

Jaquemart II - My Old Friends Don't Much Come Round No More

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13169607) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13169607>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Fandom:	Shoujo Kakumei Utena Revolutionary Girl Utena
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Jaquemart
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-27 Words: 25,140 Chapters: 1/1

Jaquemart II - My Old Friends Don't Much Come Round No More

by [alanharnum](#)

JAQUEMART

by

Alan Harnum

Utena and its characters belongs to Be-PaPas, Chiho Saito, Shogakukan, Shokaku linkai and TV Tokyo.

This copy of the story is from my Archive of Our Own page at <http://archiveofourown.org/users/alanharnum/pseuds/alanharnum>.

II. My Old Friends Don't Much Come Round No More

* * *

The boy, slender and rather small for his age, sat with his back almost touching the concrete wall. Hands folded calmly on the table before him, he stared unblinkingly up at the room's single bright light.

"Tell us exactly what happened. Your own words."

"How is he?"

"That isn't relevant."

"Then I won't talk."

The two men exchanged glances. A few seconds passed, during which the boy continued to gaze intently at the light.

Finally, the bigger man began to open his mouth.

"I'll know if you lie," the boy said sharply.

"Sure you will, kid," the smaller man muttered. Tired did not even begin to describe how he was currently feeling.

The boy's eyes narrowed. "I will."

The bigger man coughed. "He died in hospital last night."

"Good." The boy nodded. "Now what?"

"Good?" The smaller man almost snarled the word, and took a step forward. His partner stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Easy," he said softly. "Now tell us what happened."

"I'm sort of glad he's dead," the boy said. "I guess that means he can't hurt her any more. That's all I wanted. I challenged him; I killed him, though I didn't start out intending to." He stood up and held out his hands to them, wrists upward. "Could you put me back in jail now? I'm tired of talking."

* * *

"Chu-Chu, please. Things will be all right."

The little animal lay in a huddled ball on the edge of the bed, shuddering in silent paroxysms of grief, occasionally letting out a small, wounded-seeming cry. Anthy reached out and hesitantly stroked his head with one finger.

"Come now, little friend; wasn't it just the two of us for so much longer than seven years?" His short fur felt rough as sandpaper to her skin. "The hurt should not be so much."

Chu-Chu's sobs only grew more wracking, and he shrank away from her touch. Unable to do anything to console him, Anthy returned to the destroyed kitchen. Broken dishes turned the floor into a dangerous wasteland of jagged shards, with ruined food flung from the gaping fridge scattered liberally amidst it. Only the residual light from the hallway let her see; the overhead bulb--even the smaller bulb in the fridge--had shattered during her display of power.

"I... did this?" she murmured, gazing around at the wreckage. "Yes. I did this." So long since she'd last lost control of her power like that. No wonder Utena left. It must have been terrifying.

Anthy interlaced her fingers over her abdomen and bent forward, pressing hard with the heels of her hands as though it would expel the lump of cold, hard pain deep down in her stomach. She pushed until her eyes threatened to tear up from the pain; but that wasn't the kind of crying she wanted to do, so she stopped.

A wave of her hand could fix all this, just like it had fixed the dorm room when she'd first been engaged to Utena. Time would fly backwards in the small kitchenette; the dishes would become whole again and the cupboards would close over them, and the food would be restored, completely edible, to the sealed fridge.

She closed her eyes and envisioned it. Hundreds of shards, all rising up to cleave to one another again... the overhead bulb

reforming, the light coming back on...

"No." She clamped her left hand down on her right wrist.
"It's not going to be done like that."

Power had torn this place apart; now her hands, working only by themselves, were going to clean it up. She went to get the broom and dustpan from the hall cupboard.

It took a long time. She had to haul in the wastebasket from the bathroom after the kitchen's plastic garbage bin ran out of space. As she swept and mopped and scrubbed, she didn't think of anything, falling into the pleasurable monotony of a simple but necessary task.

When she was completely finished, she hauled the two bins of broken glass and ruined food to the garbage chute in the hall and poured them down, remembering only near the end about the rules against dumping unbagged garbage--especially broken glass.

A momentary guilt assailed her, but then she shrugged; no one would know that she had done it, so why worry?

Returning to the apartment, she spent a long time looking around the bare, gleaming cleanliness of the kitchen. No food, no dishes--even the cutlery, every single piece, (as she'd discovered upon opening the drawer) had been warped and bent to the point of uselessness by her wild expenditure of power.

Tomorrow, she would go shopping for groceries and the few dishes she would need for the near future. Beyond that, the future did not bear thinking about, so she would take it as it came.

She was tired and hot and sweaty from the work, and was precariously balanced--so she thought--just upon the edge of breaking down. In the bedroom, she stripped out of her clothing, and glanced sadly at Chu-Chu, who now appeared to have fallen asleep. The bathroom tiles, blue with green flecks, were cool beneath her feet. She closed the door and locked it, then spotted one of Utena's blouses lying in a discarded heap on the floor.

Slowly, almost with exaggerated care, she picked it up. As she did, a small rag-edged rectangle of newspaper fell from the breast pocket and fluttered to the floor.

Anthy plucked it up and glanced at the headline:

PRIVATE SCHOOL TRAGEDY

Then she crumpled it into a ball, threw it into the toilet, and flushed. She watched the water spiral down into the depths, and tightly embraced the empty blouse against her bare skin. Water hummed in the pipes, a dry, hollow sound.

She leaned back against the sink counter and pressed her face into the abandoned blouse. Utena's scent--soap, skin, sweat and a vague odour of roses, even though she knew Utena didn't like to wear perfume--clung to it like a memento.

Roses? No; Utena would never buy rose perfume.

"Oh, phantoms of my past," said Anthy, shaky voice muffled by the blouse. "Why must you haunt me still?"

She hung the blouse on the towel rack and stepped into the shower. As the hot water ran down her cheeks in rivulets, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine that she was crying the tears for Utena's leaving that she had been unable to shed.

* * *

The address Utena had been given was in one of the nicer areas of downtown Sapporo, nice enough that the security guard in the foyer of the apartment complex called up to make sure she had a legitimate reason to be there, even after Wakaba buzzed her in at the front door.

Not that she really blamed him; he was just doing his job, and she wasn't exactly inconspicuous with her enormous beat-up gym bag. The suspicious stare got old pretty quick, though; he seemed to be trying to bore a hole into her back with his eyes as she walked to the elevators.

Inside, the walls of the elevator were all mirrored; so was the ceiling. The procession of her images in the facing mirrors stretched to infinity in either direction. Awkwardly balancing her gym bag against her hips as the elevator rose, she tried to give some semblance of order to her hair, and failed. The long day had run her ragged as an old shirt.

The Saionjis (funny to think of Wakaba that way; she was going to have to adjust) had their apartment on the second-to-last floor of the building. She walked down the richly-carpeted hallway leading off from the elevators, past wallpaper covered in soft-hued splashes of colour, and turned the corner at a t-

junction. The apartment was all the way at the end of the hall; Utena approached the door almost hesitantly, and knocked.

She barely had time to study the brass numbers and make a last worried confirmation that she had the right place before the door was flung open and she was practically dragged inside and into Wakaba's arms.

"Utena-sama!"

"Hi, Wakaba."

The outpouring of perky joy was almost stifling, and yet somehow comforting. Familiar. Wakaba was one of the few things she'd had before going to Ohtori, and one of the ones whose loss she'd missed the most.

"Seven years," she murmured, embracing the other woman awkwardly back. "Seven years." Over Wakaba's shoulder, she could see Saionji seated at the head of a small but solid oak table near a picture window, curtains currently closed, that dominated one entire wall of the apartment's living room.

"Let her at least put her things down, Wakaba," Saionji said quietly.

Wakaba let go and scampered back a few steps into a clumsy half-bow; she wore a high-necked blouse with long sleeves and an ankle-length skirt. Her hairstyle was still the same. "Sorry, Utena."

"It's all right." Utena put her gym bag and purse down on the floor, near a spidery wire-frame display stand holding a bird-themed decorative vase. "Thank you for letting me come by on such short notice."

"You didn't tell me you intended to stay the night." Saionji steepled his fingers and looked pointedly at the bag containing Utena's hastily-packed clothing.

"I left rather abruptly." An inward frown that she kept from her face grew; maybe Saionji hadn't changed as much as she'd thought after their earlier reunion. "I can leave after I talk to the two of you. I have enough money for a hotel." For a single night, maybe, if it was cheap.

"Don't be silly, Utena-sama," Wakaba said, looking almost pleadingly at her husband. "You can sleep on the couch. Right, Kyouichi?"

"I suppose."

Wakaba grabbed Utena's hands and led her towards a seat at the table. "Kyouichi said you lived with Himemiya. Did you have a fight? I remember that she was a very strange girl. Didn't you date her for a little while, Kyouichi?" She sat Utena down and hurried into the semi-detached kitchen of the apartment, still talking. "I suppose I should be jealous or something, but I'm not; it was so long ago. How do you take your tea, Utena? I should remember, but I don't--no, wait, two sugars, no milk. That's right."

Utena tried to relax against the cloth-padded back of the heavy oak chair, and half-succeeded. "Wakaba's just like I remember her."

Saionji smiled, and his face softened into that of the man she'd met earlier in the day. "Yes; she hasn't changed much. She's always been a good balance for me."

The living room was tastefully decorated with a few antique vases similar to the ones Saionji had in the store. In the far corner, near a closed door leading to what Utena guessed was their bedroom, a three-section silk-painted Chinese folding wall depicting a pastoral landscape stood half-unfolded.

"Nice apartment," she said wistfully; the distance between this tasteful place and the cheap dwelling she and Anthy shared--had shared--was wide as the gulf between ocean and stream.

"Thank you." Saionji looked around as though he too were experiencing the place for the first time. "I chose everything myself. Even the wallpaper." Stark, hard-edged black geometric shapes against a white background; not a good match for the elegant old antiques, in Utena's opinion, but she wasn't going to say that out loud.

Wakaba returned with a tray containing teapot and cups and a plate of tea biscuits. She placed it carefully in the centre of the table, then sat down facing Saionji, perpendicular to Utena's left-hand side.

"Everyone wants tea, right?" she asked, then began to pour without waiting for an answer.

Saionji took his cup without putting sugar or milk in it, and held it without drinking from it. "Now what is so urgent, Utena? You said this was about Anthy." Something about the way

he pronounced Anthy's name... Wistful? Sad? Angry? Utena couldn't tell.

"More than Anthy, but she's important to it." Utena sipped her tea and let it rid her of the last lingering remnants of the winter chill. "Saionji, you were a member of the Student Council the last year I was at Ohtori, weren't you?" It wasn't only a matter of what he remembered, but how he remembered it, and she didn't know either of those very well.

Saionji nodded. "Yes, I was. What of it?"

"Do you remember what you did as a member?"

A thin smile, slightly sharp-edged, came onto his face. "I remember we had an exclusive headquarters, and that we spent a lot of time playing cards."

Underneath the table, Utena rubbed her right foot against her left ankle, a nervous gesture that neither Saionji nor Wakaba could see. How to approach it? Hey Saionji, do you remember how we used to all fight those duels for possession of Anthy's body and soul, and how it was all just the plot of a fallen prince to regain his full power so he could revolutionize the world, which basically meant twisting it into whatever shape happened to be pleasing to his diabolic mind at the time?

No; that wouldn't work. Too blunt.

"Do you remember the Rose Bride, Saionji?"

He licked his lips and stared at the table thoughtfully.

"That was Anthy's... nickname, right? I don't remember why, though."

"How about the Rose Signets? The duelling Platform? The Ends of the World?" Once she began, she could not seem to stop herself; the names came pouring forth as though from a wound deep within her. "The Sword of Dios? The Revolution? Do you remember the car? It was red."

"Red car," Saionji muttered. "Ends of the World." His face suddenly twisted into a snarling mask. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Is this some kind of joke?" He slammed his cup down heavily on the tabletop; tea splashed over and puddled on the polished wood. "Ends of the World... no." His eyes suddenly went wide and fearful. "I don't remember. I should, something about Ends of the World... a red car."

"Black roses," Wakaba interjected quietly. "I remember black roses."

Utena experienced one of those full-body shivers supposedly associated with someone walking over your grave. Black roses? What was Wakaba talking about? There hadn't been any black roses.

Had there?

There was a word on the tip of her tongue that would, if spoken, render all things clear. But she could not remember the word, could not be certain if the word existed at all.

"Red car," Saionji said in a raw, ragged voice. "The Ends of the World. Something about a red car. I remember there were lights, a procession of lights. Touga--"

The phone rang from the wall beside the kitchen. None of them moved.

Wakaba leaned over and grabbed Utena's left hand in both of hers. "Utena-sama, what about the black roses?" The desperation in her voice was almost heartbreaking.

"I don't know, Wakaba." The truth, the only answer she could give. "I don't remember anything about black roses." But no; there was something there, she knew there was--

Ring.

"Answer it, Wakaba." Saionji almost growled the words.

Wakaba got up and walked shakily to the phone. "H--hello?"

Closing her eyes, Utena pictured a black rose in her mind. A long green stem, covered in thorns as long as a finger-joint, with silken petals the colour of starless night...

"Hello? Who's there?"

...one by one, she peeled the petals off and cast them away, dancing her fingers around the twisted thorns, moving from peeling to tearing as the petals began to resist their plucking...

"Hello? Hello?"

...sought the core, the secret heart of the rose that grows in darkness...

"Hello?"

Not black, no, but rather red, arterial crimson, beating and full of fire. The blaze washed out through her mind, down her spine and into her limbs, coated her heart with molten lead. And she remembered.

She opened her eyes, and said, "Mikage."

Saionji started. "What?"

Wakaba hung up the phone and began to walk back to the table. "Nobody there."

"Mikage." Utena felt drained of all vitality, and wracked with an inexplicable grief. "Seven years; you all forgot me, but I forgot too, I forgot too. Monster. Dreams, nightmares, reality, it's all the same to him, he doesn't even care..."

"Who's Mikage?" Saionji asked. "The name is--"

The door broke off its hinges as someone kicked it in from the outside. A masked male figure, white-clad and dark-cloaked, stepped in and raised the gun in his hand.

A surge of adrenaline rid Utena of the weariness the moment she heard the door splintering. She seized the tea tray, dumping biscuits and shattering the teapot upon the floor, and threw it like a discus at the intruder's gun hand as she leapt from her chair.

A perfect hit, but not in time. The muffled bark of a silenced bullet echoed in the apartment, and Wakaba cried out and fell. The gun spun from the attacker's hand to skid across the carpet, and as Utena came at him with full intention of killing him with her bare hands, he unsheathed a long katana from his belt.

Utena ducked under his first swing, avoiding decapitation by a narrow margin. Her heart was beating so fast it seemed to be trying to escape from her ribcage, and her eyes were full of tears. As she rose from her crouch and hammered her fist into his stomach hard enough to stagger him, she noted that his mask, a black executioner's hood emblazoned with a white diamond, had no eyeholes.

