Lelouch chuckles warmly, the sound fading from Suzaku's ear as he releases his grip and leans away to grab a pair of red devil horns from the shelf behind them.

"I thought I already told you"—he places the headband on his head with a smirk—"I'm a demon."

"I don't see your tail," Suzaku criticizes playfully. "And shouldn't you have a cape and pitchfork?" That's the typical Britannian caricature of a demon, isn't it?

"Would you like to see my pitchfork?" A lack of chastity in Lelouch's words and tone bend his lips upwards as he swoops towards Suzaku—

"Not really," Suzaku blandly rejects with his palm to Lelouch's chest, face pointed at the splayed collection of eclectic accessories from whence those devil horns came.

A subtle huff hisses through the air as Lelouch tosses the horns back on the shelf.

"So do you have anything in mind or are you just looking?"

"I'm just looking," Suzaku answers, a finger to his chin as he carefully scans his eyes over the merchandise. "I guess you could say that I'm hoping to find some inspiration."

"...Well, do you have a type in mind?"

Suzaku looks at him curiously.

"You know, something scary or funny… or sexy," he says lastly with that creeping smirk of his. Suzaku shakes his humored head, "You don't give up, do you?" picking up a feathery failure of a mask that never had any hope to live up to the artfully crafted Venetian masks it tried to emulate.

"You should know that better than anyone."
Indeed he does.

"Anyway, do you know what you're dressing up as for the party?" Suzaku's lips quirk dryly, "Or should I ask if you're even going to dress up?"

"I don't know yet..." Lelouch's voice is tender in an odd way as his eyes travel over the shelves. "I usually dress as a pair with Nunnally but she hasn't said anything to me yet."

"Does Nunnally usually come to you with the costume idea?"

"Sometimes. We typically work on it together but she usually has a theme or something in mind that she'd like to do. I think she's more enthusiastic about dressing up than I am."

That's ironic, considering Nunnally is blind, but Suzaku would never say that out loud.

He's ashamed he even thought it.

"That's not surprising," Suzaku says instead, holding up a ghoulish mask for brief inspection. "Trying to get you into any kind of costume is like trying to dress a cat."

"If only I could scratch and bite like one, then everyone would stop trying. Maybe I should adopt Arthur's defense."

"Maybe," Suzaku laughs. "I can tell you from experience that's its very effective."

Lelouch smiles softly at him before slinking closer to speak against Suzaku's neck, "You aren't afraid that I might bite you, too?" his finger taps at a package of false vampire teeth hanging from the shelf.

Suzaku grins as naughty memories brush warmly over his cheeks, "I can't be afraid of something I'm already used to."

Lelouch hums pleasantly, circling his arms around his pregnant prey from behind and stealing a succulent bite from a pulsing neck, the feeling of grazing teeth nibbling down to Suzaku's crotch. He feels himself smiling dumbly at the tingling sensation as he places his hands on Lelouch's arms, squeezing them as a command to make Lelouch stop, but hips are pressed against Suzaku's backside instead.

Lelouch seems far more insatiable than usual lately...

Probably because they've rarely seen each other.

"Lelouch!" Suzaku laughs despite himself. "You're not helping!"

"I don't remember saying that I was going to help you."

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In the end, Suzaku was unable to select a costume and any inspiration he was looking for was blocked by Lelouch's ambitions to make-out on every aisle and in every corner of the small establishment.

But, mostly, it was because the store manager kindly told them to take it somewhere else before Suzaku could invest in any more productive searching.

Seems not everyone is so welcoming when it comes to public displays of affection between a boy
and a girl.

On the surface, that blonde-haired girl Nunnally has been growing rather fond of reminds Lelouch too much of C.C.

Same emotionless expression.

Same hard eyes.

Same tight lips.

It's equally upsetting to see her settled next to Nunnally at the dinner table when he walks through the door as it is – was – to see that witch.

Lelouch can't say he doesn't like the girl, he hardly knows her – but that's the problem. It just figures that Nunnally would befriend a new kid Lelouch has yet to sleuth for their background. He supposes it's only a matter of time before Nunnally started making her own friends, and he should be happy for her because life hasn't been an easy journey for his little sister. Sometimes it still feels like just yesterday when she was running around the villa with garden flowers woven in her hair—

When she was confined to a hospital bed—

When her hysterical episodes as a newly and frustrated blind, handicapped girl punctuated their lonely banishment—

But he can't let those tense memories darken his aura, not while he's in front of the light of his life.

"Good evening, Nunnally," he greets her with the smile he saves for her, nodding genially at Alice.

"Welcome home, big brother!" she happily returns, having already started smiling at him once he walked through the door.

"So," Lelouch says as he walks up to the table, roaming his eyes over the Braille text book and various papers cluttering the surface in front of them, "what are you up to?"

"Oh, Alice and I are just doing some homework."

"Are you, now?" he asks, leaning to look over her work after kissing her forehead. "Need any help?"

Nunnally smiles, "No, we're doing fine."

_We're doing fine…_

So Nunnally is having this Alice help her with her homework (instead of him)?

Perhaps it's his own fault for being so engulfed by Zero that he neglected to care for what he was protecting… and now someone else is swooping in right under him.

"Ah… then I guess I won't keep you from working," he says, unbuttoning the collar of his topcoat to relieve a strange feeling that's bottling up inside him. "Is Sayoko making dinner?" That would explain the delicious smell sauntering from the kitchen.
"Yes. Is Suzaku eating with us tonight?"

"I don't think so. It appears he'll be working late again today."

"He shouldn't work so much," she pouts a little, reminding him of the exuberant child she used to be.

Lelouch chuckles, "You should tell him that the next time you see him." He pats her head before walking away, "He doesn't seem to listen to me."

Although the seahorse knows he damn well should.

Lelouch has half a mind to jump Suzaku and make it so that he'll be too sore to do much of anything except rest.

He finds his smile falling as soon as he's out of sight of Nunnally and Alice, slightly skulking his way into the kitchen with the Nunnally dilemma swarming around his head. Sayoko is indeed hard at work preparing their meal, pots steaming on the stovetop that create the wonderful aroma that makes his empty stomach grumble.

"So you're making Italian tonight?" he asks her with a hungry grin, inhaling the rich, tomato scent of the red sauce simmering in a large pot.

"Spaghetti upon Nunnally's request." Sayoko smiles, amused by his sigh of anticipation as she stirs the marinara mixture. "Would you like to taste it?"

He thought she'd never ask.

Lelouch takes the offered spoon, sipping lightly from the wood and savoring the prickle of flavor that blankets his mouth.

"It's good." He rolls the sip around his tongue thoughtfully, "Maybe… add a little more oregano?"

She gives him a lopsided smirk, "If you say so," and dashes more of the herb into the pot.

Although Sayoko was not originally to prepare meals for them, being a maid and nothing else, she's always been a capable cooker and has improved over the years. They both know that Lelouch has a picky palate that prefers his exact measurements as he's taught himself the art of cooking growing up, but Sayoko is one person that can please his taste buds other than himself.

"Thanks for cooking tonight," he says, leaning against the counter next to the stove and crossing his arms.

"No problem." She regards him for a moment before turning her attention to the uncut cucumber waiting to join the lettuce in the salad bowl beside the cutting board. "But that's not why you're in here right now, is it? There's something else you want to talk about, besides oregano."

Lelouch blinks at her in surprise, and then releases a quiet, wistful sigh that inflates his lips into a very faint grin.

"I forget how perceptive you are sometimes."

"It helps to have known you for a long time." She glances at him fondly before turning back to the cucumber, slicing thin circles from the vegetable, "What's on your mind?"

Aside from the fact that Suzaku is becoming more pregnant every day, that Zero is prematurely
being absorbed in bureaucracy, and that there is a growing distance between him and Nunnally?

Nothing at all.

"Well…" Lelouch taps his fingers on his arm, looking away from her tender gaze. "I'm just curious about Alice."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Is she around Nunnally a lot?"

"Well, they've been seeing more of each other lately. I think they're getting closer, becoming very good friends."

"I see…"

"You don't sound happy about that," Sayoko says, looking to him with her gentle, brown eyes.

"I'm just concerned. I don't know anything about this girl and suddenly she's in our home. I don't even know her family name." Or her family relations and connections.

"Don't let your first impression fool you, she's a very nice girl," the maid assures with a kind grin, "but she doesn't seem to make friends easily. Perhaps that's why she and Nunnally are hitting it off so well. Nunnally is as accepting as they come. Alice has also proven herself to be rather protective of Nunnally in her own way. Just get to know her and you'll see they're good for each other."

The chopping sound of a knife hitting wood follows Sayoko's words, and somehow Lelouch feels as though it's cutting his voice from his throat.

The older woman is more than trustworthy, so if she had any doubts or suspicions about Alice, she wouldn't keep it to herself – she doesn't even show restraint in chiding Lelouch about his gambling habits. Sayoko is the closest thing he and Nunnally have had to a mother since theirs died seven years ago and speaking to her is as reassuring as Lelouch hoped it would be even though he still needs to investigate the girl to a level of his own satisfaction.

But then, Lelouch isn't sure if he could bring himself to separate the two when Nunnally is warming up to Alice so much…

"Thank you," he murmurs, feeling a tremor of inadequacy stifle his voice, and walks away from Sayoko's polite welcome to join Nunnally at the table while they wait for dinner.

This is a good opportunity to conduct his interview.

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Alone in the hallway, Euphemia and Zero converse privately, almost too comfortably for Suzaku's liking. He can't hear what they're talking about from his distance but he knows if he were to draw closer their conversation would likely end.

Suzaku is curious to know if Zero is aware his surveillance, if he can feel it, if that mask obscures more than just an identity. He wouldn't put it past the vigilante, having proved in the past to be very aware of his surroundings, but, Zero hardly pays any attention to Suzaku – not that Suzaku has been willing to makes friends, either.
It's strange, actually, suspicious, even, that Zero spends the majority of his time concealed in his office of which only select persons are allowed inside, for the most part. A somewhat-disguised Kallen is usually the security, standing at attention with the antsy expression of a guard dog just waiting to snap at the slightest threat. Suzaku doesn't know what to make of their truce now, but he knows better than to go preaching to her while she follows Zero around by an invisible leash. Surprisingly, a man named Ohgi has been doing a lot of the diplomatic errands, always present at every conference and often seen shuffling with papers as he marches through the halls. Perhaps it's to be expected since the man is Zero's number one (but he looks more like Zero's student than his right-hand man.) Zero has shared few words with Suzaku, not that he expected they would become best friends while stabilizing the Zone—

Speaking of best friends, Lelouch's behavior lately has changed. He doesn't come in late, typically being home before Suzaku, and his demeanor as a whole seems… lighter, peppier. Even though he still skips class whenever he feels like it and occasionally slips out after student council meetings, something is odd about the picture. It's almost as if he's trying to look innocent, but by doing so he only looks all the more fishy. Yet, at the same time, Suzaku has to wonder if this is all just some paranoid delusion. Maybe Lelouch simply is happier now that Suzaku is safer, even if he was initially reluctant about the Zone. And, it's not like Suzaku said anything directly to Lelouch about possible connections to Zero… but Lelouch isn't stupid and tends to pick up on things no matter how subtle… Perhaps Lelouch caught on to Suzaku's conjecture and aimed to rebuff it. He might be a closet supporter for Zero and the Black Knights, but…

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that if you make that expression for too long your face will stay that way?"

Suzaku blinks at the pretty face of ex-princess Euphemia who is a lot closer than he remembers— when did she…?

"Spacing out, are we?" she asks him with a light grin.

"No," he says, shaking his head and rubbing his face but pauses to give her an honest glimpse of his guilty eyes. "Well… maybe a little."

She giggles at him behind her fist.

"I'm sorry. I'm just having a little trouble focusing these days."

"Don't apologize, Suzaku." Euphemia's consoling voice is like a cool tonic to his nerves and restless mind. "It's understandable considering your situation."

That's right.

He'd read in those books that a common side-effect of being pregnant was an inability to concentrate, the mind being too focused on the baby.

Well… he's certainly preoccupied, just not always on the baby.

"And it's getting late, anyway. You should probably be heading home soon."

But he isn't sure he wants to go just yet.

He'd rather listen to Lelouch's reprimanding later than deal with his sexual advancements now.

"What were you and Zero talking about just now?"
"Still don't trust him?" she asks with a facetious line pulling up the corners of her lips.

Suzaku is careful to not glare at her, "It's reasonable, don't you think? He protects himself by hiding behind a mask, not to mention I'm no fan of his methods."

"Reasonable, perhaps," Euphemia acknowledges with a tilt of her head. "But, did you ever consider that he might be protecting more than just his identity?"

Suzaku's eyebrows scrunch at her as a response.

"He's hiding his face, but why? Only because he doesn't want anyone to see him? Maybe he has family and friends just like everyone else. People he loves and doesn't want getting entangled in his affairs or hurt because of them. Never judge a book by its cover, they say. And don't you think that accepting my offer is a step in the right direction for him?"

"...I haven't thought of that," he gravely admits to her despite not knowing if it's really true. When he thought about Lelouch being Zero, it seemed to make sense, but what would that case be if it isn't Lelouch? "But why would he risk everything to fight this battle?"

Her lips form a strange half-smile, "I don't know. Maybe that's a question you should ask him yourself." Suzaku blinks at her and before he's able to respond, she's tugging him by the arm to walk down the hall in the opposite direction towards her office. "Anyway, this isn't what I wanted to talk to you about. Come, come! I have something important to give you!"

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"One… two… three!" Lelouch hoists Nunnally from her chair to her bed in a perfected motion without jostling or any slips. She situates herself sitting up in front of her pillow as Lelouch moves the chair towards the foot of her bed, out of the way but still within reach, and returns to her to encase her like a jewel in a box with the blanket. "Are you comfortable?" he asks, pulling and tucking the covers around her.

She nods with a smile, "It's always perfect when you're the one to tuck me in."

Affection draws a smile on Lelouch's lips and he sits down beside her, fiddling with minor adjustments to the blankets that needlessly straightens any fiendish wrinkles.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it to dinner tonight. I know I haven't been spending a lot of time with you lately because I've been busy..." he pauses, but not to hear her forgive him, just to read her grave expression, "but I haven't forgotten about the Halloween party. Actually, I think I've come up with a concept," he announces proudly until her grim silence chisels the smile right off his face.

"About that..." she begins delicately, her fingers clasping tensely together. "Alice asked me if I wanted to dress up with her this year. You see, she doesn't have anyone else to go with, so..."

...What is Nunnally saying?

"You don't mind, do you? If I dress up with Alice?"

Yeah, actually, he kind of really minds.

A lot.

"No... If that's what you want to do."
"Are you sure? I mean, I know you don't really care for this sort of thing and Halloween is less than two weeks away…"

Lelouch never thought such harmless words could hurt him so much.

Or that Nunnally could be the one to speak them.

"I… just want you to be happy. Whatever you want to do is fine."

He isn't lying to her, but it hurts like he is, and he wonders if there's even a difference in this moment.

It shouldn't be a big deal, it's just for one party…

One they've always celebrated together since…

Lelouch strains to smile, grabbing her hand in both of his.

"Don't worry about me. Go have fun with your friend."

Even if he was really looking forward to it.

Even if it ruptures a small crack in his heart (or is that her bubble world that's breaking?).

"Ok." She smiles faintly. "I guess this means you can go with Suzaku now."

"You mean as a pair?" Lelouch asks her and when she nods he breathes a wry puff through his nose, "Somehow I doubt that."

_The idiot can't even pick a costume._

"Wouldn't it be fun to go together? It'll be the first time to spend Halloween with him."

He feels his eyebrows crease a little at her.

In a way, this is a strange conversation to be having.

"It isn't like I won't see him there."

Nunnally nods, "I guess you're right…"

"You sound concerned," Lelouch says, lifting one corner of his lips and rubbing the back of her hand in his grasp.

She seems to shrug a little, "I guess I am."

"And why is that?"

Nunnally's lips press together rather firmly, her eyebrows twisting into an uncertain frown – a moment of consideration on her part that's as alarming as it is adorable… as long as nothing is _actually wrong_.

"I know about you and Suzaku."
"…What do you mean?" Lelouch's lips curve into a skewed grin; not just taken aback, but yanked aback by a quivering panic – he should probably stop holding her hand now if he's going to try and squirm his way out of this one…

"Lelouch," she stoically pats his hand, almost in reassurance to his quickened heartbeat, "I know I can't see, but I'm not blind."

She… has a point.

Ever since she's lost her eyesight, her other senses, including her intuition, have become surprisingly sharp to the point where she can not only distinguish people but know where they are in the room. It's uncanny, but it's made life so much easier for her. At the same time, however, it's made it harder for Lelouch to uphold his calm, cool, and collected big brother bravado when things aren't so great in reality.

Seems he should have figured she could sense the emotional attachment between him and Suzaku, but that doesn't quite explain her square knowledge of the fact – unless that idiot went and opened his big mouth again – and she isn't one to jump to conclusions.

Maybe he shouldn't ask.

"I'm not bothered by it, or anything like that," she says, her words cushioned with sincerity. Lelouch's eyes only look down at their grouped hands in a sullen sink. "I wasn't going to say anything, but I don't want you to feel like you have to keep it a secret from me. I love you and support you, no matter what."

No matter what, huh?

Her soft hands squeeze his and he looks up to her with a light smile.

"Suzaku was right."—her eyebrows curiously crease—"You are becoming too mature for me to handle."

She giggles quietly, "The two of you understand each other and fit together so well… I'm happy for you."

"I suppose I'm happy for you, too, finally having a special friendship."

"You suppose you're happy?" she teases, tugging his hands.

Another half-smile pins up the corner of his lips, "I don't like the idea of sharing you, is all."

"You haven't changed at all!" Nunnally laughs.

"I hope I've changed a little…" Lelouch pretends to sulk.

"I mean that in a good way. I like that you're still the same since…” a frown threatens to eat her lips as her hands flirt with a clench and it jolts his chest.

"You're still the same little girl, too." Lelouch tries to distract her with an upbeat tone to counteract the sad hint that ghosted in with her words. "Just missing the pigtails…” he playfully flicks a finger at her long hair, but he doesn't get the response he wants.
"Did you hear the announcement about Euphie?"

Lelouch is surprised by not only the sudden topic change, but that Nunnally is the one to make it and that she tried to lighten her voice. It's not like her…

"Yes, I did," he replies slowly, almost cautiously, to her.

He doubts that there is a person on this island – or the world – who hasn't heard the announcement and indulged in the shocking story. Just like Euphemia had promised, nearly a month after the Zone was welcomed with wary minds, the mainland made the official announcement about the Third Princess stepping down from succession "in order to fully devote her time to the SAZ."

While an obvious bent truth, to their credit it was actually done in a tasteful manner.

More so than Lelouch's disowning…

But who's comparing?

"She's very kind, isn't she?"

"I suppose so," Lelouch coolly replies.

The sacrifice itself doesn't come with just her giving up her title; it's the lifestyle and privileges that go with it that makes it selfless. Euphemia has relinquished the only life she's ever known: one of lavish and little suffering. While true that the infighting within the royal family can be brutal she's never really been threatened by it, and life on the outside is an entirely different world – although she's already in better standing than Lelouch was when he dared to defy. Euphemia may still have the luxury of Cornelia's (…and Schneizel's, as long as it serves his gains) protection, dotage and guidance but she will be shamed as nothing but a turncoat number lover – that's not exactly good for winning over many, or any, high-tiered Brits, but it does boost support for numbers and remaining independent countries, if nothing else.

Nunnally bites her lip slightly, "I know I shouldn't ask, but I really want to see Euphie again. Do you think we could see her one more time? She's not royalty anymore, just like us, right? Doesn't that mean it would be easier to see her now?"

"I don't know…" Lelouch says, unable to completely reject her. "I'm not sure it would be that simple, even given the circumstance."

Unfortunately, Euphemia's status, or lack thereof, doesn't make anything easier.

She'll still most likely have guards and still mostly likely have Cornelia hovering over her now more than ever and there's the press that's still flocking to her like bees to honey thanks to the double effect of the Zone and her status change. It's all spelled a scandal in big letters, rumors about her and her knight thickening like sticky peanut butter in the mouths of both the media and general public. If anything, Euphemia has probably made it harder for them to meet. At least for now.

"…I see."

"I'm sorry. Maybe we can see her again later, when things are a little more settled with the media."

Nunnally silently nods – Lelouch tries to not imagine the dejected glaze flowing under her eyelids.

"You know, Euphie hasn't changed, either," the abandoned fourth princess says.
"You think so?"

"Yeah." A smile struggles to lift her lips. "When we spoke before finding you, it was just like before… when we were younger."

Lelouch forces an undersized smile and nods, ignoring the way his childhood sores blaze like lit gasoline through his veins at the light of sad implications strung to her words. He'd like to remember only the good times… but they only remind him of how it all ended.

"It was like I could see the garden again in her voice. I could smell the fresh grass and flowers… We talked about those memories, and I really enjoyed it."

"That's good."

It is, really.

Euphemia can recall those happy times without festering, like Lelouch.

Nunnally deserves something like that in her life…

"It made me happy to revisit those times, when we were all together..." she appears to nod at her own statement, as if to verify it's true. "There are so many things I feel I've forgotten… like exact colours and expressions. What the sky looks like throughout the day…" her tone steadily dims as the outline of her eyes roll downward, perhaps trying to chase after her fading memories, and he feels it hollow his chest with remorse. "...Do you still miss mother?"

Lelouch doesn't have to hesitate at this.

"Every day," he confesses to her softly, smoothing his palm over her hand.

"Me too… I think about her a lot." In so many ways right now, Nunnally is digressing into her childhood self in Lelouch's mind. He won't deny that he's never stopped seeing her as nothing but his kid sister, but it's different this time somehow, as if the morose mood is turning back time… especially when she sniffles.

…When she sniffles?

"Nunnally?" Lelouch beckons with a tilt of his head at the stifled sound of her sniffing nose, a spike of fear rising up from his gut when droplets race down her cheeks. "Nunnally, what's wrong?" he asks hastily, reaching to wipe—

She shakes her head furiously, "...Nothing!"

"You're crying." He feels a little silly saying that out loud, as if she doesn't know.

Her head shakes again, although less dramatically as the tears gain momentum.

"Please, tell me what's wrong," he implores, a nasty knot of childhood angst constricting his stomach. "Why are you upset?"

"...Because!" Nunnally's voice is close to hysterical, a crack in her speech causing her sharp inhale to shudder out as a sob. "Because I can't remember mother's face!"

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"I know about Lelouch and Nunnally," Euphemia says in the cozy confines of her private office,
causing Suzaku's heart to nearly burst.

"...I don't, um, I have no idea... what you mean."

She grins at him, "Don't worry, Suzaku. This isn't due to any fault of your own. I ran into them when I visited Ashford."

He breathes a giant sigh of relief, the fresh air birthing a new heart in his chest – he thought that might have happened... He can hear Euphemia's giggling as she rounds her large desk, sparsely decorated by documents compared to personal photos and knick-knacks. A pink gift-bag with brightly coloured tissue paper clouding up from the inside is placed on top of the polished surface and her light-blue eyes pleasantly gleam at him.

"Are you still friends? I mean, do you see each other a lot at school?"

"Yes..." Suzaku answers with a nod and a hint of a question in his tone.

"Good! I'm so happy to hear that." She smiles something close to relieved joy, and Suzaku couldn't find it more strange. "You always seemed so at ease when you talked about them, I'm glad they're back in your life. I think they'll be good for you. Also, I have a little, selfish errand, if you don't mind." She gestures to the bag, "Nunnally's birthday is coming up but I can't really go visit her, so I was hoping that you would give this to her for me."

Suzaku looks between Euphemia and the gift a few times before he steps closer to the desk.

"Sure, I can do that," he says with a smile that she quickly returns.

"I wish I could see her on her birthday, but..." Her shimmering eyes drop from his again and into a sullen shade. "I guess this is the best I can do for now."

Suzaku can't imagine the emotional toll that was taken on her heart after grieving for her brother and sister for seven years but she truly appears to be in better spirits with the knowledge of their survival. Still, the initial information probably has a waning euphoria when she realized she can't see or speak to them – the one thing she's wished for since they were banished from the palace and the country.

Euphemia suddenly laughs a little at herself, "I probably shouldn't even be giving her a present! I can already hear Lelouch's disproval, but it would be worth it to see the look on her face."

"...Then why don't you just give it to her yourself?"

Her expression is a collage of surprise and disappointment, "I can't..."

"Well... I could ask if it's alright, if you want."

Her eyes instantly light up, "You'd do that?"

"Of course," Suzaku answers with a smile. "I'd be honored."

Nunnally's birthday party will be a big celebration and have the attendance of the student council, and whoever else the birthday girl wants to invite, but Lelouch informed Suzaku that they always do something together, alone, around her birthday.

Big sister will be all right to come on that night, if only for dinner.

Euphemia grins coyly at him, "You're a genuine gentleman, aren't you?"
Gentleman…?

Don't make Suzaku blush!

Some awkward chuckles toulse in his throat and he looks down at his shoes, bashfully rubbing the back of his head.

"…If you say so."

"Learn to take a compliment," she teases. "I still want you to take this gift anyway, just in case. Don't give it to her until her birthday, though!"

"Of course." Suzaku's green eyes look up to her with a soft smile. "Can I ask what it is?"

Euphemia shakes a chiding head and finger at him, "No peeking, even for you!"

A hearty laugh puffs from Suzaku's mouth as he looks down at the bag, wishing he had the same finesse with presentation like Lelouch and Euphemia – although maybe she had gift-wrapping done for her…

"So… how are you doing?"

"Doing…?" Suzaku repeats with a blank look before the small fry slaps his brain with recognition. "Oh! Fine. Just fine. I had a check-up recently and I'm due for another one after Nunnally's birthday."

"That's good to hear." The weighty mood of her face is brightened like a budding flower. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks…" Suzaku timidly accepts with an awkward lift of his shoulders.

Why does she insist on making him blush?

"Does… Does Lelouch know?" Her shy question makes Suzaku inwardly guffaw at the irony.

That Lelouch is the father.

That he is a very naggy father.

But Euphemia doesn't know any of the above, so he must remain dignified while mentally curious about whether or not she'll ever know anything.

Suzaku grins, trying to tame the dryness from his voice, "Yes, he knows."

Euphemia's pink hair bobs with the nod of her head, a firm expression hardening her eyes with sincerity.

"That's good. Friends should support each other."

Suzaku didn't say Lelouch "supports" him, but it's nice that she instinctively thinks the best of her brother.

Perhaps Suzaku should follow her example.

…And Lelouch is a very supportive father and friend.
"By the way…" she starts again tentatively, eyes seeming to search for courage, "the father, of your baby, I mean, is he…?"

Suzaku lifts an eyebrow when her blue eyes flock to him for help – like he knows what she's thinking.

He's not Lelouch.

"…Well, I know it's not any of my business, but I'm just curious about him…"

Ah…

"You want to know what kind of person he is?"

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"…Nunnally," Lelouch manages to murmur through his surprise, barely able to find his voice as he wipes her eyes with tender thumbs.

"I've been looking at the same faded image of her for years… I've only realized it recently that… she's gone." Nunnally weeps, clinging to her big brother's arms as they try to pull her up from her river of tears. "I've been trying to remember, concentrating for hours, but not even in my dreams can I see her face…! There's nothing there… She's gone, Lelouch."

He hasn't seen her cry like this since she was young… since the bittersweet days at the Kururugi shrine. He just isn't sure what to say. Her tears and her sadness have always left him feeling mute, as if his knowledge of the English language has been scooped out of his skull.

"I'm sorry," she hiccups. "I know you don't like to talk about the past, but I—!"

No…

Don't apologize for this…

"I feel so empty! Like I've lost a part of myself and I don't know how to get it back!"

This is Lelouch's fault.

For every brittle brush-off he made at the topic of their past…

For every absent response at the mention of their mother…

For every promise of talking later and later never coming…

For shutting her out along with the feelings he refused to face…

For leaving Nunnally alone in the silent dark…

Not even ignorance is to blame.

This is all Lelouch's fault.

"I'm sorry… I was trying to be strong for you, so you wouldn't worry about me… I didn't want to tell you…"

"Don't apologize," he quietly murmurs, trying to hurdle his voice over a quivering lump in his
throat as he gently wipes away the teardrops rolling down her cheeks, cupping her face and looking at her eyes as if she'll stare back – there's always the chance… "You don't have anything to be sorry about. Nunnally…" I'm sorry… His voice drowns in her wavy weeps and it's as if she really is the little, pig-tailed girl that could only be consoled by mother's kiss and rocking arms or the blind girl who just wanted to see and walk again… He's consumed by a staircase drenched in blood and a nurturing smile he isn't sure he can completely remember anymore as it's stolen by dead eyes.

Lelouch can't seem to remember how to speak, suddenly becoming a helpless boy all over again.

Why do words always feel so meaningless at times when they are needed the most…?

He wordlessly gathers her into his arms as he slides up next her, petting her long, brown hair as she tucks her despondence into his shoulder, feeling his eyes prickle as his white shirt dampens.

There isn't anything else he can do.

Lelouch had never been so powerless during those nights when Nunnally was inconsolable, sobbing through violent tantrums… No one would believe Nunnally is capable of such horrific sorrow and distress. Lelouch didn't until he saw it. There wasn't a word he could say or a promise he could make to ease her pain, to calm her heart.

All he could do was hold her to keep her from literally falling apart, and it seems the present is the same as the past…

Because if her smile is his motivation, then her tears are his demise.

Lelouch realizes how much he's taken for granted as his violet eyes prickle with sadness that stubbornly stays tightly knotted in his chest. It's been so long since the last time he's so much as blinked a tear from his eye, because he wanted to be strong for Nunnally. Instead, it turns out, she is the stronger one.

*You're not the one who should be sorry.*

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*It's so late…*

Lelouch is going to kill him.

It was already very late when Euphemia grabbed him, well past supper and close to bed time, and he meant to head home right after speaking with her…

Suzaku really dropped the ball this time.

He was more than surprised by Euphemia’s question, for more than one reason, and even though he wanted to talk to her, if only a little, he knew he'd inevitably say something he shouldn't. Suzaku wonders what real harm could come from her knowing that Lelouch is the father, but… Lelouch has been hiding for seven years for a reason.

Lots of reasons.

Suzaku tried to convey some basic, non-personal things and maybe Euphemia recognized that it was a sensitive subject because she didn't pry. It really would've been nice, though, because the only person he has to talk to is Lelouch, and in that case he might as well be talking to a frowning brick wall. But, at least Suzaku re-learned his feelings for Lelouch run much, much deeper than he
initially thought. (Deeper than any loathing he carries for a certain masked terrorist.)

Suzaku quietly steps through the hall of the clubhouse as if afraid the taut tension of Lelouch's temper will snap if he walks too heavily – perhaps it's exaggerated, but if Suzaku expects the worst, the reality won't seem that bad... It's a trick he's picked up from Lelouch. Too focused on the probable scorning, Suzaku turns into the first pair of doors that slide open for him and the light that douses his vision isn't unperceived—

However, the light, floral scent thick in the air shocks to his senses—

He realizes, a bit embarrassedly, that he stumbled into Nunnally's room and quickly opens his mouth to apologize—

"I'm s—!" But there, on Nunnally's bed, are a slumbering prince and princess.

Suzaku feels as though he's walked into a picture frame as he stands in a stunned stupor for a moment to register the scene, even smiling very faintly to himself as he steals an intimate glimpse. Lelouch looks like he'll wake up with a sore back, being propped against the bed rail like a saggy stuffed animal, but Suzaku imagines he likely won't mind it. His arms are curled around a sound-sleeping Nunnally who's snugly folded into her blankets as she uses her big brother as a big pillow, her cheek perched on his gently rising and sinking chest. Their breaths are so soft and slow, Suzaku catches his own so he doesn't cause them to wake and shatter this image. He nearly turns to tip-toe out before glancing at them again, at Lelouch who isn't covered and still wearing his uniform minus the topcoat. After laying a spare blanket from the foot of Nunnally's bed over Lelouch, Suzaku ducks out of the room, flipping off the light as he leaves.

It's too late to take a shower, but he's feeling too antsy to sleep – probably because of the pregnancy, like the books say. He has been a little preoccupied lately, but it has yet to affect his sleep, so he figures taking a hot shower will soothe his body enough to set a course to dreamland. Suzaku heads to the bedroom first to shed some of his own uniform and decides to set out a book to wait for him after washing up to read in bed—

Only, he can't find the one he wants to read.

*Shit!*

He's torn through his book bag and the pile hidden in Lelouch's closet – because he's that paranoid – but no luck. Sure, he could read any one of the many books Lelouch has purchased – an abundance that has grown with their small fry – but that isn't the issue.

Suzaku lost the book.

Losing the book is a *bad* thing.

If someone found it... well, there aren't any names or anything personal written in them, but how is Suzaku going to get it back? He doesn't even know *where* he lost it!

Just what will Lelouch do to him if he learns Suzaku lost the book?

Lelouch will *freak* if he finds out and he'll never let Suzaku hear the end of it!

"Just think!" he growls to himself under his breath, standing with a frown in the middle of the room.

The last time he remembers having it was in his school bag – which was unwise in itself, he
realizes, but he only had it in there because he wanted to try and do some reading before heading to work… Well, there isn't a lot of free time to come by, which is why he's late to noticing its absence… But Suzaku clearly brought the bag back, he just hasn't touched it since then, apparently…

That was before the Zone, wasn't it?

What if it fell out of his bag during school, in one of his classes?

A lazy meow startles Suzaku, making him jump and nearly pounce the intruder until he sees a pair of feline eyes staring at him – judging him.

A thick sigh of relief hales from Suzaku's mouth, "Arthur… what are you doing in here?"

Arthur doesn't even do him the courtesy of blinking.

"I don't know where it is, Arthur," Suzaku says as he flops down on the bed, falling onto his back like a dead man.

The cat quickly appears on the bed, strutting up to Suzaku's head with what he supposes is ill-intent in those golden eyes.

"You haven't seen the book, have you?" He reaches to scratch a furry head as some sort of peace offering, as if Arthur is the fiend who stole the book and will return it with the right coaxing—

Before Suzaku can even hope to experience the familiar pang of Arthur's fangs, the book's whereabouts flood his mind like a brilliant light. He remembers chasing the cat out of his bag at the end of a club meeting once, and forgot to check and make sure everything was there because he was running late, so the book just has to be there!

"Oh, Arthur, why didn't you say so?" Suzaku deliriously chides with a smile as he springs from the bed as if jolted by the electric epiphany.

Arthur merely yawns at his jaunty exit.

*The human idiot.*

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Milly knew her bait would work, which is why she's doubly glad that she installed a hidden camera – courtesy of the boys from the film club! Perhaps she'll keep up her end of the borrow bargain now that she's got something to show for her persuasive personality.

She wouldn't have thought it would be Suzaku, however.

Several replays later before the start of the club meeting and she's still reeling in the find and the possibilities that come with it.

Obviously, there's only one sound – and decidedly dramatic – conclusion to draw.

"Former Princess Euphemia must be involved in this," Milly announces as if she's finally found the answer to an equation.

There is simply no other explanation.
Shirley, the wet blanket, predictably chokes on her breath and her appalled eyes flare at the blond.

"M-Madam President!"

"It makes sense and you know it." Milly waves her hand perfunctorily at the girl, staring at the figure caught on the computer screen, Nina standing awkwardly beside her as she holds the linked camera. "Just think about it: there are a lot of rumors running around about her and her brave knight – something most have disapproved of to begin with – and then she 'resigns' from her royal status out of the blue?"

"Because of the Zone!" Shirley insists. "That's what they said in the announcement!"

"Do you believe everything you're told, Shirley?"

The swimmer huffs, her face tinged red by frazzled nerves and embarrassment.

"Do you even realize what you're saying?" Rivalz asks cautiously, sitting at the table across from Shirley. "That has to be, like, slander or something, right? You don't have any proof except that Suzaku picked up some book."

"Slander?" Milly sounds like her voice doesn't even want to touch the word. Because it doesn't.

And it isn't like she's going public with this information – as tempting a thought it is…

"And she's still part of the royal family!" Shirley tags in a tad too desperately to sound the least bit convincing. "You shouldn't be disrespectful."

What's so disrespectful, exactly?

That Milly is saying Euphemia might be having a relationship with her knight? (Like it would even be the first time something like this has happened.) That she could be pregnant as a result, even though she's under age and not married?

Who even cares about all of that, anyway?

They can't possibly be so… old fashioned.

And why does it all fall on Euphemia?

Suzaku is a part of this as well. Why aren't they upset about his reputation? He's the one who's their friend! It's true that Euphemia probably has more at stake in this scenario, farther to fall from grace than him, but it's this bloody double-standard that's causing all the problems in the first place!

Why can't these two ignore tradition and just be happy for the happy couple?

Two words: Wet. Blankets.

As far as not having any proof… Well, perhaps this is only speculation, but this explains why Lelouch and Suzaku spent that one afternoon at the bookstore as if it was some clandestine affair! The Lelouch point makes sense, but, since only Milly knows of his royal connection – aside from Suzaku – she can't share this indisputable piece of evidence.

"You're being too serious," she drawls at them – let them be close-minded and never enjoy
themselves, see if Milly cares. "So serious that you've forgotten the most important thing!"

Rivalz and Shirley exchange a glance to confirm they both feel the eerie chill rolling in with Milly's chipper tone.

They do.

"What important thing…?" Enters Kallen on her own dull beat, the sick girl's bland voice heavy with confusion.

Milly perks up like a recently hydrated plant and bounds over to the girl who quenched her thirst, grabbing her by the shoulders as Shirley and Rivalz watch from the side with certain-doom still hovering over their heads from the last time.

"Why, the baby shower of course!" the excited president declares, all smiles and glittery aurora that infuse a look of utter shock and fear into the red-head's very soul.

Oh, Kallen.

She should've gotten out while she still had the chance…

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Lelouch stands in the doorway with crossed arms, leaning against the frame as he looks at Nunnally's smile from a distance, watching Euphemia fill a void he hadn't realized was growing in Nunnally's heart. Euphemia's visit has proven to lift Nunnally's spirits, their private dinner being a nostalgic night that she's needed, and perhaps a little something that Lelouch needed, too. It isn't easy accepting that they needed her for this, but Lelouch is aware that he's closed up too tight for his own sake and forgot about Nunnally, that she's different and has different functions.

Lelouch is comfortable with repressing, Nunnally isn't. He forced his own unhealthy emotional problems onto her and that wasn't fair even though it was unintentional. All he can do is work on his vulnerability issues, however difficult that might be.

He doesn't want to end up making the same mistake with his child.

"You don't look happy," Suzaku says quietly, appearing at Lelouch's side as the two sisters shower each other in shameless affection – Lelouch can do that, although his isn't as emotional about it as Euphemia…

He lets Suzaku's statement stay unattended in the air, choosing to not reply as he stares at the golden, heart locket dangling around Nunnally's neck and the small box sitting in front of her on the table – the present Euphemia gave her. It's not an overly lavished item, relatively small and a little plain. It's rectangular and wooden with a heart-shaped cut on the lid filled with glass, stained with a soft pink rose – but for this box it's the inside that truly matters. Not only is the inside carpeted in burgundy velvet, but once opened, it plays a soft, tinkering melody just like the one Nunnally had when she was young, when she was still a princess – mainly because it is the one she had when she was still a princess. Euphemia had apparently managed to save it after they left and has kept it in excellent condition. Nunnally gushed when she heard the music, excitedly feeling the box with her fingers, and she immediately commented that it would be the perfect place to store her new necklace, if she ever takes it off. Their mother had given Nunnally that gift, a souvenir of sorts from Europe, and she used to sing and hum that song to them…
Nunnally doesn't love one gift more than the other, which is just like her, but Lelouch almost wishes Euphemia hadn't given her anything at all… Suzaku splurged on some very fancy and rather expensive special origami paper with different textures, and she loved that to the same weight, but that doesn't bother Lelouch as much as that music box.

"Are you not alright with her being here?" Suzaku asks, not to be deterred by Lelouch's silence – a quality that is as needed as it is annoying. If there's anyone to help Lelouch with his intimacy problems, it's definitely this stubborn, emotional seahorse.

"Honestly? No. I don't want her here," Lelouch answers in a firm slate of words. "It's too dangerous and risky for her to be anywhere near us. I don't like this at all." He can see Suzaku tilt his head from the corner of his eye.

"Then why did you agree to invite her?"

Why?

That should be obvious.

"Because I want to make Nunnally happy." No matter what…

Suzaku releases a very soft breath that sounds a lot like a voiceless puff of laughter.

"When we were younger, I sometimes wished that you were my real brother."

Lelouch slides his eyes away from Nunnally's glowing smile to look at Suzaku sideways, at his crooked grin.

"For obvious reasons, now I'm glad you're not." There's a light touch on Lelouch's back, pulling his face towards Suzaku fully. "Nunnally is extremely lucky to have a big brother like you."

It's as if those are the exact words Lelouch has been needing to hear; they loosen the tension, guilt, and doubt in the holes of his heart with tender warmth as a hand on his back rubs at his invisible wounds. It doesn't quell the pain completely, but it's a start. If they weren't currently sharing the room with Euphemia, Lelouch would gladly express to Suzaku just how appreciative he is to have heard that, but he supposes that for now a heart-felt smile is just as good until he can smother the boy with a kiss later in private.

And that's just a kiss.

Lelouch isn't a whore for affection…

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Suzaku is marveling at the triplet collection of ultrasound photos in an unmarked, white binder – because Lelouch didn't have anything else on hand – instead of catching up on his baby reading as he sits in bed. He drags the pad of his forefinger along the profile of their small fry over the plastic sleeve, wishing he had more pictures in between the first two to really see the development, but he supposes that he'll be gaining more now that the doctor visits are more frequent. In fact, with a growing smile, he slides the latest image into the next available slip and fondly compares it against the one just before it…

And then Lelouch enters the room like a dark fog rolling over water and Suzaku considers warning other ships about the impenetrable weather. He tries to brighten his partner's dismal haze by sharing his smile, but he's more or less ignored as Lelouch deposits his dirty clothes in the hamper,
a bath towel still around his neck.

Something's been up with Lelouch lately, like he isn't looking at the present or he's just distracted – in Suzaku's case, his distraction is mostly the baby (and maybe other things he wants to ignore), but it doesn't seem to be the same case with daddy. Maybe he is more bothered about Euphemia than he let on, or is it…?

"Lelouch," Suzaku calls, lifting the binder up from his lap in little a gesture, "I added the ultrasound picture, do you want to see it?"

Murky violets flick to him and the boy steps over, rubbing excess water from his hair with the towel as he reaches for Suzaku's handy work with passive grace that makes irks the seahorse before a rift of joy gently breaks along Lelouch's lips after taking the binder.

"Hard to believe it's not even the size of a finger yet."

"Yeah…" Suzaku smiles softly up at his parental partner, at the pleasant surface flowing over his preoccupied gaze again like a rising tide. "Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl?"

"Does it matter?" Lelouch tonelessly replies, turning away from him to stash the baby binder in his desk and hang his towel over the back of his chair.

"No. Just making conversation."

"Hm…"

"Lelouch, is something bothering you?"

Lelouch looks at him with a half-shrug and a head shake, trying to look indifferent, but Suzaku knows that look in Lelouch's eye when he sees it – rather, when he can't see anything else.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Lelouch appears to frown a little, "Yes. Why do you keep asking?"

*Getting defensive over practically nothing is a good enough reason to…*

"Because it seems like you're bothered, or distracted about something. Is it still Euphie?"

The determination to maintain the lie is steadfast in Lelouch's eyes, almost shining like a challenge, but the façade must be wafer-thin for it wavers quickly with a deep exhale.

"It's just…" Lelouch climbs into bed, crawling over Suzaku's legs. "Nunnally wants to dress up with Alice this year for Halloween, leaving me to go solo for the first time."

"And that bothers you," Suzaku says, not asks.

Lelouch shrugs again as he scuttles under the blanket.

"But, isn't it true that you don't care for wearing costumes?"

"*That* isn't what this is about," Lelouch bites with a furrow of his brow. "I did it for Nunnally because it makes her happy, and thus makes me happy. I never minded if it was for her."
"But now you don't have a reason to do it, is that what you're saying?"

Lelouch opens his mouth, but he doesn't manage to say anything.

"Lelouch, it isn't the end of the world. So Nunnally wants to have fun with a friend, can you blame
her? You and I do stuff all the time."

"We're different," Lelouch petulantly counters, commandeering Suzaku's lap as his pillow, not that
Suzaku particularly minds, he just finds it… odd. Because this is the first time. And he didn't do it
in the most snuggly of manners. "It just seems like she's growing up all of the sudden."

Suzaku simpers, resting a hand on Lelouch's shoulder, "She's fifteen now, Lelouch. She's been
growing for a long time."

"I know that, Captain Obvious. But it's starting to feel like she doesn't need me as much anymore." Lelouch's solemn tone only seems to add to the invisible weight on his shoulders, never mind the
insult – Suzaku likens those to some sort of defense mechanism, and are thus to be ignored. "…I'm
not ready for that."

Now who's playing Captain Obvious?

"I know it must be hard for you, but just remember that she'll always be your little sister no matter
what and you'll always be her big brother no matter what."

Lelouch doesn't seem convinced of that and Suzaku is uncertain if he should press this issue.

His mouth, however, seems to think he should.

"Listen, she'll always need you, but isn't the point of growing up to become independent? To find
our own place in the world?"

"I don't want her to be independent. Her place is with me." Lelouch sounds very silly but he
couldn't be more serious.

"You know what they say, Lelouch: if you love something, you should let it go."

"Whoever said that obviously never loved anything."

Suzaku chuckles slightly, "You sound like a child."

Lelouch grumbles.

"It'll be fine. When Nunnally is ready to start her life, you'll be ready to let her go because you'll
have been the one to prepare her. But, she'll always need you."

Lelouch grumbles… again.

Well, at least he stopped shrugging and sighing.

"And think of it this way: it will be good practice for our baby."

"Practice?" Lelouch dubiously repeats. "No, no. If anything it will be a lesson learned."

"Just what are you insinuating?" Suzaku playfully pokes at Lelouch's head.

"Keeping our small fry a small fry, of course. I won't give it the chance to grow."
"Now you just sound psychotic."

"But it isn't even just her growing up..." Lelouch ignores him, caught in a cloud of tension that darkens the room. "As much as I refused to believe the day would come... When I spoke to Nunnally the other night, she said she can't remember our mother's face anymore."

So that's what's been hanging over Lelouch's head lately...

Heavy stuff.

"I've spent the last seven years protecting her, but when it really mattered I was useless. What am I if I can't even keep her from getting hurt? That's all I've wanted to do for her and I can't even do that much." Suzaku doesn't think he's ever heard Lelouch sound so distressed and vulnerable, as if he's opening his chest for an inspection of his heart.

Even if Suzaku wasn't stunned silent, he doesn't think there'd be much he could say. This is the first time Lelouch has opened up so much - it must be a serious wound for him to talk about it - and Suzaku doesn't want to make Lelouch close back up like a clam. He just pets Lelouch's head as soothingly as he can, absorbing himself in the actions of his fingers as they comb through the inky tendrils of Lelouch's hair, relishing more than just the soft texture that swims over his skin.

He isn't sure he should pursue this vulnerable path laid before him by stating the obvious - that Nunnally is probably going to get hurt one way or another despite the efforts of big brother - but he doesn't think he should cater to Lelouch's delusion, either. Reality can hurt, but not facing it doesn't make it go away or any easier to handle in the end.

Suzaku knows that from experience.

Yet... this sounds contradictory; to say Nunnally is growing up but can't remember their mother... she's going to rely on Lelouch for something like this. But, because Lelouch feels helpless, there's nothing he can do, so... Are these two issues related or is Suzaku just puzzling over a clear picture?

"It doesn't matter if she gets hurt," he says softly, looking down at the raven-haired head in his lap. "What's important is that you're there to catch her when she falls. Words of wisdom don't always need to be shared; sometimes just being there to listen or hold her is enough."

Lelouch merely hums dispassionately, but he doesn't move away from Suzaku's touch, so maybe that's speaks for itself - if he was uncomfortable in any way he would spurn or deflect. Suzaku doesn't expect Lelouch to bare his soul, at least not all at once, and he doesn't want to become the exception to Lelouch's guarded heart; for Lelouch to feel safe and comfortable enough with him to not apply the shields he uses on everyone else. The fact that Lelouch has come to him with this worry at all is a giant step toward that certain sense of intimacy this violet-eyed clam has been avoiding by burying himself in the sand as deeply as possible.

Suzaku doesn't know what exactly inspired Lelouch to spill this private, personal morsel; all he does know is that he's welcoming this unprecedented phenomenon as attentively as he can like he finally got an independent, stray cat to willingly come to him and wants to savor the moment, unsure of when it will happen again. So, Suzaku is torn. He's too afraid of scaring Lelouch back into his shell and yet he doesn't want this chance to peer inside Lelouch's heart to pass by unfulfilled.

Maybe it would be smart to just leave it at this and not press his luck.

"...What does your mother look like?" Suzaku asks suddenly thanks to a persistent curiosity.
Lelouch shifts a little before answering, perhaps not expecting that question or maybe thrown by the present tense, and he speaks with a slow, mechanical slant to his words.

"You… want me to describe her to you?"

"Sure, if you don't mind. I have no idea what she looks like."

A true statement.

Suzaku has heard brief mentions of her, but nothing to do with her appearance.

And it isn't as if there are images of her littering today's society despite her reputation. Otherwise her son would've been recognized a long time ago.

"Well…" Lelouch fidgets again, "she was tall and thin, but strong and willful. Her face was kind of narrow but soft and warm when she smiled. She had deep blue eyes and long wavy hair like Nunnally, except it was black, and had fair skin…"

"She sounds pretty."

"She was. At least, I always thought so…"

Suzaku grins, "She also sounds like you – you must take after her a lot."

Lelouch shifts again and Suzaku gets the impression there's something he's not sharing.

Suzaku doesn't doubt it.

"Maybe."

"And from some of the stories I've heard Nunnally tell, it seems you inherited some of her protectiveness."

"…I don't want to talk about that."

The sudden clap of a shell snapping shut in Lelouch's words causes Suzaku's hand to flinch away in surrender, a physical doge of a line he, perhaps, shouldn't be crossing.

Not yet.

Hell, even Lelouch just saying he doesn't want to talk about it is saying something.

"Is there anything else you want to talk about?" Suzaku resumes petting Lelouch's hair, hoping he can maybe skim just a bit more off the crusty surface of Lelouch's shell.

But Lelouch reels from Suzaku's lap and he can already tell by those amethyst walls that the time to peek has passed. Instead those secretive, prideful lips press against his with a cupping hand on his cheek while another touches his hip… He faintly registers that there are indeed fingers flirting with his skin under his shirt and that they do indeed belong to Lelouch as he hears himself contently sigh. Lips are drawing him into a delightful daze that thickens when Lelouch's tongue bluntly enters his mouth, rubbing and slithering against his in hypnotic motions that practically wash his mind of everything except the physical realm. Suzaku almost can't believe how quickly they've gone from talking about Nunnally and Lady Marianne to—

Nunnally!
Suzaku instantly withdraws, his lips not quite catching up as he licks them clean, "So, have you finished your class work?"

What a lousy distraction…

But, Suzaku is desperate.

Lelouch’s eyebrow is already arced, "…You don't need to worry about that." He swoops in for Suzaku's lips to resume where they were, but firm hands act as a buffer against his chest and flush out his sneaking hand.

"Lelouch…" Suzaku murmurs, Nunnally-guilt bolted to his voice and pants like a chastity belt, making him sound more disinclined to the other boy's advances than he means to.

A disdainful screw tightens Lelouch's lips into a small, sneering smile and Suzaku can't blame him for it.

Suzaku doesn't mean to be a tease, but that's exactly what's happening.

The sour prince doesn't retreat from the defeat, though. He holds strong in his position.

"You've been avoiding me physically a lot lately," Lelouch's voice is surprising level considering the straining smile he just wore, tapping his fingers over Suzaku's leg in patient drumming, "and I know it isn't because you're not interested. Do you want to tell me why this is?"

Suzaku tries to swallow the confession budding in his throat, throwing his eyes as far away from Lelouch's once those vindicating violets pin to his, trying to upheave the little secret Suzaku's been sitting on with this single look. Suzaku doesn't make it a habit to lie, therefore he is not a very good liar and he doesn't intend to develop this skill, but it makes these moments with Lelouch all the more difficult. Once the brilliant boy has sniffed something peculiar, he won't relent until he's found the origin of the stench.

Which is unfortunate because Suzaku knows he's giving off quite a powerful smell.

He's also very vulnerable to Lelouch's intense stares.

"Suzaku…" Lelouch coaxes, rubbing his hand up and down Suzaku's leg as he pivots his head to look into evasive emeralds.

The suddenly skittish seahorse tries his best to steer clear of Lelouch's roping eyes, but he is inevitably wrangled by the stronger will of his friend.

"…It's…" Suzaku begins, a reluctant purse on his face to both confess and lie, "I'm worried that Nunnally might hear."

"Hm…" A grating pause sits on Lelouch's end, making Suzaku's nerves curl – Lelouch couldn't already know, could he? "She said something to you, too?"

"You mean she told you that she heard us having sex?!" Suzaku blurts out in a burst of nerves that were clogging his throat… but when he acknowledges Lelouch's expression [...(o_O)...?] he realizes his mouth has gotten him into trouble again.

"No…" Lelouch is surprisingly sober when he speaks – perhaps he knows what to expect from Suzaku by now, at least…
Suzaku is already nodding.

He knows he goofed.

"Suzaku… you really need to start thinking before you speak…"

"Yeah…"

"…or at least get the whole story first…"

"…I know."

"…As fun as it is to hear your spouts of stupidity…"

"I know…"

"…it's going to get you into a lot of trouble someday."

Suzaku merely nods – today wouldn't happen to be that "someday," would it?

Lelouch heaves a heavy sigh as he rubs a hand over his face as if trying to scrub the moment from his mind.

"…So… I guess that's to blame for your distance."

Suzaku nods without another word.

"I guess it can't be helped. But if you were quiet she probably wouldn't have heard anything in the first place."

Suzaku gawks at him – the nerve!

"You! You! You…!"

Lelouch fondly smirks at him and kisses his cheek.

"You're welcome, by the way."

"And you're an arrogant ass."

"You say 'arrogant,'" Lelouch grazes his lips over Suzaku's, "I say confident."

"Overconfident." The younger boy pushes the older one away in a strong rejection. "Work on your stamina and then get back to me."

"I'd suggest we work on that now, but the moment's been spoiled… thank you." He flops onto his back, folding his hands behind his head.

"Sorry…"

Lelouch shrugs.

…Just a shrug?

"You're actually handling this very well, for you. I thought you'd be more upset about this."

More like he thought Lelouch would bring upon the apocalypse at the mere whiff of this
"Oh, Suzaku..." Lelouch smiles strangely, staring at the ceiling. "You have no idea." Some unsettling chuckles cackle from his throat, "...It's almost amusing."

Suzaku stares.

Is this some sort of sick trick?

Or is he just underreacting on purpose...?

"...It is?"

"No. But I've been told I should learn to find the humor in life." Lelouch looks at his companion, placidity smoothing his features, "Otherwise I might endure health problems."

Who told you that?

"That doesn't mean you should repress your feelings." Suzaku frowns. "That's not any better than stressing out or getting worked up."

Lelouch laughs again, but it sounds less crazed and more humored as it tumbles in his chest.

"You're right about that, I suppose." He sighs, looking up again like he can see right through the ceiling. "I don't know, I think I'm kind of... relieved."

"Really?" Suzaku asks as he slides to lie down.

Lelouch nods, "Like I have one less thing to worry about. There's nothing proper about the situation, but Nunnally has a lot of grace and dignity to make this somewhat bearable."

"She is your sister," Suzaku smiles widely, nudging Lelouch with his elbow. "If anything, you have enough dignity to spare her."

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment." Lelouch gives Suzaku a sideways glance, "So... I guess this means we won't be having any sex if Nunnally is around."

"Not a chance."

•-

Lelouch finds Death on Halloween night and smiles.

The cheesy, plastic scythe complete with a flowing, black cloak, and skull mask are a far cry from bringing the fear of a true death to life, but the idiot picked something that's somewhat interesting, at least. Lelouch would certainly be impressed if the irony is on purpose.

Suzaku is standing by the window of the student council room, the dark sky a perfect backdrop for such an evening, as he socializes with Milly – who he would have to guess is supposed to be a pixie (because she could never be a fairy). The whimsically sheer, embroidered wings on her back, slender wand, and the glitter all over her exposed skin are a dead giveaway. She is dressed promiscuously enough, wearing a dark red halter-top and black miniskirt with dark hose and knee-high boots, all of which shows her figure rather unabashedly... which is being very much admired by the flamboyant clown behind her.
Rivalz couldn't have dressed any closer to the truth... but the white, dotted one-piece he's wearing isn't going to earn him any points despite being as vibrant as a peacock fanning his tail for a mate. He looks like a giant marshmallow, sprinkled with multi-coloured confetti and his orange wig looks like a flame trying to melt him into a sticky mess... He of course completed the outfit with a painted smile, a bulbous, red nose and big red shoes... Rivalz gets points for dedication, if nothing else.

Even Arthur is decked out for the party, although he doesn't look pleased as he scratches at the fake crown strapped to his head and cape tied around his neck while resting on his high perch. Nina is standing awkwardly beside him, looking as if she can't decide to pet him or not, and looks relatively regular, save for the white lab coat swathing her body.

Kallen is sitting at the table nearby, looking as bored and annoyed as an invalid can, dressed like some samurai warrior out of a painting, a fake, sheathed katana lying in front of her – at least Lelouch hopes it's fake.

The only person missing is—

"Is it true that Zero is really a woman?"—Lelouch hears an excited Milly ask Suzaku and he decides, rather irritatedly (why is she so fixated on that...? And who ever factually reported that he is a woman?), that now is a good a time as any to steal his seahorse away from the party.

When he sets out to make his decision a reality, however, he finds himself caught from behind by the gloved, beseeching hand of a life-size doll in a short, baby blue dress with orange pigtails, rich red lips, and bright pink cheeks.

"Shirley?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I just really need to talk to you," she meekly says contrary to her strong grip, her powdered face pursed with angst.

"It wouldn't happen to be an apology for standing me up, would it?" he asks her a bit derisively, watching her flinch with guilt – he isn't even really bothered by it, but an apology would still be nice.

...It doesn't matter that he initially planned to do the same thing to her when he agreed to attend the concert with her... because he did show up, even if he was late – better late than never. (And it was for her own good, anyway. She didn't need to get anymore attached to a troubled rebel than she already was...)

"I'm sorry about that... I'm just so confused. Everyone keeps saying things about me and you, that I, err, we were friends or something, but I don't remember anything at all. Why is that? Why can't I remember you when we've clearly known each other for years?"

Lelouch isn't sure how to answer that, but he figures that, in this case, maybe honesty isn't such a bad idea.

It's about time this gets wrapped up nicely, anyway.

He smirks at her a bit playfully, "Because I told you to forget about me."

Shirley blinks at him; his words wiping her face clean of any understanding.

"Because you told me to...?"
"That's right," he says still smiling as he offers her his hand – knowing a pixie-Milly is watching them from the corner of her eye. "So why don't we start over now? A fresh start for a new friendship?"

Shirley's brain is lost at sea as she stares at his hand as if it's some strange, new fish species, but grasps it anyway.

"Ok… I guess…" her olive eyes look up at him bemusedly, "Does this mean I'm supposed to start calling you 'Lulu'?"

He'd rather she didn't.

But, for the sake of appearances…

"I think everyone else might leave you alone if you do."

She smiles and it's nothing short of relief that washes her brain back to her, "Then I guess I will."

"So our Vice President finally shows himself," Milly sassily calls as she sashays up to them, her eyes rolling over Lelouch with a disdainful grin. "I'm so glad you worked hard on your costume."

Lelouch smirks back at her, "Always try my best, Madam President."

She hums at him as she tugs one of Shirley's pigtails, "Well, now that all the business has been taken care of, it's time to kick off the party! Everyone to their posts! We draw the curtains at seven o'clock, sharp!"

Lelouch gets a feeling of déjà vu as he watches everyone walk through the door behind her like a train – they were supposed to have a quick overview of tonight's schedule and protocol, but it seems Milly can't be bothered with that anymore…

Or did he miss that part?

"Guess it's time to go, then." Shirley's hair bounces about her shoulders as she prances out of the room, "See you later, Lulu!"

Lelouch smiles despite the use of his cutesy nick-name.

That was certainly an easy fix, but Lelouch won't complain.

He likes reconciliations that are concise and straightforward… even though that wasn't quite straightforward…

"I don't know what surprises me more"—Lelouch hears someone say behind him—"The fact that you're a devil or that you hardly even tried on your costume."

Lelouch comes face-to-face with the Grim Reaper himself and he smiles a crooked smirk, "And I suppose you think you're better?"

Suzaku shrugs, but it's hard to tell through the mask and roomy robe just what type of shrug it is.

"At least I didn't just tie a tail to my pants and call it a costume."

Fact: Lelouch got dressed in his regular street clothes, added devil horns and tail, and went to the party.
Fact: No one said he had to put a lot of effort into his costume, just that he had to wear one of some kind.

"You're the one calling it a costume, aren't you?" Lelouch counters airily with a cross of his arms. "As far as you know this is the real me."

"So you keep telling me, right?" Suzaku laughs.

"The sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll understand."

Suzaku shakes his head, pushing his mask up under his hood to reveal a light sheet of sweat already beading on his face – oh, how that leads Lelouch's thoughts astray…

"Something's missing, though." Suzaku lifts an eyebrow, looking Lelouch over with inspecting eyes. "Where's your pitchfork?"

Like Lelouch cared enough to carry something like that around, let alone find one.

Fact: Lelouch didn't try on his costume, remember?

Feeling in the spirit for the first time this Halloween, a sultry smirk crawls over his lips at the naughty thoughts that fill his head and he seductively taps on Suzaku's chest with one finger.

"You know, Nunnally is going to be out for some time tonight, enjoying the festivities…"—supervised, of course; Nunnally might be off with Alice, but everywhere they go, a ninja is watching them—"So," he bats his eyelashes at Suzaku, his gaze steaming with allure, "we could slip away if you'd like to see my pitchfork."

A roguish grin claims Suzaku's lips, "I should've known a demon like you would jump on the chance to take me to heaven."

"I wonder if a reaper and a demon are even capable of going to heaven," Lelouch murmurs huskily, sliding his finger up Suzaku's chest and snatching his chin, "but it's worth investigating, don't you think?"

Death appears to swallow and a skittish ripple quakes his voice, "Certainly. But won't everyone notice if we're not around? We have jobs, and aren't you supposed to help with the costume contest? I'd rather not be interrupted on our trip because we're not at our posts."

Suzaku does bring up a good point… unfortunately.

Thanks to the festival last month that ate quite the hole in their budget, this Halloween is a rather low-key affair… to Milly's standards. They've still got all the junk food any kid could ask for, plenty of music for the dancers, the scary movie marathon for the thrill seekers, a few murder, killing related role-playing games, but for the most part it's an independently celebrated holiday – one the school supports because it keeps their students out of trouble, or at least keeps their trouble on campus. Still, these aren't terribly difficult tasks to manage, the rest of the student council can handle these few activities fine, along with the chaperones (who are the real babysitters, not Lelouch) without two of their members; and if they can't, well, Lelouch is even more worried about the future state of this world.

There's only one thing Lelouch ever looks forward to and it is taking Nunnally through an unofficial Trick or Treating throughout the campus - but she's going with Alice this year…

All that's left is the costume contest, which is Milly's baby and the only real "event" of the night.
Lelouch only has to be there as a formality because he's the Vice President, and because Milly doesn't like to count the votes… and because she would try to rig it. It isn't even exciting, although he is fearful. The winner is determined democratically and always receives some mysterious prize that could be anything – though it usually involves exploiting some poor member of the student council.

Actually, that gives him an idea…

"Not to worry," Lelouch reassures. "I can take care of that." He struts over to the intercom, complacently clearing his throat before ringing the attention chimes. "Attention, students, this is your Vice President speaking with an important announcement: as a surprise twist tonight, the Student Council President herself has promised to award the person who can capture her and steal her wand first with one wish! All high school students are eligible, so go find her before the game ends at midnight! Good luck!"

*Let's see her try to run in those boots.*

Too distracted by the costume contest, Milly doesn't realize she led herself right into the lion's den…

And that she left Lelouch with the gate key.

He grabs Suzaku's wrist and flees the scene as quickly as possible, before he can become trapped by his own trick.

••

"Lelouch, I'm a little surprised at you," Suzaku says in a breath with a toothy smile, his heart racing to catch up to him as he slips his shoes off at the door of Lelouch's dark bedroom.

"She won't be president forever and it'd be nice for her to get a taste of her own medicine before she leaves." Lelouch shrugs, turning to Death after locking the door behind them, a wily warp on his lips, "…And it isn't like she doesn't deserve it."

Suzaku is grinning, "This will buy us some alone time, at least…"

"That was the plan." The Demon happily wags his eyebrows, not wasting any time to smooch with Suzaku where they stand, his arms roping around Suzaku's waist and pulling until there's no space left between them. Suzaku wraps his own limbs around Lelouch's neck, somewhat wishing he could just hop up into the taller boy's arms and be carried to bed… but that's like wishing for the moon.

But he doesn't need the moon to come to him.

He can meet it halfway.

Suzaku decides to take the initiative for once, pulling Lelouch with him around the bed by their locked lips, breaking when he sheds his mask, scythe and long, black cloak. They fall from his fingertips as Lelouch's palms softly skim up his naked torso under a white t-shirt, those hot hands sliding around his hips and up his back, spreading a wildfire over Suzaku's skin. He feels the fiery excitement churning in his crotch as Lelouch kisses his neck, sucking and lapping along his pulse in a way that entices his muscles to wither and beg for the bed. The clatter of devil horns crashing against the hard-wood floor cracks loudly in their thickening air, the thud of Lelouch's shoes close behind them as Suzaku sinks into the bed with the Britannian between his legs. Lelouch pulls Suzaku's knees up as he settles between them and a hand rakes into midnight his hair as he kisses
the brunet again with pleasantly firm and controlling lips.

Lips that sweetly claimed Suzaku.

They break a bit for air and Lelouch licks Suzaku's bottom lip, sensually sucking the plumping part with close attention to the boy's hidden hot spot with a hinting scrape of teeth. Suzaku tries to keep from *drooling* as he holds his mouth open, gasping as one hand rubs down from his thigh over his clothed crotch with just the right pressure in just the right places. It pushes an unsuppressed moan from Suzaku's throat, making Lelouch slurp off his lip to lustfully stare at him as he concentrates the groping of his fingers on tightening testicles. The affectionate hand has Suzaku's hips squirming faintly as it massages and pulls, squeezes and rubs as if polishing a dirty but delicate *doorknob* and it knocks the soldier's head back, tipping his face to the side in mewling pleasure.

Those smoldering violet eyes are staring down at him with sharp, intimidating focus. Suzaku is almost surprised the *demon* hasn't swiftly devoured him yet, but he can tell by the ravenous glimmer on Lelouch's entrancing eyes that this won't be a short encounter – not that he minds it at all, being as horny as he's ever been in his life, *so far*. Suzaku never knew he could become so physically starved, and maybe the pregnancy is affecting his hormones, but these past weeks of frustrated kisses and petting without promises of more has raised a realization within him.

Maybe because this time was different – probably because now he *knew* exactly what he was missing.

It was hard to find the time to be together before, but there was always *something* to tide them over until they could devote all of their attention to each other. A hand down his pants in the boy's restroom, some quick dry-humping in the storage building, a friendly fellatio on the rooftop, or even a discreet after-dinner dessert… But this time, there wasn't any of that. Suzaku's schedule didn't allow for a lot of spare time in and out of school, and any of the chances he got he was too afraid to take due to Nunnally's unintentional warning. Suzaku can't believe it's been over a month since they've had *intercourse*, and that he's *so* conscious of it. In reality, they haven't been together all that long, for a little over two months now, and their physical relationship is just as old, but it feels so much longer since they became this secret item.

Like, maybe, *seven years*.

Suzaku can already feel the craving for copulation heating his body with lustful blood and dull throbs in his flexing insides, a sensation that intensifies when Lelouch's fingers breach his clothes. They tuck behind the borders of his gym shorts and boxers, tugging them easily from his hips with their elastic waistbands dragging over Suzaku's hardening flesh, making him groan in his nose and fist the sheets. He just knows his knuckles are bleached by the anticipated tension tightening his body as his clothes clear his feet and by the way Lelouch's hands leave a burning chill as they smooth over his legs towards to his flushing length. It twitches at the teasing caress of fingertips that cruise up and down the shaft before curling in a secure grip and decide to dilatorily start pumping as his own hands clutch to Lelouch's shoulders with a whimper. Then Suzaku becomes aware of the fact that Lelouch is still fully clothed while he's nude from head-to-toe just before he feels Lelouch shift and the lazy fumbling of clothing reaches his ears—

But he flinches when something strange nudges his nipple and immediately sees Lelouch's wanton smirk, then the hard plastic of a devil tail topped with a spear-tipped cone. It circles around his tight nub, trickling tingles from his chest down to his wet erection still caught in Lelouch's sluggish hand as it slinks up and down with no end in sight; sensations that sink Suzaku into darker depths of pleasure. It flicks over his stiff nub and Suzaku lets himself openly gasp with closed eyes,
presenting his chest for more with a small arch of his back, and it heeds his request. A softly satisfied sound nuzzles in Suzaku's nose as his hard nipples are teased with a circling, flicking tail of a demon above him. He succumbs to the pull, letting his partner drink in his open expression of fulfillment as a thicker moans flow from his throat until everything stops and his drooping eyelids are lifted like shades. Those molten violets eyes are the first thing Suzaku's sees as Lelouch leans in close to his face, their noses almost brushing as that red, slim tail is brought between them, the plastic tip rubbing over Suzaku's lips with pushy flirtation.

…Suzaku sees where this is going.

He parts his lips – hoping he looks as sexy as he's trying to be – and touches it with the tip of his tongue, sweeping over it as if it's a piece of candy, or maybe something else – Suzaku has just realized how much resemblance it bears to a certain body part. He actually rather likes this playful suggestion (not like Lelouch has ever given him the chance to do it for real), and he can see the enjoyment glimmer in Lelouch's eyes. The Britannian is smirking at him again, always, gently moving the tail forward and back onto Suzaku's taunting tongue and it slides through puffing lips, in and out in a slow, sensual manner until he adds his own tongue to the mix. It prods only briefly in Suzaku's mouth before vanishing in a flash—

Kisses melt on the inside of Suzaku's thigh as they slowly plant closer to the place a hand is gripping, wet sounds stirring the excitement in his loins with sweltering eagerness that only boils once hot puffs of air sail down his pulsing erection. A wide lick over the top of his cock pulls a moan from Suzaku's throat, teeth biting down on plastic as his knees are hooked over Lelouch's shoulders and his hips twitch upward for more, to be deeper. He doesn't have to wait long for the hot pocket of Lelouch's mouth to engulf him, sucking tamely as he wiggles and slides his tongue in the perfect places that makes Suzaku feel like he'll blow a fuse.

Their physical relationship might still be young, but Lelouch is a very fast learner and a very good listener to what Suzaku's body likes. He's more or less gotten pleasuring Suzaku down to a science which seems impersonal but isn't (entirely) accurate. Truth is, Lelouch couldn't be any more up close and personal than he already is. He knows which buttons to press and which knobs to turn to get Suzaku running like a well oiled machine – but this thought brings Suzaku dangerously close to Lloyd and the Lancelot, and he'd rather not stay on that path for too long.

Not that Suzaku has the capacity to concentrate on anything other than Lelouch's bobbing head anymore…

With closed eyes Suzaku is gripping at the roots of onyx hair as if they're his only tether to the planet and his earthly hold is tested when fingers begin to tease at his entrance. They are dry and gentle as they entice him to open up and relax with inviting pressure, but he's been ready since they started and welcomes the attention with a contented jerk of his hips. The swampy mouth savoring his hard flesh slides off, lazily lapping his tense balls a few times as his knees are pushed all the way to his chest – with the order to hold them there – and then he feels a hot wetness slide up his empty entrance—

And Suzaku's emerald eyes spring open when he flinches at the moist breath hotly puffing against his opening, realizing what is happening—

"Lelouch, what are you…?" the seahorse worriedly beckons as the tail leaves his mouth, looking down between his knees and seeping length only to see the top of the older boy's head. A taunting heat torches across Suzaku's face and ears while a tongue continues to lick his pink portal and he clenches the inside of his knees. "…louch…" Suzaku pants, head falling back into a rising flush of scorching pleasure that threads up through his blood with Lelouch's needling tongue. He's not sure
if he wants Lelouch to stop… but he is surprised and…

His hardness pulses as he feels his entry invitingly flex the slimy thing that teasing pokes him. Lelouch rubs Suzaku with the flat of his tongue, lapping up the morsels of desire that drip from Suzaku's mouth in Japanese drops. Suzaku's toes curl and he noshes a curse tangled in a stifled moan at the teen that dominates his every nook and cranny, and how much he carelessly enjoys it. They both enjoy it – and Suzaku likes Lelouch's attentive passion, even if he might get a bit carried away on his own sometimes…

When the devil tail returns, Suzaku gets to be surprised again. Rather than the mind-numbing dexterity of Lelouch's long fingers it's the plastic, slightly curved rod that tenderly turns into him with the help of a moistening tongue. Suzaku's body initially locks up with a strangled grunt at the intrusion but Lelouch's mouth swiftly returns to sucking his cock along with a holding hand and all the pleasing stimulation eases his eager body into acceptance despite uncomfortable reluctance to what's happening.

…Lelouch really seems to have already reached the point where he'd like to spice things up a bit, which would be fine if he wouldn't just decide these things on his own. This left-brained boy isn't the spontaneous type, prone to adhering to schedules and routines, but that doesn't mean Suzaku can predict his every move. Lelouch is thinking things long before they come to life, so in his mind there's nothing random about them even though all that pondering stays in his head.

Shoving a devil tail up Suzaku's ass – without introduction or permission – is very random.

It's only more disturbing if Lelouch has actually spent time thinking about it prior to this moment.

Suzaku is initially quite uncertain how to feel about this – he really should've been asked first – as he feels that slim spade sig into his body, but he can't deny the delight it brings as Lelouch carefully slides and swivels it around inside him, stretching and filling his needs. Sometimes Suzaku still can't wrap his head around the surreal reality that has blossomed between him and Lelouch – who planted and nurtured this unknown pleasure inside him. He wouldn't have thought he would or could hanker to not only be this close with someone but to feel that ache within him – and that it's for Lelouch.

Maybe Suzaku had lots of reasons to be dumbstruck by Lelouch's feelings, but, maybe there are many more reasons they're a perfect fit.

It isn't even just the superlative sensation; it's also the pure connection between them that quells a strong, lonely emptiness in Suzaku in both the literal and metaphorical senses. Suzaku doesn't want to say that all of his emotional problems are simply solved by Lelouch's penis (because that's just absurd), but sex, this entire relationship, with his dashing, brooding prince has made him feel almost human again. Suzaku doesn't imagine that he'll ever feel this way about anyone else, that any other man could satisfy him like Lelouch and he plans to never, ever need know otherwise. He wants Lelouch, and only Lelouch.

Of course, this novelty tail doesn't compare to Lelouch's strong flesh, being much too thin and thrusting only so far, but it certainly does the job that a pair of fingers could do. He can feel that tip he previously slathered with his tongue prod at his prostate, swiping over it with Lelouch's calculated aim that shocks hot excitement through Suzaku's blood until it bottles and bubbles in his sopping erection. Pressure that threatens to burst right of him and into Lelouch's tortuous mouth as he continues to lap and suck, his tongue a constant assault to Suzaku's sensitive flesh. Lelouch is almost too casual about it even though the sucking intensifies and reddens Suzaku's body while searing through his loins with pulsing pleasure that's licked up by that slithery tongue. It continually works with tormenting purpose; so soft and ruthless as it circles and sweeps over his
leaking tip, tempting the orgasm right out of his body more and more each second.

Suzaku isn't sure he can take much more of this…

His hips are unsteady as his toes curl again and his thighs compress the slurping head between them while squeezing around the tail that bumps his prostate enough to bake his cock and balls like eggs in a frying pan. It doesn't thrust aggressively or dive to the fullest depths but at Lelouch's hand it really does become a devil, leaving Suzaku craving so much more even as he rockets to heaven. Spurred by a pre-tremble volt of his climax, Suzaku tugs on Lelouch's hair as a warning, to stop everything before he reaches the point of no-return, but Lelouch only moves faster, even ignoring the gasping plea of his name. Suzaku hears his voice leaping from his throat in confused sounds, the desperate, begging words to stop because he's about to— rasping from his lips as his slightly panicked lungs choke his voice.

Suzaku doesn't understand why Lelouch won't heed his warning – undeniable request – and with his mind so distractedly trying to wrap around the boy in front of him, his orgasm rushes him like a surging surf, blanketing him in blinding bliss. He is suspended in the shuddering flow consuming him as his knees curl towards his chest and his hips jerk like a second hand on a clock as all the heavenly pressure jets from his body. On the clear edge of his mind, he's aware of Lelouch slipping off of his softening length to lean over the side of the bed, the evident sound of him spitting into the trash bin near the desk is heard, causing the younger boy to dryly swallow through his gaping mouth.

"...You didn't stop..." Suzaku pants almost as a question, sweeping the sweat on his brow up into his hair with one hand.

Lelouch looks at him with a smugly lifted eyebrow, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You'd have rather I left you unfinished?"

That isn't what Suzaku meant…

Lelouch removes the tail from Suzaku's body rather roughly, prompting him to grunt and grumpily jump on the new subject.

"And what was with that tail?" Suzaku lightly grouses.

Lelouch's ebony-haired head tilts, "Didn't think I was getting the optimal amount of enjoyment out of my purchase. Thought that would enhance the experience."

Suzaku's scowls tightens, "This isn't a game!"

Lelouch could've asked or at least warned him first!

…Never mind that Suzaku could've stopped him if he really wanted to.

"Don't fret. I'm taking this very seriously." Lelouch seems to mock him like a snake flaunting its tongue as he retrieves a bottle and condom from the desk.

Suzaku watches him for a second through scrutinizing squinting before snatching the bottle from his partner's hand.

"Then take off your clothes," he pointedly declares with a plain almost-glare, causing Lelouch to blink at him first and then smirk at him second.
Sometimes Lelouch is just so… Lelouch.

The brunet is shaking his head at his own tolerance of the other teen, looking at the lubricant gel in his hand – Lelouch usually does this part, to enjoyable detail, but this time Suzaku thinks… It’s his turn to be spicy. He flips the cap remembering their first time together with a subtle bottle of vanilla-scented hand lotion Lelouch had for unknown reasons – perhaps it was used in his private time, Suzaku can’t say. To this day whenever Suzaku's nose catches a whiff of the light, delicately sweet scent he's washed in that evening, and night, when his body learned Lelouch’s. And Lelouch learned his. And Suzaku has to be careful because if he wades too deeply… his thoughts will form rather publicly in his pants. The proper young Britannian has since purchased something suitable for their love-making but Suzaku misses the aroma as he spreads a cool dollop of (impersonal) gel on his fingers. As it warms on his fairly calloused digits, Suzaku glances at Lelouch to see the lad's torso is bare and working to make his lower half the same. Then he looks back at his coated fingers with different eyes.

After a brief moment of deliberation Suzaku decides he's deliberating too much and turns his body to face Lelouch toward the head of the bed before reaching with a somewhat tentative hand. He leans back on one hand as he presses his own slickened fingers against his opening, rubbing himself before slipping in a middle finger that makes room for a first finger. His movements grab Lelouch’s observant orbs and even in the dark Suzaku can see the double-take those violets make when they digest what it is he's doing. Suzaku swallows under that attentive stare, wondering what thoughts are tossing around behind it – hoping it at least enjoys the view, because he's trying to be sexy for his controlling clam. This isn't the same feeling of Lelouch’s care but it still sews an arousal within him. Suzaku's entrance is surprisingly relaxed but still tight and yearning to take in his fingers as if they belong to Lelouch, as if of its own mind, and a whispering moan even escapes his throat as he massages his own passage. A naughty heat bubbles up his body as he tries to prepare himself more that a skinny tail did, feeling his hot blood bake up through his skin and tingle in his nipples. They twist with prickling pleasure starving to be touched just like Suzaku's inner hunger that only intensifies the longer he teases himself and Lelouch's sharpening gaze. The passive boy is slightly reveling in the way his display steams those strong amethyst eyes as he begins to roll his hips in calm, almost tranquil motions at the full feeling reclaiming him—

And Lelouch tears the condom wrapper open with his teeth before he pounces like a lion before Suzaku can feel too sinful. Hands are roaming Suzaku's body once again and lips are pressing a flock of kisses over his shoulders, neck and face in an amorous onslaught that leads the soldier to believe Lelouch likes very much what he is seeing. Suzaku would ask, but it's not like he’d get an adequate response, and he doesn't want to bother with the redundant now as he is immersed in an ardent kiss. His knees are pushed up toward his chest again and Suzaku is pushed down as their tongues tango while another hand skates fingertips down his arm to flirt with his handy work. Two of Lelouch’s long fingers dip into Suzaku and tangle with his, hoisting a lustful sound from the younger boy’s lungs, overpowering the timid twiddling of the younger boy’s fingering. Suzaku breaks from Lelouch’s mouth with a crisper moan and withdraws his fingers to feel the stretch of his filling ring opening around his partner’s shifting bones.

Suzaku has wanted nothing else.

His frame practically buckles under tension the both releases and builds as Lelouch thoroughly strokes his insides. Suzaku is pushing his hips up towards Lelouch's lap with pleasure mounting his body, throbbing in the rapid return of his erection. Lelouch's covered length is full and standing, so he quickly slips his still-wet fingers around his boyfriend's hard flesh before feeling it thickly enter and fill his narrow channel. Not soon enough, Suzaku thinks…

"Does it still hurt?” Lelouch cautiously asks as he's fully breached inside Suzaku, his brow folded
into a troubled crease.

"Not as much as the first time," he quietly admits with a dissolving grimace, wrapping his arms around an ivory neck and taking a pacifying breath as he clenches in adjustment to the deep girth in his body. "Just… try not to rush." Of course, this gentle murmur is requesting more than Lelouch keep it slow; it's also asking him to last longer, to make it longer.

Lelouch appears to understand that as he fully and fervently kisses Suzaku. The pilot doesn't know when they'll get a chance for this again and he wants to make the most of it for as long as they can – perhaps Lelouch is on the same page for he didn't even crack a quip at Suzaku's implication, and his beginning movements are measured, patient.

Suzaku never took Lelouch as a physical person, for obvious reasons, but he's turned out to be a… domineering but attentive lover who has yet to truly disappoint Suzaku – he may not last for very long, but it's the quality, not the quantity.

And Lelouch's quality is superb.

However, it took some time getting used to the way Lelouch performs.

He doesn't just have sex, he makes love.

It's almost too corny to believe, but Lelouch is as soft inside as he is hard on the outside. There are times when their messing around only appears to be an animalistic urge, but Suzaku has observed that Lelouch is incapable of leaving their physical moments to be that shallow and meaningless, because they simply aren't. It became clear to Suzaku that every careful touch Lelouch makes and every kiss he takes are done for more than the fun, they're an expression of his heart, of the things he can't say out loud, and Suzaku has learned to accept that. He doesn't want to change Lelouch or even try to, even if that means never getting to hear those three, little words as often as he likes to say them. Lelouch prefers to show his affection rather than tell it, and that's perfectly fine. As it is, he's grown fond of Lelouch's pampering in bed despite the dead eyes of his father telling him he shouldn't enjoy it, that he doesn't deserve it – but as this time passes with Lelouch, those eyes have begun to fade. Suzaku can lie underneath his lover now and not feel guilt crushing him as he is taken by the feelings of a boy who is too introverted (traumatized) to share them in words.

It is ironic, though, to have an eloquent boy rely on his actions while a boy who's inarticulate to rely on his words.

Still, Lelouch isn't any less bossy in bed than he is out of bed, and it's apparent to Suzaku that his handsome prince is happiest when he just lies under him like a limp noodle. Not romantic and not really fair, but Lelouch is still much too attached to his perceptions of power and control – security – to allow Suzaku any sexual venturing of his own. Lelouch probably thinks he's hiding that fear well, but not well enough to fool Suzaku – or maybe Suzaku has just finally understood.

[He'll never forget the time he gambled on pinching Lelouch's nipple when things were heating between the sheets only to receive a complete halt of action and a strangely fearsome stare along with a stern: "Don't do that."

"Because you don't like it?" Suzaku had asked, innocently enough.

Lelouch only answered with another stern response of "Don't do it" before resuming as if none of that had just happened.

One would have to assume that Lelouch did not like it.]
When it comes to Lelouch, everything is always about control no matter what. It isn't to say that he views Suzaku as less than an equal, it's just some paranoid distrust that's been left to stew in his brain with the betrayal of his father, resulting in a boy who is afraid to yield. It isn't even that he distrusts Suzaku, either; he just doesn't know how to trust, how to open up, or how to properly express his deeper thoughts and feelings. But because Suzaku loves him and understands him, he'll be patient.

"Suzaku…?" Lelouch's concern-laden voice flutters at Suzaku's ears. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah… why?"

Lelouch's expression is flatter than a tortilla, "For one: you didn't notice when we stopped moving. Two: you don't look like you're enjoying it."

"Since when did that stop you?"

"I'm a heartless lover. Funny."

Suzaku laughs a little under his breath, "…No, I was just thinking…"

"Hell of a time to pick up such a nasty habit."

Suzaku pushes him playfully—"What if I told you…"—only to draw him closer with a smile—"that I was thinking about how much I loved you?"

Lelouch appears to consider that with a lift of his eyebrow.

"In that case, maybe you should refocus that energy somewhere else."—he squeezes Suzaku's round rear—"You know, somewhere more proactive. Where it won't be wasted."

"Oh, I'm a dunce. Funny."

Lelouch grins, "I think so."

Suzaku shakes his head but accepts the kiss Lelouch mischievously presses against the humored curve on his lips, hugging the demon close by a snowy neck.

…At any rate, their sex situation works well as a whole because Suzaku doesn't mind being whatever Lelouch wants and Lelouch doesn't mind making him be whatever he wants.

They're truly made for each other.

Like a sculptor and clay.

But that's always been the reality.

That's how it began.

Beyond their rocky start as children, their reunion as restless teenagers brought something different to the table; brought the past seven years they hadn't shared and an uncertain future they both feared to lose. Suzaku, especially, wasn't sure how much longer he'd be walking the face of the Earth and fell into Lelouch's advances through some initially impure motives…

Lelouch was the initiator, he's always been the initiator, always been the one with the idea, to make the first move and take the first step towards his ambition whatever it might be. When Lelouch gambled their friendship on an uncertain kiss not long after the *Arthur chase*, Suzaku ultimately felt
that he didn't have the right to let Lelouch be alone with those feelings because he knew Lelouch wouldn't squander their relationship on a whim – even less so with something like a kiss. Not with his closed emotions. Suzaku knew Lelouch was serious. His own feelings for the older boy were muddled and obscured by the veil of guilt he constantly wore, which hastily brought him to Lelouch's bed without much resistance.

At first there was a strangeness that it was Lelouch – said boy being a boy almost didn't quite register after that fact, but even that detail going almost unnoticed made Suzaku realize that... it didn't really matter to him. Suzaku never really thought of other men in that way but there's also only one Lelouch in this world. Maybe that's cliché, but he doesn't care. What he knows is that it felt—feels so natural to be with Lelouch in every sense; the feeling of Lelouch's hands on his body, of their sliding skin, and even Lelouch's wheezing... He doesn't really know where Lelouch stands on his sexuality as it's not something they discuss – because again, it's Lelouch – but he knows that Lelouch was also a virgin regardless of how emboldened he was. It had seemed that Lelouch might've been interested in girls... and maybe he would've been with one (like a certain orange-haired girl of the Student Council) if Suzaku hadn't—

(Because maybe he shouldn't have—)

Because he didn't deserve—)

That first time they spent together was the result of Suzaku feeling all he had to offer was himself, so he gave himself wholeheartedly, hoping Lelouch would at least have something to treasure when death finally came between them. That Lelouch wouldn't hurt as much when he was gone, but just that one time together was more than Suzaku wanted to admit it was. He knew it was special, but didn't ponder on why. He couldn't. Suzaku realized he probably wasn't going anywhere soon, and he realized that he was beginning to love Lelouch too much to want to, or perhaps he realized he always loved Lelouch and was only recently allowing himself to accept it – because Lelouch deserved someone better than him. But, the former prince made his choice and that was that – Lelouch wasn't going to lose anyone else if he could help it, and it seems he's been victorious in his battle.

The Zero problem is still here, still lurking behind every smile Lelouch makes, but...

Maybe Suzaku would like to go back to second-guessing himself. At least until he's ready to confront that ugly truth.

Sometimes he just wants enjoy the ride without analyzing every detail to death.

That tiring job can be left to Lelouch.

Right now Suzaku has forgotten everything – his pregnancy, the Zone, how to properly breathe – as his body coils like string around Lelouch's finger – which wasn't so far from the truth earlier. He braces himself against the bars of Lelouch's bed with folded arms while the achingly apparent emptiness gnawing at Suzaku's insides is pushed farther and farther away every time Lelouch thrusts into his clenching walls. He moans as he stretched and filled so divinely he can't help clinging around his friend's cock deep in his body even as it's quick to return. It's a maddening repetition that pounds his prostate with every lunge and Suzaku's breathless body is too starved to let this slow build slowly drown him. He can hear his voice pushing out of his throat with every swing of Lelouch's hips and how needy words weakly bead from his throat.

More.

Faster.
Harder.

Deeper.

Suzaku had asked the other boy to not rush but he's quickly bowing to the demands of bottled lust. His ravenous body can't get enough of the hips ramming into his bottom with propelling thrusts that have him unconsciously crooning. All the anxious snowballing of every chance Suzaku couldn't take to be alone with Lelouch has crashed, melted and swept him out to the musky sea of Lelouch's passion. He already preprogrammed Suzaku with his *mouth* earlier (or maybe he actually did during their *first* time) and Suzaku is too caught in the swarming haze of his blood to bother grasping to control.

Lelouch, *the master*, can handle that.

Yet, maybe he's slipping just as fast as Suzaku down their sexy slope.

Through his haze Suzaku feels himself being guided over onto his knees and he fists the blankets with one hand while his other grips the cold top bar of the foot rail as Lelouch continues, but *faster and deeper*. The taller boy's length slides all the way in at this angle and Suzaku's whole body opens up from his rear to his throat that spills out a loose cry. It sharpens and chops into satisfied crows with Lelouch's thrusting hips flooding bliss down Suzaku's spine and over his shoulders when his upper half slumps to one elbow. He feels Lelouch's soft and firm hands affectionately fondle his plump posterior before they slide away; one gently holds the bullet scar near his waist as he likes to do while the other surfs down his waving spine. It soothingly rubs between his shifting shoulder blades and Suzaku sincerely presses his backside against strong hips when it weaves up his earthy hair and pets his head. Suzaku calls the older boy with a lusty dusted voice and cries when Lelouch dives *harder* in response, noisily plunging in as completely as he can.

*Thank the Halloween gods* they get to be alone right now—*no, thanks Lelouch.*

And how Suzaku would love it if they could have *all night*.

The end of this frolic is creeping up Suzaku's skin and he can hear it in Lelouch's labored breath, too. Suzaku's lungs can't seem to trap enough air either and he's pulling himself up with bed rail as if to break the surface of their foggy lust. The brunet can feel his face flaming a ripe red and wishes he could see the intense, impassioned violet embers of Lelouch's eyes right now as he feels the same gent's hard flesh inside him. It strides perfectly against his prostate while re-shaping his tightening insides and Suzaku props himself on the bed bar with solid arms and hanging mouth. Cries freely fly from his rolling gut and pounding cock that he doesn't want to touch. He wants to climax from feeling Lelouch inside him, from Lelouch's thrusting that's carving his back into a solid dip. Suzaku gasps a guttural noise when fingers pinch his pulsing nipples and wonders with a hungry whine if Lelouch *read his mind* and is purposely teasing him, by not groping his panging erection. Lelouch rolls the rigid nubs and Suzaku can't help the desperate call of his boyfriend's name as his clamping hands constrict around heated metal. Lips peck the top of his spine as hands appear on the rail outside of Suzaku's—

And again the shorter boy is jostled out of his skull when his passage is stricken with unexpectedly forceful thrusts and a rough cry rips from his throat.

This…

It's too much—

"I'm gonna…!" Suzaku feverishly warns, feeling acid in his locking joints and the threatening boil
in his loins.

Lelouch merely moves his hips and—

Suzaku is fairly certain that if his brain wasn’t already oozing out of his dripping hardness it launches out of him now when he suddenly soars right over his peak (…they’ll have to remember to clean the floor later). He shudders and pants, feeling his arms weaken as Lelouch’s hips twitch against his contracting tunnel with the further evidence of his climax in the short groaning grunt that squeezes from his throat. Without the obvious release spilling inside him…

He rests on the tired fold of Lelouch's lap a moment with a forehead also resting on the back of his shoulder, arms loose around him. Suzaku can hear – acknowledge – the chaos Lelouch spread over the campus like mass hysteria; cries and shouts firing in the distance outside the clubhouse's halls. It feels so far away despite being so close, as if he and Lelouch are invisible or in a secret place, existing in a realm hidden by curtains of which only the two of them know. Such an isolated feeling would be daunting if he was alone but with Lelouch, it doesn't seem half as bad as it would otherwise (like it had after his father—)

"Lelouch," Suzaku softly says, turning his face toward the head leaning against his shoulder. He weaves his fingers through sweaty strings of dark hair when it lifts. "…I love you…" Suzaku quietly puffs toward lips that near his, laying his other hand on an arm that tightens around him – he never wants Lelouch to be anywhere else."I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you." In moments like these he feels he'll never be able to say this enough times, like it will take him an entire lifetime to tell Lelouch just how strongly and how much he really loves him while not expecting to hear it in return. Suzaku knows Lelouch well enough to not need to hear it. "…So much…"

The more introverted male always mirrors the emotion with a gentle gesture; this time, as it often is, with the tender kiss that he plants on Suzaku's lips, along with a hand that blankets the one on his arm.

And the hammering heart Suzaku can feel against his back when Lelouch's chest is flush against him.

