

Jaquemart VI - Walls

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by [alanharnum](#)

JAQUEMART

by

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

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VI. Walls

* * *

These three shadows, of them then should I speak?

There are five double yous.

Do you know them?

Do you, do you, do you?

The old lion yawned, showing toothless gums, but when she extended a hand to stroke his head ("nice kitty"), he swiped at her with hooked claws sharp as razors.

Shadows, I fear you do offend.

We do, do we, we do?

Begone!

Red, red eyes.

Utena started and woke to the sound of someone quietly sniffing, as though just finished crying. For a brief moment, she had the utter conviction that Himemiya was weeping in the bottom bunk, and then she remembered who, when and where she was. Disjunction.

"Nanami, are you crying?" Very softly; the noise might only be in response to some dream.

But, an answer from the other bed: "No."

Quiet for a moment, then, "Were you?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Silence.

Utena rolled over onto her side and peered towards Nanami's bed. With the curtains drawn over the windows and all the lights out, the hotel room was almost utterly black, with only a thin crack of light from beneath the door. "I think I had one," she said quietly. "I'm a heavy sleeper, you know, and something woke me up, and I don't think it was you crying. But I don't really remember much."

(Red, red eyes)

"You were crying, right?"

"Yes, fine, I was crying," Nanami suddenly snapped, no more and no less than a voice in the darkness. "Are you happy now?"

"I'm just worried about you," Utena replied defensively.

"Well, don't be. I can take care of myself."

"I never said you couldn't."

"Then why are you bothering me about it?"

"Fine," Utena sighed, exasperated. I don't even know why I try sometimes, she thought. She lay quietly in the darkness for perhaps two minutes, listening to Nanami breathe short, tight little breaths.

"Hey, Nanami?" she said finally.

Nanami's voice sounded as though it were muffled by her pillow. "What?"

"We're friends, right?" She nervously clasped her hands beneath the sheets. "I mean, we didn't get along too well at Ohtori, most of the time, but we're both older now, and things have changed, so..."

"Friends?" Nanami said slowly, as though studying the word from every angle. "I don't know. Are we?"

Utena smiled, even though she knew Nanami wouldn't see it. "I'm willing if you are."

"Whatever."

"Hey, hey," she said joshingly, "don't be too enthusiastic."

"It's three in the morning. I'll be enthusiastic after the sun rises, okay?"

"Okay."

"But I'm not going to jump on your back and call you 'Utena-sama', got it?"

Utena laughed quietly. "I can live with that." She paused. "All I really want to say... if you've got something bothering you, don't be afraid to talk to me, okay?"

"You're exactly the same," Nanami said, somehow with both respect and disdain. "Trying to be like a prince, trying to help everybody, even if they don't want you to."

"Everyone wants to be helped," said Utena, surprising herself with the force of it. "Some people, well... they just hurt so much, for so long, I think, that they get scared of being helped. Does that make sense?"

Nanami stayed silent for a while, then replied, "That makes a lot of sense."

"Want to tell me why you were crying now?" Utena prompted gently.

"Last year, I took a course on European folklore," Nanami said, as though she hadn't heard Utena at all. "There's a story that recurs quite a lot. A knight or a prince, well, a hero of some sort, meets up with a really hideous woman. A witch, maybe, or an ogress. But she turns out to be a beautiful woman who was... I don't know, testing him, somehow. Seeing how he'd treat her if he didn't know she was beautiful."

Utena felt pained as she listened to Nanami talk. It would have been nice to go to university, but there had been no money for it. "Like Urashima Taro, right? Guy saves a turtle, and it turns out to be a princess?"

"Kind of. The example we used in class was 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', from Chaucer, which the professor said was just a recasting of a much older story."

"Don't know it."

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, right at the end of the lecture--it was only one class where we talked about it--the professor read a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke. You know who that is?"

"I think so. A poet, right?"

"Yeah."

"I've heard the name before. That's all."

"Anyway, I really liked the quote. I'm trying to remember how it went again... I used to know it by heart." Nanami sounded annoyed with herself as she struggled to remember. "Oh, yes; I remember now: 'Perhaps the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.'"

Utena slowly smiled as she silently repeated the words to herself. "Once beautiful and brave," she murmured. "I like that. I really do. Thanks, Nanami."