His sword fell in a downward cut; she leapt aside, and her foe recovered before his blade hit the floor. Hilt gripped in both hands, he drove her back with a series of lightning-fast

thrusts. Saionji, she saw, knelt down next to Wakaba; blood stained one side of her blouse. Wakaba-chan, she thought vaguely; oh God, please be all right.

"Tenjou Utena," the attacker said, as she dodged away from his thrusts. "It's been a while, hasn't it?" His voice was cold, laconic, vaguely familiar, but she could not put a name to it.

"Who are you?"

In answer, he tried to remove her legs; she hopped over the cut, grabbed a nearby chair--they were near the table now--and upended it just in time to catch his next slice against the bottom.

The sword bit deep into the wood, but did not catch; as he pulled back for another swing, Utena twisted the heavy chair and tried to entangle the blade between the legs. He laughed, slipped sideways to free his weapon, and nearly eviscerated her.

"The Knight of Pentacles," he said. Utena backstepped and awkwardly threw the chair at him, forcing him to dodge and giving herself a moment of breathing space. The curtain-covered picture window was right behind her, and she was running out of room to avoid his attacks.

And yet she wasn't frightened. She felt calm and strong and in control. If it weren't for the fact that Wakaba was possibly dying on the floor, she might even have felt good.

"You're mine!" the Knight shouted triumphantly, darting forward with a wide waist-height sweep, nearly impossible to avoid in the cramped conditions. Her death reached out for her, riding two-and-a-half feet of tempered steel.

It could not end like this. It would not end like this.

She dropped to her knees, keeping balanced on her toes and the balls of her feet, and arched backwards until her head nearly touched the floor. The blade howled over her head in a glint of light on steel.

Using only the muscles of her hips and waist, she bounced back up from the floor before his swing was even fully completed; it felt rather like doing the hardest sit-up in the world. Her hands shot up and seized one of the Knight's wrists in a tight grip. She rose, shoving with the strength of her unfolding legs, gaining leverage but not really needing it, filled up with an

impossible strength that would have let her rip his arm straight out of the socket if she'd wanted to. In little more than an extension of the motion initiated by his swing, she hurled the Knight of Pentacles through the curtains and out the picture window in a tangle of white cloth and a spray of glass. The last sight of him was his black cape, fluttering flaglike as he fell.

Ten stories down. She drew a deep, gasping breath, and then turned away to hurry to Wakaba's side. "How is she?"

Saionji was holding one of Wakaba's hands while staunching the blood flow with a white linen napkin. "Call an ambulance."

"Utena-sama, I'm okay," Wakaba whispered. "It doesn't hurt much. It just grazed my side." It looked like more than a graze to Utena, but she was immensely relieved to see that it looked like a comparatively minor wound to all the nightmarish scenarios she'd imagined during her short fight with the Knight.

"Lie still," Saionji commanded. "Don't try to talk." He squeezed her hand.

Utena hurried to the phone and called the emergency number. In a calm voice that belied her own internal turmoil, she told the operator that her friend had been shot, and gave her the address and apartment number. Then she hung up before any more questions could be asked.

"I have to go," she told Wakaba and Saionji.

"What?" Saionji snapped. If he hadn't needed to tend to Wakaba, Utena thought he might very well have got up and attacked her, so angry did he seem. "You can't!"

"I have to get back to Ohtori as soon as possible. I can't get caught up in a police investigation right now. Do you remember now? I remember." The Black Rose Signets; all the Black Rose Duellists, from Kanae to Mikage. Then, nothing. Two different memories, and she could not tell which (if either) was real.

"I don't know what I remember any more," Saionji said blankly. "A car... the Ends of the World." He moaned softly as though in deep and hidden pain. "What did they do to us there?"

"Black roses," Wakaba murmured. She began to cry: soft, gentle sobs. "Utena-sama, I didn't want to fight you, I just wanted to stop being so ordinary."

"What are you talking about, Wakaba?" Saionji let go of his wife's hand and gently touched her hair. "Utena, what's she talking about?"

"Picture the rose in your mind," Utena softly said. "That's how I remembered." Was there more? If so, how much? Damn Akio; damn him for this most awesome violation. "You have to tell me quick. Where are the other Student Council members? Touga, Juri, Miki, Nanami. Where?"

"I already told you that I haven't seen Touga since graduation," Saionji said. "Miki and Nanami were still at Ohtori when I left. Juri lives in Tokyo; she's been by the store there a few times. We had lunch the week before Wakaba and I left for Sapporo." He had her bring him a notepad and pen from the kitchen, and scribbled Juri's address--rather awkwardly, as he had to keep the napkin pressed against Wakaba's side while he did so.

Tokyo, then. "Thank you, Saionji."

"Don't mention it," Saionji said bitterly, looking down at his injured wife. "The Chairman was responsible, wasn't he? I... remember something about him, but..."

"Acting Chairman Ohtori Akio," Utena answered, unable to keep a snarl out of her voice. "It should come back to you in time, now that you're starting to remember." She hoped so; she didn't know if Saionji or Wakaba could manage a thunder-clap revelation like she had, considering how much more of their memories they'd had twisted by Akio compared to her. Or so she thought. There was no real way of knowing if Akio had done any more manipulation of her mind, was there?

The ambulance and the police would be here soon; she had to go. "I'll call you if I get a chance, but I may not. Tell the police what you can; I know they'll be looking for me, but I'll try to stay out of their way."

Saionji nodded. He looked pale and sick. "I don't know what I'll tell them. I don't even know what's real and what isn't. Maybe this is just a dream."

"It's not a dream," Utena said firmly. Whether she had proof for that was another matter; she had to act as though it was in order to act at all. "Listen, you can try calling Anthy and asking her. Maybe she'll help you, maybe she won't. It's worth a try, though."

"Do you need anything?" Saionji asked. "Money? I have some in the apartment."

Utena bit back her immediate denial. Money would help; but no, she wouldn't take what she didn't need. "I need a key to the store."

Saionji blinked. "Why?"

"You have swords there," Utena explained. "I need a sword. I'll slip the key through the mail slot after I'm done."

Wakaba, who had kept on softly crying during the whole conversation, suddenly spoke up: "Good luck, Utena-sama."

"Thank you, Wakaba. I'm sorry I can't stay longer."

"Here." Saionji reached into his pocket and tossed her a ring of keys. "Be careful."

"I will." Faintly, she heard sirens. "Goodbye." Grabbing her bag and purse, casting a last angry glance at the discarded gun and the broken picture window, she slipped out the broken door.

* * *

The showroom of Green Rose Antiques was dimly lit by the ambience of street lights when Utena entered, after finding the key to unlock the rear delivery entrance on her third try. Without the bright lights shining from overhead, the antiques became sinister: the grandfather clock hulked like a giant's shadow, and watches and jewelry glittered faintly within their display cases like observing eyes.

Adrenaline was still gently coursing through her body, both from the fight and from having to run down ten flights of stairs. At the t-junction of the hallway beyond the Saionji's apartment, she'd heard the ding of the elevators opening; unable to risk that it might be the police, she'd ducked down the nearby stairwell, and then through the emergency exit at the bottom that led directly out into the streets. The antique shop had been close enough to walk to, but even the trudge through the winter streets of Sapporo hadn't calmed her down. She felt as though she were fully alive for the first time in seven years.

Behind the counter, she took down the sheathed swords and weighed them up and down in her hands. Smiling without realizing it, she pulled six inches of one katana's blade from the sheath;

in the near-darkness of the shop, it shone with a dull, steely sheen. She pressed one finger gently against the cutting edge until it dimpled her skin like a lover's touch and a tiny bead of blood welled.

"Sharp," she whispered, well-pleased. "You would keep them sharp, of course." The katanas were beautiful weapons, but too unwieldy for her tastes. Not only that, they were too long to fit in her gym bag. She hung them back up on the wall, and picked up the rapier from where it lay sheathed on the counter.

Perfect weight, perfect balance, even within its sheath. The grip was a column of ribbed steel, with a bell-shaped pommel and elaborately fretworked cross-guards that twisted like twin serpents to practically embrace the hand of the wielder.

She wrapped her hand around it, and drew it with a gentle, rasping ring from the leather sheath. Moving out from behind the counter, she stood in the spacious floor at the centre of the shop, sword in one hand and sheath in other, and did a few experimental thrusts and swings.

The old muscles remembered; how could they ever forget? She felt a little rusty at first, but that soon disappeared; she lost herself in the song of the blade as it cut the air, and duelled with shadows.

Thrust. Parry. She imagined invisible foes all around her, recalled the different strengths of the Duellists she had fought: Saionji's savagery and skill, Juri's grace, Miki's speed, Mikage's...

Mikage. What was she doing here, wasting time, slashing at shadows? The police would be looking for her by now. She hastily sheathed the sword, packed it away in her gym bag (it took some rearranging, but she eventually managed it without making it bulge too conspicuously), left the same way she'd entered (slipping the keys back through the mail slot after relocking the door like she'd promised), and hurried away to find some place to spend the night.

* * *

The phone woke her from a pleasant dream that was almost completely forgotten as soon as it ended; only the vague memory that she had been happy there remained, and she lay on the bed savouring it as the ringing continued.

At the fourth insistent ring, she slid out from under the quilt she'd fallen asleep beneath, and picked it up from the bureau beside the bed. "Hello?"

// "Anthy." //

"Utena." She breathed a sigh of relief. "Where are you? When are you coming home?"

// "I'm in the cheapest, smallest hotel room I've ever been in, and I'm not." //

"Utena, please. Come home. We can work this out..."

// "I'm sorry, Anthy. I'll be quick. You have to be careful, really careful; I think Akio's been watching us all this time, I think he was just waiting to see if we'd ever become a threat to him. Someone tried to kill me tonight. Called himself the Knight of Pentacles. Ring any bells?" //

"No." Anthy swallowed and knotted one hand tightly in the folds of her nightgown. "None at all. You're not hurt, are you, Utena?"

// "Not me. Wakaba. She married Saionji. I suppose he was trying to kill all of us." //

Wakaba; Anthy remembered her vaguely. Always cheerful, just about the happiest person she'd ever known... she remembered a wooden hair ornament, a leaf painted in green and gold.... "How is she?"

// "Wounded. Be careful, Anthy. I threw the Knight out the window, and it was a long fall. But where Akio's involved, you never know." //

"Utena, I wish I could..."

// "You can. You just won't. Forget about it. I told Saionji to call you; he and Wakaba are starting to get their memories back, and if you're not going to help me, would it kill you to at least tell them the truth?" //

Pause. Ashamed. "No, it wouldn't. I'll do that."

// "Thank you." //

"What are you going to do, Utena?"

// "I'm going to Tokyo. Juri's there; with time, I think I can get her to recover most of her memories." //

Anthy sat down on the edge of the bed, cradling the phone against her ear. "It's not hard. Akio's strength draws so much from our own illusions, our own desire to be deceived... what he builds is mighty, but fragile."

// "Yeah, well, I'm going to go give the whole damn thing a good kick." //

There was something unsaid; Anthy could sense it in the way Utena paused before each thing she said, in a tension that lay baited like a hook in her voice even beyond the boundaries of their fight. "What else, Utena?"

// "What?" //

"There's something else."

// "...No, there isn't." //

"Tell me."

// "Anthy--" //

"Please."

The sound of Utena drawing a long, shaky breath on the other end of the line from wherever distant place she might be reached Anthy's ears and made her heart tremble. She waited for an answer. One second, two seconds, three, until nearly half a minute of silence had passed.

"What's wrong, Utena?"

Brokenly, Utena replied, // "Why didn't you ever tell me about Mikage, Anthy?" //

So, then, it was now her turn for silence. Anthy drew her legs up beneath her on the bed and folded them into a seated lotus position. As she tried to compose an answer, she reached up and rubbed the bridge of her nose; it itched slightly, as though some small, invisible weight were pressing upon it.

// "Anthy, answer me." //

Was Utena crying? She couldn't tell. "I... I just thought it would be better that way. As though it had never happened."

// "But it did happen, Anthy. It did. Just because... Just because you wanted to pretend that none of it ever happened, what gave you the right to force that on me? Why didn't you tell me?" //

Anthy couldn't answer.

// "Was Mikage all, Anthy? Or did Akio rip more memories out of my head? Did he put some in?" //

"Mikage and the Black Rose Duellists were all," Anthy finally managed to reply. "They were all that he made you forget."

Poor, weak Mikage. Led astray by the doppelganger of a boy years dead. Only one of many that she should but could not mourn for.

// "Why didn't you tell me?" //

"You seemed so happy." She closed her eyes and freed her mind from its body; it was as easy and familiar as removing her clothes.

// "I wasn't happy." //

"Not ever?" Follow the voice, the flow and throb of words, the humming of the wires... "Remember that hike we went on last month? Chu-Chu got in a fight with that squirrel. You laughed. I remember, you laughed so hard. You weren't happy then?"

There was a hard, wiry tightness in Utena's voice now.

// "It wasn't the kind of happiness I wanted." //

"What kind of happiness did you want, then?" Yes, there she was...

The wire snapped. Utena's voice became half-choked, defeated. // "I'm sorry, Anthy, I'm so sorry. I l--I'd love to be able to live with you and Chu-Chu, to just be happy, but I can't. I tried for seven years, but it never really worked. I'm so sorry." //

"It's all right, Utena," Anthy soothed. "Come home when you're ready. Come home when things are right again."

// "It's not too late, Anthy." // Desperate; Anthy felt it sympathetically, and the tight ball of hurt in her stomach grew heavier. // "I need you for this, we all need you. You know

about these things, you're smarter, wiser. I'm still in town,
please--"//

"I can't. I'm sorry, Utena, but I just can't."

Angry, bitter; such a sudden change. //"You mean you--"//

"Are we going to start this again?"

Defeated. //"No."//

"Be careful, Utena. My brother is more dangerous than you
can imagine."

Wry. //"I don't need to imagine. I've got experience."//

A stabbing pain in her abdomen, Akio's hands moving over
flesh that was not her own...

"Goodbye, Utena."

//"Goodbye, Anthy."//

Anthy laid the handset down on the bed, but did not hang it
up. Her eyes remained closed. Soon, the complaining beeps of a
phone left too long off the hook began. Searching with her
hands, she found Chu-Chu's small, sleeping form on the edge of
the pillows on Utena's side of the bed.

Sliding her hands beneath his body, she picked him up and
brought him into her lap. With one finger of one hand, she
gently stroked his head, not hard enough to wake him; the other
she passed thrice above him, as her fingers writhed like the legs
of spiders.

"Go, small friend, cheerful soul, brave heart; go to her for
me."

And then her lap was empty.

Anthy buried her face in Utena's pillow and finally,
cathartically, wept.

* * *

Utena put the phone down and lay back on the bed, crossing her
hands behind her head and staring up at the worn ceiling panels
above her head. They were a really hideous magenta, and looked
luridly bloody in the glow of the single bedside lamp that
currently served as the hotel room's sole illumination.

The TV remote, if there had ever been one, was no longer present. Not that it mattered to her much; she and Anthy had never even owned a television in Sapporo, and vague memories of watching children's anime and sentai shows on a small colour set in that brief interval of her life when her parents had been alive were all she really had of the so-common experience of television.