Suzaku sappily smiles through the flocking kisses that flutter over his cheek, jaw and neck, even lightly laughing with utter – pure – contentment when they also land on the round of his shoulder in arms that hold him close…

Until a demon gets antsy to clean up so they can relax more comfortably. Suzaku plops back on the bed with a gratified sigh, feeling reality pour back into his bones as Lelouch cleanly removes the condom and wipes both of them with tissues. He's able to take a gander at the Britannian for a moment, at the unconstructed view of his princely body – something he doesn't get to do as often as he should. Lelouch has a tendency to obscure himself and Suzaku doesn't know if it's on purpose or if the other male just does it without thinking. Either way, he wishes Lelouch wouldn't be so compulsive about it. Lelouch is a person who has a very high opinion of himself but that doesn't mean he comes without insecurities and anything physically related will be doused in complexes, even if he won't admit it. It's not as though Lelouch should worry about his appearance, however, because Lelouch is beautiful – handsome, as he'd rather be called. He might be lacking some muscle definition, his bones might protrude too much, and his skin might reflect the ability to tan, but he's still stunning. His eyes are unreal and intense, his voice is strong enough to turn tides, his mind is too brilliant for his own good, his heart is roughened but nurturing, and he certainly doesn't need to worry about his private department – although Suzaku doesn't know if Lelouch ever does worry. (Not that Suzaku worries about such things, either…) Lelouch is perfect in his
Suzaku is taken from his fond gazing when Lelouch tugs on the blanket for them to burrow underneath, returning to settle between Suzaku's legs instead of crawling over to (what has become) his side of the bed. His soft hands skim over Suzaku's hips, curling around them as he tenderly presses his lips on a pregnant abdomen, peppering light, abundant kisses that make the seahorse smile. Suzaku runs his fingers through Lelouch's hair, petting the affectionate head with both hands and a content sigh as he relishes the loving attention he's positive the little one in his tummy can feel.

He just hopes it didn't feel anything else.

"Do you think everything will turn out alright for us?" Suzaku asks suddenly and quietly, unable to keep his fears separate from his thoughts of their baby. "Do you think the baby will be alright?"

So far the checkups are going as smoothly as Suzaku could've hoped for, but the baby is still small and regardless of all the positive thinking he tries to cushion himself with, there's that haunting doubt that keeps sneaking up on him. It's alarming enough to have his doctor appointments more frequently than usual compared to other mothers, and now it's been increased to each week rather than every two – although that is more often he gets to see his budding baby. Even the doctor says that everything looks normal, relatively speaking, so why is Suzaku still worried—?

("I don't think I need to stress to you the risks you'll face with this...you're not built for pregnancy, Suzaku.")

—Because Lelouch was right with that warning just as the doctor is with her close surveillance. Things look great now, but the end to their story could be an unfavorable one.

Lelouch glances up at the uneasy question and then kisses a taut navel, "Hard to say, but..."—he continues, slowly pecking up a toned stomach—"...if small fry is as stubborn as we are..."—trailing up over a breast bone—"...I don't think there's a chance it'll give up without a fight..."—pressing over a clavicle and up a neck—"...or give in to the laws of nature." The kisses stop on Suzaku's cheek with violets peering down into green eyes, "Regardless of the outcome, I think we can pull through this together," and Lelouch cements his words on Suzaku's lips with a full, wholehearted kiss.

It isn't the first time Lelouch has uttered similar words but it's no less reassuring to hear. They fill Suzaku with those three words again that are urging to fizzle out of his mouth and into Lelouch's ears, but with the lips pressed firmly on his and the nature of the clam he's smooching with, Suzaku decides it's just fine to not speak his feeling again. He wraps his arms tightly, invitingly around Lelouch's neck instead, returning the kiss deeply and lovingly without even bothering to mention that the Halloween evening is still in full swing. He knows Lelouch would rather stay in bed, even at this early hour, and Suzaku does, too. The rest of the world can move on without them for now as they snuggle in the warm darkness and breathe-in each other's company. Suzaku only wishes to make the same promise as he spoons up next to Lelouch with his head lying on a bony shoulder.

He wants to stick with Lelouch for better or for worse.

Regardless of the outcome...
[Please let me know of any typos/grammar errors.]

No m-preg fic is truly complete without cross-dressing ;]

FAN ART link:

A sketch by Saxzer
Chapter Notes

Time to get reconnected with the crackier roots of this story…

"…Let me tell you something about Bat Man, ok? He's the same as the rest of these guys around here; they're afraid of women. They're afraid of the almighty uterus! ALMIGHTY UTERUS!" –Wonder Woman from Robot Chicken

Ambiguous

The Difference between Boys and Girls

Everything is too calm.

Lelouch doesn't know if he's harboring a healthy suspicion or if paranoia is trying to sabotage the peace – the quiet before the (possible) storm.

As far as the home front is concerned, he can't find reason to complain. Suzaku has eased on the Zero issue, probably because now all he can seem to think about is the baby, which Lelouch doesn't mind. Admittedly, even Lelouch has caught himself floating away on daydreams every now and then, but Suzaku is much more distracted… and that actually worries Lelouch a little because being spacey is that last thing Suzaku needs to be. It's almost like he's turning into a walking cliché of a pregnant mother – Lelouch is just waiting for the days riddled with stomach-turning food cravings and nausea, which will probably strike in that order. Overall, the pregnancy is treating Suzaku well, and Lelouch couldn't ask for anything more.

Nunnally has begun to perk up noticeably now that Lelouch is devoting more and more time to her, mostly in the evenings. They eat dinner together daily now, a ritual that has been suffering since Zero's birth, and he puts her to bed each night. The time isn't terribly long, but every second is used to catch up, to listen to Nunnally as she happily chatters like a spring-time bird, and Lelouch is feeling less and less stressed. Suzaku is even beginning to come home early enough to dine with them due to the Zone work finally falling into a manageable rhythm.

The daytime is still filled with school, club duties, and Zero, but even that is starting to balance itself out better now that his studious pupil, Ohgi, is showing more self-confidence and picking up more slack. Lelouch knew he'd made the right choice to make the man his second in command; he has a good heart, all he needed was to be given the chance, to learn the trade of politics, to find that inner strength in order to become a true leader, and he has only continued to grow even if in the smallest ways. He's on the road to out-growing Zero and letting Japan have a new hope to rely on, which is a destination that might be closer than it is far…

Even Britannia is still behaving itself in this whole affair, suspiciously so, but behaved nonetheless. Since their little debacle, China has been like a sleeping giant, one Lelouch is keeping a very close eye on, but perhaps they're just waiting to see what really comes of the Special Administred Zone like the rest of the watching world.
...But all this goodness only drives Lelouch's danger senses wild.

The Universe has never been this kind to him, so that must mean it's planning something.

Lelouch's first taste of impending doom is one evening early on the Friday after Halloween when Milly sends him a suspicious text concerning an emergency student council meeting (without any real sense of urgency, as far as he could tell) and that he needed to bring Suzaku along...

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"SURPRISE!"

—Is the ear-splitting greeting Lelouch and Suzaku are subjected to upon entering the student council room. Pops of confetti fill the air in an excited frenzy as pastel pink and blue balloons lazily sway around the room with a banner hanging happily across the windows, apparently congratulating someone. There is a cake on the table with decorations on it that Lelouch can't quite see and a stuffed bear of some kind beside it... All he can seem to comprehend is the horrendous gleam oozing from every pore of Milly's face as she shows every tooth in her giant, giddy smile.

So, Lelouch was mistaken.

It wasn't the Universe that was teasing his paranoia.

If anything, it was his Milly sense that was tingling!

He certainly thought it possible that she'd get some revenge on him for his Halloween stunt, but he didn't imagine anything like this...

He doesn't even understand what this is.

"What's going on?" he hears Suzaku ask without any caution weighing down the delighted surprise prancing on his words. Lelouch quickly notes all the smiling faces of those who call themselves his friends – only Nina looks disgruntled, but more so than usual... Nunnally is even here, beaming, but that smile isn't as soothing as it should be for the innately wary boy – all it does it is intensify the churning sense of danger in his gut.

"A surprise baby shower!" Milly exclaims, brimming with pride that shocks Lelouch like a lightning bolt, temporarily short-circuiting the part of his brain needed to react to this moment with blinding bluntness he should have seen coming.

Of course.

A surprise baby shower.

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.

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~...System reboot...

~...Threat detected—

~DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!
Lelouch opens his mouth to—

"How did you know I was pregnant?"

—That's not what Lelouch was going to say, but thanks, Suzaku.

Lelouch wasn't about to defuse the situation, or anything productively preventative like that.

It isn't like Lelouch is good at that sort of thing.

…Suzaku really pounced right on that one, didn't he?

Is there anything his mouth can't spill?

Didn't Lelouch tell Suzaku to work on that?

Britannia should hope Suzaku never get's captured by enemies because he'd probably spill every secret without even being asked to!

(And the Idiot Award goes to… Suzaku!)

Like there was even a competition…)

Lelouch can't even catch up to the stupidity fast enough, but when he painstakingly pulls himself up from the verbal slap of Suzaku's confession, he notices a peculiar frame over everyone's faces, as if they're not sure if it's a joke or not…

For the love of God, let the pregnancy be a joke for once. That's all Lelouch is asking for – since he can only seem to cringe as Milly's jolly chuckling steals his chance to speak—

"You can't be serious," she says with a smirking huff and playful flap of her hand.

The dooming redness torching Suzaku's face causes her to double-take with a skeptical twist of her features while everyone else's smiles finally wane.

Suzaku is overly honest even when he doesn't speak.

It must be impossible to wash the stupid off of his face.

Milly realizes that Suzaku couldn't be more serious and Lelouch begins to leak nervous sweat – why is this room so hot? It bakes a lump in his throat so large it's almost as if he's having an allergic reaction (…to the sheer idiocy?), and now he can't find his voice like some socially inept outcast.

"...So Miss Euphemia isn't the one who's pregnant?" Shirley asks quietly, her voice wavering with confusion that rolls over Lelouch's skin like a blizzard.

Suzaku avoids eye-contact as the mortified flush consumes his face during everyone's stifling silence, their brains struggling to comprehend the situation. Lelouch is struggling to understand why he's just standing here while Suzaku – his partner – is burying himself with every word he doesn't speak. It almost feels like a defense mechanism he can't control, an attachment to his brain through years of remaining as invisible as possible without suspicion, especially in moments of public revelations. Lelouch would probably, normally, use moments like these to his advantage for escape, but he can't – and won't – do that to Suzaku. He loves the idiot enough to accept idiocy… However, there isn't much Lelouch can say now to salvage the situation with his attempts sounding like an obvious lie, and trying to just play this off as some kind of joke or
misunderstanding would never work… even if their friends were nice enough to play along, and if they didn't already know half the story. The joke angle is a sad excuse for cover-up story.

Though, it is a tempting dream…

And, obviously, Geass is out of the question.

Milly's brow crosses with confusion, "Well don't tell me Euphemia is the father!" she utters incredulously and a bit more seriously than is appropriate from her words.

The seahorse is beyond any ability to speak with hunched shoulders and eyes stuck to the floor as if wishing it is an ocean that would swallow him whole… Lelouch doesn't want to, but he can't leave Suzaku to suffer this alone – and it's not like there's any value left in keeping things a secret now that everyone knows he's pregnant.

The most intelligent of the pair slowly steps towards his dimwitted pal, feeling his body boil with nerves and steels his face to remain emotionless as he wraps his arm around Suzaku's waist.

"No, she isn't."

Honesty… kind of really sucks, doesn't it?

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"... I still don't understand why you assumed Suzaku was the one expecting a baby just because he retrieved the book," Lelouch languidly says to Milly at his left, sitting to Suzaku's left at the head of the table in the "daddy" chair signified by a blue balloon, Suzaku of course is in the "mommy" chair indicated with a pink balloon they had to quickly attach. "He could have been picking up the book for a friend."

Milly was gracious enough to explain herself, and her reasoning is easy enough to follow… but it seems like she jumped to too many conclusions all on her own, like she let her imagination get the better of her (although the truth is exponentially more fanciful). The connection between Suzaku and Euphemia is pretty solid, and the sudden resignation of her title points to some secret scandal, but there aren't any facts to support this theory, which is pretty typical. Milly even revealed she didn't involve Lelouch in the "surprise baby shower" because she thought he would spill the beans, intentionally or not.

Turns out Suzaku is the only one to do anything like that.

Thankfully, no one asked when Lelouch and Suzaku were planning on sharing the big news… or how it happened.

Even their relationship is self-explanatory, for the time being.

"Thank you!" Rivalz exasperatedly utters from beside Milly with his hands thrown up in the air. "That's exactly what I've been saying!"

Milly ignores him, looking only at Lelouch.

"What friend?" to her credit, she honestly tries not to laugh, just not very hard – the fact that she's unafraid to jeer while within his reach is insulting. "All that was left was you and I highly doubt you'd get a girl pregnant."

There's a bit of a sting to that remark – did she think Lelouch was incapable because she suspected
his sexuality or because he simply doesn't have the skill?

Well, he totally has the skill.

So… in her face.

"You're right about that, at least. I didn't get a girl pregnant." Lelouch smirks, hooking an arm around Suzaku's waist with a promiscuous pull to bring him closer, making said boy blush a little as he pokes his fork at the small slice of cake Lelouch allowed him (because it's nothing but sugar!), trying to shake off Lelouch as if he hasn't heard a word.

"How did you even find out that you're gonna have a baby?" Rivalz asks, his puzzlement clearly connected in his voice.

That's a fair question.

"Oh, well, random drug test," Suzaku answers, clearly unsure how much he really needs to embellish.

"They can tell that from a drug test?" the blue-haired boy swoops in with another stupefied question, amazement stretching open his eyes.

"How do you think at-home pregnancy tests work?" Lelouch teases with a mild quirk of his lips. "They're both urine tests."

Rivalz's mouth drops open like a fish, thinking of a response, and then it shuts with a coy smile as he laughs at his own lack of thought.

"So, then…" Shirley timidly dips her toe into the conversation, perched beside Suzaku, "how far are you? Or, you know, how old is the baby?"

"Um…" Suzaku's leafy eyes flutter around as he mentally counts the weeks, his gaze falling to Lelouch in either uncertainty or fear of giving the wrong answer – if only Suzaku would check with Lelouch more often before speaking.

"Eleven weeks," Lelouch suavely answers for his absentminded partner, as self-satisfied as a cat with its mangled dinner.

"Only eleven weeks?" Nunnally playfully whines between Lelouch and Milly. "I'm ready to be an auntie now! Why do I have to wait so long?"

Lelouch chuckles warmly, light and fluffy spurts in his throat, and he momentarily grasps her hand.

"That's right!" Suzaku abruptly bursts like a popped balloon. "We have ultrasound images of the baby; does anyone want to see them?" Suzaku has apparently forgotten that Nunnally is blind, but everyone is polite enough – or smart enough – to not question how he drew this connection from what Nunnally just said.

Lelouch knows Suzaku didn't mean anything by it and that Nunnally has taken no offense.

Suzaku's just an idiot, after all.

"Ultrasound?" Kallen asks, looking less ill than she normally tries to as she slouches at Shirley's right.

"You mean from a doctor?" the orange-haired girl questions, insultingly confused.
Suzaku's excitement falters, "Uh…"

"Yes, who else?" Lelouch answers with his nose turned up just slightly. "I know this situation is strange, but we're not so careless that we'd go through this without professional help just because this is abnormal. What kind of parents would that make us?"

Milly is grinning, "No one was trying to insult you, Vice Prez. The idea of two boys going to prenatal visits is like asking everyone to notice the two of you. Not to mention Suzaku is well-known now."

Suzaku simpers, "Well, we're discreet about it, if that's what you're trying to say."

"Discreet?" Rivalz tilts his head.

Once again, Suzaku's mouth is empty – why couldn't he have been like this earlier?

"He wears a disguise," Lelouch simply explains.

"Disguise?" Rivalz asks.

"Just like Milly said, two guys can't walk into that kind of doctor visit without getting noticed. In order to avoid unwanted attention, we don't go as two boys." Pink is already climbing up Suzaku's cheeks, but Lelouch is complacently smirking to himself, looking at his fair lady with an unbridled glimmer.

"Don't tell me…!" Milly nearly gasps with excitement.

"Suzaku dresses as a girl." Lelouch should probably feel guilty about how much it pleases him to see the feared Lancelot pilot shrink into himself and redden like a ripe apple, but he isn't.

"I knew it!" Milly ecstatically exclaims, hungrily leaning over the table towards Suzaku from her seat. "You really have a thing for women's clothes, don't you?"

"It's not a thing!" Suzaku squawks, looking like a little ruffled red bird. "It's just…"

"But you said you thought it was fun before." Milly gladly recalls the past – once again, Suzaku is done in by his own mouth, only it's past comments this time.

"That's…!" Suzaku can't wriggle out of this, and he apparently knows it because he shrivels into himself all over again with hot embarrassment colouring his face and in comprehensible mutters dribbling from his lips.

Lelouch affectionately rubs the humiliation into Suzaku's back, "He goes by Suzie, and so far no one has recognized him."

"Now it makes sense…" Nunnally suddenly speaks, her soft face hardened slightly by reflection. "Alice told me she saw Lelouch with a girl a few weeks ago at the clinic," she begins to explain, feeling empty stares on her, "but I knew that big brother was already involved with Suzaku."

"Alice saw us?" Lelouch briskly scrambles onto this new scrap of information. "When? What was she doing there?"

Perhaps his eagerness is too emphatic, because it almost looks like Nunnally blinks at him.

"…She said her sisters work at the clinic you go to and she sometimes goes there after school. She saw the two of you leaving, I think."
"I'm sorry that you're upset," Nunnally apologizes, and the sound of her gentle voice wrapped around those words jolts Lelouch back to the moment. "No, don't apologize," he guiltily and vainly tries to un-hear her sad tone. "I'm just surprised…"

Alice…

He knew that girl was only trouble.

"Quite an interesting development," Milly chimes in, so thrilled with everything that her mirth is like an angry sore inside Lelouch's stomach. "Maybe I'll have to have a chat with that girl…"

"Spare at least one person from your nosiness for once, would you, Madam President?" Lelouch jadedly jeers with a lazy grin.

She scrunches her nose at him in a defiant, sassy gesture.

"…Anyway, does anyone want to see the ultrasounds?" Suzaku awkwardly asks to reroute back to forgotten topic, pushing himself up from his chair when everyone answers in the affirmative—Halting when his arm is caught by Lelouch.

"Sit down, I'll get them for you," he orders in a tender tone, pointedly waiting for Suzaku to do as he was commanded by sitting with a loving upward bend of his lips. Lelouch also earns a couple of sweet and mocking croons that he tries to ignore while he stands.

"Aren'cha gonna kiss him before you go?" Milly bluntly goads, her lusty eyes showing a bit too much. "Oh! Wait, we need some pictures of the happy couple. Sit back down and—!"

"That's not happening," Lelouch dully rejects.

"All I'm asking for is one, little, measly kiss," Milly's lips pout, but that doesn't stop Lelouch from walking away from her.

"Not. Happening."

"Suzaku~! Knock some sense into your stubborn hubby over there, won't you?" she tries to wheedle the pregnant boy.

"Sorry…" but all Suzaku has to offer is a pitying laugh and shrug as Lelouch leaves the room to retrieve the desired digital prints, and it draws a smirk along Lelouch's lips.

There's a good boy.

Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet?" Shirley gushes at Suzaku, an oddly happy expression on her face now that she's grown used to the idea of his pregnancy and pawing at the ultrasound pictures like everyone else… except Nunnally. "Which would you rather have?"
"We don’t know yet. And I guess I don’t have a preference." Suzaku shrugs. "I just want it to be healthy whatever it is."

Lelouch would have to agree.

He just hopes *it* is human at this point.

Shirley coos sweetly at that, "What about names?"

"Oh, we already have names picked out for both genders."

Milly, Shirley, and Rivalz's ears are all over that little announcement whereas Kallen, who is interested *enough*, and Nina certainly aren’t holding their breath. Actually, Lelouch is convinced Nina isn’t even paying attention due to her eyes stuck at the end of her fork as she prods her half-eaten piece of white cake. But, at least she’s *here*…

"What are they?" asks the meddling blonde.

Suzaku opens his mouth—

"It’s a secret," Lelouch answers – there's no way he's going to let these degenerates ruin their baby name picks (he also doesn't want to get into the reasoning behind their choices, either) – with his arm slung around Suzaku, a hand closed tightly over his mouth.

If Lelouch and Suzaku could be like this all the time, it would solve a lot of problems.

"Boo~!" Milly gives him a thumbs down while pinching her nose.

Rivalz laughs, "Yeah, what's the big deal?"

"Please tell us!" Shirley clasps her hands together.

"No can do." Lelouch firmly shakes his head. "You'll just have to wait until the baby is born."

"Or until I can get Suzaku alone in my prying clutches," Milly smirks like a feral animal, eyes practically gobbling Suzaku where he sits.

Said soldier laughs in shakes of discomfort when Lelouch's hand drops from his mouth to hang limply around his neck, allowing him to take a nervous sip of his water as he averts his eyes.

Knowing Suzaku, he'd probably spill them easily enough… like he almost just did before Lelouch stopped him.

*This tiring idiot…*

Of anybody here, Nunnally is the acceptable set of ears to tell, but that can wait until later *in private.*

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At some point during the festivities of baby games and fluid conversation, Milly attempts a subtle steal of Suzaku, but he's part of a permanent pair, so Lelouch is on their heels the *second* she has him literally cornered across the room.

"What are trying to do to him?" Lelouch gruffly interrogates with a firm face.
Milly doesn't even blink when she looks at him over her shoulder, "Just giving Suzaku a little something."

Suzaku is indeed holding a white, slim, rectangular package tied shut with a pink, billowy bow.

"I thought you said you guys only got the gift certificate." Lelouch narrows his eyes on the box. He knows this can't be good – nothing involving Milly ever is.

"Yes, but this is a personal item that I purchased for a certain pretty lady, but I don't see why Suzaku can't still have it, especially considering how things are working out."

Milly doesn't smirk, but it can't be any clearer in her tone or the sparkle in her eye.

Lelouch wants to rip the box from Suzaku's hands and chuck it out the window, just to be safe, but he knows Milly would love nothing more than to see him lose his cool. All he can do is quietly fester and seethe as he watches Suzaku open the present through an eagle eye.

"It's ironic," the she-devil says out of nowhere and he glances at her.

"What is?" Lelouch asks.

"I've finally got some dirt regarding you, and yet, it doesn't feel as good as I thought it would..." her voice is wistful, and for once her face is soft and human looking when he looks her way again.

"That's what happens when you delude yourself," Lelouch cattily quips, causing Milly to stick out a mocking tongue at him.

"Uh… What is this?" Suzaku asks with a light pink, suggestive, satiny, lingerie trimmed with some fuzzy-feathery nonsense pinched in his fingers as if it might be diseased.

…It is a present from Milly.

"What?" the president proudly defends. "Who says a pregnant woman doesn't want to feel and look sexy?"

*That would have to depend on your definition of "sexy."*

"…That's very thoughtful of you," Suzaku politely replies, placing the skimpy article back in the box with a kind smile.

"I hope it fits you," she grins at him with a cheeky smile. "Keep in mind I thought I was buying for someone else. But, I have the receipt if you'd like to exchange it for something that's your style of sexy."

In Lelouch's opinion, Suzaku's style of sexy is his *birthday suit*.

"Tell me you weren't honestly going to give that thing to Euphie." Lelouch is already disgusted with the mental image alone that he couldn't fight off from his mind – *good God* how he honestly tried to fight it.

"Like I said, what woman doesn't want to feel sexy?"

Lelouch is about retort, but he reminds himself that this is Milly, so there's no sense in a sane debate.

She'd only like to get him riled up, anyway.
"Thank you for the present," Suzaku says with a hand on Lelouch's shoulder – as if he needs this emotional soldier to tell him to watch his temper.

"I do hope Suzie enjoys it," Milly says with a wink before sashaying her cocky self back to the others.

As she leaves them in silence, they both finally understand why she decided Suzaku could still use the lingerie...

Suzaku's eyes flop to the box suspended in his hands, a flat but troubled line in his lips.

"I don't really have to wear this, do I?"

If the boy didn't want to wear it, he shouldn't have accepted it.

Lelouch would've asked for the receipt, not that he expects he'd actually get it.

"She did go to the trouble of buying it…" he answers with a sly smile – maybe this will be good entertainment. "I think you owe her one time, at least."

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Some hours later after the layers of cake and questions calmed into a mellow mood, Lelouch reenters the club room after putting Nunnally to bed to see Suzaku sitting quietly on the couch by himself. His eyes are hooded as he softly stares at the others who are regaling in stories and jokes that have strayed from the theme of the party, seemingly too absorbed in each other's words on the other side of the room. (Save for Nina, the ghost of a girl having drifted out of the room after he left, apparently.) Although it's unexpected, Lelouch is glad to have this little wedge of time to themselves.

"Tired?" Lelouch tenderly asks, seating himself next to his sleepy seahorse. "Do I need to put you to bed, too?"

Evergreen eyes flip open and look at Lelouch with a listless glaze that drips over his lips in a faint smile, dropping his head on Lelouch's shoulder. The black-haired boy shakes his head with a similar smile and gently pat the leg of the boy sagging against him as he reclines into the couch. Lelouch softly rubs his hand up and down Suzaku's thigh before letting his own limb fall limp when the brunet nestles closer. Too content to really care and perhaps sedated by Suzaku's seductive somnolence, Lelouch closes his own eyes on the peanut gallery who practically take instant notice of this special moment.

"They're so cute together, don't you think?" Milly asks to no one in particular, a gratified grin on her lips as her eyes trace over the pair. "A very striking couple."

"Eh… I think it's strange to see Lelouch act that way around anyone other than Nunnally," says Rivalz. "It's even disappointing when I think about all the girls falling at his feet – where's the justice there?"

"It isn't strange, it's adorable," the president insists with stoic faith. "And don't bring up such a sensitive subject in front Shirley."

"Me?" said girl blinks.

"Oh, there's no need to put on a brave face," Milly takes sympathetic hold of her friend's shoulders. "You're among friends and we'll support you through this troubling time."
"I'm not putting on a brave face," Shirley diffidently defends.

"Pish-posh," the older girl scoffs. "The guy of your dreams—"

"Guy of my dreams?"

"—has not only just stepped out of the closet, but he's holding hands with another guy! How could you not be devastated? Your chances of ever being with Lelouch now are so low you owe him points just to be in the same room with him!"

"That doesn't make any sense," Rivalz mutters.

"But, you have to admit that these two are a fangirl's fantasy. The handsome slacker and brawny softy going at it in secrecy, and then, poof, a baby out of nowhere? It's what romance and BL novels are made of!"

"Romance and BL novels?" Kallen insipidly echoes – does she even really want to know?

"At least we can admire the view, although capturing the view would be much better – pictures do last longer."

"...This is weird. They're our friends," Rivalz uncomfortably utters, stuffing his hands in his pockets and crinkling his brow. "I don't want to watch Lelouch and Suzaku, uh, 'go at it' like you said. That's gross."

"Only because you haven't discovered your inner fanboy yet," Milly easily diagnoses, arms folded beneath her bust in sinister contemplation. "Or maybe you can't enjoy it because you're insecure about yourself."

Rivalz sputters, face flaming with her bland accusation – that's not what he meant! – and Shirley pats his back in an effort to soothe the blow his character took from the girl he virtually worships.

"The more I think about it, though," the blonde continues, "it makes me wonder what else Lelouch is capable of."

"What do you mean?" Kallen asks, something strange glinting in her crystal blue eyes.

"This is Lelouch – he can't take two steps without stopping to catch his breath in between, and yet, he's topping the boy who's arguably the most athletic person at Ashford. I just didn't know Lelouch had it in him! I want to know where he's been hiding that vitality all this time!" A thought strikes her mind, causing her to pause and cradle her chin on her fist, "...Or maybe it's more about Suzaku than it has to do with Lelouch? Do you think Suzaku rides him a lot?"

"I can hear you over there!" Lelouch indignantly barks, clinging to his last nerve, causing the group to jump as one body. "Stop talking about us like we're not in the same room!"

"Roger that, Vice Prez." Milly winks. "We'll wait until you leave before we continue discussing anything further."

Lelouch grumbles – hiding his vitality, more about Suzaku, what does Milly know about anything? – but his irritation fizzes when he looks back at the peaceful, slumbering face of the idiot he's still delicately supporting. If he listens carefully to the peaceful breaths pushing and pulling though Suzaku's nose Lelouch can hear his bed calling him… It's probably a good idea to leave now before he's inadvertently insulted by the forgetful fools when they begin babbling again while staring at him like he's some kind of caged animal.
Suzaku is the one who's pregnant for crying out loud!

Milly should be pondering over that, not Lelouch's "capabilities"!

What is wrong with that woman?

•-

The following morning is less of a nightmare, but not entirely.

It starts pretty normal like any other weekend and being as uneventful as it should be with Lelouch sleeping through most of it, dragging himself out of bed early enough to his standards, but long after Suzaku's long years of conditioned military service – something Lelouch has learned to ignore more and more with every morning. The only times Suzaku sleeps in later than usual are after they've had sex, which hinders his regular routine for obvious reasons, otherwise he's shuffling around the room (while trying to be quiet, but it's the effort that makes him noisy) at the break of dawn and disrupting the sleep Lelouch fights so rigorously to catch and keep. He's even employed snuggling as a deterrent for Suzaku's unnatural amount of energy at such an unnatural time and it's gradually wearing the soldier down… as long as Lelouch is conscious enough to capture him before he hops out of bed.

They've long since abandoned their old safety schedule for when Suzaku sleeps over, the honorary Britannian pretty much unofficially moving into Lelouch's nest. Suzaku still has his dorm room, but the minimal amount of possessions he has resides with him in Lelouch's bedroom, which makes most of Lelouch's nights easier now that he has consistent comfort. So easy he wants to get out of bed even less than before when sunshine steals him from sleep.

Lelouch seriously considers turning over and going back to sleep this morning, but he likes to eat breakfast with Nunnally and the idiot, so he darkly makes his way to the door. After a brisk shower and wardrobe deliberation, he steps into the dining room around ten-thirty where Suzaku and Nunnally are still calmly consuming their breakfast with Sayoko refreshing their glasses of orange juice.

"Good morning big brother!" Nunnally pleasantly sings, everyone else greeting him with a simple smile.

"Good morning," he replies just as affably but considerably more mild as he walks up to the table.

"Coffee, Master Lelouch?"

"Ah, yes please, thank you." He nods to Sayoko who scurries off into the kitchen as he takes a seat next to Nunnally. A fleeting glance at Suzaku across from him conveys the "we need to talk" look, and those green eyes appear to understand as the boy belonging to them subsequently nibbles on his buttered toast.

Suzaku became unusually drowsy towards the end of the party last night leaving them zero time to recap the evening, and while Lelouch doesn't want to cry foul play on the suspicion that the seahorse was trying to avoid discussing what the hell had happened, he wonders if Suzaku was really that tired.

Sayoko places a nice, full cup of steaming hot coffee in front of him that's always as black as his knights but, before he takes that first rejuvenating sip, he decides to be a little adventurous this morning by adding a touch of cream. He thanks Sayoko once again for the round plate of fried
eggs and tomatoes with bacon and buttered toast she also placed in front of him before she
gracefully bows and returns to the kitchen.

All is well this morning as the three of them smoothly sail through their meal with the company of
casual conversation—

So it's only natural that a certain impertinent president bursts through the doors in an entrance that's
short of grand only because there aren't any trumpeters or fireworks; instead she has her two trusty
followers in tow as she rounds the table towards the dinning trio.

"It's Saturday, so you know what that means?" The question on her lips isn't nearly as inviting as
her smile – not to Lelouch, and he's certain Suzaku feels the same way once his shoulders are
ensnared by her evil clutches.

"That there's no school?" the brunet's answer is insecure and confused, just like his eyes that don't
know where to look.

"It's time for a girl's day out! And Suzaku, you're coming along as our honorary woman!"

"I don't think so," Lelouch stonily states. "He's staying right here. With me."

Poor Suzaku will probably get eaten alive.

"It's not up to you," the blonde argues, shaking up the boy in her grasp even more as she jostles him
in his chair. "And don't be such a Suzaku hog!"

"Is it up to me?" the newly crowned honorary woman meagerly croaks.

"Nope!" Milly chirps unethically excited. "I say you're coming, so you're coming! And Nunnally,
being the lovely Lady Lamperouge, you're also welcome on our outing."

"Not without me," Lelouch unequivocally invites himself, his voice and eyes like a jagged iceberg
compared to Milly's flippantly fun-loving attitude that has her fluffed up like meringue.

"Absolutely no boys allowed!" she rebukes with a shaking finger.

"But I'm a boy…" Suzaku murmurs, only to be completely ignored.

"If I don't go, they don't go."

"The gentlemen will stay here," the damnable president stubbornly continues, gesturing to Rivalz
behind here who grins uneasily with a likewise wave of his hand. "That includes you."

Lelouch briskly stands up with a screech of his chair and flaming lance of his eyes – he would
rather roll over and die before he'd let Nunnally and Suzaku go anywhere with Milly without him—

"Oh, but I can't even go," Nunnally politely declines before Lelouch can start growling like a
territorial tiger. "Alice and I have a school project that we have to work on and we were going to be
in the library most of the day. But thank you for the invitation."

Milly lifts an eyebrow, "Alice, huh? I'm beginning to think she's trying to steal you away from
us."—Lelouch hates how she so sarcastically says that when he felt that thought so honestly
—"Well, can't interfere with a lady's studies, so you get a free pass this time."

"Uh, well, I have some schoolwork I should—" Suzaku tries to weasel himself free.
"Not so fast!" but Milly isn't shaken off that easily. "We can't go have girl fun without our Student Council Mommy. Now hurry up because we have to get you dressed"—Milly practically hauls him out of the chair, causing him to flounder over his own steps and words as he is pushed towards Shirley and three of them shuffle to the door—"and then we have to go pick up Kallen on the way and I don't want to waste time!" Odd that she doesn't mention getting Nina too, considering the girl isn't standing here with them — if Nina doesn't go, this outing isn't really official, is it?

"Don't just do as you please regardless of what others want!" Lelouch scowls, stiffly marching after them to grab Suzaku by the arm. "Listen to what other people are saying!"

A sharp smirk pinches the corners of Milly's lips, a corrupted curve that could stand well against the many smirks Lelouch has worn while operating as Zero, but Lelouch isn't so easily shaken, either.

"Lelouch, do you really want to fight me on this, hm~?" the tone dripping from her lips coats her menacing words in a sugary shell as she places an "intimidating" hand on his shoulder — what does she take him for, exactly? "You left me in quite a bind after that little trick of yours on Halloween, but I'll consider us even if you just let me borrow your little boyfriend here."

No longer having the worry of Milly's wrath hanging over his head would definitely be nice, but this bargain only makes Lelouch uneasy. The only reason she's making such an offer is because she's so confident that she can get something out of Suzaku — which isn't all that hard in the first place.

It really puts Lelouch between a rock and a hard place—

Wait, what is he thinking?

He's Lelouch vi Britannia!

And Lelouch vi Britannia fears no one!

"Or," Milly continues, "perhaps we could revisit the kissing booth idea that I wanted to do last year for Valentine's Day."

••

And so Lelouch is forced to spend the day with Rivalz.

Completely

And

Utterly

Alone.

"…So, I was just wondering…" Rivalz starts off their day by beating around the bush.

"Wondering what?" Lelouch dully indulges, not particularly interested in the thought Rivalz is trying to push off the edge of his tongue being much too concerned about how Milly might be torturing answers out of Suzaku… Or how she doesn't need to torture answers out of Suzaku.

And just to clarify, he isn't sitting here, sulking at the dining table with Rivalz like they've been shelved and left to stare at each other because he cowered in the face of Milly's threat. Suzaku is
the one who caved in the end, stammering that it really wasn't a big deal if he tagged along with them.

Lelouch is positive that Suzaku only did it to spare him from an attack by a malevolent Milly.

Not that Lelouch was ever worried…

"Well, why didn't you tell me you were, um… gay?" he whispers that last word, Lord knows for what reason. Maybe he suspects Arthur of being homophobic – that could possibly explain the feline's aversion to Suzaku… "You're my best bud; I thought you knew you could trust me. And I mean, I'm totally cool with it, you know. Just… Just wondering."

Lelouch just closes his eyes on the dumbfounded boy sitting across from him and sighs.

This is going to be a very long day.

••

Deeming all of "Suzie's" two outfits as insufficient (one of them being that green dress which didn't get as many critical comments as he thought it would – seems Lelouch really does know what he's doing), Milly hastily sped them off to Kallen's house, who apparently didn't know anything about this impromptu female frolicking, either. After dragging her from the house nearly half asleep, the four of them rode to the mall to the sound of Milly's excited plans.

Suzaku had asked about Nina, hesitantly, and Milly solemnly told him that she isn't comfortable going into the city after their last trip which involved a run-in with terrorists. Understandable, maybe even believable, but Suzaku knows Nina is more afraid of people who aren't her own race rather than the rare chance they'll encounter terrorists a second time.

He decided to not think about that too much, though.

Now he's standing in some high-end store with repetitive, electronic music jumping on his head from the ceiling, lost in the spotty lighting and scattered clothes racks as Shirley and Milly browse them. Kallen is standing on the other side of one metal frame they're leafing through, her bleary eyes uninterested in the fashion in front of her as she indifferently slides hanger after hanger to the side – of course, Suzaku understands that shopping isn't the kind of interest that Kallen holds… It also reminds him that he hasn't really tried to talk to her yet, his entire world now revolving around the baby.

He's also noticed she doesn't seem to look him in the eye anymore.

Suzaku doesn't have the luxury to brood over those issues at this time, too involved in sifting through article after article of clothing and indecisively eyeing the suggestions of Shirley and Milly while insecurely tugging at his clothes. He honestly likes the outfit he's wearing now that he bought with Lelouch; it's simple, if a little too monochromatic. He wouldn't mind expanding for Suzie's sake, but looking at all of these options is… overwhelming. With Lelouch just the one time they had to spare, their approach was so direct and he was so blunt about what is and isn't flattering, or what just looked tacky, and didn't bother showing Suzaku the entire store. Lelouch laid out everything in the simplest way, heeding Suzaku's tastes and letting him have the final say, unlike here where he's being asked to start from scratch while clueless about what ingredients go together. Without that objective guidance, Suzaku isn't sure what he's supposed to do with himself. The girls are helpful, but it's taking a while for him to get the hang of it.

He is trying to understand the function of various buttoned straps on what he originally thought
was a jacket, but now isn't sure, when Milly slinks up to him like a pouncing phobia – might not be far from the truth…

"So…" she starts, rifling through the hanging clothes too casually, "how big is Lelouch?"

"How big?" he curiously glances at her. "Uh, we're about the same height. I don't know how much he weighs, but probably less than me…"

The chiding chuckles that condescendingly fall from her lips soak Suzaku in certain dread and the understanding that he answered her incorrectly.

"Don't play coy with me." She suavely bumps his arm. "I wasn't talking about his height or weight and you know that."

"Right…" Suzaku verbally agrees but is mentally lost.

"I'm talking about the certain length in his pants," she explains with a generously lecherous tone and Suzaku feels a panic start to coldly break within him. "You see, Lelouch has that rich, deep voice and those long fingers, so I always thought he'd be…" Milly trails as she holds up her hands in the air, spreading them apart wider and wider…

Her words as well as her action lick scarlet streaks over his cheeks and he looks away from Milly's hands just when they pass the width of her shoulders—Suzaku is pretty sure that's not even a humanly possible.

"I think we should change the subject!" he salvos, looking at Shirley across from him who also bears his heated flush. "Shirley! How is… Swimming! How is swimming going?"

Shirley opens her mouth but Milly cuts her off, "Now, now. What's the point of having quality girl time if we can't have quality girl talk?"

Suzaku is reigned in by her arm that's much stronger than it appears to be.

"Girls talk about… this sort of thing?" he's afraid to ask, but admittedly curious. The female population is something he knows little about.

"Of course. What else do you think we talk about?"

"I don't know," Suzaku says lamely. Somehow he isn't sure if he can believe the answer Milly provides – Shirley looks as uncomfortable as a kangaroo with a cactus in its pouch and a glowing blush is spawning on Kallen's very disturbed face. "Make-up and clothes, or something like that…" They are at the mall, shopping – or is this just a ruse?

Milly scoffs, "Maybe if you're a child. Who else would be entertained by such dribble?"

Suzaku doesn't answer.

Because he can't.

"Then at least tell me if he's a good kisser," Milly meekly implores.

"A good kisser?" Suzaku asks and Milly nods – perhaps there's no harm in this.

"Yeah, you know, when he kisses you do you feel it in all the way down in your knees?"

Suzaku smiles dumbly at that – he feels it everywhere when Lelouch kisses him.
"Yeah…"

"So how is he in bed?" – logically, that's the next step in this conversation.

Suzaku can feel his ears turning the colour of Kallen's hair when Shirley shouts; "Milly!"

"Oh, come on, just a one word answer will do: good or bad." – as if that won't lead to more questions.

Suzaku isn't that naïve.

How can he even answer a question like that anyway?

He contemplates how to get out of this question knowing Milly will be insatiable now that she's gotten a taste of personal Lelouch information, but he's beginning to wonder if he'll even make it out of this "Girl's day out" alive, and if Lelouch is fairing any better.

"Listen," Milly takes on a frank tone, pulling him closer to privately murmur in his ear, "I've seen you limping around before but I always thought it was military drills or something of that nature, but now I know Lelouch is the one behind your pain! I wouldn't have thought Lelouch had so much vigor! He really gives you a reason to limp, doesn't he? I'm just curious to know if it's his appetite or his big—"

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"So… what's it like… you know… with a guy?" Rivalz tries to ask casually, his friendliness and curiosity the perfect cocktail that pour a headache into Lelouch's skull.

It's a bit surprising that Rivalz didn't begin this sexual trek with the more innocent, subtle question concerning kisses – is there a difference between boys and girls? That is one question Lelouch can answer objectively, based on experience, because Lelouch has in fact kissed a girl before. More than one, actually.

And there isn't really much of a difference, honestly. It's not the gender, but the person that makes the difference… Not that Lelouch has been kissing boys all this time… or plans to kiss anymore girls any time in the near future… or anybody other than Suzaku, as long as he has his way.

No, instead, Rivalz decided to go for the gusto and jump right to the sex question, showing his lack of sophistication and awkward immaturity in one swift blow. But, thanks to Rivalz's inelegant curiosity, Lelouch has been offered a chance to toy with his friend.

"What's what like with a guy?" he asks, personifying obliviousness in a seamless performance that involves tilting his head into an innocent slant.

Rivalz shifts uncomfortably, his cheeks beginning to redden considerably – Lelouch doesn't really even need to do anything, does he?

"You know… it."

The inner smirk Lelouch wears is so wide that it's threatening to pierce his clueless mask and rip it right in half.

"It?"

Rivalz slaps his palms on the table, "Come on, man! Sex! I'm asking about sex! With another guy!"
Of course, *that very second* Sayoko enters the room with their tea and Lelouch knows the steam from the pot isn't what stains both their cheeks a ripe cherry.

This truly is too much fun.

Even if it is too easy.

"Why don't you try it yourself if you're so curious?" Lelouch coolly deflects once the maid mutely sets the tray down and shuffles from the room, leaving Rivalz in his humiliated despair.

He's glowing redder than any sunburn Lelouch has ever had.

The poor fellow… Lelouch has to wonder if it hurts just as much.

"I'm not *that* curious…" he mumbles, a finger doodling distracting designs on the table. "I'm just wondering if it's different than being with a girl."

"I don't know," Lelouch blandly answers, "what is sex like with a girl?"

It takes a moment, but surely enough, a nervous bumble of desperate chuckles flounce from Rivalz lips.

"Touché, man."—But then, something strange lights up in Rivalz's eyes and all of his embarrassment is forgotten with frightening ease—"Hey! Does that mean those *scratch marks* I saw on your back in the locker room that time were really from *Suzaku*?"

---

Lunch in the food court brings a brief *reprieve* from Milly's impetuous interrogating and lugging around the multiplying bags in his hands – it's more than he needs, but Milly wouldn't hear of him *not* getting anything. He's thankful she wants to splurge on him, but will this kindness come back to haunt him, or is Lelouch's paranoia just rubbing off on him? Whatever the case, he's begging to actually enjoy himself. It's only a little strange at how well they're all so accepting of the situation, mostly the pregnancy and cross-dressing part.

"What's it like being pregnant?" Shirley innocently inquires, bringing a refreshing topic change.

"Um…" Suzaku has to think for a second. "I don't know, I don't feel any different yet."

"You don't have morning sickness or anything like that?"

"No, not yet. Everything's still normal for me. Although…" he scratches at his itchy wig, "I think right now it's mostly mental. I tend to think about the baby a lot."

Talking about his pregnancy to Shirley, in front of Milly and Kallen, has to be the most bizarre moment Suzaku has ever experienced.

Other than being told he was pregnant, that is…

Even just talking to Shirley about this doesn't feel right because she once told him that she fell in love with Lelouch… Perhaps something really did change during their "tiff" because something about her is still *off*.

"Oh, yeah?" she enthusiastically engages. "That must be strange."

Suzaku finds himself laughing softly, "It is. But I think Lelouch is more concerned. He practically
won't let me do anything and has me eating a really strict diet." If it isn't organic, is too high in sugar or sodium, or has a word not easily pronounced in the ingredients, Suzaku can't eat it. All of his meals are home cooked and preapproved by Lelouch – but Suzaku won't complain, because the food is the best he's ever eaten in his life. It isn't as though he's been ingesting nothing but garbage food, but this is way healthier and more natural than he's used to. It's just… Lelouch doesn't need to be so… uptight.

"How is Lelouch acting about everything? Is he freaking out or anything?" Shirley continues to ask, sounding somehow… investigative?

"I'm more interested to know what he's like in bed," Milly slips her voice into their conversation with a snide snip.

Suzaku knew this breath of relaxation was going to be short lived.

"Madam President!" Shirley shrieks.

"Oh, come now, this is harmless fun. Anything said between us girls will stay between us girls – it's what we do and what girl time is all about!"

But, the majority of the student council (Lelouch's and Suzaku's only group of friends) is comprised of girls, who are mostly all here, so that doesn't really count for much regarding security or privacy.

…And Suzaku isn't even a girl.

"But it isn't any of your business!" Shirley says.

"Like you're not curious, either, lover girl~!" Milly teases.

"Why do you want to know so badly, anyway?" Suzaku asks, taking Milly off-guard. Her eyes slide to him, a shimmer of surprise swimming over her blue irises, and for a stunned moment she can't respond.

"…Because he's so secretive. And because he's never seemed like the 'coupling' type. You do realize you're the first person he's ever dated, don't you?"

Lelouch hasn't said as much, but it's been implied.

"So in other words," Suzaku translates, stabbing a plain leaf of lettuce (again, strict diet, thanks to Lelouch) off of his plate with a fork, "there's a part of him that you don't know and it drives you crazy?"

She hums, "Something like that, maybe…"

He watches her take the straw of her drink between her lips as her eyes drift away and he thinks that it isn't so much about that mysterious part of Lelouch that has her obsessed, but that she isn't the one to see it and never will be.

"So, I don't see why you can't give me a little something." She stretches her claws again, an ominous coaxing before they sink in and pry him apart.

"Sorry if you thought I'd be your gateway into Lelouch's private life, because I'm not." Suzaku doesn't know why he's apologizing; he doesn't even feel guilty this time. "I'm not going to betray his trust like that."
"But I'm asking for so little..." Milly sighs.

Asking if Lelouch has any closet, strange kinks or fetishes, if he ever fails to *perform* because of his stamina, if he ever makes Suzaku dress like *Suzie*, if he favors a certain position, or just *what type* of lover he is are *not* little questions!

"I told you he's a good kisser."

"But is he good at sex?"

"*Milly!"* hisses the orange-haired girl.

"Why do you keep asking that?" Suzaku bites, and at more than the cherry tomato on his fork. "I never need to *fake it*, if *that's* what you're asking!"

Chew. Chew.

A glance at Shirley's wide eyes.

Chew. Chew.

A glance at Milly; the sheer expression of *heaven* illuminating her elated blue eyes and gapping smile.

Chew. Chew.

A glance at Kallen's wide eyes.

Ch...

Oh, wait—!

Suzaku *didn't* just say that…

••

"So, why Suzaku?" Rivalz asks.

"What do you mean?" bored-Lelouch prompts.

"What is it about him that you like? Or, uh, what attracted you to him?"

Lelouch internally sighs.

There's no way he's answering that question.

"Is it his looks?"

"..."

"His personality?"

"..."

"...Well, what's he got that I don't?" Lelouch whips his eyes to Rivalz and the boy shrugs with his own confusion. "Why him and not me?"
Lelouch gapes, "Are you telling me that you're jealous?"

"I don't know." Rivalz sheepishly shrugs. "I mean, am I not your type?"

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"I think it's time we get some fresh air..." Lelouch finally mutters, wanting to escape this awkward turn of events before he learns other things about Rivalz he wishes he didn't know.

••

With perfect timing strapped to his heels, Lelouch steps out of the clubhouse to greet the collective Student Council Girls as they stroll up to the door. In the thick of it is Lelouch's beacon, the pair of wide green eyes from his seahorse who looks like he's been battered enough by the battle. Lelouch stops short as Rivalz continues forward up to the charge of clicking heels, letting Suzaku separate himself from the herd to build some privacy for themselves. His course is set straight for Lelouch with a bit of a rush to his step and an eager flush on his cheeks... or maybe that's just from the chilly air?

"Lelouch!" Suzaku happily hops up to him, his springy, blond wig bouncing around his head, and he holds up the various shopping bags in his hands. "I wasn't going to really get anything, but we did find some things." He begins to shift the bags around as if uncertain what to do with them, his cheeks still rosy, like his lips. ...His lips? "I wasn't so sure I'd find anything, but with their help I got some new outfits for Suzie." Is that... There's eye shadow on is eyes! "And I got a few things for the baby, too—"

"Are you wearing make-up?"

Suzaku freezes a short second, and then shrugs, "Well... Yes. But, we were at the mall, you know, and, it just kind of happened. Anyway, look at this!" he joyfully produces a plush animal a little bigger than his hand, shoving it right into Lelouch's face. "Guess why I got it."

After a startling slap from more of Suzaku's puppy-dog excitement from being reunited, Lelouch carefully studies the chubby, baby-blue body of a certain water-dwelling creature that has a pale yellow belly and iridescent teal fins.

"Because it's a seahorse."

"Right!" Suzaku is overflowing with delight, his smile a radiant beam that Lelouch can't keep from shining on his own lips. "I saw it and thought it was too adorable. Plus, it's so personal. It was just too perfect. And babies like soft, fuzzy things, right?"

Not infants, but Lelouch doesn't want to rain on his parade.

And they can save it for later.

"So you had fun today?" he asks instead, still radiating with all of the contagious ecstasy Suzaku is
emitting.

"Yeah," Suzaku says, finally taking an actual moment to look at Lelouch—the moment catching in their eyes as a tempting kiss—

But Lelouch finally realizes their audience, standing the polite distance he left between them but still nosy beyond Suzaku's shoulder. Milly is unabashedly staring; her smirk a sharp cut on her lips compared to the wide-eyed gazes of everyone else who aren't accustomed to this type of exchange between their two friends. Everyone is looking on innocently enough, aside from the she-devil, but Lelouch has never liked having spectators observing his personal affairs and he quickly slings his arm around Suzaku, placing a pushing hand on the boy's back.

"Let's go inside so you can show me all of the things you bought in private, where we won't be watched," Lelouch purposely utters at a high volume as they walk away, turning his head towards their friends to give them fair warning.

••

"I wasn't sure what to expect today, but it could have been a lot worse," Suzaku says with a maintained smile as he sheds his sepia, corduroy half-jacket, laying it on the couch.

That statement isn't really comforting…

Lelouch scuttles into the bedroom closely behind Suzaku, carrying all of his shopping bags (like he insisted, and now regrets) and sets them down on the table but his violet eyes are focused solely on the other boy beside him.

"I wouldn't want to do it again anytime soon, but it was… interesting."

A pale hand smoothes over the back of the off-white blouse snug around Suzaku's torso, the brown print of tiny clusters of flowers ignored just like the tight tan pants that accentuate Suzaku's firm, round bottom – Lelouch is only looking right through these clothes.

"I'm glad that you enjoyed yourself today, then," Lelouch murmurs in Suzaku's ear from behind, waiting for the connected head to turn so he can devour those painted lips with a kiss – it isn't as pleasant as Lelouch was hoping, the fake taste of lipstick not suited for his palate and thus forcing their mouth's to stay closed. Suzaku doesn't seem disappointed when they part, instead looking amused as he touches the pad of his thumb to the corner of Lelouch's lips.

"Now you have lipstick on your mouth."

"This stuff is awful, don't wear it ever again." Lelouch frowns, a hand instinctively flying up to his mouth to rid the offending substance, but his hand is instantly caught.

"But then I can't leave my mark." Suzaku grins and then proceeds to stamp a pair of dusky chestnut lips on a pale cheek, much to Lelouch's dismay.

"Exactly," he grumbles, hurrying over to his desk for a tissue.

The kissing culprit laughs quietly to himself as he sits down on the couch and begins emptying his bags, "It won't happen again, so don't worry. I just did this time because, well, I was with Milly. She kind of just pushed me into the offer when we were walking through the cosmetic department."

"Was she too much for you to handle?" he asks, tossing the tissue into the trash bin.
"She was just unapologetic about all of her personal questions." Suzaku pauses, giving Lelouch a direct gaze. "She really wants to know a lot about you. She practically wouldn't talk about anything else. I think she likes you."

Lelouch shakes his head, "Don't try to scare me like that, it isn't nice."

Another wisp of laughter as more clothes are piled onto the table, "I'm serious. You were the only topic on her mind."

Lelouch doesn't know if he should find this more frightening or depressing. The thought of Milly vying for him? He'd rather not venture into that territory.

She's practically like a sister.

One he never wanted or needed, but a sister nonetheless.

"I didn't tell her anything, of course – which wasn't easy."

"I'm proud of you, in any case."

Suzaku nods appreciatively, "I did tell her you were a good kisser, though. That seemed harmless and she was just dying to know something. If I'd held out completely she might have torn me limb from limb to find her answers."

"I don't doubt it," Lelouch mutters. "But I'm only a 'good' kisser?"

"An excellent kisser," he says with a grin and sly glance, flattening and folding one noisy paper bag before throwing mystified eyes back at Lelouch. "You know she actually asked me about the size of your—? Um..." he shyly points down at his own crotch – the fact that Suzaku can't say "penis" is cute.

Lelouch wishes he could say that about Milly surprises him, but it doesn't. It's no wonder she didn't insist so much about Nunnally joining them – Nunnally would've been a nice buffer against these kinds of questions, not that Lelouch would use her or that Milly wouldn't be able to get around it.

"Should I even ask what happen then?"

"Oh, don't worry," Suzaku reassures. "She thinks largely of you in that department."

A wicked smirk takes shape on Lelouch's lips, "At least she got something right for once."

Suzaku dryly rolls his eyes, dipping his hands into another bag, "Anyway, how did your day with Rivalz go?"

Lelouch stalls a bit, crossing his arms as he leans against his desk and stares at the layers of clothes beginning to cover the polished, wooden surface of the coffee table – the boy might have gotten a bit carried away, buying all of this female apparel.

"Let's just say I've gotten to know him a little better."

"Oh no?" Suzaku can't keep a wide grin from breaking across his lips. "You don't sound happy about that."

"Rivalz is one sad, strange individual, that's for sure," Lelouch supplies with a shallow sigh, turning to the window behind his bed.
"So you guys didn't do anything or go anywhere?"

"I can't properly enjoy myself when I know Milly is up to no good." He peers out briefly at the dark tint to the late-afternoon sky before tugging the curtain closed.

"...You're not mad about all of this, are you? About them knowing?" Suzaku asks, his timid, mercy-begging voice making the room feel colder than it really is. "I know we haven't really been able to talk about it yet."

Lelouch looks at the sad seahorse sitting stiffly on the couch, his head bowed with big, staring eyes that put every puppy, kitten or various other fuzzy, baby creatures Lelouch has ever seen to shame. With a heavy sigh, he turns his gaze from the idiot he can't live without, willing to accept that there might be some things that just don't change.

"...No."

"Really?" The uncertainty clinging to Suzaku's tone doesn't hold back a shred of suspicion or fear of some heartless bait-and-switch on Lelouch's end and it makes the sable-haired boy glance over his shoulder again with sympathetic half-smile.

"Really."

"You're not mad at all? Not even a little bit?"

All this questioning is kind of insulting, and a little annoying, but Lelouch understands Suzaku's apprehension. Lelouch knows he isn't always the most pleasant person in the world, especially when dealing with personal matters. Despite everything that suggests otherwise, Lelouch isn't mad or upset. He knew the pregnancy announcement would have to be handled at some point soon, or forced upon them whenever Suzaku starts to show – which is a horrifying image if only for the mind-bending biology of it – because Lelouch knows there isn't a chance in Hell Suzaku would participate in a parade of lies. Even then, making up stories about why Suzaku has a beach-ball stomach wouldn't account for the little bundle once it's born, and those dots are all too easily connectable. Realistically speaking, what happened last night works out for the best in the end. ...

"Not even a little bit," he confirms again, this time in a huff of wry laughter, gazing at his cautious seahorse with a soft-hearted and somewhat amused smile lightly touching his lips. His head slants to an impish angle and he lifts his hand, beckoning Suzaku with the gentle gesturing of one finger, "Come here."

Suzaku complies with measured steps – apparently still harboring a strong belief that Lelouch will strike him down at any second – and a firm line to his lips, hands held behind his back as if they're cuffed.

Now there's an interesting thought...

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know," Lelouch softly says, his voice being the cushion underneath Suzaku's skittish steps.

"And I am sorry." The apology was inevitable and the quiet sweep of his words makes him seem smaller when he finally stands in front of Lelouch.

"I know." Lelouch caresses Suzaku's temple with the tips of his fingers, his touch as feathery as his
voice as it weeds into the earthy curls, forcing the wig to fall to the floor, and leans in to press his lips against—

"It's just, for a second, I thought they really knew…"

"I know," Lelouch nods, sliding his other hand around Suzaku's hip, leaning in again—

"I realized my mistake the second I said it, but didn't know how to fix it."

Lelouch waits for further interruptions but when silence is all he hears, he leans in again—

"And then it was too late to even try."

Lelouch takes a breath, "I know," mutters quickly, and tries to—

"I just wasn't thinking and did something stupid."—plant a kiss before Suzaku speaks again.

…Suzaku can't be this thick-headed.

"Do you want to know how you can make it up to me?"

"How?" he's too relieved at the opportunity to right his wrong, as if it will cleanse the world of all its impurities.

"Shut up and let me kiss you," Lelouch orders flatly, the tenderness of his disposition blistered dry by the constant blowing of hot air from Suzaku's mouth.

The sheepish grin to muddle over Suzaku's lips is also inevitable, "Sorry."

Lelouch chides the boy with a lighthearted, **wordless**, shake of his head and taps his lips, a smile growing as Suzaku concedes with a simper. Of course, Lelouch doesn't leave it at a simple exchange, and he suspects that Suzaku expected as much because his lips easily part. The taste of lipstick is thick on Suzaku's mouth, but Lelouch isn't going to let some aesthetic annoyance keep him from savoring the soft slip of their pressing lips. He takes advantage of the apologetic atmosphere – not that it's particularly difficult – to sink his thoughts down Suzaku's throat with his hand clutching firmly to brown hair and let the kiss linger on slow, sensual seconds.

Lelouch is grinning provocatively through smeared lipstick once they part, sliding his arms in a tight, secure circle around Suzaku.

"You should apologize like *that* from now on."  

"*That* can be done." The younger boy smiles back, palms spreading on Lelouch's chest as his body is brought to a flushed embrace. "Although, I have to say, you keep surprising me."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." There's a hint of a smirk creeping in the upturned corners of Suzaku's mouth as he stretches his arms over Lelouch's shoulders. "Here I've been thinking you'd lose it over Nunnally and this thing with the student council, but you haven't."

"Of course," Lelouch replies with an authentic air of arrogance, letting his own arms fall to the Japanese' hips. "I'm not some raving lunatic."
"Of course." Green eyes glimmer briefly like the flash of a camera, but Lelouch's eyes still capture the condescension and he is quick to seal Suzaku's lips with another kiss before more words spoil the moment. This one is deeper than the last but just as patient with more tongue and less air, leaving them lost in each other's arms as everything but their contact wades from their minds.

Suzaku's seeking hands sweep around the smooth skin of an alabaster neck, anchoring his fingers in straight, sable hair as the hands on his lower back flatten and pull to connect their teenage hips like magnets. Feeling the heat of the moment slide from their mouths to his crotch, Lelouch nudges his pelvis forward just a tad, to test the waters, and at the avid reaction of a throaty moan and body twitch from Suzaku, Lelouch decides the water's fine. He brashly slips his palms down, open hands happily grabbing the firm, ample cheeks of Suzaku's bottom with equally delighted squeezes, much to the brunet's startled surprise, earning himself a rasp of his name against his lips.

"I think we should move all these apologies to the bed," Lelouch deviously purrs, his voice deep enough to visibly rumble through Suzaku's body. "So you're more comfortable."

Victory over Suzaku's reluctance is already blooming on his cheeks in wisps of pink and by the shy smile under his shifting eyes.

"...We really shouldn't," he quietly says, the timid whisper of his breath feeling like a formality against his waiting body in Lelouch's arms.

Lelouch hasn't forgotten the concern of Nunnally, but she's still in the library with Alice, so it's safe enough for their promiscuity.

"It'll be fine," he confidently insists with a forward step between Suzaku's legs and a graze of lips.

"Such a naughty daddy!" Suzaku smiles widely, showing his teeth in a light patter of giggles, and hugs his princely partner closely by the neck as they hobble to the bed.

Lelouch is positive he told Suzaku to not call him that.

He doesn't really even understand how that title is supposed to be sexy, if that is in fact the desired effect.

Still, if it gets Suzaku's motor running...

"But mamma likes it when I'm naughty." Another tremor of Lelouch's low, seductive voice coils around Suzaku's spine, making the boy bend backwards and fall to the bed underneath the Britannian who begins kissing him deeply once more.

Fully intending to carry this mood as far as it will go, using his tongue to encourage Suzaku to do the same with his hips placed firmly between Suzaku's legs. A whispery moan seeps from Suzaku's mouth, apparently needing little motivation to embrace the moment as he curls a leg around Lelouch's body with a heel zealously pressing down. Lelouch rubs his hips against the pair beneath him at their indulgent insistence, gratified at the twitch that sparks between them and grinds against Suzaku's crotch growing just like Lelouch's. This mutual enthusiasm is already catching their breath in heady air, trapping and suffocating any escaping thoughts that might steal their attention or create distractions. Only for a brief second do Lelouch's ears flinch at a faint sound he thinks he hears, but he passes it off as his imagination and refocuses on Suzaku's wiggling tongue—

"...can't hear..."

"...No—! Wait—!"
The abrupt hiss of Lelouch's bedroom door spills a tumble of bodies into the room, limbs and groans of pain mingling on the wooden floor near the foot of Lelouch's bed, effectively smashing the sexy mood and concentration to bits.

Millions and millions of bits.

The whole student council gang is here (minus Nina, of course), a tangle of apologies on their lips and embarrassed blushes on their cheeks – both of which Lelouch would rather have from Suzaku right now, as was the plan. Milly is the only one unashamed of their spying even though she's the one who fell under the weight of their snooping and ruined things for everyone.

Too surprised, and yet also not surprised, all Lelouch can really seem to do is look down at a wide-eyed Suzaku with a wry smile, "And you thought I'd be mad."

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Normally, seeing Suzaku shirtless upon walking into the bedroom would be a pleasant surprise worth entertaining dirty thoughts, but today, as Lelouch strides through the doors, he finds only a big question mark weighing on his mind. Perhaps Lelouch wouldn't find the scene of a half-naked Suzaku observing himself in front of the full-length mirror strange if not for the critical tilt to his head and groping hands on his chest – it's the hands, definitely, that worry Lelouch. Despite resting on a flat surface, they're cupping and rubbing as the soldier stares at himself sideways.

Lead by insatiable curiosity and an arced eyebrow, Lelouch joins Suzaku at the mirror, searching for meaning in the reflection.

"What are you doing?" he can't help but ask, now more disturbed by those groping hands than he is perplexed.

"It's…" Suzaku's voice falls away into his arching back, shoulders pulling tight and dropping loose as his palms slowly move in small circles. "I think I'm growing breasts."

Lelouch nearly falls over himself.

He is somewhat grateful he waited to take a swig of his coffee for now he is at least spared the indignity of violently choking or spewing it from his mouth in messy surprise – maybe he is finally learning something after all this time spent with this big-mouthed idiot. Instead, he is openly gawking, not really sure where to begin making sense of the chest in question or if he even should.

"…What?"

"I think I'm growing breasts," Suzaku repeats as if Lelouch had asked him to, head turning and torso twisting for inspection through another angle. "What do you think?"

What does Lelouch think?

Is that a serious question?

"Why do you think that?" Lelouch is using his non-judgmental voice here.

"What do you mean why do I think that?" Suzaku unexpectedly barks with annoyance in his eyebrows. "Can't you see them!"
Lelouch can't see something that isn't there.

Rather, he can't see something that exists only in Suzaku's imagination.

However, Lelouch doesn't like the untamed tone already beginning to foam from Suzaku's mouth, so he honestly reconsiders how he views what is (or isn't) presented to him in a silent, studying pause... but it's no use. Even with the comparative gestures of his squeezing fingers, Suzaku's chest is as flat as this moment is ridiculous.

"I'm sorry, I don't see anything," Lelouch confesses gently with a slow, careful shake of his head.

Suzaku practically stomps his foot, "Then you're not looking hard enough, because I can feel them! All jiggly..."

*Jiggly?*

"If you're this concerned we can ask the doctor about it on our next visit," he casually offers for the sake of appeasement, leaving not Suzaku but the mirror full of awkward shifting and pinching in favor of his desk – that being his original destination.

"No, I'd rather not have her feel me up again unless it's absolutely necessary." Suzaku visibly shudders under the memory of touch. "Can't you just feel for yourself and tell me what you think?"

That question begging for help freezes Lelouch where he stands, hand on the back of his desk chair, and drags his eyes back to Suzaku, at the way those green eyes stare at him as if Lelouch is a source of comfort.

*Damn it all...*

Lelouch was hoping to avoid getting roped into Suzaku's... whatever this thing he's having right now is, but they're *partners* and *partners* don't abandon each other regardless of whatever has befallen them. It isn't that Lelouch *doesn't* want to help Suzaku, he just isn't so sure he'll say what his *lover* wants to hear, and that will cause them both a lot of unwanted stress which he was also hoping to avoid.

Lelouch sets his coffee down on the desk with a repressed sigh, mentally telling himself to just accept this situation and not provoke his pregnant seahorse no matter how unreasonable he might become. He's just not awake or willing enough to fight about whether or not Suzaku has breasts.

Having prepared himself for this as much as he can, he pads over to Suzaku in patient strides rather than patronizing clomps, and awkwardly lifts his hands into the air once standing in front of the mirror again.

"Just..." Suzaku turns his back to Lelouch, pulling the older boy's hands up to his chest and tentatively presses them right over the possible *bosoms*.

Lelouch is staring at their reflection, at his hands, and briefly wonders what he'll do if he *does* in fact feel that his little seahorse is becoming *busty*.

All he can do is *squeeze*...

Rub.

Grope.
Fondle.
Grope.
Rub.

…and squeeze until the conclusion that Suzaku does not have breasts during at least this moment is proven.

"No, I don't feel anything." Lelouch shakes his head, hands still clutching to the idea on Suzaku's chest.

"Are you sure?" Suzaku almost sounds disappointed. "It's not extra… flabby to you?"

"No. It feels the same to me." Not that Lelouch makes it a habit to feel-up the boy's pectorals – ok, well, not like this. He slides his hands down to narrow hips, "I think you're just imaging it."

"...I guess you're right," he murmurs, skimming his fingertips over his chest.

Lelouch kisses the side of his head, silly boy—

"Too bad," Suzaku says. "I was starting to look forward to the idea of breastfeeding… Ow! Lelouch? Your fingernails are hurting me!"

Oh, sorry.

Was Lelouch unconsciously imbedding his nails into Suzaku's skin at this disturbing leak of information?

"You can't be serious." Lelouch ignores Suzaku's pain with furrowing eyebrows and a dark tone, unclenching his fists. "Breastfeeding?"

"What?" Suzaku's face is wrinkling right back, his voice taking on a defensive quiver. "It was just a thought."

"Let's leave it that way," Lelouch mumbles slightly, walking back to his desk and taking a sobering sip of coffee.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, Suzaku."

"Because I'm not a woman?" Suzaku slaps his hands to his hips.

"Yes!" Lelouch plops down in his chair and turns on his laptop. "You can't tell me that idea isn't strange or even a little disturbing to you."

Suzaku doesn't answer, his eyes following a thought in his head.

"That's what I thought."

"You're wrong!" Suzaku argues.

"Suzaku—" Lelouch tiredly starts.

"No!" he loudly defies. "Why else would I be growing them? That's technically what they're there
for. And I've read that men can lactate, too, so why wouldn't I be able to do it?"

That's quite possibly the most horrifying question Lelouch has ever heard Suzaku ask.

This is officially too absurd of a conversation to be having.

"Listen, just because your body might be reacting to the pregnancy the way it would for a woman doesn't mean that it would be preparing the way a woman's would by having the proper nourishment to sustain the baby." Lelouch taps a little too aggressively on his keyboard. "Yes, men can lactate, but that doesn't mean they can breastfeed. That's like saying a man who builds birdhouses also knows how to build houses for humans. It's two different situations."

"…That doesn't mean they don't know, either" Suzaku stubbornly grumbles in a pout.

"Besides," Lelouch ignores him, again, "you become aroused when your nipples are stimulated. That won't work out well for you in the end."

"You—!"

Lelouch laughs at the flustered outburst he caused, nabbing the chance to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"Where is this even coming from, anyway?"

Suzaku sighs, "I don't know… When I was with the girls, I just… found myself thinking a lot of things."

"Maybe you spent too much time with them. Their estrogen must have gotten to you."

Light snickers pop from Suzaku's mouth at the silliness of it all, "Maybe you're right."

A self-satisfied grin shines from within Lelouch – damn straight he's right.

"All you need to worry about right now is taking good care of the small fry while it's inside you. That's a far better use for your time."

Suzaku hums a dejected sound, making Lelouch look over at the boy who slides his hands down his stomach while looking at himself sideways in the mirror.

"…I worry about that, too."

"What do you mean?"

Perhaps a better question would be: why does he sound so sad?

"You see how flat my stomach is."

It's as flat as his chest.

"And?"

Greens eyes fling at Lelouch, "How many months am I into this pregnancy? I should've started showing by now, but I haven't. It worries me. What if there's something wrong?"

"The doctor has said and continues to say that everything looks fine. I'm sure we're conducting over a very strong safety net."
As strong as can be, at least…

"But what if it's a problem they can't detect or some new side effect they can't see? Male pregnancy isn't an everyday occurrence."

"Well…" Lelouch won't admit it, but he's at a loss for words, particularly because the seahorse is so down and so right. As far as anyone knows, a male pregnancy has never been recorded outside of fiction, and they don't know what will happen. To have Suzaku mention that he thinks about the fatal possibilities threatening their baby is unsettling on its own. "It is a small fry, right? Maybe we're just having a small baby – that happens sometimes."

A noncommittal sound seeps from Suzaku's lips, his eyes turned to his disappointing reflection.

"Sometimes babies a bigger, too. For your sake, you should probably hope it is a small one. A hefty baby might kill you."

The corners of Suzaku's lips lift faintly, and he looks at Lelouch with weak amusement – showing his appreciation for the attempt at comic relief.

"Don't worry so much, that's my job," Lelouch commands softly through a smile as he turns his attention back to his laptop, opening an undoubtedly annoying and pointless e-mail from Milly. "And it's like I said before; not everyone's body is the same. It'll probably take a little more time before you start showing."

His fingers tick across keys for only a few seconds when he is suddenly encased in a loving embrace, strong arms linked around his shoulders and a tickle of hair on his neck, causing him to fall still. Strokes of hot breaths slide over Lelouch's skin in more beats of wordless time, Suzaku's scent filling his nostrils and encompassing his brain with warm, fuzzy contentment.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Suzaku says, his affectionate delivery muffled by Lelouch's shoulder.

Lelouch smiles, a soft glow on his face like a lit candle, and touches Suzaku's arm with his hand.

"Die, probably."

"You're the best daddy in the whole world."

"I thought I was a naughty daddy."

"You are," Suzaku turns his head so his nose is pointing at Lelouch. "But you were right: I like that part of daddy, too."

Lelouch's eyebrow twitches, but it's an intrigued quirk rather than an annoyed reflex, and he stares at the kiss glittering in emerald eyes that's clearly calling him. Not one to pass on such an offer, Lelouch sweetly and tenderly presses his lips to Suzaku's, feeling the other boy happily mirror the movement.

The imposing idea of budding bosoms has been successfully squashed.

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Seated side by side on the couch in Lelouch's room that evening, the teenage parents-to-be stare at the laptop screen, readying themselves for the childbirth video found on the website of their clinic. They're both unsure if they're really ready to see what this video holds but also sure that they
should be prepared (not just because the thoughts of Suzaku's mind are truly worrying), and unquestioningly curious about the truth. Lelouch has heard the horror stories and the glory tales, but can't say he knows what the experience really entails – perhaps if he hadn't skipped his health class so much he'd be more knowledgeable, and Suzaku's been playing soldier boy so he's just as clueless.

Lelouch inhales a brave breath, "Ready?"

Suzaku wordlessly nods.

The click from the mouse has never sounded so deafening to Lelouch's ears.

The laptop glows softly on their faces which quickly contort when the video – watching this in full screen was definitely a bad idea – cuts right to the chase. Lelouch can feel himself frowning deeply, cringing at the clear angle and anguishing sounds emitting from the woman whose face they can't see. He glances at Suzaku to see those evergreen eyes expanding beyond their natural limits and his ears turning red like a mercury thermometer during the height of summer, in the desert.

Neither of them was prepared for this, and that's a grievous understatement.

It even feels morally reprehensible because they are in a gay relationship and under the legal age to be taking part in anything to do with this subject. If Suzaku wasn't pregnant, they'd really have no right to watch this video – not that they'd be dying to if he wasn't…

"Uuhh!" the woman groans in distress – a person should never groan like that.

"...So that's what it looks like," Suzaku says, his voice empty and distance like his purity was just stolen from him.

As much as Lelouch would like to admonish Suzaku for making such a blunt remark, he only said what they were both thinking… and it did break the tension crackling from the video, if only a little.

It is an image Lelouch is certain he'll never forget.

"Aahh~!"

For better or for worse.

"I don't think it always looks quite like this," Lelouch mutters sourly as the woman's screams of pain intensify, siphoning a harsh, acidic taste into his mouth from his stomach.

"Push, push, honey! You're almost there! I can see the head!"

"No…" Suzaku's voice is almost completely smothered by the video.

"Guh! Guhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa~ÅÅÅÅÅÅÅÅÅÅÅAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

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The boys are scrambling into the bathroom in a race against their stomachs; Suzaku being much faster to the toilet than Lelouch, flipping the lid and dry-heaving into the bowl as if he's trying to cough up the memory of what he just saw. Lelouch stands at the sink, palms on the icy surface as he stares down into the drain, his throat flexing and clamping the volatile feeling of vomit just
teetering on the verge of tongue.

…There are some things that just aren't meant for mortal eyes.

"Please tell me I don't have to do that," Suzaku begs with hefty huffs, eyes wide open with the truth.

Lelouch is still swallowing in an effort to keep his lunch, and his stomach, from lurching up his esophagus, completely against making any promises to Suzaku at this point. He'd like nothing more than to reassure Suzaku – and himself – that it isn't possible for a male to give birth that way, but a male shouldn't even be pregnant in the first place. They're treading new lands, and Lelouch doesn't have enough facts to declare anything safe just yet anymore.

"I just want to know what kind of sick people call childbirth beautiful," Lelouch mutters into the sink, rubbing the nausea away with the shock of cold water. "Or what sick things a person would have to see first to even call it beautiful."

"I think people think the idea of childbirth is beautiful when they say that." – is all Suzaku can seem to offer in a tired toss of words as he slumps before the Porcelain God.

Lelouch's lips curl at the imagery of that video as if he smells rancid garbage, "I hope you're right."

Homeroom might just be another time for napping to Lelouch, but not Suzaku. While the older boy snoozes his free period away, face buried in his folded arms on the table, Suzaku sits next to him with a straight back and an open history book in front of him to do his assignment… Trying to, at least. His paper is still blank, aside from his name, while his mind chases thoughts that lead him farther and farther away from the point of his pencil. Suzaku hasn't found it completely impossible to focus in every case, but school work and class lectures are a different story. Although he's never thought of himself as the student type, he's been doing pretty well since enrolled at Ashford, only now with the pregnancy hatching in his mind is he facing a constant daze. Doing his work would actually be fine, if he could remember a single word any of his teachers have said...

Normally turning to Lelouch would solve Suzaku's problems, but he doesn't want to bother the boy who struggles to sleep at night so he's just staring helplessly down at his paper when a shadow slides over its empty surface – a silhouette he can instantly recognize.

"What's up, Suzaku," Rivalz greets, dragging an empty chair to sit backwards in it across from the honorary Britannian, "Doin' homework?"

"Trying to," he bashfully mumbles. "I can't seem to concentrate."

Rivalz waves off Suzaku's troubles, smiling breezily, "Just get Lelouch to do it for you later. He's never done it for me, but I'm sure he'd do it for you."

Suzaku smiles faintly as Rivalz warmly laughs, but the twist on his lips is more sneering than it is humored.

He already knows what Lelouch would expect in return for such a favor.

Because Lelouch's charity has its limits.
"So… I was just curious about something," Rivalz's lowers his voice, his face shaping to match his sober words.

Suzaku's head tilts, "What?"

That blue mop of hair sinks to dock a chin on his over-lapping arms, his shoulders raised and eyes intensely focused on what he makes seem like a top-secret conversation.

"What was it like, being one of them?"

"Them?"

"You know, when you were with the girls. What was it like?"

In itself, coming from Rivalz, that's not an odd question, just a little unexpected in timing. After the event on Saturday, Lelouch didn't really give off the appeal of wanting to know more than he needed to about what went on at the mall, either because he simply didn't want to know or he didn't care to know all the details, Suzaku can't say. He didn't feel particularly obligated to share more than he needed to, either, because the whole day was repetitive of Milly's harassment.

"Oh, well… different, but not very different from just being around them any other time. I think it was just the context that was strange? I don't think they're different because they're girls." Different for other reasons, maybe, but everybody is quirky in some way.

"Huh…" Rivalz sounds disappointed. "They didn't act different around you?"

Suzaku shakes his head with a faint shrug, "No. They were the same."

Milly might have been more aggressive, and cared only about Lelouch, but Rivalz doesn't need to know that.

"Did you get to see them in their underwear?" Rivalz asks a bit too excitedly and a bit too loudly, painting a blush across Suzaku's cheeks and pulling some unwanted eyes onto them. "Cuz I've heard that girls are really open with their, erm,"—he glances around briefly to make sure no one is listening, anymore—"special guy friends. They'll, like, change in front of you, or even more than that!"

"Don't be stupid, Rivalz." —comes the muffled scorn of Lelouch who doesn't bother to lift his head. Guess he's not really sleeping.

Rivalz brushes off Lelouch's derision with a brittle straighten of his spine, "Whatever. It's just what I've heard. But, did you get to see anything? I mean, I know you probably don't care about that sort of thing. But, the president? Even you'd have to admit that she's got a nice figure – did you get to see it up close and personal, hah? All of them look good, you know, but Milly is more mature, if you know what I mean."

This part of Rivalz is actually kind of funny.

Creepy, but funny.

And, no, Suzaku doesn't know what he means.

"Sorry." Suzaku simpers. "That didn't happen."

"Figured not." Rivalz slumps back down against his arms. "But… are you sure they're really like
us? Because it doesn't always seem that way."

"Yeah," Suzaku says with an ironic half-smile at the reflective thoughts of how carnivorously Milly wanted to know about Lelouch just like Rivalz wanted to about Milly. "I think just their parts are different."
One Foot in the Nest

Chapter Notes

I'm finally back (with a different penname) and of course on Lelouch's 18th birthday! :D ♥♥♥

I feel so incredibly guilty about the way this fic was just abandoned. That was never my intention (and I was kind of in denial about it being abandoned) nor did I intend for this story to be left incomplete forever. So, now I'm resuming updates and finishing this story properly because an ending is deserved to both it and its readers. The ending is happening a little sooner than planned but I AM still using the same ideas for the ending. (This story will be completed at 11 chapters.)

I also did some minor editing of the previous chapters before posting this one.

I really CANNOT apologize enough to readers I left hanging. I hope these last few chapters will be sufficient – for old and new readers alike. *sobs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The wisest of men is a fool when love is concerned." –Lord Conrad Weller from Kyo Kara Maoh!

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Ambiguous

One Foot in the Nest

Suzaku softly moans.

His back gently arches above the plush, plump snowy beddings of the hotel bed under him as Lelouch's hips ease close between his bent legs, against his cushioned backside that lifts him more comfortably as he's carefully entered. His arms are tense and straight, spread at his sides with hands fisting mounds of the blanket as his chest curves in the warm glow from a dimly lit bedside lamp. It traces his somewhat rounded stomach and stiff nipples, but doesn't quite coat the rest of the posh, pale-toned furniture sharing their room.

"Is it all right? Any discomfort?" Lelouch quietly asks as he skims his palms up then down from Suzaku's waist until he's holding a raised pair of hips.

Suzaku fondly smiles with heated cheeks. "Yeah. It's good." He reaches and holds Lelouch's jaw when the older boy lowers to link their lips.

Their kiss is slow and loose, lips sifting like sand until Lelouch shifts his hips against the boy connected to them, easing a contented moan to sail from soldier's throat. Lelouch lets the sound ooze into the air as he turns his attention to kissing the brunet's neck whose face falls to the side, baring his flesh for supple lips and a tender tongue. The former prince mouths down a warm, tan neck and into the curve of a shoulder when he's tempted by the tense nipples on Suzaku's rising chest. He presses a light kiss on Suzaku's flat pectoral and then the tight nub, making the gent
under him breathily moan and weave fingers into his feather-soft raven hair. A royal tongue spills from parted lips and carefully blankets the dusky pink point, nudging the tightening bud with its wet tip before lips close and tamely begin sucking. Lelouch listens to the wet sound of his mouth on the Honorary Britannian's chest underneath a current of airy mewls and words that try to be Japanese dissolve down Suzaku's throat. He pays equal attention to Suzaku's other nipple, earning a roll of hips against him with the tight compression of brawny thighs and a deep squeeze in their connection.

And then the husky beckon of his name.

Lelouch lifts to gaze at Suzaku, at those swimming green eyes, and kisses the struggling native words trapped in his mouth. He delicately pulls his hips back and then pushes forward in testing movements that coax a coasting croon from Suzaku's nose, encouraging him to deepen his range. Suzaku's head tilts back as his body is lapped into the gentle shores of flourishing pleasure, a slow-burning passion chasing the pulse of their blood. Everything about them is measured, savoring. Pleasure rolling out in their breathing like the swaying of the ocean with Suzaku's quieted cries calmly pulling Lelouch in farther, faster. He is careful to not place pressure on the seahorse's stomach as the mild rhythm he began with fades from his hips, sinking into Suzaku's hot body like every time before. Falling into a lust that eats at his mind and body until there's nothing but their pumping, pulsing heat.

Lelouch absolutely loves the way Suzaku clings to him, the connection, the charging of their bodies.

All wet skin and air.

No complications, no lies.

Lelouch watches the movement inside Suzaku's body affect him; he's always been enamored—no, enthralled in the way he can make Suzaku's body move – but not like a puppet, rather, like he cut the puppet's strings. Lelouch watches Suzaku's cheeks tint more darkly and his slivered eyes glaze as he listens to that Japanese voice squeak against his moving hips, feeling Suzaku's entire being – not just his body, but his heart and his head – desperately, greedily grip around him. Pull him ever closer. To be inside Suzaku and have the ability to create this ecstasy is an empowered feeling that Lelouch does, admittedly, let go to his head, but it's not just pride. It's not the same as toppling pieces on the battlefield or the commanding swoop of his absolute Geass.

It is different.

It is… pure.

Suzaku's body, surely, has no rival and Lelouch honestly enjoys making his best friend cry in rapture – more so than bringing himself to that same brink.

But when they fall, it's always together.

Suzaku's wings might unfurl first but Lelouch is on his tail. A stab of Suzaku's voice cracks the isolated air around them before a hand can stuff it back down – mindful of neighbors. Lelouch doesn't allow a hand to stifle, however, and tangles their fingers together in the rumpled blankets, welcoming the flutter of Suzaku's voice into his ear; it pushes darkness from his eyes as his body rows them faster—

Deeper—
"Closer towards that thrashing edge—

And it all fades with Suzaku's sinking crows of pleasure…

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"How did we get here?" Suzaku thoughtfully asks, nestled at Lelouch's side under the hills of blankets with his head resting on a pale shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Lelouch holds the hand resting over his beating heart.

"It feels like so long ago, doesn't it? When you and Nunnally climbed all those stairs to the shrine —"

"You mean when you punched me in the face."

Suzaku flinches with a simper. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Maybe if you were sorry."

"I'm sure that I apologized." Suzaku wryly grins up at the resentful royal.

"I think I'd remember that," Lelouch haughtily maintains.

Suzaku did apologize.

7 years ago.

But he could always stand to be more apologetic about it.

Without even a hint of rolled eyes, Suzaku cradles Lelouch's head with one hand and tenderly kisses the cheek he so wrongly hit almost ten years ago.

"I am so very sorry for punching your very perfect face."

"...Actually, it was the other cheek."

Suzaku good-naturedly laughs, his simper widening into amusement as he proceeds to kiss the "other" cheek in the same fashion.

"Can you ever forgive me?"

Lelouch's mouth quirks – and for just a brief moment, he sees the ethereal shadow of Suzaku's guilt hanging on his words.

(As well as the mask and cape hanging from his own…)

"I forgive you."

Suzaku holds his warm smile as he leans down to softly and fully kiss Lelouch's prideful lips.

They're just at three months since the seahorse first burst the rebel leader's world unlike anything else had. In more measured terms, Suzaku is nearing four months of pregnancy and his belly is finally rising. Not overmuch, but enough to soothe some stress.

Four small months.
Four big months.

Eight whole weeks.

Roughly one-hundred-twenty days…

It seems they've made it all the way to the cold month of December, Lelouch's birthday, and this hotel weekend was a gift from Suzaku. Their club gaggle did throw a rather unwanted shindig for Lelouch – he's not one for parties, especially Milly's parties, but it was surprisingly low-key despite him becoming a legal adult which is typically a big deal to many teens. (Never mind that Lelouch "grew up" the day he was kicked out of the only home he'd ever known and across the globe.) Fortunately, it wasn't all that difficult to sneak away with Suzaku who unwittingly prepared their getaway.

Where they could be alone.

Away from the world.

Away from their tactless friends.

Away from fearing about Nunnally over-hearing them in bed…

The two boys had been restricting their love-making to the bathroom – namely, showers – because that's where Suzaku is more comfortable. It's often later in the evening after Nunnally is tucked into bed and as such away from her bedroom. While in itself not unpleasant, the shower is always slippery and steamy and sweltering, but this bed is open and secure and Lelouch doesn't have to stare at the back of Suzaku's head. (Aside from that one time he got Suzaku bent of the sink in front of the mirror.) Even if he does adore the mesmerizing flexing of Suzaku's muscular back… and the way his flesh is absorbed into Suzaku's body.

Lelouch has to admit, Suzaku has given him something he—they needed. Lelouch hasn't felt this at ease since… he could smell the flowers in his mother's garden. Or see Nunnally's big lilac eyes.

It's a fleeting slice of heaven, Lelouch knows, even frivolous, but maybe an escape is just something he needed yet would never give himself. There's always something to be done. These months with Suzaku as expecting parents have been admittedly stressful—piling on top of his already crowded shoulders as he walked the tightrope of rebellion, determined to never fall.

"I've been curious about something," Suzaku says, spooning against Lelouch on his stomach, anchoring his elbow on the other side of the black-haired lad's body. "When you were a child, did you ever want to be anything when you grew up? I-I mean, when you were in Britannia… did you think about it?"

"I was…" Lelouch isn't quite sure what word he's looking for here, "…naïve then, I didn't see the world that way." Truthfully, Lelouch's concerns weren't so different as they are now: Nunnally.

"Do you miss that?"

"It was a lie," Lelouch impassively says – emptier than Britannia is far. "What I have now isn't a fairy tale, but it's real."

Zero might be a shroud of lies but he's felt more honest behind Zero's mask than he ever did behind the one of "Lamperouge." As vi Britannia Lelouch wasn't allowed to forget that his blood wasn't
pure, even if he did—does?—have happy memories of that time. Lelouch isn't some hot-house orchid but looking back, yes, there were things his ten-year-old brain couldn't conceive.

His father not loving him was one of them.

"...You don't think something like that—that kind of happiness could ever be a reality? Honest?"

Lelouch's hand skating over Suzaku's side is his answer, caressing a scar in a way that makes the soldier visibly shift as if in unconscious discomfort. Or trying to hide his obvious discomfort. He traces the ghost weighing Suzaku's eyes with the fingertips of his hand and lifts his head up for a kiss that efficiently silences all these unwanted questions. The younger boy yields with a pleased sound wisping through his nose as he leans fully into his friend's bedeviling mouth, but when Lelouch moves as if to flip them over—

"Wait," Suzaku gently insists, tossing his leg over to straddle Lelouch. "It's your birthday. Let me treat you for once."

Lelouch hums, intrigued. "Treat me how?"

"I don't know." Suzaku pulls on a feisty expression but it doesn't quite fit, hanging a little loosely on his body – although apparently actually accepting the subject drop. "What do you want?"

A dead Britannian Emperor.

"I wonder..." Lelouch slyly answers, sliding his fingertips up along the outline of Suzaku's waist, grinning at the reflexive way a body shifts into his touch. "You might want to be careful now, you know. Technically you are underage and we could get into a lot of trouble if we're caught together like this." It will still be a half year before Suzaku is "legal" (although the "shame" of being with an "eleven" would probably be more damaging to most others.)

"I won't tell anyone if you don't," Suzaku impishly grins back, leaning down to kiss his 18 year-old beau. "But, actually, I do have another little surprise for you," he suggestively says against Lelouch's lips.

"That so...?" Lelouch asks in a similar manner.

••

A sexy nurse exits the bathroom.

A small, paper pillbox hat with a red plus on the front crowns Suzaku's brown mane as he walks towards the bed in a white nurses' pencil dress slinked around his body. It's tighter around his lower half than his upper half that has a plunging v-neck that was apparently tailored for somebody more busty – or at least somebody with a bust. The skirt is also quite short, above mid-thigh, but it does fit rather nicely around Suzaku's shapely behind and doing little to conceal the bulge of his front.

"Well?" Suzaku asks as he walks up to the bed in a slow spin, sliding his hands down his sides. "What do you think?"

It's certainly not the regulation kind of uniform.

"I am... surprised."

No, really.
Lelouch is astonished.

Suzaku simpers a bit bitterly, "Did you forget?"

"I didn't." Lelouch smirks. "Halloween, costume shop." But he wasn't serious when he mentioned it then and really didn't think Suzaku would purchase such a thing – although maybe Lelouch should know better, by now. And to think he's been holding onto it this entire time…?

"Do you like it?"

"...It looks good on you," Lelouch casually says, smoothing his palms around Suzaku's waist to pull the boy closer to the edge of the bed where he sits with bundled legs.

"But?" Suzaku asks, hearing the noticeable pause on Lelouch's end.

"I appreciate your effort, but, I wasn't being serious." Actually, the fact that Suzaku would even do this for Lelouch is what makes it sexy. "This isn't some interest I have." That is to say it's not his kink and he doesn't want Suzaku to overly invest in it.

Suzaku stares a moment, thoughtful. "What about Suzie?"

"Even Suzie."

Suzaku gives him a skeptical look and Lelouch lightly laughs.

"You do look good in skirts and dresses, and their easy access is very appealing, and they are easier to strip off you," Lelouch says knowing there's honesty in his words, slowly spreading his low voice like warm butter up the inside of Suzaku's bare thigh with his palm, while his other hand smoothes around a round rump towards the hem of the rather thin dress—

And Suzaku faintly gasps in surprise when the tight fabric is yanked up to full expose the firm flesh of his bare backside, and front – so he didn't bother with underwear. If not already past the date, Suzaku definitely can't return the outfit after this. Steel hands grip Lelouch's shoulders and he smiles against the squirm of skin on Suzaku's chest as his hands massage up between thighs and over one plump cheek.

"Because I really like you best when you're wearing nothing but my name on your lips," Lelouch fiendishly murmurs hotly against skin he sucks, listening to the sharp breaths from the other boy above his head.

Even better is the honest sculpting of pleasure on Suzaku's face, when Lelouch is wearing Suzaku.

"Lelouch, you're surprisingly... sexual," Suzaku mutters as he shivers in Lelouch's attentive hands.

The older teen has to look up at that, "What's that supposed to mean?" You say that like it's a bad thing.

"Just," and the flushed brunet smirks of something wry, "you know how you are..."

Is that really an answer?

Or is that just an insult?

Regardless, Lelouch understands what he means...

"I wasn't before you, that's true." Lelouch's mouth is adorned with a soft smile while he uses both
hands to massage the ample mounds of Suzaku's rear.

The pilot quivers delightedly as he leans closer to the older boy.

"I'm honored that I bring that out in you," the seahorse breathes with an unexpected, affectionate shape on Suzaku's lips, hands slinking up Lelouch's neck. "And that I'm the only one who gets to see it."

The former prince proudly quirks his lips, "You should feel honored."

Lelouch doesn't fully understand it himself, other than that Suzaku is just… special – not just for a boy, but as another human being. He doesn't think he'd feel differently if Suzaku was a female (at least then this pregnancy would make sense.) A romantic cliché, maybe, but Suzaku is the only person Lelouch feels he can really trust. And maybe that's… really all there is to it.

(Even if Lelouch still keeps secrets, because that's just in his nature.

Zero shouldn't—)

Suzaku is grinning as he's pulled flush against the boy that instantly plants kisses over his chest while squeezing hands grope his bubbly buttocks. A growing hardness rubs Lelouch's stomach as his lips speckle close to one nipple and he gently pecks on a stiff nub, softly grazing his pursing lips until Suzaku slightly wriggles.

"Any discomfort here?" Lelouch asks with a checking glance at answering greens.