"I've never told anyone else about that before," Nanami said sleepily. "I mean, I suppose everyone else in the class wrote it down too, but... I always sort of felt as though it were especially mine."

"I think everyone likes to feel as though they have at least one thing that's especially theirs," Utena agreed, closing her eyes.

"You know what the problem with these three A.M. conversations is, Utena?"

"What?"

"In the morning, after you've actually had a decent amount of sleep, you realize you sounded like a total fool."

Utena yawned. She almost wanted to say that she thought Nanami had sounded about as far from a fool as you could get, but instead, all she said was, "Goodnight, again."

"Goodnight, again," Nanami echoed.

(Red, red eyes)

* * *

She watched the water splashing over her hand, running between her fingers, and remembered another day before this: a hot, muggy jungle day, near a waterfall spilling from high above. A tree had fallen across the foaming basin, and the spray glittered on the dark green limbs.

Live long enough, acquire enough memories, and each new experience recalls older ones. Inescapable. You came to consider living as a familiar book, reread countless times, with nothing new under the sun. Occasionally, a certain passage holds what seems a surprise, but you were always aware that you had known it once before.

Hot enough now. She shook droplets from her hand and pulled the knob to plug the bathtub. Water beat gently upon the floor of the tub as she waited for it to fill.

The last seven years had held more surprises than all the centuries before: friendship, freedom, choice, love. A normal job, an almost-normal life.

A new coffin, built to new measurements.

The tub was filling quickly. She straightened from her crouch beside it and began to strip. The water already in the tub frothed and bubbled as the water falling from the tap joined it.

Normal; as though that could ever be. She smiled, and drifted her bare toes through the water to test it. A witch she was, a witch she would be forevermore. What was a witch, then?

"Girls who cannot become princesses must become witches," she murmured, and slipped into the tub with a sigh. But that wasn't true, was it? Maybe it had been true long ago, when the Rose Prince had been in full flower, but it was true no longer. They could be other things. Princes. Heroes.

But could one be a witch, and be other things as well?

She lay down and let the water cover everything but her nose and mouth. Her hair, buoyed upon the water, floated like a cast-off veil about her face and shoulders and breasts.

The time was almost seven-thirty in the morning. Saionji Kyouichi had left to ask permission of his wife for the journey shortly after seven. Himemiya Anthy hoped it would be granted, for she feared making the journey entirely alone.

This journey, by contrast, she had no choice but to make alone. Only a witch could make it. An easier journey if in water--it conducted better than air. Easier still if nude--clothes only got in the way.

Utena would still be asleep, if things were normal. And if things were not, she would know. She had not sent her familiar along without reason.

She traced a circle, using the index finger of her right hand, around one breast, and then the other, and then upon her stomach. The dull echo of the surrounding water in her ears grew to a fevered hum, and, even with her eyes closed, the light from the glow filling the room reached through and turned the blackness into a field of almost solid white.

An image. A message. She formed them both: Herself, hair flowing, clad in Utena's old uniform (but white instead of black). "I'm coming. Wait for me."

She smiled, slipped the shackles of flesh, and sent herself and the message hurtling like an arrow. The whiteness reaching through her eyelids faded to pinpricks, as though she were heading down a long tunnel towards the faintest of lights.

As soon as the simile occurred to her, she was in a tunnel, ivory-bricked, vine-wreathed. The light at the end grew brighter as she hurtled towards it at a vast speed, as though she rode aboard a bullet train--

And she did.

Details began to fill in. The vines sprouted white roses with white thorns. The headlights of the train swept over them, and they glowed, and she saw they were of white crystal.

She pushed the throttle up to full speed, and watched the walls blur into striated bands of white and green. Smiled.

And saw red eyes. Far ahead in the tunnel, glowing like the heart of a forging-fire.

"You're not welcome here," a voice pronounced, like the quiet sentence of a god.

The train shuddered as though struck a great blow upon each side, and began to slow. Wheels screeched; sparks flew, white-hot, and lit the vines afire down the entire length of the tunnel. Crystal roses began to melt and run like wax, covering

over the track before the train and rising up into a wall a short distance ahead of her.

"Who are you?" she snarled, and shoved the throttle forward again, intending to smash through the wall. Arrogant thing! Whatever or whomever it was--some dweller or intruder on this plane, or a traveller like herself--she would teach it the folly of impeding her on this particular task.