Now she got up and turned on the television, then rapidly flicked through channels until she found what looked like a news station. She hadn't been so careless as to check into this cheap hotel near the airport under her own name, and the police couldn't have gotten a photo of her by now to release. Could they? She wasn't the one they wanted for the shooting, after all--merely a witness wanted for questioning. So she assumed; there was no way of knowing exactly what Saionji would tell them, confused as he was by the patchy return of scattered memories of the true Ohtori.

Had they found the body of the Knight of Pentacles? Had there been anything to find? A ten story fall, but still... No. This was not Ohtori, not Akio's domain; it was the real world, and he would need to use things of the real world here, not illusions. Agents on the outside? There had been something familiar about the Knight's voice.

Tall, male, expert swordsman, katana... Saionji was definitely ruled out, unless things were much stranger than she thought... Which left...

"*I haven't seen Touga since graduation.*"

"Could it be?" she muttered, hugging her knees to her chest and leaning back against the head of the bed. "What have you been up to these seven years, Touga?"

There was no news on television that she cared about. She watched the flickering images and talking heads for a few minutes longer out of the sheer lack of anything else to do--there wasn't enough floor space to do some shadow-fencing--and then hopped up from the thin mattress to shut it off.

Her extended finger was inches away from the POWER button when her attention was suddenly distracted by a scuffling sound from behind her. Rats? Mice? In a place like this, she wouldn't be surprised. "Flophouse" would have been only a slightly harsh appellation.

Well, it wasn't as though she was scared of rats or mice. She turned away from the TV and got down on her hands and knees on the thin, faded carpet. "Come on out." She beckoned with her hands. "I won't hurt you."

Scuffling again, from under the bed. She crawled over to the bureau beside the bed and picked up the packet of rice crackers she'd bought at the convenience store beside the hotel before checking in. She popped one into her mouth, then pulled another from the packet and lifted the edge of the bedspread to look underneath.

"Hey, come on--I've got a snack for you."

A dim shape turned, eyes reflecting ambient light in the darkness beneath the bed. Too big to be a mouse; the wrong shape to be a rat.

"Chu?"

Utena nearly choked on her cracker. "What?"

Chu-Chu scampered out from underneath the bed and held up his small arms pleadingly. She handed him the cracker on instinct more than anything else, and he contentedly began to eat.

The cracker was gone before she recovered from her surprise, which didn't take long. "How did you get here?"

"Chu! Chu!" He gestured at the cracker package. She set it down on the rug with a harried smile, and Chu-Chu began to inhale rice crackers.

"Hungry, aren't you? Like you've been on some big journey." The animal's presence lifted her spirits to a degree almost inverse to his small size. "How'd you get here? Smuggle away in my bag all that way?"

Chu-Chu blinked, then nodded enthusiastically and resumed devouring the crackers.

Utena laughed. "You're lucky I didn't poke you in the eye when I put that sword in my bag." The crackers were almost entirely gone now. "Hey, I need some of those for breakfast." She took them away and put them in the bureau drawer, ignoring Chu-Chu's clamorous protests.

She picked him up in her hands, climbed back onto the bed, and sat with him in her lap. "You need to go back to Anthy, of course. Can you make it back yourself? I... I'd rather not have to bring you back. For a lot of reasons."

Chu-Chu shook his head.

"You can't make it back on your own?"

Another shake.

"You don't want to go back."

Nod.

"I'm going back to Ohtori. It's too dangerous."

Chu-Chu folded his arms over his chest, and made a good show of laughing in danger's face.

Utena sighed. "Anthy will be lonely without you."

He shook his head again.

"You are a funny little thing." She touched his head with a warm affection born of seven years; seven years in which Chu-Chu, whatever sort of animal he was, didn't seem to have aged at all. Odd, that. "I guess you know Anthy better than I do."

The television was still on. Utena was beginning to realize why remote controls were popular. She began to ease herself back up yet again in order to turn it off when the image of familiar streets--familiar buildings--stopped her.

"...one of the city's poorer areas, and also one with one of the highest crime rates. Two of tonight's three murders, an unprecedented number in Sapporo, took place here." The commentator was off-camera; the view panned across the front of a building Utena had walked by hundreds of times. "Police have released few details, but sources say that the two victims were minors belonging to a street gang called the 'Black Sharks'. The possibility then exists that the murders are gang-related."

Utena sat back down on the bed and watched, silent. An alley, a familiar shortcut between home and the local market, cordoned off by police tape. In the night (she'd never walked through it at night) it resembled a dark and hungry maw waiting to be fed. Flashing police lights from somewhere off-camera striated the screen with a throbbing tinge of blue.

"The police say no connection is suspected between these two murders and the third, a security guard at a downtown..."

She slowly got off the bed, with the voice of the commentator dissolving in her ears into a wordless humming like the surgings of the sea, and finally turned the television off.

"Following me," she said numbly, brushing at her sleeves as though to rid them of some invisible stain. "All that time. Since I left home? But why kill those two?"

Maybe she was simply being paranoid. There was no... well, not a lot of reason to... it might be entirely coincidental. Not the guard; she didn't doubt that the Knight had taken care of the guard before coming up, but...

Three. Not four. No body for the Knight. But maybe they just hadn't found it yet. A ten story fall...

Hell. Oh, hell, she knew, she felt it like a solid blow to her stomach that made her feel as though her scar were about to tear itself open. It hit her then, very suddenly, just how deadly serious this was. The Duelling had seemed somewhat like a game to her back at Ohtori, but it had been serious as well, and she hadn't realized how serious until it was too late.

Three people dead already. Wakaba injured. She looked at the bedside clock. Nearly eleven. This time last night, she'd been lying awake in bed with Anthy asleep beside her, worrying about doing well on the interviews the next morning. Twelve hours ago, she'd just been going into the first interview, the one that went so badly.

She was exhausted and scared, and she missed Anthy so much already. But she was determined, as well. No half-measures. Tomorrow, she was going to draw what was left of her trust fund.

Her parents hadn't exactly been royalty, but they'd been well-off, and the money left to her after their deaths had paid for years of good boarding schools--Ohtori was only the last. Then it had paid the expenses of setting her and Anthy up in Sapporo, and allowed them the time to get their high school diplomas at one of the local schools.

What little was left was seed money, something put away for the future, for emergencies. Or had been; tomorrow, she would draw from it in order to pay for a plane ticket to Tokyo--which wouldn't be her last stop, either.

Had she felt much more grief at this symbol of her last severing of the life she'd led for seven years, she would have cried. But there was not quite enough, so she simply lay down under the sheets, cuddled Chu-Chu against her chest, turned off the light, and went almost immediately to sleep.

* * *

The weekend, and she had the day off work. Having neither food to eat, nor dishes to eat it from, nor utensils to eat it with, Anthy ate breakfast at a small restaurant near the apartment. Then she went shopping for the bare minimum of food and dishes she would need for the near future. The shopping was pleasantly free of any depth or thought, and she returned home feeling much better than she had when she'd left.

She put away noodles and vegetables and spices, plates and cups and utensils, and tried not to think about Utena going off to face Akio. She arranged everything very precisely. Then she cleaned the entire apartment. It was important to have things to do, routines to follow; those were what let you bear up, what gave your life structure, a skeleton upon which to drape the too, too solid flesh of life. Certain times to do things, certain ways to do them: which corner of the bed to tuck in first when she made it, which order to chop the vegetables in when she made dinner. Such were the things she thought about.

The voice came as she was rearranging the cushions on the couch in what was theoretically (if you didn't mind being cramped and uncomfortable) a combined dining and living room semi-detached from the kitchen.

anthy?

A little boy's voice. That was the most painful to hear, of course; her memory went back very far, and she could remember her true childhood as though through a thick, dark fog of time.

anthy, where are you?

How long, now, since the last time? She counted on her fingers. One, two, three, four... Four months. Always like that; just when she nearly forgot about it, it would happen again.

anthy, it's dark and i'm scared. come home. please?

"Leave me alone."

Even if he--Akio or Dios, whomever it was, it didn't matter--could hear her, he never responded as though he did.

anthy, i'm so lonely.

As she had every time before, she tried to close her mind off. But that wasn't possible, not to her brother.

anthy, please come home. i'm sorry.

"Liar."

i can't make him stop, anthy. help me.

She let out a single throat-tearing sob, and dug her nails into her palms. Pain, she had discovered, was the only thing that could make the voice recede.

This was another thing she had never told Utena. Then again, it was none of Utena's business. Not that it hadn't played a role in her refusal to even consider returning to Ohtori; it simply was not something she was willing to share.

She had been her brother's slave and puppet for so long. If even at this distance, his voice could reach her and bring her the same kind of sorrow that had led her to first don the garb of the Rose Bride, what might it do if she returned to the seat of his power?

Akio had been of Dios once; it was no wonder he could speak so well in imitation of him. She would not be fooled, though.

anthy?

Drops of blood welled up on her palms where she had driven her nails deepest.

anthy?

The voice went away. Anthy walked into the kitchen and washed the blood off her hands at the sink. The cuts were shallow, not at all serious.

What was done was done. No more princes, princesses or brides. No more fairy tales. The blood spiralled down the drain, turning the water crimson for a moment until it was completely washed away.

Someone knocked on the door. Utena, she thought, in a moment of wild hope, before reason killed it; Chu-Chu was with

her now, and she would know if Utena intended to return. Who, then? She put her eye to the peephole.

Two men, both in their late thirties: one tall and thin in a long overcoat, the other short and stout in a bulky winter jacket. Even as she looked out, the thin one knocked again.

She checked that the chain was on, then opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

Her eye was no longer to the peephole, but she guessed by the voice--a rough-edged, nicotine-scarred rumble--that it was the short one who answered. "I am Detective Omekki, of the Sapporo Homicide Squad, and my partner is Detective Osenbi, also of the Sapporo Homicide Squad. You are Himemiya Anthy?"

"Yes." She had to force a tremble of fear out of her voice; had something happened to Utena? No, she told herself; again, Chu-Chu was with Utena, and Anthy would have known. This was undoubtedly about what had happened at Saionji's.

"May we please come in and speak to you for a few minutes?"

Anthy looked through the crack of the chain-held door. The thin cop was holding up his badge; behind him, his partner scuffed the hall carpet with his boots and looked bored.

She unhooked the chain and opened the door. "Please come in."

"Thank you." It turned out that the rough smoker's voice belonged, in spite of her earlier presumption, to the thin detective.

The two detectives stepped into the apartment. "This way, please." Anthy directed them into the tiny living room and seated them on the couch; the short detective hopelessly disarrayed her carefully-arranged cushions with his casual descent. "Would you like some tea?"

"No thank you," the thin detective--Omekki, she believed--said. His partner--Osenbi--shook his head. "Please sit down, Himemiya-san."

Anthy resisted the urge to Watch them; it was an unfair intrusion under any circumstances, and they were both undoubtedly good men, merely doing their jobs. She sat down on a small padded wooden chair, the only other seat in the room other than the couch. "What is this about?"

Omekki reached into the pocket of his overcoat. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Yes." She had minded when Utena did it, after all. Thank God she'd finally quit.

No change of expression passed across Omekki's narrow face. He took his hand out of his pocket and returned it to his lap to keep company with its mate.

"It's a horrible habit, isn't it?" Osenbi asked suddenly, almost sadly; he had a sweet, clear tenor voice. "I've been trying to get him to quit for years."

She received the distinct impression from their conversation was that this was not even close to the first time this sort of exchange had occurred.

"We will be as brief as possible," Omekki said, pointedly glancing at his partner. "Last night, a security guard at an apartment building was shot to death, and a woman who lived there wounded. Your roommate, Tenjou Utena, was reported to be present, but we have been unable to locate her."

Osenbi took out a small spiral-bound notebook and poised his pen to take notes.

Omekki cleared his throat. "When did you last see Tenjou Utena?"

"Last night. A little before seven."

"She left the apartment?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We had a fight. She took a bag."

She stared at them challengingly, as though daring some sign of disapproval. None appeared forthcoming. Omekki rearranged the positioning of his hands in his lap; Osenbi tapped the top of his pen on the pad.

"Have you heard from her since then?"

"No."

She would be as honest as she could be without putting any undue danger of being tracked down upon Utena.

The questions continued: Do you have any idea where she might have gone? Does she have any friends she might go to?

No, no.

Anthy almost felt sorry for them. She had been deceiving smarter people for longer than both of them had been alive. They would leave, and not return; so she hoped.

"Thank you, Himemiya-san." Omekki concluded his questioning with a brief nod. "There is only one thing further. Do you have a recent photo of Tenjou Utena that we may have? It would be helpful to us."

"I do." She stood up. "It's in the bedroom."

Osenbi put away his notepad and pen, and rose from the couch with surprising grace for such a bulky man. "I'll get it."

She led him down the hallway and into the bedroom, retrieved the large photo album from the top drawer of her bureau, and found a recent photo with only Utena in it. Taken on a hike last summer: Utena, posed between two tall pine trees in a half-crouch, both hands on her upraised knee. Smiling.

Had she really been so unhappy? She'd hidden it well. Then again, Anthy knew very well how deeply things could be hidden.

The stout detective took the photograph from her and slipped it between two pages of his notebook. "Your friend is not a suspect," he said quietly, as though he did not want the possibility of his partner hearing him. "We only wish to talk to her to clarify some things. The statements from the other two witnesses are rather unclear."

"Thank you," she said after a moment, genuinely surprised by the gesture. Osenbi nodded once, and followed her out of the bedroom.

At the door, Omekki thanked her again and bowed slightly, followed a moment later in doing so by his partner. They left; Anthy closed the door behind them, bolted it, and chained it.

"I shouldn't," she muttered, pacing the kitchen and wringing her hands. "I really shouldn't."

She swallowed, and folded her hands in front of her breast.

"O spirit of wind and whirlwind... O gentle power of air... Harken unto my call..." A light breeze that could not have existed within the sealed confines of the apartment stirred her hair. "To my service you are bound."

The sylph, visible only as a mild disturbance in the air, like the ripple seen when looking over the top of a hot grill, danced about her head in blissful stupidity. The minor air elementals were cheerful as puppies, and nearly as smart; merely being able to exist in this plane, even for a brief moment, sent them into an almost incapacitating ecstasy.

"Go."

It went, literally quick as the breeze, and she abruptly began to hear the voices of the two detectives as though she stood right next to them. From the acoustics, she judged them to be descending in the elevator.

"...foreign extraction." Omekki, rough and gravelly.

"I think she's Indian." Osenbi, silk smooth.

"The call last night from that hotel to the apartment was almost certainly Tenjou."

"Shouldn't you have pressed her on it?"

"Not yet."

"What about the roses?"

"I highly doubt she has any knowledge about them that could help us."

"Serial killer, maybe?"

"A red rose in the mouth of all three? It would seem a signature."

"What about..."

She unbound the sylph, ignoring its pitiful cry as it was banished from this fascinating world back into its own dull plane of existence, staggered back, and slumped down into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Damn you, Akio," she murmured.

How redundant a curse, some part of her whispered; and she almost laughed.

* * *

Her plane touched down in Tokyo shortly after noon, descending through a thin but pervasive cloud cover that lay over the city like a veil. As the plane coasted to a stop on the dark tarmac, Utena looked out the window and saw that the gentlest of snowfalls rested upon Tokyo, a shallow dusting of white upon everything.