Suzaku has become more sensitive here lately; his nipples as well as his breasts – which, while still very flat, have softened and are sometimes tender. Sore nipples can make even just wearing a shirt unbearable, so Lelouch doesn't want to over-stimulate…

"No," Suzaku murmurs, fingers scrunching in a nape of midnight hair. "It's good."

Lelouch kisses the rosy nipple again and leans over the brunet when he lies back in the fluff of hotel linens again, legs dangling over the side. The Britannian takes the protruding point of Suzaku's nipple between the rims of his lips and mildly slices the tip of his tongue over it from side to side. A soft moan inflates Suzaku's chest like a sail and he rises a little upward into Lelouch's mouth who traces around the peaking bud before flatly licking over the tightening pink spot. He lightly rubs his thumb over the sharpening point as he drifts over to the other nipple with a shove of loose fabric. Lelouch repeats the light tonguing he did to the other, feeling Suzaku's body ripple under him in a way that inspires him to briefly suckle the sensitive nip. He lifts to the steady shallow of Suzaku's pants as he smears his thumbs over wet nipples, circling around tips that harden even more before closing both of them between his fingers. Lelouch's concentrated violets swing between each nipple he carefully rolls in his fingers, listening to the quiet growth of moans rooting under loud breaths that pour into his blood. Suzaku's arousal is fully lifted with Lelouch's and he twists the sensitive tips in his fingers, watching a restless chest push up for more.

"Lelouch…" Just like the sound of his name.

Lelouch's eyes flick up to Suzaku's face splashed with red pleasure and can't resist slightly harder pinches to the younger boy's nipples to see his face glaze over. Then he kisses Suzaku again and nails lightly scrape his shoulder-blades as he surfs a hand down a wavy stomach to briefly stroke an erection with loose fingers. When they tiptoe farther down and press against a soft opening, Lelouch laps at a moan that breezes from Suzaku's throat before parting from their wet lips to wet his fingers. He dips them back down between Suzaku's thighs and the toned leg not under
Lelouch's weight bends around him with lifting hips as fingers slide through a loosened entrance. Excitement deepens Suzaku's breath and their open lips graze as fingers swab around inside his hot body. Lelouch pets the hot coil of inner walls as he shifts his mouth lower to the moist length he grips with his other hand.

"Wait," Suzaku's voice *steams* from his lips and he tries to pull away but his hips are hooked on Lelouch's pumping fingers. "I want to… I want to do that for you."

Lelouch stares at the sheen of lust on Suzaku's clover eyes. And decides to make a little joke.

"You can reach your mouth down here on yourself?"

That question pelts Suzaku's face with confusion. And then annoyance.

"I meant I want to *mouth* you, you jerk," he half-heartedly grouses and rustles Lelouch's hair with a fairly rough hand – which isn't really helpful in selling his offer.

Mirthful chuckles just bubble in Lelouch's chest. Flattering, but "No need," and he lowers with a hanging tongue— Only to be literally cock-blocked by Suzaku's palm on his forehead.

"But…" Suzaku murmurs as his hot inner walls are groped with firm, long fingers, "you never let me and it's your birthday… I want to do it." Fingers curl over Lelouch's scalp. "Let me make you feel good."

This *does* make Lelouch feel good.

He likes being in the lead. And Suzaku asking Lelouch to let him do something that Lelouch doesn't want him to do… doesn't really constitute as a "treat."

"Alright then," Lelouch says, on the other hand, with a smirk that lights Suzaku's eyes, "why don't we skip the appetizers and jump to the main course?"

They're both ready—*hungry* for it, anyway.

Lelouch is quite proud of himself as he shuffles up the bed to grab their supplies left on the nearby wooden night table; he's squirting out some lubricant gel on his fingers when he turns to Suzaku— And is pounced by a sexy, pregnant nurse with an erection.

Suzaku is perched on Lelouch's lap with a strangely pleading simper, "You really don't want me to? Even if I ask you nicely?"

Why should Lelouch let him? That's not what the *birthday boy* wants. Letting Suzaku do this is a treat for him, not Lelouch.

"Did I not satisfy you earlier?" Lelouch asks with feigned hurt.
Suzaku gapes, "That isn't—! O-Of course you did!"

"Too easy.

"Then why meddle with a good thing?" the secret rebel leader coos as he pulls the skirt of the dress so it fully gathers in a rumple around the pilot's waist.

Suzaku's sigh sounds slightly jaded, "Can I… ride you at least?"

The dunce seems strangely adamant about this…

Well… this is weekend is kind of for both of them, isn't it?

Still.

Lelouch doesn't like it.

"You can try." Lelouch rigidly permits, realizing that… just that he should at least try to be flexible for Suzaku.

That way when he rejects it he can say at least he tried.

And maybe… he thinks that he shouldn't take Suzaku's nature for granted; that it will always be there.

That Lelouch shouldn't break it.

(Because—)

Lelouch allows himself to be pushed back and kissed by a randy seahorse and reaches between the thighs of the boy straddling him and slips in his slickened fingers. Suzaku chokes on a startled sound that turns over into a moan as he accepts the insertion with a pulling passage – just because Lelouch is lying back doesn't mean he's passive.

He's Lelouch vi Britannia inside Zero's mask, after all.

Once Lelouch is safely sheathed, Suzaku doesn't waste much time in impaling himself on the taller erection with guiding fingers courtesy of the dominating demon. Lelouch at least enjoys the taut feeling of Suzaku's skin sealing completely around him with his fingers – he's still tight and scorching and panting, and that's good.

But.

While the bobbing view of the seahorse is nice – Suzaku's eagerly frosted evergreens, unhindered, flushing face and his arcing back pushing out his hard nipples from the sagging front of the dress – Lelouch isn't content to lie here like a slab of meat with Suzaku doing all the work (having the control). So he decisively tumbles them over, much to the younger boy's discontent – though he doesn't stop the birthday boy and wholly accepts the tongue and flesh that confidently enter him—

Lelouch tried.

Totally.

That should totally count as trying.

—"Urgh…" Until his face suddenly twists in displeasure.
Lelouch pulls back with a pause of concern, "Does it hurt?"

Suzaku shakes his head, face contorting behind the back of his hand over his mouth. "It's—!"

He shoves Lelouch away by his face—

Then he's stretching over the side of the bed—

*Vomiting* rather violently onto the unlucky plush carpet.

At first, Lelouch is a little too stunned—

Cough!

—startled—

Cough!

—confused—

*COUGH!*

—a tad egotistically wounded—

HA~CK!

—before he reacts.

He pats Suzaku's shoulder, soothingly rubbing a blade, "Are you alright?"

Suzaku is (un-sexily) panting, gulping one last stomach *curdle* as he rises, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "...Yeah. It just..."

"Are you ill?" Lelouch asks, feeling a forehead with his hand and carefully studying his features for signs of sickness.

"No, I think it's..." he trails off, eyes and hand landing on his stomach. "I guess with all that... bouncing..."

Lelouch hums.

Seems the (not)morning sickness has finally stricken the poor seahorse.

What perfect timing.

"I'm sorry," Suzaku mutters, rubbing at the discomfort on his face. "That really ruined the mood, didn't it?"

*Don't apologize.*

"Not like I'm mad at you." Lelouch shrugs before leaning in for a kiss, "Anyway, if you're finished..."

Suzaku backs away with a blink, "What?"

"...I'd like to continue," Lelouch blandly murmurs – thought he made that clear enough.
And, well, they are still connected.

A slight shock fleetingly flickers in Suzaku's eyes until amazement overrides. "Really? You're not bothered?"

"What kind of partner would I be if I was bothered by your bodily functions?"

Suzaku stares. "...I think that's the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."

_Hilarious._

Lelouch deadpans at Suzaku's cheekiness, "So, the question is whether or not you want to continue." If Suzaku hadn't ruined the mood by retching, his _antics_ surely will.

Suzaku seems to consider the notion, an impish smile reforming on his lips—

Until it falls—

And he's curled over the side of the bed again, retching like a sea-sick seahorse...

All Lelouch can do is pat Suzaku's back. "There, there..."

Let this be a lesson to Suzaku: Lelouch belongs in charge. _Always._

It's just the natural order.

•••

A few swishes of mouthwash later and Suzaku is moaning on his back again with _better mounting_; a sexy nurse is deflated on the floor by Lelouch's feet – although the little hat miraculously clings to Suzaku's head. Lelouch stands at the foot of the bed – away from the _sick_ on the one side that he tried to clean, covered with a towel – as he thrusts into the boy lying on the bed, jerky legs folded over his arms. His curled fingers are secure on Suzaku's hips as he watches the seahorse surf on the fluid motions of pleasure filing his slim, athletic body. Suzaku undulates as his hands fist the disheveled beddings above his head that tosses to the side as lust froths inside him with sprouting sounds. They twine around Lelouch's covered cock, slinking around and pulling him deeper into clamping heat the older boy is only happy to feed. He withdraws his rigid length leaving only the head inside and then slides all the way back in to the base with long strides that weights Suzaku's breaths with desiring whines. Composure frays at the edges of his huffing pants as his open body writhes on the bed like a luxurious feast on a silver platter. Long ago are the days Lelouch was given anything on a silver tray but he can honestly say that this Japanese offering is superlative. For all that Lelouch curses exercise and Suzaku's insufferable military mentality it has carved him into an appetizing lean _slab of meat_, but tastes and looks far juicier.

Suzaku notices Lelouch's stare and calls his name.

Somehow it sounds like a haunting breeze.

Until he says it again, louder.

Needier as it curves his back off the bed.

And Lelouch _knows_ what he's doing – he just told Suzaku he liked that, so of course... Whether or not it's better when Suzaku does it unconsciously or not... it's not as though it's insincere and it has the same effect. Yet, Suzaku should be a little more mindful that this is still a hotel room and that
they're not isolated up on a mountain top, like *Mount Olympus*.

Even so, Lelouch swings his hips and strikes harder at that place inside Suzaku that only he can touch, watching it spring through his friend in claiming jolts. Suzaku cries out a half-eaten morsel of Lelouch's name, the end of it hissing sharply from Japanese teeth until the middle oozes into nameless moans he can't shape. Pleasured croons swell in Suzaku's throat as Lelouch pumps his swelling hardness in the inviting squeeze of a narrow passage that doesn't stop tempting him in deeper and he hears his own breath heavily shove from his chest. He leans against the bed with one hand and begins stroking Suzaku's shaft, legs falling open to the side as if requesting more of the thick bliss Lelouch thrusts into him. He drives himself deeply as he leans over the seahorse caught in their tide who pants and ruts hips into a jerking hand while Lelouch quickens his pace. Suzaku clings to the blankets, and Lelouch's thrusting erection, as if he might fall off the planet and Lelouch knows that the pilot is balancing on his peak, just waiting to be tipped over.

Ecstatic moans freely drop from Suzaku's voice like they can't at home and Lelouch has to close his eyes on the rapturous display melting under him. If he stares too intently on the intensity of pleasure he whips into Suzaku with his hips he'll rush right over his peak too soon. He clenches his amethyst eyes on the pair of emeralds that narrow on a backward-tilting head. Lelouch can't see the way an open mouth launches those bursts of moans but Lelouch can hear them and they constrict around his throbbing hardness like an ax to a tree. The Britannian's blood boils down into thickened length that his boyhood friend's body hungrily swallows and a deep groan rusts the hinges of his resolve, prying open his eyes. It's almost a cruel joke that his gemstone irises tumble right on top of the prominent points of Suzaku's nipples and he doesn't fight the urge budding in his mouth. Suzaku grips the blankets at his sides and bites a startled, delighted cry of surprise as Lelouch laps at the sensitive nub of a shriveled right nipple, sucking the erogenous spot and his slippery hardness twitches. Suzaku mangles more moans in his throat when a pumping hand thumbs his tip and Lelouch can hear them over his laboring pants puffing around the tense nib in his mouth.

They break through the finish together, Suzaku's legs bending around the body between them and his insides constricting around the boy—man filling him and Lelouch presses his forehead against Suzaku's thudding chest. His hips buck with the clinging climax of Suzaku's hot canal and he manages to peek up at the pleasure shuddering off a flustered Japanese face that also wets his mouth. Lelouch deeply inhales air as they both go soft and he deflates over Suzaku's limp body, piles of snowy blankets melting around them…

"I love you," Suzaku quietly says like a feather brushing over Lelouch's ears in the fading dazzle of sex that claimed their bones.

All Lelouch can do is kiss him.

Soft lips pressing below Suzaku's eyes and spotting over a red cheek as a palm flattens on his chest when their lips join – can Suzaku feel what Lelouch's heart is telling him? The words Lelouch can't easily reciprocate? (The words that are no less true behind Zero's mask.)

*I love you, too.*

•-

"Oh, my, a hickey?" Lelouch hears Milly prod when he enters the club room the following Monday, looking to see her eyebrows lifting at Suzaku's neck with intrigue and attempting to peel the oh so subtle bandage poking above his Ashford collar.
But Suzaku is too fast, slapping his hand over it with a reddening face.

A corner of her lips sharpen as she looks to Lelouch. "What are you, in middle school?"

"What are you, jealous?" he coolly counters.

"You said no one would notice..." Suzaku murmurs at Lelouch with a hint of annoyance.

Lelouch does his best to not shrug, "Milly is often the exception to the rule." Frightening as that might be...

"You two just never stop, do you?" Milly says more offhandedly than that *glint* in her eyes. "To be expected of our star couple."

Star couple?

Is Milly's life *really* this dull?

Student Council meetings used to be such mundane affairs – key words there being *"used to be."* Well, all right, maybe they've never been *"mundane"* under Milly's reign, but when the focus shifts to him and Suzaku as if they're an exotic exhibition he suddenly yearns for their old exaggerated escapades. Lelouch *knew* there would be changes, he just hoped beyond hope that a semblance of grace would usher those changes. To their credit, they have shown more sophistication since they first learned, but they should really stop staring whenever he and Suzaku are near each other in the same room.

Honestly...

"At least you're on time today," Suzaku cheekily says.

"Don't get too excited. I might take a nap," Lelouch dryly replies as he ignores their peers to sit at the table.

"Must've been an *exhausting* weekend," Milly wickedly grins.

"Wouldn't you like to know." Lelouch effortlessly bats back, not even bothering to look at her – or anybody else – in the eye.

When Suzaku sits next to Lelouch, Milly sighs with obvious pensiveness.

"It really is true what they say, isn't it?" she says, leaning against the head of the table.

"What do you mean?" Shirley asks, perched across from Lelouch and Suzaku, paper and pen ready for note-taking.

"That all the good men are either taken or gay." She faintly shrugs, lips weak under the saucy weight they try to lift. "In this case, it's both."

One look at Rivalz and it's almost painful. The poor lad. He remains unnoticed (namely, by Milly) at the President's side even as he chokes on her words; Lelouch can see his malnourished pride shrinking all the more.

"Y-you don't really think that, do you?" Rivalz doesn't say it in so many words, but he's begging her to notice him – it's the straining anxiety in his voice.

And then Shirley is sharing her stifled giggle with Suzaku's blush—
Hang on. Why is Suzaku blushing?

Lelouch scowls at the possibly-flattered seahorse, reminding him he's very much attached to this scowl, but Suzaku openly pretends to not see.

"Well, you'd be hard pressed to find their doubles, don't you think?" Now she's smiling like her usual self, fierce and unwavering. "But I guess even then, if their doubles are just like them they'd still be out of reach." An impish gleam as she taps her lips, "Perhaps I should give up on men. What do you say, Shirley?"

"Say to what?"

Milly saunters over to her with a pronounced sway of her hips. "You and I are sharing the same pain. Surely we could comfort each other, no?"

Now it's Shirley's turn to become a sputtering, flushing mess as Milly cups the sides of her face – but it's Rivalz who looks far more concerned than Shirley.

"I have told you that I admire the young woman you've grown into, haven't I?"

"Ma-ma-ma-ma—!" Shirley squirms as Milly leans in, puckering her lips—

And then laughs—

Laughs—

"Madam President!" Shirley scolds, red-faced and jittery as she removes herself from Milly's reach. "Don't do that! It isn't funny!"

The blonde is holding her stomach, barely trying to contain herself – to which Shirley stomps her foot with a huff and rounds the table to sit as far away from Milly as possible.

Lelouch isn't sure there is a place that's far enough away from Milly.

"Relax, Shirley. You're not exactly my type." Milly wipes a self-satisfied tear from her eye. "I prefer someone who isn't so soft."

By the looks of everyone's faces, they guessed right: that was a lewd pun.

Before Rivalz can utter something that won't help his case in the least, Lelouch blandly blocks his friend's opening mouth.

"As much as I'd like to let this continue..." Lelouch mutters, elbow on the table and head in his palm. "Are we actually going to do anything important, or can I just take a nap?"

"Lelouch!" Suzaku instantly chides.

To which Lelouch smirks once again, "I warned you, didn't I?"

"You're right. That makes it all better."

"I knew you'd see it my way."

"I was being sarcastic!"
"And yet you don't know it when you hear it."

"You—!" Suzaku stops himself. "You just like to be difficult, don't you?"

"You should know that well enough by now."

"This is a bit sickening..." Milly's mouth morphs into a snide grin. "You two are as good as married already, eh—? Wait!" She interrupts herself, body stiffening and eyes widening like a meerkat standing tall above its burrow. "That's it!" —

Uh oh...

—"We need a wedding!"

"W-wedding?" Nina unexpectedly speaks, sounding like a meager squeak of concern. Lelouch can't disagree...

"Yes! If these two are as good as married," she slaps her hands on the table in front of Lelouch and Suzaku with far too much emphatic passion, "then why not make it official?"

Because Milly absolutely has the power to do that.

"Th-that's..." Suzaku tries, obviously oblivious of what to say to her. "I'm not... sure I, uh..."

"..." Don't look at Lelouch. He's staying out of this one.

"It's perfect, don't you think?" Milly is beaming, brimming with this rushing high of inspiration. "We could have a little ceremony right here in the clubhouse! Just picture it: a white winter wedding! We can have decorations and music, and food. It would be just us, of course. A small and intimate gathering—Suzaku, you could even wear a wedding dress if you want to!"

Suzaku blushes at that. "Now, hold on just a min—"

"Don't worry your pretty, little head!" she beams at him, boisterous and complacent as she poses like a super hero with hands on her hips. "I promise to make this dream of yours come true in the most elegant and classiest way possible!" She spins on her heel and jabs a finger into the air, "Now, there's so much to plan. First, we'll need flowers and decorations. And cake! Mustn't forget the cake! And then, clothes. Measurements. Should we see a tailor, or maybe-well, the drama club has some interesting pieces—but first and foremost we have to decide on the bride and groom's attire, and then everything else will follow. Shirley! Are you getting all this?!"

The orange-haired girl "eeks" and then scrambles to scribble as Milly prattles on, thinking aloud of the possibility for themed weddings...

Suzaku has effectively and cleanly been removed from the conversation – about his own wedding – with the quick-moving blade that is Milly's ambition. Looking as helpless as a fish on a hook, he turns to Lelouch with a pair of dumbfounded eyes, and it's rather adorable.

"What just happened?" Suzaku is left to ask in his abandonment.

Lelouch smirks, "Didn't you hear? There's going to be a wedding and we're both invited."

...On second thought, this is business as usual for the student council.

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As tempting as it was – too tempting – to sail away on the dreamy idea world nested in that hotel bed and never set foot on the shore of reality again, pretending problems don't exist doesn't make them disappear.

Lelouch has spent the past months getting far too comfortable.

Restless.

Perhaps the notion of... home, a real home (like he's never had), is more seductive than Lelouch initially would've thought. But he can't get complacent. Suzaku is still at Britannia's mercy and still very much pregnant with the child of their enemy who just happens to be their discarded un-dead prince. A reprieve from their troubles only serves to remind Lelouch that they are far from out of this mess just yet...

Lelouch made a vow that when Nunnally opened her eyes she would see a more peaceful world and he had been certain that only with the destruction of Britannia (or at the very least, the Emperor) would that become reality and those anxieties haven't vanished. The Zone might enable many things, but it doesn't simply solve everything. Even though the SAZ does, in a way, enable him to have what he wanted it still doesn't grant him his two goals:

Obliteration of Britannia and his mother's murderer.

It's quite possible that one stone could hit both targets, in this case.

Euphemia and her little utopia can only protect them for so long... No matter how strong Lelouch tries to make it.

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"Shinozaki Sayoko, thirty-seventh successor to the Shinozaki School of martial arts. ...You are an impressive person." Lelouch sincerely says through Zero's filtered mask, tapping away files on his terminal from the privacy of his still-hidden vehicle-quarters. The Black Knights may have moved up in the world, but this "gifted" trailer is still one of many valuable secrets outside of Britannia's sight.

"...Thank you, sir," she says with a curt bow, her modesty a nice glaze on the confidence in her eyes.

When Diethard spoke of an "undercover" agent of sorts in passing, Lelouch noted the information and saved it for later, not particularly investing any time to dwell on the matter until it was relevant. Diethard is a suspicious man, but so is Zero, and to be fair, the Britannian had proven himself to be useful if nothing else and Lelouch trusted as much as circumstances allowed – and any such secret supporter would ultimately be judged, measured and put to proper use on Lelouch's authority anyway, so he wasn't concerned.

The pregnant seahorse at home was more pressing.

With things settling somewhat between the Zone and Suzaku, Lelouch decided to call upon this person for evaluation, to determine just where they stand in his world and for what purpose.

Lelouch never expected it would be Sayoko.

It's almost harder to believe it with her standing in front of him.

Vivid, personal memories are tied to this woman, so many strings tugging on Lelouch's heart that
he only grows more pleased than anything else. This woman was his caretaker, is his caretaker. She brought him a tenderness he didn't fully recognize as maternal until he was too old to really need her, and he sometimes wonders if she's aware of this fact when watching her care for Nunnally. Although seemingly docile, she isn't without her own secrets and masks, Lelouch understands, and that she wants to be a part of Zero's fight makes his chest bloat warmly with pride. He considers her to be real family, so without knowing it, she's already doing him a great service just standing by him.

(That's more than he can say about a certain someone, but he knows he shouldn't think that way, even if it hurts…)

He has the perfect job for his trusted maid.

"But as you know, with the timorous state of the Zone we are not openly acquiring new members." Not publically, at least (although whether they ever did "publically" is debatable) – while Euphemia had aided in preventing Zero and his Black Knights from completely disarming, certain compromises were to be made. Yet, it also remains true that some of his own have left entirely to join the SAZ. It's a wound that cuts more deeply than Lelouch wants to acknowledge.

Her gaze visibly deflates, and he smiles.

"Not to worry," he smugly announces, tilting his head with fingers prodding for the hidden release on his mask and making her blink at him—and then nearly peels her eyelids right off when he places Zero's face on the table in front of him. "I have a special task for you." Lelouch pulls the cloth from his face with a hooking finger as he waits for her surprise to settle – which is rather quick, to her credit.

Then again, Sayoko always did have graceful composure.

(Not that Lelouch is remembering when she saw him in his undershorts for the first time that one morning Suzaku kicked him out of his own bedroom and never said a word about it.)

"The days ahead might be more interesting than is preferable. Ashford remains untouched and I would like it to stay that way. Your standing orders for now are to remain a reserve. At Nunnally's side."

Suzaku might not be Euphemia's Knight any longer but situations are crossing rather too closely. Sayoko appears to understand with a flick of a smile and she bows.

"I'll notify you of any changes," he says.

"Yes, my Lord."

He can't help the prideful but tender smile that smoothes right across his lips—

"You revealed yourself to her that easily?"

—Which C.C. so effortlessly rips right off his face once Sayoko has left them alone.

And just why is the witch on the surface in the first place?

That's what Lelouch wanted to know.

"I entrust Nunnally's well being to her on a regular basis," Lelouch coolly responds as if that's
enough of an answer, not sparing a glance at the green-haired nuisance on his couch.

"You trust the same to Suzaku, do you not? And yet you won't tell him of your second life? Maybe you don't really trust him as much as you claim."

"You know that's different."

"Is it…?" she idly wonders – an insect digging into his ear. "You were to harden your heart. You vowed from the beginning to walk this path of destruction regardless of the consequences and the prices you'd have to pay – which I can undoubtedly say included your own life – and yet… you're too afraid to lose Suzaku."

Lelouch decided Britannia had stolen enough from him. He was to walk this path alone, but Suzaku (and the baby) is—

"Are you jealous?" Lelouch airily asks.

"Of course not." C.C. breezily counters. "Not only is our relationship unique, I'm already closer to you than even the boy supposedly carrying your child."

Lelouch silently grits his teeth at her.

"What was it that you said?" she continues. "Only those who are prepared to be shot should shoot? Have you lost your nerve? Is that why you've yielded your rebellion and—?"

"I haven't yielded anything," Lelouch sneers, eyes blazing. "The course has changed but the end goal is the same."

"Which one is that? The destruction of Britannia, the identity of your mother's murderer, the naïve dream of your sister or raising a child with Suzaku?"

"Is there a distinction between those?"

"Are you absolutely certain of what your sister wants?" C.C.'s emotionless stare is somehow cautionary.

Lelouch looks at her inquisitively. "She said so with her mouth. If she could wish for one thing—"

"Such a notion isn't original to her, Lelouch. There are others in this world who would make the impossible happen given the chance," she blandly, coldly interrupts him, and he only grows more annoyed. "That's why they're wishes. Helpless fantasies."

"Since when did you outgrow your cynicism?"

"Have you asked what she truly wants in this lifetime above all else?" she easily sidesteps his derision.

(Euphemia smiles sweetly, "She told me that if she could be with her brother, that was all she needed."

"That's why?"

"That's what made up my mind," Euphemia answers as she gives him a brighter smile. "I asked myself what is really important in this world. Lelouch, I haven't given up anything that I really, truly treasured...)"
"Why are you asking me this?"

"The Power of the King is an isolating one... You might be a demon, Lelouch," she looks at him with the slightest of smiles on her lips, "but you're a beloved one."

This conversation is weird.

C.C. is being weird – even for her.

"Rather than air my dirty laundry and speaking of wishes, perhaps you would like to tell me of yours," he tiredly utters at her, not expecting much of a response. This back-and-forth could go on for an eternity, Lelouch imagines, but it does tend to shut her up.

The hard cast of her amber eyes, however, is even more unexpected.

"...Maybe you aren't ready yet."

Lelouch's left eye tenses.

Of course.

"Such evasion. I have to wonder if it's a trap," he dryly says.

Her lips pleasantly bend – and yet there's a slinking ruefulness lurking in the corners, "If it is you are already caught within it."

"That might be one way of looking at it," Lelouch mutters, donning his mask on the suddenly eager twinge of his Geass – so instead of a bug in his ear, it would be the snare of her web? "But it's obviously something you can't obtain on your own." Not yet, at least. "Until then I'll take my chances."

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"Why didn't you say anything during the club meeting?" Suzaku casually asks later that evening as he idly stirs a pot of cooking rice on the stove in the clubhouse kitchen.

Lelouch shrugs, taking the cutting board of chopped vegetables and scraping them into the same pot with a knife.

Suzaku's eyebrow arcs, "Well, I find it hard to believe you're alright with all of it."

"For once her plans seem harmless enough." For now, anyway.

Suzaku purses his lips, looking down at the swirling of bright, crisp vegetables with the brown grains of rice.

"This is because you want to see me in an 'easy access' wedding dress, isn't?"

"A reasonable guess," Lelouch quietly laughs. "You can stop stirring the rice." Suzaku steps back as Lelouch takes the wooden spoon from him and covers the pot with a clear lid, steam and vapor bubbles instantly pebbling the glass.

"So... what, that's it?"

"Like I said, this seems harmless." Lelouch turns his attention to the chicken breasts sizzling in the pan beside the rice, carefully flipping the browning meat over with tongs.
Suzaku crosses his arms, "Are you feeling alright?"

Lelouch gives Suzaku a funny look over his shoulder.

"This just isn't really like you. Normally you'd be a big sour puss about something like this…"

"Sour puss?" Lelouch distastefully repeats with eyes focused on their dinner.

"So…?" Suzaku shimmies over to the Britannian's other side away from the stove to lean against the counter.

Lelouch grins at him, "You're cute when you worry." Suzaku releases an exasperated sigh, making Lelouch chuckle very warmly in his throat. "It is Milly, and that's always cause for concern, but she knows this is delicate so she'll use discretion. She can be capricious, certainly, but when it comes to *truly important* matters she is also trustworthy. It goes without saying that she's helped Nunnally and me all these years."

Perhaps it also goes without saying that Milly doesn't have much say in her own *wedding* and wants to live vicariously through her "star couple."

"Capricious," Suzaku takes his turn to echo in a murmur. "You never did like people who are impulsive."

"That's because impulsive people do not think." Lelouch briefly checks the underside of one chicken cut, not ready. "Therefore they are idiots. And you are the only idiot I don't dislike."

"Right. It's not because it makes them harder for you to predict. Like—"

Suzaku's dry, but soft and warm lips are suddenly pressing against Lelouch's with an arm hooked loosely but securely around his back. Stunned still by surprise, and cautious in front of a live stove, Lelouch's reaction is concentrated in the jump of his heart – and the heat on his cheeks, which he blames on the cooking – that lingers after they part.

"—this?" Suzaku murmurs against Lelouch's lips, his mouth bearing a sharp grin.

Suzaku is right.

But Suzaku isn't *allowed* to be right.

Lelouch deadpans, "Case in point: only an unthinking, impulsive idiot would lean over a hot stove and risk being burned, or some other incident, to prove an ill-conceived point."

Suzaku is still grinning as he pulls himself up on the counter backwards to sit, "Whatever you say." This strange air of smugness around him is so not cute. "You know I'm right."

"I could say the same…" Lelouch returns to checking that same lean cut of meat, this time flipping it over.

"So we're both right… And wrong."

"Yes," the cooking boy dryly agrees. "Ours is a *flawless* logic."

"Good thing we're getting married, then."

"Even better: we're going to be *parents.*"
Suzaku laughs, "Seriously, though… What do you think about Milly's wedding idea?"

"I think it's pointless."

"Er—" Suzaku stumbles over Lelouch's bluntness, "Uh… Care to elaborate on that?"

"She has no authority – this is just her version of make-believe."

"Well, yeah, but… Don't you think it's a nice thought? I know it's not real or anything, but, they want to share this… happiness with us. I think that's nice."

"The sentiment isn't lacking."

"But it's still pointless. And harmless."

"I would've thought you would appreciate me trying to be positive for once."

"If this is your way of being positive, then I'm seriously worried for you."

"I thought we agreed to leave the worrying to me." Lelouch's hand somehow finds itself inspecting Suzaku's thigh rather than the chicken. "All you have to do is look cute for me."

"I don't remember ever agreeing to that," Suzaku very plainly mutters as he sternly shoves away the hand groping up his leg. "And don't tell me that just because I don't remember it doesn't mean it didn't happen. Because that's getting old."

"Sometimes it's true." The sly tone of Lelouch's voice flirts with his lips and he rubs his left eye with the back of his hand at the implication. "But it seems my tricks don't work on you anymore. I'll have to update my tactics."

"Or you could just try being more honest." He leans forward a little, an imploring presence shimmering in his searching greens. "I would appreciate that."

"I think I've always been very clear about my wants with you."

"That's not what I meant."

Lelouch can only lock eyes with Suzaku in a brief and silent glance, quickly evading whatever it is he's hiding from in those lucky clovers by looking back to the stove. Although the chicken is juicy and teasing his tongue with its seasoned sent, he only hears it cackling at him as it simmers in the pan, causing him to lost his appetite.

The chicken is laughing at him.

How ironic…

Although the thought that Suzaku could be pressing about Zero does cross Lelouch's mind, he doubts that's what Suzaku is alluding to. For one, it's the wrong place and time for something so delicate, even a dunce like him would recognize that. Second, although Suzaku is prone to random subjects, they haven't spoken of anything that would lead to Zero – which in itself is rather… pleasant. No ugly politics or lies or prodding. Maybe that's suspicious, but Lelouch is still grateful for it. (Perhaps he likes to pretend there isn't something ominous awaiting them in the shadows. And he really tries to not feel guilty about Sayoko.)

This time the seahorse is fishing for something else…
"Don't get me wrong," Lelouch says, "I appreciate the acceptance, but this…"

"Do you have something against weddings?"

"…Not especially."

"Meaning?"

"…No, nothing. Never mind."

"Lelouch, I want you to know that you can talk to me." Suzaku almost sounds like he's *pleading*. A short sigh – Lelouch was going to try to be more flexible for Suzaku, right?

"Considering that I'm the son of a Darwinist-preaching polygamist who spawned a disgusting amount of offspring for his own benefit? That his *harem* is constructed of conceit and indulgence? That it's all a nest of superficiality, selfishness, bigotry, competition and backstabbing? Why would I possibly have any issues about marriage?"

A sobering blink claims Suzaku's eyes, "I guess… I never thought about any of that – your family, I mean. I didn't really have family, it was mostly just me and my father, but you lived with an *empire*. So many other women and their kids… I can't imagine what that must've been like."

*Unpleasant would be putting it mildly.*

And not to forget that most of them didn't like the "vi" Britannias because they weren't *pure* blue bloods.

"I'd rather not dwell on it." Lelouch tightly begins to close up again. "And you should know that I don't have any issues marrying you, fake or real – and there isn't a *soul* on this planet that I would let keep that from us." Britannia can try, but it will be a *cold day in hell* when they succeed.

"That's… very sweet of you to say." Suzaku's eyes are shimmering with… something *warm and fuzzy*. "A little aggressive, but sweet."

What's with that reaction?

All Lelouch did was state the truth.

"I should prepare our plates," Lelouch says as he takes off his apron.

"Lelouch." Suzaku hops to the floor and stops him from approaching the cupboards, waiting until both violets give him their undivided attention and gently places his hand on Lelouch's cheek, a somewhat roughened thumb gently rubbing fair skin. "I love you," he softly says, as if the world is balancing on those three words, and kisses Lelouch deeply and gently. Lelouch feels himself blinking at the tender, full press of lips against his, having enough presence of mind to at least return the kiss, but is blindsided – more so than the *impulsive* kiss from earlier.

*This* is just…

A half-eaten chuckle squirts from his lips before he can swallow it—

And Suzaku notices, much to his displeasure, "What was that?"

Lelouch shakes his head and turns away, but the laughter spills from deep within his chest.
Suzaku isn't angry so much as confused and a little offended, "Why are you laughing?"

Because Lelouch is uncomfortable.

Suzaku's tender sensitivity is strange and… awkward. He's trying to be supportive and loving, to make Lelouch feel better than he perceives Lelouch to feel, but it doesn't have that effect. It just makes Lelouch feel even more vulnerable – weak – than he wanted to and already does, but because it's Suzaku and he's just trying to be comforting, all Lelouch can do is laugh.

Laugh at the cheesiness.

Laugh at what he doesn't want to feel.

Let his body shake with this slight insanity like a purge of his systems to rid what is unwanted – memories, emotions, insecurities…

Suzaku doesn't quite huff as he walks away to presumably ready the table, mumbling something about clams to himself in Japanese; although Lelouch is grateful that Suzaku likely dismisses the chuckling fit as Lelouch being unromantic, he wishes he wasn't so immature. Emotionally speaking.

Suzaku just tried to reach out, again, and Lelouch literally laughed in his face.

So pathetic…

But Lelouch can't help it. Shutting down and shutting out is just a reaction – habits that have kept him safe, kept him feeling safe like a turtle in a shell. (And despite his strong affections for Suzaku, he doesn't understand emotional commitment. He doesn't understand why they can't just be together in the understanding they already have. He's given more to Suzaku than he has to anyone, shouldn't that be enough…? Or is Lelouch missing the point?)

Lelouch is still grinning as he portions everyone's meals, if only to maintain his mischievous façade, but he tries to soften it considerably when they all sit down for dinner. A real smile of contentment and appreciation, no matter how small or faint, that he hopes conveys something to Suzaku that his voice can't.

Considering Suzaku smiles back at Lelouch in a similar manner, his silent action must be clear enough for even this idiot to comprehend.

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"You really don't give up, do you?" Kallen grumbles at Suzaku as they sit together alone in the club room for peer-study during their free period.

Suzaku is surprised that Kallen still attends school – it's not as though her identity as a Black Knight is exactly public, but he figured that she might simply not see the point in maintaining this charade. She still pretends to be ill, of course, and doesn't come as often as she did before the Zone. There might be a truce with Zero and his Black Knights but Suzaku isn't willing to let these opportunities go to waste so he rather swiftly opted to partner with Kallen right now, to chat.

Lelouch didn't like it, but, they don't need to be attached at the hip all the time. Besides, Shirley seemed eager for his attention and after the strange fight they had Suzaku figured it's for the better.

Even if she is still acting a little unusual.
"Wouldn't you change someone's mind if you thought you could?" Suzaku asks, scratching in his notebook.

"Maybe. But I pick my battles." Kallen isn't playing at school seriously, but her history book is at least open – although from what Suzaku understands Kallen's grades don't suffer even with her frequent absence.

…Not unlike Lelouch.

"You mean ones that actually are battles," Suzaku jokes with a bit of a snide smirk.

"What can I say?" And she tosses it right back at him, plus a gleam in her eyes. "I'm a fighter, not a diplomat."

"I hadn't noticed," Suzaku mutters, earning him a shove from her fist.

Suzaku likes this.

More than just seeing her true self, it's this lightness and joviality over something that could have been disastrous – that almost was. A strange sort-of acquaintance that was given the chance to float rather than being sunk by all the conflicts and evils of a world that struggles to understand the concept of unity. Suzaku feels there's a victory here with Kallen, no matter how small or how slow-moving it is. If he can just keep this ball rolling…

(And don't ask anything about Zero's identity – unless he wants to get punched in the face.)

Suzaku is curious about her experiences as a "half-blood" but he isn't sure how to breach the topic. There might not be much point in asking, however, as she only wears her Britannian half as a mask. To Kallen, her mind, heart and soul are Japanese, and Suzaku already knows the hardships of that life…

Kallen's gaze slides over Suzaku from the corner of her eye. "…Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"…Why Lelouch?"

Suzaku smiles a bit tartly, "You mean why a Britannian."

Kallen shakes her head, "No. I mean why Lelouch?"

He looks to her again, nearly getting caught in her critical stare, "…He's not really as he seems."

"Oh, really?" Kallen dryly scoffs with a lift of her nose. "You mean he isn't a complacent prick?"

Suzaku grins, "No, he can be… well…"—and then almost forgets his argument—"You've seen how he is with Nunnally, haven't you?"

"…More or less," she answers with a noncommittal shrug – is she always so defiant about everything?

"So then you understand he's not one-sided. I'm not saying he's perfect, but there are sides to him you don't know."

"Oh, please!" Kallen snorts. "I can't believe you're giving me the 'you don't know him like I do'
cliché. You must be more gullible than I thought you were."

So she really is defiant about everything.

"I don't care what you say or think, you really don't know him as well as you think you do. He's a good person."

"I'm sure that's what he wants you to think."

"What's with all this? What do you have against him?"

Kallen doesn't turn her head, but he can see a blue eye peek at him from a safe corner, only lifting her chin and firming her lower lip a little when her eye slides forward again.

"Just rubs me the wrong way, is all. Something about him…"

"I know what you mean."

"Weren't you just defending him?"

"Truth is, we didn't like each other when we first met. Actually, we fought."

"Lelouch? Fight? Now I really don't believe you."

"Well… we were only kids and I was the one who started it. But I felt guilty about it and later apologized to him and he looked at me like I was crazy. We got along great after that, though. I don't know why but… we just clicked."

"So, what, you knew you were meant to be together because of that?" Kallen dourly drawls.

"Maybe." A whispering laugh cushions his voice, knowing how absurd it is that Kallen’s sarcasm is the truth. "When we finally saw each again these years later, it was…" Suzaku pauses to consider another word for magical, "almost like fate. I guess the same red thread is tied around our fingers."

"Red thread," she idly repeats.

"Oh, it's a myth tha—"

"I know what it is!" she snaps, very insulted. "It's just been a long time since I've heard anyone mention it."

"Sorry. I forget who I'm talking to."

"Anyway, you said you met Lelouch when you were a kid?"

"...Oh, yeah." Suzaku mentally stumbles, trying to remember the lie he once fed Rivalz. "It was summer and he was at a resort…"

"A resort? So it was before the invasion…" she accurately muses aloud. "He's been here all this time? Why didn't he go back?"

"...He didn't have family to go back to. He and Nunnally were orphaned and taken in by the Ashfords."

Surprise doesn't escape her fierce eyes.
And then he wonders if… she's thinking that's how Nunnally became… the way she is.

"What's worse is that was when the tension between Japan and Britannia was reaching its breaking point – just before the invasion." Suzaku mentally wonders if he's already saying too much (Lelouch would most likely say yes, very much so), but he feels it's important to share. As if changing Kallen's mind about Lelouch is another victory over all prejudice in the world. "You think he's just a snob, but he knows what it's like to be bullied for the colour of his skin, for the way he was born. Kids in town, uh, near the resort, were cruel and would pick on him whenever he went into town. They never let him forget he wasn't wanted.'

Suzaku had blamed Lelouch at the time. He's too weak and stubborn – Suzaku had thought. He didn't understand why Lelouch insisted on doing everything on his own rather than let the Kururugi family feed them and tend to their needs. Not much has changed for Lelouch, either, and it's painfully easy to see him as that rejected, bruised little boy even nowadays when he cuts coupons for groceries, cares for Nunnally or re-stitches the worn seams in Suzaku's uniforms.

And it's easier for Suzaku to feel shame over his 10 year old selfishness, ignorance and pride all over again.

(And he remembers an irate young boy vowing destruction and the teenage boy with old grudges.)

Then Suzaku wonders, not for the first or last time, if things would be different if he hadn't misguided killed his father.

"I… didn't know," is all she can murmur, downcast – a conceding look souring in her eyes.

"Like I said, there's a lot you don't know about him."

Kallen sighs very heavily, "Look, I know he's not 'the enemy' I was just…"

"You don't trust people easily," Suzaku finishes for her, quietly.

Her eyes are hard on him a moment, and then she's shrugging, "Anyone who does is an idiot."

On that, Lelouch would agree – practically sounds like it's spoken from his own mouth.

Suzaku smiles a little to himself, "Just do me a favor and… don't tell him I told you all this. I don't want to get in trouble."

"Trouble? How much trouble could he possibly bring you?"

Suzaku laughs, "You really don't know him at all, do you?"

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"Ireallydon'tthink—" Suzaku tries to protest under a tense blush on his cheeks.

"Now, now, Suzaku. We have to get your hubby's opinion!" And with that Milly shoves Suzaku into the council room, where every member is present—

Judging by the look on their faces, they weren't expecting this anymore than Suzaku was.

"Ta-da~!" Milly proudly exclaims, arms waving about the white, hooping gown that consumed the soilder. "What do you think, Hubby? This is the bride's dress from the drama clubs' play a couple years ago – you know, the one about the princess and the frog? This dress actually fits him quite well."
Well enough, at least.

It certainly isn't the first one she made him try on – once she snagged his pants after the first dress, there was little he could do…

Lelouch's calm violets look Suzaku down—

From the long veil attached to a golden tiara to the taut, floral lacey, faux-corset chest resting above the wide bell skirt, draped with puffy layers of but more lace pinned with fake gold rosebuds, and all the way at the golden ruffles dangling along the hem.

—then back up.

A smug smirk smears right over the ex-prince's cool lips, "It's not frilly enough."

Suzaku can only flatly sigh.

_Damned snarky over-confident little…

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_Schneizel._

Lelouch would spit if he wasn't currently masked.

In fact, if he'd do _more than that_ if he could manage to get the precious White Prince alone.

His Geass is just _itching_ to get acquainted with _dear brother._

Sadly, Schneizel is no fool and is never without company – even if it is only that little pretty-boy shadow of his – as he floats around the building like a goddamned _peacock._ At any rate, having this pompous snake in close proximity is fortuitous even if tricky. After all, Schneizel is just as protected by the "truce" as Zero is and even though Lelouch is _more than certain_ his elder brother is up to something, he has to tread carefully. At the same time, however, Lelouch isn't _obligated_ to engage with Schneizel more than he needs to, so there's a bright side…

Of all the wonderfully horrible things that Lelouch could submit Schneizel to, he hasn't made a decision yet – Lelouch does intend to get answers about his mother, at least. Clovis fingered both Cornelia and Schneizel, but neither has been particularly accommodating to Zero. Cornelia doesn't forgive easily and whenever she's hovering around Euphemia in Lelouch's presence she's killing Zero – her brother's murderer – with her eyes. Euphemia had taken it upon herself to inquire Cornelia about her investigation of Lady Marianne's death, she claimed a frustratingly fruitless search but was sparse on the details despite Euphemia's effort; as expected of big sister – too grisly, although it seems likely that her dead-ends are real. While Lelouch is… appreciative that Euphemia tried he knows there's more still that Cornelia just isn't going to share with sweet little Euphie.

_Details vulnerable to Geass._

As it is, Schneizel seems suspiciously laid-back about this whole affair – _everything_ Schneizel does is suspicious, yes, but Lelouch doesn't like the idea that _something somewhere else_ could be occupying his attention from the Zone, the first yielding in Britannian expansion. While it hasn't brought the giant to its knees it is at least a trip in the right direction and that's something that would bait Schneizel. He is undoubtedly hungry for that Throne. Lelouch is expecting something, anything, and he'd much rather strike before he's stricken.
Lelouch doesn't engage much with Suzaku, either. Not informally, anyway. Suzaku has asked some prodding questions here and there but overall still seems uncertain as to how he should act around his "former" enemy.

Lelouch wonders if that's good or bad.

Maybe it would be different if Zero appeared more often. But Zero was battle-born, he's a Commander, not a bureaucrat, and as such Lelouch hasn't felt it absolutely necessary to be present every day – which has enabled him to spend more time with Nunnally. He maintains an extremely close eye on the proceedings, of course, but is careful to avoid hanging by red-tape or being diluted by Britannian osmosis. As it stands, the Zone is at capacity and Lelouch doesn't want to bother being delicate or coy about expanding, no matter how much it displeases Britannia's upper-crust – yanks their leash.

Perhaps in truth, Zero is the warrior the worlds needs during crisis, not during peace.

(Needed for destruction, not creation…?)

Currently the former Knight is leaving the former princess's office, presumably heading home as the evening has gotten rather late – which is also where Lelouch will be shoving off to soon.

"Kururugi," Lelouch greets as they pass in the hall, making the Lancelot puppeteer slightly stammer.

Ok, so, Lelouch does kind of like that.

"Zero." And then Suzaku pauses with an open mouth, making Lelouch stop as well. "…I was… wondering if I could ask you something."

"Oh?" Lelouch continues on his way to Euphemia's office knowing Suzaku will follow him.

When inside he hands over his revised copy of the budget that Britannia won't be able to wiggle from as simply as he suspects they think they can. She takes it with a smiling thank you – she insisted on being involved in every facet as much as she can, and while she is coming into her own with the business side of leadership, she is still inexperienced.

"Um… It's just…" Suzaku starts.

"Something personal?" Lelouch is amused but keeps his voice even.

Euphemia clears her throat. "If you two will excuse me a moment, I have something I need to ask the projections division." Then she's very smoothly exiting the room to leave them alone.

Yes, very smooth.

Suzaku rubs his hand through his messy hair, "You probably won't answer, but, I was wondering if… you have a family?"

Not such an unusual question.

Somehow Lelouch was expecting something else.

"You assume I wouldn't?"

That hits Suzaku.
"That is—I mean I wasn't—"

"Not to worry, I'm not offended," Zero's tall voice cruises over Suzaku's sputtering, although he's sure Suzaku isn't all that worried about offending the "terrorist" leader. "It's not such an unreasonable assumption."

"Maybe, but I really shouldn't assume things on my own."

Lelouch feels himself smile.

"And if I said that I do have a family?"

Suzaku lightly bites at the inside of his lip, seemingly pondering that thought.

"I guess I would wonder if you were willing to sacrifice them to your war as you have with the families of others. But maybe you aren't, and that's why you agreed to the Zone."

Ouch.

"I rather admire your bluntness," the hidden Britannian wryly says. "I suspect your superiors are not so appreciative."

"And I'm not surprised you deflected my question," Suzaku dryly retorts but doesn't push – no, he was only *poking*. "Good evening to you."

Not even half a minute after Suzaku turns and leaves does Euphemia predictably enter.

"Have a nice chat?" she cheerfully asks.

"It was… interesting," Lelouch drolly responds, wondering if she put Suzaku up to it. Undoubtedly. "Anyway, I must be going."

It wouldn't do well for him to arrive home late after Suzaku.

"Wait, before you go." Euphemia locks the door behind her before approaching him with tentative eyes. "Can I…?"

Lelouch holds a pause.

Then lifts his hands and removes his mask.

"I think I can understand why you are Cornelia's weakness." He pulls the cloth down from his face, grinning at the light in her eyes.

"You should be flattered that I want to see your handsome face," she winks. "After all, there was a time when I thought I'd never see it again."

No need to go bringing up *feelings*.

"Did you have a nice birthday?" Euphemia asks. "I really wish you would've let me give you something…"

"It was pleasant," is all Lelouch says. It's not as though he got *her* anything for her birthday – she said she didn't need anything other than her beloved siblings and he expressed similar – that he doesn't need material things, at least. But more than that, he doesn't want anything linking them together, even a sentimental trinket.
"There is something else that I wanted to ask you."

"Lucky for you I have time for one more question."

"Always so clever, aren't you?" She almost giggles, yet her pastel gaze hardens rather quickly into something strangely critical. "Do you think you'll ever tell Suzaku? About you… know…?" She leaves the rest of her question to hand gestures indicating his alter ego.

Lelouch and Euphemia do not often talk in such an informal way, nor does he often remove his mask for her… mostly because he doesn't trust a Britannian building to not be bugged in every nook and cranny – although regular, subtle checks and Euphemia's insistence about that being untrue lessen his concern that does not erase it. Of course, he also cannot be seen as being too comfortable with her, either.

And he's also not entirely comfortable being comfortable with her.

"What's with that question?" So suddenly.

(Has Suzaku said… something…?)

"It's just…" Euphemia hesitates. "I know that I shouldn't meddle and I'm not trying to, but I… know about the two of you. Being together."

Lelouch heavily sighs, "What did that idiot say now?"

She seems to smile at that, "He didn't say anything, rather he didn't need to. He thinks I am unaware."

Great.

So Lelouch has picked up Suzaku's unwitting way of confirming without meaning to?

(Or did Lelouch accidentally say something before…? Seems like he might… remember something like that… On that god-forsaken island?)

"Didn't need to?" Lelouch unhappily echoes.

Something shimmers in her eyes, a reflection of the past that sparkles where it drowns Lelouch.

"I know the two of you well. Don't underestimate a woman's intuition!"

…Euphemia's intuition is above average, Lelouch will give her that.

Should it be to her credit that she realized Lelouch and Suzaku's secret affair sooner than their club friends – who spend much of their time around the couple – or not? It's not to say that that they are so unable to notice, just… Regardless, Lelouch takes comfort in the fact that the club crew were so unaware, as that means that distant others are also ignorant. Even as Suzaku sleeps nightly with Lelouch – it almost seems that at this point somebody else should've noticed, if not for Lelouch's expertise in discretion. Suzaku is quite capable, too, considering… And perhaps with all the goings on, it's not suspicious that Suzaku isn't around his dorm-room much anymore.

"When I was there for Nunnally's birthday, I could just tell." She continues. "I saw you, both of you. Your body language, your energy… the way you look at each other. Sometimes it's like nothing else existed. Most people might not see it on you, but I do. And I… saw it reflected in him."
Lelouch hasn't forgotten that she crushed on Suzaku.

Pretty hard.

So hard he became her Knight.

(And sometimes, Lelouch wonders, would it have been better if he hadn't—)

"What are you trying to say?"

"I..." she falters, as if uncertain of that herself. "Maybe he deserves to know? I mean, do you intend to just keep it secret forever? Your whole life together, raising a family, and you'd just have him be ignorant of this? Is that fair for either of you? And what if he ever did find out? He'd be hurt. Wouldn't it be better if it came from you?"

Lelouch stifles a haughty huff, "You think he'd just accept it so easily?"

"I think that he loves you. And I think that, maybe, you don't give him enough credit."

"I thought you said you weren't trying to meddle."

Seriously, is there some kind of psychic connection between the women in Lelouch's life, or something?

She sighs, a bit a herself, "I'm not. But I do worry. I love you, both of you, and I can see that you love each other very deeply. I want you to be happy, together and in love without fear. You both deserve it."

Lelouch can feel his jaw clench.

Even if... even if Lelouch wanted to tell Suzaku, he's not sure how he would.

And after all this time...

(After the SAZ announcement... Suzaku cornered Lelouch with the choice to say something and Lelouch stomped it like an annoying bug.)

"And the truth is that I... like seeing the two of you together. You're so comfortable and I can tell that you bring out something special in each other. The Lelouch I know, whom I mourned, hoped and wished for, he is strengthened by Suzaku." Euphemia's soft, gentle hands delicately grasp one of his gloved, protected hands.

"That's... That's just about the cheesiest thing I've ever heard!" he laughs in her face.

It seems laughing in people's faces when they try to reach out to him is becoming a habit...

Euphemia takes a few irritated steps back, "Say whatever you want, it's the truth!" The way she crosses her arms at him with a huff is exactly the same as when they were younger. All that's missing are flowers in her hair and a doting Cornelia reprimanding him for "upsetting" her precious little sister. While the flowers are unimportant, Lelouch couldn't be gladder Cornelia is absent.

His false amusement tapers until he's mildly clearing his throat under his mask, "It is getting late. I must be going."

"Please, just think about what I said, all right?"
It's already something Lelouch thinks about…

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"...I'm beat." As if for proof of his statement, Lelouch crumbles backwards on his bed in his light blue plaid pajamas.

"I imagine so." A sly bend warps Suzaku's lips. "That shower was so exhausting."

"You don't wear witticism well, Suzaku," Lelouch mutters. "So not cute."

"I'm not trying to be cute," he says plainly – missing that subtle strum of sarcasm in Lelouch's voice – and sits on the bed with his back to the older boy as he briefly fiddles with the alarm clock.

Like Suzaku even needs to try in order to be cute…

Lelouch only frowns in response, drawing the pad of his finger lightly down Suzaku's bare back.

"You shouldn't sleep like this." Suzaku has a tendency to sleep in his underwear, sometimes an under t-shirt and sometimes not, which has never bothered Lelouch, but... "In winter like this you'll catch a cold."

"Didn't you know that idiots can't get sick?" Suzaku pokes his tongue at Lelouch.

Maybe idiots can't get sick, but apparently they can get pregnant.

"Anyway, it's not cold in here, and I'm still hot from the bath." Suzaku turns to him with another funny grin, pulling the blankets over his legs as he settles into bed, "Besides, we have this extra blanket"—he pointedly tugs on the dark green covering Lelouch uses for just this purpose—"and I have you to keep me warm."

Lelouch lifts an eyebrow to the way Suzaku's shoulder wiggles at him.

He does like to feel Suzaku's skin when he sleeps…

"You mean to tell me you think an Ice Prince like me can keep you warm?"

Suzaku's expression falls completely flat, "Are you still on about that?" and he lies down on his side, turning his back on Lelouch's somewhat passive-aggressive banter.

Lelouch stares at Suzaku's naked shoulder, his showered-fresh skin glowing, as if it's entrancing him, feeling a deep desire to reach out and touch it like a cursed princess to a spindle. Unlike in such fairy tales, the soft texture under Lelouch's touch is soothing and sumptuous as he daintily slides his fingertips up and down Suzaku's bare arm, absorbing his consuming warmth. He brings his lips to Suzaku's shoulder because using his fingertips isn't enough, gently kissing soft skin as his hand smoothes down the slopes of Suzaku's stomach to his hip. Suzaku fidgets a little, leaning into the affection.

"Lelouch, I've been thinking..." he says in a careful, thoughtful tone.

Not the words Lelouch likes to hear gurgle from his little seahorse.

The older boy hums noncommittally in response, still enthralled by savoring the scent and touch of Suzaku's skin. It's almost strange at how everything about Suzaku's skin radiates comfort; that something so simple can be an intoxicating heaven just by simply existing and that it could, possibly, drive him crazy. Hell, it's a nice buffer against whatever stupidity that might tumble from
"Well..." Suzaku holds the pause, turning onto his back, eyes bearing a strange uneasiness. "Say that... somehow with the Zone Japan does become independent, what would that really mean for us? I'm in the military, so, wouldn't I have to leave if Britannia is forced leave, too?"

What kind of question is that, exactly? Suzaku almost sounds like he doesn't want Britannia to leave.

It's also sudden. Although maybe it shouldn't be strange that Suzaku has such thoughts – his goal wasn't that different from Lelouch's. In a way. It's even a similar line of thought Lelouch has been having lately... well, since he set out to purge marauding Britannia from the Japanese islands, the entire map, but weighing more so on his mind now that it's becoming urgent Suzaku needs to be liberated. As far as Lelouch has come he still doesn't have any control over Britannia.

But, if he could change that...

"That would depend, I suppose." Lelouch flattens his palm on the light dome of Suzaku's belly. "Even if Japan is freed Britannia can't just leave the next day. It's more complicated than that."

"I know that," Suzaku quietly says. "But, eventually, I'd have to leave, right? I'm not Japanese anymore."

Is anyone even really Japanese anymore? – Lelouch bitterly wants to snarl, but knows better.

"Not necessarily." Lelouch isn't sure he wants to tread this topic. It's not as though Suzaku is ever pleased with what he hears. "If Britannia relinquished Japan I don't think they'd be especially keen on keeping any honorary Brittanians – and don't get mad when I say this – because that system is essentially a form of psychological warfare and a means of oppressing the native people." As well as cannon fodder. "While you've proven it's possible to make it as a non-Britannian, that just makes their honorary system more dangerous."

Although Suzaku is wearing an unhappy frown, he doesn't speak.

"So, I could see them ejecting all 'elevens' because they're no longer needed – there wouldn't even be an 'Area Eleven.' Then again, Britannia hasn't suffered such a loss since they began spreading, so who's to say what could happen. But, I hope they reject you all the same," Lelouch says with small, sad smile against the disheartened cast of emerald eyes, "because if you're forced to leave, neither Nunnally nor I can go with you." Not that Lelouch would ever let that happen.

Suzaku quickly looks away, not able to face the mere thought. "I know..."

Suzaku had asked if there was any way that Euphemia could help with Lelouch and Nunnally's "situation" – when she was still a princess – but Lelouch strictly spurned the idea of returning "home" to roost with the royals. Suzaku didn't bring it up again. His heart was in the right place, but...

"Of course, if Britannia stays that won't be good for us, either." He pauses with a sardonic puff. "It isn't good for us now."

Things might be better, but...

"And no matter what, our baby will be half," Suzaku adds with too much despondence drooping his voice. "Our baby will be treated differently be it Britannia or Japan, won't it? What are we supposed to do?"
Lelouch suddenly feels very small.

Powerless.

Defeating a corrupt nation that breeds hate and fear is one thing.

Undoing their damage is another.

His body becomes empty, hand lifeless against Suzaku's pregnant tummy. "These things take time. As far as that goes, the Zone is becoming the free and safe place that Euphie had promised." Outside of it, though…

A "rocky" start is accurate, and honestly they're still smoothing wrinkles. A rebellion doesn't just stop dead in its tracks without feeling backlash – on both sides.

Lelouch supposes he could control everyone to be more… agreeable, but that's a bit… insane.

(Absolute power corrupts absolutely.)

It's also counterproductive to the ideal of his goal.

"I guess that's true," Suzaku says. "There are a lot of people that don't want to fight."

There are a lot of people that would rather Britannia just go away without fighting, which isn't really a good thing. Freedom isn't something people ask to have. It should be taken and never bargained like the right it is.

But all this talk is…

"I think it also goes without saying that anybody who hurts our small fry will suffer an eternity of cruel and unusual punishment."

That makes Suzaku smile, "I'm trying to be serious."

Lelouch is being serious.

"I wish things were different."

"It's not your fault," Suzaku softly says and kisses the apologetic tone from Lelouch's lips.

No.

He's sorry he can't fix this problem.

(But that was part of the goal, right? To change the world…?)

Lelouch closes his eyes on his dejected thoughts and presses another kiss to Suzaku's lips, pushing him into the pillow. He thinks of the baby. He thinks of his mother, of the ugly words his "pure" siblings and the Emperor's other wives would hurl at him and Nunnally. He thinks of Zero and just what the hell it is that he should be doing now, trapped in a Zone-bubble he didn't really want. Of the expression Suzaku might make when he sees Lelouch's face behind the mask.

(And he thinks, maybe, he never should've involved himself in any of this at all…)

All this angst must not translate through the kiss (because he has a filter that catches what shouldn't escape), because when they part Suzaku is wearing one of his common simpers.
"I thought you said you were tired." Meaning he thinks Lelouch is getting frisky.

Lelouch smiles very faintly, "I am."

"Warm showers are supposed to help you sleep better at night. Has it been working?"

Lelouch shrugs. He doesn't know if it's been helping or not. It's probably only spoiling him, in reality – any future showers without Suzaku will be boring. Their shared showers have become about more than sex – rather, that isn't necessarily always the goal. They have unexpectedly but smoothly fallen into an intimate ritual of bathing not just together but each other. (Lelouch sometimes thinks it's odd at how he's come to know Suzaku's body better than his own. At how comfortable they are with each other in their bare skin, free. It's not something he ever would've imagined to be possible, if not for Suzaku.) It's not always intended to be foreplay into bolder acts, even if that might've been how it started. It can be enough and too much all at once when Lelouch's soapy fingers and palms slide along all, over and into Suzaku's curves, and even feeling Suzaku's fingers carefully washing his hair – it's intoxicating with both lust and innocence. Lelouch has come to cherish what has evolved into an important, irreplaceable cornerstone of their relationship, and he knows Suzaku feels the same.

At any rate, Lelouch knows of one thing that always seems to help him sleep at night.

"You're taking off your shirt because…?" The confused blanket of Suzaku presumptuous question slides right off the black-haired boy's back along with his long-sleeved pajama top.

"Don't flatter yourself," Lelouch snarkily replies, knowing Suzaku is assuming a sexual context, which is reasonable, as he tosses his shirt at the couch before slinking under the blankets and leaning over to reach for the lamp at the edge of the desk. "I'm just still hot from the bath, too."

They both know it's a lie – as indicated with Suzaku's simper – but Lelouch is seeking the comfort of Suzaku's skin and, perhaps, Suzaku is as enticed to feel Lelouch's skin in this more innocent context too. He certainly makes himself cozy against Lelouch's chest once the light is off and those willowy, Britannian arms are wrapped around him. Suzaku's cheek is soft and warm against Lelouch's nose and the arm that holds him in return is strong, secure and loving.

It's… painful.

"Suzaku…" Lelouch beckons – from behind too many masks.

(Will you still love me if you know?)

"Hm?"

"…Are you going to wear a wedding dress?" But Lelouch can't speak of it – because in the darkness, he's still Lelouch. He's still the boy living in a storage shed. Not a demon. Not Zero. All of that is hidden.

Suzaku pushes him, tells him he isn't funny, and leaves it at that.

Lelouch chuckles and cuddles, because it's all he can do.

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"Lelouch sure is picking a bad time to ditch," Rivalz says with a begrudging scratch of his pen in
his notebook. "If he doesn't study he could fail his exams."

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas around town and campus, but the time has also come that every student dreads: semester final exams.

Well, most students.

While the rest of the student body takes the half-day to study as Ashford Academy so graciously gives, Lelouch left after their last lesson, saying he needed to do holiday shopping alone but that he would still make it in time for their doctor appointment in the afternoon. He did seem to vanish rather quickly – although not unusual it's something he hasn't done in a while…

"Maybe if he hadn't skipped so much of the semester he wouldn't have to worry about it in the first place," Suzaku admonishes at full strength even though said ditcher isn't present to hear it – rather, to ignore it.

Shirley is also strangely absent.

Kallen is napping on the couch, a warm, snuggly lure that thankfully keeps Arthur content with not biting Suzaku.

Nina, as usual, is tapping and clicking away at her terminal.

Rivalz chuckles a little sheepishly, "You know how he is. Smart people like him get bored at school because it's not challenging enough, don't they?"

Suzaku never thought of it like that, but it makes sense in a way.

Even so, Lelouch wouldn't shave free time from Nunnally just to toy with something trivial—

"I could see how gambling would be more interesting than school." Temptation dangles from Milly's voice as she also neglects her own study work, lazily leaning back in her chair – from what Suzaku understands, her grades have suddenly dipped considerably these past few months.

"Not sure if it's that." Rivalz slants his head against his palm, twirling his pen between his fingers. "But whatever 'game' he's playing has certainly captured his interest."

Milly grins, "If I didn't know better I'd say he's having an affair with an older woman. Or man." She glances at Suzaku. "Turns out he likes them younger." Then she winks.

Suzaku humors her by shaking his head in the absence of a witty retort Lelouch would probably make, if he was here, and fishes his mobile out of pants pocket.

He's glad that their friends have accepted his and Lelouch's relationship – not that he expected they wouldn't, exactly. Discovering that their two friends – namely Lelouch – are in a secret affair would be shocking to anyone, and to be having a baby on top of that…

"Maybe he suspected it might be his turn to play dress up, and that's why he didn't show today," Milly says with longing under her proud smirk.

Suzaku grins a little laugh.

That's certainly a fair guess.

"Meanwhile he's left me to suffer alone with the chemistry review," Suzaku grumbles, pocketing his phone.
"You aren't the only one," Rivalz pityingly adds as he tiredly stands. "Don't know about the rest of you, but I'm calling an early lunch."

Milly perks right up. "You know, the Baking Club has been hard at work testing their dough recipes for the holiday cookie contest later this month…"

"Yes." Rivalz practically drools. "They've been baking all morning – it smells delicious!"

Milly shamelessly floats over to him as he walks out the door, "And as Council President I'm sure they can't deny us some taste-testing~…"

"Not like they don't owe us for 'accidentally' getting an increase in their budget this month." The gleam in Rivalz's eyes is almost as scary as Milly's.

The way their maniacal cackles echo in unison down the hall, however, is much scarier.

Suzaku just simpers to himself, tapping the bottom of his pen on the table, no more eager to join ink and paper than the two deserters. Cookies really don't sound like such a bad idea right now… minus the extortion and blackmail.

"Um…"

Suzaku looks up to the person casting a shadow over his schoolwork, startled to see Nina fidgeting at him.

"You… need help?"

Suzaku blinks, and she points at his papers, "Ah, uh, well…"

She timidly pulls out a chair beside him.

But she doesn't speak for several beats that hotly squirm under his skin.

Or could that just be small fry churning his stomach again? He's been feeling a bit unwell all day…

"Princess Euphemia." A push of her glasses as if they're a shield. "Y-you helped me… see her again."

He did.

When Nina had asked about it before Suzaku wasn't in any position to make it happen. Through the course of things, it has become easier because Euphemia has taken more authority over her own life, and has become friendlier with Suzaku. As a result, Nina has been able to spend time with Euphemia – the former princess had said – and if there's anybody who can bring out the good in people, it's Euphemia. In fact, Nina doesn't appear to be as frigid around him as she used to be.

…And then Suzaku realizes maybe she's trying to thank him.

Or, maybe, even… reach out to him.

"Happy to help," Suzaku warmly replies, hoping his smile doesn't reflect how stupefied he feels.

Nina's voice is still small and mousy, but she does prove to be a better tutor than a certain defiant ditcher Suzaku knows.

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"Ohgi and Villetta Nu?" Zero dubiously questions, looking at the printed pictures in the privacy of his trusty motor-base.

The woman at the festival…?

Does that mean Kallen knows – and didn't say anything?

"That is what I found," Diethard evenly says. "She doesn't appear to have her memory intact."

Lelouch has to suppress a snort. "Amnesia?"

Informants within Britannia revealed that Villetta Nu was casted MIA, and considering all that happened with Shirley, Lelouch thought she was dead. There hadn't been any chatter about trying to find Nu, either, as her allegiance to "Orange" after Suzaku's rescue didn't endear her much to high command. Missing in action is as good as killed in action.

That's to be expected from Britannia, however.

"It is unclear how this situation began, but she doesn't appear to be acting," the blond responds.

"And they've been living together all these months? Just what have they been doing all this time?"

Disappointment is hard to stem from Lelouch's voice – at Ohgi's reckless behavior, at his blatant secrecy – but Zero is more admonishing than anything else.

At that Diethard coolly clears his throat, but—

"My, you are thick-headed when it comes to these things," C.C. offhandedly insults from behind a half-eaten wheel of pepperoni and triple-cheese pizza. To think he almost had all those pizza stains removed… "They've been involved in romance."

Romance…?

Zero's right hand and an amnesiac Britannian officer?

The pure absurdity of it.

But, when the parallels align Lelouch almost wants to bitterly laugh. He's a non-Japanese freedom fighter in love with an oppressing non-Britannian officer. Lelouch and Suzaku might have their situation a little backwards, but they're in the same boat. They are enemies on any military and social standing, yet they bunk together nightly – even planning a life beyond their reality, a family. Wishing for that happily ever after they once thought as children they'd have as an adult. Despite the precarious line between reality and fantasy, they all seem to be tempting fate as they continue reaching for the unreachable – human nature, isn't it?

And is it only more weird considering that Lelouch picked Ohgi for his second because… he was similar to Suzaku?

"…I see," Lelouch says with solemn resignation. "Is there anyone else who might know about this?"

"Intel is limited to just us. To his credit, he's managed to keep it clandestine."

To his credit?

This really isn't the kind of mess Lelouch expected or would've even hoped to find sprouting right under his nose. Moreover, he doesn't like this being unearthed by Diethard – his dedication is
appreciated, but he's still too eager to mend things on his own. If anything, Lelouch should have been the one to notice Ohgi’s off-kilter behavior.

But just how much of his lapsing judgment can he blame on Suzaku?

As if with a sixth-sense, a message from the seahorse rumbles on his phone from his pocket.

"Understood. Await further orders," Zero commands as he thumbs a quick reply to his little boyfriend.

Diethard doesn't look happy about the lacking of immediate action in Zero's order, but he bows out gracefully enough regardless.

Lelouch agrees this situation needs to be handled post-haste, but it's an incredibly fragile matter and he'd like to come out of it without losing his Second or secret.

"Interesting predicament," C.C. says with another rather indulgent mouthful of pizza.

All right, so, maybe Lelouch didn't exactly heed satisfying her wanton pizza gluttony while she was underwater – many things, it seems, have unexpectedly fallen through cracks he didn't know existed.

Which is unacceptable.

"Don't start," Lelouch heavily sighs, returning his mobile to his pocket. "I'm not in the mood for more cryptic banter with you at my expense."

"When are you ever in the mood for that?"—Could've been a joke if not for her impassive tone. …Or maybe it actually is because of that.

"Precisely."

"...Lelouch, what is it you miss most about your mother?"

"What?" He doesn't refrain stabbing the immortal girl with his disgruntled, disconcerted eyes.

"I'm just curious." C.C. seemingly claims innocence.

An old, un-healing hurt stitches in his brow.

"It's not any single thing," he quietly answers, turning his eyes back to his computer.

It's everything.

"How different do you think your life would be if she was still alive?"

Lelouch wordlessly scrolls through text on his screen.

"You might not have ever met Suzaku, don't you think?"

Meaning that even something good came of something bad?

"Am I speaking to the *Oracle of Delphi*?" the exiled prince snidely snips.

"If so, would that make you *Oedipus*?" the witch fluidly flings back, wiping red-blood of her pizza-prey from her mouth.
Lelouch's lips curl.

Is that with or without the "-complex"?

Regardless of his intentions with his father, Lelouch at least knows with absolute certainty that Suzaku is not his mother.

(Disregarding that he also once knew with absolute certainty that males cannot get pregnant.)

"Do you think it's possible you would have become an arm of the Britannian Empire, like your siblings?"

"You assume that without having suffered my mother's death I wouldn't see the injustices within the empire?"

"Isn't that how it is? Humans are selfish. If something doesn't affect them, why should they care?"

Is that how Lelouch seems?

"I have to disagree. I'm not an empty-headed drone. I would not serve or spread Britannian ideals as a loyal lapdog like Cornelia and Clovis as if I was bred for it."

"Would you instead vie for the throne, like Schneizel?"

Lelouch reclines against his chair, not realizing his back was so tense.

"You're certainly chatty lately, C.C." he facetiously grins.

"Maybe I just missed you."

Lelouch looks to that remark but her face is too vacuous for him to tell if she's being sincere or not. He smirks at her all the same, "I imagine Tamaki isn't as stimulating a converser as I am."

"He's entertaining in his own right."

Lelouch chuckles, a little surprised at how it lightens his chest, and looks down at Zero staring up at him from his lap.

"If you could speak to your mother… what would you say?"

Until she plugs the drain.

She seems unusually fixated on strange things these days…

"I…" But he considers her question nonetheless. "I'm not sure."

"Really?"

Sharp violets flick at her stone face, bouncing off just as easily as blades against a rock.

"Maybe… I would ask if she knew who murdered her."

C.C. doesn't respond to that.

"Anyway," he takes advantage of the lull in her talkative curiosity to stand, "I need to get going." He told Suzaku he was doing some shopping – while he shouldn't return to his seahorse's side
without proof, and while true he always finishes his holiday shopping early, it's also true that there are a few things he'd like to purchase.

She seems to wait until he's at the door before tugging his leg with her wraithlike voice again—

"What if the answers you find aren't the ones you want?"

—Lelouch pauses.

"I think they rarely are the ones we want," he replies, quieted inside Zero's face, before taking his leave.

••

"Shirley?" Suzaku says when he bumps into her on his way off campus, both of them bundled in winter coats against the crisp December air. "Is everything alright? You never came to the club room."

She exhales with exasperation, "Sophie needed help with a final project that was due by the end of the day. I couldn't just abandon her."

That's Shirley's roommate, isn't it?

"You're a good friend to help her out like that."

"I feel used." Her lips pout. "But she offered to pay for dinner so I'm going to get some now."

Suzaku laughs, "I'll walk with you." Somehow he didn't think Shirley could even conceive of that feeling.

"Where are you headed off to?"

"Just a doctor appointment," he answers with a shift of his school-bag – a change of clothes for Suzie, since it's better to not wear them on campus. No work today, either, and he's supposed to be meeting Lelouch in town. Suzaku was hoping to maybe get some of his own holiday shopping done too – hopefully with Lelouch. Christmas wasn't a winter holiday Suzaku's family celebrated, and after… well, everything, it isn't as though Suzaku kept up with any of his cultural traditions that Britannia was sure to heartlessly crush – he was also much too young to fully remember, and then once he became a soldier… Even if Suzaku wanted to he never had any reason to buy gifts. Now with Lelouch and Nunnally and so many special people in his life for the first time since… Suzaku is excited to experience what seems like a whimsical season in the west.

He wants to see the ones he loves smile…

"Say… Shirley, can I talk to you about Lelouch?"

She prickles at his apparently unexpected question – can't blame her, but it's been on his mind. Sometimes Suzaku feels like he got in the way. While it's true that Lelouch didn't seem to have much issue expressing his interest in Suzaku in a shorter time than he'd known Shirley, maybe something still could've bloomed if given just a bit more time…

Then again, maybe not.

"I didn't forget that you like him, and we haven't talked about it yet."

Hell, Suzaku even called Lelouch for her to ask about his feelings not long before the supposed
ladies' man made his desires quite clear to his boyhood friend.

Her olive eyes dart away, "Well, that's…"

"I just want to say that I'm sorry. If I hurt you. I didn't mean for anything like that to happen. And I... don't think that he did either." Lelouch can be clumsily callous about girls' affections for him; it's possible he said something insensitive by accident. Suzaku wasn't around enough when Lelouch and Shirley were fighting and when he asked about it Lelouch was, of course, cryptic. "Is that why you were mad at him?"

Shirley doesn't immediately respond, instead stepping on Suzaku's words as they walk, making the brunet wonder if perhaps he shouldn't have brought it up at all.

"...You really love him, don't you?"

"I..." The way she anxiously hangs the question between them makes Suzaku pause. "Yes, I do."

"Would you..." An undersized smile worms onto her lips, an uneasy shadow weighing her eyes that drag up to him. "Would you do anything for him?"

"Anything?" Suzaku curiously questions, feeling that word hook into his chest as they stop at the entrance.

Shirley takes a breath as if about to speak, but then hesitates and—

"ORANGE!" Shakes the earth around them, a shatter of the air as if the sky is falling on them and their eyes are yanked to the shouting man across the street—

"G-Gottwald?" Suzaku stutters, aghast.

Jeremiah Gottwald was listed amongst the dead after Narita...

But dead men don't stand outside of schools and laugh at teenagers like a hysterical hyena.

"I see your Orange now, Zero!" he bellows up at the heavens with clawing hands, insanity bleeding out of him in shrill rivulets. "I'll get you! And your little girl too!"

What?!

"Sir Gottwald, stand down!" Suzaku tries to disarm – the former officer has been knocked too far off his rocker, it seems. "These are innocent civilians—!"

"I will cleanse you of his Curse! And I will find him!"

Curse?

"MUWAH-HA-HA!" The man loudly laughs.

...Seriously?

What is this, a cartoon?

Actually, that could explain a few things...

"Shirley," Suzaku cautions as he steps in front of her when the deranged man marches across the empty road right towards them. "Run." He casts a sharp glance over his shoulder at her when
she *doesn't move*. "*Now!*"

Shirley peeps like a lost chick, but her legs somehow find life and she's dashing off back towards the school—

An unstable smirk curls on Jeremiah's face, an ironically orange mask glinting under the afternoon sun with the long blade that *flicks* right out of his arm—

Suzaku's jaw clenches and he swallows a sloshing feeling in his gut, feet planted firmly on the ground—

*This isn't good.*

And the disgraced phantom fearlessly charges at Suzaku—

Chapter End Notes

“I’ll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!” ;]

Anybody (still) out there? I’d love to hear from you! Chapter 9 is in-progress.

And if you see any grammatical mistakes/typos, please let me know. orz
"What's the point of being able to talk if you always gotta keep secrets?" --Donkey from Shrek

Pants on Fire!

Suzaku doesn't stand a chance.

While fortunate and grateful that his overall fitness hasn't receded despite taking things more easily as his pregnancy progresses, Gottwald is a *machine*. Literally, as far as Suzaku can tell. Any pressure point that Suzaku tries to target is invulnerable and he appears to be more metal than man. For as much as Suzaku is agile, the undead Britannian is relentless and, well… maybe if Suzaku's stomach would just *stop swaying* around he could stand a better chance. Every time he dodges, dips, ducks or dives his gut carries a sloshing warning that spikes higher each time. One nauseated waver too many and he's feeling gravity hook into his belly as he curls in the larger man's shadow —

A familiar, consuming emptiness injects his brain like ink in water.

—He's hoisted out of the dark fog, high up off the ground by the front of his uniform and he's staring down at Gottwald and—

"Urg," Suzaku queasily mutters over his churning tummy, "it's coming."

Making the Britannian quizzically stare at him, "What—?"

And there it goes, Suzaku's lunch.

On Jeremiah's chest.
The entire world darkens around them to spotlight the ghastly splat of a very deconstructed version of Lelouch's spicy tofu stir-fry and garden salad – sadly sans any club cookies. Suzaku might have started hallucinating, but he's pretty sure he can see the rancid stink lines waving in the air.

"And there's… more where… that came from," Suzaku tries to utter with confident, regal intimidation like Lelouch does, but the threat quivers out of his throat about as confidently as it could through a throat coated in retch.

A single golden eye flicks back to Suzaku in a quite impressive impassiveness, and the judgment in Jeremiah's bland tone is surprisingly thick; "...What is wrong with you?"

Oh, so many things...

...\n
Lelouch abandons mid-text to Suzaku about his last-minute arrival back at campus when he hears the crazed cry and runs – pausing to breathlessly curse that the entrance is so far away once or twice... or seven times – to round the corner of Ashford's protective wall—

But it's the slumped seahorse well past the deserted entrance that makes him trample his heart under his quickened feet.

"Suzaku!" Lelouch doesn't hide his alarm as he rushes to the collapsed seahorse, clasping shoulders and dropping his paper shopping bag. "Are you all right?" To think he almost just waited at the train station...

"Jeremiah… Gottwald," Suzaku greenly gasps. "He's chasing... after Shirley."

"What?" Lelouch can't conceal his shock.

Jeremiah Gottwald?

Doesn't that cockroach ever just DIE?

But, why is after Shirley?

"I tried to stop him, but he's..."

"Are you hurt?" Lelouch frantically grips his annoyingly brave dunce. Is the baby...?

Suzaku shakes his head, holding his stomach, "I got sick. He left."

Lelouch sighs with relief.

Seems the small fry protected Suzaku.

Lelouch won't forget that.

"Attention Students. This is a security announcement. A suspicious person has been sighted near the Club House. All students should avoid that area until further notice. Repeat: all students stay away from the Clubhouse and surrounding area."

"Clubhouse?" Lelouch repeats with panic. Nunnally...! "Stay here," he orders as he stands and pulls out his phone.

"But—"
"Do not move." Lelouch raises his phone to his ear, firing off speed-dial—

But Suzaku ensnares his arm with steely fingers, "You don't understand," he adamantly says as he stands. "You can't go alone."

Lelouch scowls, "You're the one that doesn't understand—!"

"Now's not the time to argue!" Suzaku impatiently yells. "We have to hurry!"

Lelouch is glowering with the strength of a thousand suns at the back of his stubborn seahorse, and chases after the brawny idiot when the line is answered with a woman's voice.

_Goddamned hero complex_

"Sayoko, we have a Code... Orange." Seems Lelouch enlisted Sayoko just in time...

••

After the... incident with Mao, Lelouch made it a priority to tinker with some of Ashford's – rather complacent – low-level security to better protect the clubhouse, to protect Nunnally. The school has panic switches in place but with some subtle, secret tampering Lelouch can shut down the entire clubhouse with his own codes. There aren't any security shutters on the windows, however, but at the very least he can partition intruders and safely lead them elsewhere. Like the sublevels.

Or at least, that's the plan.

The Universe should really follow his plans more accordingly.

It's not like he puts a lot of time and thought into them, or anything. It's not like he enjoys concocting all these—Well, all right, so he does enjoy being brainy, but it's not like he enjoys them being swept aside like trifles.

As it is, the campus around the clubhouse is cleared thanks to the triggered announcement (thanks to Sayoko) as well as the inside. Except for two occupants in the rotunda. Sayoko confirmed that she and Nunnally are safe in another room. So at least the most important part of the plan is intact. Lelouch re-locks the doors behind them after he and Suzaku enter – cursing not only the fact that Suzaku, despite being sick, beat Lelouch to the door and that Shirley, despite having a head start, couldn't shake Orange off fast enough. A daze is clouding her face as she spills onto the stairs from Jeremiah's loosening arms – no blood anywhere to be seen, so she's at least not bleeding (externally) – who turns towards them with disbelief.

"...Lelouch?" It falls from Jeremiah's lips like a ghost that ices the marrow in Lelouch's bones. "...vi Britannia? The deceased son of the late Lady Marianne is Zero?"

Wow.

All Lelouch's hard work to keep secrets was erased with one small phrase?

Like.

This guy seriously sucks...

Screw you, Universe.

But there's no way he could have guessed all that so easily, or accurately. There's Shirley, but... she shouldn't remember anything – nor does she know of Lelouch's past life.
The ousted teen maintains a cool exposure, however. Suzaku can try to melt him with his eyes all he wants, Lelouch is unfazed. He's about to question Jeremiah when he notices obvious spit-up stain on Jeremiah's chest and feels mountain-tall.

"Interesting choice of accessory," the prince dryly utters feeling mountain-tall [take note, Suzaku, that's how it's done], all while thinking of the pistol concealed in his coat.

Jeremiah blinks. …Or winks? Hard to tell with only the one eye.

"Your Knight used a new attack," he plainly says. "It wasn't very effective."

Is that—did Orange just make a joke?

Somehow that's even more disturbing than the frothing lunatic Lelouch expected to find…

Lelouch catches Suzaku edging closer from the corner of his eye, and then glances at Shirley passed-out on the stairs.

Why couldn't Suzaku be the pass-out one?

"Stand down and step away from Shirley," the dutiful soldiers warningly tries to disarm, and it's actually kind of adorable.

Jeremiah blatantly ignores Suzaku as easily as stepping over an insect.

Ah, the sweet, naive seahorse.

"You've been alive all this time." The older man says with noticeable relief. "What of the princess? Is she with you?"

"What do you know about Lady Marianne?" Lelouch redirects, making the seemingly mechanical man freeze in place.

He blinks almost indignantly, "I was in her guard under Princess Cornelia."

"Guard?" Lelouch suspiciously echoes – he was much younger, but he doesn't remember this fool. "And you… remember me?"

"Of course. I admired her greatly. To this day her death remains my biggest failure. If not for those despicable terrorists…" His hands tightly fists with disgust, "That filth never should have gotten near her. Nor Princess Nunnally or you, Your Highness. Both of you should be safe at home."

Hm.

Maybe Lelouch forsook the Universe a little too fast on this one.

"What do you know of her death?" he cautiously asks.

"Only that we were sent away on her order before it happened."

Sent them away? But why? Because she thought she was safe? No. She was always alert when they visited the palace; she knew better. Maybe she was meeting somebody she trusted?

"Including Cornelia?"

"Yes. She didn't like the idea."
"What about Schneizel?"

"I don't recall him being near at the time."

Lelouch wouldn't put it past Schneizel to be the culprit while leaving somebody else to do his bidding, because he's a hypocritical piece of shi—snake too precious to get his own hands dirty. Lelouch doesn't know about the motive, however… There also don't seem to be any obvious gains. Clovis dropped Schneizel's name, so even if only in investigation he's involved – and that's already too much involvement. Schneizel could've only been covering his tracks.

"She just told you to leave?" Lelouch furrows his brow. "And that's it?"

"It was odd. As a former Knight of the Round she didn't like to imply weakness on herself, but never dismissed us like that before."

That's… strange. She fought with the other wives often enough, although nothing so dramatic as drawing blood since many of the other women were pampered poodles bred to be concerned about preening, posturing and pedigree rather than gathering life skills. Lelouch's mother focused her effort on guarding her children, though… If she ever suspected something she always shielded Lelouch and Nunnally first, but that didn't happen this last time.

"What about Nunnally?"

Jeremiah lightly shakes his head, "I don't know how she got there. She wasn't around at the time, but we were dismissed around an hour before Lady Marianne was killed."

Meaning Nunnally could've wandered in? She did like to run about when she was younger. When she could. She loved playing hide-and-seek at the villa, and was exceptional at it, but she didn't like the palace because it was big and scary and filled with mean people. It wouldn't be farfetched for her to have scampered off unseen to find their mother and, for better or worse, she doesn't remember what happened that day.

This whole situation reeks even more, but it seems Cornelia might've been honest when Euphemia inquired. Certainly doesn't clear the Britannian Prime Minister.

"…You say it remains your biggest failure," Lelouch slowly starts, "even now after all you've endured."—Of course, what he means is: even after he utterly humiliated Jeremiah and left his life in shambles.

"It never should have happened, especially not on my watch," Jeremiah laments with such strong conviction it's almost kind of… touching? He seems sincere and based upon history not adept for this level of subterfuge.

"Her son is in need of your loyalty, as is the justice of her memory," Lelouch airily announces with a lifted chin. "Zero is a means to that end."

It's not a crisis of faith that flickers through Jeremiah's eye, but a doused fire that reignites – Lelouch is personally familiar. Orange steps forward and kneels to one knee, lowering his head and placing his fist against his heart.

"It would be an honor, Your Highness."

Lelouch smiles with pleasure down at the bowing man from up high on his mountainous throne.

Well, that was easy.
Because some things just need to be that easy, ok?

OKAY?

Ok.

"Lelouch," hisses a familiar seahorse who always has been annoyingly adept at ruining Lelouch's fun.

"Security protocols need to be handled first. You'll be taken to the sublevels." Lelouch's eyes flick to Shirley as he presses his mobile to his ear. "Suzaku, check on Shirley." He offers a glance at the simmering brunet finding as sour of a face as he would've expected, but there's no time to deal with a tantrum right now.

The little soldier does as instructed, though (he rather likes his damsels in distress, doesn't he?), with Jeremiah watching him as he does. Suspicious one, isn't he…

"Sayoko," Lelouch says into his phone, "The situation is under control but I require your assistance. Is Nunnally well?"

"She is, but, something has happened..." Sayoko sounds off but not alarmed—

Lelouch takes the alarm upon himself, briskly walking towards the kitchen with panicked feet and icy blood, "Is she hurt?"

Suzaku's eyes jump over at that, and Lelouch is grateful.

"No. You... just need to come."

Lelouch swiftly arrives at the kitchen door, his entire body a heartbeat that practically shakes his fingers across the keypad—

His eyes hit Sayoko first who hovers over Nunnally who looks at him with—

Lelouch's mobile falls to the floor in a hard clatter.

—OPEN EYES

"Big brother!" she calls out to him with reaching hands and tearing, lilac eyes.

"Nu-Nunnally..." Lelouch is breathless like he just raced around the world and he tries to swallow his imploding heart. But somehow his legs manage to carry him closer. He feels as though he's walking into the past to a happy little girl with shining eyes and always that radiant smile—

But then there's pain.

A sharp plunge in his eye reaching all the way up from the Underworld itself, and his hand flies up to his left eye.

Not again…!

"...Brother?"

No…!

He cannot look her in the eye.
Lelouch crumbles into the floor and his hearing fades in and out as if dunked in the river Styx. His sense of gravity even sways as his entire body now tries to smother the spiking, brawling anguish.

It's different from before.

He can't even think a single thought other than pain.

It's aggressive.

It's an electric corkscrew yanking at his eye, tightening like a snake the more Lelouch fights and there's the taste of blood in his mouth. Dark red drops hit the cold, hard floor beside his fisted hand as his vision becomes dark and murky. He can vaguely hear the distorted voices of others, garbled shouts and hands on his body, but he kicks and claws to stay above thick currents of acid burning through his veins—

Suzaku's frantic green eyes are the last he sees before darkness swallows him…

••

Suzaku didn't want it to be true.

All this time just… covering his eyes and pretending it wasn't there. As if because he couldn't see it that meant it didn't exist. Yet, even that is somehow…

Is he angry or… disappointed?

After trying to deny it all this time… Is denial just a malformed version of… acceptance? Because to face something is too painful, so instead just pretend. Suzaku doesn't have a habit of pretending everything is ok. That's not who he is; out of sight is not out of mind. It's just, with Lelouch and Zero, it was… scary.

He was afraid.

What would happen, or wouldn't. What he would… or wouldn't do. How he would feel or… not feel. And now because Lelouch has suffered some strange… aneurism Suzaku feels like he can't be mad because he's too worried. Or he isn't sure if he's too worried to be angry or too angry to be worried, or—

(Does he even have the right to be angry when along he just knew but didn't want to admit it?)

—He just knows that he feels very isolated right now, like a lonely iceberg drifting in an empty ocean that's much too warm.

Suzaku doesn't like it.

He doesn't like any of this.

He didn't want this.

And he has no choice right now but to just sit here and not like it—

"Suzaku. Did you have any trouble rescheduling your appointment?" Nunnally asks with tender concern that reflects in her lilac eyes when he enters Lelouch's room with his mobile in hand.

It's… an adjustment for her to see him. Even without her sight she was extremely intuitive and perceptive like her brother. As selfish and cowardly as it is, he can't hide from her staring eyes like
he could her closed ones. Although he wonders if her sharp senses might fade now that she can see. Or if they'll become empowered with her sight. She's been staring at him, which he can understand and he knows he's (probably) just being self-conscious, but it's unnerving. It feels as though her eyes will pierce and see right through, or, see something she shouldn't…

(In reality, maybe she's already been able to see the truth… but he doesn't feel he matches her perception.)

He never thought he'd actually see her eyes stare back at him—Not that he didn't believe it was possible… Lelouch never gave up on her sight returning despite all signs pointing to the opposite. Perhaps there was a way to help her, but countless doctors and professionals couldn't find one. Suzaku had always known Nunnally as she is and… accepted her as is. While hopeful that maybe someday she could be helped, he sometimes wondered if he should be more concerned about Lelouch's adamant belief that her eyes would open one day. If it was an unhealthy delusion. Especially when, for the most part, Nunnally accepted it herself.

Seems Lelouch was right, however.

Because he always is.

Regardless, it appears a miracle has touched the little storage shed trio once again. Maybe they are actually luckier than they appear…

"No, it's taken care of," Suzaku answers more tonelessly than he means to, looking at Lelouch's shopping bag sitting on the coffee table. They've more than missed their doctor's appointment and there's certainly no way Lelouch can make it. Suzaku isn't leaving now, either. Not yet. (…Yet?)

Nunnally is at Lelouch's bedside. It's been less than an hour since he collapsed; he's warm, but not hot, and his pulse is steady while he lies caringly tucked into the middle of his bed with Nunnally petting his hand in her hold. She's remained glued to Lelouch, just as protective and concerned as her big brother would be, like a little lion mama.

She doesn't appear to know any of the specifics of what's happening but knows something is wrong. Suzaku, meanwhile, is trying to shove and store all his thoughts and feelings and sit on them like an overstuffed trunk. He can't talk to Lelouch and no matter how upset he is he can't involve Nunnally. Suzaku isn't a condoner of lying but he barely knows what's happening himself. The instinct to protect her is strong. (And… maybe… there's some understanding in that. Maybe. But that does not give Lelouch license nor excuse him from what he's been doing.) The situation is complicated enough as it is now, Suzaku doesn't want to muddy the waters even more.

"Suzaku?" Nunnally beckons, making him notice he's been lingering at the door. "Come, sit with us," she says with a reaching hand.

Sit with us.

Suzaku places his cell on the table and… hovers a bit beside the bed, his green eyes scanning Lelouch as if worried he might suddenly spring up—

But he feels soft fingers grasping at his hand, yanking his eyes back to the little girl that… isn't so little anymore.

Suzaku tries a sheepish smile as he gently seats himself on the edge of the bed, not sure he wants to make himself comfortable. He lets Nunnally cradle his hand, though, and in this moment as she
holds both boys' hands she's like a bridge between them.

Rather fitting right now…

He tries to avoid her gaze and not avoid her gaze, and she undoubtedly notices this.

"Suzaku," she calls again, hand lifting up toward his face. He lets her delicate fingertips skate along the shapes of his countenance in silence and he realizes that's she's matching memory to present. "You're as cute as I thought you'd be," Nunnally finally says with a smile.

Suzaku feels a small laugh bubble inside him, "Not as cute as you."

"There you go sounding just like big brother," she lightly teases. Her eyes twinkle with a wry playfulness he's never heard in her voice and thinks that eyes are probably her most expressive feature. Not guarded like Lelouch's walled gaze.