"Mama doesn't like you," the voice said, a peal of thunder, shaking the world. "I don't like you. Go away."

The train hit, the wall gave not even a shudder, and her body hurtled out through the windshield to break against the sheer crystal surface like a china doll.

She awoke in the bathtub, lungs and throat full of water. Choking, she burst upright and vomited it back out into the tub. Her eyes felt slightly too large for their sockets, as though they were about to burst from the pressure upon them. Shaking, she clambered out of the tub and huddled nude upon the bathmat beside it, hugging her knees to her chest.

The feeling of pressure upon her eyes went away shortly, but she sat there until she heard a key turning in a lock. Slowly, she rose and began to let the water drain from the bathtub. She heard light footsteps beyond the door; they paused for a moment outside, then began to walk on.

"Kyouichi?" she managed to call.

"Yes?" he answered after a moment.

She numbly took down a towel and began to almost mechanically dry her body. "I'm just getting out of the bath," she said. She hoped her voice sounded normal. "What did Wakaba say?"

"She granted me her permission."

Bless her, Anthy thought vaguely. "That's good. I'd like to leave as soon as possible. Are you ready?" She took another towel and dried her hair, then twisted it into a rough turban around her head.

"I stopped by my place to pack. That's why I took a little longer than I said I would." A pause. "You must have been in the bath for some time. I called from my place, but you didn't answer the phone."

"Oh," she said softly. "And what time is it?"

"Just past eight-thirty," he replied. Pause again. "Are you all right, Anthy? Or do you still need time to rest?"

"No," she replied quickly, pulling on a complimentary bathrobe and trying to stop herself from shaking. "I'm fine. A hot bath does wonders. But I'd like to leave as soon as possible for Daisetsu."

"I'm ready to go whenever you are."

"Good," she said. "That's very good."

* * *

"So... just what are we going to do next, anyway?"

Utena looked up from her cross-legged seat in the middle of her bed, sections of the morning paper arrayed around her like fortifications. "Hmm?"

Nanami, seated in the desk chair, had put down the magazine she'd been reading. "You know what I mean. Even with all these new complications, our objective is still the same."

"Like I said last night," Utena replied evenly. "The web doesn't go away just because you get rid of the spider."

"So? All you need is a big stick to clear all the webbing away. One time, when I was six, I found this huge spider web in one corner of my closet--I was really scared of spiders when I was young, you see--so Touga got a broom--"

"I think this metaphor is breaking down," Utena said, turning her attention to the Sports section again.

"Metaphors tend to do that if taken far enough," Nanami agreed. Utena heard her turn a page in a magazine. "Ooh, that's a nice design."

Utena read summaries of intercollegiate basketball results for perhaps two minutes, then spoke. "Basically, I want to figure out what's going on before we go rushing into Akio's office with our swords drawn." She paused, and a vision occurred to her: Akio, pinioned by a million swords as Anthy had been. Too cruel; too cruel a fate for anyone. "You know what a deadman trigger is?"

Nanami looked up from her magazine. "I think so," she said uncertainly.

"They have them on subways," Utena explained. "The driver's got to keep the switch pulled down at all times, or the train stops running. So, if they have a heart attack or something else happens to them, there's no risk of an accident; the train just stops." A million swords, cutting from every angle...

"So... Akio might have his own deadman trigger..." Nanami murmured. "That would be just like him."

Utena nodded. "He's a planner. Wheels within wheels." A million swords; too cruel. Why was she even thinking of it? "I don't even know how deep we've gone beneath the surface yet. I think there might be consequences if we do manage to... eliminate him." What punishment was right for one such as him, who'd condemned his own sister to undying suffering, who'd hurt so many others? "And, I'm willing to accept them, if I have to... I just want to know what they are."

And what gives you the right, Tenjou Utena? The voice of the thought did not seem her own. Is your own conscience so clear that you can be judge, jury and executioner?

Nanami flipped to the next page of her magazine. "That makes sense," she admitted grudgingly. "Although a simple plan does have a certain visceral appeal to it." Her voice softened. "I need to try and find a way to help Tsuwabuki's friend, Mari, the one I told you about... Tsuwabuki, too, if I can." Pause. "I need to call my brother and find out if I can see Tsuwabuki somehow." Her distaste for the notion was clearly audible.