She rested her head back against the seat as the plane came to a stop next to one of the airport buildings, and put her hand into her jacket pocket where Chu-Chu lay asleep. She'd smuggled him aboard inside the rather cramped pocket, and he had, remarkably, remained quiet the whole time.

From her window seat, she watched the ground crew work to extend the short, flexible bridge between the plane and the building, and unbuckled her seat belt. The flight had taken a little over an hour from take-off to landing; good time.

Once the captain announced that they could disembark, she quickly made her way off the plane and hurried to collect her bag (which had been too large for carry-on luggage) at the luggage carousel two floors down. Back at the Sapporo airport, she'd been worried about security taking issue with the sword, but her gym bag came down the carousel's track as expected, and a quick check seemed to indicate that everything was in the place she'd left it.

At a tourist shop in the Arrivals terminal, she bought a street guide and a city map with the subway lines on it, and sat down at a table in a crowded airport cafe to plan out the route she would take to Juri's. She sipped poorly-brewed coffee that she'd put too much sugar in to numb the taste of the too-bitter beans, and made marks on the map with a stubby pencil she'd had in her purse. Chu-Chu sat in her lap (out of sight--no reason to raise any fuss the presence of such an animal might cause without necessity) and nibbled almost delicately on the cookie she'd bought for him.

Juri's apartment building--probably a highrise, the apartment number was 1017--was in Shibuya district, near the University of Tokyo. She guessed Juri might have gone there; might still be going there, if she were doing graduate work.

Should she call ahead? She considered it, then decided against it; easier to explain things face-to-face. Easier to make Juri remember in person, now that she had an idea of how it might be done from Saionji and Wakaba, and, for that matter, from the sudden, shocking recovery of her own memories of Mikage and the Black Rose Duellists.

She consulted the marks she'd put on the map, then wrote down the subway route she'd have to take on the inner back flap of the street guide. Best get moving; she hastily gulped down the last of her coffee and left the cafe, Chu-Chu again riding in the pocket of her jacket.

The airport was full of people; as she left the terminal, she saw so many embracing friends, lovers, family, all come from afar. It made her feel very lonely.

A small shuttle bus ran frequently between the airport and the nearest subway station, free for the use of anyone who could present a ticket stub from an incoming flight. Utena got into the line of people waiting for a spot outside the terminal; the air seemed too cold for the small amount of snow that had fallen, and she huddled into her coat and puffed on her gloveless hands to warm them. Two buses came before she managed to get aboard, and even then it was standing room only. At the back, a thin and harried young woman tried futilely to quiet the crying of the baby she held, looking terribly embarrassed and receiving numerous glares from the other passengers.

The baby's wailing filled the small bus from one end to another, worsening the already claustrophobic press of bodies. Despite the cold of the outside being almost as present within the confines of the bus, Utena saw sweat on many a scowling face as the bus left the grounds of the airport.

She had to make two line changes to get to the Shibuya stop, awkwardly dragging her bag around beneath the tiled ceilings and bright lights of the stations. The Tokyo subways were always busy, but Utena had been lucky to get out of the airport just after the lunchtime rush, and a few hours before the trains would begin to fill up with hundreds of thousands of workers returning home.

Upon finally reaching Shibuya station, she climbed up from the underground into the bright, crisp winter day. Shops and restaurants predominated in the area around the subway station, and the sidewalks were filled with people going about their daily business. She consulted the street guide again, then set out

across a small tree-filled park that lay like an oasis in the middle of the crowded urban desert; that was the quickest way to get to Juri's apartment.

Halfway across the park, she realized she was hungry--her last meal had been a light snack served almost immediately after the plane took off from Sapporo--and paused to buy two yakitori skewers from a vendor's cart. She ate perched on the edge of a park bench next to two chattering old ladies. Chu-Chu had begun to grow fidgety in her jacket pocket, so she took him out, sat him on her lap with one of the skewers, and ignored the odd looks the passers-by occasionally gave her.

Juri. She'd always had trouble getting a handle on her, and it probably wouldn't be any different today. Back at Ohtori, Juri had worn her elegant reserve over some deep and lasting scars that Utena had only hints of.

As with Saionji and Wakaba, there was the trouble of approach, and even if she could make Juri remember, what then? Hey Juri, now that you remember about Ends of the World and the Rose Bride and the Duels, why don't we go back to Ohtori together and kill Akio?

Appealing though the direct approach might be, it might not be the most successful. Killing Akio; the first time she'd really consciously thought about it, but there was really nothing else to do. This wasn't going to be a formal little duel where winning was just a matter of cutting someone's rose off.

That which was left unburied would not bury itself. With the realization that the only conceivable end to things was Akio's death came another: she had no idea at all how to accomplish it.

You always rush into things, she chided herself gently, as she finished off the skewer and licked meat juice from her fingers. She picked up Chu-Chu, set him on her shoulder, and walked the rest of the way across the park. Juri's apartment building was on a street one block north of here; she waited at the lights with a dozen other pedestrians, then crossed once it turned green and the rushing cars halted.

The building was a big, modern, steel-and-glass edifice that towered against the skyline and loomed over several smaller brownstones. She was fortunate enough to arrive just as an older man in a rather rumpled suit was leaving, which meant she didn't have to buzz up to Juri and try to explain who she was and why she should be let in over the intercom. The man looked at her

suspiciously as she caught the door, his gaze lingering on Chu-Chu.

"Visiting a friend." She gave him her most winning smile.
"Thanks." He shrugged, and walked away down the street.

This time, there was no nosy guard to question her presence there. No nosy guard to end up dead, either; she winced, and stabbed her finger hard at the UP button of the elevator, then rode it in silence to the tenth floor when it came.

Apartment 1017 was a few doors down the hallway, to the right of the elevator bank on the tenth floor. She breathed deeply, steeled herself, and knocked. No one answered.

"Stupid," she muttered, shaking her head in self-derision.
In the middle of the day like this, of course Juri wouldn't be at home.

Then the door opened, and Arisugawa Juri was on the other side. "Yes?"

"Juri-sempai." The words had a comfortable familiarity in her mouth; after seeing Saionji and Wakaba again, the impact of meeting another old acquaintance--friend?--from Ohtori was considerably lessened, but it still brought back the pain and triumph of old memories. "It's good to see you again."

"I remember the monkey more than anything else for some reason." On Utena's shoulder, Chu-Chu puffed up slightly with pride. "Didn't he belong to Himemiya Anthy?"

Utena's smile threatened to waver. "I'm kind of borrowing him at the moment."

Juri shrugged. "You were on the fencing team?"

"Sort of."

"Seven years now. I guess you were in the neighbourhood, and just decided to drop by?" Juri smiled, an edge of suspicion to it.

"Saionji gave me your address."

"He did?" The suspicion seemed to ebb a little; Juri stepped away from the door and pulled it a little wider. "Come in; easier to talk that way."

Inside, the apartment was nice, though a bit cluttered in places. The wall left of the large overstuffed couch that dominated the central area, was entirely devoted to fencing gear: a selection of foils, two suits of different sizes, and two wire-mesh masks. That and the faintly audible sound of a shower running made Utena guess that Juri had a roommate.

"Do you want tea? I was making some when you knocked."

"Yes, please."

"Have a seat. I'll be back in a moment." Utena sat down on the extremely comfortable couch, and watched Juri's back as she walked into the kitchen, red-gold ringlets bouncing against her back. Juri woman looked much the same as she had the last time Utena had seen her, albeit slightly taller and more filled-out; her hair was still so tightly curled as to almost resemble a helmet.

Utena put her bag down on the floor, as Chu-Chu scampered off her shoulder and took a seat in the middle of the cushion next to her, sinking almost halfway down into the plush fabric. From the kitchen, she could hear spoons clinking on china and cups rattling; moments later, Juri reappeared with a tray, a tea pot, and four cups.

"You should have called ahead," she said, as she poured tea for both Utena and Chu-Chu. "We don't get a lot of visitors." She poured a cup for herself and sat down in a hard-backed chair to the right-hand of the couch. "So, what brings you to Tokyo? If Saionji gave you my address, that must mean you were in Sapporo."

"Did you hear about what happened at Ohtori?"

"The boy who was killed in the duel? Yes, a terrible thing." Juri half-grimaced. "These amateurs, waving swords about, no idea what they're doing... no wonder someone event--someone got killed. Amateurs." She looked suddenly disconcerted, and put her teacup down on the saucer too hard; hot tea slopped over the sides, spilled onto her hand, and pooled in the saucer. "Ow; damn."

"Are you all right?"

Juri wiped the tea off her hand with a napkin. "Just a little scalded. Let me get a cloth to clean this up."

As she rose and started to return to the kitchen, Utena realized she could no longer hear the shower. Juri seemed to notice something as well, and paused. Chu-Chu lapped indelicately at his tea, face stuck into the cup like a cat's into a bowl.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Takatsuki Shiori stepped out, towelling her damp hair and clad in only a silk bathrobe belted slightly too loosely. "Juri, what--Oh. Hello." She dropped the towel on the floor, and turned away from Utena to belt her robe so it was decent above the waist as well as below. "I didn't realize we had a guest."

"She just showed up a few minutes ago," Juri explained, almost apologetically.

Utena very carefully sipped her tea, and tried to keep any expression of shock off her face. They were old friends, after all, and would have forgotten everything that happened between them--the Black Roses, Tsuchiya Ruka--so it wasn't especially surprising that they'd end up as roommates after graduation.

"Hello, Shiori-san," Utena said, as the woman turned back to them. "Nice to see you again."

"Tenjou Utena? You're still dressing like a boy?"

Juri, who in slacks and a long-sleeved turtleneck wasn't dressed much more femininely than Utena, frowned. "Shiori..."

"I'd stay to chat, but I have to get dressed and get to class." Leaving the discarded towel on the floor behind her, Shiori walked to the closed door at the far end of the apartment, directly opposite the couch Utena was sitting on, and opened it up. Beyond it, Utena could see a dresser with a mirror, the edge of a bed, and a chair upon which some clothes were draped.

Juri, a resigned look on her face, walked over to where Shiori had left her towel, picked it up, and tossed it back into the bathroom. Shiori, meanwhile, slipped out of her robe without bothering to close the bedroom door. Utena almost choked on her tea, and had to cover it up with a few discreet coughs.

"Just ignore her." Juri sat back down, shaking her head, and seemingly trying to keep a smile off her face. Utena turned her head almost a full ninety degrees to look Juri, but could still see Shiori standing before the mirror to pull on her panties and do up her bra out of the corner of her eye. "Now, what were we talking about again?"

"Well, umm..." Avoiding blushing was simply not possible. Utena gulped tea again, as it gave her an excuse to close her eyes; when she opened them again, Shiori was sitting in the chair pulling on pantyhose. Utena could almost certainly see her smirking. "You see, Ohtori..." Shiori finished with the pantyhose and began to comb her hair in front of the mirror, body turned in such a way as to present her profile to Utena. "Killing. Duels. Just awful. Student Council?"

Juri obviously was having difficulty not bursting out laughing. "Yes, what about the Student Council? I was on it the year you went to Ohtori, as the Treasurer."

Shiori was done with her hair now, and began to put on a complimenting jade skirt and green blouse; it was actually quite a modest ensemble, but Utena was so embarrassed by this point that it wouldn't have mattered if Shiori had been putting on a snowsuit. She simply couldn't find any words to say; they all seemed to have been consumed by the hot, undoubtedly obvious flush that had engulfed her face. Chu-Chu, who'd had just as good a view as Utena, was passed out face-down into his empty teacup.

Juri leaned over towards Utena and whispered, "I'm sorry, Utena. I shouldn't find it so funny, but..." Her words trailed away as she smiled broadly.

"It's okay," Utena muttered, even though it wasn't. She stared at Juri's smile, and felt some of her own embarrassment begin to leave; she had never seen Juri smile like that at Ohtori.

Shiori came back into the main room of the apartment, closing the bedroom door behind her. "Bye, Juri. See you at dinner tonight." She leaned down and, quite casually, kissed Juri on the mouth.

Juri looked surprised for about half a second, and then closed her eyes. Shiori did not; her gaze turned almost challengingly upon Utena.

Utena tilted her head back to drain the last of her tea, and looked away. When she finally turned her eyes back, Shiori was pulling on her coat and boots at the door, and Juri was watching her preparations for departure with almost painful intensity.

"Goodbye, Utena," Shiori called sweetly--Utena could not justifiably say merely from tone that it was mocking--as she left.

"Bye, Shiori," she replied, too quietly for Shiori to hear--and she'd already stepped out before Utena got the words out anyway.

"Shiori's a little possessive," Juri said, as though it explained everything.

Utena nodded and tapped her fingers on her knees. "I noticed."

"She doesn't usually act like that. People from Ohtori make her nervous." Juri frowned. "Bad memories."

"Lots of those," Utena softly agreed.

"Ohtori's what you came to talk about, isn't it?" Juri was suddenly all seriousness again. "About that boy who got killed."

Utena nodded. "Juri, this is going to sound a little strange, but... what do you remember about me?"

Juri pursed her lips thoughtfully. "You dressed like a boy. Then again, I was always in my student council uniform, so I wasn't exactly in regulation female dress either. I seem to remember you were on the fencing team. Or was it the kendo team? I think we had some matches together, but..." She shrugged helplessly, and then scowled. "You know, I really can't remember, but I feel like I should." She shook her head. "No; I know I should."

"Once, when I needed it, you lent me a sword," Utena quietly said. Something in Juri's eyes; a flash of recognition, or long-hidden pain. "I didn't have one I could use, and, even though we'd been foes before, you let me use your blade."

Juri stared at her in total silence. Utena went on. "It broke; it broke, but I won anyway. It was a miracle."

"A miracle," Juri murmured. She closed her eyes; a single tear, of which she was seemingly unconscious, slipped out from beneath her left eyelid and slid down her cheek.

"Juri," Utena said urgently, "picture a rose. What colour is it?"

"Orange. No, black. No, wait." Juri's voice was somnambulant and entranced, as though she were hypnotized. "Black and orange; black and orange roses, thousands of them. They're all entwined together. A giant fence. Thorns."

"Is there a gate? There is a gate. Find the gate." With no real idea of what she was doing, Utena improvised on the fly.

"A gate. Thorns. A lock of thorns. I can hear water. Cold."

"Open the gate."

"There's thorns. I'll cut myself."

"Take the handle."

"I'm not wearing my ring!" Juri's voice had a note of desperation in it. "I'm not wearing my ring, the thorns are growing, they're going to rip my skin off, oh my God--"

"Draw your sword!" Utena snapped. "Cut them down! You're a Duellist--fight. Fight your way through the gate."

Juri screamed a wordless battle cry; tears were streaming down her face now. Her hands rose up, clawed once at the air as though trying to scabble up the slick walls of some sheer pit, and then fell limply at her sides.

Utena leaned over and hesitantly touched her shoulder. "Juri?"