"It's the truth," Suzaku maintains with a sincere smile.

"And so modest. Maybe I should've tried to snatch you up first!"

Uh…

Suzaku is just gonna go ahead and take that as a joke.

Nunnally is his sister, even if not by blood.

So Suzaku uneasily laughs, "Don't let Lelouch hear you say that. He'd have a stroke." That feels like such a tactless choice of words considering Lelouch is lying comatose beside them from what might've actually been a stroke.

"I would never steal you away from him," she innocently proclaims, cupping Lelouch's hand in both of hers.

Well… that's not what Suzaku was implying.

Nunnally having any kind of adult thoughts or feelings… Lelouch wouldn't be able to handle that. (He can barely handle his own adult thoughts and feelings.) Lelouch is a parent and he'll probably never see Nunnally as more than that little girl with pigtails even when she's a full grown woman.

"He loves you so much," she softly says with tender warmth. "And you've made him much happier, too."

Suzaku just shifts in place on his packed feelings.

But the flutter of his leafy eyes is caught by the pale violets that regard him with an affectionate smile.

It occurs to him that she might be waiting for him to say something.

"…You really think so?" Suzaku tentatively asks. He doesn't want to have this conversation right now. It's unfair.

It hurts.

She couldn't be doing this on purpose? She can sense tension and she's expressed in the past that she could tell when Lelouch and Suzaku were in… a tiff, so perhaps she's trying to mend a tear?
…Like Lelouch does with a needle and thread.

"Maybe it's not easy to see. He's never really been an emotive person but I can feel it," Nunnally says, sliding her blinking eyes to fondly trickle her fingertips in Lelouch's hair. "It reminds me of when we were living with you as kids. It was really difficult for us after our mother died, and we were all alone. The three of us had a rough start but you helped us begin to heal."

Suzaku can hear the heartbreak in Nunnally's vice and suddenly wishes he hadn't asked.

"I'm really happy that the two of you are together. All this time we've been living here he's been trying so hard to take care of us but the past still hurts." She looks at Suzaku with a simper, "He even has gray hair."

"Really?" Suzaku can't help being astonished.

She nods and he leans to look at the three gray sprouts near her fingers on the crown of his head.

That—

("It's not true that I don't worry or stress – I stress and worry so much it's a wonder my hair hasn't turned gray yet or that I haven't had a heart-attack." Lelouch rubs his face. "I seem confident because I am confident, and I like to think I have all the answers, but I know I can only control so much around me. And sometimes, Suzaku, the bigger picture is a whole lot bigger than you think it is.")

—Those weren't there several months ago, were they?

Damn. Shouldn't Suzaku know something like that about his best-friend-lover-baby-daddy?

Nunnally affectionately pets her brother's hair again, "I realized that even though I want to do anything I can for him and make him happy like he does for me, maybe there's something I can't give him. These past months living together, it's like we've been a real family." She smiles at Suzaku with affection glimmering in her eyes. "And his demeanor has brightened, just like almost eight years ago."

"...Nunnally..." Suzaku says, feeling utterly helpless under the weight of her words. The door abruptly hisses open, sparing Suzaku from untangling his tongue and he looks over his shoulder to see the girl from the poison capsule—

...?!

"C.C.?" Nunnally says with pleasant surprise.

—But Suzaku leaps to his feet with unpleasant surprise and trips on his tongue again.

C-2?

The green haired girl hovers at the foot of the bed like a ghost and Suzaku feels not just his stomach turn but the universe tilt. She was with Zero when—

Ah, right. She was with Lelouch. All this time? Lelouch said they were separated...

Another lie.

Just how many is it, then? Is that all that holds him together? Lies stitched to his bones like a patchwork quilt desperately hiding whatever is underneath?
Is that what hurts more? They *lying*?

Amber eyes widely stare at Nunnally, with… neutral surprise?

"It's you, isn't it?" Nunnally asks with bright eyes. "Why are you here? For big brother?"

Hold

On.

Nunnally *knows* her?

They're *acquainted*!? 

Suzaku's mouth is hanging open, uncertain what to do with itself, when Sayoko swiftly enters.

"That is correct," the mysterious woman replies, golden eyes *oozing* over Suzaku in a pokerfaced glaze.

As if Suzaku wasn't unsettled *enough*.

"I don't understand…" Suzaku slowly says, looking to Sayoko for answers. "Is *she* who you said Lelouch told to contact?"

The increasingly suspicious maid dips her head politely like always but doesn't otherwise explain.

Typical.

"It's getting late, Miss Nunnally," Sayoko gently patters into the room toward the younger Lamperouge. "We should get you prepared for a bath and then bed."

"I'm not leaving," Nunnally firmly says and Suzaku is surprised by her stern tone. "Skipping one bath won't hurt."

"Of course. How about at least changing out of your uniform and into your pajamas?" Sayoko smiles.

Nunnally is still resistant, apprehensive.

"Don't worry," the supposed C.C. says as in a somewhat robotic voice, "he will be fine."

That should be *Suzaku's* line!

Nunnally allows Sayoko to take the reins and push her toward the door, stopping at C.C.'s side.

"It's nice to see you again," Nunnally gently smiles.

"You as well," the girls responds with a likewise curve of her mouth.

"You look as pretty as you sounded."

"And you have your brother's eyes."

"Oh, I don't remember us having the same color?"

"No." The frosty air around the capsule girl defrosts, a little. "They're kind, just like his."
Nunnally's cheeks faintly dust pink as she mutters a thank you, touching a stunned Suzaku's arm as Sayoko pushes her out of the room.

What
the hell
is happening.

The door hisses shut and then the electric-haired woman climbs over the foot rail toward Lelouch without a glance at Suzaku, leaning over Lelouch's face with her long hair draping around them as if for privacy. Suzaku's brow is furrowed as he leans over the bed to peer. Her hands are on his jaw and their foreheads are touching.

That… this feels too intimate.

And not just because he and Lelouch are together. (Still are, not were.)

"What's going on?" Suzaku demands, feeling frustration wire through his veins. "Just who are you? What are you doing here?"

She leaves his questions unattended, instead spooning against the unconscious Lelouch as if he might freeze to death – well, Suzaku can't really say that can't happen at this point.

Suzaku's furrow matures into a scowl, "Don't ignore me. I asked you something."

"Three somethings," C.C. dully corrects, propped up on an elbow and resting her head on her fist.

"That's—!" Suzaku stops himself with a curt sigh. "…Is he… alright?"

Suzaku remembers Narita. He saw her with Zero and then—

That feeling crept back into him again like a sinister spirit in his blood when Euphemia and Zero—Lelouch, met about the Zone. This girl was there both times. Whatever is happening, she's obviously involved, and Suzaku does not like the implications – more-so when topped by an orange nutcase.

"He will be fine. He is stronger than he seems." Her hand is on Lelouch's rising and falling chest, and Suzaku… really doesn't like it. "You should know that."

Suzaku angrily grimaces.

To just fling something like that at him so casually yet callously…

"Who. Are. You." And must you remain so close to him!?

"You're beginning to sound like an annoying caterpillar from a fairy tale." Her golden eyes punch Suzaku's gut when they swing at him.

"What are you doing with him?" Suzaku scowls.

She grins, "It's nothing naughty, don't you worry. He only has eyes for you."

Suzaku flushes – both in annoyance and at her audacity.

Somehow, it's just like talking to Lelouch!
"I'm serious!" he yells, hands tightly balled at his sides. "I—!"

"Have many questions," she tonelessly snips his indignant scolding with ease. "But you are distracting. Either be quiet or leave."

This girl really...

She's not going to answer or be helpful at all, is she?

_Like Lelouch, indeed._

No point badgering her, Suzaku supposes. He wonders if Lelouch told her to be quiet or if she's just as secretive as the ex-prince.

Suzaku silently complies by perching on the table between the couch and the bed, hands clamping around the edge.

She apparently knows about his and Lelouch's relationship. Does she know... about the baby as well? She obviously has some strange power, which begs the questions of how and why did Prince Clovis have her in a capsule disguised as a weapon—

Or is she really a weapon—?

And Lelouch... he... does he know? Because he—

_He killed Clovis._

Shirley's father, and... and _countless others._

Did Lelouch... become a weapon too?

Suzaku saw it. The shape of Lelouch's bleeding left eye. It wasn't... human? But it was also... familiar? Maybe? He isn't sure.

Suzaku roughly rubs his face with his hand but he can't scrub his skull of the thoughts he's already tried to drown that are now bobbing to the surface. All of this is just—

"It's exactly this kind of lying, secretive bullshit that makes the world worse and everything so much harder than it has to be," Suzaku hears his stress stewing over.

"That's human nature," she tonelessly utters in response. "Everybody tells lies and keeps secrets for various reasons. You are no different."

Suzaku can't suppress the glower that creases around his eyes as he stares at the enigma lying next to the boy who was just supposed to be a teenager, his lover, and nothing more.

"You remain after learning the truth," she speaks again, her voice circling around him like skates over brittle ice, "is it out of affection, entitlement or retribution?"

_Retri—?

"...It's not like... I want anything to happen to him," Suzaku quietly responds. Lelouch has a lot to answer for but that's not—

That's not the only reason he's waiting for Lelouch to wake.
(Because it's not like Suzaku can claim complete ignorance here.)

"Even if he hurts you?" the girl asks, fingers tracing the edge of Lelouch's strong jaw. "Even if he does something that you cannot forgive? Surely, there's a limit. There always is."

What… is with that?

Is she just trying to goad Suzaku or actually push him away?

But at the same time, it's not like he hasn't pondered that question in the past. Just… how far is too far? Suzaku didn't want—Suzaku was trying to reel Lelouch in, not follow him out to sea…

"Whatever he's done, whatever he will do, it doesn't matter." She tucks her limey head on Lelouch's shoulder and gingerly yet decisively drapes her arm over his chest. "I won't let him be abandoned," she declares in a way that makes Suzaku's stomach turn and blood burn.

•-•

Lelouch's room is too small, Suzaku's body is too hot and his head is too overloaded. He spills out of Lelouch's room with no other outlet, rubbing his forehead. He can't sit in there with… that girl, not now. Suzaku just…

It's all too much at once.

And worse, he's not even sure of what all of "it" contains, yet.

Always that yet.

He heads toward the kitchen, thinking only as far as wanting to coat his throat with crisp water, when he sees Shirley outside of Nunnally's room, where she had been temporarily laid to rest. To avoid suspicion, or some other such business…

"Shirley?" he scurries up to her. "You're awake? Are you alright?"

A weak, shadow of a smile barely lifts her lips, "I'm fine… I just want to go back to my room."

"Are you sure?" Suzaku touches her shoulder with concern. "You can rest as long as you need."

"I…" Her gaze wavers in obvious discomfort, making Suzaku withdraw his hand. "How is… Lelouch?"

Suzaku feels his face flatten, almost frown, "You should worry about yourself right now." At Shirley's pleading stare Suzaku weakens, "He's still asleep. Seems to be ok."

She nods a little, "Tell me when he wakes up?"

Suzaku doesn't feel he can do more than nod at that himself, although uncertain if he should agree.

"Let me walk you," he warmly offers, "to make sure you get back safely?"

"…Ok," Shirley faintly smiles and they walk down the hall together. "I want to thank you, for trying to protect me."

_Trying_ to protect her.

"It's what I'm here for," Suzaku's tone could've carried a shrug but it only slumps instead while he
tightly fists one hand in his pants pocket. "Do you know why he was after you?"

"No… I've never met him before."

Yet he obviously saw some connection with Zero. And something about a "curse."

"But you knew about Lelouch, didn't you?"

Shirley is quiet.

Silent.

And it's clear she doesn't want to talk.

Suzaku wants answers but he doesn't want to push or stress Shirley… Although, he doesn't expect Lelouch to be very forthcoming even though it would be better to hear everything from him – *would've been better to hear everything before now.*

"I'm not trying to interrogate you," he starts with an apologetic breath on his lips.

"But you didn't know," she timidly finishes.

"How long have you known?" Suzaku just can't help asking. It's unlikely she's known the *entire* time, but she *knew.* All this time she acted strangely, it has to be because of this.

"…Hard to say," she obviously noncommittally responds. "I… found out by chance, and—" She stops them. "I know you want to talk, and we can later. Right now I just… want to get back to my room and my own bed."

"…Sure. Of course," Suzaku's voice sinks lower. "You're probably still shaken up, so be sure to rest. Call me if you need anything."

Shirley shyly nods, "You, too, and… I'm sorry."

Sorry for what? None of this is *her* fault…

••

Suzaku has rather had enough awkward silences for one day, but the brisk winter air cooled his head even if it didn't freeze the swimming. He feels pretty certain that only talking to Lelouch soothe him.

Or make it worse.

Suzaku enters the kitchen to see Sayoko busy at the island making a sandwich, likely for Nunnally as they haven't had a proper sit-down dinner. And probably won't until Lelouch is awake and active. Suzaku doesn't feel he has any other choice but to take advantage of their moment alone.

"Who is that girl?" Suzaku asks standing across from her, but tersely (passive aggressively) shoe-horns his own response, "Or did he tell you not to talk."

"Perhaps that's something you should ask Lelouch," she calmly answers, spreading mayonnaise on one wheat slice of bread. "Would you like a sandwich as well?"

Suzaku briefly eyes the layers of meat, cheese lettuce and tomatoes on the other wheat slice, the tang of mustard even curling in his nose, but he isn't hungry.
"He told you to contact her if something like that happened, meaning he *expected* something like that to happen." Rather, Suzaku is only hungry for answers.

She places the smeared bread on top of the filling stack, completing the sandwich on a small glass plate, "He prepares for a great many situations."

No shit.

She's just deflecting his questions.

When did it become so difficult for people to just *directly* answer questions?

"And what were his orders regarding me if I ever found out?" he asks with frustration, fully aware of the connotations and danger in his tone.

Sayoko's brown eyes lock onto his. Suzaku can't tell if it's a challenging stare or not, so he pushes.

"If I wanted to apprehend him?"

"To not harm you," she evenly answers in such blunt sincerity that it surprises Suzaku. "He hopes he can handle the situation himself."

…But what does "handle the situation" mean, exactly? Damage control after the fact, or…?

"I would not defy his wishes, but I have been caring for him for a long time, Suzaku," she says without breaking eye contact while holding a sharp knife in her hand. "And I do not intend to stop."

Ominous tone.

Poised weapon.

"Un-Understood," Suzaku surrenders before watching her cut the sandwich diagonally into two triangles. "…Is Lelouch… why you joined the Black Knights?"

"I joined because of Zero. Stayed because of Lelouch." Sayoko replies, turning to wash the knife in the sink. "The Zone wasn't the outcome many of us wanted, but I trust him and will follow even if the path is unclear."

That is high praise from an important person. Sayoko has tended to the Lamperouges' needs for the past seven years, the only close caretaker they've had – treated less like a maid or a nanny and more like… family? And her faith in him hasn't shaken, only strengthened as they work together…?

Maybe it's no wonder Lelouch trusted *her* so much…

Suzaku's expression sours with self-deprecation, "You must think I'm big fool." *Like everybody else…*  

"I think that many of us do what we can with what we have, hoping we won't have any regrets." She dries her hands on a towel and looks Suzaku honestly in the eye. "The truth is, Suzaku, only in the end will we know if any of our choices were right or worthy." Suzaku remembers Lelouch said something very similar months ago when they first learned about the pregnancy. "And right now I think our immediate concern is protecting and helping those close to us, however we can." Her tone isn't condescending and she even smiles small and warm at him before placing the plate on a tray with a glass of water and exiting the kitchen.
She kind of just… boldly implied she would protect Lelouch against Suzaku, but is willing to be a civil enemy similar to his truce with Kallen—

*Kallen*. Does she know, too…? She *does not* discuss Zero's identity, or say much else, actually. Not really suspicious, though. She's as secretive as anybody else around here. Apparently. She's made it clear that she is not Lelouch's fan but clearly idolizes Zero. Kallen might be fooling everyone with the invalid act but the contradiction feels too sincere… Maybe not impossible but she's not a substantial actor on closer inspection.

But does it even matter?

She'd have no reason or motive whatsoever to tattle, much less to *Suzaku*. Probably it's just more that… so many others seem to know but Suzaku didn't.

(And yet, even that's half untrue.)

••

Suzaku is face-to-face with the repaired, ticking pocket watch resting in his palm while the other three people in the room rest on Lelouch's bed. He's perched on the couch while Lelouch is sandwiched between Nunnally and this unknown woman that apparently has earned her place at his side. Maybe it's a fitting metaphor (or analogy?) that there isn't any room for Suzaku to sleep with Lelouch on the bed.

Maybe it doesn't matter because Suzaku can't sleep, anyway.

The room is dim as Lelouch's desk lamp is more of a spotlight for working, but Suzaku can clearly see every tiny scratch and scuff on the small metal watch despite his caution – irony sure is relentless. He always carried it with him, in Lancelot's cockpit or Ashford halls and anything else in between. He would grip it in his pocket or smooth his hand over it in his pilot suit. When Suzaku moved into this room with Lelouch it found security in a desk drawer with his identity cards, paperwork and the occasional hard cash, being his only real possessions. Somewhere along the way it just… stayed in the drawer.

Maybe he didn't exactly mean to, but he can't just plunk things in a drawer and pretend they don't exist. Suzaku has felt more at ease lately but he'll never forget his father or what he did, and he's not sure he should. Though restlessly agonizing over it never got him anywhere, either… Learning to live with it… That's not something Suzaku felt was ever an option, and maybe it's good that it will always stick with him—

There's a small stir from the bed that plucks Suzaku eyes up from ticking history. It's a wispy breath pushing from Lelouch's lips and his hand slightly twitching under Nunnally's. Suzaku stares twitching under Nunnally's. Suzaku stares just hovering with uncertainty. Another breath peels from Lelouch's dry lips and Suzaku's empty hand reaches through reflex to touch the older boy's forehead, gently rubbing his thumb over Lelouch's let eye where he imagines the disruption lies. He feels his jaw clenching and even holds his breath as he listens and watches Lelouch calm under his touch. Still. But *alive*. Like the lime-haired girl soundly sleeping beside him. Suzaku releases his breath in a quiet push and his heavy eyes fall back to the pocket watch in his other hand.

••
Waking up is like fishing his brain from a sea of gelatin but with a distant twang of blood on his tongue. He allows himself to settle into his bones as he washes ashore from sleep and he feels warm, like he's distinctly being spooned by two other warm bodies. He cracks his eyes open and two amethyst gemstone irises shimmer in the dim glow loosely stretching around the room and finds himself swaddled under his blankets between Nunnally and C.C.

And on the couch is a sleeping Suzaku.

And that's just… fantastic.

Lelouch carefully wriggles under arms and blankets like an unspooling mummy as he tries to loosen himself. When free from the waist up he gingerly caresses the outline of Nunnally's face in a half-circle. Her eyes were open. That wasn't a dream. The timing is far from ideal, but he sincerely hopes it wasn't a hallucination. He presses his lips to her forehead in a delicate kiss, feeling her skin to be a healthy temperature. He doesn't want to wake her and definitely doesn't want to leave her, but…

Violets flock to the brunet curled and slumbering on the couch.

Lelouch successfully excavates himself from the two twining bodies without rousing them and steps off the bed. The desk lamp is on, Suzaku is still in his uniform, no blanket… and a glance at the red numbers on the digital clock reveals it's just at midnight. Suzaku didn't intend to fall asleep, Lelouch is certain, wanted to wait for their… showdown.

The ousted rebel leader takes the dark green blanket still at the foot of his bed and unfurls it to drape if over Suzaku—

Pausing at the sight of a pocket watch quietly and steadily ticking like a heartbeat near Suzaku's head. Lelouch leaves it as he covers the boy with the blanket. He doesn't see the green eyes that drowsily open when the door hisses shut after his exit.

••

"Not only an entire Geass Order but another Code bearer as well," Lelouch muses aloud in the same sublevel Mao tried to use in a futile attempt to outwit the strategy genius. "That's… troubling." Way to massively understate the situation, Lelouch. "But you say they aren't targeting Zero? And you're the only one with a Canceler?"

Jeremiah nods, "Correct. I'm sorry that my information is so limited, Your Highness. Reality has been… distorted these past months, drifting in and out of consciousness and—well, insanity isn't very sustaining."

Lelouch's amethysts are sharp a second, but he waves it off; it's still more information than he had at the start of yesterday. Jeremiah claims to have "fled" and he's lacking any bugs or tracers, so Lelouch is willing to take him at his word [because, sure, let's make it that easy.] The thought of a Geass group is alarming, but it doesn't yet appear that Lelouch specifically was a blip on their radar. Of course, that could change now that Jeremiah has gallivanted himself all the way here.

Or perhaps it has more to do with a certain secretive witch.

"That still doesn't explain why you came here to Ashford."

"When I was still under Schneizel's people, before I assume failing his knightmare experiments, I distinctly remembered briefly overhearing him mentioning… Kururugi's suspicious behavior around Zero. It's the last thing I remembered before waking in a different laboratory and once I
learned about the SAZ…"

Lelouch noticed Suzaku's behavior but didn't think it appeared abnormally suspicious to others.

*Stupid seahorse—No, fucking Schneizel…*

"…You came here hoping to apprehend him on your own, then? Why did you switch gears and chase after Shirley?"

Jeremiah is sheepish, "…Her hair is orange."

"…What?"

"It's a sensitive trigger!" Jeremiah defensively stomps his foot and Lelouch *pffts* — what is he, a bull? "And I could sense Geass on her…"

So, Jeremiah came looking for *Suzaku* — since it's no secret he attends this school — to get to Zero, but he went after Shirley because of her triggery orange hair. Yet, if he sensed the "curse" on both of them why didn't he remove it from Suzaku, too? He must've thought that Suzaku was being controlled—

…Ah, of course.

Suzaku has been, by all means, a rival. Jeremiah was hoping to lasso Suzaku together with Zero's capture and reveal him as a traitor in order to further his own ends as well as throw Suzaku into ruin. Perhaps it shouldn't be so surprising that Jeremiah, a *Britannian* (former) *noble*, would be so deviously shrewd.

"So, now she's clear… Is it safe to assume that when you erase Geass it will also erase the limitation and allow another casting?"

"For your Geass? Yes, I would say so."

Lelouch takes a considering pause. "…Do you remember your colleague, Villetta Nu? She is in a delicate and dangerous situation after losing her memory while searching for Zero's identity, which I fear she was successful in doing."

"Yes, I remember she said she experienced the same momentary memory loss as I had after—" he clears his throat. "After the Orange incident."

"She's a ticking time-bomb that needs to be defused. Her amnesia could be permanent, but that's remarkably rare outside of fiction."

"What do you ask of me, Your Highness?" Jeremiah asks with such unwavering allegiance it's not just pleasing, it's *satisfying.*

Arrogance is a serenely sadistic carve on Zero's smirking lips, "You're not exactly subtle but I'm sure she'll trust you. I need her cleared and extracted with utmost discretion, so that I can remove that information." At the very least; quietly resolving this little honeymoon charade for Ohgi. They might be "involved in romance" now but she'd likely feel the opposite when she finally regains herself, and Lelouch won't let Ohgi's soft heart be the end of him.

"What the hell is this?!" A sudden shout (spin)kicks the doors open on the clandestine rendezvous, ripping the eyes of both men to an outraged Suzaku looming at the entrance. "What the hell are you doing?" He storms up to Lelouch who mentally inhales-exhalizes.
And notices Jeremiah bristles.

"Are you some kind of wizard," Suzaku continues to spit, "down here conspiring in your little lair? Couldn't take a break, could you?"

Correction: Warlock.

And Lelouch's actual lair is way better than some hydro-basement.

As for that last part... there's no rest for the wicked.

"Look at you, almost eavesdropping like a pro," Lelouch coolly counters. "Except you didn't wait to hear the entirety of my evil master plan to take over the world."

"I've heard enough," Suzaku spits with a glare. "Controlling people's minds, all this time? Including mine? And you're just going to keep doing it?"

Lelouch leaves Suzaku's tirade unanswered and it only enrages him more.

"I knew you were keeping secrets, but I didn't think—I don't even know what sinister garbage this is. What did you call it, Geass? You used it on me, didn't you? On that island. It all felt so strange and unnatural but I didn't—How could you?" Hands that naturally learned to grip knightmare's controls grab the chest of Lelouch's white undershirt and yanks him until their noses are almost touching. "What did you do to me?"

I told you to Live. Because you wouldn't. Because nothing else mattered to you.

Jeremiah springs toward Suzaku, reaching to grab the back of his neck—

But the prince halts him with a lift of his hand.

"I should've let you die that day, then?" Lelouch tonelessly responds, wanting to smother his own voice. He should let Suzaku wear himself out, and then... "Schneizel would've razed the entire island just to quash Zero. Then where would we be? Not standing here, having this argument." … whatever happens next, happens.

Jeremiah lingers close, watching with a hawk eye at the seahorse whose face ripples with too many emotions to carry and he hangs his head.

"That's not fair," he weakly murmurs.

"It's the truth. You don't have to like it."

His fingers desperately tighten in Lelouch's shirt, "Damn it, Lelouch." He lifts his head and the conflicted sheen on those evergreen eyes is heavy. "After everything, all we've been through together, all this time… We're having a baby—I'm carrying your child. How can you—?"

"What of it?" Lelouch slams hard on the feels break and shoves away one of Suzaku's clinging hands (a clam snapping closed before it buries itself in the sand, alone and away from everything else.) "It's certainly a compelling reason to stay, isn't it?" Maybe it was foolish, the two of them together like this, but it was real.

Suzaku gapes.

Jeremiah clears his throat and side steps a few times away from the quarrelling couple. Then a couple more steps.
"Admit it," Lelouch coldly digs himself deeper. "You wouldn't be with me if you weren't pregnant. You could leave whenever you want." To Euphemia. Who's easy to love. Pure. And all the things Lelouch isn't.

The expression on Suzaku's face…

Lelouch went too far.

(Or maybe not far enough.)

"Fuck you!" Suzaku spits, a boiling venom that corrodes Lelouch's skin as he shoved back.

Lelouch doesn't look at the broken dam of Suzaku's eyes.

But he does clutch the buttons on his shirt (over his heart).

"You don't have to start being an asshole just because things aren't going your way right now. I've been nothing but committed to you ever since that first night we slept together – when you"—he jabs his finger into Lelouch's chest—"got me pregnant. If I'm being honest right now, and I AM, I had a feeling for a while now that you were Zero but I didn't leave you, did I? And NOT because I'm having your baby – but it wasn't a lie when I said it's made me happier than I've ever been about anything even though my body feels weird sometimes and my nipples are really sore right now!"

…Jeremiah coughs again in the distance.

Yes.

Suzaku did just say that.

Let that settle, everyone.

"A-And I realize that last part isn't really relevant, it's just really pissing me off!" he shouts with a sudden flush, "My point is that you don't get to throw this in my face like I'm the guilty one. You lie to me this whole time and couldn't even tell me about this Geass at least when we found out about the baby? Don't you think that's dangerous? Don't you think I should have a choice in this?!" Suzaku looks at Jeremiah and Lelouch already knows what he's thinking.

"For all we know my Geass is the only thing keeping the baby alive, or keeping you healthy through all of this. You really want to risk disabling it now when it could be exactly what's sustaining this medical mystery—?" Lelouch turns stone-still with sudden, chilling realization. "Jeremiah, you can sense those affected by Geass and can distinguish individuals."

Said man eyes the not-question, "…Yes, Your Highness."

"When you activated your Canceler on Shirley, you must have detected others nearby. How many?"

Thoughtful pause, "…Two others."

…No. NO. Not—!

"Lelouch? Wait!" Suzaku grabs the older lad by his elbow when he turns to leave. "What—?"

"There were only three others here with Jeremiah at the time before we arrived," Lelouch's voice thickly frosts past his lips despite the fire in his eyes. "That includes Nunnally."
Nunnally is still asleep when they return to Lelouch's room. C.C. also still appears to be under Sleep's spell.

"We were talking earlier and she seemed normal." Suzaku is trying to be consoling but there isn't anything that can put Lelouch at ease.

Nunnally is, was under Geass.

Under fucking Geass.

The implications and possibilities... Reality is beginning to unravel from his fingertips and what small grip Lelouch thought he had on life just got a lot smaller.

Fingers that always felt strengthened in black gloves gently shake his little sister's shoulder, "Nunnally..."

She wakes with an inhale and slow struggle to lift eyelids under heavy sleep but grabs at the empty space where Lelouch was with a flash of panic—

"Nunnally," he quietly soothes, and she rapidly blinks the weight of somnolence from her tired eyes.

"Lelouch!" Her arms loop and knot around his neck.

He pulls her closer in his laced arms, nose nuzzling in her hair with a watchful eye on C.C.

"Sorry I worried you," he tenderly murmurs and she squeezes tighter.

These are not what he wanted the circumstances to be when Nunnally opened her eyes...

"As long as you're all right..." she murmurs in kind, partially muffled against his neck.

A warm smile lifts his lips before he kisses the top of her head.

"Come, I'm going to take you to your bed."

Nunnally leans away to look him in the eye, "Can't I stay with you? Just tonight?"

More than seven years since Lelouch has been able to look his precious little sister in the eye.

Somehow he... didn't think it would be so difficult.

"I'll stay with you in your room," he softly says, patting her head and she nods.

Lelouch gathers and cradles her princess style in his arms with practiced ease – she is his entire world, she's not heavy and he's never felt like punished Atlas damned to forever hold the heavens apart from the Earth on his shoulders. Nunnally tightly clings to him as he carries her out of the room and a silent Suzaku knowingly follows with her chair.

Lelouch ensures Nunnally is tucked in her bed like an egg in a nest with loving tucks of her warm,
winter quilt and nearly succumbs to apprehensive hesitation. Not because he doesn't want answers. Because Nunnally is the key holder.

"Nunnally," Lelouch gently starts with a soft voice, "I know it might be painful, but do you remember what happened?"

She gazes up at him with sleep in eyes, "It… it's confusing."

Suzaku is silently hovering but it's an annoyance Lelouch can, and must, ignore.

"Take your time," the big brother soothes, rubbing his hand over the back of hers. He doesn't want to be forceful but this development is paramount.

"It's… Mother was…" Nunnally struggles with words, and Lelouch can feel it pierce his heart. "She was already… dead?"

"…What do you mean?" Lelouch asks.

"On the stairs. I thought I was with her when—but she was already there."

Nunnally was found with their dead mother, crippled and blinded by trauma. She couldn't remember what happened, either. Too painful.

That's the story.

"Nunnally," Lelouch is worried to push but his previous apprehension is edging into anxiety, "what happened?"

"Father talked with me."

"Father?"

"He said things… and then they were real. And his eyes…"

"His eyes?"

"They were strange. Gave me a bad feeling. I don't understand—"

Lelouch squeezes her hand, "Don't try to think too hard about it now. You've suffered and it won't be easy to process." His throat is so knotted he doesn't know how he's speaking actual words (rather than maybe just furious growls.) Nunnally's open mouth closes and her eyes searching for meaning in his make him quickly avoid them by leaning up to kiss her forehead, and hold her there against his lips. "It's late, so for now let's just try to rest. Are you thirsty? I'm going to get some water and then come back to bed."

Nunnally murmurs a small, quieted decline and he's out the door before she can feel his bones shaking.

(Sense the rumbling of all his dark feelings surfacing like a volcano.)

Lelouch can't stride (run) away from her door as far as he wants to.

He has left his body, floating off the planet on a string.

His skeleton is icy and hollow.
Dangling in darkness.

It was all a lie—more of a lie than Lelouch could've feared.

(But he doesn't understand the Emperor's motive, gain—)

"Lelouch?" Suzaku touches his shoulder out in the hall past her door, but he doesn't feel it.

This isn't happening.

This isn't real.

*This can't be.*

"He took her legs." Lelouch almost can't believe his own words but the quiet rage is a strong quake in his voice.

Suzaku looks on with obvious sense of helpless perplexity, "What?"

"I fucking took her legs." Pins, braces, surgeries, x-rays and bandages, the sound of her tears and taste of her blood in the air—*that was real.* "Whatever else he did to her, *that* was permanent."

Suzaku reaches for Lelouch again with desperate, tentative fingers—

But the damaged prince shirks away and lances flaming eyes at Suzaku like a dragon lanced awake—

And Suzaku flinches much like a knight behind a shield.

"You want to play the noble hero and do things the 'right' way, but that won't work against a monster that mutilated his own daughter and then cast her aside without a backwards look."

Lelouch can feel the burning tears in his eyes, the sear of erupting emotions he doesn't want to feel leaking from his chest and streaking down his cheeks, but he doesn't know how to stop it (and he hates that Suzaku is a witness—these cracks aren't supposed to show, *nobody is supposed to see them*). "The rest of the world will suffer while you try to keep your hands clean but I will not allow it." He doesn't spare a second to linger, turning on his heel to leave—

"Lelouch, wait—" Suzaku reaches once again with his own eyes watering, ensnaring Lelouch's wrist in his grip—

Lelouch glares back with his left eye unnaturally flaring, "Unhand me. NOW."

—but he's just a frail human vainly grasping the tail of the mountain-sized dragon.

He lets go.

Lelouch yanks his freed limb away and then thunders off down the hall and Suzaku releases a deep exhale that slackens his back against the wall, face fraught with fretful lines before they're hidden behind his smothering, shaking hands.

*••*

Eyes, plural, meaning not only does the Emperor have Geass but it's older, stronger and under control, unlike Mao. And oh yeah that he has Geass. Before Lelouch runs around like a headless chicken, he marches back down to the sublevel where a meandering Jeremiah greets him with another regal salutation. When he vehemently demands to be *cleared*, Jeremiah doesn't breathe a
word against it. He steps closer to the fuming former prince and his hidden eye glimmers a blue sigil instead of red, unleashing an electric wave that funnels into Lelouch's brain, a spiraling rewire —

...But all Lelouch recalls is his own command to forget the plan against Mao. Nothing else.

That's not a relief.

Not because Lelouch only has more questions than answers, but because Nunnally. Why did it have to be her (and not him instead?) Why take her legs, blind her and then—

Doesn't matter.

No reason is good enough.

Lelouch's child isn't born yet, but he already knows that he would do anything for it. Anything to keep it safe and unharmed. It's not an entirely different instinct than with Nunnally.

He would kill for it.

He would destroy everything so that new life can grow from the ashes, even if—

He would die for it.

He most certainly would never butcher his child, or Nunnally.

A parent sacrifices everything for their child, not the other way around.

Lelouch has to make a move against his father. There is simply no time to lose with that man possessing Geass – a power he's had for more than seven years, if its strength is any indication. Far too many questions remain but Lelouch isn't sure if answers are even worth the risk. Moreover, C.C. just might be the real Trojan horse.

("Such evasion. I have to wonder if it's a trap," he dryly says.

Her lips pleasantly bend – and yet there's a slinking ruefulness lurking in the corners, "If it is you are already caught within it.")

The possibility that she gave the Emperor his Geass is heavy on Lelouch's mind, but—

("You're the first contractor I've had who hasn't become corrupted or hasn't failed me in some way before this point.")

—Whether or not they're working together...? And for what purpose? If she did originally contract with Charles, perhaps he couldn't, or wouldn't, give her what she wanted. However, that doesn't speak for what he wanted and why he needed Geass or even what his Geass is. Seems it requires eye-contact and manipulates minds, like Lelouch's, but its limitations are a big unknown. Lelouch has Absolute Control but has rather strict limitations – perhaps because of his unique power.

It just cannot be a coincidence that C.C. contracted Lelouch regardless if she did with Charles or not. As far as can be seen, she hasn't worked against Lelouch and has helped him in the name of her wish. Perhaps it really is that simple, but Lelouch is doubtful. She's played it cagey this far; she knows something. Direct assault hasn't gotten Lelouch far with her in the past, and at this point his only edge up on her is barely enough to stand on. If C.C. is somehow in cahoots with Charles it wouldn't serve Lelouch well to over-share with her now, even after all this time.
If Lelouch is only a useful tool, he'd prefer to remain an unbroken one. Until he can become the wrench in the cogs.

Lelouch will destroy him.

••

"You really won't go see a doctor?" Nunnally asks with concern at the table before school during what has to be THE most awkward breakfast they've ever had.

"It looked scarier than it is," Lelouch tries to soothingly reply, pretending Suzaku isn't avoiding his eyes in favor of his little sister's stare.

Nunnally doesn't look convinced and honestly, he's not even sure if what he just said is true. As far as he knows his own Geass itself can't kill him but it seems like it's trying bloody hard to. Either way, a doctor can't help and it would be better in the end to not involve one. Lelouch already has paranoia about taking Nunnally to the hospital for checkups, fearing her royal blood might be exposed. No need to draw attention to himself, especially now.

"At least go to the infirmary here at school," she insists.

Lelouch smiles and stands to take his plate into the kitchen, "How could I say no?"

"You can't," she smiles back.

Lelouch isn't sure he's up to pretending to care about his exams today and he's fairly certain he can convince the physician to officially excuse him for the day… He does have security things to tidy up around campus after Jeremiah's unscheduled visit (namely the evidence removal of his visit), which is just as well considering Lelouch doesn't feel comfortable leaving Nunnally right now despite the crushing urgency, or maybe because of the urgency.

"You didn't sleep at all, did you?" Suzaku asks in a hushed tone that isn't soft – not that Lelouch would expect it to be. He's not sure if Suzaku actually wants an answer.

He didn't sleep a wink, though.

Lelouch might've been comatose for several hours yesterday but that's not the same as a restful sleep, which he sorely needs. He shared Nunnally's bed with her and Suzaku – upon Nunnally's invitation (though Lelouch is certain that Suzaku remained to keep aware of him, and because C.C. is an occupying force in his room) – but all he felt was the regrettablly familiar spooning of stress-induced insomnia as his brain toiled and boiled. His head did at least cool, enough. As if Lelouch didn't already have enough to think about. Nunnally remarked that it was like when they were kids, all huddled together in a creaky shack, but he couldn't find comfort in nostalgia last night. It brought quite the opposite.

Well, he can always sleep when he's dead…

Suzaku's question goes unanswered long enough to make him thinly sigh; "Speaking of doctors… I had to reschedule our appointment. She was able to squeeze us in today after noon."

Lelouch stills, eyes flicking to Suzaku's, "You still want me to go?" Somehow that question just flies right out of his mouth.

Suzaku takes a moment to thoughtfully eye that question.
"I… I don't… really know how I feel, to be honest." A sincere weakness deflates Suzaku's low voice, but that doesn't ease the pressure in Lelouch's chest.

Neither the worst nor the best outcome, all things considered. Anything Lelouch could say now… words feel like such useless things. They've yet to have a real discussion, despite Suzaku's outburst (and Lelouch's). It had seemed that the elevated eleven suspected the hero in Zero but they've hardly spoken of it in the meanwhile. Maybe having the actual confirmation has hit him harder than an unwanted inkling but Lelouch wasn't expecting the recovery time to be fast.

(Would this really have been easier if Lelouch hadn't let himself… be with Suzaku?)

"But you're not off the hook. We still have a lot to talk about," Suzaku adds with a lifted voice that's still rather flat. "And I think you really should go to the infirmary today – and definitely no sneaking off campus."

"Are you trying to ground me?" Lelouch wryly scoffs, coasting on an air of detachment – his old, comfortable default mode – as he exits the kitchen.

"Not trying at all," Suzaku unexpectedly quips back, following after the older boy. "Or do you want me to give you a real reason to see the school doctor?"

"Pardon me while I tremble in fear," Lelouch dryly mutters before they reach the dining table where Nunnally is still waiting to be taken to class—

But Suzaku isn't shaken off so easily, "Lelouch, I'm serious."

Nunnally's eyes are an unwanted magnet on them.

As are these words for her ears.

"Perhaps if we're all feeling under the weather we should stay home together and rest?" Lelouch smiles genially at Nunnally before turning back to sharpen it at the soldier-boy breathing down his neck. "Wouldn't that put you at ease?" Watching my every move every second of the day…

Is it an achievement that Lelouch swiftly severed the tiny, tentative olive branch between them?

Or is it just sad?

"Oh, are you not feeling well, Suzaku?" Nunnally's sweet voice that would typically be a salve is only a distraction.

"No, don't worry. I'm fine," Suzaku says to her with a slight exhale, moving past Lelouch to take hold of her chair as if Lelouch shouldn't have the escape – or the privilege. "If you'd rather stay at home, though…"

"I'm a little tired but also kind of excited!" she chirps with a shining smile.

"Of course." Suzaku softly chuckles – seems he's become quite the little actor himself. "You have a lot of new things to see."

Lelouch was more than willing to sit at home with her for the day, at least, but Nunnally is eager to attend sessions today. It's the first time she's seen the world in over seven years. But it's still not the world Lelouch wanted her to see.

"Don't push yourself," Lelouch cautions, quickly joining her side before they can leave him behind
alone in the dining room. "If you feel overwhelmed just ring me and I'll take you home." He'll beat away any gawking children with a stick if he has to. No exaggeration. He even has a special stick—well, it's more like a walking stick that—

"Now's my turn to tell you not to worry. I will if I need to, but I'm sure I'll be fine." Nunnally giggles with those glittering eyes of hers that only makes her bright smile stronger.

A smile that changed everything.

Her words are hard to hear, but it's true that he shouldn't be her crutch forever…

••

Suzaku probably flunked his history exam, which was already dicey before the bomb last night that wrecked his brain. Lelouch didn't show up. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. Sit on Lelouch all day to make sure he doesn't do anything? Suzaku is feeling conflicted about a lot of things but that didn't feel like the best approach; like it might make the problem—situation worse. Maybe it really is naïve of him, but he wants to believe that Lelouch isn't up to anything sinister right now (even though he's prepared for the opposite.)

He's… never seen Lelouch like he was last night. Not even a single tear, ever.

It was scary.

And heartbreaking.

Suzaku didn't want to let go but knew he couldn't contain the situation. Lelouch was like a wounded, cornered animal. Maybe he's actually been that way the entire time—

"Suzaku…"

Said brunet looks over his shoulder in the hall at the orange-haired girl, "Shirley. I wasn't sure if you'd be here today. How are you feeling?"

She meekly shrugs, "How are you feeling?"

Suzaku gives her a tiny, tired smile.

Fair enough.

"I noticed that Lulu didn't come today."

"Yeah, he's… resting." That's what he claimed in a text message, anyway. "I was going to see him now during break. Did you want to talk to him?" Shirley toes the floor with one shoe; Suzaku glances at the other students trudging through the hall— including Rivalz griping to a couldn't-be-more-uninterested Kallen. "Um, why don't we get some air?"

••

The rooftop carries a sharp nip of the lazy December winds, but it's coated in very warming, midday sunlight and is one of the few places Suzaku knows they'll be alone and uninterrupted.

"I'm still not sure what to say to him." Shirley hugs her satchel to her chest. "I think… I'm just kind of relieved that this happening? I didn't know what to do."

"How did you know?"
"...I found out kind of by chance, and then..." She tries to explain, but seems reluctant, still, to
share more. Suzaku wonders if it's difficult for her or if she's trying to protect Lelouch. "Well, I
didn't know if you knew and didn't know if I should say something. Zero is a dangerous person,
and he is partly responsible for my father's death."

"Partly?" Suzaku tartly questions.

"My father was in the military. It was always possible something could happen to him even though
I didn't think it ever would."

"So you've forgiven him already?"

Shirley's eyes fling up at Suzaku—"I..."—then they swing away again. "I don't know. He did bad
things. But, he's still Lulu. The way he takes care of Nana and you. And he did join the Princess
Euphemia's Zone."

In terms of Zero, based on appearances, Lelouch has been rather cooperative. Aggressive and
assertive, but playing nice enough as he wrestles for expansion (that the Britannians seem to
mostly humor while tensions outside still bubble). Or is that just what he presents on the surface?
It's true that there are many things happening that Suzaku wasn't aware of even with his Zero
suspicions and they do not inspire good thoughts.

Suzaku has known all along that Lelouch is not a simple person, most people aren't. Lelouch is still
that doting big brother and that's why it's so hard, isn't it? Lelouch isn't just black or white, he's an
overlapping gray area that Suzaku couldn't face.

Lelouch learned about Suzaku killing his father by accident and then tried to use it against him as
Zero.

Lelouch has been lying this whole time while sleeping next to Suzaku every night.

Lelouch has been controlling and manipulating everyone.

That's not ok.

(Lelouch claims his father is dangerous, and he is, but depending on perspective Lelouch is just as
dangerous.)

"He lied to me, Shirley." The pain is thick in Suzaku's voice, seeping from his confused heart, and
she lets the bleeding flow for a quiet moment.

"...Maybe he was afraid to tell you," Shirley tamely offers, causing Suzaku to look at her with just
enough incredulity. "You've been his enemy this whole time and I've heard you openly condemn
Zero and his Black Knights in front of him. And did he even know that you were piloting Lancelot
before you were exposed?"

To be fair, Lelouch wasn't exactly supportive of Suzaku's beliefs, either, but that wasn't why
Suzaku kept his business private. Aside from that he didn't see it as important anyone know, and
that his superiors certainly weren't eager to let out the news, if he was killed in action (which he
more than expected to happen) he didn't want his friends to be sad. If they didn't know they could
be told that Suzaku had transferred, or whatever else. He—

He could've protected them with a lie...

"As long as I've known Lulu he's never cared about anyone like he has you. Never given anybody else a second glance." Shirley shares with soft honesty that shears Suzaku's gut right open. "When he finally gives himself to someone special it's the same person that's his sworn enemy, who openly speaks against him and something he believes in."

"So just forgive anything and everything?" Suzaku snaps a little. "There has to be a limit to how much someone hurts you." Otherwise…

("…Even if he does something that you cannot forgive? Surely, there's a limit. There always is.")

"You're not wrong," she says with a sullen slump in her voice. "But when you care about someone you also want to try to make it better, together. I believe that love can conquer all. It has to."

She almost sounds like she's trying to convince herself of that, but Suzaku doesn't disagree. He's tried to not only believe in the better nature of others but also that one needs to embody the change they want to see in the world. Suzaku might've had good intentions that caused him to wrongfully act on impulse and kill his father—

That's right.  

Another lie.

It was a necessary lie Lelouch had said when he learned the truth – and Suzaku thanked him. For understanding. Suzaku bears only shame for what happened that day and the lie hasn't shielded him like an umbrella from the storm as intended. It sank him like an anchor—

Tried to.

He was willing to let it.

Lelouch was the life-raft that wouldn't let him – as a childhood friend, teenage lover and undercover enemy. There wasn't hesitation to eliminate Lancelot before Suzaku was revealed as its pilot, but afterward it was the opposite. Would Lelouch have reacted the same if somebody else had been Lancelot's pilot – especially just another Britannian soldier? Probably not, if Suzaku is being honest. But if Lelouch was completely ruthless and devoid of any heart, he could've removed Suzaku like the enemy he initially saw Suzaku to be. He's claimed time after time as Zero that he wants to help people. He did agree to work with Euphemia – whether or not he felt he didn't have a choice… he's capable of working peacefully. Lelouch is capable of anything, if he just focused his brains on the right way he could still accomplish so much…

And that's the point, though, isn't it? That anybody can be capable of anything, even "good" people – especially when they feel they have no other choice but to fire… (A flash of good intentions that lead to the rot of regret… Suzaku wouldn't wish that on anyone.) It doesn't mean they're bad people. They just need help seeing other paths.

But what if a person cloaked in gray refuses to see any other paths? Right and wrong has been strictly right and wrong for Suzaku ever since that one fatal mistake, but Lelouch just contradicts everything.

"Do you still have feelings for him?" Suzaku gently asks her, not as a "rival" and he hopes she can see that. "After everything?"

Pink dusts high on Shirley's cheeks as she ponders that question with conflicted eyes.
"I…” She clutches her arm and slides her gaze to the side. "I don't know. In the end I think he tried to protect me. Maybe the wrong way, but…"

"He blanked your memory," Suzaku corrects. "Toyped with your brain."

Shirley is stunned by him knowing something she obviously didn't think he did.

"I was in pain. I didn't know how to make it stop. But you know… instead of just removing that one thing he made me forget him completely. The only reason I came to be in that situation was because of my feelings for him. So he pushed me away." Her voice and tone dip. "He's not easy to get close to. I know that now more than I did before."

"Shirley…” Suzaku sadly wants to soothe—

Making her grin up at him with a sad simper and waving hand that tells him she doesn't want him to.

"I mean, I probably fantasize love, you know? I guess a lot of people think that, though. That when you meet the right person everything will just be perfect. Maybe that's true sometimes. But I don't think that 'imperfect' love is less real. Like, love isn't all just sunshine and roses. It's rain and thorns, too. And by going through challenges you grow stronger together."

"…I… guess so."

Like a flower needs not only sun but also rain – too much of either, and the flower will die.

Nothing she's said so far is really wrong, but Lelouch and Suzaku aren't just having some domestic squabble or lover's spat. It's murder and mind-control, and it's difficult to wrap his head around all this and how he feels at the same time.

However, all this downpour of information in under the past 24 hours has also washed away some debris to reveal a clearer image of Lelouch. Suzaku doesn't approve of what Lelouch has done but he's beginning to better understand why. Suzaku has always only known Lelouch as he is now and only after Zero did he begin to see the shadows, now knowing not only how deeply they go but what inked them in the first place.

Or, rather, who.

Everything that Britannia is doing and has done is wrong, Suzaku doesn't disagree with Lelouch on that, but his methods… Killing his own brother… Vowing destruction. He's beginning to feel an untreated, intimate anger in Zero that didn't have any other outlet until now. Suzaku feels stupid for not really realizing it sooner, but what happened to Lelouch and Nunnally when they were children… it was abusive. That had only been made more apparent with the revelation of Nunnally last night. It's a delicate subject, Suzaku understands, and it's not to say that Lelouch is "villainous" because of what he suffered. But he did suffer. Possibly more than even he's aware.

It boils Suzaku's blood.

Even if setting aside the strange, barbaric event with Nunnally, these two siblings lost their mother which is already traumatic enough even without conspiracy and murder. Many children are never the same after the death of a loved one, but a mother who seemingly shielded them from everything? And then only to make matters worse their father just ships them off to the other side of the world without a care of their wellbeing, when they really needed him? Where they're treated less like an inconvenience and more like invaders? Hard to say how Lelouch might be different if this or that never happened, but it doesn't matter. He is who he is now and Suzaku—
"It doesn't have to be today or tomorrow, but… nothing is unforgivable, you know." Shirley's gaze is soft on him. "If you're willing you can forgive."

—He's the person Suzaku fell in love with. Difficult, stubborn, know-it-all, bossy, protective, reserved, passionate, compassionate, secretive… scared, scarred boy. That doesn't mean things can carry on the way they have been and it doesn't mean that Lelouch doesn't have amends to make.

It doesn't mean things can't change.

But it also doesn't mean that Suzaku should give up – not if he really wanted to keep Lelouch from falling completely into darkness. How can he call himself a friend or lover if he does give up without trying his hardest? It's not about condoning or condemning, because judgment between them won't get anyone anywhere. Nunnally said Suzaku helped them heal and considering these past months where Lelouch, or Zero, hasn't done anything to rock the boat all while being at home nagging and caretaking his tiny family… Things can turn around. Suzaku believes in the chance for change. Lelouch didn't have any choice in the events of his life when he was young, but he does now.

It's not too late yet.

••

Nunnally's memory regarding their father's Geass on her seems to be hazy despite being cleared, or she really just can't comprehend it. Maybe that's a blessing, because she's been through enough. Or maybe eventually it will clear in her mind…

Lelouch didn't think he could be more irate and vengeful than he was before.

But he grips the handles of her chair as if all of the pain and rage is bottled up behind the mask where it belongs as he pushes her into the club room—

Where the whole gang has gathered, including Suzaku and Shirley who stand close together.

Not unexpected…

Shirley has dark circles around her eyes from lack of sleep, but she… smiles faintly at him where Suzaku hides behind ruffling his hair.

Nunnally is instantly the point of interest and Lelouch reflexively tugs her chair back and away from astonished Milly all too bold to crowd her.

Lelouch isn't sure if he steps back or is pulled back, watching Nunnally happily tell everyone they look just as beautiful as she imagined them. When she remarks that Rivalz is very handsome he flushes profusely and Lelouch feels his face purse with slightly revolted pity—

"Saw you sleeping in the nurse's office," Suzaku quietly announces under the excited prattle of Milly and Rivalz.

"What?" Lelouch is too focused on the way Nunnally reaches for the hand of Nina who also blushes rather bashfully. "Oh, yeah." Even a depleted-looking Shirley gushes a little, honestly happy for Nunnally but maybe also thankful for… distraction. Lelouch feels like a planet drifting away from the sun—

"I'm glad you went and rested." Suzaku's voice is closer than Lelouch expects as the club's hubbub around Nunnally bleeds dully into his head.
He doesn't respond.

Lelouch doesn't tell Suzaku that he relented because the fog in his head was still lingering like invading fingers trying to pluck his brain, making it difficult to concentrate. That he was given a sleep-aid. That he didn't want to stay in his own room with C.C. after their little chat.

("Nunnally's eyes have opened," Lelouch utters at C.C. still lying in his bed late in the morning.

"So I see." Her long electric hair lazily sways as she sits up. "And Suzaku as well knows your secret. I've missed a lot, it seems."

"But you know more than you don't know," Lelouch icily barbs.

Golden eyes gaze at him unyielding.

"Just how caught am I in your trap? How far down the rabbit hole have I fallen?"

"...I am not your enemy."

"No?" Lelouch scathingly sneers. "How can I believe that?"

"You expect others to trust you all the time without telling them your secrets. Don't you think it's fair for you to do the same in return?"

It's hard to argue with her on that point, other than that Lelouch really doesn't like not knowing. He abhors being vulnerable or at the mercy of others and absolutely will not allow it. He hasn't come this far only to roll over and die.

And he does not intend to.

"...d love your input on the wedding attire for our happy couple. Your brother is no help, of course." Milly's purposely wheedling voice worms into Lelouch's ears and he subtly sighs. "After all that stress of testing today it would be nice to unwind and finally strap him into something..."

Lelouch kind of misses the days when Milly was his only foe.

Nunnally clasps her hands together with glee, "That sounds like fun! Big brother always did look so nice in formals!"

He also had a habit of wearing things he didn't like only to please his beloved little sister – if Milly ever finds that out now that Nunnally can see...

"You sure you want to do that?" Lelouch slyly asks, very smoothly sliding into the conversation like he wasn't just seething with thoughts of patricide. "You'll miss out on the ultrasound."

Nunnally's eyes shimmer, "What do you mean?"

"You've said you wanted to go, what could be a more perfect time than today? We're supposed to hear the heartbeat."

Nunnally evaporates into excited bubbles and it's obvious Milly has lost – her defeats always taste so sweet... and without casualties.

Lelouch has been reluctant to take her along in favor of discretion, but Lelouch has since learned that her new best friend forever, Alice, is none other than the little sister of their doctor... Nunnally being his sister isn't the biggest secret now. He also trusts their doctor enough so far with
such personal information – seems it was the right call to not Geass her from the beginning, although the option to erase it all from her memory afterward seems even less plausible, as long as Nunnally and Alice remain close – and she doesn't give up on others easily.

There is also the fact that if Nunnally is along on their checkup Suzaku won't mention anything of their strained – stagnant? – squabble, but Lelouch wouldn't use her as a shield. He absolutely is using this bait to keep her away from Milly, however.

Said President shamelessly raspberries Lelouch as he smugly pulls Nunnally away from her and out of the room.

"If you're not careful you just might stand at the altar in your underwear!" Milly's shouted warning carries out into the hall after Lelouch but he's heard far scarier threats than that.

("Your Geass reacted again, severely." C.C. says in a tone more firm than it usually sounds. "Almost as if you've been exhausting it."

Lelouch clenches his jaw bellow his furrowed brow. He hasn't used it since that last time it "inflamed." She knows that.

Eyes like amber holding fossilized secrets sternly capture his, "That's not normal.")

••

Thump-ump
Thump-ump
Thump-ump

That sound is the entire world.

Thump-ump
Thump-ump

A tiny, fast heartbeat.

Thump-ump

Lelouch doesn't—can't define it a better way than that.

No single emotion or thought can touch this sound. This fragile, impossible sound he couldn't have been prepared to hear even if he tried. He's both hollowed out and bursting at the seams all at once. However brief, nothing else exists except this unending beat.

Thump-ump

Maybe Suzaku and Nunnally embody the feeling better.

The room is still, frozen around this little blooming baby on the monitor with Nunnally delightedly gasping and cooing as she soaks in every blip and convulsion on the screen; fake-blond Suzaku is only a few soft chuckles away from tears. He tries to rub them away but only coaxes them free with a glowing smile. Lelouch passes his handkerchief over without a thought. Suzaku blinks up at him, that overflow of emotion still so easily falling from his eyes, and he takes it – squeezes Lelouch's fingers.
Lelouch himself doesn't realize he's been clenching Suzaku's shoulder until that moment.

The last thing Lelouch wants to do right now is part with Nunnally, but he knows that hovering around her won't solve anything. When Suzaku strongly suggests he and Lelouch make a stop before returning to Ashford, Nunnally is sent home with the ever vigilant Sayoko in a black town car.

Lelouch doesn't have to wonder why Suzaku chose the Kururugi Shrine.

Silence ushers them up the stairs that were a mountain to Lelouch as a child under his small feet with Nunnally on his back. Climbing them is easier now, physically, but not less uncertain. Exactly. Where Lelouch was a displaced child with an unknown future, Lelouch is a calculating man seeing the different paths he can or could take.

They pass through the red gate at the top of the stairs and step into the shadow of the entrance foyer. Suzaku in his Suzie camouflage stops short while Lelouch walks a little farther until reaching the threshold, taking in but more legacy left to rot like the ghettos of old Japan. The floor is thickly swathed with a near-decade of dirt, grime and sadness. While there's minimal debris the floor is littered with misshapen tatami mats and the traditional paper door is moldy, warped and crookedly ajar. Beyond that Lelouch can smell the bitter musk of forced abandonment and yet wonders if or how many squatters might've sought refuge here. When he turns back to face Suzaku the boy is without the blond wig but with a slight frown.

Just for a moment Lelouch isn't sure which expression he should wear.

He leaves it blank.

(Which is probably the most honest of all.)

"I was really worried about you last night," Suzaku's voice is gentle but stiff. "You really scared me."

…Now maybe you know how I felt, all those times. Lelouch is stone-faced at that offering of words, bricks slowly stacking up between them, and after a silent moment of them staring at what's unspoken, Suzaku sighs with frustration.

"I can't be completely angry with you when… When I suspected it all this time and didn't say anything—But I didn't say anything because I knew you wouldn't be honest with me if I did. You would've lied, and that hurts. You didn't even tell me the truth about the girl we found."

Lelouch can see the vulnerable flesh and bites, "And you wouldn't have wanted to turn me in?"

Suzaku gives him a stunned blink – as if he should be surprised or act so innocent.

"Why not? You were willing all this time when Zero wasn't someone close to you. Even after I rescued you from certain execution. You said so yourself – assuming I didn't kill you if you tried."

"That—that's different."

Lelouch's teeth sink and tear with a smile, "So now your rules have some bend."
"Would you just—?" Suzaku cuts himself off with another terse exhale and fist of his forehead fringe hair. "I didn't want it to be like this. I want to have a real conversation with you. Can we try that?"

Lelouch casts a wordless gaze to the side and Suzaku at steps closer when the winter wind whistles by like a ghost from the past. It flirts with Suzaku's red-plaid, pleated, mid-thigh skirt and open navy-blue pea-coat while it ripples over Lelouch's stiff, belted charcoal long coat and touches the tips of his hair.

"I understand that you're secretive by nature, that it's even something that's kept you and Nunnally safe all these years. And I think I can understand why you wouldn't want to tell me the truth. But, would you have ever told me?"

"You were content to pretend it wasn't an issue until now, weren't you?" Lelouch noncommittally replies, still not meeting Suzaku's expectant evergreens.

"…Yeah…" Suzaku responds in kind. He looks down at the wind weaving through the golden tresses dangling from his grip before storing it in his school bag hanging in his other hand. "I was afraid. But I didn't know what you were really doing to people."

Lelouch scoffs and it catches Suzaku's eye.

"Do you regret killing our brother?" 

Lelouch looks at Suzaku sideways, "Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to."

Suzaku's brow wrinkles and he visibly swallows, "What about Shirley's father, and all those other people in that landslide?"

"Would you have killed Tohdoh if I hadn't stopped the execution?"

"That's not the same thing."

"You wanted to have 'real talk'," Lelouch says almost too nonchalantly. "You treat invading Britannia as the authority, so is it still murder on their order?"

A scowl etches more deeply in Suzaku's features, but he doesn't immediately respond. Lelouch already knows Suzaku doesn't know what he would've done if Zero hadn't interrupted. The honorary Britannian wouldn't have any choice and the part of him that would've felt obligated to follow the rules wouldn't have kept his hands clean like he desired.

"Do you want to kill your father?" Suzaku tensely questions.

Well, duh.

But the Emperor might serve a purpose if he can be collared and controlled just like his subjects.

"He's too dangerous to be left alive," Lelouch stoically says.

"Can't the same be said about you?" Suzaku heatedly counters.

"I didn't claim otherwise."

"So you want to be just like your father, is that it?"

Absolutely not.
"One of us wishes he could trade current places with his father," the prince scathingly bites once more—

And then he's shoved against the frame of the threshold almost instantly; his back cushioned by jagged, weathered wood.

"Goddamn it, Lelouch," Suzaku sneers with water wavering in his eyes, those same soldiered fists as before desperately clutching at Lelouch's chest. "Why do you have to make this harder than it has to be?"

"What you don't seem to understand is that I am the way I am." Lelouch's eyebrows wrinkle together. "You don't like it. You don't have to. But the parts of me you don't like are real – the things I've done, why. You can either accept that, or you can't."

"But you don't have to keep doing it," Suzaku practically pleads.

Another faint but noticeable sardonic scoff puffs through Lelouch's nose and curls his lips.

Green eyes are outlined with frustrated creases.

"You weren't wrong about saving me – whatever I think about what you did or how you did it, I wouldn't be here if not for you. And I don't just mean the murder trial or Kamine Island. You made me want to live. I resigned myself to what I felt I deserved, and some days I still feel that way. That I'm not allowed to be happy, or be with you or have this baby. But you have made me happy.

That's way too much cringe at once.

Evasive Lelouch can only look anywhere that isn't this seahorse's honest gaze.

"Do you understand?" Suzaku says with a little shake of Lelouch's shoulders. "I care about you and I don't want to lose you to yourself. I didn't think I could ever feel this way about myself or anyone after what I did to my father, and there's nothing I want more than to be with you and raise our child together. I know the world can't change overnight, but I don't want to do any of this without you."

Seriously, this is uncomfortable.

Just stop.

"You keep going on about contemptible means or ill-gotten gains," Lelouch practically grouses meeting Suzaku's gaze, kicking dirt to dry up all these spilling emotions, "but you don't reject the Zone, do you? Even though without Zero there wouldn't be a Zone. Not even you would have gotten as far as you have without Zero."

Look like Suzaku tries not to frown, but it still trickles into the sagging corners of his lips.

"I joined the Zone but there's always a limit." A rooted rage surfaces in Lelouch's voice and eyes, "I have no interest in surrendering to Britannia nor will I allow them to continue stealing what is precious to me.

Suzaku's indignant expression flickers into something firm and resolute. "This is part of what I mean. I don't think you're a bad person and I think you're doing what you think is best, but I can't read your mind. You can't keep all these secrets and expect me to just live with it. We can do things differently and I want to help you, but if we aren't equals in this it will only fail."
Equals?

Lelouch never thought of Suzaku as less than his equal.

There are a lot of reasons Lelouch keeps Zero to himself, but inequality isn't one of them.

"You said it yourself: maybe the two of us combined can make at least one decent person," Suzaku somewhat curtly reminds.

Lelouch almost breaks their eye-contact, almost. "And that when we work together we can do anything."

As opposed to when they work against each other and nothing is accomplished.

"Whatever kind of wizardry you're doing, all the lying and scheming and… You can't keep me in the dark."

Not anymore, obviously.

"I'm not forcing you to do anything, Suzaku. The choice is always yours."

From the tart purse on the younger boy's face, Lelouch sees that was not the desired response.

"If I walked away right now you wouldn't stop me?"

*(Maybe you'd be better off.)* "I haven't so far."

Suzaku spits a bit through his teeth and looks away with a solemn, scornful shake of his head, "Some choice."

Silence reigns between them. A pause suspended in the cold breeze slicing through their thick air.

For a moment, when Suzaku's shoes grit on the ground in a small adjustment, Lelouch really does expect Suzaku to leave.

And he's not sure he can say it's the wrong choice, but it does make his heart skip.

"I want to give you something," Suzaku suddenly announces, sounding none-too cheery, setting his bag on the ground and riffling in his coat pocket.

"A gift?" Lelouch asks, honestly surprised.

"In a way… Give me your hand." He holds out his hand, open palm.

"Are you going to chop it off for stealing?" *Your heart.*

Don't liars have their tongues removed…?

Suzaku blinks, "Come on, I'm being serious," but he's not amused.

A tired smirk traces Lelouch's lips as he looks down at Suzaku's hand. He offers his dominant hand, wondering if the significance is noticed. Suzaku carefully takes a thread of red and winds it around Lelouch's little finger.

Red like the tether of Lelouch's Geass commands.

"The Red Thread of Fate. It's an old myth that two people are destined to be together, tied by an
unseen red thread around their fingers." He wraps the other end around his left pinky.

"Like soul-mates, is it?"

Is Suzaku sure he doesn't mean *star-crossed* lovers instead?

"The thread might knot and tangle but it cannot ever break." Then he holds their fingers together up in the air and tugs at their twined pinkies a little for punctuation—

Giving Lelouch an uncanny (and almost unnerving) flashback of when Nunnally had done similarly before – when he was doomed to eat a thousand needles…

"Are you so sure? Even if I take a path you cannot follow?"

Suzaku's gaze is stern. "Zero or otherwise, I care about what happens to you and I think you need someone just as stubborn as you to chase after you, and never give up on you." Suzaku smiles – and Lelouch is surprised to feel his heart stop *again*. "I can't call myself mama bear otherwise."

What a glutton for punishment…

"So, is this a formal proposal?" Lelouch asks, feeling his arrogant amusement in a crisp wash over him.

Suzaku appears to find some humor as well in the small quirk of his lips. "It is. But don't accept unless you really mean it."

Lelouch thought he lost Suzaku once – saw him die and was helpless to stop it. He let the surge of knotted feelings be more fuel for the fire he would use to burn Britannia to the ground. But Suzaku reappeared like a phoenix and not only did Lelouch have another chance to save his friend but somewhere in his dusty chest something bloomed faster than he could trim it. Could stop himself from feeling. When Suzaku arrived at Ashford the desires to have and protect were not just strong but natural – he wouldn't lose Suzaku to anyone or anything. Even so, Lelouch knew it was selfish to keep Suzaku like a caged bird so he always left the door open should the time come when he'd want to fly away.

Lelouch knew it was always possible.

And yet.

Here this idiot stands saying he'll be the angel on Lelouch's shoulder.

("The Power of the King is an isolating one… You might be a demon, Lelouch," C.C. looks at him with the slightest of smiles on her lips, "but you're a beloved one.")

It doesn't sound like such a bad thing.

Others would ridicule, belittle and virgin-shame Lelouch for being *different* from them simply because he had zero interest in *coupling*, but Suzaku is the *only one* who was ever worthy enough to kindle any of those feelings – not just sexually, but romantically, *intimately*. Suzaku has always been something that Lelouch *can't* lose but it has rooted far deeper than he could've ever thought possible. It would've been better (smarter) to keep a distance from Suzaku, but it's too late for that now—

Actually, it was *already* too late for that. Suzaku isn't wrong. Whatever the status of their relationship, Lelouch and Suzaku really were intertwined as if by destiny. It could've gone very
badly, but it didn't – it hasn't… Even though compromise isn't really in Lelouch's vocabulary and it's difficult to conflict with his own nature, this with Suzaku is something he doesn't want to change. Lelouch vi Britannia is not a quitter. He does not surrender. He does not submit. He decided he would have his cake and eat it too. In a way, trying to force Suzaku away doesn't solve anything; it would only bring them pain, strife and conflict until one or both of them die.

After all, with Suzaku at his side Lelouch really can do anything.

Lelouch gently folds his fingers over Suzaku's hand. And steps closer. Closing the distance between them—

And then he's easing to his knees, rather unceremoniously rummaging Suzaku's fabric folds.

"Wh-What are you…?" the brunet stammers with bulging eyes.

Lelouch securely holds the brunet's flaccid flesh, "Never have I ever knelt for anyone in my entire life," he says, low – not quite morosely – with a strong cast of his plum gaze up at perplexed greens. "And never will I for anybody else."

Problem is Lelouch is still _Lelouch_ and prefers his own forms of communication. The form where he doesn't really _have_ to honestly communicate.

Suzaku looks far more embarrassed than Lelouch would be _if_ he ever got embarrassed (which he doesn't, of course) – and perhaps if of the mind at the moment, Lelouch might find an amusing irony in that.

"Wa-Wait!" Suzaku pleads when Lelouch tries using his mouth as a sheath and pushes until they part, "I don't want you on your knees." An exasperated simper shapes his mouth and he rubs his flushed face at the rather blank stare Lelouch gives him. "Jeez… you really are hopeless, aren't you? Stand up." He pulls Lelouch up to his feet by their tied hands and sympathetically pats Lelouch's cheek with his free hand. "You're so dramatic."

"You're one to talk," Lelouch mutters with a wiping hand across his mouth.

Suzaku lightly chuckles but the welcomed air of mirth dissolves into the cold as his palm rests against Lelouch's jaw and their foreheads touch.

"Being _together_ is kind of scary. But it doesn't have to be," Suzaku quietly says in a tender breath. "We've always been stronger together." His fingers tighten against skin. "You just have to let me in a little more."

"I don't know how.

Everything is safe locked up on Lelouch's chest where it belongs. To let it out, to _speak_ it doesn't feel _good_, like it supposedly should. It feels like being a turtle flipped over on its back. Vulnerable. Exposed. Two things that Lelouch should _never_ be. (Bad enough that having feelings in the first place is _icky._) It's near impossible for Lelouch to be vulnerable, but all this time he thought he had been for Suzaku, physically and emotionally. At least as much as he could be. Why isn't that enough?

Maybe the reality is that Lelouch just… "...I'm not very good at this," he murmurs. Good at _relationships_, period.

"You're learning," the easily emoting seahorse gently reassures and encourages. "Even just by saying that it's proof."
Is it?

"I want us to move forward. There's still a lot we have to settle with Zero and… your wizard magic, but everything else… just takes practice."

If Lelouch is willing to practice.

"...I know things can't continue the way they have been," Lelouch says with light resignation. "But I can't promise to follow your rules." He just can't. He cannot stop his father with paper cranes or hopes and prayers. Maybe it won't be the violent clashing of knightmares, but it won't be up to Suzaku's noble standards.

Suzaku sighs a little and his head deflates onto Lelouch's shoulder, squeezing the older boy's hands in his. "I think this is part of the 'practice makes perfect' part."

"You might need practice, I'm already perfect," Lelouch scoffs with pretend haughtiness.

It makes Suzaku laugh as he hoped, small chuckles gently bouncing in his chest.

"You're something else, that's for sure." Suzaku lift his head.

"We're two of a kind, I think." Lelouch faintly smirks.

"We are both a bit broken, aren't we?" he says more than asks with a small, sad smile.

Maybe… everyone ends up breaking eventually at some point. In some way. The demon and the knight just got it out of the way early.

"Is there anything wrong with being just a little broken?" Lelouch softly rubs the back of his loose fingers on Suzaku's cheek.

"Maybe not." His somewhat chiding expression is softened with an affectionate smile.

It considerably lightens the atmosphere around them.

"...You know you're still… hanging out." So, naturally, Lelouch ruins the mood by stating the obvious.

"Believe me, I'm aware," Suzaku dryly responds.

Both boys look down at Suzaku's very drafty skirt.

Then back up at each other.

Lelouch's eyebrow is lifted like the corner of Suzaku's lips.

A thumb is a teasing graze over Lelouch's mouth and the black-haired boy takes the invitation to tilt his head and kiss Suzaku's waiting lips. They open easily, much like the rest of Suzaku, and as Lelouch slides his tongue against Suzaku's his untied hand drifts low and smooths over a plump rear. Their lips part and Lelouch partially expects the seahorse to end it, but the moment is suddenly so hot and weighted between them. He swears he can feel the words in his mouth, just sitting there like a clog of cotton smothering his voice. It's right there. Teetering on his tongue and so close to falling out, and yet, it's like trying to breathe underwater.

*I love you.*
Lelouch only knows how to hold it in his eyes and press it against Suzaku's mouth; he leans closer as those words brim on his lips and he grazes it all against Suzaku's mouth – or at least he hopes it's that easily conveyed. His childhood friend accepts the gesture, wholly, and returns the unspoken with equal vigor. Suzaku clasps his hand to Lelouch's shoulder and parts his lips for the tongue that earnestly wants to feed him all these intangible thoughts. Feelings. But even as Suzaku laps the spill from Lelouch's mouth, the fearless Zero knows it's not good enough. Lelouch kisses Suzaku like he never has before, twisting his tongue as if speaking desperate, vulnerable words and Suzaku clutches his shoulder with strong, emotional fingers while turning them so his back is braced against the inside wall.

Because Lelouch's brain never stops thinking he can't help but find this strange. This is totally not the time or place, and yet… He's not opposed to letting something other than his voice do the talking. He's better at that, and Suzaku knows it. (Who needs seducing magic?) Suzaku lifts his leg in Lelouch's wandering palm, attempting to seductively wrap the muscular limb around the body flush against him like a seahorse's tail around coral, and even though Lelouch hooks a knee in his hand he can't hoist the soldier up against the wall. Or at least can't hold him there… Suzaku takes it upon himself to hop up on the table, leaning his weight with only one hand—

_Cri~ck—Crack!_

But it buckles and crumbles under the pressure, surrendering to gravity in a rotten heap of wood and dust on the hopes of two amorous teenagers.

"…The floor would be safer," Suzaku mutters down at the tired table finally at rest.

Right.

The floor.

Lelouch spares a courtesy glance at the… all the… thick coat of dirt and dust still just… sitting there… being gross.

"But it's dirty," Lelouch says, incase that wasn't obvious.

Suzaku seems to eat a silent chuckle, "Well, if you don't want to carry on at all and would rather leave…"

Hm.

Seems Suzaku should be the one who wants to leave.

Lelouch looks back at the floor.

At the microscopic organisms and not-so-microscopic insects spawning and defecating in their filthy paradise—

Suzaku laughs, grabbing the deliberating boy by his rosy cheeks, "Don't be so uptight!" kissing any indignant protest that surely spins off Lelouch's tongue.

Tied by a red thread and lustful blood, Lelouch has little choice but to go along with the seahorse. Suzaku lowers first, pulling Lelouch down with him on a clearing in the middle of the room, landing them on their knees and locking them together at the hips. Their kisses are unending, wet and savoring as their conjoined hands fist and somewhat inelegantly try to grope against their threaded promise. Lelouch is regretting offering his dominant hand but boldly squeezes Suzaku's plump bottom with his left regardless, sucking at Suzaku's neck who pants heavily as his free right
hand tugs at Lelouch's fly. Suzaku relaxes his left hand to allow Lelouch more control and the older boy smoothes his other hand over the other ample cheek.

Lelouch is able to wrench away black leggings and slim, bikini underwear from Suzaku's lower half in a rather quick motion considering his encumbered right hand. Suzaku's perky bottom bounces rather freely with the action, and he floats on uninhibited moans at the free feeling and Lelouch's swiftly skimming fingers. Their knotted hands are pulled up, Suzaku tightly twining their fingers as he holds them at their shoulders, their chests flush and their excitement meeting in an eager grind of Suzaku's hips. Lelouch can't resist hooking his fingers into the round flesh, enjoying the delighted sound that loudly squirms in Suzaku's throat and his rather rigid front, shifting his devouring mouth up under Suzaku's jaw-line. Lelouch rubs the hot tips of his left fingers down in the cleft against Suzaku's welcoming opening—a critical thought stopping halting his blood despite Suzaku's eager moaning and flexing.

"We don't have…" he says when he pulls back, breath an alluring steam between their lips. Lelouch wonders if maybe they shouldn't—that is, if maybe they should leave it at this rather than going all the way.

"Um…" Suzaku adds to the clouding yen as he pants. "In my school bag…"

Lelouch glances over his shoulder at said object discarded just out of reach. And then he quizzically looks back at Suzaku, "You carry lubricant in your satchel?"

A puff of laughter plumes between them, "Hand cream. My hands dry out pretty badly in the winter."

How… auspicious.

"Are you sure? We don't have to—"

"I want to," Suzaku says more resolutely than Lelouch was expecting, cheeks stained with lust that's chasing away the nip of frost. "I was really scared last night. And mad. I thought I could lose you. Now you're here and… it's a lot of conflicting emotions."

"I can relate," Lelouch quietly shares with a soft touch of sarcasm.

Suzaku gives a lopsided simper, "And I'm still mad at you, by the way."

Lelouch faintly laughs, "Understood." He kisses Suzaku's lips before turning and leaning to reach for the—

Caught by his pinky and a laughing Suzaku when he glances at the tangle taut between them. Lelouch feels himself simpering as he grabs the bag when Suzaku moves with him, handing the property over to the owner. Suzaku briefly rifles through a small, inner pocket and offers the little innocent tube of near-full hand cream.

"Just don't get it on my skirt," Suzaku teases, tugging to clear away his leggings and underwear.

Lelouch nearly huffs a laugh through a sarcastic curl in his lips until he looks up from the tube and remembers something else needed. He reaches with his first two fingers into his breast pocket and pulls out his wallet were he struggles with encumbered fingers to pluck a condom he stored "just in case." Not that Lelouch was anticipating this here and now, of course. (Not to say it hasn't happened when they're out and about…) It's just responsible!
Suzaku takes it so Lelouch can safely stuff his wallet back into his pocket and the younger boy takes it upon himself further to put it on Lelouch's swelling erection. Lelouch has always done this part – all the preparations – himself while Suzaku is all spread out and… waiting… (or pushing out his rear in the shower…) He looks at the heated green gaze in front of him and thinks it's not so bad to feel Suzaku's fingers carefully touch his hard flesh. And that Suzaku likes it, too. This wouldn't be any fun (or right) if Suzaku didn't also enjoy it, but, it remains a fact of his nature that Lelouch enjoys touching more than being touched. He hooks his arm around Suzaku's waist and pulls them together with a fervorous kiss that melts Suzaku. He's practically pooling down onto the floor and bringing Lelouch with him, free fingers combing up through black hair. Lelouch's body nearly sinks with him, but as Suzaku tries to lie back—

"Don't lie down, it's filthy," Lelouch chidingly parts their wet lips, pulling Suzaku by their tied hands.

Suzaku grins at Lelouch – and the prince doesn't much care for that rather placating expression.

"Alright, Your Highness"

"Don't give me that. You want to roll around in all this muck?"

"Roll around?" Suzaku taunts with a wide grin. "Feeling energetic, are you?"

Lelouch doesn't dignify that with a response but Suzaku turns his happy little self around to present himself on his knees and his free palm; their tangled fingers hanging under him like the girth of a horse saddle.

Lelouch's jaw clenches at a… something unpleasant in his gut as he looks down at Suzaku's waiting body.

Somehow… it doesn't feel right.

But he makes sure that Suzaku's medium-length, wool-blend skirt is lifted and pushed away from his bare behind before squeezing a small, starting glob of the cream above his entrance. Lelouch sets the tube on Suzaku's back toslicken the boy bent over in front of him – not forgetting that Suzaku had just said he didn't want Lelouch on his knees. The seahorse squeaks some small, pleased mewls as he opens himself more for the preparing fingers that sift and sink inside him. Suzaku feels even hotter inside, maybe because of the cold around them or… something else. Lelouch enjoys the somewhat foreign feeling of spreading his left fingers inside a soft and clenching body that takes him with little resistance – it seems they are past the point when this would be painful for Suzaku and that really is a good thing. True enough that such practices have been maintained in their showers together… Lelouch can practically smell and feel the shower steam kiss his face while he watches Suzaku's flexible but tight skin stretch around his parted fingers that dip before withdrawing. He takes the cream again and, being encumbered, uses his only hand to gently push the rounded tip of the tube past the wet, sakura-pink ring and squeeze more inside, and Suzaku's body notably curls with the sensation.

It's still kind of strange to think that Suzaku trusts Lelouch so completely to let him do this.

To want to let him.

Even now.

…Especially now?

Lelouch has always treated Suzaku with respect, never abused his privileges; light, innocuous
teasing maybe but never shamed, humiliated or devalued him – and most
certainly never forced Suzaku into anything. But Lelouch did lie. And reinforced that lie while
lying with Suzaku… uh… Yet, despite everything that Lelouch never told him, Suzaku is still
presenting—offering himself with the same trust he always has…

Is this… really all right? Lelouch didn't expect to be accepted so easily.

(Accepted as he is.)

"…Suzaku," the older lad beckons in a stern tone, removing his slathered fingers that spread the
added cream in an otherwise dry canal.

Suzaku perplexedly looks over his shoulder before giving in to the tugging lure and rises as
Lelouch sheds his coat from his free arm and sits down.

"Come here. You can sit on me," he orders after Suzaku faces him fully, leaning back on his free
elbow.

"Are you… are you sure?" Suzaku asks more astonished than he perhaps should.

Please… just accept this. "Didn't I say so?" Lelouch insists more brusquely than he intends – and
please, Universe, don't barf on me.

A funny little something quirks in the corner of Suzaku's lips, but he otherwise swings his knee to
straddle Lelouch and leans down to kiss the Prince of Pristine heartily on the mouth. They share an
indulgent little moan when Suzaku rubs himself back against Lelouch's tall erection between his
round cheeks. He grinds his wet, open entrance along the sturdy length and reaches behind with
cressing touches while Lelouch lets his hand slink down between them. A deft prod of his long
finger on the sensitive spot below Suzaku's tight sac slings up the brunet's spine and splits their lips
with a wrenched cry. His hips quirk as Lelouch nudges the secret place and lust clouds from his
lips in shuddering breaths, groaning into the older gent's neck when fingers slip farther and tease
his slick opening still sliding against hard flesh.

Lelouch shamelessly lifts the front of Suzaku's skirt to see underneath, letting it gather behind an
exposed erection leaking with arousal. Doesn't seem the promise of not dirtying Suzaku's skirt will
be kept at this rate, but Lelouch is getting the impression the boy isn't so concerned. He's lifting
and pushing out his bare backside to angle himself over the crown of Lelouch's cock with said lad's
guiding hand and attentive eye. Lelouch watches himself slowly disappear under Suzaku's hot
body, touching with caring control and feeling tight skin stretch and swallow him all the way
down. A high moan of overwhelmed satisfaction unfurls from Suzaku's curving back with a
wanton flush on his face and Lelouch feels everything throb in their connection – with that arching
back he wishes he could see the stiff nipples hiding under warm layers. Sometimes Lelouch isn't
sure which is better, the sight of himself entering Suzaku or the expression Suzaku makes when
he's full.

"…You feel so deep like this…" Suzaku lustfully breathes in Japanese and Lelouch clamps the
soldier's hip.

When Suzaku says things like that… it's really hard to stay in an already-disliked passive role,
especially when he's buried to the hilt. Suzaku is undoubtedly unaware how much of his native
tongue Lelouch can understand, but it's not unusual for his brain to short-circuit in these
moments and default out of the "permitted" language. Lelouch takes it as a compliment, not (so much) as
Suzaku trying to be sneaky with (embarrassing) pillow talk.
"Does it feel good?" Lelouch's hand soothingly rubs Suzaku's hip.

Emeralds eyes thick with lust drop down on plums that narrow in a deep squeeze around his encased erection.

"You always feel good," Suzaku presses his loose hand on the ground and lowers towards Lelouch's face, "inside me."

Bold English hotly wafts over Lelouch's mouth, sealed by lips that noisily suck in the abandoned shrine, and the Britannian briefly wonders if this seahorse is trying to bait him. Likely not, but Lelouch still tempers a bucking response from his hips by smoothing his hand down over a firm cheeks and squeezes a happy handful.

Personally, Lelouch isn't one for talking in general.

Their lips continue to loosely mingle when Suzaku begins moving his body with testing rolls of his hips and Lelouch's fingers drift down lower to touch where Suzaku carefully slides up and down. The seahorse takes it as his own pace, finding comfort and gaining confidence in a way Lelouch probably should've let him on their hotel holiday. Maybe Lelouch can see how he might have, maybe, been selfish before. (But is this really about Lelouch loosening his grip on his control? Opening his fisted palm for Suzaku's searching fingers? Or it is about seeing Suzaku prove something by taking – letting – Zero into his body for his own pleasure?)

"Is it… Is it good?" Suzaku asks – clearly, it's good for him. Small, hungry sounds are fogging from his open mouth as he bobs on Lelouch, holding their tied hands together at his hip.

"Yeah…" Lelouch huffs under the hot body tightly and deeply gripping his hard length, but… "Show me… I want to see your chest," Lelouch huskily orders, his free hand slinking under Suzaku's layered tops to curve into a bare waist. The chocolate, loose-knit sweater and creamy blouse underneath might be warm but they're completely obstructing Lelouch's view. Which he understands is also kind of the point.

Suzaku thrusts himself a few more times before the request reaches his sex-soaked brain and he's shedding his coat, Lelouch helping him shuck the fabric off one shoulder to sag around their joined hands. Although Suzaku tries to keep his sweater and blouse bundled up at his neck it only slips down his smooth chest. So naturally, he leans forward and reaches over his head to tug the pair right off his body, leaving yet more apparel limp around their wrists. Lelouch didn't… mean for all that – he doesn't want the seahorse to catch a cold. Then again, Suzaku will have to change back into his other clothes before returning to school anyway… Lelouch smoothes the flat of his palm up between Suzaku's lightly defined pectorals but doesn't touch the invitingly stiff nipples he yearned to see, mindful of aforementioned soreness. He can only relish how tall Suzaku's hard little nubs peek from his chest as he arches his back even though they haven't been touched. Lelouch licks at the temptation budding on his lips to savor them in his mouth as he watches them move almost like ripe, forbidden fruit swaying in a breeze while Suzaku's sensually undulates his body. The brown-haired boy seems to have easily lost himself in the moans and motions as if everything else has melted away from his brain.

Somehow right now Lelouch can wonder at the scandal if this scene was discovered. The White Knight half-naked, in a skirt and riding some Britannian school boy?

And just how many would not be surprised by such a sight?

As if they matter.
Pleasure and winter apple Suzaku's cheeks pretty fiercely the more heavily he fill himself with Lelouch's thickened hardness, making the prince hiss with gripping slides. Each shift and stretch of Suzaku's body has fattened his sounds that were small and seeking in the beginning. Lelouch has always liked the little trickle, the little nasal drips that grow until strikes to the right place break everything loose. It's maybe a little different like this – or maybe it seems different to Lelouch because he's not steering them. He almost feels a little redundant as Suzaku impales himself, feeds his body that only starves for more the more it eats. Lelouch is deeply and fully enveloped in Suzaku's constricting, rolling body that throbs the thick tension of Lelouch's erection. His hips are already hooked into Suzaku's body, so Lelouch lets them jump up as the other boy is pushing down and—

Suzaku sharply cries out and his body arcs in a lightning strike.

Lelouch does it again.

And Suzaku's body curves onto this new sensation filling him. Air drapes around short moans that hoist all the way up from his filled passage as he thrusts down against Lelouch's upswing. The violet-eyed man unknowingly grits his teeth as he stakes his heels in the dirty floor to more stably thrust his hips. Suzaku leans over him, hands bracing on the floor and Lelouch is caught on the tight points of Suzaku's nipples. His chest is curved out and up as his head tosses back and Lelouch just can't help but stare at the way those stiff little studs stand so tall from his chest. Lelouch's ragged breath smokes into Suzaku's chest while he's squeezing around Lelouch and pulling him in deeply, roughly against his prostate while he openly moans in the home of his—their childhood. He leans his rocking weight onto his free arm while heavily panting moans as if begging Kami-Sama.

And Lelouch.

The prince is craving to flip them over and drive himself as hard as he can – harder than he ever has – into this troublesome seahorse and make him crow with consuming, blinding pleasure. Lelouch even briefly mentally curses his immaculate self for not just taking Suzaku on his knees like the dunce initially allowed… The urge flickers hotter when lust-dipped greens gleam down at him. Still, watching Suzaku more or less fornicate himself is a sight to see. (Lelouch relents a little in his control and he gets to feast his eyes on something enjoyable, something he wouldn't have if he'd been rigid. Perhaps there's a lesson in that.) He's enveloped far and tightly in Suzaku's constricting, slinking insides with rolling hips that nudges them closer with every plunge. Lelouch reflexively grabs Suzaku's hip with a little groan while his other hand is tangled in Suzaku's sweaty fingers and held against a bare, beating chest.

A racing heart that sustains not only a small, miraculous one.

But also an abandoned one born to make miracles happen.

Lelouch pushes himself up with his left hand and brushes Suzaku's chin with his right as he leans to touch their lips. Their eyes connect first. Then Suzaku's untied fingers are tightly threading into the ebony hair on Lelouch's nape as their mouths feast on the ooze of moans melting over words. Suzaku briefly wobbles on his rhythm but his voice doesn't stop streaming, flowing from his throat while Lelouch mouths his neck as if overflowing with more than simple pleasure. Sometimes Suzaku is embarrassingly honest but right now it's a thrill to hear him all the way from his rowing hips that take all Lelouch has to give – and he tries to give everything.

All that can't be spoken.

All that he could describe and all that he couldn't even if he tried.
Whatever curses or gifts that pump his blood.

Even as he's pushed a bit roughly back down on the floor with hands planting flat above his shoulders and is staring up into the emerald magma of Suzaku's eyes close to his as the brunet's body crashes like a stormy tide. Lelouch's senses are thoroughly pumped by Suzaku's swallowing, wanton passage and he feels an indistinguishable grunt plunk from his throat, lost in the haze of their breath battling the cold air that skates over his face. In his veins hot blood bakes his body as it rushes to gather with writhing anticipation in his nudging hardness and feels the flashing warning of his quickening climax.

"...Suzaku..." Lelouch doesn't manage to breathe more than that, still refraining from the desire to flip them over, but it inspires Suzaku to crush their mouths together.

"Me too..." the riding boy murmurs into their messy kiss and for a moment Lelouch isn't sure if Suzaku also means he's close or is agreeing to something else unspoken. The same unspeakables Lelouch just bit into a small bloom on his neck.

Lelouch slides his left hand up along the seahorse's bare side and affectionately rubs over a blooming stomach on his way to the erection still jutting out from a skirt. Suzaku moans against the corner of Lelouch's mouth as his wet length is petted and it ruts as if greedily trying to steer hips away from their fast rocking. Long, fair fingers teasingly drag up and down before curling to stroke with a pace matching not just Suzaku's moving body but his nearing limit. Violets narrow up at the molded, water-stained ceiling of the Kururugi Shrine foray while listening to its young master groan on mushrooming pleasure dripping from his arousal.

The Britannian hits his end first in a flourishing burst that claims and cements his bones. Suzaku rises a little with a curling back on bucking hips to hasten his finish in Lelouch's gripping hand and breathlessly mantras the prince's name. Lelouch watches through his slitted eyes as Suzaku thrusts himself into a tighter arch that lets his savory stiff nipples peak out from his chest again. Pants cloud up from their mouths with the slick sound of a jerking hand before Suzaku cries a sharp sound and shudders from a ripping orgasm that spurs through Lelouch's fingers and onto a black Ashford topcoat...

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While Suzaku finishes assembling in his Ashford's blacks, Lelouch kneels on the ground carefully trying to cleanly store Suzie's soiled skirt, and his own sullied uniform, in Suzaku's school bag along with the rest of the seahorse's disguise—

When the red thread teases over the back of his hand; he plucks the string sticking to the edge of a wool skirt. This thread... it is surprisingly strong outside of its metaphor.

"Where did you even get this thread?" Lelouch asks.

Green eyes flick at him as a stiff collar is snapped close, "From your sewing kit."

Lelouch feels a small puff of wry laughter in his chest and a likewise grin. He always buys the most durable thread he can find.

Suzaku closes and hoists his satchel off the ground, leaving Lelouch to thoughtfully stare at the strand draped across his fingers for a moment.

"...What if I change my direction?" Lelouch rises, violets tied to red. "Not as Zero, not with violence, but from within Britannia? Would you work with me?" He lifts and pins his eyes to
curious clovers.

Suzaku's eyebrows understandably lift, "What do you mean?"
Zero stands tall in the center of Lelouch's bedroom.

The only witness to his looming presence is Suzaku who sits on the arm of the couch, where a pillow and blanket are ready for sleep, with an almost-frown battling the impassiveness of Zero's gaze – rather, Lelouch's hidden eyes. The masked face doesn't turn as Suzaku stands and approaches in his boxers and plain t-shirt. His green eyes are inspecting as if trying to see through the slender cocoon of a cape and sculpted helmet that makes the wearer look even taller.

Suzaku just stands.

And stares.

And doesn't seem to know what to do with his hands.

He reaches up with open palms and is somewhat startled by the silent turn of Zero's head, hands flinching. His lips rub together and he musters his bones to move again, tentatively touching his fingertips on the sides of the mask and—

"Ack—Hey! You can't just yank it off, there's a release," Lelouch grouses, guiding Suzaku's fingers with his gloved ones to the hidden activation, allowing Suzaku's touch to open the back of his mask. There are subtle clicks of sliding panels before he's able to pull it off and away, slowly, to look Lelouch in his violet eyes.

Suzaku takes the mask into his uncertain hands, almost as if he's afraid he'll turn to stone by
holding it, and looks down at the face of his enemy staring right back at him.

"I think you look better outside of it." –Could've been a suggestive remark if not for the utterly un-sexy way Suzaku's sourpuss face says it.

Lelouch put a lot of thought into this ensemble.

And pride.

It's his armor.

"...I don't know about this, Lelouch," Suzaku murmurs at Lelouch's silence.

"It's a shortcut."

Suzaku's brow pensively creases when he looks back up, "But it's dishonest."

"Would you rather live with a lie or casualties?"

Suzaku looks back down at the mask, but his answer is left hanging in the air.

"Freedom is not something you ask nicely for, you take it."

"I guess it just… feels like taking away a choice."

"They have already taken away our choices. It's practically slavery. You can't work in a system that's designed to make you fail. If... any level of peace was possible by more 'honest' or 'noble' means, then we wouldn't be where we are now." Britannia's intention was always to conquer, consume and convert.