"Hey, Nanami, what do you think?" Utena asked. "I told you about meeting your brother again." Most of it; not about the kiss, of course, that wouldn't have been a good idea at all. "Do you think he's on the level?"

"I think my brother hasn't been on the level for a long time," Nanami said with fierce, brittle bitterness.

"I don't know," Utena replied after a moment's thought. "He seemed sincere... I'd like to believe that he doesn't remember... that he's really changed. And those drawings he had..."

"There you go again, Utena," Nanami said, almost affectionately. "Believing that everyone just needs to be given a chance to do the right thing and they will, and that people are only bad because they don't know how to be good."

Utena winced. "I do believe that," she murmured. "Most of the time."

"Has it ever occurred to you that some people might actually like being bad?"

"It has," Utena said quietly. "But I'd like to believe that most people don't. It's like that quote you told me about; maybe everyone who seems terrible only really wants to be helped."

"Akio?" Nanami said, a bit smugly.

Utena's face hardened. "Akio isn't human. He's different."

"Then his sister would be the same way, wouldn't she?"

Utena opened her mouth, shut it, then turned her eyes to the back page of the front section without making any reply.

"All I'm saying," Nanami said, suddenly surprisingly gentle, "is that you shouldn't be too quick to trust anyone. Don't ever believe in anyone completely, because if you do, and it turns out you were wrong..."

"You think I haven't had this conversation with myself a hundred times before, Nanami?" Utena muttered, low and harsh. "You're not telling me anything I haven't thought about myself, okay? So just drop it."

"I'm just worried about you," Nanami said, wounded. "But, fine, if you don't want to listen to me, that's your business." Flip, flip. "Oooh, that's a nice one too..."

They read in silence for a few minutes, and then Nanami said, "What time is it?"

Utena looked at the bedside clock. "Ten past ten," she answered.

"How long has it been since Juri and Shiori left?"

"About half-an-hour," Utena replied. They'd gone into town to kill time before their lunch with Miki.

"I'm bored," Nanami said.

"You think I'm not?"

Someone knocked on the door, and they both started.

"Who's that?" Nanami hissed, laying her magazine aside.

"How am I supposed to know?" Utena whispered back. "You go check; the room's in your name."

Nanami slowly got up out of the chair and crossed to the door. Whomever it was knocked again before she reached it and put her eye to the peephole.

"Oniisama!" she cried, with effervescent and apparently genuine delight. "Just a minute, let me open the door." She rattled the unhooked chain and glanced desperately back at Utena. "Oh, it seems to be stuck." Rattle, rattle. "Just a moment, oniisama..."

Utena rolled off the bed to the floor, lifted the sheets hanging down over the side, and scooted underneath just as she heard the door opening.

"Good morning, Nanami," Touga's voice said. "What, no hug for your brother?"

Beneath the bed, with only dust bunnies for company, Utena winced. This might not be pleasant.

She heard Nanami's skirt rustling, and, almost inaudibly, cloth against cloth. "Good morning, oniisama."

"Oniisama..." Touga mused. Utena could almost see them now, petite Nanami with her arms delicately twined around her much taller brother's midsection, Touga with one hand on his little sister's hair... they'd look almost fitted together, like two puzzle pieces... "Why is it almost always that, Nanami? Why not just 'Niisan'... you're not a child any more."

Nanami giggled. "Oh, you'll always be oniisama to me, no matter how old the two of us get." Utena winced again. Good acting, Nanami, she silently complimented. Some of it had to be acting, didn't it? She had only guesses for what had happened between them on the road to the Ends of the World, but none of them were good, and Nanami had clearly been changed by them. If she remembered, and Touga didn't...

"What's wrong?" Footsteps, two pairs, one pair lighter than the other--assumedly, brother and sister breaking apart.

"Something about the way you embrace me feels different... and why didn't you call me or come to visit me yesterday? I know you were in town then."

"Well, I could ask the same of you," Nanami replied, a little testily. "Why didn't you call ahead?"

Utena could almost picture Touga shrugging casually. "I wanted to surprise you for once, like you always do to me. I was fairly certain you'd come into town after I told you about Tsuwabuki." An audible pause. "Is that why you're upset? Because of what's happened to your friend?"

"Yes," Nanami said, a little too quickly for Utena's tastes. She shouldn't sound so eager to latch onto an explanation. "Yes, that's exactly it... it's why I didn't call you or come to see you yesterday, when I got in... I was so upset... you know, it's such an awful thing."