"The Ends of the World," Juri said in a thin scrape of a voice full of despair, "The end of my world. Ends of the world, end of my world." She pronounced the last sentence in a childish singsong; then her shoulders heaved once, convulsively, as though she were attempting to shrug off some great weight, and a single drawn-out sob wracked her body. "Ends of the world, end of my world; ends of the world, end of my world." She buried her face in her hands, and began to weep inconsolably. "Ends of the world..."

"Juri-sempai, come here." With difficulty, Utena drew the shuddering woman over to the couch, and wrapped her in a tight embrace.

"...end of my world."

Utena had one arm around Juri's shoulders and the other around her waist; Juri clung to her as though to a spar on the turbulent ocean, half-huddled into her lap like child to mother.

"Ends of the world, end of my world." Over and over again, chanted like a mantra, each word falling heavy as though graven

from stone.

"It's okay." Futile words and probably lies, but there was nothing else to say. Guilt and shame threatened to consume Utena; she'd gone too quickly, pressed too hard, and it didn't seem as though Juri had been able to take it. "Let it out; let it all out." All those painful memories, all coming back at once... No wonder it could not be borne without breaking.

"Shiori? Shiori?" A pause to draw breath, as though for renewed sobs. "Miki? Ruka?"

"No," Utena said; she gently stroked Juri's hair. The curls were so tight, coiled like springs... how long would it be if it were straightened? As long as Anthy's, once she'd begun to let it down? "Utena."

"Utena," Juri whispered; the word seemed to soothe her. She raised her head from Utena's shoulder and stared at her through teary eyes. Then she kissed her, quite forcefully, on the mouth.

More shocked than actually repulsed, Utena shoved Juri off her and onto the couch cushion beside her, nearly crushing Chuchū in the process. She scrambled away, half-fell to the floor, and finally ended up sitting back down in the hard-backed chair Juri had formerly occupied.

"Juri!" she snapped; her heart and head were pounding like twin drums.

On the couch, Juri hung her head miserably, red-gold curls veiling her face. "I'm sorry, Utena," she said, half-choked. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... no, that sounds stupid, I obviously did, but... it all came back at once, everything, and I... Oh God, I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Utena asked quietly, taking deep breaths to try and slow her heart down. "For being attracted to me? Don't be. That's nothing to be sorry for. You are what you are, Juri; you don't need to apologize to me."

There was silence between them for a time, and then Juri slumped down on the couch as though trying to submerge herself in it. "Dear God, Utena, why didn't you come after me sooner? Seven years of living with all those lies..."

"I was avoiding it," Utena said. "Well, Anthy was avoiding it, and I was kind of tagging along--no, that's not fair. It wasn't Anthy's fault, my choices are my own. Then I met Saionji

again, and he didn't remember me, and a little later I read in the newspaper about the boy being killed. I realized that it wasn't over, then, that Akio was still trying to..." She trailed away, unsure what to say next.

"I'm going to make some more tea." Juri stood up, a little shakily. "You can tell me about what you've been doing, and I'll tell you about what I've been doing, and then we'll figure out how we're going to stop Akio."

"Oh, I've got a good idea of how we're going to stop him," Utena said slowly, almost menacingly. "There's only one way I can think of that's permanent--at least, I hope it is."

"Kill him," Juri said bluntly. She folded her arms and looked down at her feet. "I suppose there's no other way."

"No," Utena agreed, glad to have it affirmed by someone else. "I've thought about it, and I really don't think there is."

* * *

That she'd expected the call did little to diminish its impact.

"May I speak to Himemiya Anthy?" His voice had almost always been angry, but sometimes, so rarely, he'd been able to speak her name with an almost unmatched tenderness... Now, seven years since she'd last heard him speak, she could again hear a faint thread of that rare emotion running through his voice, as he spoke her name once more.

"Hello, Saionji-sempai."

"Tenjou said..."

"I know what you're calling about. Where are you now?"

"The hospital. Wakaba--my wife--"

"I know. I'll be there soon."

In the car, as she drove the winter roads, she listened to Utena's station. Another early music program, songs for counter-tenor with lute accompaniment.

o^ Lady, if you so spite me,
o^ Wherefore do you so oft kiss and delight me,
o^ Sure that my heart oppress and overcloyed
o^ May break, thus overjoyed?

He had been so many surfaces: a callous brute, a proud warrior, a wounded boy. One of those rare ones whom she couldn't Watch with her witch's sight, whom she could know only by his actions and not by his soul.

o/ If you seek to spill me,
o/ Come kiss me sweet, and kill me
o/ So shall your heart be eased,
o/ And I shall rest content and die well pleased.

Perhaps that was why she had felt something for him; had been willing, despite his casual brutality and cruelty, to put even a little of herself into the exchange diary. Which had been consigned to the flames; her knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering wheel and turned into the parking lot of the hospital.

She got out of the car, zipping up her jacket as she did, and made her way through the wind-scattered snow flurries to the main entrance. At the reception desk, she signed her name in the visitor's book, and asked for directions to Wakaba's room. Sixth floor; she waited alone at the elevators, then rode up in one empty except for herself.

There had been something in Saionji... a longing for something he could not attain. He had truly been in Touga's shadow: not quite so skilled with a sword, not quite so popular with the girls, Vice-President instead of President.

Sixth floor. She stepped out onto white tiles surrounded by white walls; the air smelt of disinfectant and, faintly, flowers. Roses. Just a coincidence. People always brought flowers to people in hospital; she should have brought flowers. Not roses, of course, something else. Definitely not roses.

Halfway down the hallway to Wakaba's room, she stepped into a public washroom, checked to make sure it was empty, then locked herself in a stall. Minutes later, she emerged with a bouquet of colourful flowers that hadn't even existed some minutes before.

The door to Wakaba's room was closed when she reached it; she hesitated for a moment, then knocked. It opened; she looked at Saionji Kyouichi for the first time in seven years.

"You cut your hair," she said.

He smiled, a bit nervously; he looked very tired, and his eyes were ringed by dark circles. She wondered if he'd slept much last night, or at all. "I got tired of it hanging in my eyes."

Wakaba was sitting up in bed with an IV hooked to her arm; she waved, and grinned brightly, although she looked a little wan. "Hi, Anthy!"

Anthy stepped in and closed the door behind her; the click of the latch in the silence seemed to impart an air of gravity to the room. Saionji looked as nervous as she felt; Wakaba just looked cheerful. The tension in the room was unignorable; so many hidden things, so much unsaid.

"Saionji Kyouichi, Saionji Wakaba." She looked from one to the other. "It seems appropriate." She walked over to the bed and looked down at Wakaba. "How are you?"

"The doctors say the bullet missed puncturing an organ by thiiiiis much." Wakaba held up her thumb and index finger with a bare half-inch separating them. "Isn't that amazing? It's like a miracle. I guess the gods must really like me." Out of the corner of her eye Anthy saw Saionji, still standing by the door, wince.

"Utena says she hopes you heal quickly." Utena hadn't actually said that, but Anthy knew she would have if there'd been time. And it made Wakaba beam. "I brought you flowers." She held them out a little stiffly.

Wakaba took them and inhaled their scent deeply. "Thank you." She handed them back. "Put them beside the bed, would you? I'll get Kyouichi to put them in water later."

"How is Utena?" asked Saionji. "When did you talk to her?"

"Last night," Anthy answered, after hesitating. "She said you were starting to remember. About Ohtori."

Saionji's face suddenly looked even more drawn and weary than it had when he'd opened the door. "Scattered bits," he affirmed quietly. "Fragments; like picking up the pieces of a broken stained-glass window, and then another piece, and they've got parts of a figure on them--a hand, the side of a face--so you know they were meant to go together somehow, but you can't..."

"Black roses," Wakaba said glumly. She rested her elbows on her knees and propped her chin on her palms. "I remember black roses. And I was trying to hurt Utena. But I don't understand that; I would never hurt Utena." Her eyes suddenly widened. "Hey, was Ohtori like some kind of secret medical experiment facility? Or maybe they were doing hypnosis on us to turn us into super-soldiers? Kyouichi, what was that movie about the guy

who got programmed to be an assassin, but he couldn't remember it, well, not really, and he kept on having all those nightmares? 'The Albanian Candidate'?"

"Wakaba," Saionji said, a soft, steely voice; chiding, as though he were speaking to his child rather than his wife.

"Oh! Sorry!" She glanced apologetically to Anthy, but the focus of her gaze was still entirely upon Saionji. "I babble when I'm nervous. When I'm not nervous, too. You probably remember that, though. Do you? Or did your memories get--"

"Wakaba."

"Sorry!"

"Saionji-sempai," Anthy interrupted gently. He flinched a little at the honorific. "This would be easier if I could talk to each of you separately. Would you leave me alone with Wakaba?"

He stiffened a little; suspicious. She supposed that was good; he had reason enough to be suspicious of her. "I'll take a walk," he said finally, reluctantly, and stepped out the door.

As soon as he was gone, Anthy reached down, grabbed the wrist that didn't have the IV needle in it, and pulled the long sleeve of the hospital gown up past Wakaba's elbow.

"Hey--what are you doing?" Wakaba protested.

On the pale inner flesh of her arm, fading bruises left by a finger and a thumb, gripping too hard, digging deep into the flesh; small circles, yellowing on the edges like old parchment, deepening to a sickly blue-green in their centre.

Wakaba stared into Anthy's eyes; her expression was agonized. "How did you know?" she whispered.

"I used to have them too," Anthy answered quietly. She looked at the stark contrast of her dark fingers against Wakaba's pale wrist. "Though they weren't so obvious, for obvious reasons."

Wakaba could say nothing in response. She stared at the bruises as though seeing them for the first time.

"What did you tell the doctors, when they asked?"

"They haven't yet; I think they were too busy taking the bullet out of me. I hope they don't ask."

"I almost thought he'd actually changed," Anthy said. She could not keep anger out of her voice. "I suppose he's just learned to hide it better."

"No." Wakaba shook her head. "No, he's better; he... After high school, he went to a doctor. They gave him a prescription. It usually works really well, but sometimes, he just gets so angry, and then I get scared, but he's always sorry afterwards."

"Yes." Anthy let Wakaba's wrist go and walked away from the bed to the window, where she drew the curtains. "They're always sorry afterwards, but they hurt you all the same."

"No, you don't understand." Wakaba's voice was suddenly very calm. "Kyouichi's got a problem; a mental one. A chemical imbalance in his brain; I don't remember all the details. I've got a book on it at home; several books, really." She sighed. "He's a good man, Anthy, he really is, but sometimes, it's like he's another person. I love him so much, but sometimes..."

"He scares you," Anthy muttered, not even sure if Wakaba could hear her. She still had her back to the woman in the hospital bed, staring intently at the drawn curtains. "You're worried that some day, he's going to hurt you very badly. Every time you're with him, you're just a little scared; you're never completely comfortable. But you can't just leave; there's so many reasons you need to stay, and... what would he become if you weren't there to balance him? And you love him; that's what binds you to him, despite everything, and even though--" She stopped abruptly, and returned to the bedside. "I'm sorry. I'm rambling."

"Others tolerate it in me." Wakaba smiled tenuously. "It's only just that I tolerate it in them."

Impulsively, Anthy leaned down and kissed the other woman lightly on the cheek. "You're much like I remember you, Wakaba," she said gently as she straightened. "You have a good heart."

Wakaba blushed.

Anthy reached into her jacket pocket, pulled out a small wooden box, and pressed it into Wakaba's hands. "Open it."

"What is it?"

"Something that should have been yours." Old pains.

Wakaba flicked the box open and looked at what lay upon the dark velvet. A wooden hair ornament; a green leaf, ribs highlighted with gold. Confusion flickered upon her face; then she began to cry, tears sliding down her cheeks in absolute silence.

"Why does this make me so sad?" she whispered.

Anthy brushed her fingers against Wakaba's cheek and gathered tears upon them. "Do you really want to know?"

"What? Of course I do."

"Do you, I wonder? I really wonder."

Wakaba took the ornament out and held it in trembling fingers. "What do you mean?"

"A question. Merely hypothetical." Anthy sat down in the bedside chair and folded her hands in her lap. "If you could have all your memories back of what really happened, or if you could just go back to living the life you did when you couldn't remember what really happened at Ohtori--no hints at all, no dreams or flashes of memory or deja-vu--which one would you choose?"

Wakaba frowned as she thought about it. "I suppose I'd ask Kyouichi," she eventually concluded. "I mean, it would be his choice too, and I'd go along with--"

"No. Your choice. For both of you. Remember everything, or forget it all again. You were happy, weren't you?"

Wakaba nodded. "Uh-huh, always. Well, no, not always because sometimes Saionji got angry, but that didn't happen too often, but I was happy. Really happy."

"And how are you now?"

"Well, I'm happy that I got to see Utena-sama again." She stared down at the leaf in her hands. "Then again, I got shot, and... I have all these memories of acting like... a bad person. And this, this leaf--it makes me feel so sad, but I don't know why."

"If there are no memories," Anthy said quietly, "then there is no pain."

"But wouldn't I remember that I couldn't remember?" Wakaba chuckled softly. "I guess that sounds stupid. But it would be like a big gap in my head; though I've got one of those already, or maybe more than one. A gap in my soul."

"New memories," Anthy whispered. "Not painful ones; happy ones. And you'd never know."

"Can you fix what's wrong with Saionji? I mean, if you can play around with people's memories..."

Anthy paused. "Yes," she concluded. "I could. It would be..."

Abruptly, Wakaba snapped her arm out and grabbed Anthy's shoulder. "D--don't you dare," she snarled. "Don't you mess around with my head, or Saionji's head, ever again. I'll... I'll kill you if you do! Even if I can't remember, I'll--"

Anthy shrugged away from Wakaba's grip and rose out of the chair. "So," she said, "I guess that's your choice." Her hand darted out and stroked Wakaba's brow; the lights in the room flickered and dimmed momentarily, and a breeze without source flapped the curtains. A thin line of light drew by the edge of Anthy's nail shone on Wakaba's forehead, then expanded into a circle like a sleeping eye awaking.

The wind died, the lights came back full strength, and silence reigned over the room for a few long seconds. Wakaba overthrew it by drawing a long, shuddering, sighing breath, and replacing the leaf ornament back in its box.

"I see; that's why it made me so sad," she whispered. "Thank you, Anthy. But there's still a lot I don't understand. Who are you? How can you..."

"So many questions." Anthy smiled sadly; the glowing circle on Wakaba's forehead flickered, and died. "I can't answer them all; better if I don't answer any. Sleep, Wakaba; heal."

Wakaba yawned. "I am tired. But... what about Saionji? Will you--"

"Yes. Rest."

"Thank you, Anthy." Wakaba closed her eyes, and almost immediately began to snore. Anthy took the box from her hands and put it on the table beside the bed, then left the room. Saionji was waiting in the hall, arms folded and leaning against

the wall. Anthy wondered if he'd been listening at the door, and, if so, what he'd heard.

"Let's go for a walk," she said. He nodded, and they headed for the elevators together.

* * *

"So, you're doing your Master's now?"

"Yes. In Modern Japanese History. And there's been talk from the university's fencing coach about my starting to train to try and get on the Olympic team in the next few years."

"Wow."

Juri cradled her teacup in her hands in silence for a moment, then looked at Utena pointedly. "So, when are you going to ask about Shiori?"