"But you're talking about—" Suzaku is cut off by a belch bubble. He covers his mouth with a curled fist and apology, holding his quivering belly with his other hand. He opens his mouth again and—

But not words so much as a yellow, chunky slurry launch from his throat and splat Lelouch's chest. Just. Right on his chest.

For a moment they just stare.

Down at Lelouch's soiled clothes.

What is this, some new skill Suzaku is practicing?

"..." Lelouch is neither surprised nor unsurprised, just calmly neutral as the seahorse has been quite seasick lately – but his poor silk cravat... it doesn't deserve this.

"..." Said seahorse is the more stunned of the two, which is concerning considering that queasy organ is inside his body. He should be the first to know about these things and yet...

Suzaku said he could stomach a Spanish omelet for breakfast.

He was wrong.

And Lelouch paid the price.

"...I-I swear that wasn't on purpose," Suzaku defends with waving hands.
The older gent inhales sharply through his nose, holding his frustration tightly in his chest before tipping his head back and releasing it up at the ceiling like a surfacing whale. Lelouch really doesn't doubt Suzaku's honesty, it's just…

His Zero suit is so difficult to clean, and discreetly.

And now he has to

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(It's almost like this did happen on purpose…)

Lelouch begins carefully disrobing Zero's layers and gets all the way down to his black brief shorts when Suzaku stops him from moving to the closet—

"Wait," the boy says with an unusual something in his eyes. "Take it off."

"What?"

"You're underwear. Take it off."

Lelouch stands.

Unmoving.

Suzaku lifts his eyebrow, "Well? Come on."

"...I'm not stripping for you." Suzaku is seriously deluded if he thinks Lelouch will be submitting to any orders. And without even a little finesse!

Suzaku rolls his eyes, "Don't be such a child."

"I'm more than certain a child shouldn't be stripping, either." Can't argue with that logic.

Lelouch can see Suzaku's patience withering in his frosting evergreens. It does occur to him that maybe this is one of those "Lelouch is being inflexible" moments that he sort of said he'd work on improving, but seriously. He can't be the one who is unreasonable here. Then Suzaku is shedding his clothes and Lelouch is completely lost. There was absolutely no pretext for sexy timez (that haven't even been happening in this room, at this time, or much lately because of the queasys). Suzaku's shorts plop down around his ankles where his pajama bottoms have pooled.

"Please," Suzaku says more softly than his previous tone.

Eh…

Lelouch shoves his shorts off his hips.

Because Suzaku asked with the magic word… and is also very naked.

However, when the bare brunet moves closer Lelouch moves away from him like same magnet
poles repelling.

"Wha—What are you doing?" Lelouch cautiously asks, trying to fidget away from Suzaku's reach.

"Would you just be still?" Suzaku simpers.

"When you stop being weird," Lelouch slinks out of Suzaku's creeping hold. "I need to get this cleaned, it can't just—"

"Why is this weird? We're naked around each other a lot."

"For a reason," the older boy pointedly says. "This is for no point other than to be weird."

Suzaku slyly grins, "Are you embarrassed?"

Lelouch side-eyes Suzaku's rather unwanted smugness.

"Cautious," he stoically replies – it's an established fact that Lelouch does not feel that emotion. "Considering we're already halfway to the one good reason for being naked together, if you stand any closer it just might go the full way to that one reason."

Suzaku smiles with amusement and presses himself closer to Lelouch, sliding his hand around the thin teen's side and up his back as half of their hips touch. It's like he didn't hear a word Lelouch just said.

"So I take it that when you say there's only one good reason to be naked it's not for showering, but making love?"

"The way we've been going lately? It's the same thing," Lelouch mutters.

"Maybe this seems a little strange, but please just bare with me," Suzaku widely smiles with his pun.

*Oh dear god.* When Lelouch thought this couldn't get worse; "You're going to assault me with puns?"

"But you like puns, don't you?"

Lelouch tells one bad joke to the club and nobody will let him forget it.

"I really need to—" Lelouch tries to weasel away because he really can't just leave Zero's clothes sitting in barf.

But Suzaku holds him tighter.

"Lelouch…" Suzaku's voice and touches are soft, his eyes seeking the courage to meet a pair of violets and his warm palms flat on Lelouch's back. "What is it that you like about us?"

"Us?" the Britannian bemusedly echoes.

"Being together. You know…"

"…Do we really have to be naked for this?" Lelouch slightly squirms. With dignity. Is this Suzaku's idea of torture? Because already having this conversation isn't bad enough, Lelouch has to literally be vulnerable by being undressed. Uncovered. Unshelled.
While his clothes just get dirtier and dirtier on the floor…

"This is symbolic. Underneath everything else, we're just us."

"Perhaps you might've saved this for a warmer month," Lelouch mutters. Suzaku really shouldn't be left to think about things. That's how things like this happen.

"Perhaps, if you had told me the truth in a warmer month."

Lelouch lets that go — thinking this is yet another reason to have never "come clean." Suzaku can be mad or offended or whatever but this passive-aggression is childish.

"Now," Suzaku simpers again, "don't avoid the question."

It's a bad question.

Lelouch shifts a little, "What about you? What's your answer?"

"No, you first. Please try, it's important to me. And don't just tell me what you think I want to hear."

Why does Suzaku insist on talking about feelings? If feelings were meant to be public then they would… happen on the outside! Publically!

Lelouch takes a breath, a subtle hiss of reluctance blowing from his nose and considers. He didn't think—doesn't think of himself as the "coupling" type of person. Whatever that supposedly magical feeling or attraction so abundantly depicted in stories, movies and so on seemed as real as dragons and wizards. (Except wizards actually turned out to be kind of real, if Geass is any indication.) So what was it that pulled him to Suzaku? A mythological bird-creature practically personified? Maybe just the simple fact that Suzaku made Lelouch look twice is sufficient in itself? That doesn't really answer the question — not the one that Suzaku asked?

What is Suzaku asking?

Is Lelouch over-thinking this?

Or just not getting it?

Maybe Lelouch is quiet for too long. Maybe it shouldn't be a hard thing to answer. Maybe no answer is worse than any answer at all. Because Suzaku starts to pull away and there's a surge of apprehension spouting up from the gaps between their parting bodies and—

(Nunnally.

That unconditional… sense tethered only to her. Lelouch cares about his friends, he doesn't want to hurt them or see them harmed, but it's not the same. It's stronger, deeper, like gravity but in his blood. It's…)

"Comfortable," is what blurts from Lelouch's mouth. Springing from somewhere deep down (in that locked safe at the bottom of the ocean, where it belongs.) It's not as though Lelouch would be standing here like this with anybody else.

Suzaku halts, a surprised… – no, amazed? Astonished? – flutter of his leafy eyes and then a wide, goofy smile creeps across his mouth. Seems he understands that comfortable means safety, a virtue in scarce supply for Lelouch, and the former prince thought that was clear all along. Still, this
appears to soothe the seahorse and Lelouch supposes that's all that matters.

In this moment.

Suzaku leans his lips closer to Lelouch's—

It would also appear that Lelouch answered correctly (but of course, he's never wrong about anything).

—"Me, too." Suzaku places this soft confession on his boyfriend's lips rather than an actual kiss and then pulls away to redress. Seemingly leaving Lelouch alone with whatever it is that just happened and puke-painted clothes while he nestles into the couch for the night. Suzaku separated himself to sleeping on the couch since the Shrine episode of a few weeks ago – he said he was still mad, but it feels like something else lately. (Disappointment…?)

On the whole, Suzaku isn't difficult to understand, but sometimes…

Sometimes that seahorse syndrome really affects his head – although that wouldn't explain before he "contracted" it.

—

["Nunnally really saved me."

"How so?" Lelouch asks, leaning on the railing beside Suzaku on Ashford's rooftop under a cloudy blue sky and warm summer sun.

"From the kiss," the brunet bashfully answers, propped on his arms on the same balustrade. "I don't want anybody to be forced to kiss me – Student Council reward or not. It would be so… wrong."

Because Suzaku is an "eleven" surrounded by Britannians or because he's a gentleman? Likely more the last one, but still both.

"Inexperienced, are you?" Lelouch dryly teases.

Making Suzaku avert his eyes with a simper, "It's not about that… So, what about you? You never did say why you were chasing Arthur."

"You think I want to be forced to kiss somebody?"

"You went to an extreme just to prevent that, almost falling off the roof… and actually running up all those stairs."

"Did you not notice the mass hysteria?" Lelouch flatly retorts.

"I bet there are a lot of girls who'd want to kiss you," Suzaku takes his turn to tease, yet somehow with a sincere smile.

"Not just girls," Lelouch casually notes with a grousing tinge. Typically it is the girls that swarm him on superficial infatuation – encouraged by Milly most of the time – but they aren't always the only ones. All the attention is annoying, no matter who is targeting him. Especially if they try to use Nunnally to get to him. (There was also a teacher Milly said favored him, but that was probably just a joke. Lelouch aced that "killer" exam because of his brains, not his supposed
beauty.)

Suzaku blinks. Lelouch can see a playful chide (for being so conceited, maybe) bouncing behind emerald eyes—

But then his greens settle on the older boy's face and: "Yeah, I guess that shouldn't be a surprise. You're very handsome."

Violet eyes flicker.

...Oh?

What's this, now?

"I'm more than just a nice face, you know," Lelouch haughtily huffs in jest – but also really not in jest.

"Don't have to tell me that." Suzaku laughs, warm chuckles washing over them on a light afternoon breeze as if riding the wind from seven years ago. Like they never parted. "But it was just a joke, wasn't it? Nobody would really be forced to do that."

"Milly is President Pervert," Lelouch gibes, "so you'd better get used to it."

"Uh-oh." Suzaku laughs again. "In a pinch, I guess we could've saved each other the trouble and kissed," he facetiously snickers again.

Lelouch stares at the boy grinning like an idiot who doesn't seem to realize what he just said—Or… he knows exactly what he said.

"Another boy? Have you done that before?"

"What?" Suzaku's gaze plunks on Lelouch again, "Uh, er…" but then they're shifting away. "Well, I mean, that's different. You're not 'a boy.' You're my friend."

Lelouch feels a pitying quirk in the corner of his lips. But cools his face as he leans back against the balustrade with a cool smirk.

"You really know how to flatter a guy, Suzaku."

"Th-That's not—I wasn't—I meant—!" Suzaku helplessly sputters, before sighing at himself and pressing his palms on the cool surface of the roof railing. "I'm just going to stop talking."

What an idiot. Lelouch doesn't claim to be an expert, but, isn't kissing the difference between platonic friends and… not platonic friends?

"Probably wise." Lelouch is softly grinning into a quiet pause that somehow knots their eyes together. "...At any rate," he lazily says, pushing himself into walking, "I apparently have to buy a new litter box now as apparently our adopted club mascot is picky about the one we already bought."

Lelouch may or may not be attending to some of his other after-school activities while he's at it.

"Well, I'm glad Arthur has a home now where people care for him and keep him safe."
"You didn't say how you know Arthur."

"Ah… Just, saw him in the city once."

That cat must really get around, then.

Maybe he is lucky to be here, where his royal highness is getting quite comfortably pampered.

"Need any help? I was thinking it would be nice for him to have some more toys to play with."

"Sure," Lelouch agrees. The strong idiot can carry the cumbersome box of heavy cat litter that Lelouch wasn't going to buy because he didn't want to carry it. "Better for him to have more options other than you."

"I think it's just his way," the burnet sheepishly laughs.

(And maybe just accepting abuse is Suzaku's way.)

Suzaku's laughter turns fond, "I remember when we were kids and you thought kissing was 'boorish and unhygienic.'"

…Still thinking about kissing, is he?

"Most kids think that, don't they?" Lelouch easily shrugs.

Suzaku grins to himself as they continue stepping down the stairs, until they reach a landing turn.

"What about now?" Suzaku manages to pull his eyes up to meet Lelouch's.

"I'm not a kid anymore," he coolly replies, pausing in his steps – and so does Suzaku.

And they stare at each other.

A tension suddenly thuds in Lelouch's body and his knuckles bleach as he clenches the stair railing.

Lelouch's brain is doused in kid-Suzaku, who was always awake bright and early ready for another day of adventure before the morning dew had even dried; before Lelouch was out from under a blanket of sleep. When he could manage it in a drafty, creaky shed—

And then it's that gunshot. Shattering Suzaku's soft smile. Another thing stolen—

And here they are, after one more close call chasing a lousy feline, talking about… kissing.

"Still," Lelouch looks away with an idle push of his feet, still gripping the rail with his moistening hand, "it is kind of gross when you think about it."

What?

It is.

"Oh?" Suzaku half-chokes on an awkward chuckle stuck in his throat and swiftly rejoins his friend's side down the stairs. "Is that why you kissed Kallen?"

"I—What?" Lelouch flings incredulous eyes at the other boy. "What makes you say that?"

Suzaku slyly shrugs, "Not important how I know, I just do."
Lelouch's lips droop with a dissatisfied half-frown, "I don't like this side of you." Seriously, in such a short time he already knows about that?

Suzaku laughs, "But you're not denying it, are you?"

That—It was a poor decision made in haste.

Certainly not Lelouch's finest moment.

It meant nothing. It didn't even feel like anything.

"Deny it when you 'just know'"? Lelouch lazily counters.

"She is pretty, isn't she?"

"...Pretty?" Lelouch genuinely questions. Subjective beauty isn't Kallen's admirable quality or what makes her the person she is, but she hides those aspects of herself at school. And everyone. She has to.

"Is she your type?"

"..." Lelouch can't answer. What kind of question is that? What does it even mean to have a "type"?

"Or... You know, other... types of people."

Other types of people? "I don't pay attention to that kind of thing," Lelouch answers with sincere disinterest. Romance seems rather frivolous. He'd much rather have a friend like Suzaku, and taunt his lower intelligence.

And watch his tender interactions with Nunnally.

And...

"No?" Suzaku asks with innocent curiosity. "Well, not surprising I guess. But I think, if you did pay attention to that kind of thing, you need someone who compliments you. Or challenges you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Suzaku grins, "Someone to keep you on your toes, you know? So you don't get too comfortable up there on your throne."

"So not someone who's..." he half-smirks at the brunet, "cute but stupid?"

Suzaku's mirthful mouth turns wry, "I'd think that would bore you. Being with someone not as smart as you."

"Is there someone as smart as me?"

Suzaku laughs and opens his mouth, but then just stares a moment.

"On second thought, I kind of hope not." His grin glimmers in his eyes. "That might be more than the world can handle."

One is already more than Britannia can handle.
Lelouch dryly shakes his head at the roll of Suzaku's facetious chuckles that lead them to the final stair step.

"Maybe so." His amethysts gleam with a prowling stare. "Then again, it wouldn't be so bad to have somebody else I can dupe into doing my bidding."

Like lugging around heavy cat litter.

Suzaku continues to follow with a light-hearted scoff, "I'm not sure if I feel more bad for you or the dupe."]

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It's New Year's Eve 2017 and Lelouch is in Nunnally's bedroom fashioning her wavy hair into a long French-mermaid braid while Suzaku entertains Arthur with a new feather-stick on her bed. She happily chats about the afternoon ahead of hot-cocoa and a movie marathon with Alice and Sayoko in the club room. She's watched films these past years but now she gets to see them for the first time, with exception of a few from before the… accident. Nunnally will be borrowing the club room while the council group is out gathering supplies for the New Year's countdown later on tonight – which Nunnally is excitedly anticipating. It's been so long since she could see blooming fireworks fill the night sky in blazing patterns and Lelouch won't lie, he's quite looking forward to watching them with her, too.

"Remember when mother tried to braid my hair?" Nunnally asks as she gazes down at the newly framed photo of them with their mother – the Christmas present Lelouch had to finish tending to the day Jeremiah kind of ruined everything. Wasn't easy to scrounge up a digital file of the formal portrait the three of them took, but with a Euphie middle-man it was possible. He had it printed and custom framed in polished silver. She's been staring at it a lot since she opened it but her fingers still caress and outline the object as they have been "seeing" for over seven years.

"She only did once or twice because you couldn't be still long enough," Lelouch fondly teases, delicately weaving her mousy brown locks down towards her nape. Nunnally also had more of a sensitive scalp then.

Nunnally snickers, "I thought pigtails were more fun, too. Like floppy puppy ears."

Lelouch feels his mouth twitch with a smile, "And you could see the tie ribbons in your reflection. That was important." Nunnally loved colorful ribbons in her hair even though they didn't often survive a full day of play.

"I always envied Euphie with her long princess hair, though."

"Princess hair?" Suzaku curiously echoes, letting the ferocious tabby pounce on what was his Christmas present.

"In fairy tales princesses always have long hair with flowers or intricate braids," Lelouch answers as if that should be obvious (like, duh), working his fingers down the middle of the braid with practiced ease.

Euphemia did often have a more traditional, idyllic look – Cornelia, on the other hand, not so much. Nunnally couldn't maintain long hair, though; it would knot and tangle too much so it was easier for their mother to be kept short.
"Ah..." Suzaku hums, tugging only a little to make Arthur fight to keep his prey. "I guess we have the same in Japanese stories, too. Lots of hair ornaments."

"Yes, Sayoko has shown me some. I like the dangle ones!" Nunnally chirps.

"And now you can wear them. You've finally made it," Lelouch smiles, "and you put all those story-book princesses to shame." He deftly ties up the loose ends with a short, magenta bow.

Nunnally giggles and Suzaku leaves Arthur to contently chomp on feathers when he stands to hand her a small mirror so she can admire her brother's hard work. Suzaku takes the picture to set on the night-table for her and then scoops Arthur up into his arm (who is fonder of teething toy feathers lately rather than Suzaku, thankfully.)

"Smells like the cinnamon rolls Sayoko is baking are nearly done. You wanted to help with frosting them, right? Why don't you go see if she's ready for you." Big brother kisses little sister on the crown of her head and she's rolling herself out with a genial farewell.

"Don't be too late with your errands today!" she calls.

"I'd never miss our date." Lelouch sees her out into the hall, watching her a moment while Suzaku lingers in her room, staring at the picture on her nightstand.

"You really didn't have any pictures of your mother? Not a single one?" Suzaku asks with a slump of despondence Lelouch has zero interest falling into or even treading.

"We were banished; we weren't allowed to bring anything," the older boy perfunctorily answers. A bit shortly. Then makes his way to his bedroom with a brown-haired shadow.

Lelouch goes to the closet and takes out his super secret Zero case, setting it on the table.

"I really like seeing the two of you like that," Suzaku says, standing by the foot of the bed where he places Arthur. "It's really sweet. You're kind of a natural father."

"Glad you enjoyed the show." Lelouch briefly presses buttons on his phone.

"...I've been thinking about this since the shrine..." Suzaku tiptoes – still sounding pretty low in that slump. "What your father did to you and Nunnally was really terrible, but my father agreed to it, too." His voice is deflated even as he smoothes his hands over his more visible baby bump. "He agreed to take two children as political hostages."

"Britannia was a certain threat. He did what he had to do in an attempt to protect his people."

Disgust warps Suzaku's face, "He didn't have to stuff the two of you in some outdoor shack unfit for living. Especially with Nunnally..."

Lelouch wouldn't have felt safe anywhere after what happened.

In fact, he didn't.

And hasn't.

And won't.

"We were still the enemy. The use of children for spies isn't unheard of," Lelouch objectively reasons. Genbu's logic was sound even if morally questionable. It certainly was jarring to go from living in a posh home with a loving mother to camping under a pile of sticks and uncaring
strangers. (But Lelouch has to be objective because—

(Because then any pain his ten-year-old self might've felt but preferred to bury along with his dead mother just might resurface like but more seething lava. The callous care they endured under house Kururugi was hurtful but he had to be strong and carry on for Nunnally because she was all that mattered.)

—besides, Suzaku raised the sun on days that seemed unbearably dark and bleak.)

"You and Nunnally didn't deserve to be treated like criminals," Suzaku nearly snaps at either Lelouch's detachment or defense. "Nobody cared about your wellbeing. You had guards assigned to you but they only had to keep you alive. It didn't matter if you were hurt or in pain. Nobody cared about you."

Lelouch can't believe he's about to say this out loud with words: "You did."

Suzaku's double-taking gape is as subtle as tripping in a gopher hole.

Which he did once when they were kids because he was never cautious; he fell face-first with grass and dirt in his mouth and everything.

It was hilarious.

"But I was just a child, I couldn't help you." Suzaku self-consciously tucks away his eyes, drawn back to the ballooning baby in his belly.

"You did enough."

Suzaku helped more than he knows.

Obviously.

"... What I remember about my father is that he was... determined. Always working, strict and not affectionate. He was dedicated to our family line and its future. He would make me sit in during meetings so I could learn but I was still too young to understand most of it, or really care — although he did tell me once that there was a wife picked out for me already."

"Oh?" Lelouch asks with a sly smile.

Suzaku's mouth mirrors the coy bend, "Never said who it was, probably somebody I didn't know."

Lelouch hums.

"Anyway, people remember him as some hero or respected leader — a noble figure. He felt like a stranger to me sometimes even... when he was alive. I can't ever get to know him as more than a father, a person. But... I've been thinking he's the type of person to treat innocent children that way? Victims of circumstance?"

Lelouch is not a victim.

"What is this about, Suzaku?" the exiled royal presses (redirects away from himself).

Suzaku's jaw clenches. "I... I killed my father because I wanted to protect people and that was the only way I knew how. It was a mistake. I don't even know if it would've been better if it wasn't a mistake, honestly, but it's a regret... that I have to learn to live with." Suzaku takes in a slightly shaken breath. "I can't help but feel this is similar to you and your father."
"The situations aren't the same, you can't compare them," Lelouch easily says. "My father is too dangerous to remain in power."

"I'm not saying that he shouldn't be dealt with – I agree he's dangerous. I just… worry about what this choice will do to you."

Choice? What Choice?

(The feeling of squeezing that trigger is still vivid, imprinted into Lelouch's palm as is the taste and smell of fresh blood that invaded his senses before he could flee – after he saw how easily the clear, critical eyes of an artist fell flat and unseeing for the first time.

One squeeze, just one simple squeeze, and Clovis' brains are just a spray of chunks out the back of his skull—)

"Suzaku, he stopped being my father a long time ago. He's just a man. A dangerous man that threatens not just Nunnally's and our safety but the entire world. Whatever he's doing it needs to be stopped."

Suzaku doesn't look happy but at least a little mollified.

Lelouch's mobile buzzes and he taps it again before pocketing it.

"Are you sure you want to do this tonight?" Hard to tell if Suzaku is disapproving or just concerned.

"Already waited too long," Lelouch answers, with just a taste of a teasing blame (even though Suzaku isn't the sole reason for delay), as he pulls on his long coat and scarf. "I've done the math. Today is a holiday so the place will be emptier than any other day. It lines up better now than any other time."

Suzaku holds a brief pause, "...But Nunnally is really looking forward to watching the fireworks with you, and you promised you would. Do you want to risk missing that?"

"I won't break my promise." None of them. "I'll be back in time. There's still plenty of time before midnight."

"I'm not saying… Maybe I really should just go with you."

That wouldn't help and Lelouch doesn't need or want a babysitter.

"Trust me." Lelouch asking, or telling, Suzaku to trust him isn't going to butter the burnet up, but it needs to be said. "In the meanwhile, why don't you rest? You're looking a little pale and under the weather."

Suzaku lightly groans holding his rounding belly, "It's just the nausea, although I am tired."

"Rest, then, so that you'll be ready to watch Milly almost burn down the school at midnight."

Amusement tickles the corner of Suzaku's lips before he casts a glum glance at the bed.

"My back is a little achy, too. …I'm thinking that I'll sleep in the bed again," he says on an almost wistful breath, sitting and smoothing a palm over the blankets.

The sofa isn't suitable for sleeping and Lelouch didn't want to let Suzaku, but had to allow it and give the other boy his space. Seems that paid off. Those greens eyes flick back up to Lelouch with
a sparkle that's been a bit dim, and there's even a slightly cheeky smile outlining his lips.

"It's actually been difficult sleeping without you next to me. And your bony elbows in my ribs."

*And isn't saying boney elbows redundant?* "What's that supposed to mean?" Maybe it was only difficult because the couch *isn't* made for sleeping. Though, Lelouch will admit it's been kind of lonely at night.

"I'm surprised you don't know considering you've had such trouble sleeping." Suzaku's smile spreads wider with more cheekiness and frankly, Lelouch doesn't care for that expression on the idiot's face. "Even though you can fall asleep spooning you always roll away and if I try to snuggle up to your back you always jab me with your elbow to push me away. And in the ribs."

Lelouch's face contorts as if he just smelled something rancid, "I don't do that."

Suzaku lightly chuckles, "I'm the one being elbowed, I think I'd know."

Lelouch is about to counter-attack again, but the sight of Suzaku's beaming face melts the argument from his tongue. Suzaku is laughing and smiling and... this is a lighter moment they haven't had since the Orange-snowballing-secret-spilling-avalanche that nearly buried them. So he lets it be.

"Don't worry, I'm more careful now. And it's kind of endearing, in a jabby-elbow-to-my-ribs kind of way."

And, sure, Lelouch didn't adjust well to sharing his bed at the start as he's used to sleeping alone, but he thought he had improved. Apparently, he needs lots and lots of space.

Metaphorically and literally.

(To be fair, C.C. could be a persistent bed hog, too, so Lelouch had to learn some sleepy defense sharing his bed with her – but of course, Suzaku doesn't need to hear that.)

"Masochist," Lelouch fondly mumbles under his breath as he unfurls a blanket to drape over said masochist who very weakly grins and lies down sideways. Then he pulls the trash bin close to the side of the bed – better safe than sorry.

He hoists up his case secretly containing his Zero garb, sliding the strap onto his shoulder, and even though he tries not to he still catches Suzaku's stare from the corner of his eye like a loose sweater thread snagged on a nail.

"Be careful," the brunet says in a quiet push of his breath, on the brink of a plea.

"Don't worry, just rest," Lelouch orders without hesitation. "And don't vomit on the bed. Again."

"It was just the *one* time, jeez..." Suzaku quietly grumbles while snuggling like a chubby caterpillar under the blanket.

Lelouch mostly smiles on the inside, "It only takes once," before he makes his exit.

••

The afternoon of New Year's Eve finds the Zone Administrated buildings to be quite scarce, as Lelouch knew they would be. He walks down the barren halls in full Zero strides, passing only the occasional mixed Black Knight and Britannian guards. The interior of the building would be shut
down for the holiday by now if not for a few straggling workers, such as Zero himself (especially because of Zero.)

Until he nears his office.

At the mouth of his hallway not a soul can be seen; not even at his door. Lelouch unlocks the door and steps through the threshold—

Greeted by the White Prince himself seated quite comfortably at Zero's desk by only the light of the desk lamp with Villetta standing close but off to the side. The door is quickly shoved closed and locked then his wrists are bound behind his back and he's quickly frisked. He glances over the collar of his cape to see his own pistol aimed at him by the traitorous Orange.

"Dear brother," Schneizel feigns warmth – it seems fake to Lelouch, at any rate. "It only makes sense it would be you, such capability and… you never did grant Clovis mercy."

Was that a compliment? Felt fairly backhanded.

Lelouch doesn't respond, only silently eyes his opponents from behind his mask.

"There's no need to play coy, you've already been exposed," Schneizel says, gesturing to Villetta and Jeremiah. "Now, I want to see the face of my supposedly dead little brother."

Little.

Not younger but little brother.

Jeremiah pushes Lelouch's neck down and his other hand gropes around the mask before roughly pulling it off and swiftly replacing with an eye-patch strapped over his left eye. He's forced to watch Zero's head tumble by his feet before being hauled back up by his nape to face Schneizel, with a furious scowl.

The freaking nerve!

An unexpected hint of emotion washes over Schneizel's face, disappearing behind his cool eyes – but Lelouch won't be suckered by something that might not even be real.

"All these years, believed to be a tragedy of war and here you are like a ghost." He stands from Lelouch's chair.

"Or a revenant," Lelouch villainously grins more in his voice and eyes than his lips.

"Maybe still a tragedy of war," Schneizel curtly responds, a touch drolly. "As far as anyone back home is concerned. These officers here did me the courtesy of discretion, of course. Isn't that right, Sir Gottwald?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Jeremiah stoically replies.

Complacency teases Schneizel's lips, "The man disgraced by Zero himself, rather fitting. A shame he couldn't have reached me before we lost Knight Nu in the process."

Alarmed confusion splashes Villetta's face, "I don't under—"

But before she can speak much more Schneizel snaps and Jeremiah fires at her with Lelouch's pistol, square in the chest, and she crashes to the floor. Lelouch flinches at the silenced shot and then grimaces when the heated barrel is jabbed into the back of his skull.
"So this is the part where you try to declare checkmate?" Lelouch scorns.

Because that's totally Lelouch's move.

Trademark pending.

"That would be short-sighted, wouldn't it? Considering we both want the same thing."

Lelouch's eyebrow lifts, "Oh?" Like he'd fall for a trap like that so easily – Schneizel always did underestimate Lelouch...

The way Schneizel's mouth just almost, barely, practically doesn't shape with a smirk is infuriating; "You are in a unique position, as a pacified force in the land owned by your enemy."

Lelouch still isn't biting; "Unique?" He can dance this indirect word tango until the end of time.

"Exposing you would undo everything you've achieved, particularly amongst your followers, but you have already surrendered in a truce with this Zone. Turning over such a concession would only damage future negotiations and allies would be difficult to obtain."

Lelouch wouldn't say "surrendered," but agreed to.

"But you don't want this sort of situation spreading to other Areas with unrest." As the expression goes: give them an inch and they'll take a mile. All of the world has been watching New Japan.

"Assuming they would be organized enough to even come close to being a threat?" Schneizel coolly counters.

But of course.

Britannian's "Japan" concession makes them "independent" but in no way allowed to actively engage Britannia. Should the Black Knights choose new war fronts, or allies, however…? Zero could accomplish such subtle subterfuge.

"Are you seeking an ally against someone?" Lelouch coyly pushes this along – he has an important date to keep, after all.

"You have hidden your identity, which would make you easy to replace, on the surface. Any close, loyal soldiers you have would surely notice errors in any puppet that Britannia uses in your place."

Not to mention the rare few who have actually seen Lelouch's face under the mask with their own non-Geassed eyes.

"That would jeopardize the 'truce' if discovered," the younger prince says, "although it wouldn't be the first time Britannia has gone back on an agreement. Not even the first time with Japan. The emperor left his own children here as collateral but still attacked without mercy."

"But you aren't dealing with the Emperor, dear brother."

"I'm not sure I know what it is I am dealing with, yet."

"As I said, we want the same thing: change, an end to all this war and a new direction for the world."

So not an end to the Empire, then?
Schneizel is being cryptic and friendly enough to make himself sound altruistic, but Lelouch knows better. He won't hang himself with the ropes Schneizel offers.

"Why should I trust you?"

"Also as I said, there's no value in removing or revealing you. That isn't what I want."

"You want a patsy to deliver you to the throne. An exiled prince turned terrorist would be an excellent scapegoat, should things get messy." It will get messy. "You are a user and a liar, and I'm not falling for a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"So hostile…" Schneizel sighs with discontentment, looking down at his gloved finger drawing a line on the polished wooden desk. "It's no wonder you chose to remain hidden all these years rather than rejoin us back home where you belong. Almost like you've gone feral."

"I am where I belong," Lelouch utters with defiance.

"What about Nunnally?" Periwinkle eyes flick up and pin on Lelouch's. "Is she where she belongs? Can she live well at Ashford, even alone without you?"

Lelouch snidely scoffs, "Are you threatening me?"

Schneizel is never close to straightforward unless he thinks there's something to gain or it's just more smoke and mirrors. He must've known what Lelouch thinks of him to try this approach – he's too much of an empty robot to feel desperation or other human feelings and is too arrogant to admit defeat. He'd run away like a coward before ever letting that happen.

"You don't respond well to threats but it's clear you are not open to… negotiating, either. And I don't like stalemates." He holds his hands comfortably behind his back. "There's no reason this has to be difficult, but… you must realize that your secrets are no longer safe. There's also quite a mess of a Britannian officer on your floor by your own gun – one that was believed to be missing."

So he'll use Nunnally against Lelouch rather than Zero – undoubtedly both, one way or another in the end, though. (It's actually kind of cute how much leverage Schneizel thinks he has.)

"Maybe I agree. But I want to hear you say it," Lelouch commands with a sprinkle of sugar over his voice, filling the dark and quiet room with hollow fluff.

Schneizel's expression is hollow itself, cool neutrality masking his much deeper waters – a nice, white prince veneer.

"It would be in the best interest of everyone if our current Emperor… becomes a former emperor."

Lelouch exhales a loose laugh and tips his chin up with a wry smile.

Schneizel needs Lelouch, at the moment. Betrayal is inevitable between them, they both know this. Trust can't be established. Hell, they can't even get within reach. But as of now, they need each other if anything is to progress beyond an unsavory stalemate.

"Too much of a coward to get your own hands dirty?" Lelouch delightedly sneers up at the ceiling.

"Perhaps you are not in a place to judge me an indirect coward, Zero." A surprising, even if tiny, touch of sass from the White Prince.
"Perhaps not," the Dark Prince responds just as smug, looking back down at his older brother. "Or perhaps I also know a thing or two about letting others believe what I want them to." His uncovered right eye shimmers from violet to red and an evolved Geass sigil freely flies right at the insufferable second son.

*Surprise, motherfu—*

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[The weekend comes and goes (after the almost-flirting with Suzaku on the roof) with Lelouch largely catching up on the sleep he's lost handling his—Zero's affairs. Perhaps it's time that could've been better spent doing business, but despite his determination, Lelouch knows that rest is vital to maintaining it in the first place. The last thing he wanted to do on a Monday is go to P.E. but he should at least show his face and get checked for attendance every once and while. He had planned to slip away afterward when students are a loose jumble on the track… Instead, he somehow remained in the mix.

Under the climbing sun.

And outside air.

And dirt.

It's such a waste of time it's almost frustrating – more so when Lelouch is picked to wrangle some equipment as punishment for skipping – which is only more of a deterrent from ever attending after he skips again. He could've been relaxing on the roof instead, pondering business. Contemplating recruiting, assessing a batch of newbies, comparing statistics, strengths and weakness and whether or not they're an asset, liability or a threat. (It's not unheard of for a shill or two to try pulling the wool over Zero's eyes, but he knows better. The instant a person walks into the room Lelouch can read them inside and out…) The only thing that made this insufferable class hour bearable was seeing Suzaku. Rather intent on exercising, that one, so they didn't socialize much as he ran his laps. Suzaku is still a little distant in their classes, today especially, and maybe Lelouch could understand if it wasn't completely unnecessary. He doesn't need to worry about exposing Lelouch's history (– no, this feels like something else.)

At any rate, Lelouch doesn't get into the locker room until late, already after the change bell has chimed. Lunch is next, though, so he won't be tardy. Just sweaty. And sour. Lelouch is thinking about skipping lunch to quickly rinse off in the private comforts of his Clubhouse bath when sounds of peer-on-peer aggression echo from the showers in the locker room. He quietly steps through the empty locker aisles towards the noise—

Seeing a blond and red-headed pair of boys trying to keep an unnervingly naked Suzaku on his knees on the wet shower floor for whatever nefarious ideas they have in their coconut heads. Lelouch is grabbed by a brunet he didn't see and his arm is twisted behind his back faster than his slower reflexes can launch his Geass – he has to be careful not to cast friendly-fire into Suzaku's eyes when the other boys look his way. The grip around his contorted arm is tight and the pressure on his bones hurts, but he can tell there's slack.

But of course.

Lelouch Lamperouge is known for his looks and little else.
A pretty face always signifies a helpless weakling.

Idiots.

"So it's your little boyfriend here to the rescue," the blond leader maturely spouts – and he sounds so very tough when he and his friends outnumber the Number. "Protecting your Club pet?"

Lelouch isn't accustomed to altercations with other students – not to say he cannot handle them. He had his share of contention with the royal blood. It's been relayed to him that he's not the most approachable person so he isn't approached, which is more than fine by him. Lelouch's biggest concern is an overflow of mail during Valentine's and the various schemes of Lady President Ashford. Most kids stick to their own group of friends and, well, none of them are foreigners. Until now Ashford was a pleasant enough place. Even still, many students are wary of Suzaku if only because of that whole "Prince Murderer" thing. Zero took his claim but the suspicious and prejudiced will believe what they want.

He instantly recognizes the trio of brutes; they're in the same year but in another class, a few nobodies that usually blend into the background. Suffice to say, they aren't worth naming. Lelouch has familiarized himself with all students at Ashford, can't be too careful, and this set of boys are unremarkable in every way, really. All have upper-crust families fattening on the pillaging of Japan, although business not military, with parents that likely would rather have somebody else raise their children. They are average students with little behavioral issues, though, and they don't venture outside Ashford's walls. Maybe it should be comforting that they don't go looking for "numbers" to harass, but it means little when they've waited more like spiders in a web and that Suzaku is the poor soul to get ensnared.

The apparent "top dog" picks up a nearby broom and Lelouch won't deny the way it makes his gut drop like an anvil. Seems these brutes know only one way to assert their authority and mark their territory – staying true to their troglodyte nature by thinking only with their genitals. And more than likely overcompensating, of course.

"You two are getting each other off all the time, aren't you?" the blond jabs Suzaku hard in the chest with the tip of the broom handle, making him wince. "You like Brit bananas, don't you monkey? Eat one with every meal?"

Repulsive trash.

The redhead is seemingly trying to force Suzaku's head down against the floor, leaving his backside exposed and nothing to the imagination of their intentions, but the soldier is stronger than they probably thought – but… Suzaku couldn't be holding back, could he?

Sex crimes like this are most often about the violence of it and Lelouch's arrival might've made this worse but he offers Suzaku a subtle wink. It's not as reassuring as the secret Zero thought it would be. Without the freedom of his hands he can't flash any of their secret signals – Suzaku might not even remember all of them, anyway. Even after Lelouch dumbed—uh, trimmed it down. These boys don't seem to think they'd be interrupted, which is concerning if there was outside help, but this really seems like something they didn't think through. They aren't the "masterminding" sort, after all. Just nameless idiots doing what idiots do: not thinking. Makes foiling them all the easier.

"And I bet this monkey-lover is more than happy to provide," the brunet sneers behind Lelouch with such vile, oozing hatred it's like he hopes to transfer it through literal osmosis.

But Lelouch bets the coconut doesn't even know what osmosis is.
"There's no need to be jealous," Lelouch taunts with scathing, honeyed arrogance. "If you wanted bananas so badly all you had to do was ask." Lelouch reaches back with his free hand and boldly grabs the crotch of the boy behind him—

Entirely expecting to be shoved away in disgust with a dirty epithet, freed by phobia—

He's barely able to brace himself with his arms when he slams against the lockers. The one next to him wasn't completely shut and the door is pushed open by his impact—

And inside is a small but unobstructed mirror he could see through the slits. Lelouch leans just enough to the side so he can clearly see the boy behind him still quivering with revulsion—

And the instant their eye's meet he takes the chance and fires Geass at the reflective glass.

"Stand down," He orders and is thrilled to see his command bounces and catches the eyes of his intolerable target. The boy freezes, his body relaxes, and Lelouch delights in the Geass only he can see shackling the bully's eyes – but as soon as he looks away from the mirror it will break the spell.

"Yes," the boy drones.

"You should stop this bullying, and you will stop your friends," Lelouch holds tightly to the leash, an uncontrollable smirk of pride pulling his lips. "If you know what's good for you." –A touch of his own bravado, for show, before he turns around and breaks the contact.

"Yes," he concedes as he walks away toward the other boys. "Yes, you're right."

Immediately there's dissension.

Lelouch's puppet tries to physically pry the tangle of other boys apart but obviously struggles – seems a Geass drone works with what they have, or what is within their abilities. He is successful in distracting the leader, however, resulting in quite a furious shoving match, leaving the third boy holding Suzaku without a brain. Lelouch listens quite contently to the stilted curses and squeak of shoes over the floor as he grabs the broom that his drone confiscates. He doesn't even want to touch the tainted thing but it's safer in his hands.

"What the hell is your problem?! What are you doing?!!" the blonde leader indignantly demands as the two boys push each other away, and his eyes just happen to look at Lelouch—

Who, with his aim pointed away from Suzaku, very easily collars yet another mad dog with his red glare – a boy of weak leadership, to say the least. Lelouch can't see but hears the scuffling and from only from the corner of his eye does he catch a blurry of brown hair before he finally looks to see that Suzaku has subdued the bully with a face-full of towel. It's wrapped around the other boy's face who is crumpled on the floor without a single mark on his body. Suzaku does clean, gentle but efficient work, it seems – Lelouch might not be gentle, but they have the other two in common. He's able to easily dismiss his Geassed dimwits on their way without resistance while the third scurries off with his tail between his legs – sure, when he's outnumbered. Lelouch makes a mental note of tracking the boy later to ensure there won't be any retaliation as he takes a clean towel from the stack outside the shower, letting it unfurl from his fingers as it hands it to Suzaku.

_Probably a stupid question, but: "Are you all right?"_ he asks with soft concern.

"Fine." Suzaku takes the towel and covers himself, without meeting Lelouch's violets. "Just sorry you had to get caught up in that."

Lelouch's brow deeply furrows, thinking Suzaku shouldn't be apologizing.
"I mean I'm thankful for your help. It was... impressive." Suzaku walks past Lelouch towards his locker just to the side, tossing a simpering grin.

It's... actually quite vexing. This side of Suzaku has certainly changed. He never let himself get pushed around or let bullies get away unscathed when they were kids - not to say it's his fault, just...

"Ignoring the provocation is usually good enough to make them give up, but sometimes it does the opposite."

"They've harassed you before?" Lelouch asks with his back turned to give his friend privacy but is entirely unable to keep ire from coiling around his words like barbed wire. Were they the ones that gratified Suzaku's property...?

There's a considerable pause on Suzaku's end and it gnaws down Lelouch's spine - he peeks over his shoulder to see Suzaku stepping into his uniform slacks—

Noticing the fresh smears of abuse purpling his skin before averting his burning eyes.

"...There's really nothing for you to worry about."

FALSE

Such a glaring lie and obvious avoidance of answering the question (can't lie to a liar). Lelouch knew Suzaku was suffering from harmful bigotry and it occurs to him that this is something Suzaku has been dealing with for a long time - for as long as he's been an Honorary Britannian, at least. Then there's the immensely sickening thought that Britannian soldiers can and undoubtedly did commit far more heinous acts. Britannians are essentially bred to believe it's their right to dehumanize non-Britannians, some even make it a sport.

Lelouch turns at the sound of a locker closing, seeing Suzaku fully dressed in his Ashford blacks and lifting his satchel. He tries his best to mask a wince with uncomfortable shifts of his body but little escapes Lelouch's practically perfect perception.

"I have some cooling liniment that will help," Lelouch says, blocking Suzaku's path.

"...That's ok, I don't need it. It's too far to the clubhouse—"

"If you don't treat it now it will only be worse later." Lelouch presses, even literally with a light poke to an aggravated shoulder (he's lucky it's not dislocated) and making the stubborn brunette wince again. "And our lunch break is now, you won't miss anything." With the lunch break and a fee period right after, they have an hour before their next class begins. They can even eat in the clubhouse kitchen and won't lose any time.

The former prince doesn't wait for any verbal agreement, merely hooks Suzaku by the arm and pulls him along like a wayward child.

If Suzaku really wanted to stop him, he could try.

But he doesn't.

-.-

"I'm really all right," Suzaku modestly tries to dissuade. "You don't have to do this."
And yet, here they are in this tiny bathroom.

Together.

Lelouch ignores him and sets a shoe-box sized first aid kit down on the counter, opening it to retrieve a small bottle.

"Spare me the tough-guy act. This will soothe and it dries quickly." Lelouch holds the bottle with an expectant look that Suzaku is reluctantly regarding. "And I'm not asking."

Suzaku surrenders with a subtle sigh through his nose and turns himself around, facing the mirror to shed his top coat and shirt. Lelouch helps at the sight of some straining on the soldier's part, laying the coat on the counter. His violets catch on Suzaku's reflection, watching rougher fingers flicker down buttons and a foreign, funny suspense turns in his gut—

That boils with familiar ire at the sight of discoloration on Suzaku's back. Splotchy bruises that have swelled faster than Lelouch would've thought – but they shouldn't even be there in the first place. He can't blame Suzaku for being in that situation, but it just seems so unlike him. Suzaku might've been easy to lead around when they were kids but he was still stubborn and never a doormat. It's almost like he didn't want to fight back but that doesn't make any sense. Suzaku used to make at least that much sense.

Lelouch doesn't realize his eyes are burning and seething until he notices timid emeralds staring at him in the mirror, and he quickly averts back to the bottle in he's tightly clenching in his hand.

"Why do you even have something like that?" Suzaku asks as an obvious distraction, pressing his fisted hands on the cold sink counter. "Isn't it for athletes?"

"The purpose of a first aid kit is to be prepared." Lelouch oozes a small squeeze onto his fingers. "So you prepare for everything?" Suzaku meagerly smiles.

"Try to."

Suzaku's body flinches slightly under the touch of the ointment, forcing their eyes to connect in the mirror.

"It might take a few minutes for it to activate," Lelouch says, dipping his eyes back down to his finger pads that are delicately soothing the medicine into taut skin on shoulders with practiced fingers – Nunnally used to get pains after the… and Lelouch was always there to ease her discomfort.

"What about your arm?" Suzaku quietly asks and his voice fills the small space in a hot fog.

"It's fine," Lelouch says without meeting Suzaku's eyes. "He wasn't holding that tightly. Thought I was too weak to cause trouble, I suspect." He warps his supposed "weak pretty boy" face with a sardonic curve of his mouth when he looks into waiting greens, "People have a way of underestimating me."

Suzaku's lips faintly curl, "You kind of like that, though, don't you?"

Lelouch shrugs.

Comes in handy sometimes.
It did this time.

The liniment begins to chill and even tingle up Lelouch's fingers as he massages more on some blooming bruises of Suzaku's lower back. Warm, firm skin that ripples under his touch as he rubs the medicine into flesh that has an entrancing texture. Suzaku watches through the mirror but Lelouch is focused on the gentle rubbing motions over abused skin that tempts his fingers to touch beyond the frayed edges of blue-green. And maybe he does give in a bit to the temptation when he's smoothing over a lower bruise near the back of Suzaku's right hip—

The icing liniment prickling up his fingertips isn't what sharply ices Lelouch's chest.

A reddened, ruined patch is glaring at him from Suzaku's skin almost like a command of his Geass roped around somebody else's eyes. But that's exhilarating. Satisfying. This is just…

The gunshot is a ripe memory, pungent with Suzaku's pooling blood. His soft smile of affection warmed Lelouch's chest—but then both were shattered by a Britannian reprobate of a soldier that the exiled prince couldn't control—And it all just steeped in the back of Lelouch's head as but more gasoline on the fire of his wrath. He wouldn't be so helpless again. He wouldn't—

"It… The shot was obstructed," Suzaku says when he notices Lelouch's faltering attention, his voice is a soft murmur but still somehow balloons to fill the entire bathroom, "but it still penetrated."

Lelouch flicks his amethysts up at their reflection only briefly, choosing to continue repairing on Suzaku what shouldn't be broken.

"This really is so familiar," Suzaku suddenly chirps, clovers eyes anywhere but the mirror. "You used to do this when we were kids. Tend my wounds, I mean."

_Little bird_ is changing the subject.

Lelouch is willing to play along.

"You had a habit of leaping before looking," Lelouch playfully recalls.

Suzaku gently chuckles in his chest, "You're gentler now, though."

"Yet you're still leaping without looking," Lelouch dryly chastises, fingertips slowly circling. Almost idly.

Suzaku's smile is distant but fond, "Remember that one time with my knee? It stung so bad when you cleaned it with disinfectant… Nunnally said a kiss would make it feel better but you wouldn't do it."

Lelouch remembers Suzaku trying to pretend it didn't hurt, being the _tough young master_ of the shrine, but the tears in his eyes betrayed his tough young bluster.

"I told you that you would only hurt yourself jumping down from that high in the tree," Lelouch says, "but you didn't listen."

Suzaku ignores him just like he did seven years ago; "But then Nunnally kissed it instead and it actually _did_ feel better. Like magic. I was amazed."

Their mother used to do that because that's what mothers do. Suzaku didn't have a mother and his father wasn't the cuddly type – seems he and Lelouch have that in common – and he'd never had
anybody who loved him kiss his hurts before. Lelouch refused to do it because Suzaku was an idiot and… he didn't really believe that he had the same magical touch as his deceased mother.

Not like his kisses ever opened Nunnally's eyes.

"Mind over matter – although that would imply you have a mind to begin with." Lelouch smiles into the mirror. A rather toothy smile.

"So cruel," Suzaku lightly laughs again. "Even though Nunnally said you used to do it for her all the time."

"What are you saying, you want me to kiss you now?" Lelouch facetiously says right into the reflection of Suzaku's eyes—

Surprised by the rather sudden redness on his face.

And the dramatic shift in atmosphere.

…Like they've just fallen off the planet. Or into it.

"It should be dry in a few minutes." Lelouch is finished with the… massaging so he pulls himself away to wash his hands in warm water, and Suzaku moves aside.

The brunet turns around to rest against the counter, eyes sunk on the floor.

"I'm sorry," he apologizes in a pained murmur.

Violet eyes sharpen at the reflection of the brunet's back, "Sorry?"

"You got hurt because of me. With the other boys."

That isn't… "It's not your fault that other people are ignorant barbarians." He dries his hands with a towel.

"But something worse could've happened."

Lelouch wordlessly clenches his jaw.

"This is why I said we should keep a distance. I appreciate what you did, but you're only going to get into more trouble or hurt because of this and I don't want that to happen. You don't need to stick up for me. You've done enough."

Done enough?

This—

"I'm not some delicate damsel that needs your protection," Lelouch scolds in a partial growl and fierce eyes that Suzaku can't see because he won't look. He didn't watch Suzaku die once, powerless to stop it, then save him from certain-execution only to yield to schoolyard bullies – a Lelouch that succumbs to intimidation or surrenders is no Lelouch at all.

"It's not that, it's just… After I was shot, when I woke up my first thought was you. I asked about you, but… Didn't know what had happened to you and I hoped you were ok. And Nunnally, I was just so worried. What if she was left alone? Then I come to this school and the two of you are here, safe together and I…" Suzaku finally takes a chance to look up and toward the older boy but there's still a weight in his evergreens. "You could've been seriously hurt then and still now. Then what
about Nunnally?"

Lelouch doesn't want to hear it. Not another apology. Not the spewing of some mutated form of the bravado ten-year-old Suzaku used to have. How is Suzaku different from Nunnally?

Suzaku was dead.

DEAD.

And Lelouch wasn't—couldn't—

"You're such an idiot," Lelouch snarls and then he's claiming Suzaku's lips (and maybe something more) that are stunned frozen. (It doesn't even occur to him that he might've been calling himself an idiot, too.) Lelouch is a man of action… and whatever this action is, it needed to be taken.

Needs to take Suzaku.

He holds Suzaku's—his childhood, best and only true friend—face in his hands with their lips glued together in a kiss that landed hot and plush. Short but lingering. Not Lelouch's first kiss by any means but the first one that isn't… an empty nothing. It's something more and something he wants more of, a heating of his blood—

"You almost died twice," Lelouch says with hot possession against Suzaku's lips. "All I could do was watch."

No, don't bring that up – Lelouch can see in Suzaku's childish green gaze as his shoulders are clenched in the soldiered hands of a scrappy, summer kid.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, pinching a small scowl on Lelouch's face.

"I don't—" Lelouch runs out of words, out of thoughts. If he had any to start. Empty-headedness is unnatural. There's a twisting tangle pulsing somewhere between his head and stomach – his chest – that's both unpleasant and… not unpleasant.

He doesn't want to let Suzaku go.

Not then, not now.

Not ever.

Lelouch tries again, ignoring his crisscrossing instincts to lean in and press more softly against Suzaku's lips with less force and roar but not less power or… rawr. He sees green eyes slide shut and then feels the younger boy melt more than before.

This is better.

Words are meaningless and inferior.

Lelouch doesn't know how long their lips smoothly rub against each other, the tender way they open and the taste of Suzaku floods his mouth. A distant flavor of fruit swaying on the hint of tongue and Lelouch finds his hands on the small of Suzaku's back because that's… just where they should be. Maybe like how Suzaku's hands just need to be clinging to Lelouch's elbow and shoulder. Wall by wall and seam by seam the bathroom dissolves into a hammering in Lelouch's chest (and traveling farther south) until there is only the flush touching of their bodies and mouths spooning in a stretching kiss that deepens, sinks deeper into his bones—
But their lips are unlocked by an abrupt (rude) buzzing in Suzaku's pocket. The haze is cleared completely when Suzaku answers a call and the sound of him taking (somebody else's—Britannia's) orders for the evening fills the room instead. Like a bad smell…

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"Kneel," Lelouch commands and his devilish delight practically sets the air ablaze around him when the second prince lowers to his knees. There's never been a more wondrous sight.

Mental image saved and archived.

Certainly won't get dusty…

Jeremiah removes the false restraints from Lelouch's wrists before walking over to lift a still-conscious but limp Villetta off the floor and into a chair. Lelouch, meanwhile, savors the moment with a wicked smirk carved into his lips at the defeated sight of his older brother utterly prostrated. Utterly.

Prostrated.

"Marianne vi Britannia," But it's time for Lelouch to mix business with pleasure, "who killed her?"

"I don't know," Schneizel answers in monotone.

Lelouch glowers, "Clovis said you investigated, but you don't know?" It's not possible that he's lying, Lelouch's Geass is the ultimate truth serum, but it's suspicious nonetheless.

"No, I only removed her body."

*Removed her body? "Explain,"* Lelouch commands in a near-growl.

"After she was discovered, I oversaw that her body was taken and discretely secured in a safe location."

…What the hell is that even supposed to mean?

Although, there was never really any sort of official service for her – none that Lelouch can recall. Maybe he was too young and upset, what with Nunnally in the hospital, but…

"Did father arrange her death?"

"I cannot say for certain."

"...Did you?" Lelouch incredulously asks from a different angle despite knowing that there's no loophole in his Geass interrogation.

"No."

Disappointing. Schneizel is more useful alive than dead so maybe it's for the best that he isn't the murderer, near or far. His death would've been too tempting – although enslavement is still immensely satisfying. Doesn't get Lelouch closer to any answers, however.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Toppling Schneizel lines Lelouch up for the ultimate checkmate.
"Just… what the hell is going on here?" Villetta slowly rasps an interjection with confusion, eyes sharpening on her former comrade. "You shot me."

"It was a temporary paralyzing agent," Jeremiah corrects. Instantly potent, it's fast-acting but not long-lasting (and with a blood burst capsule, for effect). "It was necessary. I knew you would only believe this if you saw it."

Indeed. She should be grateful that Lelouch brought a modified pistol – a partial risk, he was only about 87% certain that Schneizel would try to execute her, fortunately, Lelouch has always been 1000% certain that Schneizel is the type of asshole prone to such.

(And that Lelouch might've done similar if he was in his brother's place.)

Her brow deeply furrows, "Believe what? That you've really turned and have been working with Zero this whole time?"

"I have not turned on my country. This is about saving it, even from itself." Jeremiah proudly defends (If that's what the Orange thinks, Lelouch won't stop him.) "Don't you see? He's a prince, he has a right to the throne."

Only, like, seventeenth in line for it… by legitimate means.

Though that was according to seven years ago.

But who's counting?

Villetta scoffs with dripping disdain, "This is betrayal and… treason no matter how you try to reason it. I can't believe I'm hearing this from you."

"Betrayal? Treason?" Lelouch honestly tries not to laugh, but there's no stopping the trickle of ironic chuckles. "Is this loyalty to the same country that revels in watching you climb an unending ladder? That would sooner push you off of it than offer you a hand up?" Lelouch gestures to Schneizel, kneeling like a true sheep. "Your own Prime Minister would rather kill you and keep this prize you offered for himself for his own advancement to the throne – but at least then they'd actually have a corpse to send back to your family. Because it's not as though they spent a single second looking for you after you went missing. Wrong allegiance?"

"You are a self-righteous hypocrite," she spits, gaining strength in her quivering limbs. "Killing your own flesh and blood, your brother Prince Clovis, for your own advancement."

"Villetta, please." Jeremiah steps between them with a sympathetic tone that sounds out of place in his mouth.

"She's not wrong," Lelouch interrupts almost casually as he shoves Schneizel's face down against the carpet with the dirty bottom of his boot.

(…He probably shouldn't linger around Schneizel in this state for too long.)

"Your Highness?" Jeremiah curiously questions, drawing the teenager's eyes back up to him.

"My methods might not always be noble but my ends are vastly superior to any highborn 'noble' Britannian." Lelouch presses his heel into his brother's skull before pulling himself away to retrieve Zero's mask from the floor. Best to leave his mother's murder details for later, in private.

"You speak of justice as if you are the definition, but you're the same as the second prince you've
kowtowed,” Villetta spurns.

Ooh, ouch.

That's so uncalled for.

Comparing Lelouch to Schneizel like that.

But she's seeing the taint of the White Prince, at least.

"If that were true, I wouldn't have traded my pistol for a tranquilizer weapon, and we wouldn't be talking as we are now." Lelouch might be many things, but he is not his family.

That gives her enough pause but defiance is a rooted fire in her eyes.

"So you didn't kill me. What do you want? What happens now?"

"Answer me this: Would you rather be a ranking officer on a sinking ship or in the favor of the island that keeps you from drowning?"

Her amber eyes flit, rereading his words coasted into the air, "…Are you even giving me a choice?"

"More choice than my dear brother," Lelouch lances a leer in Schneizel's direction. No, using the fact that he can subjugate isn't the best persuasive path, but he just can't stop basking. Glorious, unfettered basking.

"And if I refuse?" Villetta challenges – she's quite spirited and it's… kind of refreshing. "This is still treason," she argues with anxious eyes at Jeremiah. "It's—!"

"No different than any other maneuver within the Empire," Lelouch cuts off her desperate, misplaced patriotism. "There are continuous plots to climb, even dethrone – something exacerbated by an Emperor who is more concerned about preaching than leading. That man leaves the rest of us to fight with each other rather than work together." He points to Schneizel. "Your precious Prime Minister is no different. He was going to kill you and maybe send your body back home in a box. Is this who you want to serve? Leadership that you can't even trust to stand with you when they should? That will always and only be out for itself? You want to get ahead of everybody else keeping you down, what does it matter how you get there?"

She's almost speechless, "…It's not that simple." Villetta Nu is Britannian born and can't argue the truth, but this system is the only one she's ever known and has tirelessly worked within to get where she is—and still, where has that gotten her? Even if she could've someday achieved whatever status she desires the fighting wouldn't end; she'd only have to guard her place more fiercely as yet another lion in the crowded den. With an impassive ringmaster Emperor barely taking notice.

"Isn't it?" Lelouch asks. "Work with me and you'll get security and a post."

"In exchange for my loyalty?" She can't stop challenging him but she's clearly wavering as if Lelouch plucked a thread and it's all she can do to keep from unraveling right into his hands. (Too late.) "What's to stop me from reporting you?"

"Kaname Ohgi," Lelouch simply utters and watches Villetta bristle into ice. "You must not have told your dear Prime Minister about where you really were all this time, with your secret love
affair; otherwise he would've considered you more valuable."

Her jaw tenses but she doesn't speak.

Unsurprising.

"You obviously didn't think him trustworthy. I just have to wonder if it was because you felt shame or… concern about the wellbeing of your paramour?"

"You mean the eleven terrorist holding me hostage?" Villetta venomously volleys. "If you expose me you would be exposing Ohgi, too. A terrorist keeping a Britannian officer hostage."

"Hostage?" Lelouch echoes with amusement. "It certainly doesn't appear that you were held against your will, does it?" he pulls photographs from inside his cape and lets them drop to the floor in front of her; images of shared smiles, warm embraces and no room for speculation. "You know how Britannians play. They always side with the bully and always blame the victim."

She can't meet his gaze.

Vulnerability confirmed.

"Or maybe you'd prefer to go back to the way you were? I can make that happen," Lelouch ominously boasts. "I can take each and every one of these shameful smiles and erase them."

It would be so easy.

Lelouch could wipe all of this from Ohgi's mind as well as reprogram Nu with Geass, leaving none-the-wiser and efficiently securing the situation.

Lelouch could do it… (It's the smart thing to do. Lelouch could do it.)

And be just like his father when he used Nunnally.

(But would Lelouch have done so if he hadn't learned about Nunnally…?)

"Every moment you spent with him. Each meal cascaded in conversation. The comforts of night and hope of morning. The restless waiting for him to return home with his smiling face. The warm feeling of his embrace, blanketing you in his scent. His voice soft in your ear. His sheepish laughter. All of it could be wiped clean as if it never even happened—"

"Stop it!" she vehemently objects practically shaking in distress.

Lelouch can feel himself in her shoes, thinking of Suzaku. He doubts he could make the thought of losing a… love sound so dire if he didn't have one. But Lelouch can't—won't dwell on that now.

"You… You blackmail me and still dress it up as a choice?" Villetta is exposing more than she thinks by clenching the arms of the chair as hard as she is.

"This isn't just about you anymore, don't you realize? Anything you do will also affect him. This isn't just about me, either. It's about protecting my people."

"Your people?"

"Those who stand with me," Lelouch clarifies without question and her stare falters. "He is a good person, you know this, and there are too few people like him – eleven or otherwise."
"He… deserves better than you," Villetta quietly admits.

Ohgi is her weakness, but he's also Lelouch's weakness. She's spent roughly half a year living with this man, seeing him at his most vulnerable and intimate and sharing these sides of herself as well in a bonding relationship that wouldn't have otherwise happened – he got in way over his head but obviously cares deeply for her. Perhaps they are not sides she wanted to know she has, maybe she doesn't consider them to be real and she's free to determine whatever she wishes about them, but Ohgi is…

"Yes," Lelouch likewise agrees, "he does."

That seems to surprise her. All this time behind a mask, a faceless enemy promising only destruction to the unjust, a symbol rather than a person, perhaps she didn't think a human heart could beat at Zero's center.

"Jeremiah, you… really believe in this?"

"I believe in him, yes," the guardsman answers resolutely and without hesitation – it feels pretty good. "I understand your apprehension, but you know I would not stand with him, take these risks, if I didn't. Things cannot stay the way they are"

True enough, Jeremiah has been fanatical in his dedication to Britannia – Lelouch might've thought it was purely selfish interest in rising up the tiers, but now with all this business regarding his mother, perhaps Jeremiah isn't as shallow as he seemed.

"…What…" Villetta is able to hold herself upright in the chair and rub her face with tentative resignation. "What would you want me to do?"

Yes, about that—Lelouch opens his mouth but feels his phone buzz in his pocket. He turns away and presses it to his ear.

"We have to leave." C.C.'s surprisingly alarmed voice speaks on the other end. "Now."

"So impatient," Lelouch calmly replies, knowing he's being heard by the other two. "I'll be—"

"THEY have Suzaku."

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["Shouldn't this be happening before or after school?" Suzaku asks. "Or at least during our free period?"

"You're not actually complaining, are you?" is Lelouch's blasé dismissal.

"Just wondering after your intentions," Suzaku mutters semi-loudly.

Making Lelouch lift an eyebrow at him.

"I mean, you don't have to protect me."

"I do what I want to." Lelouch lifts his nose. "Those cretins don't concern me. After everything, it's not so unreasonable for you to have a skip period to adjust and relax. As the Vice President of the Student Council, it is practically my duty to aid you in this transition."
"So you pulled me out of P.E. for the rest of the week to adjust and relax by peeling potatoes?"
Suzaku skeptically questions, looking to Lelouch standing next to him at the kitchen island where
he’s helping his friend prepare for cooking dinner later.

Lelouch, apparently, made the _executive_ decision to get Suzaku "excused" from gym class courtesy
of a rather _mysteriously_ obtained but official pass from a guidance counselor.

Suzaku isn't sure if he agrees and realizes Lelouch is also using this time to purposely avoid his
most detested class, but… also realizes that the gesture itself isn't such a bad thing. The older boy
cut the entire school day yesterday and it was… odd. Lelouch skipping lessons isn't unusual, but a
full day? And after their… moment in the bathroom? Seems like obvious avoidance but somehow
that just seems so… _high school_ for Lelouch? To kiss Suzaku and then leave him to simmer alone
with wonder – if Lelouch had been gone longer Suzaku would think the Britannian was doing it on
purpose as some kind of _romance mind-game_.

Although, it… is kind of endearing that _Mister Cool_ could be this awkward.

"Chopping and peeling can be therapeutic," says the prince dicing stalks of celery with a rhythmic
run of his blade.

"Maybe for you," Suzaku grumbles at the stubborn spud in his grip that he can only seem to hack
off chunks of skin with the knife rather than, well, actual peels.

Lelouch looks at the not-handy work and grins.

"You're in the military but you don't know how to peel potatoes? Didn't they teach you anything?"
the homemaker teases, wiping his hands on his apron and sidling up close to the soldier.

"They don't like numbers touching their food."—It's out of Suzaku's mouth before he realizes, and
the discomfort of those words snaps around both of them like a padlock. Lelouch's hands falter and
Suzaku vainly tries to swallow the words he didn't really mean to say out loud.

Lelouch doesn't retort or scathingly scorn, just gently takes Suzaku's untrained hands and puppets
them under his careful, artful, masterful pair. He firmly holds Suzaku's hand clutching the root
vegetable and glides the knife just under the skin with the other hand so the right amount of
pressure can be felt. Lelouch's hands are soft but not pampered, and they feel nice on Suzaku's skin.

"You're not trying to whittle a stick. Dig in a little and take it slow _with_ the contours." Lelouch's
voice is patient and soothing, and Suzaku realizes this is probably how he would teach Nunnally
who needs to _feel_ how to do it.

Suzaku can suddenly feel his heart beating in his hands and wonders—hopes Lelouch can't hear or
feel it pounding in his chest.

"Just like that." Lelouch takes the fully skinned potato and places it in an empty bowl beside
another bowl full of others waiting to be peeled. He looks at Suzaku with a smile—

That rather quickly flattens under surprised eyes at the sight of Suzaku's blushing face.

"Right." The brunet takes another potato and tries to repeat what he was shown.

"Careful and steady. It's not a race," Lelouch instructs instead of acknowledging Suzaku's apparent
embarrassment. "At least, not until you get better at it."

_That_ sounds like an _entendre_ and it makes Suzaku turn even redder and nearly slice open his own
"I said careful and steady," Lelouch admonishes. "I should think you at least know how to follow orders."

The younger releases pent-up breath but doesn't say anything else. Lelouch smiles a little seemingly to himself as he continues cutting the rest of the celery stalk and carrots that will be added to a light roast he's letting cook on low through the afternoon in a crock-pot for tonight's dinner. Suzaku steals furtive glances now far more distracted and feels less able than before to peel these blasted root foods, but he manages somehow, trying to carve away the nerves with each potato skin.

Soon enough they've finished. Lelouch adds the assorted chunks to the pot while Suzaku cleans the knives and cutting boards – because that much he can do.

But the lack of words between them is louder than clashing knightmare battles.

Suzaku dries his hands with a towel, watching Lelouch pinch a little more of this and that into the pot, stir and taste, before closing it with the glass lid and adjust the dial setting.

It occurs to Suzaku that they probably won't be discussing the bathroom face-maul. It almost feels like Lelouch knows Suzaku is waiting for something and deliberately not doing or saying anything, and it's maddening.

"So, are we going to peel and chop various other vegetables for the rest of the week?" Suzaku tries to joke when Lelouch turns towards him – but it's mirth without wings and falls splat on the floor right between them. He kind of wishes he'd just stayed silent.

"Practice makes perfect," is Lelouch's snappy deadpan response.

But his stare.

It's... so adult and precise. It's Lelouch but it's not Lelouch. It's the cloudy musk of yesterday's kiss and it's scary but also... tingly; a small quiver in Suzaku's bones. This isn't the snotty kid prince. This is the handsome outcast that knows what he wants like a prowling panther. When did Lelouch learn to stare like that? How is Lelouch even capable of staring like that?

Suzaku is just a giant, breathing heartbeat.

He almost feels like prey, helpless in the trance of a snake feeling anxiety bubble in his belly – that spikes when Lelouch steps closer. Suzaku closes his eyes, thinking he much preferred the kiss that surprised him rather than the slow-burning tension baking his skin and how he's pretty sure that his flapping heart will fly out of his mouth if he tries to speak. But it isn't fear. It's nervous... something. He can feel Lelouch's breath on his mouth and it's like all his nerves and senses are magnetized to the body in front of him just barely not touching... lingering heat crackling between them...

But

Nothing

Happens.

Suzaku cracks his green eyes open seeing Lelouch's smirk.
"If you want to go back to class tomorrow, or... come here, that's your choice," he so very coolly says as if whatever heated, riling essence he just had sunk under his skin (Suzaku didn't just imagine that, did he? How could he?) and he pulls the towel so very slowly from Suzaku's strangling fingers. "But I'll be here."

Suzaku is instantly irritated that he's pretty sure he's radiating red all over and sweating in places he didn't know he could nervously sweat while Lelouch is so damn nonchalant and aloof like a snake slithering across still water. Then again, Lelouch is probably incapable of actually breaking a sweat, the fussy prince.

"You're also welcome to join us for dinner and enjoy your hard work," Lelouch adds absurdly casually. "I know Nunnally would love it."

Suzaku slightly scoffs – this guy... is he seriously using Nunnally against Suzaku right now?

"Unfortunately, I have work tonight, so I can't."

Lelouch's mouth softly bends into a smile that feels a tad... mocking?

"That's too bad," the older boy says, turning away and hanging the towel on the oven handle. Suzaku watches with a longing gaze and can't help agreeing.

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Suzaku grips the knife with a small hand and a heart beating like the wings of a hummingbird as he lunges to plunge it deep into his father's flesh. It sinks through skin almost like through butter and blood instantly weeps from the wound. His little, ten-year-old feet are off the floor, the pristine wooden planks and white rug speckling with red, as he falls with his father. A towering man that crashes like a redwood. Suzaku is left kneeling in the lake of blood that just might become an ocean and swallow him...

He looks down at his stained hands.

At his father's glassy, dead eyes—

And jumps to his feet with tears welling in his emeralds eyes he inherited from his mother, throwing the knife down.

No.

This isn't real.

This isn't happening.

He didn't—

Suzaku whirls around and sprints from the room, through parted paper doors—

Reentering from the darkness with the same knife clutched in his shaking hand.

And again, he's lunging, stabbing, feeling the world fall out of place as he kneels in blood that should be less than what would flood his homeland. Just a lake instead of a tsunami seeping into the cracks of the polished wooden floor rather than their small island home. His father lies in his
own blood blooming in a circle on the large white rug like their flag hanging proudly on the wall—
But it's still a stain. It's on his hands. It doesn't wash off.
No.
This isn't real.
This isn't happening.

*He wouldn't—*

Suzaku's eyes overflow with tears as he races out of the room—
Only to return again from the darkness.
Take his father's life again.
Run away.
Return.

He can't escape. There isn't any escape. No outrunning. How many times has he tried? Tears unending. Less like a memory and more like a nightmare, but he can't wake up. How did he get here? He remembers lying down to nap in Lelouch's bed and now he's just—

Throwing his weight into the thrust of the knife, because he's just a boy and his father is the mountain that wouldn't bow to the sun. Son… The rising one on the wall Suzaku wanted to protect. And the blood is dark and hot on his skin, thick in his nose and swimming on his tongue, his stomach curdles. He leaps up, dropping the knife—

No.
This isn't real.
This isn't happening.

*He couldn't—*

Suzaku is staring down in horror at his hands thick with blood when water falls from above him. Rain. He looks up, maybe for the first time since being in this… dream to see the universe staring down on him. It's billion starry eyes twinkling near and far while a faceless Jupiter looms directly overhead. Suzaku's eyes drop back down to his hands being rinsed of red, streams dripping from his teenage knuckles and fingertips—

Other than a thin thread strung around his left pinky, slackened but leading right into the darkness of the looping doorway that's been trapping him. A cage. Not a dream or a nightmare. The rain falls harder, thicker, washing away the blood lake. Or at least diluting it. There is no clearing this slate, can't forget—

The red thread tugs his finger—

The doors slam shut on the string. No longer paper now metal like the ones to the Ashford Clubhouse—

He beats the doors with his fists. Yanks the handles. They don't budge.
Won't let Suzaku leave.

Can't keep Suzaku trapped.

The thread is unbreakable and it tightens before pulling like the trunk of an elephant, ripping Suzaku right through the seam—

...-

...-

[Of course, it rains the next day, heavily, essentially negating outdoor activities in physical education class – not that such stormy weather extinguishes all activity. As far as Lelouch is concerned, there's no difference. The sky is dark and the clouds are clapping with thunder but it might as well be clear and sunny in his mind. His bigger problem at present is the pizza-witch that is currently threatening the sanctity of Nunnally's bedroom not unlike the poison gas she was masked to be.

"I told you I don't want you in here—Don't touch that!" Lelouch snaps, yanking a glass figurine of a horse from C.C.'s probably greasy fingers. He delicately wipes the pink-tinted glass with a handy handkerchief from his pocket and placing it back atop Nunnally's dresser.

"Holing up in your room, staring at the same four walls, gets very dull. I need a change of view. Where else should I go?"

The prince calmly glowers but can't admit he doesn't have an answer.

"I don't like you in here," is all he can huff in response, flexing his healthy authoritative voice in a room where it doesn't belong. Like a cannonball through a china shop.

"Relax," she tonelessly says, not even a hint of comfort fluffing her tone. "I won't touch anything in this room nor will I leave it."

Despite Lelouch's irritation, he's instantly cooled by her plain words of concession.

Everything about this makes him uneasy and yet… it's sort of a blessing.

"Don't touch anything," Lelouch sternly repeats as he walks out of the room.

"...Enjoy your date."

Lelouch's spine ices but he manages to throw a melting glare at her back just before the door hisses shut. A door he decides to lock without telling her. She should manage well enough without feeding for a few hours. Lelouch proceeds down the hall toward the kitchen thinking of making tea when lightning flashes and thunder booms and bangs overhead—

But it's the slamming crash of hinged doors in the rotunda that alerts his nerves. He rushes to the front of the clubhouse to see the cause—

Finding a sopping Suzaku breathlessly dripping all over the floor.

Lelouch raises an eyebrow.

"10% less wetness really worth running through the rain?" he lightly teases. Walking or running in this weather a person is still going to get wet regardless.
Said brunet drops his bag to the floor with a(n ironically) dry glance before shaking the water off his hair with his hands as if he were a stray animal.

How undignified…

"It's dangerous to be out in a storm," the soldier supplies.

And yet he still ran through one, over dangerously slippery grounds no less. Lelouch wasn't actually… entirely certain that Suzaku would come again today, so he's honestly surprised to see him burst through the doors like they're broken floodgates. He's even… pleased that the idiot rushed over through such weather.

"You're a walking hazard, getting the floor all wet," Lelouch scolds, grabbing the younger boy by his elbow. "Come, I'll get you some towels."

-.-

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea to skip today," Suzaku says as he rubs his head with a fluffy white hand towel.

"Because of the storm?" Lelouch asks conversationally, something he realizes he doesn't really do (or does he?) as he sets out a battery lantern alongside some lighted, battery candles on the coffee table, just in case. Their soft, faux-flame flicker adds to the low light of Lelouch's desk lamp filling his room behind closed curtains.

"Do you think the power will cut out?" Suzaku asks.

Nunnally should be fine. The storm sounds bad but predictions indicate it should disperse before the afternoon and she isn't frightened by the noise anymore.

"Even if it does there are emergency generators." Lelouch turns around seeing that even though Suzaku has removed his topcoat the rain apparently soaked right through the seemingly thick layer to bleed his white undershirt. Forcing the rather transparent front to cling to his chest. By the looks of it, Suzaku must be cold. "Your clothes won't be dry and wearable soon enough," Lelouch says a lot louder than he intended and slightly startles the other boy. "You should take them off. I'll lend you a set of mine." It'll be long in the limbs, maybe, but their builds are similar.

He doesn't wait for any sort of acknowledgment from Suzaku before walking to his closet, but he does hear an awkward laugh tumble from Suzaku's mouth. Lelouch hangs the wet topcoat on a clothes rack, used for carting clean uniforms from the wash, sitting near the closet and returns to Suzaku with a fresh set.

Suzaku, his childhood mate, standing in his bedroom in only undershorts.

A pair of plain old striped ones, at that.

(Lelouch has to give credit to the weather; it's nearly doing half the work for him.)

Lelouch hands over his uniform shamelessly eyeing the bare boy. Suzaku has a… nice body? Is that a thing people say? Not the first time Lelouch has seen another boy in their skivvies, but this is more pleasing on the eyes. Could be more pleasing if not for the angering sight of bruise stains of bullying on his skin. Lelouch is touching them again without even thinking of it, a nurturing reflex from being a surrogate parent but not one he shares with anyone other than Nunnally.

"Does it still hurt? I can get the liniment," Lelouch offers, fingertips caressing a bruise creeping
over Suzaku's shoulder.

"No, it's fine," he answers, a bit quickly.

Lelouch doesn't pull his tracing fingertips away, drawn to the memory of healing kisses and the way Suzaku's face reddened in the bathroom just days ago. How that led to a different kind of kiss. Was that a healing one? It felt—

Thunder crashes down on them and Suzaku jumps into a poorly-suppressed simper—

While Lelouch is struck with the memory of the gunshot that speared right through him, shatter his very core when it claimed Suzaku. They were only just reunited after seven years and then—

Suzaku died once, as far as Lelouch could tell, and the instant his friend was in danger again after Clovis he swooped in for the rescue. Timing is critical, it's an art, but it's not to be wasted and once Lelouch has decided something he doesn't dally, dither and would never wait for somebody else to make it happen.

Lelouch takes his fate and life into his own hands.

The discarded prince leans in, boldly as he pleases, with his hand skimming up Suzaku's neck, seeing the soldier swallow, and seals their lips together. It occurs to Lelouch that this is the second time he's taken a kiss from his friend, but it's also the third time he hasn't been stopped or pushed away.

Rejected.

Suzaku is accepting, an open door that welcomes him inside, and Lelouch pulls them closer, dipping into a deep kiss. Suzaku tightly grabs hold of Lelouch's elbows and it's like their bathroom kiss all over again. Almost. There's a touch of more certainty grounding them. Lelouch's fingers thread up Suzaku's nape into damp, frizzy brown curls and he can feel the roughened patch of the reunion scar with his other hand that snakes around the soldier as if with a mind of its own. He wants… desires to have—claim Suzaku.

In a way that nobody else can.

Or should.

"Not such a bad idea to skip today, right?" Lelouch murmurs against Suzaku's moist lips, a familiar moment he's content to relive.

"…Yeah…" Suzaku breathes back under a more distant rumble of thunder rolling above but away from them.

The clean uniform plops on the table while a wet one drops to the floor in a most unruly fashion and Lelouch is pushing a compliant Suzaku toward the bed as they descend again into feverish kisses. There's no fog in Lelouch's head, his brain is very much at the wheel and he's very aware of everything. Of himself, of Suzaku, of how hot these uniforms can get. It's a lot of stiff black and Lelouch is tugging off his topcoat and making himself more comfortable between Suzaku's bent legs… It's not something Lelouch has felt for anybody before but somehow he understands this new language his body is speaking. Maybe it's been whispering to him in his sleep or maybe it was always there and finally has reason to wake. Doesn't make much of a difference to Lelouch. His brain has new gears to shift and everything in his being is telling him that this with Suzaku is correct.
Not so much like the stars and planets have aligned, but that the math is right and doesn't lie.

Because math never lies.

It's math.

It brings comfortable logic to a situation where Lelouch might've felt discomfort, anxious, insecure or otherwise. He just feels the deep beats of his heart bouncing around inside his skin and the fingers curling into the loose fabric on the back of his undershirt. Lelouch doesn't want to part from tasting the learning shift of their tongues for even a second and before he even realizes it's happening the buttons of his shirt are freed by Suzaku's fingers. Feeling encouraged rather than invasive, Lelouch sheds his uniform shirt and it's almost instantly replaced with Suzaku's sweeping hands. They smooth hot reassurance into Lelouch's skin and he pushes a hand between them to ease some comfort from his pants when a need for air finally parts their mouths. Lelouch is intending to dive back in as is fly is loosened—

But Suzaku has noticed a pattern of bruises on Lelouch's skin, on his arm where the bully restrained him. Suzaku pushes himself up to gingerly touch the finger-shaped splotches with concern and sadness.

"You lied," he murmurs through a droopy frown.

"I said it was fine, and it is," Lelouch corrects in an even but quiet tone. "You don't have to worry about it."

It looks bad but it really doesn't hurt. It just stands out on Lelouch's pearly skin.

But of course, Suzaku doesn't look convinced. (And that's a familiar reflection of Lelouch himself.)

Rain is pelting the windows and trampling the roof overhead while Suzaku's fingers slide away with regret, slinking into the curve of Lelouch's shoulder and neck. There's a lingering stain of guilt on his face before he closes his fretful eyes and pulls the older boy in for a kiss. A measuring kiss that sifts deeper into their mouths and brings Suzaku's other hand skating up Lelouch's bumpy spine. Again thunder booms and lightning cracks, drenching the world outside in water and dark, natural chaos with a tease of danger. Somehow it's the perfect atmosphere – or maybe that's just Lelouch not knowing what is or isn't romantic. It's almost like clashing in battle, crushing enemies under his boots, but better.

(Because this is… partnership.

Lelouch and Suzaku working together, achieving something they couldn't apart.)

Well, not exactly…)

It starts as settling into the partial familiarity of their bolder mouths, the rubbing of their open lips and tentative tongues until it's as if Lelouch is searching for an answer in Suzaku's skin – to a question he'd never asked – as his hands and lips caress every inch. He listens to Suzaku's hitched breaths as his mouth travels down neck, feels skin pebble and muscles tighten under his fingers smoothing over contours. Lelouch follows his haunted senses over a breathing chest, tasting the hinted answer warming Suzaku's taut, smooth flesh with every press of his lips. He chases the unknown with feasting, fleeting nibbles that make the enigma under him quiver and sigh like a faint breeze ghosting over a pond. Lelouch is hardly even noting his path as his mouth travels downward, no breadcrumbs to follow back (he doesn't want to go back), just heeding the secret call of his blood singing through Suzaku's body until he hits waistband. He ricochets and kisses his way
back up, licking over a quivering navel and then tastes his way back up between a pair of stiff nipples, one of which Lelouch idly rubs with his thumb.

A tremble of Suzaku's voice through the heating air calls Lelouch's wandering mind back home and he opens eyes not even realizing they were closed. He rises and sees that Suzaku has also risen and is completely red. From the tips of his ears down to below his navel he's swathed in a glow that rivals the shackle of Geass in the eyes of those Lelouch conquers, that only he can see – but where there is tranquil submission, here is an unsettled wind in grassy green eyes.

"Are you alright?" Lelouch's soft question is chased by a deep but more distant growl of thunder.

"It's... just a lot." It's hard to tell if Suzaku is certain of anything himself. "And I haven't... been with anyone before."

Neither has Lelouch. "Do you want to stop?" Because unlike so many pawns, rooks or otherwise, Suzaku always has a choice.

Suzaku holds what looks like a considering pause and it actually seizes Lelouch's heart in a freezing grip, afraid for a second that this might end.

"No," he answers. "No, but we don't have a lot of time." Suzaku looks uncomfortable – but maybe that's understandable, being new at this. And apparently, Lelouch just tried to tongue-bathe him, so...

(So, "whatever we're going to do, we should get to it" is what he means?)

At any rate, Suzaku is right about their limited time. Lelouch more than doubts he'll just roll out of bed and go to class after... after, but it's probably best to heed his friend. Lelouch could've been happily lost tracing Suzaku's every vein with his tongue and that level of blissful unawareness is almost kind of... unnerving? Because it's not like him? Or because he doesn't care about being so entranced?

Lelouch pulls himself away from Suzaku, remember something vital, to rifle in a low desk drawer for the totally-innocent-hand-lotion bottle. When he looks back at Suzaku it's clear in both of their stares that they're crossing over the line between friendship and... whatever comes after this. ... Should that be scary? Lelouch feels confident that what is happening now and what follows is how it should be. He's led the way this far, so... down go his Ashford slacks and undershorts and up goes a strange smile wiggling on Suzaku's mouth.

"...What is that smi—Don't smile like that at a time like this," Lelouch scolds – this is exactly the wrong time to make that face.

"I'm not," Suzaku very weakly defends.

Lelouch is not amused, "And I suppose you're not laughing, either."

"No—I mean, it's not—I'm sorry," flushed Suzaku flounders, still unable to stop simpering. "You could let me be a little awkward right now, can't you?"

Lelouch's face thoughtfully relaxes. He spoons up closer between Suzaku's legs, smoothing his hand on the outside of one thigh.

"Just realized your childhood friend has manly genitals, didn't you—?"

"Jeez—!" Suzaku slaps his hands over his grinning face. "Don't say manly genitals 'at a time like
Lelouch softly grins and wedges himself on his knees between open thighs that softly sandwich him. He gently eases the weight of his hips down while lightly kissing the back of Suzaku's fingers, spotting over knobby knuckles until they pull away like a curtain and Lelouch is able to kiss that awkward little mouth. Suzaku's smile melts against Lelouch's lips and he slips his hand over an ivory neck, body lightly shifting as their bodies meet. There's focus on the slow motions of their mouths again, now with hips and the warm touch of their rubbing skin – like easing into a hot bath. Slowly, it doesn't seem so strange. The Britannian boy nurtures a desire to explore Suzaku's body and understand it like rolling his fingers across the keys of a piano for the first time – all he wants to do is make it sing. His fingers skim over and into counters still seeking the secrets sewn into Suzaku's skin with the urge heating his blood, smoothing over taut skin not his own and noting every bend, quiver and shift under his touch—

Until he chances brushing over the soldier's stiff nipple and a muffled sound passes between their tongues to ripple down Suzaku's body. Lelouch spoons off Suzaku's lips with checking eyes, listening to the soft moan turning in the brunet's throat when he sweeps over it again. He smooths over the standing nub and watches pleasure darken Suzaku's cheeks more, feeling a hint of fingernails in his back.

"Have a lot of practice at this, do you?" Suzaku breathily murmurs with that unusual cheeky undertone again.

"Lots," Lelouch easily grins. He's actually just a fast learner.

Suzaku lightly shoves the teasing Britannian's shoulder.

"We can stop whenever you want," Lelouch says clearly and in all seriousness.

Suzaku gazes up at him for a beat and then slides a hand over a nape of dark locks, "I don't want to stop." Then he lifts his head up a little to reach Lelouch's lips.

Maybe not yet, Lelouch thinks, but it's still a… good (thrilling, exciting, relieving) thing to hear.

Lelouch, of course, hasn't with anyone, either. Nobody has ever warranted even the glancing thought. Even as he hears Suzaku's soft moans and feels Suzaku's body stirring under him as he rubs a sensitive nipple, he doesn't think he's missed much. He leaves Suzaku's lips again to hear shy moans and watch the bashful blushing while he more firmly tweaks the pink bud. The younger boy turns his face as if trying to hide under his own flush and it makes Lelouch smile. He kisses a turned cheek, feeling the heat seep into his lips, and lets his fingers skate away farther down Suzaku's body, grazing a full arousal tented in boxers between them. Lelouch tucks his fingers under the waistband and, when Suzaku lifts his own hips, slowly pulls them up thighs and over knees. The former royal sits up and unabashedly takes in the view, Suzaku still very much a red lobster, before taking the lotion bottle to squeeze some on his fingers. Their eyes meet again and Lelouch realizes the tremendous amount of trust it takes Suzaku to allow himself to be this vulnerable; on his back with his knees apart and…

And then Lelouch's brain just… sort of falls between Suzaku's spread thighs.

Feeling it pulse in his manliness.

Perhaps he is only a skin sack of hormones, after all.

Lelouch smears the sweet-smelling lotion on his fingers and lowers them, watching Suzaku's body
twitch before grabbing the pillow under his head when a coated fingertip presses and circles his entrance before dipping. Suzaku is tight around just one finger and Lelouch tries to be gentle as he slowly pushes in farther into this convulsing heat tempting him in more hasty throbs.

"Is this all right?" Lelouch softly asks when he's in up to his knuckle.

Suzaku mutely nods.

Lelouch withdraws, adds more lotion and repeats. He paints the scrunched opening a little and slides in his finger faster, pushing deeper. Suzaku's body bows in a way that angles his backend down and Lelouch briefly wonders if maybe it would've been easier to do this with Suzaku on his knees – but then he wouldn't be able to see his face. Doesn't look like he doesn't like it, at any rate, and Lelouch will stop the moment that changes. For now, Suzaku's body looks to be reacting positively with his scarlet skin, formed erection, piercing nipples, twitching thighs and gripping—

"…You're staring…" Suzaku mutters in a bashful shuffle, looking away from Lelouch's intense gaze.

"Should I be looking somewhere else?" Lelouch asks between dubious and sincerity. He's fairly certain visual confirmation is important.

Suzaku mutters something in Japanese that Lelouch can't distinguish and turns his face bashfully away again.

A small, twitching smirk of amusement escapes Lelouch's control.

Lelouch realizes it's not unreasonable for Suzaku to be self-conscious or uncomfortable – but he shouldn't be. Rather, Lelouch doesn't want him to feel that way. So he kisses the corner of Suzaku's mouth, coaxing the brunet into returning with a fuller, open kiss and he seems happy for the distraction. Their tongues turn in a slow dance and Lelouch can feel Suzaku's tighten around his finger with hands gripping his shoulder when he slides in a second, pushing a wave through Suzaku's hips. A mewl hums in the soldier's chest as his hand rakes into and holds Lelouch's licorice locks through the loosening of their lips. The Britannian feels emboldened and takes the leap to mouth Suzaku's neck while twisting his fingers in deeper and the smothered sound Suzaku makes seeps out of his throat a little stronger. Lelouch spreads his wet digits in Suzaku's clamping ring of heat, tasting the nervy shifting of skin faintly dewing with sweat (or is that still just rainwater?). He bites as if to have more, to devour, and listens to his cherished friend's breathing hasten, sharpen – his body can't seem to settle on being tense or lax. The older boy himself is feeling a churning rush to his hardening length but is still enjoying carefully plucking Suzaku's strings. He tries nibbling at Suzaku's earlobe (because that's a thing that happens) and it rolls a shudder through the brunet's body all the way down to the opening squeezing around his fingers.

Seems Suzaku's body is sensitive and Lelouch figures that works to his advantage. He moves downward, painting Suzaku's chest with his hot breath until his returns to the pink pair he only sampled earlier – tasting one with a light brush of his tongue tip. Suzaku's voice croaks a bit, sounding like it escaped but caught halfway and Lelouch repeats, hearing more stifled sounds. Seems his nipples are also not just sensitive but arousing, and that's a good thing – not just because it's useful for helping to distract him from the long fingers filling and spreading him, but because it also seems to make him feel good. He squeezes tighter around Lelouch's shifting, diving fingers while a tongue lightly laps at a pink stud that pushes up into the wet teasing with a bow of Suzaku's back. Lelouch flicks it with the tip of his tongue a few times more, his steamy breath still pooling over Suzaku's skin, before he closes his mouth around and tests a little suck. Suzaku's clamps even harder inside and his legs squish Lelouch's sides with an encouraging sound – less muffled by nerves than it has been. So Lelouch does it again and doesn't stop, hands rewarding him
with a sharp clench in his hair. He pokes at the standing bud in his mouth, thinking he can almost feel Suzaku's pleasure through osmosis as it begins to meld their skin together. Lelouch's body is hot and his heart is beating in more than just his chest when he lifts his mouth to land on the other erected nipple and slides in a third finger. Hips rut against Lelouch, heels push his back down, and already he's not sure how much more he can take. His childhood friend is gasping, naked and pleasured under him, and it's all racing straight to a place that (as far as he can tell) leads most other people.

Lelouch rises from Suzaku's chest, mouth wet and cheeks burning — throbs throbbing when he sees the… pure desire melted in green eyes. He asks if Suzaku is ready, because he'll wait if he has to, and the Japanese boy nods with little more than a murmured sound. Lelouch takes the lotion to coat himself—flinching at the coldness. He reapplyes to Suzaku as well (apparently can't have too much between them) and hears preparing breaths while watching his long digits paint and push inside a boy that was once too stubborn to share. (And now he gives everything?) Lelouch aligns himself with only a glance back at evergreens because more than that is just a little too much at the moment and then tries to ease himself in. A strange sound groans out of Suzaku's throat almost as if the air is being let out of his body when Lelouch pushes into him. Lelouch's breath is caught in the daze around his head at feeling so much tight heat hugging his hard flesh. He's grounded by the drag of nails down his back.

And certainly, at this moment, both boys share the astonishment that, yes, this is totally happening. Lelouch is inside Suzaku.

They went from barely having their first kiss in the bathroom to inserting in barely three days?

It's weird and glorious and weird and amazing and weird and… damn, are Suzaku's nails a lot sharper than they look.

"Is it… Are you alright?" Lelouch asks with concern, only halfway inside. Suzaku looks… "Does it hurt?"

"It's fine," Suzaku pushes out of his lungs. Squeezing around Lelouch's intrusion.

Lelouch hesitates a moment, wondering in the contradiction of words and body.

But, he continues to push in anyway, making Suzaku's body curve and tighten all over.

"Is it… too deep?" Lelouch asks.

"It's really hard."

Lelouch is slightly amused by the husky murmur, "Is that a bad thing?"

Suzaku shakes his head, "It's… weird."

Lelouch looks down at their connection. This sort of thing… hurts for a reason, doesn't it? Lelouch tried to do what he's supposed to do (according to his thorough research), but Suzaku is… His body is… very tight.

"Is it too big?" Lelouch honestly asks, lifting his eyes—

To see Suzaku's lips sardonically curling at him.

"Don't get cocky!" he chides, tugging a fistful of Lelouch's hair, making the older boy wince.
And then lightly chuckle.

"Interesting word choice," Lelouch can't help quipping.

Suzaku sighs with a wry grin, hand sliding out black hair to gently cup Lelouch's face. Thumb tracing under his left eye.

And Lelouch leans down for a kiss that affectionately joins their lips.

"Is it bad?" Lelouch quietly asks in the tapering of their kiss and tension of their connection. They can still stop if it's too much...

Suzaku lightly shakes his head, "No..." and his hands slide into the loose hair dampening at Lelouch's nape to pull him into more kisses.

Relaxing kisses.