"Yes," Touga said sadly. "Truly terrible."

"Anyway, let's not hang around this stuffy hotel room any longer than we have to. Why don't we go for breakfast? Or just some coffee?" Too eager again, Nanami, Utena thought.

Touga's footsteps moved across the floor again. "Nanami, are you sharing this room with someone?"

"What makes you ask that, oniisama?" Too innocent, this time.

"Well, it's a double, for one thing."

"Oh, that's because I like one bed for sleeping, and one bed for reading the newspaper on in the morning," Nanami said with a giggle.

"Hrm. Well, it's your trust fund." But Touga sounded dubious.

Utena tried to think of things that might give her away. Her shoes and boots, quite obviously a larger size than Nanami's, were in the closet across from the bathroom door, which was closed. Her dirty clothes, also obviously sized for someone else, were in the bottom drawer of the dresser. Her clean clothes were in the drawer above, with the sheathed sword from Saionji's shop hidden beneath them. No, there was nothing...

Chu-Chu.

Where was he? Where had he been when Touga had knocked on the door? Still asleep in his box, if she remembered correctly.

They'd brought him back tidbits and leftovers from breakfast, and he'd woken briefly to eat them, then fallen back to sleep.

The box would be hidden from Touga's sight by the TV, so long as he didn't come too far into the room. If he stood under the familiar crack in the ceiling, though...

Her stomach twisted, and, lost momentarily in the memory of staring up at it in another time (and asking, childishly, for she had really only been a child then, what eternity was), she imagined the revulsion she felt was much like what Nanami must be experiencing being in the presence of her brother again.

"Chu." Very softly.

She blinked, and looked down. Barely visible in the darkness beneath the bed, Chu-Chu raised his finger to his lips. Utena nodded, slowly, and raised a finger to hers in reply.

Touga spoke again. "Anyway, yes, let's go out. We've got lots to catch up on."

At that moment, Utena's next inhalation of breath caused a dustbunny to dive up into her left nostril as though into a long-sought home. Instantly, her lungs and throat began to tremble with the oncoming sneeze. Inescapable.

"Yes, oniisama."

She clamped a hand over her mouth and tried to resist. Her face began turning bright red.

"Where do you want to go? I had breakfast early today... we could go to brunch. Or just some coffee. What do you feel like?"

"You're always so considerate, oniisama, letting your little sister choose... why don't you choose today?"

"Well, all right... let's see..."

Get out, damn it, Utena snarled silently. Holding in the sneeze was like trying to hold back the ocean. The door opened. Footsteps moved out into the hallway. The door closed.

Utena sneezed, and dustbunnies scattered before the blast like sheep before a marauding wolf. She crawled out from beneath the bed with them adhering to her hair and clothes, and frowned sourly.

"Would it have been _that_ much trouble for him to call ahead?" she muttered.

* * *

Utena hung the phone up and flopped back on the bed wearing only a towel. Her eyes itched with tears that she was _not_ going to shed.

"She could at least have said something."

She sat up and began to brush her hair, hard enough that it tugged at her scalp and made her wince. She paused, took a deep breath, and began again with gentler strokes.

"Why did she even pick up the phone, if she wasn't going to say something?"

The towel slipped down to her waist, but she didn't bother to pull it back up. It wasn't as though anyone was going to walk in on her suddenly.

"Why would she do that to me?"

After a half-hour of reading the paper, itching, and trying to brush dustbunnies and under-the-bed grit from her hair, skin and clothes, Utena had simply given up on the matter, stripped down and got into the shower for the second time that morning. Beneath the streaming water, she'd reflected that she was going to need to go to a laundromat soon (you couldn't fit that many clothes into a gym bag, even a big one), and upon other things, as she had a tendency to do when in the shower. It had occurred to her that it would be good to give Anthy a call.

Four rings. She decided to let it go to ten. The phone was picked up on seven. Nothing on the other end, not even breathing.

"Anthy?"

Her own voice echoed faintly back in her ears, but nothing from the other end of the line.

"Anthy, won't you say something?"

Apparently not.

"Anthy... please."

Nothing.

"I know I said some really terrible things to you, but--"

Click, and the dial tone.

She'd dialed again, but, this time, there had been no answer.