"What?" Utena tried, and failed, to sound as if the thought had never occurred to her.

"I know you want to ask," Juri said with a tiny, almost melancholy smile. "If I were you, I would."

"Only if..."

"I'm comfortable talking about it? Don't be silly, Utena; I'm me. I'm not comfortable talking about anything related to my personal life."

Utena laughed. "Then don't."

"You deserve to know something after that performance Shiori gave." Juri grimaced. "Where to begin... I suppose I have Touga to thank, much as I hate to have to thank that bastard for anything."

"Oh?"

"Do you remember how badly Shiori took Ruka dumping her? Maybe you don't; I do. Now. Just believe me, it was bad." Juri's mouth had become a completely horizontal line, with narrowed eyes staring over it; Utena thought she could hear her teeth grinding together. "She took Touga dumping her worse. We ended up getting drunk together; don't ask why, it would take too long to explain. Then we ended up sleeping together--stop blushing, Utena, not like that. Just in the same bed; Shiori didn't want to sleep alone that night."

Juri took a long gulp of her tea. Her hands shook a little as she put it back down on the saucer. "You have to keep in mind that we didn't remember anything about the Duels, or the Black Roses, or Ruka, or... well, anything. We were roommates, just two old friends. I was still... in love with her, but... God, things are going to get complicated once we give her her memories back."

Utena almost said, "We don't have to", but stopped herself.

"Anyway, I woke up the next morning, and Shiori was gone. So was my locket." She reached up and touched her throat, presumably to indicate where the locket lay beneath her loose turtleneck. "Akio gave it back, of course; good as new. He was very careful."

"You still have it?"

Juri nodded.

Utena blinked. "He was careful, then; he must have had a duplicate made. If it was just an illusion, it wouldn't be able to pass beyond Ohtori's grounds."

"Do you know that for certain?"

The thought troubled Utena. "Anthy basically said as much; Akio's power is limited to Ohtori."

"Why?"

"It just is. What happened after that?"

Juri shrugged. "I really don't know. Shiori didn't come back to our room until the evening; I was all ready to have to try and explain about the locket. Make up some lie. That was also the day Miki's sister died, so I had a lot on my mind."

"Kozue?" Utena pronounced the name slowly, slightly shocked.

Juri nodded. "I can't say I was ever very fond of her, but... well, Miki took it very hard."

"How is he now? Do you keep in touch?"

Juri shook her head; she looked more than a little regretful. "We just kind of drifted apart. He changed after Kozue died, withdrew a little more into his music and his

mathematics. He was still at Ohtori three years ago; that was the last time I heard from him."

"And... you and Shiori?"

"We talked." Juri frowned; the memory was apparently painful. "For a long time. Got a lot of things into the open. And... it turned out she wasn't actually that uncomfortable with it. Nervous, more than anything else." She gestured around at the apartment. "You've pretty much seen how things ended up."

Utena smiled. "I'm really glad things worked out for you, Juri."

"You're not the only one." Juri cracked her knuckles, shook her head, sighed. "As I said, things are going to be complicated once Shiori starts remembering the duels, Ruka... especially Ruka." She laughed derisively. "It's complicating things for me already."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No. I think I've shared enough. And unless you want to get anything off your shoulders, let's figure out what we're going to do next." Juri's tone made it clear the offer was more symbolic than sincere.

"All right." Utena leaned back in the chair and tried to think of where to begin. "What do you know about what Touga did after graduation?"

Juri scowled at the mention of Touga's name. "Nothing. I've made a studious effort to avoid contact with him ever since he left Ohtori. Why?"

"The Knight of Pentacles," Utena replied. "Something about him was familiar, but I couldn't say for sure. He used a katana, though, and he seemed to know me."

Juri sighed. "There's a way to find out, although I was hoping we wouldn't have to involve her."

"Involve who?"

"Who else would know what Touga had been up to?"

"Nanami. Do you--"

"She goes to a private university on the other side of the city," Juri explained, cutting Utena off. "She's on their

fencing team. Not a lot of formal skill, but loads of raw talent. Fast as all hell, too. Shiori had a match against her a few months ago at the divisional finals." Yet again, Juri scowled. "Shiori lost."

"I was going to track her down anyway," Utena said. "This just makes things easier."

"Are you sure you want to get Nanami involved in this?"

"We need all the help we can get; once she gets her memories back, I'm sure she'll have as much reason to hate Akio as we do."

"Think about it," Juri said, "if Touga's still working for Akio--and this Knight makes it sound as though he might be--then what guarantee do we have that Nanami isn't as well?"

"Ahh. Is she still, umm..."

"Obsessed with her brother?" Juri hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose I have to be fair. Nanami's a lot better than she used to be. She... I'll admit it, one of the reasons Miki and I drifted apart is that he and Nanami started hanging around together a lot more after Kozue died." She sighed. "I'm not very close to my older sister, Utena; I guess I couldn't relate nearly as well to losing a sibling who was that important to me."

Utena blinked. "You have an older sister?"

Juri smiled, a bit sadly. "As I said, I'm not very close to her. Not like Miki and Kozue were."

"How did Kozue... die?"

"Car accident. I never got any more details than that. Miki didn't like to talk about it, at least with me."

"Have you got Nanami's number?"

"I can get it. I'll have to make a few calls; my fencing coach to get the number of her coach, then her coach to get her number."

"Good. Do that."

"Are you certain?"

Utena rubbed her temples. "Look, Juri, if you think we can't trust her..."

Juri looked troubled. "I think the gains outweigh the risks. After all, we don't necessarily need to restore her memory to quiz her on what her brother's been up to; we can feel her out, get a sense of where she might stand, before we make that decision." She got up, walked towards the bedroom door, pulled it open. "I'll be back in a few minutes." The door closed behind her as she entered.

Chu-Chu, who had been gobbling cookies straight from the box during their entire conversation, looked up at Utena. "Chu?"

She picked him up and craned her neck down until her eyes were only inches from his. "I think this is going well, don't you?"

"Chu." His beady black orbs glittered.

"Exactly." She gave him another cookie as reward for his eloquence, then settled back into the chair. It really was going well. Juri was so different from the person she'd been at Ohtori, more whole. The only sticking points were Shiori's hostility, which Utena couldn't really understand, and... the kiss. That was even understandable, given a moment's thought; she remembered Juri asking her, right before everything had come to its end, for a photo to put in another locket. Seven years of that attraction being repressed... no, it was understandable. Forgivable, if there had been anything to forgive. Maybe even a little flattering...

Juri returned, interrupting her thoughts, and sat back down on the couch. "Well, I set up a meeting with Nanami for later this afternoon."

"That didn't take long."

Juri shrugged. "She was surprised to hear from me; I think she's curious." Juri looked at her watch. "The meeting's in about an hour." She handed Utena a scrap of paper with an address written on it. "That's where she's going to meet you; it's a coffee shop."

"Meet me? Aren't you coming?"

Juri flopped back onto the couch and crossed her ankles. "How you got me to remember. Do you think I could do that to Shiori on my own?"

"Akio's illusions are mighty but fragile," Utena murmured. "I think it's more a matter of realizing they're there than

anything else. Talking about things that happened that were important to them--probably Ruka--seems to be the key. Oh, and having them picture the rose."

"I was the first one you tried it on, wasn't I?" Juri asked dubiously.

Utena's head drooped a little. "Yeah."

"Nice to be a test subject," Juri said with false levity.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"It hurt!"

"I didn't expect it wouldn't."

"No; I suppose not." Juri looked momentarily pained, and then shook it off. "So, I'll help Shiori remember, and you'll go to meet Nanami."

"How long will it take me to get there?"

Juri glanced at her watch. "At this time of day? About an hour."

Utena made a small, panicked sound. "Ack. Better hurry. Can I leave my bag here? And Chu-Chu? Nanami never seemed to get along too well with animals."

"Go ahead," Juri said resignedly. "I suppose we have enough food in the apartment to last him until dinner time."

"Oh, he doesn't have to eat that much." Utena poked Chu-Chu in his pudgy belly. "He's just a glutton. Don't put up with him if he tries to bully you into doing what he wants."

Juri reached over and took the nearly-empty cookie box away. "I won't."

"Chu!"

* * *

Near the hospital, a winter-clad park stretched across several city blocks. Anthony walked beside Saionji upon one of the serpentine paths that had been cleared through the foot or so of snow that still remained upon the ground. No one else was in the park, which didn't surprise Anthony much; its naked trees and frozen pond were not inviting to walkers.

They had come all this way in silence, which had begun to wear thin on Anthy. Saionji seemed deep in thought, and she wondered again if he had been listening at the door while she talked to Wakaba.

"How long have you and Wakaba been together, Saionji-sempai?" she asked finally, unable to stand it any longer.

He blinked, then answered, "Since my last year at Ohtori, I suppose, although it was just casual dating then. After I graduated, I kept on coming back every week or so to see her, and things eventually just kind of clicked in my head that she was the one for me."

"How nice," Anthy murmured. They walked along a little further, and then he stopped; she looked back questioningly. "Saionji-sempai?"

"Kyouichi," he said softly. "Call me Kyouichi. Please."

"Very well." She looked at him carefully. "Shall I do it now? I suppose this place is isolated enough."

"What?"

"Your memories."

He nodded, once. "I want to remember." His tongue nervously flicked out and moistened lips chapped by the winter air. "I... we had something. I know that. But I can't remember what. And a car, driving down the highway, but it was like there was nothing else around me but the night, even though there were lights burning everywhere... No grass or trees or mountains or people... Just me, in a car, and... others, too. And nothing else. As though we were driving right to the very ends of the world."

As he'd spoken, his voice had become more and more shaky, trembling as though he were speaking through holes in his throat, holes in his mind. "And, at the end... eternity. Something beyond eternity, outside eternity. So bright; so very bright."

Anthy extended her right arm perpendicular to her body in a slow, continuous sweep; pale fire limned her fingers, then gathered to a point upon the nail of her index finger. Saionji closed his eyes as she reached up to stroke his brow; his mouth opened into a small, silent, almost ecstatic O. The line of light shone as though emanating from beneath the crack of a door, then opened fully, and, with full opening, died.

Saionji cried out softly and stumbled forward, hands grabbing her shoulders to support himself. He was much taller and heavier than her, and the sudden extra weight made her stumble back with him still clinging to her.

"Himemiya," he gasped. "Himemiya." His eyes were wild, pupils dilated; his breathing came hard and heavy, and she could feel his whole body trembling through his grip on her shoulders. For a moment, she wondered just what the consequences of what she had done would be; then she cast those thoughts aside. Wakaba had made the choice for both of them, after all, and she was not her brother.

"The Revolution, Himemiya; I forgot all about it." His voice had begun to crack, approaching shrillness as he spoke. "But it's not too late, is it?" She nearly cried out in pain as his grip tightened on her shoulders. "We--you and I, we can still bring it, and then--"

"It's too late," she snapped back, slicing his words short. "It's seven years too late."

His handsome face turned ugly so quickly it was like the donning of a mask. "Don't take that tone with me!" One hand left her shoulder and drew back.

Anthy's eyes flashed green, and he froze. She stepped back, leaving one hand clutching empty air, and the other raised in preparation for a slap that would never connect.

Not a muscle twitched upon his body; only his eyes moved, darting back and forth within their sockets with the trapped gaze of a hunted animal.

"You see, Saionji-sempai?" she asked, cool and cold as the air around them; at the same time as she saw the worst in him, though, she had to fight back her pity. "Any time you touched me, anything you did to me, it was because I let you."

He did not, could not, respond. His body stood like a statue.

"I am Rose Bride no longer," she hissed. The thought that there might be people entering in the park now, people near enough to see this strange tableaux, occurred to her; then she realized, with a liberation of her heart like a bird flying free of its cage, that she did not care. "And no one--not you, not my brother, not anyone--will touch me again unless I allow it."

Her hand snapped out, almost of its own volition, and caught him a ringing blow across the face; he did not, could not move, but she saw tears of pain well in his frightened eyes. She let her hand swing back almost to her shoulder, and then backhanded him; the sound echoed in her head like the tolling of bells. The tears began to run down Saionji's immobile cheeks like cataracts down a cliff-face.

"How do you like it?" Her voice snarled in her ears like a beast's. She hit him again, breaking a nail and drawing a line of blood across his cheek. "HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?" A drum--her heart--pounded in her head, and the world seemed covered by a thin scarlet film.

Suddenly, she felt it like a cold chill. She was being observed. Her head snapped from one side to another, but there was no one in the park; the use of her power to paralyse Saionji had also heightened her senses as a side-effect, but she could spot no one... Wait. Distantly, atop a building, a glint of light that was out place, as of the sun reflecting off a lens...

Forgetting about Saionji, she hurled herself free from her body like a bird taking flight from some dark cave, rushing towards that glint of light like a falcon dives upon its prey...

Then, suddenly, she was snapped back into her body; that would happen automatically if it was disturbed. Saionji was on his knees before her, arms wrapped around her waist, face pressed into the folds of her long skirt, sobbing.

"I'm sorry," he wailed. "I'm s-s-sorry."

Anthy looked down at him, and pity filled her to almost the limits of her capacity. There was blood all over one side of his face from where her nail had cut him; she felt sick with herself.

"I see," she murmured; she reached down, and gently traced her fingers through his hair. "It's not just who you are; it's the power you have. If you have absolute power over someone, no matter what kind of person you are..."

"I'm s-so b-b-b-bad, I'm s-s-so b-b-b-b..." His voice dissolved into helpless, wordless stuttering; Anthy glanced around to see if they were attracting any attention at all, but no one was close enough to become curious. And the glint of light on lens was gone.

"Shh." She knelt down and cradled him in her arms as best she could; he was so much bigger than her. "Kyouichi, it's all right. I'm sorry too."

"I'm s-s-sorry, M-m-m-mother."

"Shh." Suddenly she was very, very cold. "I'm not your mother. It's Anthy. Himemiya Anthy."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes; there was no recognition in his eyes. "Anthy. Himemiya Anthy." He said the words as though testing them for authenticity; then the haunted, agonized look left his eyes. "Anthy." He broke roughly away from her embrace, stood up, and took a few steps back. "I'm..."

"Shh. Don't talk. It's all right." She sorted through her purse and found a half-empty packet of tissues. Stepping forward until she stood before him, she began to wipe the blood and tears off his face. It was, undoubtedly, going to bruise; already swollen, in fact.

As she dropped the damp, bloody tissue on the snow-dusted path, Saionji reached up, touched his cheek, and winced. "This is going to be hard to explain to Wakaba."

Unexpectedly, they both laughed.

Saionji closed his eyes, and took a deep breath of winter air. "I'm trying, Anthy," he whispered. "I'm really trying. I haven't got that angry since before Wakaba and I were married. I'm on--"

"Medication. Wakaba told me."

He winced a little. "Oh."

She wanted to ask him why he'd called her "Mother", but didn't. If only she could Watch him... no. She'd already paralysed and brutalized him using her power. There really was only a difference of degrees between her and Akio.

"Maybe you should put a little snow on your face," Anthy suggested. "It might not swell up so bad, then."