Lelouch tries to gently mouth any discomfort from Suzaku's body as the boy adjusts to being fully entered when he earns an intriguing sound from Suzaku's throat and he drifts lower. The older boy listens to the hitched breathing from the younger under him as he tongues a scarlet ear again, tracing the lobe. Perhaps not... the most pleasing taste but the shivers it sends down Suzaku's spine – and around Lelouch's length – are more than worth it. He isn't sure how long, or how much time he should give Suzaku, though, and he experimentally pulls his hips back, sliding out just enough to make a set of nails streak his back again. But Suzaku sounds... contented? Maybe? There's a thread of pleasure twisting with discomfort and maybe that's enough. For now, Lelouch slips his fingers between their chests to tease a pink nub like before to help strengthen the weaves of pleasure, and it seems to work. Suzaku squirms under the light pinching from fingertips and the moans that drip from his lips are sweet and fragile but his breath still somehow sounds like a wistful breeze.

Like a nostalgic memory shaded by something dark.

Speaking from experience, Lelouch thinks he understands that spectral feeling.

And why he senses it.

(Poetic, isn't he?)

But right now isn't about anything other than right now. It's not easy to forget (to let go) and although history may hound Lelouch at every step (to the point of directing his future) he wants to have moments that are his. And now Suzaku's.

Theirs.

Lelouch moves his hips again; his beginning movements are slow, shallow and careful. He listens to Suzaku's stilted gasps and feels him tighten. Watches the pressure building up inside him water and stream from his eyes even when he closes them. Lelouch has to admit he might be getting the better end of this deal, sinking into clenching, soft heat that melts his bones, but endeavors to make it better. He comforts with more kisses and realizes the boy is straining with hisses.

"Don't hold your breath," Lelouch puffs against the corner of Suzaku's panting mouth, feeling nails carve down his back.

Suzaku releases his breath, lungs loose around sounds that are almost words pushing from the hard flesh pushing up inside him. Lelouch curls his hand around Suzaku's stiffness and strokes to keep it
strong and make his cherished friend feel not just good but better. The younger boy reacts, body convulsing from his limbs to his insides that grip Lelouch's length when he slides in deeper. He lightly tongues Suzaku's ear and it makes nails dig deeper into his boney back along with ghosting moans and a shift of his hips—

He suddenly cries out from his gut when Lelouch strikes a certain something inside him that singes his nerves.

"Feel good?" Lelouch pants without stopping his hips – he knew for what he was aiming but it still caught him a little by surprise. Then again he's not super sure of what he should've been expecting.

Suzaku's initial answer is a spilling, stumble of a moan practically eaten up into his body with the older boy's thrusts. Quite the boost to Lelouch's ego, if he should say so.

"...Good..." Suzaku eventually huffs out.

The soldier seems to be chasing his own lungs and body as Lelouch thrusts in and out at a smoother pace. Wasn't so hard to find a good rhythm, Lelouch thinks as he grabs Suzaku's hip, but then again maintaining it is another matter. He pushes himself up for a better angle on his knees, making the other boy's open legs fall near his shoulders, and continues to pump a slick shaft with his hand as he throws himself a little harder—granting another surprised cry from Suzaku's throat. This isn't as hard as Lelouch thought it might be.

(...heh, hard.)

"Do you like it?" Lelouch hears himself asking in bold pants, staring down at the glaze of pleasure on Suzaku's face. "Here?"

"...Good," is all Suzaku can seem to voice again and the Britannian decides that's good enough – he's wearing it all on his face, anyway.

It's a mesmerizing sight.

And yet, there's also something... still off about it. Probably just the virginal experience (for both of them) but it does nibble uncomfortably at the edges of Lelouch's clearer thoughts. Maybe that's why his violets slide down at their connection. At the full girth of his bare erection sliding out and in, disappearing all the way to the trimmed patch of black hair. He stares at the tight ring swallowing his length and feeling Suzaku grip him every time he returns – not wanting to part but desperately wanting to savor the return. Lelouch almost can't pull out when he strikes that sensitive spot inside Suzaku and is clamped so divinely it makes his head sway. He's not entirely sure he should continue aiming for that button, at this rate. Too much too fast. He shifts his focus upward, jerking the handful of Suzaku's shaft, hot and slick in his palm, jumping with every heave of his hips.

Feels good. But still weird.

(Who would even think of fitting bodies together this way in the first place?)

It's the right motions if the currents of Suzaku's body and voice are any guide. Just follow the rhythm and flow, not so complicated when Lelouch stops thinking so much – and their eyes connect. He sees his friend like he's never seen anybody before. Not right through like when analyzing, but something deep inside. For a moment it's unnerving because he realizes that means Suzaku might be seeing the same – but is that bad? Lelouch bites at Suzaku's neck before he can decide, closing the door before too much is seen, and feels sinking nails sink slowly scrape his
shoulder blades as he listens to the brunet's moans surf over his lapping hips. Somehow their blood just knows where to take them and he's content to let it carry them away—

Abruptly Suzaku's whole body is a tight, stiff coil and with a scuttling sound, something spills past Lelouch's fingers. He slows—stops in surprise, feeling Suzaku squeeze almost unbearably around his beating erection and realizes that the younger has jumped ahead to the finish. Maybe it was all too much at once... or the right amount?

"...It...s... because before..." Suzaku murmurs, clearly embarrassed and looking as though he'd like to just fall through the floor right now. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Lelouch says – he's pretty sure this should be a compliment?

Suzaku's fingernails unhook from skin and he re-grips behind pale shoulders.

"...You can keep going," he says.

"...Are you sure?"

But Suzaku nods with clear emerald eyes and Lelouch leans down to kiss him, feeling fingers clenching his shoulders. Lelouch is still unfinished but it's a bit... impolite. Suzaku isn't just a thing. This isn't all about Lelouch; it's about both of them being together.

It's not fun if he's alone.

Lelouch kisses Suzaku's lips again, savoring a lingering press before moving down his neck with traveling fingers. He revisits the places that made Suzaku's body become alive. He likes pleasuring Suzaku and that in itself makes him feel good, too. Isn't that the way it should be? So the prince redirects, sucking Suzaku's tongue and lightly pinching a nipple and then there's a hint of a laugh in Suzaku's throat instead. A slight snicker spooling into loose mewls around the still-hard flesh moving within him again, he doesn't sound displeased. Suzaku's body is more relaxed than before but is still tight and Lelouch's pulsing hardness eases out and in with more confidence than when they started. He just gave Suzaku bliss. Not bad for the first time.

(The research absolutely helped.

And practice will make perfect.)

The secret Zero can feel the demand for bliss throbbing in his blood as he buries deeply into the velvet heat of Suzaku's body. He moves quickly and if he wasn't eager to slip over the tension of this peak he might be more concerned about this baser instinct. Suzaku is soon foaming again with panted moans, even ones that somewhat squeak against his rapidly rowing hips. Nails scrape the lower half of Lelouch's back but less like they're trying to contain something and more like they can't. The disgraced prince looks down at the pink face of his childhood friend pursed in more pleasure as he fills him deeply with his own flesh. It's a rushing, intoxicating feeling – which he uses to toss right back, or into, Suzaku. It only gets better the more the idiot enjoys it and that is where the real thrill lies. Without lie.

Lelouch is tempted to teeter-totter Suzaku on the brink for as long as he can, taste the craving on his tongue to just whip this boy into an unending frenzy. Reality, however, isn't so enthused. Lelouch finds himself out of steam rather suddenly and maybe too quickly. He hasn't exactly been counting the minutes. (...Or seconds. It's his first time, cut him some slack.) His lungs and muscles – some of which he didn't even know he had until now – burn with exhaustion over the churning
wild inside him. He finds himself biting Suzaku between neck and shoulder even though he can barely breathe. Like controlling an animal that wants to claw out of his skin with every lunge of his flesh into Suzaku's squeezing heat. The brunet makes enough sounds for both of them even though right now Lelouch would like to watch those emerald eyes boil and ooze with their overflowing lust. (It's invigorating to see Suzaku this way, all stripped down almost like the boy he used to be rather than the… what he's become since then.) His own peak is tipping over, all too quickly, and perhaps with a bit of desperation, he works his hand and hips together to push Suzaku once more before—

Lelouch is almost certain he can feel his life-force surging from his body, but it's pretty damn relaxing. He rides through the crashing waves of flashing, hitching pleasure that funnels out of him, feeling Suzaku clench around and clasp to him with lingering sounds and another release wet between them.

He made Suzaku climax twice on the first try.

Because Lelouch is just that amazing.

But too hot. And empty. He rolls over and lies still on his back in his bed next to Suzaku just waiting for his breathing to calm and not thinking about anything. A surprisingly comfortable emptiness in his head filled only by the thunder still brooding outside, although it sounds like it's crept more into the distance even as rain still taps the windows.

But such absence of thought – or peace – can't last long for Lelouch. He feels the bed shift and glances mostly by reflex (because C.C.) and sees Suzaku turning over onto his belly, still with a rouge on his cheeks. It's a good look on him. Lelouch would like to see it—all of this again (but… is there room behind the mask?)

How long or how much until it's too crowded in there?)

Right now he… just doesn't want to take his eyes off Suzaku's first afterglow, given by him.

"So… have you really ever done this with anybody else?" Suzaku tentatively asks, head resting on Lelouch's pillow scrunched in his folded arms. He sounds like he's expecting a certain answer but Lelouch isn't sure of which Suzaku wants to hear.

"No." For once Lelouch decides to be honest. Maybe Suzaku deserves that much, now.

Whatever he might've expected the brunet's reaction to be it's kicked out the window by a wide grin.

Lelouch is mildly annoyed. "What's with that look?"

"I had a feeling," Suzaku slyly says – but, sure, that's easy to say after the fact.

Lelouch doesn't know why that should deserve such a smug response and merely shortly sighs in response with closed eyes.

It's time for a nap.

Screw the rest of the school day.

Quiet blankets over them, aside from the lighter sheets of rain still thudding on the glass and roof. It's nice. And Lelouch thinks this right here is something he's glad to have. Another something worth defending against any force that might try to take it.
"I… I like this side of you," Suzaku says with soft sincerity.

Lelouch noncommittally hums but there's a warm, cozy smile snuggling him on the inside. (Behind a solid mask, where it'll be safe.) Then, with eyes still closed, he turns on his side toward Suzaku and drapes his arm over the bare back of his best friend. Because that's better than words. Because whatever else happens or comes, this moment (if nothing else) will always be this. And Suzaku will be his. What they were before now might be different, but not gone – just recreated.

*Nothing* in the Universe can *ever* change that and there's *nothing* Lelouch won't do to keep him.]

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A hasty hop, skip and a jump and Lelouch arrives at Kamine Island under the cloak of an evening sky. Nunnally is safe, still on campus with Alice and Sayoko and the club crowd is otherwise occupied. Suzaku was alone. Didn't seem like a risk at the time. Ashford has… been a safe haven for so long – until Jeremiah.

Lelouch should've known better.

Whatever beast sleeping under his nose is waking—has woken.

He hasn't been and won't be safe until certain heads roll.

C.C. hasn't indicated much beyond Suzaku's precarious state, other than she can't share more. Which is frustrating. Lelouch alerted Sayoko to be extra cautious with Nunnally while Jeremiah finishes with Villetta and Schneizel.

(Heh. That still feels good.)

C.C. leads him to a cave Lelouch visited before – well, more like passed through in a stolen knightmare after nearly being blasted off the face of the planet by schnitzel—uh, Schneizel. It's empty, no trace of whatever it is the second prince was doing – which is good but reminds Lelouch to pick his brother's brain for that later—

Lelouch feels his Geass tingle behind his eyes, not activate just *react*, and he stops short of the wall at the back of the cave carved with a pattern of lines he doesn't quite recognize even though it somehow feels familiar…

"…C.C." he calls to her, caution striking a flat echo against the rocky cavern walls.

Her fingers stop just shy of caressing the stone slab; her long limey hair swaying when she looks over her shoulder at him with solemn eyes.

"I'm…" She hesitates in a way she never has. "Suzaku is all right, but we should hurry."

"I need to know what I'm walking into."

"I know it isn't easy, but please trust me."

Lelouch's jaw clenches, but he joins her side. "I do."

This significance isn't lost on C.C. and a flickering twitch of a smile tugs a corner of her mouth, but it's too weak under her solid amber gaze.
"Lelouch," her voice is softer than her eyes seem to allow and her other palm tenderly cups his cheek. "Don't forget your promise."

"Which one?" he asks, a little sarcastically.

Her eyes are hollow, her voice distant, "All of them." She flattens her other palm against the carved wall—

Lelouch feels gravity break in his belly and his mind warps through an electric tangle to somewhere beyond this mysterious cave—

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At first, there is only light and the loose sensation of Lelouch pouring into himself like sand down an hourglass.

"I'm going to make this simple," the white space speaks in a childlike voice that he doesn't recognize. "Give me C.C." A boy. One with a smug, overly familiar tone.

"C.C. isn't property to be handed over," Lelouch austerely huffs, furrowing his brow – when he's sure he has his brow again. Disembodied voice or not, Lelouch doesn't follow anybody else's commands. C.C. is in here. If she wanted to show herself to this… whatever, she would.

"Suzaku is in danger, don't you realize?" the child says with delighted condescension. "That extra little life he's carrying isn't natural. It will kill him."

A thin river of blood kisses Lelouch's bare toes and his vivid violets follow it upstream to Suzaku, bare-bodied and bleeding down his thighs. He crashes to his knees clutching his swelling stomach when Lelouch runs to him, collapsing dead away before he can be reached. Lelouch swoops and desperately gathers a limp Suzaku into his arms.

No.

It's not real.

Lelouch knows it isn't real, but at this moment he is cradling Suzaku's dead, lifeless body—

"Give her to me and you don't have to lose either of them."

—it liquefies, nearly bursting like a water balloon and melting over him in thick red blood, leaving him to stare at his stained hands… A thin line of red hanging from his right pinky and he realizes it's actually a thread.

The red thread.

Tight around his finger and into in the evaporating blood pool.

"Nature or… otherwise," the child's voice arrogantly continues, "I'm sure you don't want them harmed."

A bluff.

"You kill either of them and you'll never get what you want." Lelouch presses his palm to the shrinking red puddle—

Haughty laughter rolls over Lelouch's bones.
"You really don't get it, do you? So much loyalty for a woman you don't even know. She's only using you."

—Lelouch is yanked down by his wrist through the blood and falls into an electric slideshow of the life of a green-haired girl. A small child with dirt-stained, bare feet and torn rags for clothes in a seemingly Victorian, rural landscape, alone—A tender nun giving this lonely girl Geass—the power that makes others flock to her, adore her—but then too many, overpowered, out of control. Her eyes permanently seared with the avian sigil—the nun cackles, her caring façade cracking with the Code glowing on her forehead that flashes and brands the girl's forehead instead—

"Your power is gaining strength. A little longer and she'll force her Code onto you and finally be free. That is her wish. Morality while you are locked into an unending life, watching everybody you care about age and die until you can pass it along, just like her and all before her."

("You're the first contractor I've had who hasn't become corrupted or hasn't failed me in some way before this point."

"...I am not your enemy."

"Your Geass reacted again, severely," C.C. says in a tone more firm than it usually sounds. "Almost as if you've been exhausting it." Eyes like amber holding fossilized secrets sternly capture his, "That's not normal."

"Lelouch," her voice is softer than her eyes seem to allow and her other palm tenderly cups his cheek. "Don't forget your promise... All of them."

"I can save you from that, and spare your little pet from certain death."

"The only death that's certain is yours," Lelouch spits – pointed goading even as he's vulnerable in free-fall. Suzaku's checkups have been positive; despite the unnatural risks, there hasn't been any indication of immediate danger.

Suddenly, he's saved by the thread hooking on a corner of Ashford's clock tower, dangling by his pinky. He strains to reach for the edge with his other hand when Suzaku grabs him by the wrist and pulls just like when—

The child hums with condescension.

"You think this is the only time your lives have intertwined? The variations of life are infinite and the two of you have already lived and died thousands of times over."

He's lifted into sunlight. The thread short between his and... Suzaku's fingers—but they're children. Two boys standing above a sunflower field and under a Japanese sun nurturing something that didn't grow in the west—

"You think this time is different?"

The sky rumbles dark and angry with a storm overhead as they lie naked and joined in Lelouch's bed, like their first time. Lelouch is between Suzaku's legs and can feel himself deep inside Suzaku's body, his heat, and even though far from pleasurable he realizes that this really is Suzaku—

Then they're flipped and at the shrine almost like they were weeks ago. Both are still bare, Lelouch is on his back and Suzaku is impaled on top of him—
Their hands bound by red thread desperately clenched.

"You have no idea how many times the two of you have killed each other."

In the cave again, outside the mysterious door that he and C.C. just passed through—

But Lelouch and Suzaku are staring down the barrels of their pistols at each other. Lelouch in Zero and Suzaku in Lancelot's jumpsuit—Lelouch squeezes, the thread of his hand whipping—His shot spears right through Suzaku's eye, blood filling the air as he falls back, lifeless to the ground—

Lelouch is bombarded, accosted with a myriad of death and murder, memories that aren't organic to his mind shuffling through him like cards. Like stories somebody else has told. Flashes of him and Suzaku adorned in different outfits and backdrops, welding different weapons with the result always the same. Emotions surge, overwhelm as if living these exact moments that are more than mere nightmares. He's slaying Suzaku or being slain by Suzaku, each death fueled by rage or despair—

A few accidents flutter across; Suzaku's execution uninterrupted, Lelouch unable to stop or save. Lelouch consumed by his own power, Suzaku an unwilling but unstoppable Geass puppet—

But then they're in daylight on a crowded street as Lelouch stands atop a float, watching Zero race toward and lunge at him—A sword spears straight through his chest, Suzaku's face behind the mask—

"Sooner or later, all rivers lead to the ocean."

Blood trickles from Lelouch's mouth while they're suspended in this pose as their clothes and everything else dims around them. Cold steel in his chest, life and heat pouring out of him while Suzaku's hands shake and tears streak down his cheeks—

"Enough." C.C.'s voice pierces through the haze before her form appears, draped in her white prison garb. "I am here, as you wanted. No need to involve them in your theatrics."

"You are the one who chose to involve them," says the boyish voice.

Their surroundings quiver and twirl away like a sandy breeze, revealing a young lad with floor-length blond hair—

Lelouch and Suzaku crash to the floor, gasping and squirming like fish out of water as the reality that they aren't dead washes away their virtual deaths. Only the sword remains next to them…

—The Universe becomes the ceiling with Jupiter full and wide staring down at them. Just below it is a spiraling column of gnarled skeletons that seems to be reaching towards it. This place is not a cave; Lelouch isn't even sure this is still Earth. Not at this close proximity to the gas giant.

"Really, you didn't have to make this so difficult," the little blond boy says.

"Maybe I just wanted you to ask nicely," C.C. deadpans.

"You've never been susceptible to sweet-talk."

Lelouch checks Suzaku, earning a quick nod of assurance and they help each other up to their feet.

"You've never been good at delivering it." Her amber eyes look to Lelouch and Suzaku from the corner. "Where is Charles? I'm assuming he knows you're here."
"Wouldn't dream of this without Brother."

"But you can without Marianne."

The teen males remain silent. Lelouch is reaching into his cape, making Suzaku's eyes shift with concern.

"...It is unfortunate that she couldn't be here," the boy continues, not sound as sad as his words would imply, "but she's with us in spirit."

"More than you know, V.V."

The crack of a pistol and the child catches a shot to the forehead, dropping to the ground in front of Lelouch's behind the smoking gun. Any lingering haze is lifted but not his fury.

"You're going to get us out of here and then explain everything," he commands C.C. with fuming eyes, still grasping Suzaku's wrist.

"You don't understand—" C.C. tries to speak.

An understatement.

"You made sure of that," Lelouch bites. "And now it's endangering more than just you or me—"

The cackles of this V.V. fracture the air as he rises from the dead, blood streaming down his nose.

"What you don't understand is—"

Lelouch is quick with another shot, right between the eyes, and V.V. drops again.

"...The other Code bearer," Lelouch murmurs.

"Yes," C.C. patiently confirms.

Jeremiah mentioned one but didn't know their identity nor could he obtain it.

"I should've known," the prince in Zero's clothing quietly admits. He regenerates fast. Or, faster than any wounds he's seen on C.C. "You could've warned me."

"It isn't that simple," she cautions again. "I told you to trust me."

"Trusting you doesn't—"

"There are things... even you don't know," V.V. arrogantly airs, if tiredly, trying to push himself up—

"I could say the same," Lelouch can't resist snarking, firing his pistol again—

And, again, V.V. falls like a sack of hammers.

"I don't think that's going to help," C.C. deadpans. "He'll just recover."

"I never miss at this range." Lelouch waves his pistol in the air. Besides, it feels kind of good.

"Lelouch!" Suzaku chidingly hisses.

"He more than has it coming," Lelouch plainly defends.
Suzaku scowls, "That's not—"

V.V. twitches in defiance and Lelouch doesn't hesitate another trigger squeeze.

"This is not a permanent solution," C.C. sighs – sounding damn close to a _chide_.

"You're the one with all the answers," Lelouch sneers at her, grabbing the sword that plunged through his chest. "So, you tell me what the permanent solution is." As long as V.V. is at least unconscious he can't spin them on some insane merry-go-round of memories and what-ifs.

C.C. doesn't respond and Lelouch swiftly stakes the blade downward into V.V.'s head, making Suzaku grimace at the sound of steel cracking bone. The blade should block the healing, at least longer than repeated gunshots or even a beheading where his brain would self-heal anyway.

"Lelouch..." the brunet squirms.

Lelouch is still gripping the hilt and his eyes are almost too heavy to meet those pure greens.

This is exactly the sort of thing he never wanted Suzaku to see.

"Perhaps I can help," a familiar voice beckons from the dead.

Lelouch turns around and—

This isn't...

It can't be.

"...Mother?" Lelouch's breath is stolen; he's not sure how he even speaks that word. He checks the little menace still spiked in the head, still seemingly dead, and then looks back up to his mother. If this is another heartless, twisted trick—

"Don't trust your eyes?" Marianne smirks, exactly as he remembers her, and spins in place making her long orange dress whirl around her. "Don't worry; I'm not a desperate attempt at smoke and mirrors."

"You're... alive?" But...

"In this place, I am."

But.

Marianne walks closer, stepping around V.V.'s temporarily disabled body with dissecting eyes. Lelouch glances at C.C., caught a little off-guard by her guarded gaze resting on him.

"What is this?" he asks. "What's going on?"

The blue eyes that Nunnally had forgotten flick to Lelouch in an unfamiliar stare that's a little unsettling – not just because she should be dead.

"It's a long story. Your father is near but time is short," she simply, shortly, supplies. "V.V. is dangerous. You have subdued him but he will wake. Lelouch, you should take his Code and then he won't be able to recover."

"What?" Lelouch is aghast.
"He is the one who murdered me, and he's already threatened you. He needs to be eliminated."

Something about this isn't…

"Why did he want C.C.?" Lelouch asks. He won't be tricked by a phantom, real or not.

She falters, "…What? We have very limited time—"

"I want answers," Lelouch demands in a booming voice. His "mother" can't just pop out of thin air and—

If his mother has been alive all this time, why didn't she… Why did she just leave him and Nunnally hanging in the wind?

"Somebody prone to telling lies wants the truth? Isn't that interesting."

Before any semblance of reassurance can swaddle him, Lelouch's blood ices at the rustling sound of a male voice that hounds his sleep with stress dreams and stokes the fire of his rebellion. Charles zi Britannia in the corporeal flesh, Lelouch is certain by the stench, right before him in all his silk, velvet and ridiculous hair curls.

Those stupid, stupid hair rolls.

Stupid!

Lelouch nearly feels his jaw crack as he clenches his teeth and his fist around the sword, twisting it with sharp cracks of re-stitching bone. His eyes flare with the power of kings—

But remembers to avert his gaze, eyes falling on the incapacitated Code Bearer—

"You knew V.V. was here, what he was up to?" C.C.'s impassive voice is surprisingly calming but her unspoken implication is clear – Charles arrived too quickly to be unaware, and if he knew that means he let this happen. That trap he was waiting to spring – the web that had already caught Lelouch.

—Lelouch can't make direct eye-contact without risking being cast upon and Nunnally proves that his father absolutely would do it. He has a pistol in one hand and is gripping a sword in the other – those dots aren't hard to connect. Lelouch might not get the whole story once his father is dead but better safe than sorry. His violets shift toward Suzaku who is diagonal to him but close and those emeralds notice with distinct scrutiny.

"It's all only a matter of time," the old man responds with complacency and Lelouch seethes at the sound with shaking bones.

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out," Lelouch prods – the man sounds about ready to break into a villain's monologue and Zero the Hero won't stop it.

As it is, the renegade prince can't signal to Suzaku with full hands, but even if they've reached a point where the dumb seahorse can roughly guess Lelouch's thoughts it's not safe. Suzaku is a freak of nature physically, but he's not at his best. It saved him from sparring to the death with robo-Jeremiah, but that was more or less a straight fight. The Emperor has Geass and no reason whatsoever to hold back. Suzaku could get caught in the Emperor's Geass and then… Lelouch isn't willing to risk it. Suzaku knows enough to avoid the Emperor's gaze now, but that won't shield him from a more… direct death route, should the Britannian elder choose.
"Even you, son," Charles says to Lelouch and that last word is unnatural to hear coming from his mouth. "Did you think Jeremiah's appearance was a coincidence? Mere providence?"

Very suddenly Lelouch's chin is being tipped up by the gloved fingers of his father and—

He has to squeeze his eyes shut – to the arrogant sound of his father's jumbling chuckles that grates his skin like thorns.

Well… this is just… fantastic.

Totally how Lelouch saw his day going. He claimed a prince only to be cornered by the King – who knows that Lelouch is aware of his Geass.

Yep. Fan-friggin-tastic.

"C.C., how kind it is of you to finally join us," Charles' voice oozes in a slime of arrogance that Lelouch feels sinking into his pores. Suffocating and enraging.

"When you went to the effort of this invitation, how could I refuse?" C.C.'s bland, almost-snark helps to cleanse Lelouch's ears—

But the low tide of contented chuckles from his father's throat seeps in, reaching to smother the fire still left, rekindled, in Lelouch's chest. He can even smell his father. A haunting scent from the past when his world cracked apart and he fell right through the core.

Lelouch feels small.

Once again the helpless 10-year-old child that pleaded for safety and love from a father that only gave him the opposite—

His father might be a dinosaur but that's still a fossil. Lelouch is the dark knight of justice risen from the earth, vengeance of the dead decaying in the shadow of the Britannian beast. He is Zero and he embraced the fires of hell to ensure righteous victory. A bully from his past is but an insignificant speck of dust in the Universe, the dirt under Lelouch's boots. Lelouch will be the sun, the goddamn eternal flames that keep the world turning.

He will not fall!

He does not cower!

He is Lelouch vi Britannia and he conquers!

The sound of his mother's gasp prickles Lelouch's reflexes, but he doesn't open his eyes until—

"Lelouch…" Suzaku cautiously beckons.

Plum eyes carefully peel open to see Charles is paralyzed in some sort of smoky stasis right in front of him, but Lelouch's mother is not, maybe because she's not corporeal or… because Lelouch's hatred is targeted at his father. She gasps and gapes at her popsicle husband with mystified awe. As well as at C.C. and Suzaku who are shelled by a protective barrier.

"How… How did you…?" she can barely ask, eyes turning to her son. "Such control is…"

Absolute Control is kind of Lelouch's thing.

If anybody hasn't been paying attention.
"You don't know anything about your son." C.C.'s words frost from her lips, "and that's your own fault."

Still, Lelouch has surprised even himself. This ability… whatever it is, he commands it and as such controls his father without using his Geass in haste.

Brawns are so overrated.

"I want answers," Lelouch repeats himself with strained austerity, leaving staked V.V. to walk to the side of his father, out of eye-range just in case, and aims his pistol at the Emperor's temple.

"Foolish boy, you know nothing and yet insist on commanding the board," Charles rumbles – so it can still speak. Wonderful.

"All I need to know is how to pull the trigger," Lelouch superciliously sneers.

"Lelouch!" his mother pleas, rushing closer but not in between them. "You don't understand."

"Enlighten me."

"We… just wanted to make the world a better place. Where nobody was judged or afraid, where there was no need for lies or masks. Where we could all be together again, us and you and Nunnally."

Lelouch furrows his brow at her, "As a ghost?"

"This world, this reality is but a shell of what it could be," Charles speaks. "We live in the shadows of Gods who have turned their backs on us. They devote all their time to their own infighting, lies, and destruction not caring at all about how it affects us."

(Funny, that sounds like a certain human emperor that Lelouch knows.)

"But here… This is the Collective Unconscious of all humanity."

"Otherwise known as C's World," Marianne notes.

"This is a place of true freedom from all the ills that humans bring upon themselves – not even death is a shackle."

"Clovis waits here as well," Marianne adds again. Making Lelouch's eyebrow twitch. "On a beach, his favorite place. In C's world life can be anything you want it to be."

"Indeed. The endless lies, masks, and subterfuge… the pain they cause each other out of fear or anger. The very pettiness of life can be abandoned."

"So the perfect utopia?" Lelouch scoffs a little. "Where life is unchanging and stagnates?"

"Is that how you see peace?" Charles rebukes. "People live the way they do now because they do not know a better way. They can't. The Gods are responsible for the chaotic mire of our reality and have long ago stopped caring about our suffering or how their selfishness affects us. But break the chains and life, past, present and future, can coexist in a way that could never be accomplished now."

"Break the chains?" Suzaku cautiously asks.

"Slay God," Marianne answers much too simply.
Lelouch looks back at the towering spear forever climbing to pierce the planet—God above them.

"And then what exactly would happen?" Lelouch questions, not hiding his judgmental incredulity.

"Life as you know it would cease to exist. The barrier between worlds would break and we would enter a reality not bound by our secrets or even physical limitations."

"Physical limitations?" Suzaku asks again, sounding more than a little concerned.

"We would merge into the massive collective of all consciousness," Marianne answers.

That still doesn't sound good.

"Everyone would be known as they are, and accepted. True happiness discarded of any weights we bare. We could embrace the next evolutionary step of existence."

And, what, live as disembodied minds in a big bubble?

"You… would change reality. Force this on people without their consent?" Suzaku is appalled.

Lelouch knew his father was… off but this is just almost too much. He sounds like an entirely different person.

"You could see your father again," Marianne shamelessly tries to coax.

Suzaku is taken aback, nearly flinches as if she pricked him, "Whether or not I wanted to."

"It would be a life free of despair and pain or conflict," Charles defends.

"You mean the very things you have been spreading across the world?" Lelouch spits.

"We wouldn't even be here today if not for V.V." Marianne redirects, sounding more callous than he can ever remember her voice sounding.

"My brother and I made a pact long ago to destroy the selfish gods that neglected us, that toiled away in their destructive, unending wars. But he grew jealous of Marianne and became exactly what we fought. When we spoke of her death he lied to me, his own brother, without even blinking. He was no longer my brother after that day."

"He didn't know I had survived and told Charles. I had contracted with C.C. but my Geass didn't come to life until that day to save mine. I was able to hide in the soul of a young servant girl so we could continue our work. Even keep tabs on C.C. And now we are finally ready." Marianne looks to a stone-faced C.C.

"So… my fighting in Japan is just what, white noise?" Lelouch asks in a near-broken voice. Has anything he's done even mattered?

"It shouldn't have taken this long," his mother responds.

"And in the meanwhile? Did that ever occur to you?" Lelouch scowls.

Marianne stammers, "That's why we sent you and Nunnally far away from V.V. It was the only way that you and Nunnally would be safe."

("It's safer to keep those you love at a distance." C.C. had said on route to confronting Mao. Lelouch thought she was referring to Shirley at the time…)
Even if that's true—

"But you used Nunnally!" Lelouch scolds, setting aside the very horrible (traumatic) way his father publically "protected" him in the royal court. "You speak as if you care but you have no idea what you've done to her, using her as a temporary bandage. You don't even know what it means when she smiles."

"...Smiles?" Marianne repeats as if the word is meaningless.

As if everything he and Nunnally have suffered is—

...None of it mattered. Not at all. Not to them.

Strange, he didn't realize his heart was so vulnerable, that it could hurt so easily. Lelouch's heart broke at age ten and he was forced to strap it back together while growing up too fast, but it never healed. Now it bleeds at the cracks that can't be repaired or erased because once something breaks it can never be as it was before.

Maybe that's not a bad thing.

It's not a pain to fight.

It's a pain to harness.

To let spill out of him in faint and frayed chuckles.

"Hypocrites," Lelouch scoffs with a weak but derisive smile. "You detest Gods that are too consumed with their own petty, self-serving affairs but you are no better. You have become exactly the same as them. You fashion yourself as above the concerns of everybody else on this planet, letting—no, encouraging endless warfare, agony, and strife. You don't care about their lives because to you this world, this reality is already dead. A lost cause. Not even Nunnally or I were worth your attention."

"That's not true!" Marianne tries to argue. "We loved you."

"Then why didn't you end the war with Japan? You abandoned us," Lelouch bites back – no longer mama's little teething cub but a full-grown lion with claws and rage to match. "You just said so yourself; it didn't matter what happened to us because you were planning this all along."

Marianne looks to Charles with a speechless, disconcerted expression and all at once she is not the mother Lelouch remembers.

Or the mother he would have wanted to find here.

"...But I won't let you do it," Lelouch stoically proclaims with a bit of a wilted breath.

"Your selfishness ends here."

"Lelouch you—!" Marianne starts.

"Enough of this!" V.V. suddenly shouts, sword clattering to the ground from his hand after his bloody but healing wound apparently forced it out of his skull. "I haven't come this far to listen to the whining of petulant children." His gaze is malevolent and Lelouch feels something strange in the air twist in the center of his soul.

Suzaku shrieks like lighting through a dead, cloudless sky, curdling Lelouch's blood, before
crumbling to his knees and into C.C. who tries to catch his fall. He clutches his stomach and Lelouch can see Geass hoop around his eyes when—

Out of his body floats a shifting red sphere… with a humanoid small fry.

Lelouch whips his pistol into aim in reflex, and it makes V.V. villainously smirk.

"Careful where you shoot, boy," the child-uncle hollowly warns, pulling the pulsing orb between them.

A scowl pinches C.C.'s face, holding a pale and withered Suzaku, "That's not really necessary now, is it?"

"I will not be stopped," V.V. ominously answers. "Not by you, a ghost woman or her brat." His blue eyes flick to Lelouch and the detached placenta appears to crystallize like a ruby. "It's too bad. I liked you because you reminded me of Charles, but I see that you just have too much of your mother in you." His eyes gleam with the most sinister shade yet and without even moving a finger the miracle baby is hurled towards the ground—

Lelouch can only watch, motionless, even though everything in his head is screaming at him to do something as time slows around its fall but heartbeats—

It smashes in an exploding bloom of red shards spraying across the blackened ground. (Almost looking like a firework Nunnally is eagerly waiting to see with her… two big brothers.)

"You want your child back? You know where to get it." V.V. utters in the haughtiest of huffs. "All we have to do is create the new world and you will be reunited there. Simple."

Lelouch is left staring, maybe for only a second but it's a second that stretches his heart around the Earth—Universe that just cracked into pieces—

This can't be real.

This isn't happening.

How can this be really happening?

—Until a whipping blur slices V.V.'s head clean off his shoulders, sending it into a flying roll. Suzaku stands where V.V.'s body flops, glancing at Lelouch with the sword in hand and tears already streaming from his eyes, his barrier of protection broken. With a nauseating twist reality shutters back into Lelouch's brain and a cold, solid pit inside him. His arm rises in robotic fashion, aiming his pistol point-blank at his father's—enemy's temple—

"Lelouch, no!" his mother cries, eyes frayed with desperation.

But the little boy she thought she knew, that might've taken her hand even in the face of all this, is dead.

He died nearly 8 years ago.

If he ever lived.

Lelouch looks at her, fully aware that she can't stop him. That Suzaku isn't going to stop him. That C.C. probably wants him to pull the trigger. That he is completely in control. Unlike when he was a mere child that just wanted—
It's... not as satisfying as he thought it would be. (Because the broken world, life, he clung to has finally crumbled into nothing, leaving him empty.) Maybe it's shock or denial delaying the swelling ocean of emotions waiting to rush him because all he feels in this moment is a cold steeliness.

A blade in his chest, stopping his heart.

You are NOT my mother. "As far as I'm concerned you should've stayed dead," Lelouch sneers with every ounce of his body, Geass-blazing eyes stabbing the woman he'd loved, admired and ached for with a thousand burning needles—

A thousand needles for every single year of these past 7 that he let himself believe. Anger that had always festered deep in his blood now brims in the corners of his eyes. His grip shakes on his pistol – no, it's not just his life, the sanctuary of his childhood in his mother's hugging arms that blazes to ashes like burning pictures. That singe the net Lelouch could fall back on during these hard, lonely years. He'd always blamed his father for the future that was taken from him and Nunnally and now, still, it's the two of them that have stolen yet more of his life.

His child.

The idle and not-so background daydreams of comforting a little bundle at night when neither he or the baby can sleep. Afternoon naps with the baby on his chest. Little fingers, toes, and giggles. Lelouch and Suzaku trying and failing not to spoil that sweet little face rotten. Teaching her chess. Helping him with his homework. Wiping their tears after skinned-knees. Never letting them go. Not just a home and family, but a life that neither Lelouch nor Suzaku would've thought they could have. A fantasy realized as reality and then smashed just like everything else. Lelouch feels so goddamn foolish believing the rose-colored wool pulled over his eyes.

Why did he believe that his mother was any different?

Why wasn't she different?

(Is he any different?)

Despite how it happened, Lelouch didn't miss the palace or royal family; he and Nunnally were better off without them and in trade they met the only thing, person, that's been real this entire time.

—The familiar wrap of Suzaku's strong arms surrounds Lelouch like a broken dam and it sweeps them both down to their knees, stopping the dark prince from taking the shot.

But Lelouch still wants to.

It won't change this. Won't cure him. Won't rewrite history…

…Lelouch doesn't want that.

Suzaku weeps into Zero's back for both of them and Lelouch is... regrets that he needs Suzaku to do it. Only a couple tears are squeezed from his eyes that he didn't want to spill. He didn't—doesn't want to fall apart at the seams he had to clumsily learn how to stitch as a thrown-away child. They don't deserve his tears or his sorrow. They aren't worth this pain.

What Lelouch wants is something they never wanted.

Lelouch steels his heart as he did through sobbing nights in a shack with Nunnally, clothes damp with her tears, and stares at the broken fragments of their child. Something that maybe shouldn't have existed but certainly something that shouldn't have been taken.
"Give it back," Lelouch suddenly commands, rupturing the dead quiet with only a slight waver of his voice. He looks up to the Universe peering down on them and furrows his brow with righteous fury. "A God are you? I don't want to stop time, change reality or destroy you. Take them all, if you wish, just give me back my child."

For a moment it seems as though his words spear at but an inanimate, faceless floating sphere—

A few seconds of him even feeling foolish as Suzaku clings tighter to him.

—Until it illuminates, glowing red with the sigil of the king's power and then there's a spark like a lit fuse atop the corkscrew, skeletal weapon. It fizzles all the way down in a flash like a wick and the "god-killer" flecks away into dust. It begins to dissolve Marianne, Charles, and even V.V.'s beheaded corpse. Marianne looks at her disappearing hands and husband with confusion, then to C.C. who is solid and unchanging. "C.C., why aren't you…? You believed just as we did—"

"I knew long ago you cared only about yourselves," the green-haired immortal tonelessly says. "But now I know you're also cruel."

"Impertinent child, you don't know what you're doing," still sedentary Charles growls, unable to do anything else.

Lelouch knows he's not his parents.

And that he never wants to be.

"You do this and all you will have left is Schneizel's world." It almost sounds like Charles is concerned.

But it's too little, too late.

"Perhaps right now you should worry about yourself, just as you always have," Lelouch scorns with sour delight. (Because who even knows where they're about to vanish off to.) "Now begone!"

Marianne reaches for Charles and cries his name but their fade is fast and soon she's just a sprinkle of nothing to be lost among the stars along with V.V., Charles, and their weapon of vanity. Then, too, the broken pieces of small fry fade out of sight, but are not replaced.

Lelouch and Suzaku wait for a few beats.

Staring at a future smashed on the floor and waiting for it to be restored. The god-planet dims as does the room around them, morphing into rock and earth—

Suzaku pulls away from Lelouch with a growl of pain, clutching his stomach.

"Suzaku!" Lelouch calls with alarm, grabbing the boy's shoulders.

Sweat instantly sheens on the increasing pallor of Suzaku's face and his pants bleed like in V.V.'s vile vision. Lelouch is hanging helplessly in glassy green eyes but the entrance glows behind them, catching C.C.'s notice.

"This way," she instructs, gesturing back towards the exit leading to the cave where they entered.

"He needs help," Lelouch snaps, struggling with strangely shy adrenaline to hoist his paramour up from the floor and onto his shoulder.

"So we're helping him," she pragmatically counters – and yet it doesn't sound insulting like it
usually might. Maybe that's partly because of the way she inserts herself under Suzaku's arm like another crutch to support his weight.

Perhaps Lelouch would allow himself to enjoy feeling rather touched by her at the moment if not for the possibly dying seahorse and small fry slung over his neck.

They appear on the other side of the wall, but not in the cave where they originally entered. Instead, he finds them in a human-made facility with very a Britannian scatter of white-coats gawking in their direction. A place he's never been, but one he recognizes thanks to recon from a certain double-agent, Jeremiah 2.0. Images were few and although they spoke volumes they still don't depict the sheer scale of this place.

"This is..." he breathes.

"The Order," C.C. finishes.

"Of course you knew about this place."

"It's been a long time since I was here last."

Their eyes cross but Lelouch decides that it's futile to poke her about it now – when Suzaku is dewy and limply strung about their shoulders. And bleeding in the most disturbing fashion.

"C.C.?" gasps a scientist, drawing his attention to a few that have gathered near the steps of the door. "You've come back to us?"

"You're... here..." But the seeming leader among them is a portly, bald man in military-style dress, monocle, and nervous sweat. "But where is...?"

"I remember you," C.C. notes. "The one that worked with Clovis."

"Obey me." Lelouch's eyes flare with Geass before another word is spoken, pushing everything else down except helping Suzaku.

The man and scientists are all caught in the wide cast of Lelouch's net, bodies still and faces blanking until he makes his first command to aid Suzaku and the baby. There's a collective kowtow of "Yes, Your Majesty" before they hurry Suzaku off in a stretcher that Lelouch actually jogs to follow.

Tries to follow.

His thoughts buzz faster than his legs, unfortunately, and even though compartmentalizing is a skill Lelouch has honed it's difficult to focus on any one thing as he watches his seahorse turn off into a room down a hall. C.C. stays at his side, even touching his shoulder when he stops about halfway to grab his knees. Adrenaline ran short and has stolen his breath while his head clouds with his pounding heart just thumping

Thumping

in an anxious rhythm. The steady blip filling Nunnally's hospital room. A tiny beat growing in Suzaku's belly. It's the warm beat in Suzaku's chest that Lelouch holds close at night. The thrashing
pulse when their bodies are connected and breathless. There is no beginning or end, just all of them tied together with the thread of a fragile organ. Right now there is no after. Not until Suzaku is out safely and not—Lelouch has to stay positive. Mind over matter. Suzaku won't die, he can't. Geass won't let him. But the baby—

No, can't think about it.

Lelouch pushes himself up with a gusting exhale, rubbing his face with his gloved-hand, still in Zero's skin, and notices movement from the corner of his eye. In a room at his side are a group of children of close but assorted age in identical white jumpsuits staring at him like the unexpected stranger he is.

"...The child slaves Jeremiah mentioned?" he asks in a stern tone that doesn't sound like he wants an answer. Children are used for everything from unclear experiments to assassinations. It looks more cultish than Lelouch expected...

"V.V. granted Geass like candy," she answers in a voice that's easily emptied of all the racing emotions Lelouch should be better at controlling. "Always so hopeful in his engineering."

Lelouch scowls.

V.V.'s death was too quick and painless.

But he can't focus on this now; it's just another "to-do" on an ever-mounting pile of tasks trying to bury him. He moves his feet again, striding past laboratories emitting chemical scents that hang in the air and—

At a glance, Lelouch sees something that makes him double-take.

And then wish he hadn't.

The teen stops dead in his tracks, practically gaping with an open mouth that isn't sure of what words to form.

"...Is that... a clone of me?" he finally asks with revulsion.

C.C. is still at his side, staring into a small lab housing a tall glass cylinder containing a (hopefully) comatose Lelouch look-alike with tubes snaking out of his face and body.

"Looks like it."

Lelouch shudders, "If V.V. was still alive I'd kill him again."

"He could be obsessive," she adds and then side-eyes Lelouch. "Considering the blood-relation you might want to watch for that."

The Britannias do seem to share that... quality.

"Don't compare me that madman and his nightmare factory." Or his father. Lelouch's feet carry him away from one nightmare in particular he could've lived without ever seeing (another bullet on the mental checklist – a literal bullet in this case) towards the turnoff where they took Suzaku when he feels his phone rumbling in his pocket—

Not fast enough to catch the caller.

Nunnally.
There are several missed calls and messages from Nunnally and friends… and it's already almost 11 o'clock – did time jump in… that place?

"Damn it," Lelouch hisses, looking up to Suzaku being prepped for surgery under bright, hot lights and all the strangers that will suffer if they can't save his seahorse and small fry.

•

After hours of rather intense surgery during which Lelouch stood in – because nothing can stop him – Suzaku is still knocked out on meds, but alive, as is their baby. All through the impromptu cesarean Lelouch waited at Suzaku's unconscious head watching and squirming, feeling like he was dangling from a skyscraper with only a fishhook in his toe. It was excruciatingly intense, but…

They've all made it out the other side, if a little worse for the wear.

At present, he sits in a sterile white room that has probably seen more horrible atrocities than Lelouch cares to imagine. Suzaku will likely be asleep for a while longer yet and their baby is encased in an incubator that, again, has probably participated in other horrors. This entire evening and night have been a swinging pendulum, tossing Lelouch's head and heart, and he missed watching the fireworks with Nunnally and everyone. There's next year, but… he really wanted to be there. Should he have waited one more day? Would that have even mattered? (Did he even have any control?) Nunnally understood when it was explained that Suzaku needed sudden medical attention – and wanted to be with them, but Lelouch explained he had it under control and it was for the best – but it's all just so…

Lelouch's nerves are raw and his emotions are just a mushy pile of… mush. It's difficult to feel any single thing but too tiring to feel everything. He tries to nourish the relief in Suzaku's stabilized state, but everything else keeps trying to creep in through his unraveled edges.

Everything waiting for him.

This whole… thing and… stuff that—

…eh, he's too exhausted.

(But there's no rest for the wicked.)

Lelouch is seated next to Suzaku's bed, idly holding and petting the seahorse's hand. Even fighting a riptide of sleep trying to pull him under, probably for his own good, but his mind is restless where his body is fatigued.

C.C. enters the room, a flash of lime-green that's too energetic for Lelouch's eyes, and quietly joins his side.

"Maybe you should rest," she softly says. "I can watch them for you. Jeremiah should also be here soon."

"I am resting," Lelouch lethargically defends.

She leans against the bed. "…You haven't asked me yet."

"Asked you what?"
"For an explanation."

Lelouch's eyebrow pops – he started off demanding such, "Because that's worked for me in the past? I think I know what I need to. You used me to stop them. I don't disagree with your actions." Certainly seems like the long and short of it. Lelouch would be a hypocrite to scold her for all the secrecy, and it isn't like he can't understand why she didn't tell him – nor has he forgotten that he would be dead if not for her. All of this started with his parents, after all. "...You've... stood by me all along."

The future more than the past is their urgent concern, now more than ever.

C.C. doesn't immediately respond and Lelouch wonders if maybe she actually wants him to press her more for information about everything. She doesn't need an invitation to share, though.

"So, then, what do you intend to do with this place?" C.C. asks, sounding genuinely curious and back-to-business-as-usual.

Lelouch rather appreciates the topic shift.

"...There's a lot of information and research here," Lelouch notes. Anything that he could ever want to know about Geass is right here in this facility – and any knowledge that isn't could be unlocked. Full staff, technology...

"True."

"And child slaves, murderers, and creepy abominations," Lelouch disdainfully continues with a taste of bile on his tongue. Perhaps this place is only a warning. Lelouch was damn close to becoming his father. He can't become his "uncle."

"Also true."

Lelouch turns to C.C., looking her square in the eyes, "What would you do with it?"

She looks like a genie being asked for the first time in her ancient life what she would wish for if she could make wishes instead of only grant them. Then it occurs to Lelouch... that if he was in her place, he'd only want one thing: freedom. And probably vengeance on who or what might've imprisoned him in the first place.

"Maybe we could find a way to break the Code and free you."

"There isn't," she quickly answers, breaking their shared gaze. "If so, they would've found it. The only way is to pass on my Code to a strong enough bearer, but... I won't ask that of you."

And there are plenty of opportunities here with the crop of growing Geass kids – not that C.C. needs them. She could contract with anybody else.

However, Lelouch remembers the visions of her that V.V. mistakenly shared. Memories V.V. misunderstood like everything else. They flooded fast at first, but as Lelouch sifts through the aftermath debris the pieces of her align and he sees... another wish buried under the rubble of broken lifetimes that made her forget why she started down this road in the first place. She wanted to forget. Maybe he should remind her.

"You think it's impossible, but I like a challenge. Besides, we made a contract and I said I would fulfill your wish."
"One step at a time," she says with some rather unwelcomed judgment in her tone. "Perhaps the question you should be asking is what you are going to do now?" C.C.’s honey eyes pour into Lelouch when she reconnects their gaze. "You and Suzaku have rejected the plan of your parents, choosing this reality and the flowing of time. Now Britannia is without an emperor and you with a child…"

That sounds like a rhetorical question.

"…The pregnancy was me, wasn't it? Not Suzaku," Lelouch asks, looking at the incubated baby while holding Suzaku's hand. "You said V.V. could manipulate reality in and out of C’s world."

"He was more practiced at it. Impregnating Suzaku through imagination would be quite a feat by accident," C.C. says, easily following Lelouch's lead.

"But not impossible." He turns his eyes back to her. "When I first told you about the baby you suggested that Geass was the operative variant between us."

"…I was pulling your leg." C.C. is surprisingly candid.

"And I asked you if Geass could affect the baby – if the parents' ability could affect the baby," Lelouch continues, not to be deterred. "You said your knowledge on the matter was 'inconclusive.' You were referring to my parents."

C.C. quietly stares.

~Judgment level rising…

"It was already wired into my parents before I was born. Maybe that makes my connection… to all this stronger than others. Or maybe even grants it."

C.C. inhales to speaks but lets the breath slide out of her chest instead – rerouting the thought.

"I'm not sure it works that way, but it sounds like as good an explanation as any other," she noncommittally responds – although Lelouch gets the impression she's thinking more seriously about his supposition than she'd like to admit. "Does it matter?"

"Maybe," Lelouch distantly murmurs. His eyes are drawn to Suzaku's hand limp in his palm, gently smoothing his other hand over the back.

He doesn't know what effect any of this Geass, God, and reality-bending could have on the baby – and if it's responsible for the baby even existing? Would he be "touched" in a way they can't see? Could he be in danger, directly or indirectly? These lines of thought make it seem more prudent to keep this facility just in case. It's not as though it can't be handled ethically and he can keep a closer eye on any other Geass-related goings-on that may be happening elsewhere.

Besides, if Lelouch wants to destroy every trace of Geass he would have to destroy God, and, obviously, that's not a viable course of action. God might not care about lowly mortals but it gave them this ability and Lelouch has used it to change the face of the tangible world, for at least as much as he could.

"But more to the point," Lelouch continues, holding Suzaku's hand sandwiched between his, "the Emperor might be gone but his empire isn't and it won't necessarily take much to claim it." He lifts his eyes to meet C.C.’s stare. "I don't have to move the planets themselves, only the tip of a pen."

•-
"What's so urgent that we needed to speak here in person?" Lelouch asks Euphemia in her SAZ office, removing his mask. "I'm on my way to the hospital."

"It's not life-threatening," she assures, then falls into a small pause and turns away from her desk to him with concerned eyes. "How is Suzaku? We haven't really communicated very much."

"Nothing you need to be concerned with. He just needs rest." Phone calls or messaged are unsafe – the less said, the better – but mostly Suzaku really is just recuperating. Emotional wounds take a little longer. "Now what's so important? I can't stay long. School is resuming next week as well so I need to prepare."

Pfft, sure.

Like Lelouch can just go back to class after everything that's happened.

Euphemia nods, squaring her jaw and speaking with learned professionalism, "It's about the Emperor."—and yet, her eyes are more weighted than before. "He's… dead."

"Dead?" Lelouch incredulously asks.

"I don't know the details, only overheard Cornelia and Schneizel talking about it. He's gone."

Oh, he's gone, all right.

Gone straight to the gutter of the Universe.

"That's…" The strike of shock "captivates" Lelouch in silence a moment until he lets a coating of apathy coolly pour from his chest. "…I'm sure an announcement would've been made, why the special delivery?"

"Because… he left documentation behind," she cautiously answers, "saying… naming you his successor."

Lelouch eye's bug out, "What?"

"Apparently it's dated before… um, before your mother passed. It's all official, sealed and everything."

"I… don't believe this." Lelouch grips his forehead with his black-gloved hand.

"It's the only document about it that's been found – but they, everyone, still think you're dead. So… Well…"

"Meaning Odysseus will become Emperor, as is standard procedure. Except he's not capable." So he'll become a puppet to Schneizel, Lelouch's puppet. Assuming the First Prince is even useful enough survive that far, that's quite a long chain of strings to be pulling.

Euphemia is too polite to voice agreement but the tinge in her expression says it for her. "You think I should step forward and claim it."

Lelouch half-laughs at the absurdity.

"I will support you—!" she ardently declares, stopping her excitement and restarting. "I mean I would. I know you've been in hiding all this time to protect yourself and Nunnally, but now that…"
father is gone and with Zero..." Euphemia lets her words trail off into her brother's unreadable
gaze. "I'm not pushing you, but I thought you should know. There's so much we could do, so much
we could change and you wouldn't have to hide. We could do this together."

Lelouch heavily exhales, "It's not the challenge that concerns me, it's the risk. This isn't just about
me. Anything I do will extend to Nunnally and the people I know here. And you."

She shifts a little in place, "Any riskier than now?"

Lelouch won't say she has a point, but a faint flicker of his expression does, "...I'm not saying no."

A modest but bright smile of hope shapes her mouth, "The window is closing, quickly. Maybe you
should speak with Nunnally and Suzaku, ask them what they think and want. It's only fair."

Lelouch slightly, wryly smiles. "Speaking of, what about Cornelia if she finds out that you've been
keeping me secret all this time?"

"...I'm sure she'll understand."

Lelouch hums through a soft smirk, thinking that Big Sister isn't known for being *understanding*.

"It is a rare opportunity that shouldn't be wasted," Lelouch agrees, donning his mask and speaking
through Zero's filter, "Thank you for informing me."

Euphemia bobs her head with a courteous nod and Lelouch exits the stage.

(But please, hold all applause until the end of the show.)

•••

At their regular, familiar and cozy clinic which is totally not some secret laboratory of horrors,
Lelouch enters a private room off a lone hallway – security courtesy of Geass – to find his precious
patients quietly resting in dim lighting. Suzaku sees Lelouch and brightens with a toothy smile,
moving to stand but is waved off by the older boy who leans down to kiss his lips. The seahorse is
wearing a set of Lelouch's light blue flannel pajamas rather than any patient garb and sitting in a
chair beside a large incubator machine.

"How are you feeling?" Lelouch softly asks against these sweet lips before pulling away and
petting brown curls.

"I'm fine, really," Suzaku answers as he does *every* time Lelouch asks.

But Lelouch likes asking and he smiles because he knows Suzaku likes his fussing, too.

"How's Small Fry?" Lelouch asks, pulling up an empty chair nearby to join Suzaku's side.

Their little bundle is smaller than little, pink and has a disturbing amount of tubes stemming from
him. Unsettling enough alone but the sight and smells trigger childhood wounds of seeing a frail,
broken Nunnally after their mother's murder. It's not something Lelouch ever forgot but the
memory is sharper here. Lelouch isn't sure if it hurts more now that he knows... *everything*.

He tries not to think about it.

Mostly.

Can't move forward if he's always looking backward.
"They say things are looking good, but he's still really premature," Suzaku answers with concern, reaching through an arm-hole and fondly touching a tiny hand with the tips of yearning fingers.

Almost five months premature.

"Miracle" isn't necessarily a word Lelouch would toss around lightly, but, that's accurate. Divinely so. Suzaku, on the other hand, might have gotten the worst of it (as far as can be seen, so far.) Lelouch feels confident that the Geass command not only helped Suzaku bounce back fast from major emergency surgery but also sustained him through it. Overall Suzaku is nearly recovered (physically) but still requires rest and monitoring. He'll be back to his regular seahorse self soon but the baby—their baby will still be here for months. Britannian medicine has made surprising advances despite their vast prejudices of disabilities, but have only come so far. Lelouch isn't looking forward to the wait until their baby is healthy and stable enough to leave this glass womb, but at least small fry is safe.

"He'll be fine. I'm sure he's strong just like his Mama Bear," Lelouch reassures, gazing at tiny curled fingers (that are the correct amount on each hand, thankfully.)

As it is, Nunnally and their friends have only visited a few times. Things are looking good but more time is needed before more visitations are advisable.

Suzaku breathes a faint laugh, "Bears eat fish, you know."

"Not seahorses. They're not even in the same ecosystem. But you started the bear thing, not me."

"Did I?"

Probably. Lelouch can't remember… Maybe they have too many animal pet-names for each other.

"I don't know if maybe I'm just used to it, but Fry doesn't seem like such a bad name anymore."

"No?" Lelouch is genuinely intrigued. It was just a joke name but it has attached quite fondly to his vocabulary.

Suzaku doesn't quite shrug, "It's unique, has an affectionate origin and is cute but I think would still age well with adulthood."

"…Are you saying you want to change the name?"

"I… I don't know. I'm just thinking… maybe giving him my father's name lends the wrong impression."

"Wrong impression?"

Lelouch is glad small fry is a boy. It gives Suzaku the namesake (and life) he needed to pass down. He's not at all against having a little girl, of course, but Lelouch wouldn't have named her after his mother at this point. **First Prince Genbu Kururugi II vi Britannia** would be the baby's full title, formally speaking, and doesn't that just roll off the tongue? Maybe Lelouch could do something about all these useless, decorative titles…

"Well…"

"Does this have anything to do with what you told me about your father?" You know, the holding children as political hostages thing, and stuff.
"There is that," Suzaku quietly confesses. "I want to honor his memory but maybe this isn't the right way to do it. It's... a lot to put on a child. Too much looking back."

Suzaku is ready to start looking forward, then?

"We still have some time to decide, but if he's Fry then what pet name would we give him?" Lelouch jokes.

"How many names does he need?" Suzaku jokes back.

Humor curves Lelouch's lips and his fingers tenderly twirl into the brown curls at Suzaku's temple.

"So... How did it go with Euphie?" Suzaku cagily asks.

Ah, yes, the topic being semi-avoided.

"As expected," Lelouch likewise cagily answers.

Suzaku exhales notable apprehension.

Lelouch's violets shift between the seahorse and the small fry.

"It's not set in stone just yet," the Britannian says, and then smirks very slightly in one corner of his mouth, "Or, rather, we haven't pulled the sword from the stone just yet."

Suzaku slides somber green eyes at Lelouch.

"I know you're not happy with how this is happening."

Like Geassing Schneizel into (so very sublime, satisfying) submission, cheating (manipulating) reality to forge documents stating Lelouch is the (totally) legitimate heir to the throne. But it is the path of least resistance, violence and casualties. Cutting corners doesn't always have to be as bloody as Suzaku thinks and what's so wrong about dishonesty if they're actually saving lives?

"It's not ideal, but you weren't wrong about needing shortcuts. Your parents and... uncle? were far more dangerous than I could've ever thought," Suzaku quietly admits, looking back at their baby. "...I haven't imagined I'd ever have a normal life. Somehow I don't think either you or me were meant to."

Probably not.

"You still can. You aren't obligated and it would be safer for—"

"Don't do that," Suzaku sternly chides but holds his eyes on the baby. "I made my choice. We're a family. And family doesn't separate. We are stronger and safer together."

Lelouch hums. For as long as he can remember his mother was always part of the definition of family – now redefined. Lelouch doesn't need his mother, he has a new, real family of his own choosing and it has proven to be far superior.

"I'm sorry about what happened with your parents," Suzaku murmurs just above a whisper. "I realized I haven't said it yet. And that they didn't, either. You deserved at least that much."

Lelouch got the closure he'd been seeking but not the satisfaction.

("What if the answers you find aren't the ones you want")
—Lelouch pauses.

"I think they rarely are the ones we want."

Maybe subconsciously Lelouch did anticipate disappointment(—disappointment, not heartbreak.) And C.C. already knew.

"Doesn't matter," Lelouch dismisses but can't completely lift his voice from a sagging dejection. "Everything that's happened led me to here, where I am now." *With you.*

A pair of loving, *not-* insane parents would've been *nice*, but perhaps C.C. had a point; if Lelouch's mother hadn't died, if he hadn't "banished himself" to Suzaku's home, they might not have ever met and Lelouch wouldn't be living a life that, while not without suffering, is his own. Even if Lelouch's Mother hadn't been murdered he still had deluded parents. Hell, they might've succeeded in killing God and be living in some dreamland reality by now. Instead, he's here with a family that's *real* and worth every drop of blood in his body. Worth even giving up—

…Well, sure, Lelouch is basically getting to eat his cake and have it, too, but the thought still counts.

Suzaku looks at Lelouch as if he's the one bearing all the pain, "That doesn't mean it isn't painful."

Excruciating.

But life moves on and pain is just something that people learn to live with…

"You don't have to worry about me," Lelouch reassures.

"I think I just said that I've decided to worry about you." Suzaku somewhat cheekily replies with a glimmering gaze of evergreen.

*How very cute*, Lelouch dryly thinks.

"And the last time you didn't talk about it you waged war against your father, the emperor of a world-conquering nation, with a handful of terrorists," Suzaku adds with surprising dryness.

A: *terrorists* is a Britannian label, as forced occupiers.

B: "And now he's dead," Lelouch effortlessly retorts. "Problem solved."

C: How would boohooing about his situation have solved anything?

Suzaku is not amused, as his flat expression indicates. "You're going to have to learn how to let somebody else take care of you. Because I'm not going to stop trying."

Lelouch mostly inwardly smiles and feels a warm bloom in his chest.

He hopes Suzaku doesn't give up on him.

(He needs Suzaku to never give up on him.)

"You're like a… What's the saying…? Doctors make for lousy patients?" Suzaku continues. "There's nothing wrong with being independent but the way you think you need to take care of everybody else and that you always know what's best but refuse the other way around is the problem. It's not a bad thing to let me care for you, you know."
A faint snicker puffs from Lelouch's nose, making Suzaku curiously tilt his head.

"For as much as we're different we're exactly alike," Lelouch says almost more to himself through a mildly amused bend of his lips. "Maybe we really are only playing with dynamite here."

Shared humor molds Suzaku's lips—but quickly warps under a sudden heaviness in his emeralds.

"Do you think…?" the soldier starts on a ghostly breath. "Were those visions we saw real? Have we really killed each other?"

"We're not dead, Suzaku."

"But it felt so real."

"Don't concern yourself with other lifetimes or realities that might not exist. We have enough to worry about in this one alone without getting buried in what-ifs."

Regardless of all the smoke and mirrors, Lelouch feels certain it was real. More than Lelouch knowing himself and what he would, or wouldn't do, his similarities with Suzaku can clash in all the wrong ways so rather than complimenting each other, it's just… destruction. It shouldn't matter here and now, however, because this here and now is the life they're living. A new path diverging from possible devastation.

"…You're right, of course." Suzaku shares a half-sneer, "Mr. Smarty Pants."

"Spoken like a true seahorse," Lelouch breezily lobs back at the burnet who smiles with a fond sparkle in his eyes that eases Lelouch's chest—

Until an arm swiftly hooks around his neck and reels his rigid body closer to the soldier's unrelenting hold.

"I'm doing this for me, not you," Suzaku informs with yet another sly whiff dangling from the edge of his words.

That's at least half untrue. Lelouch lets himself relax a little in the embrace that was in no way his idea or invited.

It's a start.

"I was thinking," Suzaku softly speaks, thumb rubbing Lelouch's arm, "our baby was born on New Year's Day, and with everything that's happening now, it's like… a reset for everyone. A new start." Suzaku squeezes Lelouch in his wrapping arm, "All of us can start fresh."

"Sounds like a plan," Lelouch softly responds.

Suzaku rests his head against Lelouch's and lets his arm hang around Lelouch's neck as they sit together in a quiet, comfortable and uncluttered silence while they gaze at their precious child.

Lelouch's parents taught him what not to be, but Suzaku gave him a reason not to be. It's not going to get easier from here but tomorrow is a new day and here they are still facing it together.

(…Good grief Lelouch is getting much sappier these days…)

"…That means I've forgiven you," Suzaku mutters as if it wasn't obvious.

"Yeah, I caught that," Lelouch blandly snarks – and this idiot thinks Lelouch is the one who ruins their moments?
Suzaku shouldn't be so self-righteous, but whatever. Ultimately all of this is a victory for Lelouch.

Sweet, undeniable, absolutely deserved victory.

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"It still seems strange to me," Cornelia says with crossed arms to the small group gathered in a velvety lounge room trimmed in gold and crystal of the Imperial Viscount Building. "Even though Father never made any official mention of an heir-apparent, he didn't change the documentation after it was said that Lelouch and Nunnally were lost?"

Lelouch leaves her musing to bounce off the other bodies in the room, choosing to idly adjust the mandarin collar of his new regal, white robes flowing from his tall, willow-like form in the reflection of a window – one that rather conveniently overlooks Clovis' recreation of Marianne's Villa garden. Suzaku quietly stands stiffly at the side in his new Knight uniform (with peek-a-boo upper arm sleeves, because why the hell not?) while Euphemia is seated in an armchair next to their standing sister.

"His Majesty must have known all along about Lelouch and Nunnally," Schneizel chimes in from an unlit fireplace totally not sounding like a slave-drone in any way. No, really. As far as anybody else sees he's the tip-top Prime Minister they've always known (except they've never known anything – instead of a wolf in sheep's clothing, he's now just another sheep.) "There's security in secrecy."

Well… Lelouch can't argue against that.

But he's also learned secrecy can backfire with a vengeance.

Cornelia takes a thoughtful pause. "…I suppose that makes sense. In theory, you and the throne would've been safe."

As political hostages? Funny how people keep forgetting that part despite the former Emperor declaring it aloud for everyone to hear in the royal court. Somehow Japan is blamed for not surrendering after Britannia invaded first – blaming the victim, a favored pastime of Britannian aristocracy and no one on Earth does it better. Charles didn't give two turds about his two children and it's debatable if he ever did. If Charles really wanted to ensure the safety of his children, even after exiling them, he wouldn't have left them to fend for themselves in war-torn lands if he knew they were still there. However, Lelouch can't refute Cornelia, or anyone, even if he wants to. He elevated himself as chosen heir which would imply what she surmises.

But being the "favorite" isn't glamorous like it sounds.

"Still, you and Nunnally didn't know but you chose to remain here rather than return home." Cornelia makes it sound more like an accusation than a question.

"Our mother was murdered. Does that sound like safe harbor to you?" Lelouch answers with considerable bite, knowing that Cornelia was captain of his mother's guard and that it isn't her fault. He won't say more than that but it should suffice. She has spent her life protecting Euphemia so she should be able to understand even if she cannot fathom the idea itself of not returning home.

"…It's just a shame that Clovis can't be here," Cornelia confesses with surprising softness. "He wanted so badly to see you and Nunnally again."
"…Did he?" Lelouch's quiet voice ghosts the glass as he gazes at the garden – crafted with perfection… and care.

(Too many misplaced emotions.)

"The main inspiration for him coming to this land was to be closer to the two of you," she answers. "To bring rest to your memories."

Instead, he built a gaudy eye-sore of an amusement park under his own vanity and then nearly genocided the natives in their forced ghetto while enjoying gratuitous luxuries. Clovis never was as smart as he thought nor was he ever a match for Lelouch and truly atrocious under real pressure. He also embodied the sickness of the Britannian elite. Still, Clovis was… a nice older brother despite an upbringing that tailored him to be otherwise to a mongrel like Lelouch and Nunnally.

Too late for regrets.

"He even kept and preserved the chess match the two of you were playing but didn't get to finish," Euphemia adds in a sentimental glaze of her voice. "You know, he thought he was going to win that one."

Lelouch doesn't suppress a little scoff. Lulling Clovis into a false sense of security was always… easy.

Cornelia scowls, "That's why I don't understand how you can be so soft on the scum that murdered him. Certainly, father wouldn't have wanted our great nation to be lead astray—"

"I am the Emperor now, not father," Lelouch's interruption is calm and patient but his tongue could slice cleanly through marble. "I won't nurture his delusions for the sake of pride."

Practically heresy to say such a thing.

There's no time to waste. Lelouch forwent the pomp and ceremony by fast-tracking himself to succeeding as the 99th Emperor of Britannia – it's unfolding almost more like a "battlefield promotion" which isn't all that inaccurate. With Schneizel in Japan Lelouch's christening is ultimately the flourish of signatures on some choice, official documents. His first act of halting all hostilities has expectedly drawn hard lines in the ground. Seems, in this case, the pen is mightier than the sword.

This isn't the way Lelouch planned to bring Britannia to its knees, but in the end, they will kneel all the same. Destruction can take many forms – this one just isn't the fun "raining brimstone" kind of form. Then again, he did manage to shatter that absurd weapon overhead of his parents, so, that counts.

Whatever the "gods" think or don't think of little Earthlings, there is something to be said about leaving others to self-determinate. It wasn't the Gods that failed humanity, it's humans that need to learn from their own history and save themselves – something a tyrant like Charles zi Britannia wouldn't enable.

Cornelia's jaw tenses, "I am… only concerned."

She's racist, is what she is. Cornelia has been a loyal servant to the elitist, Darwinist preaching of their former Emperor and apparently never questioned a word – Euphemia's opposite in nearly every way. Cornelia can't be blamed for having her head filled with such tripe but she is to blame for never thinking her own thoughts about it. Now Lelouch is the harbinger pushing their nation the other way (maybe even turning it inward against itself), undoing decades of domination. Even
so, her concern about Zero isn't unwarranted.

Clovis is still very dead, after all.

"Zero is a person, too. A son, brother or father," Lelouch states, finally turning to face the rest of the room with violet eyes inherited from his father, almost like his strengthened and controlled Geass. "He had something he was protecting and fighting for the only way he knew how against an enemy that cared naught to listen. Same for those that followed him."

Cornelia raises a sharp eyebrow at him and her eyes sharpen, but then she sighs with concession.

"You really do do sound like Euphie sometimes."

"Or she's the one who sounds like me," Lelouch smirks. There can only be one original.

To his genuine surprise, Cornelia lightly laughs, "Either way, it's concerning."

Where Lelouch is secretly amused, Euphemia pretends to pout: "I take exception to that," she crosses her arms over her chest.

So maybe there's also the notion that Cornelia still sees Lelouch as the ten-year-old little lad scampering about with her pony-tailed little sister, rather than the young adult leaders they are. Lelouch thinks he can, maybe, understand that if it was Nunnally who became Empress – that pigtailed girl who liked playing in the dirt and twisting flowers into crowns with Euphemia and Clovis…

Maybe those were the only real moments of Lelouch's childhood.

(With Clovis, maybe Lelouch killed one of the few people who actually cared about him—

No.

No room for regrets.)

Jeremiah appears at the open threshold with a polite knock, as if on his usual cue of interruption, and informs that they are ready and awaiting Lelouch's—the Emperor's arrival.

"I think that Lelouch is doing the right thing," Euphemia says as she stands and everybody begins to take their leave. "Maybe it won't be easy but calling an end to the Areas is the right thing to do. What better place to start than Japan? Endless warfare across the world benefits no-one."

Except for war-profiteers, such as weapons and knightmare manufacturers, that is – which is a considerable chunk of Britannia's wealthy citizens.

"It wouldn't be the high road if it was easy," Lelouch replies with more irony than anybody in this room can appreciate – except maybe a rather silent Suzaku still playing statue.

Euphemia slings her arms around Lelouch without any preamble but with all of her energy and affection.

"I want to wish you good luck," she warmly says in his ear.

"What's with that?" Lelouch's mechanical arms don't feel equipped to return her embrace, but he manages to pat her back at least. "You've agreed to be an ambassador so it isn't as though this is goodbye."
She pulls back with a smile that tugs at heartstrings from so long ago Lelouch thought they were severed – she seems to have that effect…

"It's just a big moment out there, is all."

A small, airy smile quirks Lelouch's lips that he feels in his chest. "We'll be sharing it, won't we?"

Euphemia wrangles him into another hug but her arms cling tighter than before, fingers clenching fabric – into the stitched eye with a red, flying iris on his back.

"I love you," she privately murmurs in his ear. "I haven't said that since…" A noticeable waver briefly claims her voice. "I'm so happy that you're back."

Goddamn it.

It's like she has an exclusive, direct track to his feels.  

(Like a sword through his chest…)

They part without another word and Lelouch releases a shallow, subtle exhale through his nose after they're gone and looks to Suzaku awaiting his gaze. He looks nervous but not rattled.

"You ready?" Lelouch asks stepping closer.

Suzaku seems to hiss out a pent-up breath as he steps to close the gap, eyes lowered on the polished floor.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess." He laughs a little at himself, peeking up at Lelouch's watching eyes. "Maybe not the best response. I guess I should've said something witty."

Lelouch raises his bare hand and lifts up Suzaku's chin so their cool-hued eyes meet clearly and unobstructed.

"Fortunately, you're not here for your wit," he says through a smirking touch of mirth.

It visibly eases some tension from Suzaku's body and even shakes a snicker loose from his throat.

"I know. I'm here to look pretty."

"People always underestimate pretty faces," Lelouch smugly quips.

(Insert-something about how the Devil takes pleasing shapes-here.)

"This is just… it feels unreal." Suzaku's gloved-hands fist at his sides. "If I'm honest I didn't think I'd be around to witness anything like this, let alone be part of it. I don't know, maybe I felt like I didn't deserve it."

It's more accurate to say that Suzaku might've preferred to die trying.

"You were part of the Zone," Lelouch states instead.

Suzaku weakly half-shrugs – baggage tugging at his straight posture, "That was an important step and I felt similar but this is… so much bigger. This is the end – the top of a mountain that we've been climbing on hands and knees. And that was with Euphie… You and I weren't exactly cordial at the time."
The Euphemia part isn't worth dwelling on (anymore.) Lelouch and Suzaku were two rams butting heads over the same thing and Euphemia was the soft lamb on Suzaku's side (who almost became the *sacrificial* lamb serving Lelouch's side.)

"And I've been thinking about what you said, Lelouch. About how what happened to you as a child led you to where you are now."

It's the only thing Lelouch could credit to his parents if he felt so inclined to credit them anything.

"I don't know if our lives would've been better if any one thing had happened differently and I'm still… holding regrets, but maybe this is where we were supposed to be so that we could do this here and now. Together. Maybe we had to make sacrifices and mistakes so that we can know and do better from here on out."

There is some wisdom to Suzaku's words but Lelouch isn't so quick to believe in something such as fate. Most of his life has been out of his hands and in his parents'. …And-or uncle. Even as Zero he was barely fighting against the grain, but there's no doubt that he is taking control of his life for the first time since he was born. They have learned painful lessons getting here and only fools don't head history.

"But now I'm just thinking that… everything I've done to get here, what I've sacrificed and how hard I've tried, this is the moment that I've been waiting for. It's all built to this moment and all I can think about is that I just want to be at home with the baby right now," Suzaku finishes with a breathy laugh and goofy grin.

Lelouch smiles, finding the feeling infectious.

"I'm excited, for the first time in a long time, but I don't know if I'm good enough. If I'll be good enough."

"You're more than good enough," Lelouch firmly insists. Probably better than Lelouch deserves. Repairing Suzaku's remaining complexes will take time – time they both now have: "In fact, this leads me to ask if you want to proceed as only my Knight," he reaches into and pulls something out of his loose layers of white, "or as a Knight-Consort?" –Just a fancier way of saying Knight Husband and less embarrassing way of saying Life Partner.

Suzaku looks at him with blinking eyes but Lelouch only offers mild grin and the small, palm-sized white box in his hand. The seahorse takes the box and opens the hinged lid, eyes widening and mouth hanging open.

"This is…?" Suzaku looks at the twin set of rings in awe.

"Recognize it?" Lelouch grins a little and caringly plucks one from the plush bottom crevice. "It's the same red thread that you brought to the Shrine, set in glass on a steel band. More of a trinket, really, and actually only symbolic since same-sex marriages aren't legalized in the empire. You're also a 'number' without noble standing so in the current climate we can't actu—"

"Just shut up and kiss me before you spoil the moment," Suzaku simpers, pulling Lelouch closer by his cheeks.

Lelouch kisses his grin against Suzaku's lips.

Marrying Suzaku, that's another reason on but a mountain of reasons to become emperor – and what a pair they'll make. Lelouch vi Britannia: half commoner, once banished and back from the dead now gay "married" to Suzaku: a number turned *Honorary* Britannian serving against his own
people, former Knight of a former Princess who was another number sympathizer and now husband to an errant Emperor… (Not to mention their mixed-blood child. Lelouch would prefer to keep that secret for as long as possible. Explanation notwithstanding, it's safer for the time being.) If somehow all of Lelouch's other plans don't crack the bedrock of the Britannian Empire that should at least shake the foundation.

"You would spring this on me now, of all times," Suzaku says when they part, evergreens not just brimming but overflowing with wet, fuzzy warmth.

A subtle slyness smirks Lelouch's lips, "I should've known you'd be all emotional and weepy." Maybe he did know, but also maybe the custom rings weren't ready before today. So there. "But I thought this would be romantic? And that you'd like it." Right, and that, too.

"I do," Suzaku sniffs, rubbing at his watering eyes. "And I appreciate it. You put a lot of thought into this."

Of course. Lelouch puts a lot of thought into everything.

He's Lelouch.

"Is this a yes?" Lelouch can't help giving a teasing push. "You should know this could be a lengthy engagement." And that he'd be stuck with Lelouch.

Forever.

And ever.

Suzaku smiles and somehow it warms his eyes even more, "We have time, and I think I'll enjoy the wait."

All right, so, that's a pretty good answer.

Lelouch pulls the long, white, thin leather glove from Suzaku's left hand and slides the fated red ring onto Suzaku's ring finger – so much better than the Geass commands he sees reflected back at him in the eyes of his subjugated pieces. Suzaku gazes briefly at the ring on his left hand before taking the other out of the box. Lelouch lets his first and only best friend take his right hand like at the shrine and watches fingers slide the matching "trinket" onto his ring finger. He'll be wearing gloves when he leaves this room, so, for now, their engagement will be their little secret for a—

Droplets splash on the back of his ecru hand and he looks up to a more-teary-eyed Suzaku.

"Now, now." Lelouch lifts his hands and wipes away tears under Suzaku's eyes with tender thumbs. "We can't have my Knight of Zero weeping out on stage during the ceremony," he says.

Suzaku sniffs and takes a hanky that Lelouch offers to wipe his nose, "I'll be fine. Maybe it's just leftover baby hormones."

…Sure.

The new Knight-Consort to-be admires the ring on his hand once more and a smile blooms on his face like the sunflowers of their shared childhood.

"I think it's perfect," Suzaku affectionately announces.

Complacency (that's totally deserved) spreads a comfortable smile across Lelouch's lips as he slides
his arms around the waist of his better half, pulling them flush together.

"I don't do any less," he says, before dipping them in a deep, lingering kiss with only the ornate furnishings and the resurrected garden playing witness.

He realized that indefinable something about Suzaku that rooted into his chest (heart) is actually something very simple: home. Falling in love, being in love, isn't about the epic romance or grand ideals that fairy tales like to paint; it's the belonging. Real love is unconditional, platonic or otherwise, and it feels like coming home. That's exactly what Suzaku gave Lelouch and Nunnally when they lost theirs and didn't think they'd have one again – Suzaku reminded Lelouch of what he could have after not one but two near-tragic reunions.

Nunnally is home.

Suzaku is home.

Even the Student Council.

Maybe that's something that took Lelouch too long to realize, maybe he was just too buried in the past, or maybe he just really needed his vengeance before he could rest. Maybe it doesn't matter, now. Home is something Lelouch can hold in his arms, as he hopes to one day cradle his child, and he's never ever going to let go.

Universe, Gods, whoever or whatever else, be damned—

At the moment, it seems only Jeremiah is the hindrance. He must have an interruption hobby or something. The older man is respectful with that little throat-clearing of his, like a humanoid snooze button reminding the Emperor of the waiting world. As if Lelouch would forget. He and Suzaku will walk out together. Lelouch pats Suzaku's cheek and excuses himself for a quick moment, leaving Jeremiah and Suzaku to stare at each other in the same room.

Alone.

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awkward of silences.

The Britannian breaks it first with a subdued clearing of his throat, as he is one to do lately.

"So…"

Suzaku's eyes dully glaze at Jeremiah.

"About that whole… framing you for murder thing…"

Suzaku is almost tempted to let his flat stare speak for him. "I think you've been punished for that, Orange-kun."
Jeremiah meagerly grins. "Yes, well…" He coughs again. "You know how it is."

Suzaku's eyebrow quirks so hard it almost snaps right off his face.

No, he doesn't know "how it is."

And that wasn't an apology, if that is what the disgraced knight was attempting.

But the Honorary Britannian lets it go with a curt sigh. He supposes it doesn't matter. Jeremiah has suffered since—

Now that Suzaku thinks about it: Zero ruined Jeremiah.

Lelouch ruined Jeremiah.

A small smile tickles at Suzaku's lips, despite himself.

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Out on the grandest of all the stoops in the land of what will formerly be the Viceroy's building, Lelouch vi Britannia has risen from the grave and takes the metaphorical stage to meet his alter-ego. Cameras flash in a pulsating ripple while others feed the sunny scene live to the entire world watching and waiting for anything to happen next. Lelouch couldn't stop this from being a spectacle even if he wanted – this moment deserves a fuss. It certainly makes for a strange image in his mind, considering he's on the Britannian side with Cornelia and the like behind him instead of on the rebel side with Ohgi and Tohdoh… And yet, there's still a fluttery sense of déjà vu from the dramatic Zone day.

In the most surreal moments of Lelouch's life – more than when he met his mother's ghost – he's shaking hands with his alter ego. Something that was supposed to be his alter ego. A creation born from his own blood, the weeping wounds in his chest, that hardened around him for protection. But it also almost sank him into an abyss he would never be able to rise from, whether or not he wanted to. Right or wrong, he'd always done what he had to and that wouldn't have changed until his last breath—

(A thousand needles left uneaten.

A thousand cranes left unfolded?

A little sister left behind cradling the new world in her palm, a lifetime and more of infinite possibility only without a brother to share any of it.

Regrets enough to fill the universal void.)

Lelouch is caught in his reflection in Zero's mask, seeing himself stare back twice in two forms. He felt like he was spreading his broken wings and finally taking flight with Zero's cape and now he's standing taller still under a Britannian crown.

But he's always been both.

It's just a strange feeling of being split in half. It's like when his mother used to prune new growths from her plants and plant them to grow on their own into new life, only Lelouch can't tell which he is – the original stalk or the new bloom. Of course, inside the mask currently is C.C. but that doesn't lessen the moment, particularly to their audience. The majority of peace papers and official fuss have already been signed, dated and sealed so this show is for… show. Mostly. The terms
Lelouch vi Britannia proposed have already been agreed upon by Zero and his Black Knights – it's ultimately a form of Britannian surrender so it isn't as though Lelouch made all the decisions. Ohgi and the others have their suspicions, still do (won't be soon when the world can trust Britannia again), but here they are taking another chance with a seemingly well-meaning Britannian crown just like they did with Euphemia and the world playing witness yet again...

Lelouch sees the red laser dot swaying on Zero' chest and—

He just lunges—

Maybe too much exposure to Suzaku, for he's shoving his masked counterpart (his loyal, immortal friend) out of the way—

The gunshot cracks in the air, piercing right through him instead and pain erupts within him in a blazing wave—

He hears another crack under the blue sky as he crashes to the ground, limp, cold and hot. The impact of his bones and the surrounding shrieks of fear and panic fall away, off the edges of his mind until only his panicked heartbeat is filling his head. A flash of Jeremiah from the corner of his eye and booming commands are just wax melting into his ears. He sees Zero limp beside him and his reflection in a mask spattered with his own blood before he's pulled into a guarding embrace and Suzaku's worried eyes rain down on him. For a loose, ephemeral moment all that darkness Lelouch danced with on the edges of his heart inside that mask pours in thick and heavy, and so quickly the world dims from his eyes…

(...In order to recreate, first he must destroy.)

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[The following Monday finds Lelouch in his most detested class changing into his loathsome gym uniform before going outside to "exercise" like an un-evolved simpleton. The only bright side, which is definitely not the overly bright sun boring down on him, is that he does get to spend more time with Suzaku. Normally when Lelouch attends this "class" the exercise nut insists on all that exercising, so typically Lelouch is more or less watching Suzaku jog by on seemingly infinite laps while he walks his slow, single lap with Rivalz when the boy feels chatty. Which is most of the time. And a quiet Nina.

Butt today…

The usually athletic soldier boy is more content to take it slowly along with Lelouch and Rivalz. To think, as long as Lelouch keeps Suzaku preoccupied with other types of exercise, his suffering of P.E. won't be as bad. Maybe they could just supplement the class altogether for this extracurricular exercising…

They amble around the track and Rivalz notices the certain three-ring bully circus formerly appearing in the locker room isn't around. He speaks of overhearing that their classmates were transferred back to the mainland possibly for family reasons.

Yeah.

They thought they could fu—screw with Lelouch and his family, so they got their asses kicked ("transferred" via Geass to the proper school officials) back to the mainland where they and that hateful, barbarous behavior belong. Lenient, but at least they won't be hurting anybody else.
Suzaku doesn't say much about that. But the black-haired boy is rather content to quietly listen to Suzaku trip over some half-thought excuse for his considerable limp that Rivalz doesn't honestly question. Not even later in the locker room when the evidence carved into Lelouch's pearly back is exposed.

"Lelouch, your back!" Rivalz practically hisses, shirtless and stepping into his Ashford slacks. Then a strange and quite unwelcome glimmer fills his eyes. "Who's the lucky lady?"

How very crass and presumptuous.

Lelouch just pulls on his white button undershirt as if the scratches aren't there – they aren't deep or really painful, but he can still feel them. More than he can see them, anyway.

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," Lelouch coolly denies, catching a sweetly secret glance from Suzaku's eyes and subtly smiling mouth.

"But—!" Rivalz balks. "Telling's half the fun!"

Not from where Lelouch is standing.]

Chapter End Notes

*stifles slightly sinister snickering* Hope you enjoyed. One chapter left to go! ;]
Thanks for reading!

Also, cyber cookies to anybody that recognized the Nightmare of Nunnally riff. And I apologize to bananas.
And here we are, finally at the end. I wanted to take some extra time to make sure I was settled on this before posting, also special "last updated" date. ;] Won't hold you up here long. I hope it doesn't disappoint! It's been a sort of haphazard fic but I have put a lot of effort into taming this thing…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Back then Nunnally, Suzaku and I talked about what kind of object we thought happiness would be. If I'm not mistaken, I think it was Suzaku who said that the shape of happiness might resemble glass. His reasoning made sense. He said that even though you don't usually notice it, it is definitely there, you merely need to change your point of view slightly, and that glass will sparkle whenever it reflects the light. I doubt that anything else can argue its own existence more eloquently." –Lelouch, R2 Turn 7

Ambiguous

Re;

September 2021

Aries Imperial Villa, Britannia

Lelouch wakes to poking little fingers.

They touch his cheek with an accompaniment of poorly-stifled giggles bouncing against his ear, drawing him further up to the surface of consciousness. Sunlight is boldly reaching into the room to touch his eyes through half-parted red velvet curtains and he stirs in defiance. He's nestled in the fluffy folds of the honey blankets and silken sheets that are sprawled over the massive king bed and he's perfectly content to be consumed by all this soft luxury just like Arthur still snoozing on the corner.

Little fingers are not content for such.

Nor is the small, bouncing body attached to them.

Lelouch stirs, feeling the structure for his sound and pleasant slumber being shaken by a pair of small hands grabbing his shoulder—

"Papa~!" But it is the loud call the toddler that cracks his stubborn, sleepy smog.

Lelouch winces at the shout and briefly peeks just enough through the fan of dusty lashes to see a young pair of sparkling aqua eyes widely staring at him under a mop of messy dark brown hair. The sunlight is too bright and he retreats behind closed eyelids but not without blindly placing a hand somewhere on this energetic young body to make it still.
"Hmm… what's this?" Lelouch partially-pretends to sleepily mumble, rubbing his hand over the child's face before shifting under the cloud of blankets to rest his head on the boy's belly, earning him some wiggling. "It's not very comfortable…" Lelouch begins to poke sensitive sides as if to fluff a pillow, releasing more laughter into the air. "It's much too noisy, whatever it is. Maybe there's an off switch or something…" Lelouch lifts his head and searches for an imaginary switch with fingers lightly tickling the squirming little body.

Only when the boy becomes a fountain of giggles and cries for mercy does Lelouch relent.

"Now, why are you here, small fry?" he asks, rolling onto his back with a tired puff.

"Mama," Genbu replies with pep, sitting upright.

"I see… Well, go tell mama his monster has been wakened."

"No." Genbu shakes his head and tugs on Lelouch's blue silk pajama shirt. "Mama said bring you."

"Did he now?" Lelouch mutters, peering again at a chipper Genbu who's unblinkingly gazing at him. Far too awake. "Well, I guess that means you won't be returning anytime soon," he says with a sly smile, rolling over onto the boy. "You're boney for a pillow, but I think I can overlook that."

He snuggles into Genbu's stomach again, much to the boy's dismay who boils over with laughter, pushing on his father's head and huffs indignantly.

"Papa heavy!"

Lelouch smiles but doesn't move. "Perhaps next time you should tell mama that he should do his own dirty work."

"I don't think you'd like it if mama did his own dirty work," comes the rather cheeky reply from Suzaku at the threshold on the other side of the spacious and ornate room.

Lelouch hums, unmoving. "I'm the Emperor. I can sleep in if I want to."

"On any other day," Suzaku says, appearing at the bedside with an amused grin. "But we have to leave for an important trip, and you know that." He nudges Lelouch to free the small fry trapped under him.

Lelouch grumbles, pulling the covers over his head—

That Suzaku promptly yanks away, unveiling a withering, violet glare – as well as sending Arthur off the bed into a disgruntled grumble.

"Don't be so difficult, Your Majesty, it's not that early," Suzaku chides, gathering up vibrant little boy into his arms. "If you get up now you'll still have time to shower."

"All by myself?" Lelouch fakes a pout.

"I think you can manage," Suzaku dryly denies. "Now hurry up. Genbu is hungry so don't keep him waiting. Right?"

"Bakefest!" the little boy happily attempts to say breakfast.

Lelouch groans a little at the shameless usage of their son against him but still slowly hauls himself to at least sit up in bed.
"Coffee," the Britannian noble demands with a groggy rub of his face.

"Already percolating," Suzaku smugly announces before turning and leaving – so very satisfied his job is done.

The fact that he even knows the word *percolate* is the real accomplishment.

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On the ground floor in an open, country-modern kitchen with dark brown cabinets and brassy fixtures Lelouch is tying his trusty apron around his waist to protect his very royal jammies.

"Alright, then," Lelouch begins, looking to the baby docked in his high chair at the speckled-white granite island in the center of the room. "What does small fry want for breakfast?"

Genbu's large eyes shimmer and he reaches into the air with grabby fingers, "Cake!"

"That's not a breakfast food," Lelouch smiles with amusement.

"Cake! Cake!" Genbu happily exclaims again, slapping the table of his high chair.

"This is why you don't ask a three-year-old what he wants for breakfast," Suzaku lightly jokes from the baby's side.

Lelouch's eyebrow lifts at the brunet quietly cooing their son. "I can accommodate." He smiles and tousles his son's head with a ringed hand. "Chocolate-chip pancakes it is."

"Cakes!" Genbu giggles happily.

But Suzaku frowns. "Lelouch, that's not really a breakfast."

"In some parts of the country it is," Lelouch confidently counters as he turns to the stovetop and places a flat pan on a heating electric burner and gathers needed ingredients to make the batter.

"You might as well feed him actual cake, then," Suzaku lightly grouses.

"We have fruit to go with it." Lelouch pours scoops and dashes of dry ingredients into a clear, large bowl.

Suzaku sighs. "Feeding him all that sugar when you know he's going to be stuck on a plane for the next, what, 13 hours?"

"At least you won't be bored. I plan on napping, so, he'll be all yours," Lelouch lets the crack of an egg punctuate his dry serve. "Or he might end up just crashing, so, problem solved."

"You're so bad," Suzaku laughs.

Lelouch grins as he whisks the ingredients together in front of the baby who watches in happy amazement – he likes spoiling his son from time to time, especially when he's able to prepare their meals.

To say that Lelouch vi Britannia is a "non-traditional" Emperor is putting it mildly but it suits him just fine. Seems to rather suit the world, too. The Britannian nation, however… are learning to adjust. The fact that Lelouch vi Britannia will be the first emperor or empress in easily a century to not reside in the royal palace at the heart of the nation's capital is but the tip of the mountain. In different circumstances, Lelouch might have moved right in and made it his, but based upon
experience such a large impersonal building is no place to live. Not in any private way like he and Suzaku prefer for themselves or raising a family. So they reclaimed what was once Lelouch’s childhood home – although it almost didn't really feel like home anymore and not just because it had been abandoned and neglected. These walls used to mean something different when he was an abandoned ten-year-old in a foreign land. It used to mean home but on the bones of lies, he's built his own truth. Lelouch essentially gutted the ancient villa down to its skeleton and then rebuilt it with Suzaku – out with the old, in with the new. Marianne had a minimalist taste with a French flare indoors so it wasn't all too difficult to transform the living spaces into something unrecognizable. Her neglected sprawling gardens weren't quite recreated or replaced, but are still tended. Lelouch doesn't seem to feel the same way about any of it anymore, but flowers always made Nunnally happy and now small fry as well. Safety is the utmost priority for Lelouch and this villa offers a smaller area to secure and survey than any opulent, expansive palace ever could with its revolving door of visitors as well as disgruntled extended family.

That's a tree that desperately needed some pruning and Lelouch was more than happy to do it.