"Damn it, Anthy," she murmured, giving one last stroke of the brush through her hair. That hadn't been fair. That hadn't been fair at all. Wasn't Anthy at least worried about her?

Maybe it would have hurt too much to talk. She could see that. Sometimes, what you wanted to say could get caught in your throat like a bone, and it was less painful to say nothing at all.

She got up off the bed and crossed to the dresser. Underneath her clothes, beneath the handle of the sword, she found the picture of her and Anthy. Taken last year, on one of their hiking trips, by a nice older woman who'd been hiking the same trail with her husband. She'd said how nice it was to see such good friends as she snapped the picture, and had given Chu-Chu a piece of cheese from her satchel before going on.

Anthy, in her jade skirt and black blouse; Utena, in her blue jeans and white button-up shirt. Anthy had always worn that skirt when they went hiking, even though Utena had always said she'd be more comfortable in jeans... not that she ever had any trouble keeping up, but...

"I lied to you," she said, sniffing and fighting to keep from crying outright. "When I said I wasn't happy. I was always happy, with you... it wasn't the kind of life I imagined I'd lead, but you were the best thing in it... but this is something I have to do." She smiled, and swallowed. "Sentimental fool," she murmured. "Nanami's got your number, all right."

After putting the photo away again, she tossed the towel into the corner and began to dress. She'd nearly gotten her pants on when the door opened and Nanami walked in, looking downcast. When she spotted Utena, she blinked. Utena blinked back, and reached for her belt.

Nanami moaned. "Oh, God, you've got no decency at all."

"What?" Utena asked, pulling on a dark blouse and slowly buttoning it up. "I'm a girl, you're a girl."

Nanami threw up her hands, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door behind her. Utena heard water running.

"Weirdo," she murmured, shrugged, and finished dressing.

...crying?

Hesitant, she knocked on the bathroom door. "Nanami?" No answer except faint, choked sobbing; she tried the handle, and it rattled in her grip. Locked. "Nanami?"

"Go away." Nanami's voice snapped through the door like a muffled gunshot. "Can't I have some privacy?"

Utena gave up. "If that's what you want." She shrugged and moved back to sit on her bed. Moments later, the bathroom door opened, and Nanami walked stiffly out, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Utena didn't even look up as the blond sat down on the bed across from her.

"Why does it hurt so much?" Nanami murmured.

"Your makeup is running," Utena said, still not looking up.

Nanami sniffled.

"Want to tell me what's wrong?"

"As long as I'm away from him, I can pretend," Nanami blurted. "But as soon as I'm around him, even for a few minutes, I start to forget, and he's just my oniisama all over again, and... and..." She blew her nose into the tissue and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's just like at Ohtori... even though I know... I still love him."

Utena listened in silence, trying to maintain her uncaring expression.

"I just don't understand it. How he can seem so sweet and charming and... good, and at the same time, I know he did all those things: helping out Akio, manipulating everyone, and... and what he did to me."

Trying, and failing. "What did he do to you on the way to the Ends of the World, anyway?" Might as well ask straight out, subtlety wasn't her thing.

"Tried to kiss me," Nanami replied, apparently without thinking. Then her mouth clamped shut and she turned her head away from Utena.

"Oh." Utena pulled her legs up onto the bed and leaned forward, studying Nanami carefully. "That... doesn't actually sound so bad." Nanami's scowl made her hastily add, "I mean, as things go."

"It wasn't the kind of kiss you're supposed to give your little sister," Nanami whispered.

"Oh."

Nanami, still presenting her profile to Utena, sniffed. "Go on. Say it. I know you want to."

"What?"

"Wasn't that what you wanted?"

"I didn't want to say that."

"That's what he said," Nanami snarled, wadding the tissue into a ball and throwing it to the floor. "After it happened, that is. He didn't understand. No one understood."

"Oh." Utena watched Chu-Chu pounce upon the tissue and wrestle it under the bed. "What did you want, then?"

Nanami didn't say anything at first. Then she sighed, almost with relief, as though she had just put down some heavy burden. "I don't know," she admitted. "All I wanted was for him to love me, to stop looking at you, at all the other girls... but I don't know what I wanted from him, really." She shook her head. "It was so long ago. And I don't want it any more."