Saionji nodded and scooped up a handful from a nearby bank. They walked back towards the hospital in silence, and, all the way, Anthy's thoughts were full of glints of light.

* * *

Nanami was late, of course. Utena should have expected that; after all, this was Nanami. Touga's little sister; snide and condescending and selfish.

Also necessary. At the very least, she could help to confirm or deny Utena's suspicions about Touga; perhaps, if things worked out, there'd be one more blade against Akio. Two more, if Nanami could still fight a double-weapon style.

Utena waited in a booth in the back with a cup of coffee and a biscotti, consuming both slowly and reading the newspaper. She scanned the entire front section carefully, but there was no new information on the Ohtori killing; plenty on the three murders in Sapporo last night, but she avoided reading those articles.

Five minutes after the official meeting time, Nanami breezed in the door of the coffee shop, dressed to the nines, hair elegantly coiffed. She looked around the shop--Utena couldn't tell if Nanami's eyes lingered upon her in quasi-recognition or not, as the younger woman wore dark sunglasses--then turned and walked back out the door.

People obviously waited for Kiryuu Nanami; she did not wait for them. Utena scowled, and left behind the newspaper, a half-inch of coffee and a few biscotti crumbs as she went after Nanami.

She caught up with her outside just as she was about to cross the street, stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Nanami, wait."

Nanami looked back over her shoulder. "Yes? Who are you to use my name in such a familiar way?" Utena could almost feel the disdain radiating from behind the fashionable sunglasses.

"Juri couldn't make it, so she sent me."

The crossing light was green; pedestrians swept by the two of them as they stood at the corner, some giving them annoyed glances or muttering under their breath as they were forced to divert around the obstacle they presented.

Nanami pushed her sunglasses down her nose and looked at Utena over the top of them. "You do seem familiar. Are you on Juri's team at U of Tokyo?"

"No. I went to Ohtori, though. Tenjou Utena."

The blond snapped her fingers, drawing Utena's eyes to them. "As I thought. I didn't remember your name, but, then again, I knew so many people at Ohtori." She cocked her head to one side and looked at Utena. "Is something wrong?"

"N--no. Nothing."

"Really, you look a little pale. Shall we go back and sit down? Whatever Juri wanted you to tell me, you can tell me just as easily there."

"All right."

"Very well, then." Nanami linked arms with Utena in a spirit of false, almost cloying familiarity, and began to walk her back towards the coffee shop. Utena tried to relax, but it was impossible: on Nanami's right hand lurked the terrifyingly familiar shape of the Rose Signet.

Back in the shop, they ordered from the same waitress who had served Utena earlier (who, Utena was certain, gave them an odd look as they entered and reclaimed the table Utena had minutes ago abandoned). Nanami ordered a large cappuccino, "Low fat milk, please, and not too many of those chocolate sprinkles; and the milk _must_ be low fat", and Utena, after a moment's consideration, ordered one as well, although without the strictures. She had to fight to keep her gaze from continually falling on the rose-graved ring Nanami wore so casually.

"Do you like it?"

"What?"

"My ring. I couldn't help but notice you staring at it."

Damn.

Nanami removed her sunglasses and put them off to the side near the napkin holder, then held up her hand with the fingers spread wide in order for Utena to inspect her ring. "Isn't it gorgeous? My big brother gave it to me for my birthday last year. I think it's very expensive."

"Yes," Utena said; her words struggled up through the dry desert of her throat. "I'm sure the price is one few people can afford to pay."

"His job pays very well." Nanami put her right hand back down on the table and folded her left over it, thankfully hiding

the distracting ring from Utena's sight. "You know, it's funny; I only started fencing because of this ring."

"Oh?"

The cappuccinos arrived, and Nanami began using her spoon to pick out what was apparently (despite her request) an excess of chocolate sprinkles from the foam. "Well, it might just be a coincidence, but as soon as I got this ring, I started having the strangest dreams. All these people with swords, fighting each other, and all of them were wearing a ring like this one. And I was one of them." Apparently finally content with the number of sprinkles, she put the spoon aside and looked at Utena questioningly. "So, the very next day I went and signed up for fencing, even though I'd never even done it before, or even thought about it much. I used to practice kendo with my big brother sometimes, but that was only so we could have something to do together; I was never very interested. But I really do like fencing, and all because of this ring. Isn't that funny?"

"Yes." Was she sincere, or acting? Utena couldn't tell. But Nanami wore the Rose Signet, and the mere sight of it made every part of Utena scream danger. What mattered was to remain calm, though, and not give herself away; if there was anything to give herself away to. Perhaps she was just being paranoid; Touga might have sent Nanami the ring because it appealed to some twisted sense of humour. After all, Nanami hadn't dipped nearly as deep into Ohtori's shadows as her brother had; she might just be like Saionji or Juri, completely amnesiac about what had happened.

Nanami was staring at her, and Utena realized just how long she'd been thinking in silence; flustered, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind: "What does your brother do these days, Nanami?"

A tiny smirk appeared on Nanami's face; Utena supposed it was meant to be condescending, but the effect was ruined by a moustache of cappuccino foam clinging to Nanami's upper lip. "I was wondering how long it would take you to ask. I'd bet anything that all the girls who ever went to Ohtori remember my brother."

Utena nodded, playing along. "Yup; he was pretty memorable."

"Well," Nanami said proudly, "my brother is the Assistant Director of Off-Campus Operations for Ohtori Academy."

"Oh," Utena said, smiling until she felt as though her face were going to crack. "And what does he do, exactly?"

Juri had implied that Nanami wasn't still obsessed with her older brother. Utena was observing a lot of evidence to the contrary of that. She could almost see Nanami's eyes begin to sparkle as she launched into a precise, lengthy description of the minutiae of her brother's job.

"...and he travels all over the country--the world, even--to recruit the top students and instructors..."

Much of it made it sound as though Touga was basically a glorified secretary. Apparently, the job involved approving a lot of things, and filling out forms.

"...but mostly, he assists the Chairman of Ohtori; not Akio-san, the acting Chairman, but the real Chairman." Nanami's babble stopped momentarily, and a bit of the sparkle left her eyes. "That's such a sad story."

"What?" Utena responded a little later than she should have; Nanami's extended monologue on Touga's job had made her attention drift.

Nanami, apparently, didn't even notice. "Well, you know how Akio-san was engaged to marry Ohtori Kanae, the Chairman's daughter, right?" As she talked she twisted the Rose Signet upon her finger, apparently unconsciously.

Utena nodded. "I met Kanae." A sick, cold lump began to form in her stomach as she looked at Nanami's expression; the younger woman seemed genuinely sad at whatever memories the conversation had called up. "What happened?"

"I guess it would have been after you left," Nanami said. "You weren't at Ohtori very long, were you?" At Utena's nod, she continued: "Well, the year after you left--I would have been in the eighth grade--Kanae got very sick and died. So... there was no wedding, of course. We were going to hold the reception at our house; my brother and Akio-san are such good friends, you know." She sighed. "Akio-san stayed on as acting chairman; there was no one else to do it, really. Chairman Ohtori got even sicker after Kanae died."

The lump now felt roughly the size of a bowling ball. "Excuse me, Nanami," Utena requested, trying to keep the queasiness in her stomach out of her voice. "I have to go to the washroom."

In the empty washroom of the coffee shop, she splashed cold water on her face, dabbed it dry with a paper towel, and then sank down to her knees until her forehead rested on the cool fake marble of the sink counter. Someone might very well come in and wonder what was wrong, but she didn't really care. All her attention was focused on not vomiting.

Kozue dead. Kanae dead. Coincidences? It could be. People die; Anthy had said that. Parents, sisters, friends... yes, people died. A car accident, illness... a car accident?

She stood up, and half-staggered out of the bathroom. Nanami looked up at with what might have been concern as she came back to the table. "Utena, you look awful."

Utena ignored her, and slid back into the booth. "Nanami, tell me how Kozue died."

"What?"

"Juri told me you got closer to Miki after Kozue died. You have to know. It was a car accident. What kind?"

Nanami half-flinched at the mention of Miki; a thin flush suffused her pale cheeks. "We weren't that close," she whispered.

"Nanami," Utena prompted.

"Another sad story," Nanami murmured softly. "Poor Akio-san; he took it so badly, and it was so soon after Kanae died, a little less than year. He went driving with Kozue one day, on the cliffs beside the ocean. Have you ever been out there?"

The sea, rich and vast like cloth to weave a god's blue cloak; wind in her hair; Akio beside her, one hand on the wheel, the other on the back of her seat; the staggered lines dividing the highway into lanes blurring into a single line stretching off into the horizon; a fan murmuring softly in a hot hotel room...

"Yes; I've been there."

"The brakes failed. On his car. And he took such good care of it, too; they broke through the guard rail, and went into the sea. They never found Kozue's body; it's a miracle Akio-san lived." She paused, sighed, shook her head. "So sad."

"Nanami," Utena croaked, "can we... is there somewhere else we can go to talk? This... what I have to say, it's too public

here."

Nanami looked very dubious. "I don't see what..."

"Please," Utena said, unable to keep a pleading tone from her voice. "Please, just trust me."

Unexpectedly, she found her trembling hand clasped in both of Nanami's. The smooth, cool shape of the Rose Signet was an aberration against the warmth of Nanami's skin. "All right. Can you walk? You look really sick, Utena. If you want to sit here for a while, I can go and get my car and pull up outside..."

"No. I'm okay." She got out of the booth, took a deep breath, and stood up a little straighter. "Let's go."

"Don't forget your purse." Nanami pointed to it where it lay in one corner of the booth; as Utena picked it up, the blond replaced her sunglasses. "Come on; it's not far."

Outside, Utena found her arm linked with Nanami's again, and despite her almost profound gratitude for the kindness she was being shown in the moment of her weakness, she could not stop her gaze from lingering upon the Rose Signet that gleamed dully in the winter sun as Nanami led her to the car.

* * *

Nanami didn't have a roommate, although her apartment was easily big enough for one. Or even two. It looked to be almost twice the size of the apartment Utena had shared with Anthy.

Sometimes, she really resented the rich. Maybe that was why heroes were so often princes; they had the time to go out and rescue princesses because they didn't have to work full-time in order to feed themselves. Not fair; not fair at all.

Nanami sat her down on a plush leather chair in the front room of the apartment, told her to "Sit right there and relax", and went into the kitchen to get her something cold to drink. She was being nice to the point of almost becoming saccharine, even going so far as to let Utena choose the radio station on the short drive to her apartment. Utena had chosen to leave it off; on top of the queasiness, a headache had been threatening.

The car, a sporty little blue roadster, was nice as well. It had heat that worked, and the radio's volume knob wasn't broken, and there were power windows. Yeah, she really resented the rich sometimes.

A few big oak bookshelves dominated the room, stretching almost to the top of the ceiling. Utena glanced at the spines of the books; most of them appeared to be children's books. Half of them she remembered reading in her youth: simplified retellings of mythology, translations of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen... she even spotted the same translated edition of Steinbeck's "Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights" that she'd read as a child.

"I'm doing my degree in literature," Nanami said as she returned from the kitchen with a glass of water. "I want to specialize in children's literature once I get far enough into the program."

"Interesting. I used to read lots of these when I was younger." Utena accepted the water gratefully, and gulped it down in two swallows. "Mostly the fairy tales. I was always sorry that I was an only child... it always seemed to be the third, youngest brother who ended up becoming a hero."

"Oh, that's a traditional motif," Nanami said. "The younger child supplanting the elder; supposedly, it represents the triumph of youth over old age, innovation over stagnation... at least, that's what my professors say." She stuck her tongue out, looking remarkably childish for a moment. "But, then again, they're silly old men. I'm sure there are plenty of heroic older brothers out there."

Utena coughed, and tried to steer the conversation away from that topic. "Anyway, what I wanted to talk to you about..."

"Yes?"

"Umm... was..."

Damn. It would have been a good idea to think up a cover story with Juri to use if she decided it was better not to restore Nanami's memories.

"Yes?"

Utena grasped at straws. "Well, did you read about that boy who got killed at Ohtori?"

Nanami blinked. "What? No."

"It was in the paper yesterday."

"Oh. I don't read the paper on weekdays; I usually just read the Week in Review section in the Sunday edition. Saves time."

"When was the last time you talked to your brother?"

"A few days ago; why?"

"Well, Juri and I... we were wondering if you knew anything about it."

Nanami finally sat down in the matching chair opposite Utena and steepled her fingers under her chin. "Well, obviously not."

"We just kind of thought because of your brother..."

"So you knew what his job was before you came to meet me? Why did you ask me what he was doing now, then?" Utena swore inside her head; Nanami's voice had suddenly turned hostile and suspicious at the contradiction.

"You see..."

"No, I don't see. Why are you asking me? If you want to know, why don't you call Ohtori? Just because my big brother... it's because of my brother, isn't it? I remember you now, Tenjou Utena; you were always looking at my brother." Her voice was a dry hiss. "Well, he's too good for you; he's better than you, better than all of you. Whatever that deviant Arisugawa told you, whatever Saionji told you--"

"Don't call her that."

Nanami's eyes flashed; her right hand rose up and made an empty gesture at the air. "What, a deviant? Why not, it's what she is, isn't it? I'm glad I beat her little... girlfriend, whatever you're supposed to call--"

"Nanami, watch it."

"Oh, do forgive me. Am I insulting you inadvertently as well?" Suddenly, she giggled; all of the old Nanami from Ohtori was in that snide, knowing laugh. "I see; so that's why Arisugawa sent you. A kindred spirit."

Utena nearly hit her; only a shaft of sunlight, catching the Rose Signet on Nanami's still-gesturing hand, stopped her; it reminded her of how things had once been, and how they were now. There was no need to hit Nanami.

"Good to see some things don't change," she said slowly, icily, letting each word fall heavily before the next followed. "Saionji's changed, Juri's changed, Shiori's changed, but it's inexplicably reassuring to see that you're still the same mean, selfish little bitch you were at Ohtori. I'm not surprised you don't have a roommate; I've been with you less than an hour, and I'm already remembering why I didn't like you at Ohtori."

She might as well have slapped her, given the effect; Nanami seemed to crumple like a crushed origami bird, sinking down into the chair and putting her face in her hands. You're not the only one who can cut with your words, Utena thought triumphantly; but the victory felt hollow.

"I'm sorry." Nanami's voice was suddenly calm again. "I don't know why I said that. I didn't mean it."

"Then why did you say it?"

Nanami gestured helplessly with her left hand. "I don't even know. Because I think it? Not like that, though, not so nasty, but..."

"Juri makes you uncomfortable."

Nanami nodded, and drew her knees up to her chest until she sat in an almost fetal position in the chair. "They all made me uncomfortable."

"Who?"

"The Student Council; I used to help them out. I think. It was so long ago, wasn't it? Kyouichi was Touga's old friend, and he was always polite to me, but he didn't care one way or the other about me, really... Miki was... sweet, but so much smarter than me... Juri was just... Juri. And my brother? God, I used to run after him like I was a little puppy. Even today, I hear myself talking about him, and it's like it isn't me." She hugged her knees tightly and stared up at the ceiling. "You know I haven't been on a date, even a casual one, in eight months? Every time I get asked, I start comparing... he isn't as tall as my brother, he isn't as handsome, his voice isn't as nice... and it's sick, I know it is, but I can't stop..."