It was easy for Lelouch to Geass his way into the heir apparent and sweep Charles out of the way. The harder part was disabling the rest of the royal roost. Unsurprisingly, former Crown Prince Odysseus wasn't all that heartbroken to have the title taken from him as he was never eager to become emperor – dreaded it, in fact – and he practically jumped aside in relief that somebody else was taking his place. Odysseus is a harmless airhead without any ambition so it's rather amazing that he lasted as long as he did. In truth, Schneizel was Lelouch's biggest rival for the throne and he'd already been dealt with – that bastard is rather more useful alive than dead, Lelouch is loath to admit.

Life has changed, for everyone, and for Lelouch it still doesn't feel normal yet. His sense of time can be "it was only yesterday when" but yesterday is now a long three(ish) years ago. Meals like this with the seahorse and small fry are important (although preferably not too early in the morning...); they make him feel like his normal self.

He also enjoys it of course.

They huddle at the island eating pancakes – or from the parental perspective, just trying to keep Genbu from completely coating himself in syrup. Suzaku feeds their son a bite, Lelouch wipes away the sticky from his mouth. –Cue the warm and fuzzy montage of laughter and heart-shaped bubbles under a hazy-glam filter. They're picture-perfect – even if in the end neither Lelouch nor Suzaku gained any answers about their child. Lelouch supposes it doesn't matter. He's their healthy, happy baby boy – normal, by all accounts. Little Genbu is perfect. The most perfect baby to ever exist (Nunnally excluded).

And what a sight they make as the royal family; a "usurping" reject from the wild and his foreign monkey of a paramour. With a mixed-blood baby out of underage wedlock. A lot of questions there are hard to answer, not that Lelouch cared to provide them. Their personal business is just that: personal. Lelouch knows he probably can't keep his "home" and "work" lives separate forever, as they are essentially the same thing under the crown, but he will never stop protecting his family. His real family.

Lelouch will crack the planet open and release Hell itself before he lets anything happen to anyone he cares about.

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In the dressing room, Lelouch is donning his regal white layers alone, assembling with perfection in front of a trio of full-length mirrors. He's pulling on the long-sleeve, plain white robe, sliding it
over a patchy red scar on the back of his right shoulder blade. His amethyst eyes linger on the matching scar still red on his chest.

Suffice to say, Lelouch survived the shot. Despite the old verbiage weapons haven't used shelled bullets or gunpowder since the discovery of sakuradite, but the energy blast of a today's weaponry is no less damaging. Probably more efficient. The shot that hit Lelouch three years ago pierced through under his collar bone and out the back of shoulder like a focused beam of a solar flare. It broke bone, severed skin and spilled blood but most importantly if the shot had hit the other side of his chest it likely would've pierced his heart.

"Are you sure you want to wear this?" Suzaku suddenly asks from behind. "Kind of formal, isn't it?"

"Not all traditions are bad," Lelouch quickly closes his shirt, hiding away the scar and secures the buttons. A red-threaded ring on his finger glints in the reflection. "There's no harm in looking sophisticated and presentable." And not like a sloppy loafer.

Suzaku half-grins a little as his reflection steps closer, "No, but we'll just be sitting on the plane for a long time. Will that be comfortable?"

"I'm not a child. You don't need to ask me such questions," Lelouch haughtily utters. In other words: it's comfortable enough, stop being a nag. He pulls on the chest piece with the fierce ruby eye, winged and center on the front, letting Suzaku be useful by zipping up the back of it.

"Consider it practice," Suzaku grinningly replies.

Lelouch noncommittally hums, disregarding the seahorse's reflection when he tops himself off with his white emperor cap—

A face that purses as if Suzaku bit into a lemon. "You're not really going to wear the… that hat, are you?"

…What's with that tone coming out of that expression?

"It's all part of the ensemble," Lelouch loftily defends with a checking look of himself with dignity and grace. "It's meant to be worn all together as one." He doesn't see what's so wrong about it that it warrants such a sour pucker of Suzaku's face.

Suzaku wears a mocking smile and pats Lelouch's shoulder, "…If you say so."

Seriously.

What's wrong with the hat?

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After a few phone calls and villa staff meeting Lelouch enters the lawn of the garden all presentable like to join Suzaku who is also dressed in his formal Knight uniform… and unfortunately, it's looking like Suzaku might have to be the one knocked into the cracked earth. The Knight is playfully tossing baby Genbu into the air then catching him only to toss him up again.

Tossing him!

Like a toy!
Lelouch does not approve – a major understatement.

Up—

He marches onto the scene, "What do you think you're doing?"

—Down—

"Playing with the baby," Suzaku answers simply with a smile. "Working off some of that sugar."

—Up—

"I don't think you should be playing with the baby this way." Never mind how much the little boy loves it, as his rampant giggling indicates.

—Down—

"Why?"

—Up—

"Why?" Lelouch echoes irately, calling Suzaku an idiot without saying the word. "What if you drop him?!"

—Down—

"I'm not gonna drop him," Suzaku flippantly says – as if he isn't hurling their precious baby boy into the air and into gravity's mercy!

—Up—

"But what if you do?!"

—Down—

"I said I won't so I'm not." –Truly flawless logic.

—Up—

Lelouch huffs, "Just stop. I think that's enough."

—Down—

"What, you don't trust me?" –Says the man hoisting an infant into the air!

Lelouch looks him over slowly, as if the answer isn't obvious enough. "No."

"Well, I trust me," Suzaku is grinning widely, looking to the baby, "and Genbu trusts me, don't you?"

"Up!" Genbu happily demands, his little hands gesturing to the big, blue sky above him.

Suzaku laughs, "I'll take that as a yes," and is about to hoist Genbu up again before Lelouch flails to reach the baby—

"I said stop!"
Suzaku moves Genbu out of Lelouch's reach, "Come on, I won't let anything happen."

"Give me the baby!" Lelouch demands, but every time he reaches for said fragile little being Suzaku swiftly moves him away. "Don't play keep-away with the baby!" Lelouch indignantly commands, finally grabbing the boy when Suzaku lets him go with a simper.

"You worry too much," he playfully gibes.

"You don't worry enough." Lelouch is scowling fiercely as he adjusts Genbu's tiny short-suit and attempts to dust off the stupidity that might have fallen onto the baby from Suzaku. Universe knows he already has to fight the dumb he might've inherited from Suzaku's genes.

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Tokyo, Japan

Kururugi Shrine

13 hours later (or whatever) and it's past noon of the next day (stupid jet-lag) when they arrive on the island nation of Japan that was once shackled like so many others with a dehumanized number identity. Mere years won't salve the wounds as the damage of former Britannia was extensive but Lelouch doing what he can to help heal what will be another scar in history.

Another lesson that shouldn't have repeated, much less taught in the first place.

The former Viceroy building has been repurposed and Britannia has an embassy there but it's Suzaku's once-abandoned childhood home that will house them for their stay – the place of origin for the most famous couple in the world. Tohdoh has resided in the old compound all through its renovations that Lelouch aided in funding. It looks much like it did, on the outside, even if still different through Lelouch's older eyes. The classic red arch has certainly been restored to its glory and the grounds have been sculpted into lush lawns and shrubs rather than overgrown brush. It's very informal for the Britannian emperor to be staying in this pedestrian place during his visit but Lelouch's real concern is how this return might affect Suzaku. They haven't been back since their... confrontation years ago and much about it has changed.

As the primary habitant and caretaker, Tohdoh greets them looking all stoic like usual, with Kaguya, Suzaku's somewhat estranged cousin of some repute. Hailing from his mother's side of the family, she's tied to Kyoto and quite the Zero supporter – Lelouch's interactions with her post-Zone, however, were quite limited. She greets them with a poised bow promptly followed by a rather glomping hug on Suzaku. Considering Lelouch heard that Suzaku used to throw rocks at her when they were kids, this is a vast improvement. Lelouch is holding small fry so a quick handshake will have to do for his older comrade and younger fan, although that's really preferable to hugging anyway. When they enter the house, though, a big pink surprise is unafraid to glomp onto him despite his infant shield.

"I'm so happy to see you!" Euphemia joyously proclaims, hooking right around Lelouch's neck even though he tried to back-step away from her. "It's really been too long!"

She really lets herself be excessively informal outside of work...

"We speak often," Lelouch mutters. "Even just before I left on the flight."

"But not face-to-face in the same room." She pulls back and pinches his cheeks, knowing he can't
swat her away because of precious Genbu in his arms. "Spoil-sport."

Lelouch is pretty sure she's not using that insult properly. And if she were anybody else he'd probably kick a shin. Instead, he grumbles like a reluctant cat restraining shredding claws and she giggles with delight before Suzaku steps in for his hug, but that's too little, too late. He's the Emperor's Knight, he's supposed to be taking all the bullets.

So to speak…

"And my favorite nephew!" Euphemia happily says, already reaching to snatch up another little bundle of happy.

Note that Genbu is not her only nephew.

"He's growing so fast!" she bounces him a little on her hip and he quite happily grabs at her abundant pink hair.

"And he's in a bit of a grabby phase, so you might want to be mindful of your dangle earrings," Lelouch cautions with a smirk and straights Genbu's crumpled clothes.

Euphemia has a good-natured laugh and Eskimo-kisses her giggling nephew. They haven't seen each other much but she does have an excellent rapport with him – must just be her nature. Not everyone knows how to handle a baby, much less a sprouting toddler.

"Perhaps I could—um, would you like to take them out…?" speaks a mousy voice that Lelouch recognizes before he sees the bespectacled face belonging to it.

"Nina," Lelouch casually greets as he would have on a regular club day – actually kind of forgetting that this is anything but a regular club day.

"Good to see you," she replies, and then stammers, "uh, Your Majesty."

"Friends don't really have to use that title do they?" Suzaku slyly asks.

"There's nothing wrong with a little formality," Lelouch deadpans. He is still really not a fan of cheeky-Suzaku.

"So you've said," replies the brunet with a most unwelcome grin.

Euphemia laughs, leaning her head so that Nina's fingers can delicately unhook her hanging earrings of little florets.

Nina would be one of those people that doesn't know how to handle a baby. But she also doesn't, or didn't, know how to handle other people in general. She's been working closely with Euphemia since… about when Lelouch shed Zero's mask in favor or a crown. Nina has made some improvements, learned to unlearn what a former Britannia taught her. Euphemia is a good influence and they appear to have formed a close friendship. Milly, of course, likes to speculate that there's more than friendship between them but it's really not Lelouch's business, or anybody's. ((And it's not like he has a complete an utter mental block on any such thoughts concerning in his sister. ((Nope. Not denial.))))

"Your Majesty, it's my honor to welcome you to our home," Tohdoh takes his moment to formally welcome with a traditional Japanese bow that, frankly, Lelouch's Britannian subjects could learn from if not employ. "I hope you will enjoy your stay here."
"I feel very welcomed, thank you," Lelouch says with a subtly sardonic tone searing from his smiling lips. It's the most welcoming greeting he's ever received coming to this Shrine. First time was as a foreign hostage child. Second in confrontation with Suzaku. Perhaps third time really is the charm on this one.

Tohdoh nods. Then their attention is directed to Suzaku re-familiarizing with his younger cousin all while little Genbu is getting lots of affectionate attention from his aunties.

Quit the different welcoming indeed.

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"So you've handled the rest of the defectors?" Tohdoh asks across from the table in a tea room. "So quickly?"

"They were frantic, desperate, and not as well organized as they could've been," Lelouch answers (feeling so very adult in this adult conversation unlike with his husband and sister earlier.)

Tohdoh hums, "All flash, no substance."

"In a manner of speaking." Lelouch smirks – oh, there were plenty of big bangs happening. "Considering it took more than seven years for Japan to win back its freedom, I can understand your disbelief."

"It isn't disbelief…" the old, somewhat retired commander says, sounding as though there's a skeptical contradiction left unsaid. "Although some of your allies within the empire are surprising."

No avoidance of stepping on toes here when Tohdoh blatantly eyes the tall, orange-eyed Britannian guard standing behind the seated Emperor and Knight(-Consort.)

"People can change," is all the stoic Jeremiah replies, although Lelouch detects a hint of sass.

The "Orange" incident is replaying in everyone's mind, Lelouch knows. A defining moment when Zero made his introduction and freed Suzaku through a seeming turncoat officer. The last that was seen of Jeremiah was in the very fight that snatched and saved the JLF from Cornelia's clutches, whereupon he was believed to be KIA. Orange is often spat at Jeremiah with derision but he now wears it as a badge of honor – and he's wholly dedicated to never failing in his protection of Marianne's child. He has more than proven his loyalty at this point, especially given the things he knows, Lelouch isn't concerned.

Tohdoh hums, "I understand your former compatriot, Nu, helped root out the instigators, before retiring into marriage here." That almost sounds like a slight – but coming from Tohdoh it also feels like a compliment? "It is known that Britannia is dealing with some fracturing, as would be expected in this situation. It's in the best interest of everyone that it doesn't deteriorate further." Then there's something of a knowing glint in his eyes, "I don't envy the tasks ahead of you."

"Perhaps it's equally surprising that Prime Minister Ohgi would marry a Britannian soldier like Nu. Change isn't easy, but it always comes," The Britannian Emperor slyly smiles.

Yes. The little abandoned prince is now the conquering King. Tohdoh remembers Lelouch well, as did Kirihara, and knows well enough to be wary. It's amusing to Lelouch to sit here so peacefully in this house he was barred from entering as a child with a man that just might have separated him and Suzaku during a squabble or two – the same man that Suzaku was ordered to execute, that vowed to aide Zero and wouldn't surrender until his home was free. Whether the veteran has connected the dots between Lelouch and Zero he hasn't said so – although if he's smart enough to realize it he'd
be wise enough to not speak of it. Although *speaking of*, Kirihara is still happily keeping Lelouch's secret while minding his mine.

"True," Tohdoh nods. "And you have had the support of the Knights of the Round."

The commander isn't one to fish for details but it certainly sounds like he is.

"The Round are loyal to the crown and, honestly, can easily respect a soldier like Suzaku leading them."

Was that a shameless compliment for his seahorse knight?

Why yes, it was.

Does Suzaku appreciate it?

"For the most part," the seahorse noncommittally says.

Eh…

"Problems?" Euphemia asks. "I mean, I heard from Cornelia that there was something about one of the Knights… but I thought everything was all right?"

"A bad apple here or there won't spoil the bunch," is all Lelouch is willing to say in front of his audience. The short version is a bigoted upstart got cut down before a sense of false entitlement could cause damage. "It's nothing to be concerned about."

"Still… the defectors would have had to be desperate to try… an assassination on you when they did," Euphemia carefully says. "That was before the Knights of the Round could rally with you here in Japan because everything was all so sudden."

"Desperate is a word for it," Suzaku flatly notes almost in a mutter under his breath.

Lelouch merely sends him a small, sweet *smile* that faintly wrinkles his nose.

"I'm still just glad that you're all right," Euphemia says with fretful lines on her face. "I really thought that we might lose you again."

"It worked out in the end," Lelouch says.

"Except for Zero," Tohdoh adds and a quietness settles over the room that's halved respectful and tense. Tohdoh knew Zero as a fearless commander, a spark of hope in the downpour of Britannian oppression.

Euphemia and Suzaku, however, know the puppet-master is… no worse for the wear. What Euphemia doesn't know is that C.C. can take a lethal shot like a pro.

"Even stronger in death, I suppose," Tohdoh solemnly finishes.

"A martyr in history," Suzaku is still sounding less than enthused.

"It's a good way to remember him," Euphemia sweetly tries to cheer up the room, looking at Lelouch who stays quiet. "It's just a shame and troubling that you—we have to deal with this conflict with our own people."

Lelouch scoffs a little, "It's always been that way. It will take more than a few years for that to
change. They're not too happy about having their toys taken away, either." No more giant robots and slave fights make for some petulant subjects. But the fat-cat nobles don't scare Lelouch.

"It will take time," Tohdoh says, "but at least you have the support of your… hmm…"

"Commoners?" Lelouch finishes the delicate trail with a touch of amusement, to which Tohdoh half-nods. "On a good day, that's true."

Lelouch has absolutely been rocking the boat and if anything he's surprised there aren't more obvious attempts on his life – obvious being the keyword. The Britannian elite do enjoy their machinations and subterfuge but Lelouch is a master at cloak and dagger.

Also Geass.

Like so much the Geass.

(But don't tell Suzaku.)

Lelouch's first act as the 99th Emperor of Britannia was to dismantle the all "Areas" which of course included Japan, but returning to independence isn't a simple task. Not only are economies all tangled and reliant upon the giant but leadership structures need to be rebuilt in most cases. In a way, Japan was one of the more fortunate Areas in that they retained some of their independent spirit. With the death of Genbu Kururugi Senior Japan didn't get their chance to fight back and lose. Resistance remained in many Areas, naturally, but Japan never surrendered like many others because they hadn't been officially defeated. Zero was able to build off that innate defiance, after all, and stoke the embers. Yet it is a painful irony. If the Prime Minister had lived… Japan's spirit just might've been crushed completely. Suzaku had wanted to save people in trade for his father that day, but in a way, he managed to spare the soul of his homeland.

As it is now, Britannia is at the mercy of the world after disarming and many in the top tiers of Britannian society aren't pleased with it. To be expected, though. Such people conditioned to believe they're better than everybody else just because isn't an ideology that simply vanishes overnight, but in terms of "rebellion" to Lelouch's radical regime, there's little to speak of these days. After all, a great many native, underprivileged Britannians suffered under their previous Emperor and Lelouch is nothing if he's not for the people. It's certainly not where Lelouch thought he'd end up after his first taste of blood that day C.C. gave him the "Power of Kings" but there is also something quite satisfying about destroying Britannia from the inside. From top to bottom, inside and out.

Or as Suzaku would have it "reforming" Britannia.

Lelouch prefers to think of it his own way, though.

Things went about as smoothly as they could but are still settling. Britannia was granted to maintain an embassy, of sorts, through at least their careful, calculated process of withdrawing beyond just military means. Euphemia has remained here as the lead having a more trusted Britannian face due to her efforts with the SAZ. Controversies aside, she has come into her own and found where she belongs, helping and settling issues as a true-to-heart diplomat – and with a patient grace that Lelouch honestly respects. She is neither princess nor viceroy but still bears a title of noble distinction: Ambassador Euphie. She's certainly a friendly face for Lelouch and one he's happy to see amongst many he isn't.

"From your perspective, it would seem that Japan was taking a greater risk in honoring the pact, after the loss of Zero," Lelouch says.
Tohdoh hums, "There was trust in Zero and his support of it. Once it was confirmed that you were alive and hadn't changed your mind after the attempt on your life, it was believed that shouldn't change. Even if, or maybe especially because we lost our Commander. It was a tense few days, I'll admit. Zero's second takes credit for keeping the peace during that time."

"Hm, yes. I understand Prime Minister Ohgi handled the situation very well," Lelouch pleasantly says. What can he say? He's proud of his little number two who became a big number one.

(…Does that sound weird?

Lelouch didn't mean that to sound weird.)

"Don't be so modest," Kaguya inserts with eyes on Tohdoh. "I seem to remember you being a leading level head in the matter as well."

"He does know a thing or two about stopping squabbles," Suzaku grins. He is, of course, referring to himself and Lelouch. Also probably himself and Kaguya.

To which Tohdoh huffs with humor, "Stopping children isn't the same beast as stopping nations preparing to duel on a tightrope."

"Doesn't sound too different," Lelouch casually jokes. Seriously, has Tohdoh ever met any nobles?

"The important thing is that it worked out in the end," Euphemia says.

"Perhaps it should be flattering that His Majesty was seen as such a threat but desperation in the wake of the SAZ takes some of the credit." Jeremiah takes the liberty to speak – Lelouch hasn't ordered otherwise, Jeremiah just knows the formality of his service like a religion and doesn't talk out of turn. "But they weren't as formidable a foe as they hoped.

"Not against you and Villetta," Tohdoh finishes.

"I did fail him on the day of the attempted assassination," Jeremiah solemnly admits and Suzaku's gaze flicks to the floor, "but I will not be caught off-guard again."

"The important thing is that they didn't succeed, though, and even revealed themselves in their desperate attempt," Kaguya says before a sip of tea.

"Indeed. It was made clear they were not in their Emperor's favor." Tohdoh agrees – and now Lelouch is wondering if he's just (paranoid and) imagining that tone…

"It did—has made working with other world leaders easier," Euphemia says with a heavier tone. Whatever is thought of Lelouch inside Britannia, much of his success in gaining trust with other countries is owed to the attack on his life. When Lelouch declared for Japan to be liberated along with the vow to free the other Areas it triggered some of the riled remnants of the purists – Jeremiah's old faction. It certainly didn't help that a former forerunner like Jeremiah Gottwald seemingly turned tail to support the new, radical emperor. That fallout is helpful to a point looking from the outside and Lelouch's continued cooperation nurtures his relations with other nations. It's as Tohdoh said, though, that it's important to keep the ship from sinking itself.

There is also still the antsy Chinese Federation that has Lelouch's close attention. He won't have them swooping in like vultures to feast on the (could be) carrion of his metamorphosing Empire. Schneizel is quite adept at placating other leaders, so that saves Lelouch some trouble of having to play nice. Playing with small fry is much more preferable.
"We don't have to talk about work now." Euphemia lightly shakes her hands in the air to brush away the atmosphere with Genbu in her lap. "It might be small but it's still a break from the day-to-day. It's not a vacation but we should enjoy respite when we can."

That sounds like something Milly would say, only significantly less threatening from little Euphie's lips.

"Helping to move isn't exactly a relaxing distraction," Lelouch idly notes.

"But it's helping Nunnally move back home with you, that should be uplifting!" she happily insists with a bright smile.

Nunnally is finally ready to make the move back home to the villa with Lelouch now that her basic schooling is finished. He and Suzaku attended her graduation, of course, but she wanted to spend a bit more time amongst some friends she had grown closer to the past few years (in Lelouch’ absence.) With the fall having arrived it's time for her to leave and Lelouch has returned to help her. True enough that the bulk of her possessions have been handled by the appropriate professionals, as Suzaku so mockingly put it, but there's more involved than hoisting boxes.

Might not be a kingly thing to do but it is absolutely a brotherly thing to do.

"True," Lelouch distantly admits, although he'll be relieved when she's finally settled home. This is the longest he's ever been apart from her… and it's been difficult. He makes sure they regularly communicate and Sayoko has remained at her side as a secretly official bodyguard, but the separation has gone against his very nature. He realizes, of course, that it is… good for her to learn and practice some independence but that doesn't mean he likes it. She doesn't need to be independent when she has him.

"Besides, it's not like you're actually going to be uplifting any boxes, right?" Suzaku quips – undoubtedly remembering Lelouch's… less dignified moments.

It's really best to ignore Suzaku when he thinks he's being cute and witty.

Because he's really being neither and shouldn't get the encouragement.

"Speaking of family," Lelouch smoothly redirects, "where is dear Cornelia?"

"Oh, just… handling security," Euphemia somewhat noncommittally answers. "But you will be seeing each other. It's just a… thing she couldn't—needed to take care of."

"No worries. I know she's a busy one." Lelouch's grin is mostly inward. Sounds like Cornelia might not have been completely honest and little sister suspects but he will trust them. He doesn't like the idea of Cornelia sniffing around his Geass trails with that headstrong military mind of hers, but while he'd maybe like to keep a closer eye on her it's better to keep distance between them. For now, Cornelia does have some loyalty to late Marianne's children but in terms of unquestioning loyalty, Jeremiah is the best choice. Ironically.

"We were hoping to see Schneizel," little half-sister continues. "I know it's not as important as helping with the capital, but it's been a while since he last visited."

"He likes paperwork, didn't you know?" Lelouch is keeping an iron fist on that red leash for forever and a day. "We'll only be here a few days; he's keeping my pen warm." NOT Lelouch's throne.

But enough about Lelouch's robot sla—servant.
"I don't want to be rude, but I do need to head over to the school to see Nunnally," Lelouch respectfully announces as he stands. It's been too long since he's seen her face-to-face and held her delicate hand.

"Of course," Tohdoh says and also stands. "We won't keep you."

"Oh!" Euphemia pops. "Yes, um, there's just something I'd like to take you to see before we get there."

Lelouch would rather not detour, but...

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Euphemia is persuasive.

And Lelouch is tired from travel.

Out of the way to Ashford, they're at the base of Mt Fuji where the Special Administered Zone offices once sat. Now stands Zero as stone-faced as ever in his mask and cape – literally. In memoriam, a statue just a little larger than life was placed with his... likeness in smooth, glittering stone and noble pose pointing forward with an unfurled split of his cape, always looking to the future. At his feet there is a golden plaque etched in Japanese as well as English underneath that reads:

Zero, Commander of the Black Knights

Defender of Justice and Liberator of Japan from the Britannian Empire in 2017

May he and our struggle for freedom never be forgotten

Lelouch is a little touched. Somewhat humbled. Even proud. But mostly it feels surreal. He's staring up at the featureless face of his alter ego when Euphemia touches his shoulder with a small and uncertain but reassuring smile. She leaves a cluster of fresh flowers at Zero's stone feet where many other bouquets lie and stand in vases along with the occasional stuffed toy, burnt incense sticks, candles, and hand-written notes, open, folded and enveloped alike.

He doesn't read them.

It was Euphemia's idea to come here but truthfully it isn't bad press for the Britannian Emperor to visit and pay his respects. (Not like people aren't watching his every move while he's in the country.) It's eerier than he would've expected it to be, however, and gives him a slightly unsettled feeling.

Lelouch is surprised to feel the soft touch of another arm looping around his. A familiar act from Suzaku, but standing here before the memorial of Lelouch's masked self that was a source of contention, it feels different.

"I guess he did save my life," the brunet explains, looking at Lelouch. "More than once."

"He might not have been perfect, but none of us would be where we are now without him," Euphemia sincerely adds.

They are both talking about Zero like he isn't standing between them.

Rude.
And they both know that they know Lelouch is—was Zero. Because they talk. So they know what they're doing. (Do they think they're being funny? Because they're not.)

So rude.

Lelouch recognizes that the death of his other self is real and that he's no longer that person, but this is the first time since Zero's death under the world's lens that it's felt real. Yet, it isn't that part of him has died, it's that this part of his life is over. It's an odd, alien (and quite unwanted) feeling to realize it now. Lelouch stands side-by-side with his well-meaning, meddling sister and they work to achieve more together than maybe he would've been able to accomplish behind Zero's mask alone.

Maybe.

(Had some things happened differently, though…)

The Britannian Emperor exhales a breath. Not really a sigh of relief just… ease of pressure. He could say something heartfelt. Something appreciative of these two people that have ultimately decided to stand at his side. He should probably express some sort of emotional conveyance of that sort—

"Do you think he would think this statue is big enough?" Lelouch openly ponders.

Earning him a slightly bemused quirk of the Ambassador's lips and a flat stare from his Knight.

"I just really don't know what to do with you sometimes," Suzaku deadpans and promptly unhooks their arms.

Euphemia softly giggles, "Most of the time you mean. I'm telling you he's barely changed a bit since we were kids." They start walking away together, leaving Lelouch's flippancy to keep him company.

"Sad," Suzaku derides with scathing blandness that reeks of disappointment. "But not surprising."

"Just sayin'…" Lelouch says mostly to himself with a shrug of his voice.

—Sure.

Lelouch could have bowed to sentiment.

Or he could just continue being himself.

The man (without social compunction) they know and love.

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On the way to Ashford Lelouch can see the iconic landmark Tokyo Tower spearing up into the sky. Its red frame still stands with proud height in its illuminating lights but now the view isn't about a broken people, instead a triumphant one. Zero was metaphorically born, sort of, no too far from there but Lelouch thinks he'll keep that memory lane trip to himself.

Something tells him his current companions might not be as appreciative.

(coughSuzakucough)

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It's the weekend and so Ashford academy isn't abuzz like it would be with the regular shuffling traffic of students; although a visit from Lelouch vi Britannia causes its own stir. Security standards dictate that his areas remain clear but that doesn't stop distant gawkers. Lelouch isn't concerned with students even if, perhaps, he should know a bit better than to underestimate a teenager. He and his entourage do make quite an entrance on their way to the clubhouse where Nunnally is waiting. Lelouch, Suzaku and Euphemia... although none of them are quite strangers to campus, not even Jeremiah, their new titles can alter perception. Everyone knows by this point that Lelouch, and Nunnally, had been discreetly schooling at Ashford but he isn't seen as simply a returning (dropout) student by those observing. If he were more whimsical he might wonder if the building remembers him; as the little boy seeking refuge, the revenge-seeking teen or just... Lelouch, who dwelled as normally as he could behind falsehoods. His old home is certainly a sight for his sore eyes.

Even with Rivalz waving from the stoop like an excited puppy.

"Lelouch!" the familiar school chum without the familiar uniform greets very familiarly. He looks about ready to leap into an embrace with the Britannian Emperor or at the least a shoulder grasp. Lelouch was never a hugger or high-fiver or hand-shaker or any-kind-of-physical-contact-with-other-people type of person and Rivalz knew this well, but it's the rather stern totem of guarding Jeremiah that halts him in his place before he can spring. "Er-Er, uh, should I say Your Majesty? Emperor...?" He sheepishly asks through a less sheepish smile, and then his brow quirks. "Am I supposed to bow?"

Lelouch's mouth curls with a small smirk while Suzaku and Euphemia share a snicker at the so very important title being used on little Lelouch Lamperouge. He's surrounded by children... A little deference would be nice.

"Stay and debate if you like," Lelouch haughtily mutters walking past a disconcerted Rivalz. "I'm going inside so I can see Nunnally." Who is arguably the most mature person he knows.

Rivalz sputters, worse than that time his bike broke down in the cold on the highway, "U-Uh, um, n—Not—You can't," and practically throws himself in Lelouch's path. "Have to wait in the clubroom."

The Emperor of Britannia's path.

"Why?" Lelouch knows a feint when he sees one. Or when one stammers and jumps in front of him, as it were.

"Be...cause it's her request."

Lelouch narrows his eyes. "Why?"

Rivalz's eyes shift. "...Because she wants to meet you there."

Suspicious.

And Lelouch has learned to listen to his suspicions. Especially when any combination of the Student Council and the clubroom are involved.

Suzaku, however, has not learned any such lesson as his short sigh indicates, "Come on. There's no need to make a life crises out of this." He grasps Lelouch's elbow as he steps forwards (like he's one to talk). "Let's just go in. Is she still busy? It will give us some time to catch up."

"Hah—Yes, exactly! Just that. That's, uh, yes. Let's go! " Rivalz agrees too readily; he obviously hadn't considered the opportunity and is grateful for the chance.
Seriously. If he was going to lie he should've practiced.

Lelouch plays along, mostly because Genbu is asleep against his shoulder leaving him unable to physically resist.

Mostly.

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Lelouch sits *reluctantly* on the couch in the club room soothing away his stress by rubbing Genbu's sleeping back while Suzaku peers out the window. They are joined by Rivalz and Kallen. So much for catching up with everyone; Nina is off with Euphemia because *reasons* and their other club mates are conveniently absent. Kind of like how Lelouch would prefer to be right now…

"I still can't believe that you're really royalty, Lelouch," says Rivalz. "All that time and you couldn't even tell your best friends? I thought you knew you could trust me."

Considering the weird episode Rivalz had during the whole "omg Lulu is a gaaay?!" affair, Lelouch honestly wonders…

"Maybe it was for your own protection," the royal breezily mutters.

"Right," Rivalz chuckles, "because if you told me then you'd have to kill me, right?"

Something like that.

"Well, it must be exciting?" Rivalz asks.

"Not really."

"Uh-mm, it must be really difficult."

"Sometimes."

"...So... but there're upsides, right? Like a... personal chef that will cook you *anything* you want *whenever* you want?"

"I still prefer to cook myself."

"Never mind Lelouch, Rivalz," Suzaku says without turning around. "He's just pouting."

"I do not pout," Lelouch curtly corrects.

(He's totally pouting tho.
He came here to see Nunnally, not to *be kept away* from Nunnally.)

Suzaku makes an "uh-huh" sound and leans back against the table, flashing a smirk at Lelouch.

It's not cute.

Not like that time late at night when it was just the two of them and he was wearing that shy little smile…

So here's the part where Lelouch zones out almost completely while Suzaku and Rivalz talk about... who cares what. Lelouch is already sinking in the memory of soft, stifled moans those
bashful lips outlined as he had the muscled seahorse respectfully bent over the table. He was breathless and his snaking body was tight and pulling around Lelouch's hardness while Lelouch tasted the musk dewing Suzaku's nape… It was the beginning of many more secret dates. Although, this was before they knew Suzaku was some sort of aquatic-alien-hybrid with an egg to hatch. Before Lancelot. Before the SAZ. Before Orange. Before ghost mother. Before whatever this is that's happening right now. But not before small fry, technically. He's been with them since the beginning and sometimes Lelouch has to remind himself of that – through every step, spat and sexy time Genbu Junior was baking like a cute little cupcake that's just too sweet for this Universe.

As quickly as time moves and things change it seems only the human mind can remain frozen through the ticking of a life's clock. It's all about perspective but there isn't much that Lelouch forgets (if he may say so.) He hasn't forgotten that he, Suzaku and Kallen were all engaged in furious battles that spiraled in the air amid explosions. Rivaling factions that tried to kill each other – Kallen even attempted to stab Suzaku right in the rotunda… And yet they're here being civil if not wholesomely friendly as (tepid, tentative) allied nations.

But Kallen is staring at Lelouch.
Has been staring at Lelouch.

And it's annoying (as well as distracting him from happier thoughts Lelouch was using to pass the waiting time.)

No small talk about her life post change in leadership, not that she's ever talked about her personal life and the lack of idle prattle isn't so bad (yet Lelouch will admit to a little bit of curiosity about his board-rushing red Queen.) Most Lelouch knows is that she did graduate school, they all did, and she's still living with her mother. Lelouch can't even ask about her mother is doing in Refrain-recovery because he's not supposed to know that – only Zero. Come to think of it, they didn't converse much outside his mask…

So it's just the staring.

Lelouch stares back at her. He's mentally formulating a quip of some sort, something about how he normally charges to be admired or she should take a picture to savor later when—

"I always knew it," Kallen abruptly declares, right at Lelouch—who pops an eyebrow at her. "I just knew there was something about you. Something that I just couldn't figure out. Just that… something that made you the way you are. And I was right."

"Something, huh?" Lelouch very dryly amuses her. "To think I had no idea how dangerously perceptive you are. Mister Prince."

"That's Mister Emperor, you know," Lelouch plainly corrects.

"I… guess I know what you mean, Kallen. But I don't know that anyone could have predicted something like this, though?" Rivalz slowly flounders in the conversation.

"Yes. Who actually leads double lives in real life?" Lelouch drolly quips (in his case, triple lives.)

He can see his words simmering in her head behind her blue eyes, the obvious irony she embodies that none other are aware of, but she still looks to him with her lifted chin and adamantly says, "Point is I was right." Because he's just Lelouch to her, not Zero.

It's not so bad, though.
Lelouch likes knowing things that other people don't know he knows.

"Well, Kallen, you were kind of wrong about him, too," Suzaku says with a knowingly lifted eyebrow.

Lelouch also likes learning things he didn't previously know that maybe he wasn't supposed to know.

"He's still Lelouch, but he's not what you thought he was," Suzaku continues – Lelouch wants to know why his own name sounds like an insult.

"I… think I admitted to some… possible wrongness on my part at the time," Kallen meanders with a touch of defiance.

"Wait, were you talking about me behind my back?" Lelouch asks.

"Maybe. But you still thought he was some kind of selfish Casanova, didn't you?"

Wait a minute.

Kallen reddens lightly, "I didn't say that. I just said…"

"You implied," Suzaku grins.

"When were you talking about me?" Lelouch asks again only to be ignored. Again.

"I said there was something about him and I didn't like it and I was still right, so… that's, you know, that's the point of what I said," she finishes with a bit of a haughty sniff.

Lelouch wonders if that was even a coherent statement.

But it's good to know how she really feels, he supposes…?

(Casanova?)

Suzaku chuckles making them both look at him. "I'm just kind of realizing that you two are actually a bit alike."

"I am not!" Kallen looks insulted—

Lelouch is insulted because she feels insulted; "She wishes."

Suzaku holds up surrendering hands, "Settle down, it wasn't an attack. On either of you, jeez. You're both just stubborn and like to be right."

"…How is that not an attack?" Lelouch curiously muses.

"Seriously," Kallen quietly joins.

Rivalz laughs, unable to do or say much else – he's better off left out of this anyway.

Genbu begins to stir awake and with a telling smell.

"Here." Lelouch stands and instantly hands Suzaku's son over to him. "He's awake now so he's your problem."

Suzaku garbles an exasperated breath but still takes bleary Genbu into a delicate cradle and that's
when Milly swiftly enters pushing Nunnally, sparing Lelouch any scolding from the seahorse.

"Lelouch!" the blonde fondly calls, walking up to him and a weakly frowning Suzaku. "It's been too long!"

Lelouch is betting she's always wanted to say that.

Milly's arms are thrown out wide as if expecting a hug – like she's never met Lelouch – but she quickly pauses to critically stare at Lelouch. "...Did you get taller?" she asks, gesturing between him and Suzaku as if that's somehow an accurate measurement.

Lelouch blinks a question mark, "I just thought Suzaku was getting shorter."

Said man lightly shoves the emperor with mirth, "Nobody thinks you're funny."

Shorty is wrong.

Lelouch thinks himself fairly funny.

Milly thoughtfully hums with a tapping of her chin.

"I have a diaper that needs changing," Suzaku snidely redirects. "Is there somewhere I can go?"

"Oh, so cute~!" Nunnally oozes. "You can use my room. Actually, there's something I want to show you..." She tugs at Suzaku's sleeve.

Lelouch, naturally, is at her wheels when they leave but before he can even take two steps he's jarringly halted by her palm.

"You stay," she orders with a firm insistence that he can't be proud of at the moment. "It's... a surprise."

Wha... "Surprise?" Lelouch helplessly parrots. "But—" She just got here! They haven't even—!

They're already leaving the room and not without Suzaku tauntingly sticking out his tongue and a likewise wink from Milly.

"Oh, real mature," Lelouch chastises on his frozen feet. Has he ever mentioned he doesn't like surprises? They're highly overrated. (Unless he's the one doing the surprising, that is.)

He's having an uncomfortable flashback to the day Milly stole Suzaku away on a "Girl's Day Out" to the mall. And once again he's left alone with Rivalz... Who is good-naturedly chuckling at his side.

"Don't worry, it's nothing scary," Rivalz says. "Actually I've kinda been wanting to talk to you."

Wonderful.

"Oh?" Lelouch asks. There's really nothing stopping him from going right into Nunnally's room... except for Nunnally.

"Yeah. You know Milly and I have been together a while now and it's going really good," Rivalz continues. "Better than I thought to be honest."

"That so?" Lelouch says. He's the bloody King of Engl—Britannia, dammit, but that's the one blockade he can't crumble. A freaking Achilles heel that he doesn't want to be fixed...
"I feel like you should probably take some credit. For us finally dating, I mean."

Cue the record scratch.

The twitch of terror on Lelouch's face is real: don't blame him for that.

"How so?" he calmly asks, now giving Rivalz his full attention.

Rivalz' simper is wide and too proud, "Because, Suzaku said that you were the one to make the first move. I couldn't help thinking that if Lelouch, of all people, could take a chance then… I can do it too."

…What's this Lelouch of all people business? Why is he beginning to feel like he's only waking up every day to be the butt of others' jokes? Lelouch wouldn't say that lack of interest in such affairs is equal to ineptitude, but his friends seem happier so he supposes it's not worth debating. (Only a fool would argue with another fool.) Moreover, Suzaku says he likes Lelouch's romantic style so, like, whatever…

"You know… I'm not sure she was so certain of it at first, but she said she liked my boldness."

Rivalz is grinning.

Sounds like Milly.

"Considering she was supposed to be getting married… I figured I had nothing to lose, I guess. Or that I couldn't wait any longer."

A touch of rebelliousness on her part, then? A reason to escape an honestly god-awful paring? Also sounds like Milly. But there must've been more to it on her part, to take such a leap. She's always known how to skirt the line between harmless rascal and harmful reprobate. It doesn't seem she's wanted to cut ties with her family completely, and speaking from experience Lelouch can say that being disowned is a lot less fun than it looks, but it's not easy to live on one's own terms when part of a whole. Seems the Ashford grandparents have forgiven her for this, though. Or maybe the marriage's value depreciated with the changing of kings. Also doesn't hurt to have the favor of the current Britannian Emperor they graciously harbored when he was only a child.

Lelouch repays his debts, even if prestige isn't what it used to be in the Britannian empire.

"It's good that things have worked out for you," Lelouch casually says, "but don't blame me when you run into trouble — you knew what you were getting into."

Rivalz hardly laughs, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

A smirk lightly twitches in a corner of his mouth, "I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

Chasing away his belly-laughter is a small, wistful sigh, "Man… look at us. Both in relationships. Families. Jobs—uh, kinda. Are we adults now?"

Lelouch has been an adult since he came to Japan at age ten.

"If you have to ask that question then probably not," Lelouch dryly taunts.

Rivalz feigns a pained wince, "Always with that sharp tongue of yours. Milly says there's no such thing as adulthood."

"Of course she would say that."
Then Rivalz's eyes glimmer a bit, "She says there's only maturity."

Lelouch stares. "In either case, you're both below the bar." Which is to say they deserve each other.

Rivalz laughs again, even bumps Lelouch's shoulder, and the maybe-adults share delight as they did in carefree club meetings. "I never said it, but I'm happy for you too. And Suzaku, and all…"

"Yeah…" Lelouch quietly agrees. His old friend doesn't treat him too differently and he likes that. He misses their idle school days and didn't know at the time he was taking it for granted… "Well, I guess I'm not in any hurry now." He sits down at the ol' table of command in what used to be his usual chair.

Oh, Rivalz isn't so bad. Lelouch just likes giving him a hard time.

Rivalz brightly smiles and sits beside him, "Well, you know that Milly has really taken to report-blogging…"

"More like taking it and running as far as she can," Lelouch says.

Rivalz hardily laughs and they wade into some conversing that really isn't as painful as Lelouch pretends. (Even though he feels a little like he's sitting and waiting in a burning house with this surprise business…)

Milly and Rivalz finally bring Lelouch not to Nunnally but instead to the rotunda that is decorated in draperies, flowers, streamers, balloons and a very euphoric-looking congratulations banner.

"A late party for Nunnally's graduation?" Lelouch quizzically asks. "I don't think I'm the one that should be surprised. That's really not how it works."

"It's not for Nunnally," Milly says with a look.

That bad, bad look.

"It's for you and Suzaku," Rivalz answers Lelouch's helpless stare with a smile.

"…Why?" the King cautiously asks. If this is another surprise baby shower— "I told you I'd throw you a wedding and that's what I'm doing," Milly informs with regal insistence. "Despite your best efforts, but better late than never, as they say!"

Lelouch wasn't really attempting to thwart her, there were just more important things to do than… play pretend one last time.

(As if he'll ever actually outgrow "pretend.")

"See, I heard through the grapevine"—Milly passive-aggressively means Suzaku—"that you finally got the paperwork all drawn up to make you two all officially legal wedded on the throne and that you'll be signing it this weekend. We all wanted to do something special for the occasion. Nunnally and I have been working closely together on it. We got a bit of a late start but I dare say we've outdone ourselves – but don't worry, it'll be laid back for you, the way you like. Mister King of Reclusiveness."

That's a pathetic jab that Lelouch ignores.
So this was part of the reason Nunnally wanted to remain in Japan longer. Lelouch feels more... shocked then he perhaps should about her deceiving him, considering it was for a positive reason, but she knows he doesn't care much for surprises. They've rarely been pleasant.

"Even for a surprise this is very sudden," Lelouch says. "We only just arrived today." (JET-LAG) "This couldn't have waited at least until tomorrow?" Or, you know, until never. (Then again, the weary traveler thing could work in his favor to end the night early.)

Milly thickly scoffs, "Are you kidding? You saw Rivalz. Keeping this a secret was like holding a live grenade, pin pulled and everything. Nunnally was also really excited and worried she'd spoil the surprise if we had to wait even one day more."

Fair enough. Nunnally knows he would've suspected something when she behaved differently – because it can be difficult for her to contain her elevated excitement. "Although the cake and caterer are running a little late." Milly crosses her arms. "And after all the planning to get this just right."

"Pretty standard for us," Rivalz jokes. "Just less disastrous."

"So far," Lelouch slyly adds.

Milly swats away their buzzing gibes, "Always point out what went wrong rather than what went right."

That time Lelouch tricked Milly on Halloween was a disaster gone right for him. Now, if Suzaku was here he'd thank her and say that is was very thoughtful and considerate of them and that they (meaning him and Lelouch) really appreciate it, or whatever…

But Suzaku isn't here.

"Well, leave it to you to nose-in on something that didn't involve you," Lelouch says. Milly stares a few beats. "You're deluded if you think this doesn't involve me or the rest of us. I can't believe Suzaku thought you were worth holding onto. Speaking of the blushing bride~" she singingly perks right up, "You have to get dressed. Suzaku is almost ready so get to it!"

"Dressed?" Lelouch reluctantly asks. "I'm not—"

"Don't worry, it's not an actual dress, you wet blanket." Milly rolls her eyes.

Wet blanket?

That's a genuine and warranted concern for Lelouch, but that's not what he was going to say. "I have to get to finishing a few things so, go with Rivalz. He'll take you to get changed." Milly sounds surprisingly professional and is a lot more hands-on than she has been in the past for some of their club shindigs.

But that she's leaving Rivalz to be the one to "handle" Lelouch is an amusing oversight on her part. Lelouch looks to the lad who struggles in a somewhat abashed chuckle.

"It's really not as bad as you're thinking," he says.
He has no idea how bad Lelouch can think it is.

"Why can't I just keep what I'm wearing?" Like, Lelouch made it a point to dress formally. He's got the hat on and everything.

"So you'll match Suzaku," is all his friend says.

That answer is unsatisfactory.

Lelouch is already sophisticated and presentable.

"We were already matching," Lelouch denies a touch haughtily – he designed their outfits to match. How is this hard for other people to grasp?

Rivalz faintly sighs, "I won't force you. He is wearing white, so… I guess it won't hurt."

"Don't worry about disappointing Milly," the royal shallowly tries to mollify. "She can't touch you. I'm the Emperor. I can even grant you special asylum if necessary."

A bit of a shaking laugh claims Rivalz's belly, "Maybe you could at least see it first."

Eh… "I suppose." Lelouch would say that it couldn't hurt but he's not naïve.

They're turning towards the stairs when a familiar face appears walking towards them from the hallway leading to the kitchen.

"Cornelia," Lelouch regally addresses. "Euphie said you were attending to security matters."

"She wasn't lying," Cornelia perfunctorily replies and dismisses a couple guards that were following behind her with a wave of her hand like a true princess. This includes her own tightlipped Knight, Gilford.

Lelouch tells Rivalz to leave for privacy with only a look over his shoulder like a true king.

The Britannian siblings have that much in common at least.

"I'll just… wait for you in your old bedroom," the blue-haired boy excuses himself up the stairs.

"So," Lelouch turns his attention back to the White Witch with his arms nonchalantly crossed behind his back, "I would have thought this would be… a bit unusual for you." She is an established battlefield Commander who might've just made Rivalz soil himself.

"Of course not. Security isn't to be taken lightly."

Plus Euphemia is here.

"No, but I didn't come here unguarded," he gestures to Jeremiah currently standing at the entrance. There is also the ninja in maid's clothing, Sayoko, that has remained with Nunnally as a stealth personal guard, along with more stealth guards, disguised guards, regular guards, and more guards than Lelouch could ever need to complete his collection.

"More can't hurt," she says. "You're the Emperor. It's my duty to protect you. …And you're still my little brother." Her tone takes a dip. "I failed once. I won't let that failure repeat."

She's talking about Marianne and it's only now that Lelouch realizes the similarity. Jeremiah is even here.
It's also the softest moment Lelouch will get from Cornelia. She's never been the sort except with Euphemia.

(And again, Lelouch is realizing another, albeit uncomfortable, similarity with her and between him and Nunnally.)

Lelouch hums in appreciation. "Well, you're in for a show. Try not to be too alarmed at what you see." He smiles a sugar-dusted sardonic smirk, "Odds are its perfectly normal."

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After a little time for "preparation," Lelouch waits at the base of the stairs in the rotunda still wearing his emperor whites because changing was unnecessary – he'll fall on this sword. His violets inspect the caring decorations ornamenting the room until they land on a pyramid of champagne glasses, reminding him of Kallen's unceremonious induction into the club. It wasn't that long ago when he was lazing through club meetings and holding Milly's schemes together at the seams, but sometimes they feel like ancient times. Seems every transition in his life only feels like another lifetime and it's… nice to be here in this reprieve of a simple gathering with old, familiar friends.

Even if they did ambush him with a wedding.

But there are worse ambushes…

Being such a small gathering there aren't rows of chairs, just a few columns that border a short, red-carpeted aisle leading up the stairs where he stands. The audience is a collage of familiar faces, such as Euphemia who winks at him (the winking really needs to stop) with Cornelia of course, and even Tohdoh and Kaguya – that's all of Suzaku's family to speak of… and they were certainly better at hiding the surprise. But there's also Ohgi with Villetta, Lloyd and his better half Cecile, Jeremiah, Sayoko, Alice and her sister doctor Sanica… And they're all mixed in with the Student Council. Plus smiling Nunnally.

It looks weird.

Almost like the beginning of a humorous nightmare…

(Or at least it would be funnier if he could wake from it.)

Finally, the Wedding March cues from some unseen speakers and everyone stands to watch the bride gracefully claim the room. Suzaku appears at the aisle looking like an over-whipped meringue. At this point, Lelouch can't be, and isn't, surprised by the wedding dress plumed around Suzaku, only that it is so puffy. The buttoned-down bodice is slim but the shoulders and skirt look like somebody got overzealous with lacy frills and ruffles – it's an upside-down cupcake. Guess Milly opted out of that old play-ware from their theater club.

Now, Lelouch knows how (ridiculous) this looks to everybody else but for the Student Council this is just… tradition. He isn't fully able to smother a mocking smirk that tickles his lips as he watches Suzaku almost waddle down the aisle towards him, bouquet in hand. He doesn't even expect that the seahorse can climb the stairs, however, it turns out Suzaku is adept at handling the dress even with the long train and veil – must owe it to practice with Suzie.

If Suzaku ever dreamed as a little boy about being the breathtaking showstopper at his own wedding, well, he can scratch that off the bucket list as a goal achieved.

Lelouch takes one of Suzaku's arm-gloved hands as he journeys his last few steps and when they
stand together there's nearly not enough room for the dress. Lelouch looks him up and down. There was a glimpse of some pointed shoes on Suzaku's feet that could be higher in the heel and it looks like he might actually be a little taller than usual. Or this optical illusion of a dress is just screwing with Lelouch's perception.

"I don't think your dress is nearly poofy and frilly enough," he subtly says through a sly smile he can no longer restrain.

Suzaku leans in with the same grin, "That's what I said."

They share silent amusement, being much too mature to openly laugh, of course, before ascending the stairs together. Suzaku's grip on Lelouch's arms is strong but he can't tell if it's nerves or attire.

The ceremony begins with Milly officiating and holding Small Fry who has the very important job of ring bearer – clutching a small, white, lacy pillow with two rings loosely tied to the center. He has been redressed in a tiny white tuxedo, looking adorable and… like he might try to eat the rings —

"We are gathered here today," Milly starts in a voice that sound as though it's been practiced in front of a mirror, or Rivalz, "to witness the joining of these two souls in the holiest of matrimones…"

—Lelouch is distracted with Genbu fingering the rings from her prideful version of the ceremonial speech that just wades right through his ears. Papa pulls at the pillow a little and tries to discreetly discourage them as a mouth choice. Yes, they're shiny and small but are entirely inedible. Genbu smiles and even chuckles at daddy's serious face (like he shouldn't) as he keeps tugging on the ribbons as if it's a game. Luckily the little one can't seem to figure out even simple, slippiest of knots just yet but it's still unsafe—

"Now, I understand the engaged have written their own vows."

Lelouch looks at Milly, because obviously that's completely untrue, to only be met with her annoying wink. She must realize that as Emperor he has the power to banish her from the empire, right? He looks back at Suzaku who has a more pleasantly surprised shock on his smiling face.

It's an obvious trap he should've seen coming.

"When we first met we were just kids," Suzaku takes the leap and Lelouch can't really stop him. Maybe this is the sort of thing he should be handling instead of Lelouch, anyway. The royal isn't going to spill his emotional guts under any circumstance, much less becuz tradition (like, in no universe would that ever happen.) "And we were pretty determined to dislike each other." Suzaku is smiling as their hands link at the fingers.

"As I recall you started it," Lelouch teases, making Suzaku simper and earning a chuckle or two from their audience – the ones that know the pair.

"But we became fast friends," Suzaku continues, "thanks in large part because of Nunnally."

Lelouch glances at his little sister. "You mean we had to rescue her together after she fell in a hole you dug."

"It was a secret base!" Suzaku defends through his smile and instantly they're both ten-years-old again, covered in dirt and summer humidity.

"It was a hole in the ground and an obvious safety hazard." It wasn't even the only one Suzaku dug.
Suzaku laughs, as does Nunnally, and Lelouch smiles – he's handling this whole cheeky side of their vows well, he must say.

"When we met again it was almost like we hadn't been separated for seven years. But, things were different. We weren't little kids anymore." Suzaku's tone dips and his fingers squeeze a little around Lelouch's, who acknowledges it with a rub of his thumbs. "But you were still my friend—my best friend. And still so stubborn," he slyly slips in.

"That makes two of us," Lelouch slyly slaps back.

Suzaku shakes his head a little and his gaze drops with a harder squeeze of his hands.

…Oh no.

He's not getting teary-eyed, is he?

He better not cry.

"I don't know if you've ever known what it's meant to me. That summer, this friendship." Green eyes lift and they're looking a little too wet for comfort. "I know neither of us can be easy to live with all the time. But I have never—will never forget not just why I fell in love with you but when."

Oh, jeez…

He went and did it.

"You're so embarrassing," Lelouch fondly teases, coaxing a light chuckle from his weepy seahorse. (Remember, Lelouch doesn't get embarrassed, it's just a statement on the seahorse's behalf.) "I thought we were having this fun little back-and-forth and now you've made the moment so heavy. If you think I'm going to stand up here and cry…"

Suzaku gives him a light shove, "There's that 'not always easy to live with' part."

Lelouch smirks. "Your heart is always in the right place, and I trust it." No more need be said between them, this is something Lelouch has already vowed to Suzaku in the past. That day at the shrine. Suzaku tied them together with red thread and… a lot of things were said. That was the moment when this, they, became permanent. What's happening now is more fanfare. Celebration. And sort of official.

The brunet's lips curve in a small smile and that's really good enough. He doesn't—they don't have to give these voyeurs any more.

"So why don't we just cut this short before he starts bawling," Lelouch orders at Milly while keeping his eyes on Suzaku with a smile. If anybody thinks they're going to get more than that out of Lelouch they've obviously never met him. "He's an ugly cryer."

The seahorse sniffs a snicker and Milly haughtily clears her throat, "That was not a vow."

"Close enough," Lelouch coolly counters.

Milly lifts her chin. "Suzaku you have my personal admiration, and sympathy, in your endeavor to house-train this one,"—she gestures to Lelouch on the this one—"More so if you don't end up strangling him first."

"I should say the same to Rivalz about you," Lelouch blandly retorts. He kind of already did,
Suzaku rasps a laugh, "All right, all right. Let's get to the fun part, the reception, right? That's what everybody is waiting for—Genbu, no, that's not food…" Suzaku isn't much for diplomacy but he's rather practiced at distracting.

Suzaku pulls the ribbons out of their son's mouth and both parents have to coax the tangled rings from grasping fingers. This was far too hazardous for a baby. It should've been Nunnally instead. He does seem to like the ribbons more than the rings, though, and isn't upset to see them go. As long as they stay out of his mouth… Milly holds the strings secure so that Genbu can play without choking while Suzaku and Lelouch exchange the rings in a less traditional way.

Less traditional suits them just fine.

They've been wearing rings since that moment Lelouch (sort of) proposed with those makeshift loops. In terms of being officially married, however, the legislation paperwork has been slow-moving in lieu of dismantling and reforming Britannia. Lelouch vi Britannia is the emperor and can absolutely marry whoever he wants without needing permission, and yet, it also kind of suited them to hold off for a while. They needed to get things settled if not stable and it sadly didn't hurt to prevent any… unsavory perception of just who Suzaku was to the new king – not just an obedient "pet." Lelouch had warned Suzaku that it could be a long engagement but even he didn't think it would take this long. Suzaku hasn't pressured; he's been patient with the bigger picture and all that (in this case he understands "big picture.") Do "they" approve of Suzaku now?

Doesn't matter.

Lelouch has secured his grasp of the crown, throne, and authority.

He can still marry whomever he wants but now so can the rest of his empire – that sense of camaraderie even makes it a little sweeter.

Without further ado Lelouch takes Suzaku's hand, pulls off the long glove, and slides a ring on the same finger he did three years ago. Suzaku's face is beaming down at the ring when it contorts with a wrinkle of confusion.

"This isn't—" Then he's looking at the ring he's supposed to place on Lelouch's finger. "They aren't the same."

Lelouch is softly smiling. "I told you I'd have proper ones made."

Suzaku speechlessly looks back at the rings. They're golden with still that same, single piece of thread encased around the outside in a smooth diamond coat, mostly for durability (and it's not like the glass was cheap or anything…)

"But when did you do this?"

"A simple switch when Milly wanted to fasten our old ones to the pillow," Lelouch says as if it's a simple matter, holding up his hand for Suzaku to do his part. He knows that's not what Suzaku meant but he just couldn't refrain from pulling Suzaku's leg a little. "I had a local jeweler work them. It was ready for our trip here this weekend to bring back home." It was supposed to be a surprise when they signed on the dotted line… but it's still a surprise now. Lelouch is lucky they weren't delayed a day or two.

"It's Japanese?"
"A… combination," Lelouch somewhat evasively answers. The band is actually fused from metal sources in Britannia and Japan and the top is—It's not so important right now, he can explain everything to the seahorse later. "We're supposed to be hurrying this along, aren't we?"

Suzaku sheepishly laughs and slides the ring onto Lelouch's finger.

"That eager to skip ahead, are you?" Milly quips and gently gestures with Genbu. "Seems you've skipped quite enough already."

Yeah, yeah, they had a baby while underage and out of wedlock – cart before the horse sort of deal.

It's funny.

So funny Lelouch forgot to laugh.

"Very well," she says to Lelouch's un-amused stare. "By the power vested in me as the greatest alumni president that anyone has ever seen of this academy that brought these two souls together, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

The reception to Milly's announcement of them being wed is warm and, albeit abashedly for some, full of smiles. Lelouch can't help thinking that this would've been more special with just the old club, had anybody asked him what he wanted… but he won't let it spoil the day. Mostly.

Lelouch is not a person who publically displays affection and neither is Suzaku (although teasing him as Suzie was admittedly too much fun to resist) and that goes double in front of people Lelouch knows. It's just… not for their eyes. Suzaku, on the other hand, tends to be more comfortable with affections in front of familiares than strangers. However, with these circumstances being what they are and Lelouch perhaps mellowing a bit, when the time comes to "kiss the bride" he's willing to partake in tradition. He takes his husband by the waist and leans in – over the massive mound of Suzaku's skirt which is a feat itself – and presses their sly smiles together in a kiss that is much appreciated by certain members of the witnesses. In truth, it can help to toss a bone every now and then, especially considering that these days and in the ones to come they can't spend every day together with their friends like in school…

This all probably looks quite the sight to those invited who aren't former student peers. When Lelouch feels Suzaku's soft lips and firm fingers sliding over his neck to lightly clench the hair on his nape he somehow feels more at ease. The world isn't just the two of them, it's all those they care about and what's life without sharing moments with them? This is what Lelouch wanted to protect and preserve and he knows how close he came to not…

Their lips part to an ecstatic but surprisingly modest applause led by their friends. Seems they grew up a little, too. Despite this whole affair… Lelouch looks Suzaku up and down again before they attempt descending the stairs into their adoring audience.

"Should we air-lift you out of here in that dress or what?" Lelouch jokes. Suzaku made it up the stairs but there's no way he's getting down without tripping and splatting on his face.

Suzaku simpers, "Not like you can carry me out of here, right?"

"Like I've never heard that before," Lelouch drawls.

"I don't think that's as strong a comeback as you think," Milly happily jabs.
Suzaku raps a little laugh as he hikes up his voluminous skirt to free his feet with Lelouch lending a supporting shoulder.

"All that matters is who has the last laugh," Lelouch airily fires back, hearing Milly hum as he and Suzaku slowly walk down the stairs.

That is, Lelouch is pretty sure he's the one laughing last...

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It's an unexpected assortment of invited guests in truth; even considering extended relatives such as Cornelia, Tohdoh and Kaguya, who still look odd in this setting. If it were up to Lelouch the wedding wouldn't be a big affair with a lot of witnesses – but he's the emperor. Extending an invite to the new Prime Minister of Japan, with whom he has an unusual relationship, Ohgi seems more formal from a delegation standpoint. Although Ohgi's presence makes this shindig look far more official than it is, Lelouch knows it just wouldn't do to not visit with the Britannian Emperor during his stay. It's all part of strengthening their rapport and easing contention and it was probably actually Euphemia's idea. Kallen may have also had something to do with his invite. (Lelouch is just grateful there's no Tamaki…) Along with Ohgi is his recent wife, Villetta… Talk about contention. As Lelouch understands it they took some time while the dust was settling and have only been married less than a year or so, having a little baby girl shortly after. Then there's Cecile and Lloyd. Almost like in-laws that come with Suzaku despite actually serving Lelouch. Euphemia's idea again, it seems, but Lelouch supposes it could be worse. Schneizel could be here.

Pour these guests into the Student Council and it's one assorted nut mix. Who are all here to witness Lelouch, the Britannian Emperor, canoodle with Suzaku…

(What has Lelouch become…)

Suffice to say when it comes to Lelouch and Suzaku having that sappy first dance as a married couple he's somewhat… discomfited about the reputation he's cultivating as emperor. If it was just their club, gathering like business as usual, it wouldn't matter, but nowadays his business is all about the crown – the world weighing on top as well as the one he's guarding bellow it.

Lelouch has been and always will be a private person but since having the baby he's been coaxed just a bit more out of his shell. While he can give the baby a type of open affection he's not accustomed to displaying it's still something he doesn't share with others – not like he should be fathering anybody else, anyway. Even so, if this was just three years ago Lelouch is doubtful he'd be slow-dancing with Suzaku in a roomful of their… guests. More than doubtful, he knows he wouldn't have. Even if Suzaku wanted to he wouldn't have pushed and the most the seahorse might've gotten was a private ritual in the bedroom later. It's still… not very pleasant but there's something special to seeing everybody gathered, happy and enjoying the company and the moment with Suzaku in his arms.

Under a spinning mirror ball suspended with sophistication, Milly style, from the ceiling of the rotunda, Lelouch allows himself to lightly smile at Suzaku beaming fully back at him. The burnet comfortably hoops his arms around Lelouch's neck and it pulls the Britannian that has gotten taller down so their foreheads touch. Lelouch stops paying so much attention to the merry background of their guests and holds his husband a little closer by the waist.

It's a surreal wrapping of the present twisting with the past as if everything, even right this moment, is but a dream. Lelouch prefers to be grounded but in this case, just a little flight of fancy is acceptable. So when Suzaku tries to initiate a kiss as a totally happily, contentedly married and fearless couple, Lelouch again chooses to be a sport and allow it. A soft press of their lips in the
sway of the music in front of anybody with eyes in the room (and surprisingly the world doesn't explode. Nor does Lelouch's totally alpha, crusty reputation.) He takes ownership of the moment like a king, pulling tightly on Suzaku's waist to press his husband's body into conformity with his. Lelouch can hear Milly loudly cooing at them, setting off the whole gaggle of the Student Council to tauntingly howl at them like the super mature people they've become since high school. (Then again, they still think stuffing Suzaku into a dress is amusing, so it's not a surprise…) Lelouch would prefer to ignore them and not let the idiots lure him into their stupidity, but Suzaku laughs. It's a warm rumble in his chest that stretches a smile across Lelouch's lips when they part. So dedicated to pretending their friends don't exist that it takes Suzaku to point his attention to the edge of the small "dance floor" in the center of the room.

It's none other than Small Fry attempting to Frankenstein his way towards his spotlighted parents. A giggling Nunnally moves to secure him but Lelouch steps in to scoop the boy up and rejoin Suzaku. Mama gives Genbu a big kiss on his cheek, making the boy happily squeal on Lelouch's hip. Suzaku's arms wrap around Lelouch and the baby and then husbands share another kiss all enveloped in each other's embrace with their little bundle snuggled in the middle of their maudlin pretzel.

Now this moment is complete.

(It would only be perfect if Nunnally was able to…)

Maybe it could more perfect by being flawless but in reality the lacking sophistication of his friends makes it perfect. It's true to who they are and the life he had, one he misses. All of his alternate lives are mixing together in a dizzying cocktail but nothing makes him feel more like himself than being right here in the arms of his family, even as they stand in the center of the universe.

(Looking back, maybe the first thing Lelouch wanted to be was a good parent. One that provides, protects and sacrifices. It started with Nunnally and extends to Suzaku and Small Fry. It's probably not the correct mindset to bring into his relationship with Suzaku, but Lelouch is damaged. Cut him some slack…)

Because they aren't overflowing with schmaltz already, Euphemia suddenly pounces on them with an unbridled coo. Suzaku and Genbu laugh. Lelouch feels like they have enough arms already—apparently, no. All too quickly the Council Club is joining in, Milly dragging a nonplussed Kallen and Nina into this human knot and like…

Lelouch is still the Emperor.

He shouldn't have to remind people of that…

(Although maybe to them he'll always be their lazy Vice President.)

The music switches to something up-tempo, not so much unspooling everybody onto the designated dance floor but transforming the entire rotunda into a stage. They all separate apart like splitting cells and dive into the music. It's a relief. Suzaku is still smiling and laughing and Lelouch just can't resist kissing his knighted best-friend-forever-husband.

Their private wedding night can't come soon enough.

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Dancing with Suzaku was nice enough but Lelouch doesn't want to become the target of unwanted
invitations. He joins his precious little sister perched in a chair at a table eating cake. Nunnally is wearing a delicately layered pink dress adorned with frills and bows but in a totally mature, grown-up sort of way – and Suzaku criticized Lelouch once for his choices in Nunnally's wardrobe. As if he didn't know his own little sister! Psh… (Besides, the seahorse can't talk after agreeing to that fabric monster today.)

Anyway, nobody will bother them while they're together (Jeremiah is on alert if so, no joke) and Lelouch hasn't had any yet so he decides to partake, claiming the nearest precut slice.

"That cake tower is really something," he says to her with fork in hand. "Soon to be the leaning tower of cake, I think."

"I suggested cupcakes. I thought it would be fun to have different flavors and icing, but instead, Milly went big and had a multi-layer, multi-flavored tier cake."

It's a seriously massive tower that's taller than Lelouch with a chess white king and white knight as toppers rather than traditional little tuxedoed grooms. A bit odd even if Milly is unconventional; she went all out for the cake and while Lelouch wonders how it will all get eaten he's more surprised that she didn't use some sort of joke toppers.

"She's always had a thing for making giant foods," Lelouch wryly notes taking a sweet bit of yellow cake. Looks like Nunnally is having pink – likely strawberry.

Nunnally lightly chuckles, "I did pick the toppers, though!"

That explains that, then.

Although he's always preferred black he has acquired the reputation as a "white" king, and not just because of his wardrobe choice. (Suck it, white prince Schneizel.)

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," Lelouch smiles, "it tastes good." Although it's the company that makes it better.

"Good," she brightly smiles.

He even forks a bite from her slice and stuffs it in his mouth, "mmm"ing at her somewhat surprised gape. She quickly laughs, a bubbling stream that Genbu must've inherited, and takes a bite of his cake.

And they just laugh.

All undignified with mouthfuls of each others' cake.

The last time they ever had such a truly carefree moment was before they lost the security (they thought they had) from their mother. How heavy Lelouch has felt all these years. (Maybe Nunnally did, too, despite his best efforts to keep it from her.) He feels a little like that child he used to be with her like this.

"I'm not sure if I've said this before but I'm really happy for both of you," Nunnally tenderly says, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "I like seeing you happy."

Lelouch softly smiles, but that does hurt a little to hear her say (that he might not have given her the best of himself when they were just two orphans struggling together.)
"We can't wait to have you home," he says in a cheerful uplift from any sinking thoughts. "Your room is ready but if there are any changes you want to make, just say the word."

Nunnally smiles brightly, "So I can finally have a pony sleeping at the foot of my bed?"

"We might have to move you downstairs in that case, but yes. Absolutely doable. Or if you'd rather turn your room into a butterfly sanctuary instead…"

She laughs. "Oh, I had forgotten about that!"

That’s a shame.

Lelouch never did.

Nunnally had wanted her room to be a page out of a fairy tale with flowers and butterflies… she talked about it all the time. Her and Euphemia. Maybe such a colorful fantasy lost its luster after… so long behind closed eyes.

"Remember when Euphie and I caught some from the garden and let them loose?" Nunnally laughs a little at the memory.

"They were everywhere. The two of you were surprisingly successful."

"Then momma saw it… she was so shocked. Told us we had to catch and release them back outside because they wouldn't be happy or survive inside… I thought I was in so much trouble, but then she got that beautiful wallpaper for my walls. Filled with butterflies and flowers, just like in the book… Started teaching me how to tend to a butterfly bush in the garden."

"Yeah," Lelouch quietly replies. They were exiled shortly after that, so Nunnally never got to see her butterfly bush attract anything. When Lelouch returned to the Villa it was long dead and her room was molded and rancid. Like a metaphor for what Lelouch thought his mother was and what she really turned out to be.

Nunnally doesn't know.

She doesn't need to.

It's… easier believing in the fairytale mother they had.

"I wish she was here…"

Lelouch stays quiet.

"I think she'd be happy and proud of you, too."

Not so much.

"Things are different now," he says with reassurance. "We don't have to look back. It's time to look forward at what's ahead of us." No more cowering or hiding in the Ashford's shadows with (half) false names.

The wounds from the confrontation with their parents are still present and scars may remain long after; Lelouch doesn't have any delusions about that. Although sometimes he envies Nunnally's… innocence. He can't morn the mother he thought he had, instead it's mourning that she wasn't. Maybe it's not so different. But the honest truth is that Lelouch is Nunnally's sibling-parent and he wouldn't have it any other way.
Lelouch still carries the worry that she might one day remember more clearly what happened the
day Charles used his Geass on her… He wants to protect her from everything but he doesn't know
if he really can and that would be the biggest failure he'll ever have. (Technically his Geass could
patch that memory but that's—)

Nunnally lightly nods, "I think father picked the perfect successor."

_Ha_—Lelouch honestly suppresses a scoffing guffaw.

"As long as you think so," he says, looking down at those lilac eyes that just—

He takes her hand, but that isn't enough. Lelouch kneels on the hard floor with one knee and pulls
her into a hug that she wholly welcomes. (Maybe it's something he should've more often?) He
honestly hopes he can still make her happy.

Whatever anything else has been Nunnally was and always is real, and that's something Lelouch is
eternally grateful to have. She might never know how much she means to him but he'll try to show
her. World peace is an ongoing endeavor that had a bumpy but good start with Britannia and he
won't fail her no matter how long it may take. Lelouch is really… happy to have her along the way.

"I want you to know that you don't have to worry about me," Nunnally says when they part. Her
voice is soft but her words sound heavy.

"What?" Lelouch is confused and doesn't return to his chair. It's impossible that he'll
never _not_ worry.

"It's just… you're the king now." She grasps his hand, fingers, in the old habit that she hasn't lost –
only her fingers have changed and grown. "You have so many other people who need you and will
rely on you."

"And you think you're not one them?" Lelouch is a little incredulous. Maybe he _likes_ worrying
about Nunnally. (Maybe he doesn't know _where he would be_ if he didn't have Nunnally to worry
about.)

"I can't be selfish."

(Could this be part of why she wanted to stay in Japan…?)

"You're not selfish, Nunnally," Lelouch soothes. Nunnally is perfect. Fact. He won't hear any talk
otherwise. "But when it comes to this, you can always be selfish." He smiles and uplifts her chin
with a gentle finger. "Hm?"

Nunnally smiles back.

"Besides, now I actually have the funds to spoil you rotten. Can't pass this opportunity."

She simpers, "Butterflies and ponies?"

"One of every color and more," he vows. "If we run out we'll just have to breed new colors."

Nunnally gently laughs.

Yeah.

It _sounds_ like a joke…
"What about you? Are you treating yourself to anything?"

"...?" Other than the life he has right now? Nunnally, Suzaku, Small Fry, his ridiculous friends, and half-sister...? And just being with all of them after coming so close to losing it all? "Well, more cake for starters. That tower isn't going to eat itself," he quips, sitting back in his chair and reequipping his fork. To which she joins him.

What else could he want?

Isn't this exactly what he wanted?

"Just don't forget to save a slice," Nunnally instructs before a bite of chocolate. "You and Suzaku are supposed to eat it on your anniversary for good luck on your marriage!"

"Eh, in a year?" Lelouch disgustedly asks. What's better than eating year-old-stale cake? Not eating year-old-stale cake. (Although perhaps a little possible luck couldn't hurt...)

"You freeze it," she clarifies, and then a thought seems to freeze her with a fork sliding out between her lips. "I think it's supposed to be on the first anniversary... But I don't remember if you're supposed to eat the whole piece?"

"Don't worry. With the amount of it, Suzaku and I will probably be eating old wedding cake for the rest of our lives."

If it is such a thing that has to be a crap-load of good luck, right?

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Through the odd intermingling of Ashford-Britannia-Former-Black-Knights that Lelouch is more content to watch than participate, Suzaku has a certain pair of faces with which he'd like to personally mingle. Since they're married that means they have to do this sort of together. Apparently. The two of them are situated off to the side at one of the tables bordering the room that feels smaller with this many people in it.

"Suzaku!" Cecile warmly greets up on her feet – a level of familiarity Lelouch still finds odd, but appreciates the politeness – next to an apathetic Lloyd. "Congratulations, we're so happy for you!"

"Happy might be a strong word," Lloyd nonchalantly notes, standing in respect to the crown. "Thank you. I'm glad that you could be here." Suzaku smiles and even bows a little – he's been slipping back into his Japanese mannerisms as time passes.

Lelouch, however, bows to no one.

"We just really want to wish you well in this new journey in your life." She even dips her head at the now official Knight Consort.

"Even if it's dull and boring," Lloyd continues, sitting down in his chair. "I've basically been forced into retirement now, you know. Now that my Lancelot has been decommissioned. Along with all the others."

Cecile loudly clears her throat. "It's been so nice to see you from where we started to being here now. I'm really happy that things have worked out for you. We did have quite a scare at first about the baby, didn't we?"
"Well, statistically speaking…" Lloyd meanders, leaning his chair on its back legs, "the numbers aren't in their favor. Getting married so young being only one factor. Increases the odds for a bitter divorce."

Cecile seems to strain chuckling him off. "The two of you have so much shared history. There's something special about childhood sweethearts. I know you'll be happy together for a long time."

"Not even Nina wants to play anymore." Lloyd partially whines, lazily rocking in his chair. "Instead choosing a different playmate. I suppose I understand but it still seems like a waste of—!"

Suddenly he flops backwards to smash on his back with a loud, high squawk.

That's when Lelouch and Suzaku notice Cecile's leg move away from him all while wearing a convincingly innocent smile.

She totally just tipped him over. And subtly af. Lelouch feels he might be able to learn something from her.

"I really am very happy for you and proud." Cecile's smile is wide and finally looks relieved. Lelouch also noticed she's taken ownership with her singular pronoun. "Don't worry about Lloyd. Children pout, but they get over it."

Suzaku chokes on a little laugh, seemingly uncertain if he should laugh. Lelouch is amused. Schneizel apparently allowed Lloyd a lot of room for lip, because of course that chameleon would, but the man follows orders. Occasional back-talk doesn't particularly bother Lelouch; it's not as though he doesn't understand a bit of rebelliousness. Besides, seeing Lloyd get grief from Rakshata and lose his cool in interactions with her is quite satisfying. Although Lelouch is surprised Lloyd doesn't get the chair knocked out from under him more often.

"I made some sushi rolls for you. I remember saying you liked them – but with dried fruit instead of fish because I couldn't keep it cold," Cecile says, handing over a nicely wrapped small box. "And this time I got some quality chocolate and couldn't resist – because I know children like chocolates and sweets. But it's dark, so it's also healthier."

"Chocolate?" Lelouch asks in open incredulity and a little judgment. No, ok, a lot of judgment. Sounds like a waste of quality chocolate. And fruit. And rice and seaweed wraps…

Suzaku shushingly pats his shoulder, "Oh, you didn't have to do that."

She really didn't.

"I wanted to." Her smile is so warm and sincere it is hard for Suzaku to refuse her odd gift. "Thank you." He takes it as he naturally would. "That was very thoughtful of you. I really do appreciate everything."

Cecile's nose wrinkles with another smile, "Don't be a stranger, now."

Lloyd is picking himself up with crooked glasses as they turn to walk away. Lelouch waits until their far enough away to discreetly lean in with: "We're not really going to eat this?"

"Oh, god, no," Suzaku quickly responds with a glance down at the package wrapped with care. "I mean… she's never made me sick."

"That's comforting," Lelouch insincerely says.
Suzaku laughs, "She tries. It's sweet."

It's the thought that counts? Well, that clearly doesn't make it edible.

"Your Majesty," greets a familiarly cool, calm voice and long dark ponytail. "It's nice to see you two again."

"Doctor Sanica. It's a surprise to see you here," Lelouch genially replies. It's still weird that they actually invited her.

"Alice's plus-one," she answers – Lelouch isn't sure if that's light sarcasm or not – which makes sense, being sisters and all. "I saw Genbu. He's a healthy little boy. Congratulations."

Suzaku awkwardly chuckles, "Th-Thank you. I'm sorry we didn't get back to you sooner about dropping our appointments."

That might have slipped Lelouch's mind.

What with being shot.

Getting crowned.

Commanding a covert coup… in which he had to kill his parents.

You know, typical teenager stuff.

She hums through a very thin curve on her lips, "I figured when I saw all the news footage. Although for future reference it is very rude to not notify your doctors about any absences or cancellations. There are others that need those appointments. And we do worry."

"Yeah, sorry," Suzaku apologizes again, like the pro he is.

"I understand you'll be staying in Japan a while longer yet," Lelouch says – that's what Nunnally told him.

"Yes. Reconstruction is messy alone but there are many… former numbers here that were denied care. They need help and I want to do what I can."

"That's very admirable of you," Suzaku compliments.

"Officially with Britannia?" Lelouch asks. "Our Ambassador could always use another trusted colleague."

"Natives are still wary of Britannians, especially official ones. But maybe collaboration would be beneficial."

"She is here, if you didn't notice," Lelouch slightly jokes (because almost everybody is here). "Introductions can be made."

"Working even during your wedding reception?" Sanica slyly notes before a slow smile crooks her lips. "I like that."

Lelouch smiles in return – this doctor understands.

"Alice is coming to live in Britannia with Nunnally, isn't she?" Suzaku asks, still holding the gift from Cecile. "It will be difficult to be so far apart from each other."
She shifts in place, "Yes, well, Alice is a graduate now and she can make her own choices. Fly out of the nest, as it were."

"They do grow up fast, don't they?" Suzaku grins and bumps Lelouch's elbow.

And Lelouch doesn't know what that's supposed to mean.

(It's not like there's anything wrong with having Nunnally back in the nest.)

"Visits can always be arranged," Lelouch offers. They're both a sibling-parent, after all. "Consider it… repayment." For taking in a couple of teen boys claiming pregnancy like the lords of all idiots. For being respectful, helpful and keeping it quiet.

"Perks of helping the King?" she coyly jokes.

"Or being the relative of a friend of the King's sister," Lelouch coyly plays along.

Sanica's eyes glimmer, "I appreciate the offer. I might hold you to that."

Lelouch nods.

Looks like their holidays at the Villa are getting more and more interesting…

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Lelouch is leaving the restroom when he lingers a moment in the quiet (and peace) before he's carried by curious feet toward his old bedroom when he passes by voices in his former dining room. He stops out of sight near the door way to listen. (What, don't judge.)

"…You mean he never lets you?"—Milly.

"It's not… really about letting—it's not important."—Suzaku.

"But still!" Milly insists with an almost hiss. "To never let you switch. How selfish."

Lelouch is going to assume this is exactly what it sounds like, and it's not ok.

First: it's completely not her business whatsoever in any way at all!

Second: Suzaku knows the one cardinal rule is to never discuss their private or intimate matters with others. It's private and intimate for reasons! By their very definitions!

Lelouch is about to succumb to his irritated desire to storm in when he hears Suzaku's reflexive roll of good-natured chuckles.

"That sort of thing doesn't matter," Suzaku says. "It's about being together. That's what I like."

That was… actually touching.

But Suzaku should seriously stop having this discussion.

"You… I really hope Lelouch knows how lucky he is."

"I think he does." Lelouch can hear the smirky smile in Suzaku's voice. "And, between you and me, he's not selfish. I don't have reason to complain."

All right, that last little murmured bit wasn't necessary nor is the scandalous wink that Lelouch
Milly *ho-ho*'s with salacious delight, making Lelouch feel dirty. "Good for you, then, but still. You're his spouse so don't go letting him think he's got the world on a string. He needs some grounding from time to time!"

Is that what Milly calls her harassment? *Grounding?*

And aren't spouses supposed to be *supportive?*

Suzaku laughs, *louder* and *hardier* than Lelouch deems appropriate. "I can be *withholding,*" he says. With a touch of ironic pride in his voice, he says.

Puh-lease. Lelouch can't be manipulated by what is, or isn't, happening in his pants.

And Suzaku claims to be *above* manipulation… As if.

With a roll of his eyes, Lelouch is about to continue on his way again—

"It's still a bit surprising, I won't lie," Milly says. "Lelouch Lamperouge, now married, now Emperor *vi Britannia,* married, with a child, married."

"You said married three times." A simpering smile can be heard in Suzaku's voice.

"It's worth repeating," she pointedly responds. "It was a big surprise back then when we found about the two of you, and I still wonder about it at times. I don't think he even knew what a date was until you."

A slight chuckle from Suzaku, "I'm not sure he does now. Most of our 'dates' during school were running errands and it hasn't changed that much."

Wat.

Suzaku always says it doesn't matter what he and Lelouch do together, just that they're *together.*

Milly lightly hums, "That's kind of sweet, though. That everyday-life thing, not doing much just… living. The glitz and glam of romance are fun, don't get me wrong, and I think is needed in relationships, but that's not… always real life. Being comfortable with someone and just cohabitating *without* killing the other person? That's special and kind of miraculous," she finishes with a laugh.

Lelouch thinks far too many people spend far too much time on the topic of romance and cohabitating.

And more specifically on how it involves him.

(Although he can't argue the "not killing the other person" part…)

"You seem to be really interested in Lelouch's private life," Suzaku notes.

Thanks, Suzaku. He's *finally* come to some sense!

"Private," Milly laughs, "is a good word. Partly it's because it annoys him." Yeah, like Lelouch didn't realize that. "But Lelouch was like some wild animal when I first met him forever ago, you know? A *Prince* from far away who couldn't be kept or tamed and then you walk into the scene and—!" She snaps her fingers. "Now there's this side of Lelouch I wasn't sure existed. …Maybe I
was a little jealous."

"Jealous? Really?" Suzaku sounds sincerely surprised – considering he voiced some suspicions about Milly's affections for Lelouch that's quite a feat for him. Mister-Too-Good-To-Lie.

Milly makes an uncertain hum, "Oh, you know, just… at the time such a carefree—no, that's not the word… Well, I was engaged to Lloyd Asplund at the time."

"Ah," Suzaku replies and Lelouch mentally echoes the concise sound of understanding. No more need be said.

"Suffice to say such a romanticized notion of you two seemed out of reach." She pauses, "…It's not something I thought about a lot, but I guess I figured when it happened…"

"It wouldn't be an arranged marriage to somebody like Lloyd," he finishes – and it's odd to hear something even slightly disparaging from Suzaku's lips. Even about Lloyd.

"Kind of the worst-case scenario," Milly jokes making both of them laugh.

Shame, Suzaku.

"But now you have Rivalz."

"Yeah… I suppose," she fondly muses. "He's a clumsy goof, but… he is cute."

Suzaku chuckles, "I'm happy to see the two of together."

Eh.

Lelouch decides he's heard enough and has better things to do with his time than eavesdrop on Milly. (And it totally has nothing to do with the fact that they're not talking about him anymore.) He turns on his heel and—

Stifles a curse at the amused but faint little smile from Sayoko passing silently through the hall. Not to be ruffled, Lelouch straightens his robes and lifts his chin as he walks away as if he wasn't doing anything wrong by listening to his husband and friend talk about him behind his back. Ninja or not, she needs to stop being so sneaky. And catching Lelouch off-guard.

Makes Lelouch wonder just how much she might've heard through the years…

•••

Lelouch's old bedroom is filled with boxes like a storage closet…

A slight simper tugs at his lips as he walks into the dusted room that was always pristine under his care – save for C.C.'s discourteous habits. The bed is gone but the desk, couch and table remain. He's not sure if it's better or worse than his old home being a new club room or not… He can't say he likes the idea of strangers coming through here and pawing at his old furniture but as it is now… it's kind of lifeless.

Lelouch didn't think about how it would feel to revisit after just a few short years that both crawled and raced by. He didn't think he'd feel anything, really. Maybe he just expected it wouldn't change, as if it would always stay exactly the same while in wait for his return even though he knows he'll never live here again. It's a distant sadness that tugs at his chest like some melancholy nostalgia. For nearly a decade this makeshift lodging was his home. This campus was his home. His world.
So small and fragile and now…

He touches the empty surface of the desk, frowning at the dust that collects on his fingertips.

When he had returned to the Aries Villa after nearly the same decade it felt different. It was like returning to a dream where nothing was quite the way he remembered it. The property was in a state of disrepair as nobody had bothered to tend it despite letting it stand. Lelouch had wondered if… maybe his father had left it untouched simply because he couldn't part with it — but that sentimentality is yet another childish fantasy. Charles zi Britannia abandoned it because it outlived its use and let it remain because it wasn't worth the effort of either upkeep or demolition. It was just a speck in the shell of an antiquated reality.

Another reason walking across his childhood home was like a haunted memory – a place that had seemed over the rainbow was shrouded by storm clouds. Maybe not everything was a lie, but when it truly mattered such "paternal affection" proved a heart-wrenching falsehood. The reality he'd always known had crumbled right under his feet — and even now, it's still easier to be angry than let the despondency drench his (vulnerable) heart.

Lelouch looks at the empty wall shelf, crown moldings and wooden floors and all he sees are memories that have sweetened rather than soured — unlike his childhood home. This room that was little more than a desperate refuge as he struggled to raise himself and Nunnally instead became the found foundation of a future he chose for himself. His life here wasn't free of pain but somehow all those hurts seem smaller now. Lelouch gazes at the large stacks of boxes where his bed was and remembers the younger days when Nunnally didn't want to sleep alone and he read her stories of princesses — who also had rather neglectful parents. How abruptly C.C. wedged herself into his life with disarray. The first time Suzaku shared his bed, and the many nights after. The studious brunet that diligently worked on his schoolwork. The pregnant seahorse that repeatedly burst Lelouch's bubbles.

For the better.

This nest that always, somehow, seemed so impervious to everything else that wanted to sink claws into it and rip. Lelouch wonders if maybe in some way one of those nefarious outside things did succeed in pulling his world apart, or if he simply graduated out of the nest. Ashford isn't the home or life that was given to Lelouch, it was the home and life he made for himself. His parents claimed they were trying to protect him and while that was an obvious mistake for their own sake, maybe… it really did protect Lelouch? Maybe the worst thing that happened to him was actually the best thing that could have happened?

"Thought I might find you in here," Suzaku says from the threshold, making Lelouch turn.

Speak of the bubble-bursting, good-thing seahorse.

What, he's done gossiping with Milly?

"Am I becoming so predictable?" Lelouch tries to mildly smirk.

Suzaku grins. "Give me a little credit."

After hearing this guy bragging about "withholding"? Nah, no credit given.

"Not sure if I should be offended that my old bedroom is being used for storage," Lelouch lightly mutters as Suzaku joins his side.

"This place is really special, isn't it?"
Lelouch doesn't quite fully shrug but his violets flutter across the room, over pockets of the past that feel farther away than he expected they would.

In a brief pause, he feels fingers gripping into his sleeve.

"Remember that morning after I told you I found out I was pregnant and we fought, and I kicked you out?"

"I'll never forget." As if he ever could. "And neither will Sayoko," Lelouch says with an amused smirk.

Suzaku smiles back, "Our first time. during that big storm."

"Mm. That time you barfed on me in the middle of the night." Talk about a rude awakening.

Suzaku lightly pushes, "You've gotta learn to let things go." But he pulls Lelouch back even closer afterward. "I was pregnant, I couldn't help it."

So the seahorse says.

"I used to make blanket forts in here with Nunnally." Just a prince and princess ruling however they wanted over their imaginary lands inhabited by talking animals both fantastical and mundane. A place where nobody was hurt or scared and Lelouch thwarted all possible evil-doers.

"Oh, yeah? Just like we used to?" It was fun with the addition of Suzaku as a noble hero, but it still felt less real when they used to play with Euphie, and on occasion Clovis, at home in the villa.

Lelouch nods, gesturing between the desk and where the bed used to be, "She felt safer in a place that didn't seem so big, and we were closer." She had gotten used to living in that tiny Kururugi shed as a blind person and Ashford was but another big adjustment. "Especially during storms. The thunder always caught her by surprise, so she would get scared."

"I remember that," Suzaku softly says and the fingers of his other hand brush Lelouch's.

They don't scare her anymore. That stopped before her eyesight returned.

"If you wanted, I bet we could buy this room. Cut it right out of the building, ship it back home and patch it onto the villa."

It's not just this room. It's the kitchen and dining. Nunnally's bedroom. The bath… The whole damn clubhouse.

"You jest but I could absolutely make that happen," Lelouch half retorts. Geass or not, he could.

But, this is the past.

Fond memories soaked into the walls and floors.

(Doesn't look like this place get's cleaned nearly as often without Lelouch around…)

"I miss it here too sometimes," Suzaku confesses with a hint of wistfulness. "It was our first place. Like a tiny apartment."

Except without the perks of actually being in a private singular unit, but still better off than in the dorms.
"And we didn't even have to pay rent," Lelouch faintly jokes.

His violet eyes sweep around the room again, looking at memories blanketed in dust and hidden under cardboard, before landing on the desk. He remembers sitting at his desk balancing his checkbook before his Friday nights became wild caped crusades. Weekly budgets and tactical maneuvers all calculated in one sitting with thoughtful clicks of his pen. That hasn't changed too much on the throne; all the numbers are just massively larger. Feels less perilous though…

"What do you say?" Suzaku suggestively grins, pulling Lelouch closer by his bejeweled chest. "One more time here, for old time's sake?"

Lelouch smiles, letting himself be reeled in by his one-and-only seahorse, wrapping his own arms around the other man's cinched waist over the clouding skirt. He swam this far into nostalgia, he could sink deeper…

"Small Fry?"

"Nunnally is watching him. And I already locked the door." Suzaku's voice is a hot murmur, getting shorter as he wedges himself off heeled shoes – Lelouch so called it. "Also, I kind of want to get out of this dress…"

Lelouch's answer is given in an open, full kiss and steps pushing them to the desk – the only piece of furniture they never christened when the still lived here. Not too late to change that and now's certainly a prime opportunity. (In fact… he may just take the remaining furniture back home with him. A bit of sentiment every now and then isn't such a bad thing, and being a dad has probably changed Lelouch more than he realizes.) Suzaku is a contented recipient, savoring Lelouch's lips with a quiet moan and smoothing a fast hand down against his husband's zipper. No time to waste, certainly, and Lelouch quickly unzips the back of Suzaku's dress. He slides his hands down Suzaku's bare back to grips a round bottom with both hands and gently bites under a jaw sprouting a small sound into the air. Suzaku's rubbing fingers are swift to unfasten Lelouch's pants and the older gent almost tries to reach into the desk drawer through reflex for their lotion—

Then realizes they don't have any. Not in this room. Not anymore.

Also, Suzaku's absurd dress is an impenetrable avalanche over the drawers.

Lelouch pulls from the mark he's blooming on Suzaku's neck to voice this thought, thinking there are still other things they can do, but it seems for once Suzaku has thought ahead. Rather than a convenient tube of hand cream like that time it's a small jar of… petroleum jelly?

"It's all I could find in the bathroom," Suzaku confesses somewhat abashedly at Lelouch's inquisitive look as he shoves his dress down his gloveless arms.

Lelouch is sort of wondering just where Suzaku was keeping this…

"Um, we don't need a condom, do we? I took my pill today but did you?" Suzaku is leaning against the desk with an uncertain fret around his eyes and the top half of his dress slumping from his waist, exposing his stiff, perky nipples.

The emperor just returns grins a little and yanks down Suzaku's dress clear below his plush rear – making the Knight Consort laugh with a smile. (Seems Milly thought ahead on making the dress easily removable… not that Lelouch wants to put much thought into that thought.) Suzaku hoists himself up on the desk in another tonguing kiss with Lelouch pulling down the tight bikini underwear the brunet had to change into, along with some matching white tights (not pantyhose).
They turn inside out before even leaving Suzaku's feet that hook at the ankles around Lelouch. Knowing they're short on time Lelouch shovels two fingers into the petroleum jar and eases them inside Suzaku. His breath hitches a bit and the desk creaks when he leans against the top shelving, one hand gripping the edge of the table and the other tangled in black hair. Lelouch leans close, pressed against the hard wooden surface (with his hardening—) and lightly grazes their lips as he watches his sliding fingers purse Suzaku's face.

"If our guests could see you now," Lelouch teases, fingers fully sheathed and spreading. "Should we invite them to share this moment too?"

"Shut up," Suzaku pants a feigned scold.

Lelouch chuckles into Suzaku's ear and slides his fingers out to push them back in and make Suzaku's spine ripple. Maybe it's bad but a little tinge of embarrassment on Suzaku's cheeks does make him cuter. It's not malicious and the seahorse seems to realize this too so he doesn't get angry. Just squirmy in all the very good ways. His body is clenching around Lelouch's fingers while he trembles under the teeth that nibble his earlobe. Lelouch's left hand travels down Suzaku's chest with skating fingertips down between those peaking nipples without touching them, just grazing up and down to first feel the anticipation pebble skin. Then Lelouch kisses towards them and Suzaku's back curves to push his chest up to seeking lips. After a slide of a tongue, they seal and nurse around a pink nub making fingers sift and clench in his ebony hair. It's just a taste and Lelouch is switching to the other one, moistening them and trickling a tingling pleasure into Suzaku's blood that the younger wants more of as he holds the older's head in place. A small, weak bite on the sensitive area is irresistible and the taller gent lifts to prevent getting carried away, quickly kissing through the smog of lust building from Suzaku's lips.