"Nanami..."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Nanami whispered, so low that Utena could barely hear. "It's like there's this big hole inside me, right through my heart."

What Utena did next was not based upon reason or careful thought; even instinct told her it was stupid and dangerous. There were still too many unanswered questions, and Nanami might simply be a very good actress.

But it didn't feel that way to her, at that moment in time. And even though it wasn't really fair to make the decision without talking to Juri first... well, she had started this, after all. This counter-revolution--yes, call it that--was hers, and she had more right than anyone to make the choices.

"Nanami, close your eyes... picture a rose... what colour is it?"

* * *

When Anthy got home, the phone was ringing. She hurriedly slipped off her shoes and ran to grab it off the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

// "Himemiya; I was about to hang up. Glad I caught you after all." //

"Doctor Retasu; hello."

// "I just called to tell you that I've spoken to Yuri-san and told her you'll be taking over for her during her maternity leave. On Monday, go to her office when you get in in the morning, and she'll start showing you your responsibilities. She was scheduled to go on leave after two weeks, but we talked about it, and she thinks you can probably get a handle on it after a week, so she may go off early." //

"That would be nice for her."

// "Yes. Anyway, just thought I'd tell you." //

"Thank you, sir."

// "Goodbye, Himemiya." //

She hesitated, then stifled the almost automatic farewell that rose in response. "Sir, about what happened in your office..."

Total silence on the other end of the line; she couldn't even hear him breathing.

// "Himemiya--" //

The phone cut off. No click of him hanging up, no dial-tone. Anthy frowned, pressed and depressed the cradle button once, twice; no Retasu, and no dial-tone.

She put the phone's handset down on the counter and walked past the closed bathroom door towards the bedroom, where the other phone was.

As the door to the bedroom opened inward, blocking the bed from view as it did, she didn't see the man sitting there until she had stepped inside.

"Hello, bruja," he said. He was very old and very tall, with a weathered Mediterranean complexion. Shoulder length white hair, still thick and full, brushed against the collar of his crisp, well-tailored shirt. "Been a while." A heavy accent; Latin, and something else.

And, just like the scent of roses could resurrect the ghosts of her memory, so did that voice.

Havana. Nineteen fifty-eight. A dim bar. A hunchbacked busboy, moving through the din and smoke, never speaking, mocked and abused by the customers, clearing tables in total silence.

She's on stage, singing, very softly accompanied by a guitar. Akio behind the bar, talking, serving drinks, making jokes, dispensing advice. Pulling strings. What? No, he doesn't own the place. He's just running it for a friend who's out of the country; he doesn't really have the skills to run a popular place like this very well, but he does his best. Another drink? His own special concoction... first, a shot of tequila...

What? The singer. Yes, very beautiful. My sister, too. Oh, no, don't apologize; we live in a modern age, and she is very lovely. It is better that men of honour speak their minds, don't you think, rather than hide behind masks and smoke? How wonderful that you agree, sir. I may be frank, then.

You wish to court my sister? My blessing? Ahh, sir, you do not need my blessing. Let me give you advice, though... the courtship rituals of my family, they are most odd. From our old country.

What country? Ahh, sir, I doubt you have heard of it, but listen to me now...

He is rising from the bed. He is sitting at a table in the corner, alone although surrounded by friends. Behind her, she

hears the bathroom door open, and remembers too late that it was not closed when she left.

He is walking towards her across the room. He is fighting a duel in a shadowy alley to first blood. He is screaming her name. He is screaming a word at her. He is kissing what hangs and glitters upon a golden chain. He is hanging a glittering golden chain about her neck. Before her, there is a cloth in a hand. The cloth is on her mouth. His lips are on her mouth.

He is running away into the night. She is falling away into the darkness.

"Sleep, bruja. Sleep." Almost tenderly.

* * *

"How's your cheek?"

"It hurts. What do you think?"

"Well, I'm very sorry. But what do you _expect_, dumping all of that on someone at once? First of all, you knew perfectly well we never got along at Ohtori..."

Utena held the ice pack against her cheek, as Nanami drove, hands tight on the wheel. "It was a lot easier with Juri."

The gates--as good a word as any, she supposed--behind which the memories of Ohtori waited appeared to take a different form for everyone when visualized. To her, Mikage and the Black Rose Duellists had hidden themselves within the petals of a thorny black rose; for Juri, it had been the fence and gate of black and orange roses.

Nanami's had been a little odder:

"Yellow."

"Anything else?"

"Yellow roses. I'm wearing a dress of yellow roses. And a belt of black roses. They're very pretty. They smell nice. I'm going to a dance. My big brother will be there."

"Take the dress off, Nanami."

"What? Don't be silly. Then I'd be naked." A childish giggle. "And I have to go to the dance. My big brother will be

there. I wonder what suit he'll wear? I'm sure he'll be very handsome."

"The ball was cancelled. You don't need to wear the dress any more."

"Why do you want me to take off my dress? Are you some sort of pervert?"

"I, uhh... have another dress for you, right here? Isn't it nice?"

"Well. All right. But don't look while I change."

"I won't. I'm turning my eyes away."

"I'm taking off the dress now. Don't look."

"Okay."

Nanami had screamed, sprung up from the chair, and given Utena a right cross. It hurt as much as from surprise as from actual force, and the Rose Signet's metal face didn't help any. The two of them went down on the floor together with Nanami on top screaming and trying to throttle Utena with one hand, while slapping her with the other.

"DAMN YOU! God DAMN you, I wanted to forget, you bitch, you bitch, you lousy bitch, I wanted to forget--"

Utena got a knee up into Nanami's stomach and shoved her off, losing a little skin from her neck as Nanami's fingernails were dislodged from their strangling grip. She sprang up and got ready to defend herself, but there was no need. Nanami was on her hands and knees, pounding the floor with her fist as though it were a drum, and coughing as though she were about to dry-heave.

"Nanami!" Worried she was going to hurt herself, Utena leapt on her from behind and pressed her down to the floor with her body, scrabbling to pin Nanami's flailing arms. "Nanami, calm down!" A few more seconds of heated struggle, and then Nanami went limp below her.

"Just do it," the younger girl whispered brokenly. "Just get it over with. I know the way it goes. They may seem like a prince, but then you find out what they really want, and it's no different from any other man."

Utena was panting hard from the sudden exertion; the left side of her face ached down to the very bone, and a half-dozen tiny rips stung upon the flesh of her throat. Pinned beneath her, Nanami's body was a small, warm presence, like a tiny bird trapped between her hands.

She scrambled off Nanami as though the other woman were afire.

The blond just lay there. One of her high-heeled shoes had come off during the brief intensity of the struggle and lay near one of the chairs like a discarded toy. Her white blouse had come untucked from its complimenting yellow skirt to show an inch-wide section of bare midriff, and the long skirt itself had been pushed high up on one side, exposing a considerable expanse of pale leg.

"Just get it over with."

"Nanami," Utena whispered dully, sick with herself, "w--what do you think I am?"

"Your own sister." Nanami didn't even seem to hear her. "How could you? Bastard; your own sister."

Not what; who. Utena didn't really understand, though; a reference to her own brother, or to Akio? Had Nanami perhaps seen something during the time she'd spent in Akio's tower... but no, Akio was too cautious to let that happen. And she couldn't be talking about Miki. What had Touga done to her?

"Nanami, I'm the only one here."

Slowly, painstakingly, Nanami raised herself up from the floor. She unconsciously tucked her blouse back in, smoothed her skirt, and went to retrieve her shoe.

"God damn you, Utena," she snarled as she shoved her foot back into the shoe. "I wanted to forget. You think I wanted to remember all that? Why would anyone?"

"I had to remember it all," Utena said softly. "For seven years, while all of you went on with your lives in blissful ignorance."

"So now we all have to suffer along with you?" Nanami snapped. "What gives you the right, Utena? What gives you the right?"

Utena struggled for an answer, some recourse to a higher ideal. And failed. "Nothing. I gave myself the right, Nanami."

"Damn you."

"Call your brother, Nanami."

"What?"

"Call him, then get ready to go back to Juri's with me; we've got to get to Ohtori as soon as possible."

Nanami laughed shakily. "You're completely insane. You honestly expect me to go _back_ there? Why?"

"To kill Akio."

"_Kill_ him? Oh, you are mad, Utena. Do you think something like that can actually be killed?"

No answer.

"You know," Utena replied finally, "I hadn't even thought of that."

"You're as much of a fool as you were at Ohtori."

"Maybe," Utena admitted. "But you're going to call Touga anyway, and ask him about the boy who got killed. Then you're going to come back to Juri's with me. Then you're going to help us kill Akio."

"Why do you sound so certain of all these things?" Nanami sneered.

"You haven't even thought about ordering me to leave yet," Utena replied coolly. "Now that you remember, now that you know... you know this will never be over until Akio's dead."

Nanami glared at her, but said nothing.

Utena continued. "And there's your brother, too. What about him?"

Shockingly, Nanami began to laugh again, this time not at all shaky. "My brother." She threw her head back and giggled. "Oh, yes, of course, my darling big brother. Can't forget about him. You wait right there, Utena; I'll be back in a few minutes."

She went into her bedroom to make the call with a mask of clay, and came out with a mask of stone. Utena had waited for a few minutes, not sitting, standing in the room, thinking of nothing, staring at the books--full of the deeds of heroes who could only be that heroic within a child's mind--upon the shelves.

"Let's go," Nanami said when she came back out.

"What did Touga tell you?"

"Later," she replied tightly; Utena noticed that the Rose Signet was missing from her finger, but did not ask about it.

"Let's just go. Damn it all, let's just get out of here."

So that was why they were in the car, and why Utena was holding an ice pack against the Rose Signet-shaped bruise upon her cheek.

"I do hope that doesn't leave a mark," Nanami said without a note of sincerity.

"I suppose it would be appropriate if it did," Utena replied, staring out the window of the car so as not to have to look at Nanami. "After all, it would only put upon the flesh what's already upon the soul."

"Goodness, Utena," Nanami quipped snidely, "you've become quite the poet during the last seven years. Whatever have you been up to while I was leading my happy, normal life that you decided so casually to--"

"Shut up, Nanami," Utena muttered.

To her surprise, Nanami did, and began to drive faster.

* * *

"Yes; I see. I understand. Do not worry. I am prepared for all of this. You sound so surprised; I am shocked you don't know me better. Yes; good-bye. I will see you tomorrow at the usual time."

The prince--it still entertained him to think of himself and be thought of as a prince, despite what he had become--hung up, locked his stationery away (a few letters had been sent today, though only one of real importance) and left his offices. He didn't often do so during the day; night was really his time to

prowl. Some days, especially cloudless winter days like this, the sun seemed to shine just a little too bright for his eyes.

Perhaps he'd go driving tonight. Things had been very busy lately, and he hadn't had much time to indulge himself. Tedious but necessary interviews with the police, mostly. Why, no, detective, Ohtori Academy does not sanction duels between its students as a means of settling conflicts; the students of this academy are all free-spirited, in love with learning, and, above all, do not fight. The kendo team and the fencing team? Only formalized sports derived from combat. I'm not sure what you're insinuating... Many sports have rather bloody origins... Soccer, for example. Do you know that the ball used to represent... oh, I'm sorry.

Fools; they were pitiable. He'd been deceiving smarter people for longer than either of them had been alive. They would come back, of course; and he would divert them again.

Outside, the winter winds blew hungrily along the paths cleared through the snow by the groundskeeping staff to allow students to get around the campus. For appearance's sake, the prince wore an ankle-length coat of black wool so finely-spun as to appear almost velvety, contrasted by long gloves of soft, pale calfskin. As he made his winding way across campus towards his destination, he could feel the eyes of every female student he passed--many of the male ones, too--stroke his body like tiny electrical lashes. The prince smiled knowingly.

His destination, the newest building at Ohtori, lay on the north-western edge of the campus, near the great forest that was also encompassed within the academy's walls. Despite its recent construction--almost three years ago--it blended in perfectly with the other buildings, done in an identical architectural style despite the fact that the original architect who designed Ohtori in the early 1950s was long dead.

Once, it had been merely another private school for the children of those made newly rich in the economic boom after the war. Now it was his. The feet upon Ohtori's grounds were the circulations of his blood; the wind blowing over its forest was his breath; the tower at its centre was his heart.

He looked up at the name of the building, smirked a little, and ascended the long flight of stairs to the front door. There were a few students in the halls; two girls, looking at the wall-mounted display case near the front doors, and, distantly, a figure of indistinct gender ducking through an archway.

As he passed the display case, the girls caught sight of his reflection in the glass, and turned to look at him. Neither of them had ever seen him before, but he knew their faces, their names--would have known their inmost hearts, if they had been anything other than unexceptional, and therefore worth his time.

"Terribly sad," he said politely. And smiled at them; revelled in the knowledge that they were _his_, would have done anything he wanted at that moment if he only gave the word.

He could take them for a drive. Show them both the Ends of the World. But... they were nothing. Less than nothing. Background scenery. Oh; they were finally getting up the nerve to respond to him. How cute.

"Yeah."

"Sad."

He walked on, and heard them whispering behind him. Who was that? Is he a student? He's _gorgeous_. He looks old. A new teacher? What's his name? Dunno? Should ask around.

Inwardly, he chuckled, but did not allow it to escape his lips. He reached the mid-point of the hallway, and ascended the stairs to the second floor. A short walk, a turn, another short walk, and he was there. The door was open a crack; light and voices spilled out through it.

"Well... Isn't this nice?"

"Yes. It's a beautiful office; much more than I need."

"Don't be so humble. You should be proud."

"I'm happy."

"Not happy, _proud_. There's a difference, you know." A woman's laughter, throaty; somehow both girlish and jaded.

"Well..."

"Are you blushing? How cute."

"I'm not blushing!"

"You are!" Again, the laughter; delighted, coquettish.
"Oh, Miki-chan, you're still such a child sometimes."

Silence, but for rustle of cloth, whisper of flesh, and touch of lips to lips.

"But not _all_ the time, thank goodness."

"The door..."

"It's only a crack. And isn't it a little exciting? To think that anyone could come by, anyone at all, and..."

"Please; the door."

The prince leaned against the wall, near the side of the door opposite the crack, and silently mouthed the woman's next words as she spoke them.

"Oh, all right. But only because I love you."

Light footsteps. Click. No crack, now.

In the hallway, the prince pressed back against the wall and let out a deep sigh that hovered on the cusp of a moan; he stroked the hollow of his throat, just once, with the feather-soft touch of a calfskin-sheathed fingertip.

Then he walked away, smiling still, still laughing inside.

* * *

There's too many people, too many to recall
I thought some of 'em were friends of mine
I was wrong about 'em all
Well, the road is rocky and the hillside's mud
Up over my head nothing but clouds of blood
I found my own, I found my one in you
But your love just hasn't proved true
I'm twenty miles out of town, cold irons bound
Twenty miles out of town, cold irons bound
--Bob Dylan, "Cold Irons Bound"

End of Jaquemart - Part II

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!