Lelouch withdraws for more of the (totally unromantic) jelly to make sure it's more than enough so they can get quick and dirty. Suzaku has the same idea as he's dipping his fingers in slacks and rubbing them along Lelouch's hardening length as well as his own. Lelouch moves his hips a little in Suzaku's slinking fingers, feeling their excited flesh meet and rub together as he sinks a third finger into contracting heat. It knots a sound in Suzaku's nose and his grip tightens on their joined erections. They're preparing each other with scooping kisses and sculpting fingers faster than they usually would but time is short for their timeout from the party.

So, Lelouch decides that's enough of the quick, time for the dirty. He grabs and holds one of Suzaku's knees up to a shoulder as he eases himself in, feeling and hearing his husband's body accept him. There's only a breath of stillness when Lelouch is completely inside Suzaku's ready body before he's moving into an appropriate thrusting rhythm to start. Suzaku's sweet, soft sounds fill the room much like they used to with every full plunge inside him, although this time accompanied by the creaking of the desk. He braces himself with one hand flat on the table surface but another reaches around Lelouch's body close to his and grips at the back of dignified robes and their lips are flirting with a kiss. Lelouch circles his hips the way Suzaku likes but faster than a usual casual speed. Might not be very graceful (when is it ever, though?) but it's getting them where they need to go.

Or, well, Lelouch thought so but Suzaku's face is scrunched and twisting like a screw.

"What is it?" Lelouch pants with slowing hips. "Does it hurt?"

"No, it's fine, it's—" Suzaku adjusts, or attempts adjusting his body. "It's just my back. I think I know why we've never done it on this desk before." He's referring to the shelving propping him up.

And, well, yeah. This desk wasn't made with amorous couples in mind.
"Do you want to move?" Lelouch doesn't even know why he's asking; they can't keep going this way.

"No, it's fine."

Lelouch nearly rolls his eyes. "You don't need to be a hero. Just move," he orders and pulls out, pulling at Suzaku's legs to get the boy moving.

The Knight does as he's told, shifting off the desk, and Lelouch guides him to turn around while pepperings kisses on his neck. Suzaku's nose turns towards Lelouch and their lips loosely connect before his hands are bracing on the wooden surface. Lelouch slowly grazes his lips from shoulder to nape, lazily kissing every other breath, and smoothes his palms up and down the front of Suzaku's thighs. He presses up against the brunet's bare backside, drawing his fingertips up athletic legs, hips and then—

A pleasured sound is pushed from Suzaku's throat when he's entered and filled again. Lelouch securely grips Suzaku's hips as he thrusts to the smothered tune of indulgent moans. Suzaku has learned to control his volume and although Lelouch has learned how to make him louder anyway (at their villa) the hushed mewls are reminiscent of back then almost like memories are oozing from the seahorse's throat. It's easy to look back on those times and even easier to get distracted by it. Those chapters have ended and while Lelouch thinks he was happy then things are better now, between him and Suzaku. Lelouch draws inspiration from the mosaic of moments they've shared in this room – or even outside this room. His focus is on the depth of his diving hardness into Suzaku's squeezing body, head clouding with the lustful scent of his husband – the boy he's grown up with and will grow old with (Universe willing…)

As much as the once-forsaken-prince would like to bask in old times their time now is still limited. Lelouch reaches for Suzaku's lonely erection to pump the alert flesh with his thrusts and rub over the tip. Suzaku pushes back against Lelouch with an appreciative sound and makes the desk squeal in the opposite, but it holds against their hastening movements. It won't hurt the Knight to be taken hard and fast so the Emperor's hips don't hold back – they race forward. He rounds his thrusts into Suzaku's body feeling the deep coil of heat pull him in with every lunge and hearing Suzaku stammer Japanese when his prostate is struck. Lelouch bites the tantalizing skin in the curve of Suzaku neck and shoulder not to stifle his voice (never been one to make noise) but because of that primal, possessive urge boiling through his veins. He's sliding in and out of Suzaku, feeling the body of the man he loves stretch taut around him while hearing him pant with stifled moans. Just the seemingly unending tunnel of collapsing heat pulling him deeper each time he returns. Lelouch's teeth sink deeper to keep himself anchored while he jerks Suzaku's length up and down, not too roughly as a bit of teasing can teeter the brunets totter better. One of Suzaku's hand leap and latch onto Lelouch's arm with sinking nails and his finish hits them both a bit suddenly. The king is buried full hilt when the knight's body seizes and he lets himself loose deep inside the wringing of his husband's pleasured body that spills through his fingers.

Quick and dirty.

Well… maybe it could've been dirtier.

Lelouch pants into the back of Suzaku's shoulder as he recovers and heat wafts off of him like steam, sheening his brow and gathering a bit under his sophisticatedly layered clothes. He's washing up on the shores of after-glow and would be totally fine with flopping on the couch for a nap as he cools off. Or maybe just stay here… like this… Suzaku is a good enough crutch…

"So, uh…" Suzaku pants, staring down at the desk, "we'll probably have to pay for a replacement desk, so you can probably take this home now."
Lelouch lazily looks over Suzaku's shoulder at the certain bodily leaving strung across the desk and lightly snickers into his husband's skin. If that's the case, then perhaps the couch and coffee table should join them after all... and the bed was probably burned. If the school had any sense.

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"Have a nice break?" Milly rhetorically asks with a smug look when Lelouch and Suzaku find her in the still-functioning student council club room with Nunnally, Euphemia, and Genbu.

Lelouch doesn't dignify her with a response, instead focusing on his son sitting on the table and a few boxes of Nunnally's that have yet to be handled. Little Genbu looks almost like a coat rack propping up one of Nunnally's old kid dresses that's too big, frilly and pink. She's been trying to decide if she wants to keep or donate them. Lelouch is quite sentimental about her old clothes, having been the buyer and repairer, and would like to hold onto them a little longer, but seeing this...

"I'm pretty!" the small fry happily shouts, hands up in the air.

Euphemia giggles with affection grabbing his hands from behind him with her delicate fingers.

Lelouch's eyes spear Milly, "Have you no shame? Picking on a helpless little boy..."

She slyly half-smirks, "It was his idea."

"He wanted to be pretty," Euphemia says.

"Like mommy," Milly smirks.

"Pretty!" Genbu exclaims again.

Suzaku, once again wearing the ornately-showy dress, smiles, "Yes, very pretty!" and he hoists Genbu up into his arms, turning to Lelouch. "Right?"

Lelouch wants to sigh and rubs his face.

Present company excluded, of course: "The prettiest," he says instead with a simper, ticking at Genbu's side to make the boy squeal with delight.

Yes, it's fine. Genbu can look pretty if he wants to—

"Daddy be pretty too!" Genbu spiritedly demands with grabby little hands gesturing towards the emperor.

"Daddy is pretty enough," Lelouch flatly responds, making Suzaku warmly chuckle and feeling the ominous ooze of Milly's gaze coat his skin.

—But Genbu desperately needs to learn how to not encourage Milly at any capacity.

••

The sun is getting weary in the darkening sky not unlike when Lelouch pokes into the kitchen partially out of habit but mostly because he wants to see if it's changed since he left. All the appliances, utensils and whatnot were all just the way he wanted them and it's almost a point of pride to see if endured whoever came after him. What he finds there instead is an anxious-looking Shirley all alone. Perhaps Lelouch would inevitably come face-to-face with her tonight like this. (Why does it seem that every time Lelouch turns around there's somebody else waiting for a one-
"Are you all right?" Lelouch calmly asks although he can't help eyeing the counters – clean enough but the toaster shouldn't be floating alone on the island… it's supposed to stand by the stove.

She jumps a little, seemingly unaware of his presence. "Lulu..." Her hand leaps to her chest with a relieved breath when she sees him.

(It's kind of nice to hear her say that name.)

He can't help the tickle of a grin in the corner of his lips. "You look troubled."

Shirley's fingers are still twisting in the buttons of her green satin blouse as her eyes shift to and away from him. "...Madam Nu is here, which is a surprise..."

And she remembers that Shirley shot her, yes.

And they both know that Lelouch was Zero.

And they know each other through Lelouch.

And they know the other one knows that he was Zero—goddamn, did this shit get complicated.

"Has something happened?" he cautiously asks – she might be the wife of an ally and former lieutenant but he won't let her do anything to Shirley. Although Lelouch admits it's a delicate situation.

Shirley shakes her head, thankfully. "It just… didn't sound like she would be attending, but now she's here..."

"I don't think you have to worry about her," he tries to reassure her while calculating how to subtly handle this situation. THIS right here is a reason why he shouldn't be left out of surprises. His life is too complicated (not that they know that or should) to be thrown up in the air on a whim.

Shirley leans against the island, grasping the sleeve of her arm. "It's sort of… an uncomfortable blessing. I've been thinking that I'd like to… maybe try and apologize, or something..." Shirley explains. "But she's not really… approachable? And after everything, I'm just not sure."

Lelouch smirks a huffing laugh, "True, she isn't. But I think I can help you, if you want." It's kind of the least he can do, really. Regardless if he's Villetta's least favorite person.

She smiles, "I'd appreciate that—but doesn't have to be today! I don't want to make things… I don't want to ruin the day. We all worked hard on it, after all."

A soft smile shapes Lelouch's lips – he does appreciate the effort and sentiment.

Just.

Not.

Surprises.

Ever since Jeremiah steamrolled into Ashford Lelouch hasn't spent much time with any of his friends, but least of all with Shirley. They all visited him briefly after he was shot, but he buried himself in the acceptable excuse of imperial duty afterward. He hasn't known what he should say to
"There is… something I've been meaning to mention," Lelouch starts, feeling gross and squiggly on the inside (kind of like that time he was forced to apologize for pulling Euphemia's ponytail.) "Suzaku told me that you spoke with him after—" he considers his word choice, ultimately choosing to be helplessly vague, "…what happened." It's not like she'd forget. "I know it helped him, but mostly me, and I just… wanted you to know that I appreciate it." Blegh…

She looks a little surprised, says a lot about his decorum.

"It's what friends do, right?" A brightness outlines her voice and reshapes her frame. She says it as easily as breathing while Lelouch felt like he was regurgitating bugs.

(Not that he's ever eaten any bugs.)

"You were never supposed to be involved—"

Shirley cuts him off, "You don't have to—it's not—I mean, I know…" A meager smile worms on her lips and it does make him feel better. "Today is a happy day; we don't have to… do this."

Lelouch won't say he's grateful to hear that.

But he's grateful.

"Maybe I can just…" she holds out her arms with her sheepish laugh. "get a hug?"

Instinct says no. "Sure." Hell, she nearly killed somebody to protect him. It's an action that she's learning how to cope with, and Lelouch is familiar with that process, but it saved him.

She saved his life.

The happy look on her face makes Lelouch think that maybe she should dream a little bigger… to be so satisfied with something so small. She wraps her arms around him tightly and he loops his around her waist, feeling her warm, soft body—

And instantly remembering that evening in the rain when they kissed… It was the only time he'd ever embraced her.

Shirley wasn't supposed to remember anything. He thought he was doing the right thing at the time but now he thinks about Nunnally. No, he wasn't using Shirley to further some obscene agenda; he was trying to protect her. Shirley hasn't made it seem that she holds any ill-will towards Lelouch even if she does tip-toe around him. Understandable but still uncomfortable. Lelouch can't imagine what the whole ordeal is like sloshing around in her head. He's not so sure he wouldn't do it again. He just wishes it hadn't come to that and he has zero plans to let his failures repeat.

Shirley and her kind heart deserve better.

"I wouldn't be here without you," Lelouch quietly says in her ear. "Try not to torture yourself over this. You're a good person."

"I—" Her arms tighten around him, fingers clenching his clothes. "…Thank you," she murmurs back with a hint of a sniffle.

Good people are often the ones that actually worry about being good people and hearing confirmation come from somebody else helps.
Sometimes.

The embrace lingers longer than Lelouch intended but it doesn't feel like the evening in the rain. And he's feeling generous. She needs the comfort and security and he doesn't have to speak more of it, just hold her. All while ignoring a peeking smile from a certain seahorse half-hidden in the doorway.

To think: Lelouch now gets the rest of his life to ignore this idiot in wedded bliss.

••

Lelouch is feeling quite relaxed now, after Shirley and his private break with Suzaku, and is taking it easy away from the dance floor atop the carpeted stairs with Genbu who is amusing himself with his favorite stuffed seahorse as well as the Japanese prime minister's baby girl.

"A-Aren't they a pair?" Ohgi says with awkwardness he's still trying to shake – he doesn't exactly know how to conduct himself around a Britannian Emperor and Lelouch hardly blames him. Ohgi also always speaks English in Lelouch's presence but it still feels strange to hear considering as Zero he picked up much of his Japanese from the former Black Knight.

It's somewhat entertaining for Lelouch to interact with his former knights, particularly Ohgi. The others have mostly taken flight off into their own lives, maybe trying to pick up where they left off or repair what was broken, including Kallen. There's not much need for knightmare pilots anymore but transitioning into a more domestic life isn't always the easiest thing after what they've been through, but she seems to be handling it well doing… whatever it is she's doing. As for the others, they don't have a need to interact with the Britannian Emperor. Although, Diethard is a frequent bridge even for Euphemia.

However, it's somewhat less entertaining dealing with Ohgi's recent wife, Villetta. Eagle eyes, Lelouch likes to call her, doesn't exactly hide her distrust, or dislike, but is capable of remaining civil all while watching his every move. It's not so bad to have a bit of a "frenemy" minus the friendly part… Keeps Lelouch from getting too comfortable or complacent and is a reminder to watch his steps – stay away from the path of shadow that he left behind, as it were… Currently, she's conversing with Jeremiah nearby while her baby girl giggles on her back, vulnerable, with daddy at her side.

"He doesn't interact with others his age very much," Lelouch conversationally says, petting Genbu's dark curls and then straightening his shirt, his tiny tux jacket long gone somewhere else – the small fry might not care if his shirt is crooked but his dad does.

"Yeah, it's, uh… it's not easy, is it?" Ohgi offers in sympathy. "But I think she likes him!"

It can be difficult enough to find other children for playing and socializing, particularly when one doesn't know other parents, but more so as a world leader. Lelouch could invite certain… elements of the former royal family that have children but that's less appealing than scrubbing his bare skin with sandpaper.

Ohgi seemed like he would be a good father – he was somehow able to handle Tamaki for as long as he did… and he's always watched over Kallen as a caretaker. Lelouch imagines it's not always easy for Ohgi being married to a Britannian. In fact, they didn't marry until after he was elected although Lelouch doesn't think that was a calculated move. Ohgi and Lelouch have more similarities in their lives than it might seem on the surface, beyond even having mixed families.

"Let's not go planning any arranged marriages before they hatch," teases a female voice.
Who could it be but ol' eagle eyes herself.

Ohgi good-naturedly laughs but Lelouch is the one to slyly reply, "You needn't worry about that." Wouldn't it be just a gas, though, if these two did end up marrying each other by choice? (It's absolutely hilarious and absolutely not at the same time.)

Villetta's eyes barely shape in a smile with her lips.

"Stinky!" Genbu suddenly winces.

Causing Ohgi to lean over and sniff. "Oh, seems Chigusa needs a change…” he sheepishly announces and gathers the baby up in his arms with a polite pardoning of himself off the stairs.

Allowing Villetta to take his place.

She doesn't sit.

Is it just Lelouch or did it get colder just now?

Nice and frosty and quiet and not tense in any way.

Well, Lelouch is the emperor so he won't be the first to speak. If she wants to play the quiet game he can oblige.

Oblivious Genbu, on the other hand, starts happily bouncing on his lap and Lelouch smiles as he holds small hands in his careful grip. Villetta finally seats herself and Lelouch catches her gaze from the corner of his eye, giving him a strange look.

"You're an odd one," she states.

He gives her a glance, "Thank you?"

She hums.

They sit in silence.

It's really not as much fun with her as it is with Suzaku.

Jeremiah appears from the murmur of the room around them and walks up the stairs with a drink in hand that he offers to his once-upon-a-time sister-in-arms. He promptly turns to Lelouch, "Need anything, Your Majesty? Or His Highness?"

Yes, Jeremiah is always this formal. It balances rather nicely with the informalness of certain other people Lelouch knows.

Lelouch softly smirks, "No, nothing is needed."

Jeremiah nods, so very courteously, and continues on discussing noting of note (to Lelouch) with Villetta – maybe Lelouch isn't one to say, but, they're a boring pair.

Genbu is still jostling a bit in his lap and in reality has had too much sugar for one day or maybe it's just the upbeat energy of the gathering. It's a lot of stimulation for a little one like him though that should tire him out. Genbu hasn't even had a nap (since his earlier one when they arrived here, anyway) and is still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Lelouch doesn't understand how something so small can be so larger than life in every conceivable way. So much energy, so much sleeping, so much eating, so much… clean up. So much joy, so much fussing, so much laughter, so much
crying, so much curiosity, so much boldness, so much love… Genbu isn't a baby, he's a little human atomic bomb ready to burst into rainbows and seahorses. Lelouch manages to contain him, though, as the small fry attempts to climb up and all over him in an overestimation of his toddler abilities. Genbu slows a bit suddenly, seating on Lelouch's knees and staring quite intently at Villetta but she doesn't seem to notice.

"Pwretty!" he points to Villetta.

Who looks at him with a sharply raised eyebrow and piercing eyes.

Making Genbu cower, "Scarwy," and hide his face by tucking away into Lelouch's chest.

King Papa chuckles and rubs his little prince's back. "I think it's time for mommy's shift. Jeremiah, would you take him to Suzaku? I'd like to have a private chat with our friend here."

With a "Yes, Your Majesty," the guard carefully scoops Small Fry into his arms and carry him off to Suzaku on the other side of the room talking with Tohdoh, Kallen, Nunnally, and Alice. Who would've thought back when Jeremiah became Orange he'd one day be trusted carrying Zero and Suzaku's baby.

"You have a way with children," Lelouch quips to Villetta when they're alone.

She isn't amused. Villetta seems to be more the protector than the nurturer – seems papa Ohgi has that part covered.

"Genbu has a point, though. You can be an intimidating person. To some," Lelouch adds the last bit at her lifting eyebrow.

"We don't have to be best friends," she says.

"No, but there's something to be said for keeping the peace."

She faintly scoffs.

It hardly hurts Lelouch's feelings. "More specifically, there are some peace-talks that a friend of mine would like to… facilitate."

Villetta's avocado eyes lock onto his, "Just speak plainly."

*Fair enough, but:* "It's a sensitive, delicate subject, you see. Concerning…" Lelouch trails, leading her with his eyes to the ginger-haired topic standing with Euphemia, Rivalz and Sanica.

"I… would rather just put it all behind me, if it's all the same to you."

That is something Lelouch likes to hear, but, "Maybe you should tell her that. Or just let her say what she needs to say."

Villetta tries to be cagey but her unwillingness is always tightly ringed around her eyes.

Directness goes a long way for Villetta so Lelouch tries to be blunt: "You're happy where you are now, aren't you?"

"What?" Villetta is confused.

Ok, roundabout blunt.
"With Ohgi. Not saying it's good or bad, right or wrong, but would you be with Ohgi now if not for what happened? You ultimately chose to stay here and be with him."

Villetta nearly chokes on an incredulous cough and is unable to respond.

"She didn't deserve to get caught up in all this and... she's had losses because of it." No, Lelouch hasn't forgotten about her father. He can never forget. (Unlike Lelouch's father, hers actually loved her and she loved him.)

"Is this an order?"

Lelouch thinly smirks, "If it has to be."

They exchange another look.

Villetta tiredly sighs, "I really wasn't interested in teenage tripe when I was a teenager."

That might be putting it too flippantly considering what Shirley has been through, not that Villetta knows or particularly cares. Diminishing the problem helps to set distance from it, Lelouch supposes.

"Neither was I," Lelouch says. "But it's not really that different from the nobles, is it?" Except Shirley is a genuine person who actually wants to make amends, not just sulk and connive like a child.

The older woman makes some kind of knowing sound at him, "Can't say I miss it, no." Villetta stands wearing regality almost as if it's naturally sewn into her bones and for a small moment doesn't speak as she stares out over the room. "...I'll consider it," she finally says, a touch emotionless.

"Very well, you're dismissed," Lelouch instructs with an amused curl of his lips.

He's given a glance of her sharp eyes before she heads down the stairs and in the direction of where Ohgi shuffled.

Sometimes Lelouch really wonders just how they could have ever made a pair – but then remembers he'd really rather not think that much about it…

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A Milly conspired event wouldn't be complete without a finale, of course. So after the cake has been sliced, with Genbu getting more of it on his face than in his mouth, the foods have been eaten, the drinks dwindled, and the people successfully mingled, it's up on the roof under the evening-soaked sky for fireworks. Earplugs are given for the little ones to protect their precious eardrums and without much ado up the shells soar with big bangs and blooms. The bouquet of chrysanthemum sparks is stunning in the dark sky, but as equally captivating as the rainbow bursts are the faces admiring them. Lelouch scans the group only to ultimately land on his husband and son – Nunnally is just in front of him so he can't glimpse her expression.

The wind carries a bit of a chill from creeping autumn that loosely stretches around them making Suzaku snuggle Genbu closer to keep him warm. Small Fry stares up in amazement, mouth agape under wide unblinking eyes. Suzaku is more aware, though, and notices eyes on him and slides his greens over to violet with a smile.

Maybe it's the atmosphere.
Maybe it's the culmination of the entire wedding. Maybe it's the fact that everybody else is suspended in gawking up at the sizzling blossoms. Because Lelouch gently reaches sideways around Suzaku's waist to close the gap between their bodies and lips. A simple, lingering kiss illuminated with the strobes of fireworks and running just as hot. Their moist lips part and after a little sly smile on Suzaku's mouth, kiss again with none-the-wiser.

Nunnally, Suzaku and Lelouch had to wait years to stand on this roof and enjoy some fireworks together. Such a simple thing, such a small wish that feels so full in Lelouch's chest and every second is worth every day it took to get here. They shouldn't have had to wait this long and Lelouch is mentally promising himself to seize every opportunity that comes along to do this again. Perhaps he'll personally host New Years from now on at his house. Hell, even the weird guest list is invited—

Uh, maybe. Let's not get too carried away…

Genbu is about passed out in Lelouch's arms, his little head heavy on his father's shoulder. Papa doesn't feel far behind him. Everyone has mellowed into the evening and time to call it a night for the world leaders at the party. Namely Lelouch.

As far as surprises go, this wasn't so bad.

"I have to say, I expected worse," Lelouch teases in the aftermath of the partied-out rotunda of empty plates and a chipped cake. People are milling about and settling into goodbyes – Lelouch can't say he'll miss sneaking out to avoid the cleanup like he used to, only to have to do it anyway because the other teens were lousy at it.

"You mean you expected the cake to explode," Milly says.

"Something like that," Lelouch grins with a tilt of his head.

Milly softly smiles and her blue eyes hold an endearing shade. "I know you're the big important Emperor now but I can't have you forget that you were my Vice President."

Lelouch's chest rustles with a light chuckle, "Never get too big for the little people?"

"Little people?" Milly echoes with pretend offense. "It's nice to know what you really think."

They both look over at everybody else shuffling around in the tired room that has dimmed.

"Is it… strange?" Lelouch asks with genuine curiosity.

"I mean…?" Milly considers with a meager shrug that doesn't quite fully lift her shoulders. "Yes and no? You made it very clear that you wanted to leave that life behind, but I guess you can only run for so long, right?" Her eyes land on him again. "And, well, you can take the prince out of the palace but can't take the palace of the prince?"

Lelouch's lips twitch as he looks at her, "You think I'm that uppity?"

"You did just call us little people," Milly playfully retorts with a smile. "I am surprised that you went back after all your effort to stay away and hidden, but I also think that it's fitting you're wearing the crown now. If anybody can do it, you can. Even if you were often a lazy VP," she adds
in a teasing mutter.

"But of course you had the easy part of thinking up outrageous ideas, the rest of us had to figure out how to accomplish them."

"The challenge is part of the fun!" she chirps. "And good leaders know how to delegate."

Lelouch nods with a dry eye-roll. Milly didn't delegate. She chose victims.

But now there's a rather quick droop to her expression and demeanor. "It's hard to think that three years have passed already. I wasn't so naive as to think we'd all remain the way we were in school, but it really felt like it all ended before I even realized, especially with you and Suzaku leaving the country before even graduating."

Suzaku certainly should've stayed to finish his education…

"Nina is off gallivanting with her little fairytale. Kallen is… doing whatever she does. Shirley is talking about going back to the mainland. And now even little Nunnally is leaving the nest. Now comes the part when we all spread to the winds. We say nothing will change, but let's be realistic."

Ah…

This wasn't really just about a wedding and stuffing Suzaku into a dress or even large amounts of cake. It's about having them all together like they used to be. Because they aren't any longer. Milly's schemes always seemed so wild or extreme, but she just really wanted to bring people together and enjoy themselves if only for a day.

"You still have Rivalz," Lelouch wryly quips.

Milly wrinkles her nose in a little snide smile at him. "Yes. And the pestering of my grandparents to have children. Just when you think you've cut one leash another replaces it."

Lelouch suppresses a shudder at the thought of miniature Millys.

"Although I should tell you they are very appreciative of your support as Emperor now."

They deserve it.

"I thought it would appease them for a while yet," Milly continues in a sigh, "but they're always looking to the next horizon."

"Must be the Ashford blood," Lelouch smirks. Genbu stirs a little and it's definitely past time to put him to bed, or he'll be fussy. "You know… aside from any future weddings or baby showers," Lelouch lightly teases, "those don't have to be the only time we all get together again. I can't believe that Student Council President Milly would give up so easily." Lelouch hasn't kept in touch like he should have, instead relying on Suzaku to maintain relationships but that's not fair to anybody and is too little effort. It would be… disheartening to lose the club now. They aren't the family he was born into but they are the one he's picked and from his perspective, that's far more meaningful than shared blood.

"You're right, of course." Milly's spine straightens. "I can't give up. Ashfords don't know the meaning of quit."

That's the truth.
"And I'm the Emperor. I can make things happen."

"Nice abuse of power," she slyly smiles – she would know.

But why is there this assumption that he'd have to abuse his power to make anything happen?

(That is part of his power.)

"Here's the part where I say goodbye and have fun cleaning up," Lelouch says with much satisfaction, rubbing Genbu's back.

Milly's eyes half-roll at him, "Yeah, yeah. Go on, Your Majesty."

Lelouch makes eye-contact with Suzaku talking with Shirley across the room and gestures to leave. He gets a nod from the brunet and turns to Milly one more time.

"Next time you want to plan me a surprise party, don't," Lelouch semi-seriously orders (but seriously, don't.)

Milly smilingly shakes her head at him, "It wasn't just for you, you know. And I'd say I wish you'd lighten up, but then this wouldn't be fun."

Lelouch hums.

Feels like he walked right into that one.

The sudden hug that Milly wraps around him is unexpected. Neither of them has ever been affectionate towards each other. Somehow… it kind of hurts a little, in a way.

"I thought having a little brother would be fun, even after I met you," she says in his ear.

"I guess I wish I could say the same about having another sister," Lelouch quips. They really don't need to start getting all emotional now, after all this time. Although, honestly speaking, as far as sisters go she is in the top three of… the three he actually considers family. (Sorrynotsorry, Cornelia.)

Milly pulls back with a lighthearted scoff to look him in the eyes, "You're so mean."

Lelouch just grins.

It's ok to be soft and squishy on the inside, but not the outside.

No matter what Euphemia or Suzaku think.

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After the party, they're back at the Kururugi Shrine and Lelouch is looking forward to a quiet ending to the day. He sits at a piano in a large sitting room with Nunnally, Sayoko and of course their hosts. Lelouch didn't play much piano before the baby was born, mostly because they didn't have one in the Clubhouse, but soon discovered afterward that it had a soothing effect on little Genbu. The piano Lelouch practiced on as a child at the villa was still there but beyond repair, which is fine by him. He's reclaiming everything and it's easier to make new memories when the old is gone, so he relocated a snowy grand piano from the palace. Here, however, is a warm brown upright that gently sings under his tender fingertips. The melody is soft and smooth, each small, swooping note fading into the next like a lullaby, but not. It's an old, love pop-song that pre-dates the war. One his mother liked and sometimes sang. Nunnally likes it too; it's even the same melody
as her music box. When one of the nearby clubs had a small electric keyboard Lelouch would "borrow" it at night to help her sleep in what used to be a foreign Ashford Academy clubhouse. That already feels like a lifetime ago. Despite the tethered sadness to a forsaken memory of his mother, Lelouch's lips are soft with a contented smile. Because something that was hers has been reclaimed.

It became Lelouch's and is now theirs.

Nunnally quietly hums the tune of the lyrics as she slowly sways in the rocking chair with Genbu in her lap that just refuses to admit he's sleepy after a little blip from waking during his clothes change – such defiance is definitely from Lelouch. His head is too heavy for him to support as it rests against Nunnally's chest with a hand rubbing his back. There is some hushed, idle chatter in Japanese between Suzaku and his… family; Kaguya and Tohdoh but also and now Chiba who was busy elsewhere today. No wedding bells just yet but by the sound of it… Lelouch wouldn't be surprised if she and Tohdoh tied the knot soon. They all talk mostly about mundane things and it's nice to hear. They discuss repairs that were made to the house and property, ones that are still needed, the general upkeep and if Suzaku has any opinions on any changes – he mostly doesn't. Tohdoh is the current resident but still sees Suzaku as the young master and it's kind of… sweet. Suzaku will never return to living here again and he has voiced having mixed feelings about the place which Lelouch can understand.

It will always be Suzaku's home, Tohdoh makes clear, and by extension Lelouch.

Eventually, Suzaku appears behind Lelouch. Hands warmly pour over Lelouch's shoulders down to his chest and a head lightly rests atop his as he feels a body press against him. Lelouch faintly smiles, adept fingers not missing a key in their rhythmic stroll. All in all, this is more Lelouch's speed in terms of "gatherings." He appreciates the efforts of their friends but Lelouch is who he is and likes what he likes. Quiet, subdued, minimal tasking and sans gratuitous frilly dresses or skirts. This is homey and what he's been vying to have for a very long time.

Suzaku's cozy embrace is soothing and all the bad thoughts slowly feel farther and farther away. They don't need to linger on the surface anymore and cloud Lelouch's… everything. The sharp edges made him who is and he won't get soft or squishy but he doesn't need to hold them so close anymore (to the point he harms himself.) His teeth and claws are still for his enemies and it feels good to retract them when they're not needed.

So… maybe not a whole lot has changed, really, but enough for Lelouch.

He feels a little different, at least.

And Suzaku doesn't seem to nag—uh, reprimand him nearly as much. …About that sort of thing.

"I think it's time for bed," Lelouch quietly announces. "It's been a long day." Jet-lag means Lelouch is too tired to even do proper math on that.

Suzaku hums, feeling the motions of Lelouch's piano fingers moving up through both their bodies until the Britannian stops. He touches Suzaku wrist and seahorse hums again.

"I guess you had that nap for nothing."

Lelouch pushes back, making Suzaku lift off of him. "You think you're so clever, don't you?" he very dryly teases as he stands to see Suzaku grinning at him.

"Not as clever as you think you are."
Lelouch denies responding to that, looking at Genbu snoozing in auntie Nunnally's embrace.

"The things you say to me." Lelouch walks over to gingerly take small fry from her so that she can ready herself for bed. "It's a good thing he's asleep. You'll give him such awful habits." Lelouch lovingly pats Genbu's back as he walk out of the room, well aware of the rather wry look on everybody else's face.

"Me?" A light scoff puffs from Suzaku's throat as he follows behind his husband. "You're really one to talk…"

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Nunnally has declared that she'll have the baby in her room while they stay here for the weekend. She wants to spend some extra time with her nephew and says it will give the parents a bit of a break. Lelouch isn't sure he should say it's a breather, but… babies need. A lot. Just so much need of everything all the time, it can be tiring. He's looking forward to sleeping in late, suffice to say… but still wants to put the small to bed.

There's a crib all ready and for him in her room and Lelouch carefully places small fry down on the cushy, plush bedding with Suzaku beside him. Genbu looks unbearably cute in his pastel blue onesie embroidered with a cluster of tiny balloons on the chest. Even with the slobber already leaking from his open mouth. Lelouch reaches down and wipes the drool away with the back of his sleeve (he's going to be changing out of it anyway) as they both just stand and gaze in silence filled only with small baby breaths. Lelouch was too young when Nunnally was a baby so he doesn't remember very much other than watching her sleep once in their mother's arms. Must have strongly imprinted on him, though, as he's never forgotten that visual.

"We could've had an ordinary life like this," Lelouch murmurs almost as if it's a question, gently combing his fingers through Genbu's unruly dark hair. It almost feels absurd for Lelouch to imagine himself in some average day-to-day job but coming home to his little family and their simple life does have a tempting allure.

Lelouch had the chance. He could have walked away from all of it, the throne, another mask, everything. It would've been possible to completely amputate, erase himself and Nunnally and finagle Suzaku's release all from the Britannian chains and then just lived. Like average people doing average things. Like his friends (well, maybe not exactly like them…). It could have been done but he doesn't really know if it would have been easier. (Lelouch had already secured Schneizel. It's possible that he could have puppeted the world like but another chessboard. But Lelouch is a hands-on type of person. Controlling is kind of his thing… Suzaku wouldn't have liked it.)

"We don't really do ordinary, remember." Suzaku watches Lelouch fondly pet Genbu's sleeping head. "Do you regret it?"

"No room for regret," Lelouch says very simply, leaning down to kiss Genbu's temple and then lift, touching Suzaku's cheek with the same fingers that had lovingly caressed their child's hair. "There's only looking forward." He presses a soft kiss against Suzaku's lips, which the Japanese man returns in kind, before walking out of the room.

Suzaku lingers a few beats after, green eyes shifting to Genbu.

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Lelouch is already undressing when Suzaku joins him in their room; his top half is bare and he's
contemplating showering – has it been too long or not long enough since he last did? – when hands slowly slide around his waist. Suzaku's arms encircle Lelouch from behind in a full embrace and he turns his head toward his right shoulder where he feels lips pressing his scar. Affectionate lips delicately kissing on the marred red splotch until they inch upward to the top of his shoulder. The brunet's firm hold is lined with regret and Lelouch refrains from gripping the arms linked around him, instead fistig his shirt still in his grasp.

Although not identical it's similar to their "poison gas" reunion. Suzaku had to witness Lelouch's attempted assassination and even consider the thought that… their time together is not guaranteed, from the widow perspective. Lelouch would've died for a greater cause and that was the first time Suzaku could fully comprehend how that would feel for Lelouch while he played about throwing his life around with Lancelot's blade.

"I love you," Suzaku softly says against Lelouch's shoulder in a spill of hot breath.

"I know," Lelouch softly smirks and turns around to share it with his clinging seahorse.

A small smile of amusement flirts with his lips as they hold a shared gaze a moment before Lelouch leans in for a kiss – one that deepens fairly quickly and instantly sinks both of them. Suzaku's hands begin tugging his pajama shirt up to take it off and Lelouch helps, feeling a second wind of energy and thinking a shower can wait.

He was looking forward to their wedding night earlier.

Suzaku showered shortly after they came back to the Shrine, perhaps in anticipation of their consummation, and so is in his matching pajama buttoned-top and pants. He still sports the old undershirts and shorts while at the villa unless he's cold, but here as a guest, the cotton sleep-set is just more modest. He doesn't wear the dressing gown like Lelouch does, though, because he's not one for much fuss. Lelouch doesn't mind either way. He likes that his childhood friend keeps things comfortable and normal. Besides, they're both easily peeled off anyway…

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The room they've been given is certainly a dramatic improvement from the little leaky shack of 11 years ago – that is, it's a proper room with furniture, walls, and roofing which don't shift with the wind. Lelouch can still hear the serenade of nighttime bugs and frogs and there is a strange almost unfamiliar vine of nostalgia twining through him but his attention is on his husband rather than the surroundings. Behind a locked wooden door, and not a crooked, warped slab with a handle that barely closed, the emperor's back is cushioned by soft and numerous bed pillows with the now totally official knight consort on him in a backwards straddle with a lifted backside. Not the most elegant of positions but Lelouch can attentively pleasure and prepare Suzaku while allowing his spouse the same privilege. They're not too hurried but enthused as they prepare each other for the second time today.

Pretty good for their wedding day.

Suzaku doesn't need as much adjusting to take in Lelouch as he used to and he's still eased from earlier but they both still enjoy taking the time. Suzaku's hands are securely around Lelouch's full erection as he mouths the tip with liquid moans that ebb and flow to the motions blanketing his entrance. Lelouch rubs at the loosened opening with his tongue, lapping with the natural, vanilla, edible lubricant that warms Suzaku's skin. The smooth ring constricts to his touch and Lelouch's body twitches to the tongue lapping his sensitive skin. He grabs Suzaku's fleshy rear in both some appreciation and impatience – it's certainly easier to hold out when he's not being touched but it's fairer to let Suzaku do this, or something. He's not frustrated, though; indeed he
aims to make Suzaku squirm as he squeezes the plump cheeks in massaging, circular motions. His hands spread them apart as he more ardently licks his husband, savoring the wash of ghosting moans that seep down his erection. The brunet even slips in his efforts on Lelouch, but the royal doesn't mind. The more his seahorse spouse enjoys himself the better it is for both of them. Suzaku grips the blankets and Lelouch's hip as his indulgence overrides his brain and he reflexively pushes himself back against Lelouch's working tongue. The black-haired male can feel a panting, mewling mouth shoveling into his other hip as he relentlessly tongues flexing opening in front of him. He even rubs around it with his thumb, pushing in past the nail through the sweet-smelling lubricant mixing with musk and biting a chunk of flesh when Suzaku pushes back for more. The younger man can't focus and that's fine until he tears himself away and turns around, revealing Lelouch's residue and the flustered hunger on his face.

Time to shift gears.

Lelouch pushes himself up knowing Suzaku is ready to connect as husband and husband but Suzaku crawls onto his lap before he can crawl between muscular thighs. He's held by his face into a kiss before he can even get his bearings pushed back down on his back, though a strong grip on Suzaku's plump rear is helpful. Suzaku moans into Lelouch's mouth and the older squeezes the flesh in his hands more firmly. They part on amorous breaths and Suzaku's fingernails embed in Lelouch's shoulders as two fingers rub over and into his wet, supple entrance, teasing with the promise before they're bodies are angling to fill the knight. Suzaku lowers with groans of pleasure spilling up and out of his stiffening spine and Lelouch bites Suzaku's neck as his standing length is engulfed in the hot constriction of his husband's body. It even seems like Suzaku might finish prematurely but he bottles it up tight — tightly around Lelouch's flesh. Said Britannian can't resist teasing his little hubby, biting his neck before the seahorse pushes upright and looks down with gleaming greens. Suzaku moves his hips and loose sounds drip from his open mouth as his body practically snakes on and around Lelouch. He undulates in an entrancingly slow and steady rhythm of indulgence that Lelouch feels sinking and squeezing around him.

It's a more than intriguing sight.

The rather dramatic pregnancy and passing of time haven't seemed to affect Suzaku's body overmuch — although he's still adamant about exercising — but the past three years haven't been a honeymoon by any means. Although they spend much of their time together, with Suzaku being Lelouch's knight, the amount of that being intimate was few and far between. Their private moments have often been with the baby, not in bed. While part of it was not enough hours in a day, for the first year there was Suzaku's mental and emotional recovery from a pregnancy that ended in stress and near death. Physically Suzaku returned to tip-top shape fairly quickly (because the seahorse is some freak of nature, for sure) but he still needed time and Universe knows there was a world of other matters that also demanded their attention. It's a pleasure to getting back to finding their sexy time groove.

Lelouch grips Suzaku's riding hips and admires the view that is completely for his eyes — or at least as long as he can. His own hips are getting antsy, jumpy, not meant to be tied down. He's plunged deep within Suzaku's body and relents to the desire sparking his blood with a hop of his lower half that sinks him inside as Suzaku's is sliding back down. The younger man croaks out in surprised pleasure and their eyes meet through the lustful air smoking between them. Lelouch bumps his hips to again be rewarded another satisfied cry and before he knows it he's pushing himself up and sinking his fingers into Suzaku's plush rear as their bodies rock together. A bit clumsily at first, too. But soon enough Suzaku leans back on his hands and their hips row in perfect circles together like cogs. The seahorse is somehow able to moan, pant and be breathless all at once. Kururugi Suzaku is a wonder of the world, absolutely, and Lelouch gets to admire him up close and personal. Lelouch watches all of Suzaku from his passion-painted face, his twisted nipples standing from his
chest, jostling erection jumping from their hips and the rosy entrance that swallows Lelouch whole after spooning off of his reaching, bare hardness. Lelouch is thankful modern medicine has caught up to enable male birth control because (even though it shouldn't be a thing) now they're not constrained to condoms that obscure his view. He almost can't tear his hypnotized violets away.

Suzaku's moaning is a little distracting when poured on top of all this but Lelouch can't let anything get away from him too soon. His eyes shift upward to the jutting arousal just dripping with anticipation and closes his palm around it, not stroking so much as letting their motions slide through his hand. Another gusty moan and Suzaku becomes a bit of a droopy sail with winded lungs and Lelouch seizes the chance to take over, easing Suzaku down on his back and driving himself deep into the clenching heat to make his husband crow. He's spearing into his best friend's welcoming heat again and again, hitting that place inside harder each time. He gazes down at the ecstasy melting Suzaku over his bones and doesn't let his mind wander anywhere else. It could, but instead, he stays focused on how it almost feels like they've shaped each other with every time they've shared their bodies. Lelouch doesn't just thrust himself inside, he's invited inside because it's where he belongs.

Imagine if Lelouch had uttered something like that for his vows instead…

Looking down at himself sliding out nearly completely and then ramming back into Suzaku's gripping ring he doesn't want this to end. He would pump himself and pour bottomless pleasure into Suzaku all night, if he could. It's such maddening repetition of chasing pleasure while also trying not to really catch it. The demon disguised as the king could push them beyond heaven right now. Suzaku's pulsing body is begging his to rut like animals but Lelouch is not an animal. He's a devilish tease. The best part of being with Suzaku is before it ends; making him shiver with pleasure and toeing the line. They like to get close to that edge then ease back, and truthfully it's easier on Lelouch as well…

So he slows significantly until he's holding rooted in Suzaku's body brimming with hot pleasure, waiting through throbbing beats that just pulse and pulse around him before he pulls out. Suzaku doesn't whine or protest, just makes an uncontrollable groan that is kissed by Lelouch's lips that still want to tempt the tide by moving to nibble his husband's earlobe. The brunet squirms under him and a moan seeps out of him in a hot glaze when fingers knead one of his tall, stiff nipples. Legs squeeze around Lelouch when he lowers his mouth to lick the other pointed nub pushing up with an arching back. To be a further tease, he kisses away from the urgent little bud to savor a firm chest. Lelouch loves Suzaku's skin – he supposes he always has – and greets nostalgia when he pulls his tongue flatly above a ripe nipple. That's what he did their first time; literally tasted the boy's body under him. Now, though, he sinks in some teeth and sucks making Suzaku shudder with anticipation, letting loose another sailing sound to ghost through the air. Lelouch moves down between Suzaku's tight, peaking nipples with calculated lips, teeth and tongue that kiss, nip and lap with the speed of molasses. Suzaku's blood can barely stand it, racing through his whole body and wiggling in his limbs – including the one very eager extension. But Lelouch has learned his husband's body with tenacious fascination and he knows just how to command it. The line that he reaches first isn't any premature reaction, of course, but the scar across Suzaku's abdomen.

The mark of his… cesarean.

Suzaku is still in admirable shape but a little softer in places he wasn't before and his stomach is one of them, not that Lelouch cares. He adoringly licks over a less-than-taut navel before pressing his tender lips along the surgical mark and the breath that flows from Suzaku's chest carries contentment. A little less hot-and-heavy and a little more lovey-dovey is always appreciated. Fingers thread through Lelouch's hair with affection and while he nurtures the moment it's hard to keep from remembering the terror of that day…
Lelouch can't fall into that trench now.

His lifts up to gaze down at Suzaku, seeing a face drenched with flushed desire and reunites their mouths in sloping kisses. His lips spill down Suzaku neck in a cascade of kisses leading him to backtrack over burning skin pulsing under his kisses to pool on a tense and alert nipple. Lelouch delicately plucks his lips at the standing nub and Suzaku's chest hitches into the teasing attention as he always does, earning a lap from the tip of a tongue. The brunet's body tightly writhes a little under the tongue gently licking back and forth, then around in small circles. He smoothes the pink bud with his wet, hot organ feeling it stiffen harder and closes his lips around it to savor the pleasure splintering through Suzaku's skin. Whispering whimpers of pleasure float over Lelouch's head as he lightly sucks his husband's sensitive weak spot and adds the grazing glide of fingernails. Lelouch mouths a touch harder around the nipple while skating his fingers up and down Suzaku's body and legs, unleashing a ripple of tingling sparks that visibly pebble Suzaku's skin. The seahorse's body wriggles once more like a fish and Lelouch switches to teasing the other tall nub, smoothing the flat of his tongue over it more roughly than before and even nipping slightly with his teeth, pulling upward. Suzaku's hips jump with a half-startled sound, reminding Lelouch of his ignored erection.

Feeling a sense of empathy for the weeping hardness, Lelouch presses his lips to the side of it as he pushes Suzaku's knees up and wider apart. The full spread, as it were. Teasing kisses make Suzaku tremble quite severely and his breathing is heavier. Lelouch slowly slides his tongue up the underside all the way to the tip like one might with a popsicle and it becomes apparent that Suzaku is fighting to remain still. A light smirk curves into Lelouch's lips and he slips his fingers into the panting mouth of his knight, slicking them with a compliant tongue. Lelouch continues to idly mouth the flesh and gently rubs his saliva-moist fingers over his husband's anxiously flexing entrance but is barely pushing inside when nails imbed in his shoulders.

"Wait," Suzaku breathes and when their eyes connect he says, "Too close."

Lelouch nearly simpers, "It's ok if you do."

"I don't want to."

Lelouch would like to extend this as long as possible too, but the boy really shouldn't hurt himself.

The Britannian withdraws and stops everything, steadying himself on the bed with his hands and returns to drowning his husband in kisses. Their sliding lips wash together and Lelouch lets his body lower some on Suzaku making their hard lengths brush and twitch before pulling away to prevent any accidental, premature overload.

For either of them.

It's nice, actually, to just step back and blend their lips together in affectionate, savoring kisses. There's a pleasant tension with the heated passion is still pumping through Lelouch and he knows it's coursing through Suzaku too; it makes the moment sweeter. To just stop everything and let this simple pleasure boil their skin – it's not always just about the finish. When they get the time to really just enjoy each other they shouldn't—can't take it for granted.

"Lelouch... you've really gotten better at this," Suzaku suddenly, unprompted, announces between their lips.

And now Suzaku has ruined it.

"...What?" Lelouch doesn't hide his indignation but does effectively stall his lips.
Suzaku sheepishly laughs with his panting breath, "I just mean that… after all this time… your endurance has improved. I guess all you needed was the right motivation."

Lelouch stares in fierce deadpan.

"It's a compliment!" Suzaku tries to diffuse, grabbing Lelouch's shoulders. "I'm saying you last longer than you used to!"

Funny, that didn't really sound like a compliment.

Lelouch doesn't exactly feign hurt when he begins to push himself away from Suzaku, "You're an idiot. To say something like that at such a time… Lelouch doesn't have endless energy like the super-human-seahorse, but he has discipline and control over himself – he's not an animal.

"Wai—You're not leaving!?" Suzaku wraps his legs around the emperor before he's able to completely withdraw. "Well, I'm not letting you." And he grins far too triumphantly.

Lelouch isn't sure if he should be proud.

After all, Suzaku shouldn't be the smug one between them.

"A battle of stubbornness is it?" Lelouch loftily says with a lifted nose. "We'll remain even after the sun dies."

Suzaku chuckles a little, "True." He cups Lelouch's jaw. "I wasn't trying to insult you, and I apologize," he tenderly says with sincerity.

Lelouch was only bluffing.

Doesn't mean he won't milk this.

"And…?" he stingingly taunts, scraping his nails along the underside of Suzaku's thigh. "What do you want me to do?"

Suzaku is half-heartedly exasperated by that as if only for show. "I want you to take me, my King."

Lelouch's lips flatly curl in one corner, "There's no need to be so mocking."

Suzaku laughs again, but the rustled sound is whipped into a gasp when Lelouch smoothly enters him again all the way to his hips. The king holds still for a moment, feeling the other man squeeze around him almost as if trying to pull him in deeper, and he watches the flush of arousal return in a flash.

Lelouch leans his weight on his hips against Suzaku, "How about a please?"

Greens eyes narrow somewhat at him and he tosses Lelouch's retort back at him; "There's no need to be an ass."

Not so smug now, is he.

Lelouch could say that it's not his ass that the Knight should worry about, but he's sufficiently irritated his husband enough – teased them both enough as well. He still eases his hips back into motion rather than roughly trashing so they can build back up where they were. Slowly and deeply the dark-haired man fills his spouse with almost cautious waves of his body and legs bend tightly around him. Suzaku's soft sounds are appreciative as are the hands that slide up Lelouch's back and their lips meet in another string of grazing kisses. There aren't strained cries that leap from Suzaku's...
throat but instead an intoxicatingly sweet symphony of contented moans dusted with gasping pants. Explosive, fiery passion is good, but so is this comfortable melding between a long-steady couple. (Well, Lelouch can't believe it but he actually agrees with Milly on that.) Lelouch knows Suzaku's body better than he knows his own and he can't imagine himself ever reaching this level of intimacy with anybody else. These lips that press against his and this skin heating under his touch, the supple clench consuming his hardness… It's true, though, that Lelouch wants to make Suzaku burst like the feeling in his chest whenever they're together.

Which is every day.

The Britannian's pace quickens upon natural impulse and the nails that streak his back like the first time are more than a reward, they're an intrigue. Lelouch affectionately bites Suzaku's neck while plunging himself deeper and blooming unending but soft, stammering croons from the seahorse. They aren't even words this time and to Lelouch's ears that sounds like more of a compliment than when Suzaku reverts to Japanese or some mangled English. At the very least its proof Lelouch is doing right.

"Close…" Suzaku breathes in warning, limbs tightening around Lelouch.

Seems it didn't take much more

Which is more than fine by Lelouch.

His teeth nibble back up Suzaku's neck before lifting off to stare down at his best friend squeezing around his thrusting erection. The haze on green eyes is as hot as the flush burning on his cheeks and the blood throbbing through Lelouch and pooling in their connection. He feels the body under him rutting faster and pulling him in more strongly the closer Suzaku gets with every breath he loses to Lelouch's hips. With fiery concentration, Lelouch heaves his himself into Suzaku's tight, slinking insides and his head droops into pressing their foreheads together. Lelouch's face is slickened with the steam of their mixing gasps and looking downward he can see Suzaku's chest rise as his body arcs into the shuddering end. His hard nipples stand straight out from his firm pectorals and his violets are almost magnetized. Lelouch wants to lock his lips back around them and thirstily suck, make them twistingly tingle with his tongue, feast them with his hungry teeth and hear Suzaku crow… but he can't break form or concentration. Suzaku's body is only coiling more tightly and his voice is siphoned from him in a winded, sharpened mewl – at any second he'll snap like a rubber band.

Lelouch won't be far behind him.

It's still an irresistible desire, though, and he reaches with one hand to pinch the beckoning nipple. Suzaku moans a little as his back bends upward more, as if that could be possible. Lelouch thumbs over the rigid peak and twists it between his finger pads fully aware of the certain other extension jutting between them from Suzaku's bouncing hips. The nipple tease must be the final button to push as with a long but painless drag of his nails down an alabaster back, Suzaku breaks right as Lelouch expected. He seizes and creaks out a nasally croon as his release slashes between them while Lelouch continues pumping into the soft, flexing clamp of the seahorse's finishing body. It coaxes Lelouch right along with his lecherous thoughts circling Suzaku's still pointed nipples and he feels his back steel through the pleasure that rushes out of him and into Suzaku completely carefree. Although he misses the mark his mouth craved to taste his teeth just need to bite so he chomps down on Suzaku's collar bone and the younger closes his legs around Lelouch to keep inside him as they dissolve into dust…

And twitch into stillness.
Just two sweaty bodies.

Huffing and puffing.

Lelouch pulls out and with empty lungs kisses randomly over Suzaku's chest, targeting at least one pink oval of skin and decides why the hell not – through their dazed state he lovingly places a kiss on Suzaku's right nipple before chomping again. Suzaku's body jerks a little in surprise but the fingers of one hand pet through is damp hair so he continues to quench the indulgence, but gently. Not in a ravishing craze like he wanted but minutes ago, although still eager. Lelouch slides his tongue up over the stiff point before mouthing the whole nipple with spirited nursing. Fingers keep sifting through his hair and a contented sigh wisps from Suzaku who should probably be overly sensitive after his climax, but he isn't.

Because he's an unnatural being.

"You're going to make me hard again if you keep doing that," murmurs the super-human.

Lelouch barely breaks enough to pleasantly retort around the nipple; "That's not so bad, is it?"

"Not if you have the energy to go again."

Oh, insults, now, is it?

Lelouch actually lifts to give emerald eyes his lifted eyebrow, "I could make you finish again even if I didn't." He of course absolutely does not have the energy but he could still bring Suzaku to heaven without being as direct. Foreplay is an art and Lelouch is the undisputed master.

(Yes, you read that right.)

Suzaku lips curl in a wry simper, "Cocky one, aren't you?"

Lelouch hums and hoists himself up to either kiss the pun off Suzaku's lips or at least smother it. He recognizes the reference to their first time and doesn't doubt that it was on purpose, and while he was seriously considering taking up the challenge of making Suzaku orgasm again with minimal energy (look, his romantic skills are still developing) the strike of nostalgia stops him.

A sudden inspired thought occurs to him and seizing the moment is another skill Lelouch has mastered…

"…You know what would make for a better goodbye to Ashford?" Lelouch casually asks, making Suzaku blink up at him in question.

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"Are you sure about this?" Suzaku whispers following his husband through a dark hallway.

"I'm always sure of everything," Lelouch quips in a not-whispery volume. "And you don't have to whisper, there's nobody around on the weekend."

A door opens and Lelouch flicks on the lights to the bathroom of the Clubhouse. Funny, it looks a little smaller than he remembers…

"Back when you lived here that was true, but things could've changed," Suzaku replies, stepping into the room ahead of Lelouch.

The Britannian offers a mild scoff as he places a small case on the counter.
"Still requires a certain level of sneak, I suppose," he says, checking for towels under the sink. "Just like the good old days."

Suzaku pulls back the shower curtain, "It's not so bad now, is it? With everyone knowing?"

And he means everyone knows.

Lelouch faintly half shrugs and slides his arms around Suzaku from behind, "It wasn't so bad sharing a little secret, was it?" –Make that a sexy secret. It was more comfortable for Lelouch, absolutely, but also kind of… special. For as many secrets that compile the being that is Lelouch, the secret relationship he shared with Suzaku was the cherished gem glinting at the peak. It's not anybody else's business and it wasn't out of shame, Lelouch just likes the privacy – quite the leap to where they are now as a "power couple" of the world. But, no, it isn't so bad. He kisses Suzaku's neck and the brunet chuckles.

"Just the one secret, huh?" he coyly says, turning around to eye his husband. "This is just going to lead to sex, isn't it?"

Lelouch would be lying if he said it wasn't a strong possibility.

(Then again, there's also the high probability that he'll just pass right out and Suzaku will have to keep him from drowning…)

"Is that disapproval I hear?" Lelouch slyly asks.

"No," Suzaku grins, hooping his arms around Lelouch, "but, if we're going to do this, I think there's just one more thing we need."

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The one more thing being lighted faux candles that gently illuminate the small bathroom with fake flickers, lined across the counter and clustered around the tub. They're leftover from their wedding reception and are a nice touch. They've never had a candle-lit bath together but it does call back to the stormy day of their first time.

"This is really nice," Suzaku softly says, leaning back against Lelouch who gently slides a lightly sudsy sponge up his arm.

Lelouch hums, watching the soapy streaks melt down his husband's bicep before pushing the sponge back down.

Seems only right they share one more bath, if not the last one, in this bathroom that has shelled many of their intimate moments. It isn't just stolen moments with Suzaku, though. There are many mornings getting Nunnally ready for school when she was younger. Helping her brush her teeth and hair, helping her to learn how to do these tasks alone so that she… can have some independence.

"I really have missed this."

"Says the man who denied sharing my morning shower with me just days ago," Lelouch jokes.

"I meant living here, you gross old man."

Lelouch feigns hurt at the insult, "What gross old man? The same you married?"
"What was I thinking…?" Suzaku teases.

"I'm pretty sure you don't think in the first place and that's your problem."

Suzaku twists to give Lelouch his somewhat disapproving simper before pinching the Britannian's cheeks.

"Actually, I was just thinking about how it's strange that a place can contain so many memories and that you don't really forget but it still reminds you that they exist."

Lelouch hums again, shelving a taunt about how that much thinking might cause the seahorse a headache, and scoops water into his hand to pour it over the arm he soaped.

"Take it a step farther and consider that people are just sums of memory. Are we truly the same person if we don't have the same memories or experiences?"

"...I was going for sentimental, but sure, take it in a completely different direction instead of talking about your feelings."

Lelouch is honestly caught off-guard by the stern reprimand, as a lift of his brows indicates. He thought the sex in his former bedroom and the bath time now were about handling his feelings? Hell, this whole trip is a voyage into feels. He's pretty sure anything he says right now will only upset Suzaku, so he doesn't say anything.

"It's ok to be sad about leaving this place," Suzaku says with disquieted eyes.

It's not as though the school will vanish as if it never existed once Lelouch leaves.

"I'm fine, Suzaku," Lelouch patiently replies.

"That's what you always say." Disappointment is clear in Suzaku's voice but also a sweet craving of concern.

Emotional check-ins are still Suzaku's thing and still really not Lelouch's. He might have some low feelings but he really is fine, nothing to be so dramatic about; it's just a scraped knee, not a—

Actually: "Maybe you could make it feel better with a kiss." Lelouch's sly, cheeky suggestion earns him a face-full of palm.

"You child," Suzaku playfully scolds with a shoving hand.

Lelouch smiles grabbing Suzaku's wrist and doesn't let go, instead holds it palm facing up and admires the ring adorning the marry finger. He brushes over it with the tips of his fingers from his ringed right hand before resting it on top so their palms are touching.

Truth time: Lelouch doesn't think he'd be the person he is now if not for Suzaku.

Truth time addendum: he's not sure if that's as positive as it sounds.

He lifts his plum eyes to a pair of emeralds that are watching him quite intently and he feels the hand in his hold not just relax but touch up against his.

"You love it," Lelouch smirks a delayed tease rather than speaking any of the truth in his eyes, of course.

Suzaku softly smiles, "I do. I don't know why, but I do. Even though we do have an actual child to
"take care of."

Universe help them if Genbu is even a fraction like Lelouch.

"...And maybe another one?" Suzaku coyly continues, looking at Lelouch with bashful puppy eyes.

"Along with me?" the older male teases. "You sure you want to make it three?"

Suzaku playfully shoves him, "Be serious. I know you've been thinking about it. And Small Fry is already three... I think it would be good for him to have a sibling, and close to his age – speaking as an only child, I can say I was a bit envious."

"Try having over two-dozen siblings and you might change your mind." At Suzaku's tart simper to his dry remark, Lelouch sighs and leans his head back against the wall. "You know I'm not against it."

He's really not against having—raising another child. In fact, he rather likes the idea of having a little girl and he was Genbu's age when Nunnally was born. Lelouch and Suzaku are 21 now but that's still young. Having kids wasn't something Lelouch ever thought about before it happened, for a multitude of reasons. Bringing another child into this life... well, perhaps there never really is a "right" time for such a thing, but it's not something Lelouch can take lightly. Suzaku is more on the eager side than Lelouch, for reasons that might be obvious...

"I know, but... Seeing him with Chigusa today made me—I just can't stop thinking about it."

They were pretty damn cute.

Lelouch smiles, "He'd be an excellent big brother."

Suzaku widely grins, "Just like his papa."

The real issue is biological. They aren't going to tempt fate again with Suzaku's supposed seahorse syndrome, if it could even be possible twice (but it shouldn't have even been possible once), so that leaves them with the logical options of adoption or a surrogate, which is just... egh. Who are their trusted, viable options?

Shirley? Too weird.

Kallen? No. Just... no.

Milly? Ha! Absolutely not.

Even if any of them were willing... Lelouch can't accept the thought. He's not sure how he could even ask any of the women he knows for something like that. It's uncomfortable. And gross. And just wrong on every level.

So that leads to adoption, which gets tricky because royal status and lineage makes people stupid. Maybe all of the sudden the orphan has relatives running of the woodwork just because of a tiny crown – it could get complicated and even though Lelouch doesn't want to think that way... he can't help it. If Lelouch and Suzaku are taking in a child as their own it is with the same vow of protection with Genbu. This isn't even accounting for the trouble of a non-blood-related child joining the royal family to potentially inherit the throne... should things continue on in that way. Some things are still in the air.
"I just… don't want it to be on the back-burner for too long," Suzaku softly says in a heartfelt tone.

"I know," Lelouch likewise responds, soothing Suzaku's cheek with his thumb, "and it won't. I promise."

Promises, promises.

Lelouch's life is made up of promises.

"Anyway, you haven't finished washing me yet." Suzaku alluringly reminds of the reason they are (kind of) trespassing in this bathroom.

"Just need to do the front," Lelouch smirks.

The sexy mood has sort of been smothered under baby-talk (ironically?) but it's not that difficult to get the stirrings back when Suzaku turns full around and is up on his knees. He links their lips together with a sensuous, savoring kiss that slowly sinks them into the depths again. His hands hold Lelouch's jaw while the Britannian's soapy fingers smooth around hips, front and back. When Lelouch's lips plant along Suzaku's chest and the seahorse sighs a light sound of pleasure it becomes rather apparent that there might not be much actual bathing beyond this point…

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The imperial villa finds the vi Britannia clan comfortably back home and enjoying a litter of kittens in the garden. An orange-tabby stray had been living in the building when it was abandoned and Arthur was quite quick to employ his charms which were not so welcomed at the start. So, their family grew by not just one but now five – the debate to have both cats spayed and neutered still rages… Lelouch would rather not have a cat explosion beyond manageable and Arthur really doesn't need to feel more proud of himself than he already does… but for now, the sight of Nunnally and Genbu playing with the tiny, multi-colored fuzz-balls is absolute perfection. They sit in the glossy, plush grass under the bright sunshine in a cloud of giggles and mews. Small fry is a helpless pile on his back as the kittens climb all over him and Nunnally crowns the furry mound with a little cream one right on top like a cherry. The momma cat, that Genbu has so affectionately named Orangie, sits comfortably in Suzaku's lap near her kittens and without all the sharp grief that Arthur likes to bring. Turns out Arthur is a good dad, though. He's patient when the little ones bite and knows to be gentle when they play – then again, Orangie isn't shy about letting him know if he's stepped out of line. So, good on her.

Feeling so happy that one could die… Lelouch thinks he understands that feeling watching his family right now, but he's more than glad that he's alive and able to see this. Currently, he is watching from the shaded furniture of a patio in stripped-down clothes of a simple button-up long-sleeve and slacks with a tablet in hand – emails and reports never cease… and his weekend "break" hasn't even ended yet. This sort of thing was manageable as Zero, or maybe he just had more trustworthy help so it didn't seem like it was piling on top of him. Sometimes it feels like parliament is doing this to him on purpose out of spite that his head wears the crown and not somebody more to their favor – and damn it all, this is with Schneizel as a buffer. In any case, Lelouch has stopped scrolling through text-walls probably ten minutes ago and is thinking about ditching it altogether in trade for some kittens and giggles when a silver tray with icy drinks appears at his side.

"Sayoko," Lelouch greets with mild surprise, "you know you don't have to do this sort of thing here." She still wears the cliché maid outfit for disguise and so plays the part in public but she's not
their servant. She's become something else that a single title can't define—

"I like to help." She smiles. "And some lemonade sounded refreshing on a nice day like this."

Lelouch lightly smiles, "So it is. Thank you." He takes a glass and she turns to Jeremiah hovering off to the side.

"I find it a little curious," Jeremiah mildly says to her, politely declining lemonade with a shake of his head. "Your homeland is finally free and yet you remain at the side of Britannian royalty in their lands."

"Was that a question?" Her smile doesn't waver as her gaze shifts to the happy trio on the grass. "Perhaps my motivations aren't so different from yours."

Jeremiah half-smirks at that as he also shifts his golden eyes. "That so?"

Lelouch sips his drink as his amethysts follow her to the rest of the family in the yard, savoring the sweetness that lingers on his tongue longer than the tartness.

There's been an unspoken understanding between him and Sayoko ever since that day he unmasked himself in front of her. Her support then was invaluable but now it's immeasurable. And touching. She had no reason to stay at his side beyond her own desire; although in shambles after Britannian occupation, Sayoko could return to the life she had before she became an indentured servant – she was from a notable family and her skills are superlative. But here she is. Taking on the occasional humdrum domestic duty while protecting as a stealth guard…

—Of course, Sayoko is family. The umbrella title with numerous meanings and roles. She isn't actually that much older than Lelouch so to say that she's mother-like might not be quite accurate, but, she's been with them for so long Lelouch can't really imagine life without her. Even if she might've seen a thing or two he wishes she hadn't… (but that's Suzaku's fault.)

Then there's an alert on his screen beckoning his attention.

Lelouch swipes.

Well, life can't always be sweet. Sometimes it's a little sour.

Or maybe sometimes it's just cheesy…

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"Look at what the Cheese-Kun dragged in," Lelouch breezily greets the back of a head with long green hair braided down to the waist of a simple, tan peasant dress. "C.C., I wasn't sure you'd return." He dismisses following Jeremiah with a wave of his hand.

"Did you hope so?" she blandly teases.

Lelouch just faintly smiles. "You did leave rather quickly and quietly, I was quite hurt."

"I needed a vacation," C.C. nonchalantly informs from looking out a window. "All things considered."

"Yes, a few years of rest and relaxation after all that tireless toiling you did."

"I did die for you," she plainly retorts. "More than once."
To be fair, he only asked that of her once.

Lelouch still smiles, warmly, "Italy treated you well, then."

"You knew where I was?" golden eyes finally peer over her shoulder and aren't as unreadable as they used to be.

Lelouch's lips upgrade to a smirk. It was a guess given her unhealthy obsession with certain foods. He figured she needed time for herself and hoped she would return when ready. She's no caged bird and he won't clip her wings. If she hadn't he would've sought her out eventually but not to drag her back.

C.C. looks away, back to the window of this upstairs lounge overlooking the garden where Nunnally, Genbu, Suzaku and Sayoko are gathered.

"This place looks different," she coolly says.

"That was the goal," Lelouch idly comments joining her side. She's previously been here back in the day and probably not only before Lelouch was born.

"They look well," she says.

"They are." Lelouch holds his hands behind his back, seeing that Suzaku's eyes are aiming up at them through the glass. He'll probably join them shortly. "I'm surprised you didn't just stroll into the garden to join us, as you are one to do."

"You should be very proud of your security otherwise that might have been the case."

Lelouch's lips are tickled with another smirk. "You could have notified me ahead of time."

"But where's the fun in that?"

"Indeed." Lelouch turns his body slightly towards her. "Nunnally still asks about you," he casually informs.

"You sure you really want us socializing? I'm not friends with your sister."

It wouldn't perhaps be that this unannounced, impromptu visit has anything to do with that fact that she might not wish to stay and therefore is minding her attachments…?

"Although it seemed like I was expected. You've been waiting, Lelouch?"

"You think I wouldn't?"

She angles her face at him only offering a small, soft smile on the edges of her eyes.

"It appears I've missed out on the wedding, though." C.C. turns away from the window, leaning back against the glass – she can't have forgotten how much it irritated him when she left smudges everywhere. He never did unlearn his reflex of checking for them to clean…

"We still have a lot of leftover cake, if you're interested," Lelouch dryly informs. "I assume you saw the fluff piece that reporter Milly unofficially posted online."

Her amber eyes glaze over him like sap, "Suzaku has really decided to stick with you."

"You knew that three years ago."
"Yes, the 'angel on your shoulder' and you got your happily ever after. Practically everything you wanted."

"It's not how I envisioned it, but, yes."

"And all you had to do was fake a near-death at the hands of those nefarious purists. Who knew their connections were so far-reaching and could be dealt with so swiftly," she says.

Lelouch's calm mask twitches, "Is there something you want to say?"

"No, I'm just impressed. Even after all this time of knowing you," C.C. adds with a fond curve on her lips.

"I believe I promised not to disappoint."

"So you did." She shifts a little in place, pulling her long braid over her shoulder. "And you must be glad that you didn't employ this martyr plan on your half-sister during the Special Zone like you had wanted. It's worked out far better for you now than it would have then even though you had to give up the armor of your alter ego."

Lelouch's head bobbles slightly, "I guess you're not wrong." But he wouldn't say he's entirely armor-less like she implies.

That makes C.C. contently hum as she toys the ends of her hair, "Although I'm still surprised Suzaku allowed and participated."

"Allowed?" Lelouch echoes with distaste. "It wasn't easy to convince him but it worked and he knows to trust me."

"The scheme to end all schemes?"

"...Something like that."

Yes.

All right.

It was fake.

That day when Lelouch was shot it was an order from himself and it was only to injure him. A recycled idea that was abandoned when dealing with Euphemia's nobly intentioned SAZ plan. The gunner was a former purist that, with Villetta's cooperation and Jeremiah's assistance, was easy to capture and command. From there it wasn't too difficult to string up all the "bad apples" amongst the nobles and even royals that wouldn't have only spoiled the bunch but made things more difficult. It worked like a charm (but... perhaps too well.)

There's been an agreement between Lelouch and Suzaku that essentially involves not just Geassing everybody into submission – although that would make everything vastly easier, Lelouch agrees it isn't the right way. It's an effective shortcut and sometimes necessary but he isn't about to control the entire world just cuz like an insane megalomaniac (like his father). That was never his goal. However, he needed to remove the more dangerous undesirables mining their future path. Suzaku didn't like it, thought it all too manipulative, dishonest and blah blah blah. After the encounter with Charles, though, Suzaku was a little out of sorts (and maybe Lelouch took advantage of that).
last ploy, Lelouch promised, and they would lead the world by better example. Since then, Lelouch as the emperor has been able to progress more productively and while not without opposition it's at least without a civil war.

"Challenging task for angel Suzaku considering he can't really keep up with you. The only people who could you already defeated. Or are you not deceiving him and keeping secrets just like you always have? Is your husband really so trusting of you despite everything or is he just that gullible?"

"You think I'm so incapable of changing?"

"I think you know what's safe. And I think it's easy to create the illusion of change. Maybe you feel you've turned over a new leaf now, but we both know that if chaos ever arises again it won't be Suzaku's kind heart that shields you."

"Don't you sound delightfully cynical," Lelouch blandly retorts.

"Am I wrong?"

Lelouch's altruism might be suspect and he's certainly capable of getting his hands dirty, bloody even, but his intentions, if nothing else, have been pure. The false assassination attempt was too hard on Suzaku… Lelouch can't do anything like that to his seahorse again. He can't.

Also, getting shot hurts like all unbelievable hell – it was not just a flesh wound.

There's a brief pause from Lelouch, “…I did rather miss your prodding provocation. You nag like a conscience sometimes; perhaps you'd consider occupying my other shoulder?” he dryly quips with a twist of fondness. "Today I won't let you rain on my parade. Rather than harp on the past, let us consider the future."

"Always looking ahead?" she smiles a slight smirk.

Sure enough, Suzaku is leaving the maudlin little huddle on the grass and moving toward the house.

"In any case, your timing is on point," Lelouch says before turning to leave. "I have something to show you."

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"So you didn't shut the labs down after all," C.C. says as the three of them enter a tall, wide study lined with book-stuffed shelves.

"Downsized, more like," Lelouch answers as he briefly taps at his computer on his desk with dual monitors. "And retrofitted with extreme prejudice." Behind him Suzaku is drawing pale curtains over the towering window that obscure sight but don't shroud the sunlight.

"I honestly thought you might," she says.

Lelouch hums a bit, "There's far more that I don't know that I need to stay ahead of."

"Always a man of many battles," she wryly teases. "One would think the world at your doorstep would be enough."

"Yes, well," he wryly bends his lips in return, "there are some other matters involving the labs that
aren't transferable."

"The research?" she asks.

"And the children," Suzaku clarifies from his somewhat stony stance still at the window. "Although I'm not very partial to the research."

"It's all important," Lelouch says. "I can't be caught off guard now more than ever – but it's nothing like what V.V. was up to. Even the information that my parents gained doesn't cover what I desire to know. They really had a one-track mind…"

"So… you're doing what with the children, then?"

Lelouch holds a pause against her eyes and Suzaku answers instead, "Trying to help them."

"Help them what?" she asks again.

A timely knock on the door practically answers her question. Lelouch opens it to reveal a young teen with mauve eyes and mousy brown hair.

"I have the data you requested, My Lord," the boy says offering up a slim stick drive.

"Yes, thank you, Rolo," Lelouch takes it. "Now would you wait out there with Jeremiah."

The boy nods and turns to leave, though not without flashing his eyes across C.C.'s face.

"You brought one here to live with you?" C.C. asks after Lelouch shuts and locks the door. She makes it sound like he's taken in a dinosaur – but really, taking in strays is almost a hobby for Lelouch at this point.

"Not exactly, he's… more of an assistant. He's actually been quite helpful in the changes I've made to the labs, the chain of command and even handling the other children after some initial hesitation. Seems he wasn't a fan of V.V. by any means." Yeah, big surprise.

"But you trust him here with Nunnally and your son?" She's not normally one to ask so many questions – is she actually concerned?

"Not at first," Lelouch admits, looking down at the smooth tech in his fingers. "But second chances and all that, right?" When he lifts his violets it's to find a pair of emeralds. "Nunnally is actually already proving to be a good influence on him."

"They're just children," Suzaku adds. "They've been brainwashed and most of them don't even know about the world beyond that facility."

"You're trying to rehabilitate them?"

"Don't they deserve a chance?" Suzaku partly pleads.

"At what? To be normal?" C.C. counters but not argumentatively, just sounding genuinely curious. "Who's to even say what normal is? Because looking at the two of you I'm not sure you're shining examples."

Lelouch's mouth crooks into a grin, "A chance at not being slaves, at the very least. I think you might be surprised at even what a little compassion and caring can do."

"No… I wouldn't be," she softly murmurs.
Secretly Lelouch has considered taking in one of the Geass Order children to parent. They don’t have any strings except the ones V.V. tied but it would require covering up the child’s origin. It would also mean potentially dealing with some sensitive, difficult matters of past Geass use. Many of the children are also older than Small Fry, but that shouldn’t prevent them from being loved. Lelouch feels that if anybody can begin to understand these unique circumstances, it’s him. He already feels responsible for them after his coup and has been personally seeing to their care. He’s… not so sure about how Suzaku would feel, though.

As it is, Lelouch is sort of an unofficial surrogate, he supposes, but that still feels on the *cultish* side. Rolo is one of the real successes so far but his mindset about some things is… he’s still learning how to be *domestic* rather than a weapon, to put it in that way. Jeremiah likes to joke that the boy has imprinted on Lelouch like a newborn (or reborn) hatchling…

"We know it could take a long time but we have to try – and some of them are even making positive progress so far. And what are the alternatives? Life imprisonment? *Death*?" The very word sours Suzaku’s face. "It’s not their fault they ended up in that situation."

"What about the dangerous ones?" C.C. keeps prodding – like, if she *cared* so much she should’ve stayed… at *any* of the times she was originally there. "They have Geass, do they not?"

"We’re taking precautions. Including some implementations of Jeremiah’s upgrades, even suppressing the abilities of those that are harmful to others as well as themselves – not all of them have complete control over their abilities or the *effects* of them."

"Permanently suppressing? Should this somehow conveniently leave you the only known Geass barer in the world? Do you think that’s fair? Is it really wise to be the only man with unrivaled power?"

Suzaku clears his throat to say something without saying it.

Lelouch shakes his head as if cutting himself off before even speaking "Look, we could discuss all of this at greater length and detail another time, if you so desire. This right here is what I want to show you," he holds up the drive before popping it into the slot and tapping keys. "As you know, Charles had a collection of unusual artifacts," he explains. "Many of them having peculiar… functions."

"And mostly being useless in his research of Geass."

Lelouch tips his finger in the air at her breezily cast words, "Useless for their God-slaying efforts. Although the *Thousand Name Vase* was seemingly useless. I think it might actually be useful in the future as a makeshift prison of sorts."

"You got people stuck inside it, didn't you?"

His helpless, sheepish chuckles try so very hard to brush her off his shoulders, "…Once we learned it captures those who speak their own name—nobody important was lost."

She stares.

"We’re working on fixing it," Lelouch pushes them along in a mutter. "Point is, a number of these artifacts can interact and affect each other in interesting ways… Some not *entirely* safe, but to put it shortly I’ve found a combination of them that I think you’ll find interesting." He swivels one of the screens around to face her displaying a collection of miscellaneous items of ancient-looking tools and mundane cookware along with even a few sparkling crystalline rocks. They’re all strung
together with wires and circuit boards like a Frankenstein cadaver of forgotten objects. "V.V. had some substantial information on how the Code behaves and operates – it's almost organic, like… an infection. You interact with it, offer your Code as you would with a fully-evolved user and it will be funneled into a safe storage-type artifact. Like a… Code battery."

C.C.’s blank stare is for once one of uncertainty, "What are you saying?"

"We had a deal. I also promised you that I would grant your wish and I keep my promises," Lelouch clarifies with an almost smile around his eyes.

"This… is about taking my code?"

"V.V. said you wanted death, but I don't buy that. If it was that simple you wouldn't have run away from them." The claim was that C.C. desired to escape the immortality of the Code and while Lelouch is adamant in upholding his side of their dubious contract, he had more than doubts about what was said in God's nightmare room.

"So certain, are you?"

"Your Geass compelled others to love you. It's something you lacked in your life. Just as Mao had nobody, he needed to hear the thoughts of others to combat his loneliness. Or myself… powerless and lacking any control over my own path. Geass might be trying to grant wishes but… it doesn't or maybe it can't give you what you really want. Or need."

"Like a Monkey's Paw," Suzaku comments.

Lelouch's head tilts, "Well, yes, in a way." He didn't know Suzaku was aware of that story.

"You're still not explaining yourself," C.C. says.

It makes Lelouch faintly smile, "You don't want to die. You want more than that. At the very least you want to be mortal." He gestures to the makeshift looking device. "It's your choice. Either way, you should know that there's always a place here for you. You're my ally, friend…"

"Partner in crime?" she adds with a quirkimg grin.

"Ah, I wasn't going to say so in front of the missus…" Lelouch pretends to sideways mutter in front of his spouse.

"That's not funny," Suzaku humorlessly scolds.

"Speaking of," C.C.'s golden eyes land on green, "does this invitation extend from you as well?"

There's a small but considerable pause before Suzaku answers; "…I know that you're very important to him. He wouldn't go through this much effort if you weren't."

"That's a very nice way of not answering my question." She glances at Lelouch, "You must be rubbing off on him."

"I try," Lelouch slyly shrugs.

At least, there is a lot of rubbing.

Suzaku shortly exhales, "You're already his family, is my point. We could all sit here and talk around it but that's what's being said here, yes? I'm not opposed it and honestly, I don't know you well enough to be."
Lelouch slightly snorts, "Given time you might change your mind."

"What a snarky little family we make," she airily notes.

"Now that you mention it, it might do Lelouch some good to have somebody sass back at him."

"This again?" Lelouch drawls. "Just how high and mighty do you people think I am?"

Suzaku and C.C. arc an eyebrow at him.

Right.

He shouldn't have asked.

"Are you really sure about this? Having Zero's mistress in your known associates?"

"You say that now after showing up unannounced at my home?"

C.C. wasn't ever publically seen with Zero, given that she was considered "stolen Britannian property" but the Black Knights know of her too well. It wouldn't do for her to suddenly be at the new Britannian Emperor's side all easy-breezy after Zero's death – not that her business is any of theirs, nor is she concerned about such things. Her role within the rebellion wasn't… officially… official but she was known as Zero's accomplice – without sexy results like Tamaki would have others believe. Other Black Knights have been working with Lelouch but it isn't as though she'd have to show up to their meetings. Given Lelouch's diplomacy, it wouldn't seem overly odd for her to be 'associating' with him, but at the same time, C.C. disappearing after Zero's death was a good choice for her. How could any of Zero's former soldiers know what she's been up to in the meantime?

"She was your what?" Suzaku asks.

Lelouch gives his husband a look that says relax, "It's a joke."

C.C.'s lips softly curl, "I thought I told you that Lelouch doesn't have wandering eyes. Just godly ones. No need to be jealous."

Suzaku scoffs but he's not as convincing as he thinks.

It makes Lelouch smirk.

"I don't know~. We could work out some sort of sister-wife arrangement."

Lelouch chivalrously takes C.C.'s hand and she pretends to coyly look away. "I wouldn't be the first emperor to have a harem."

"The witch, the warlock and the knight," she adds to the teasing, simpering at the kiss Lelouch pecks on the back of her wrist.

Suzaku groans and very dryly scorns, "All right, I take it all back. I don't need the two of you here encouraging each other against me."

Lelouch chuckles and drops the act with C.C.'s hand.

"There is one other matter to consider, actually," Lelouch cautions. "If you relinquish your Code you can't go on with that pizza-only diet of yours, otherwise you will die sooner rather than later."

"And what a shame that would be," she feigns disappointment.
"Yes, it would." Lelouch simply smiles.

"You're certain it works?" C.C. asks, eyes sliding over the image again.

"It's crude," Lelouch admits, "but the tests are positive – or as much as they can be. Simulations don't always account for the human variable. At any rate, the outlook is good and I wouldn't propose it to you if it wasn't."

"You don't think it could reject or eventually fail and revert back to me?" C.C. is suddenly cautious, wary—vulnerable. For an immortal like her, that must be a magnified feeling compared to what Lelouch can feel. It's something she hasn't had to worry about in too long a time.

"It shouldn't," Lelouch says.

"Shouldn't?" she unsavorily repeats, golden eyes darting up to his violets.

"This is some unknown territory," Lelouch tactfully concedes. "But as I said if I didn't think it was ready or safe I wouldn't be offering it. If there are any issues we will correct it."

C.C. holds a small breath in her chest. "And this 'Code battery…' can it grant Geass as well? Or even force the Code onto you?"

"That's somewhat unclear at this time, but I'll be keeping it safe and secure. Locked in a vault at the center of the Earth or launched into deep space, if have to."

"Not destroy it by sending it into the sun?" C.C. queries still. "Or are you more worried about needing and not having it than the dangers of keeping it?"

"Assuming that would even work?" Lelouch takes a breath, "…My father said the gods abandoned us for their own pursuits but I was not ignored when we stopped them from attempted murder, if that was even possible. It may not be a matter of the gods not listening so much as they can't always hear us. If Geass is their gift how might they react if we reject it entirely?" His amethyst eyes glance at emeralds that briefly drop to the floor. "I won't follow my parent's shadow in trying to destroy something not fully understood nor am I interested in tempting fate as many times as I can get away with – and if V.V. was right about alternate realities, I've done more than my fair share already. With… unsatisfactory results."

"I see…" she murmurs and Lelouch can't interpret what her hushed tone means or reflects.

A lapse of words blankets the room in a slightly tense moment that pulls between their eyes – with Suzaku's greens shifting between them.

"C.C.," Lelouch gently addresses, "I'm not pressuring you into anything now. I just want you to know about your options. You want to take this jump," he gestures to the screen, "I'll be here with you. If you want to walk out the door…" his hand tosses at the door behind her, "come and go as you please or… just go – it's all up to you."

The snarky witch remains quiet with contemplative eyes gazing at the screen. Lelouch shifts uncomfortably in place and glances at Suzaku who offers a sympathetic, silent shrug.

"So, just… take your time," Lelouch says with a tinge of uncertainty.

He thought… well, he just didn't expect this kind of reaction out of her even if he wasn't completely sure of what to expect. He realizes that even if this is something she's been chasing for a long time to finally be at the brink of it… it could be daunting. Even terrifying, C.C.'s entire life
will change and the existence she's known for at least a century will cease. She'd be just a 16-year-old again, not an estimated 116+-year-old… Maybe it's the opposite of thinking the world was round and seeing it's actually flat…?

"Well…" Suzaku pushes his voice into the dark silence, "Genbu was saying that he was getting hungry and wanted that snack you said you'd make for him."

"Ah, yes, the peanut butter-banana-mash with cereal. Sounds horrid but it's actually not bad…" the king lingers at his computer a moment before tapping at the keys and popping out the drive. "Sensitive information I can't leave out but if you want to take a closer look…"

C.C. shakes her head, "I trust you."

With a bit of a curt nod, he tucks the drive stick in his pocket, "Very well, then… You're welcome to stay, of course. We have plenty of room." Lelouch walks towards the door, "We can even have pizza for dinner." Jeremiah's face is seen when he opens the double, wooden doors and he looks over his shoulder at her before leaving, "Just know that I will be keeping your room up to the health codes, so it isn't a complete free-for-all."

"Now that sounds like a challenge," C.C. jokes.

Lelouch smiles a little, just enough, and is out of the room without further delay. Suzaku rounds the desk to reach the open threshold of the office but stops to watch Lelouch, Jeremiah and Rolo head off down the hall.

"If I'm honest," Suzaku admits to C.C. in lower volume, "sometimes I worry about what effects Genbu could have because of everything that's happened and… however it is that he came to be. Lelouch has been looking into it as well. So far nothing, but, how can we really know?"

"That's why you're not so adamantly against research," C.C. accurately assumes.

Suzaku's jaw clenches a little, "I just don't want anyone to get hurt. Even when we try we're not always able to prevent that."

"And you think I'd be helpful?"

Suzaku opens his mouth when he looks at her but doesn't immediately speak "…" and then looks away, back to the empty hall, "…I don't know. But Lelouch wants and needs you here – he won't say it, but he does."

"And you?"

"I… think that if not for you Lelouch and I might not have ever been reunited. None of this would have happened, for better or worse, and we wouldn't be here now. I'll always be grateful for that."

"So sure of that, are you?" C.C. taunts with a tone.

Suzaku simpers at her, "Well, I certainly don't blame you for it."

"You say that now…" she nonchalantly taunts again.

Suzaku flashes her a bit of teeth in a laughing smile but doesn't say much more when he, too, leaves.

Then she stands alone, any expression her face held falling into the blank stare of her old eyes that
shift back to the monitor with a photo of aqua-eyed Genbu smothered in kittens as the wallpaper.

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Autumn has touched the leaves of the Villa garden, replacing the rainbow of flowers with the fiery color pallet that burns on the trees. Leaves fall and sail through the gentle winds that carry them to the ground in patches, covering the lush lawn that's lost some of its luster. Meanwhile, through the glass windows bouquets of balloons fill the kitchen, lounges and halls decked with ribbon streamers and glittering garlands. One long pink ribbon slides along the polished, dark wooden floor, dragging like a tail around a corner and into a sitting room where a messy-haired toddler toddles right in on his parents caught in a private embrace. Lelouch's arms are hooped and locked around Suzaku's waist holding their fronts flush together and his jaw is held by Suzaku's hands while their lips smear in slow spooning kisses.

"Mommy, daddy! Cake!" the little boy in bright blue overalls and lavender shirt exclaims at them. Lelouch jumps and Suzaku chuckles as they detangle from each other, "Looks like somebody woke up from his nap."

"Cake! Cake!" he keeps excitedly shouting trying to whirl the too-long ribbon in the air like a gymnast, but it mostly just flaps from his little hands and winds around him as he spins in place.

"I'm so sorry!" maid-clad Sayoko quickly rushes. "He was already awake when I went to check on him, and…"

"It's all right," Lelouch soothes, smoothing his maroon sweater. "We had a good five minutes…"

A buttoned-up flannel Suzaku is hoisting the boy up through another enthusiastic shout of "Cake!" and laughs a little.

"I don't think he understands today isn't his birthday," mommy says.

"I think he knows what his priorities are," Lelouch jokes, taking the small fry into his arms. "Nunnally wanted to wait, so why don't you go see if she and everybody else are ready for some cake."

"Cake!" Genbu says still clutching his ribbon that he tries to wrap around his head—

Suzaku touches Lelouch's shoulder with a simper and kisses Genbu's dark-brown haired head and leaves with Sayoko.

—And Lelouch promptly begins unwrapping the ribbon to avoid either a choking hazard or mummification.

"I don't know where you're picking up this food obsession," Lelouch says taking the ribbon completely away from tiny fingers and placing it up high on a certain Ashford desk placed against the wall, "but something tells me I need to be more discouraging."

"CiCi!" Genbu suddenly calls, pulling Lelouch's attention to the window overlooking the horse stables in the distance from where a certain green-haired woman approaches.

"Right… that's where you get it," Lelouch playfully murmurs. Still holding the small fry on one hip he opens one of the French doors leading to the veranda and the chill of the autumn air brushes
his face.

"CiCiCiCi!" Genbu excitedly calls, apparently forgetting all about cake and the ribbon. For the moment.

"I didn't think you'd join us," Lelouch says when she reaches them.

"I was invited, wasn't I?" C.C. replies, the wind teasing the bangs of her forehead without showing her skin.

"So you were." Lelouch smiles and welcomes her inside. "But when you suddenly left this morning I thought you might not be feeling up to it."

"You said I could ride the horses whenever I wanted," she says matter-of-factly, lightly pinching Genbu's nose and making him giggle as Lelouch shuts the door.

"All day?" he asks with a slightly accusatory tone and she doesn't immediately respond. "Nunnally would understand if you're suddenly feeling a bit shy."

"And you're not concerned? Me suddenly mixing in with your friends? They're all here, aren't they?" C.C.'s golden eyes almost avoid his. "Funny, isn't it? The lengths you went to in the past in order to prevent such a thing from ever happening."

"More concerned that you now smell like a horse," Lelouch shamelessly sniffs at her. "You should bathe first."

She sweeps her long hair over one shoulder as if to either waft her scent at him or flick away his insult.

He doesn't stifle a small ugh. "…Anyway, Kallen is the only tricky one but it's easily handled. Besides," he shifts wide-eyed Genbu on his hip, "you're already auntie CiCi."

The boy who dubbed her with her new namesake is currently quite entertained with her long, vivid hair. She looks down at him with a soft smile.

"Don't suppose that will be easily handled with your Geass. You already used it on Kallen – or have you had Jeremiah erase that for you?"

"You know what's amazing, is how I'm actually able to miss you when you're gone," Lelouch mildly jeers.

When C.C.'s eyes lift up to his again it's with a cheekiness that seems warmer than it ever did in the past.


"Cake?" she blinks at him.

"Cake!" Genbu excitedly shouts, completely dropping her hair.

Lelouch fakes an exasperated sigh through a loose smile, "…Off we go, then," and leads the three of them out of the room.

They join a group of bodies already huddling around the big oval table in the dining room where Nunnally is docked at the wide side in front of a window. Indeed, the whole Student Council club is present along with Alice at Nunnally's side and Rolo awkwardly orbiting the edge near a
watchful Jeremiah and Cornelia until Lelouch enters. He pats the boy's shoulder on the way to his little sister who reaches to have the cake-starved nephew on her lap. Sayoko and Euphemia walk in with trays of cupcakes in every color, crowned with edible butterflies, and set them on the table aside from a special rainbow one with a single candle which Milly lights. She starts off the chorus of the birthday song then most everybody sings, even Lelouch who stands opposite from Nunnally with his hand sliding around a singing Suzaku's waist. Jeremiah is still a quiet guard and Rolo is unpracticed, but when the candle is blown out clapping is easy enough for everybody to do. The applause and cheers are easily heard just outside the house through the windows, not smothered by the air getting colder and still pushing leaves off spiny branches. The world outside tarnishes in the garden and beyond, making way for new growth that comes with every spring while inside colorful cupcakes are eaten. Icing is smeared on Genbu's face and Lelouch manages to claim another kiss from Suzaku under the distracting spirit of celebration sweeping through everyone.

Lelouch destroyed so that he could recreate. No paper cranes or needles needed. Just all these fools here who fill his heart – not just Nunnally, Suzaku and Genbu – that he will continue to protect even when they irritate him. The shadows of the past, the mistakes and regrets, they're valuable lessons especially when painful. What Lelouch has learned most of all is that *yesterday* isn't so important he should blind himself to today or tomorrow. Life is to be lived and he plans to do a lot of living with the ones he loves.

The future of the world is, and always will be, shining brightly ahead of them like the rising sun.

*Happy birthday, Nunnally.*

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*Wise men say only fools rush in*

*But I can't help falling in love with you*

*Shall I stay?*

*Would it be a sin?*

*If I can't help falling in love with you*

*Like a river flows, surely to the sea*

*Darling, so it goes*

*Some things are meant to be*

*Take my hand, take my whole life too*

*For I can't help falling in love with you*

—*Can't Help Falling in Love* by Elvis Presley

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The end.
Lelouch I'm sorry but your emperor hat is hideous... Here's the song above that Lelouch also plays on the piano: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGJTaP6anOU

Anyway, I felt I should say something since there was a time when I didn't think I'd ever finish this fic… It's a relief to be finished, honestly. I posted the first chapter around 9 years ago on a whim, didn't really expect much from it, but it got a response so I kept writing. But then kinda stopped. And now it's finally done. I really wouldn't have carried on at all or even ended it now without the readers of then and even if they're all gone I still really appreciate the support from you reading this now. This story might not have become all it could be but I did the best I could and I really hope it's enjoyed, new and returning readers alike. And to any future readers out there seeing this since it completed: I hope you also enjoyed this crack-twisted tale. It's been a loooong time in the making.

Thanks so much to those that have supported the recent updates. I'm sorry they were so far between. Even though I was determined to get this fic done for its own sake it helps immensely to have an audience and not feel like I'm just throwing words (so many words) into an empty void. I'm not very good at "communing with communities" but I really appreciate anyone that took the time to read, comment, follow, favorite or anything else!

All that's left to say now is that I still have fics I'd like to work on, so, hopefully you'll still see me around. :]

-Sincerely, escapeasy.

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