Utena lay down and stretched her legs out, resting her chin on her forearms and staring at the wall, only able to see Nanami out of the corner of her eye. "You know, people have all sorts of different sides to them. It's not as though your brother has to be either totally perfect or totally bad. People can be noble and strong and good, and, at the same time... they can be weak and foolish and bad." Focus on the wall. Don't think. "And it's okay to keep on loving your brother. You don't have to stop just because you've seen some of his bad side; you didn't at Ohtori. Didn't you duel me one last time because you realized that you did love your brother?" She rolled over onto her back and stared at the too-familiar ceiling. "I mean, he's your brother. He'll always be your brother."

"You don't understand anything at all," Nanami said quietly. "But... thanks for trying." She swallowed audibly. "I mean

that."

"Yeah, I know."

"We just had coffee for a little while."

"Yeah. You weren't gone very long."

"And talked. I told him about my classes, he told me about work." Pause. "Oh. And he said he'd try and get me in to see Tsuwabuki."

Utena turned her head to look at Nanami, who was staring fixedly at the bed. "That's good," she said eventually. "He could probably use a friend to talk to right now."

Nanami nodded. She looked as resolutely miserable as Utena had ever seen her.

"Hey, cheer up." Utena smiled, hoping it would make Nanami do the same. It didn't. "Everything will be okay. We'll win."

"Do you actually believe that?" Nanami asked softly.

"Of course. We're the good guys."

As Nanami opened her mouth to reply, the phone rang. Utena reached for it automatically, but stopped when Nanami frantically shook her head and picked it up herself.

"Hello... Oniisama! Really? That's great... thank you so much... what... oh, yes, thank Akio-san for me too..." The grimace on her face didn't show up in her voice at all. "So soon? I'd better hurry, then... yes, call me this evening... maybe we can go to dinner tomorrow, it will depend on my plans... bye, oniisama."

She hung up and turned to Utena. Smiled, just slightly. "I'm going to go see Tsuwabuki-kun now."

"That quickly?"

The smile faded. "He told me he called Akio. Akio has a lot of influence in this city."

Utena suppressed a wince. "How are you getting there?"

"I'll take a cab," Nanami replied. "I gave the car to Shiori and Juri."

Utena blinked. "I didn't see you hand over the keys."

Nanami shrugged. "I made sure you didn't... I didn't want them to think that I was only doing it because you were watching, so I waited until you went to get the paper." She walked towards the bathroom. "Anyway, I have to fix my makeup. It's all runny from crying."

Utena sat on the bed and listened to the soft sound of water running in the bathroom. Chu-Chu crept out from underneath Nanami's bed, draped in shredded tissue and with a triumphant grin on his face. Utena shook her head at him and grinned; leaning down, she held out her cupped hands, and he leapt into them with a happy sound. She placed him in her lap and began to pull scraps of tissue off him.

"Hey, Chu-Chu, do you think Anthy's okay?" she asked softly.

Chu-Chu looked up at her, and, for a moment, his eyes were clear and bright. He nodded, slowly, and said, with utmost solemnity, "Chu."

Utena hesitated, then said, "Do you know that she's okay?"

She wasn't very good at reading his expressions, but he looked perturbed. He closed his eyes, said "Chu" softly, and opened them again. Utena frowned. They were horribly bloodshot, hideously red. He blinked, and they cleared. "Chu," he said again, yawned, and fell asleep with his head pillowed on her knee.

"Weirdo," Utena murmured discontentedly.

* * *

Highway before them, winter landscape to either side. Kyouchi drove, and Anthy sat beside him in the tilted passenger seat, staring out the window. They'd left Sapporo's suburbs behind long ago, and would reach Daisetsu shortly after noon at this rate. After that, they would have to hike to get where there were going.

Music on the radio. A song in English, with piano accompaniment. Melancholy.

o^ Home no more home to me, whither must I wander?
o^ Hunger my driver, I go where I must.
o^ Cold blows the winter wind over hill and heather:
o^ Thick drives the rain and my roof is in the dust,

o/ Loved of wise men was the shade of my roof-tree,
o/ The true word of welcome was spoken in the door--
o/ Dear days of old with the faces in the firelight,
o/ Kind folks of old, you come again no more.

"Anthy?"

"Yes?" She watched grey birds soaring over a snow-draped forest.

"Do you remember what you promised me, if I came along?"

She said nothing for a time, and watched the forest retreat into the distance behind them.

o/ Home was home then, my dear, full of kindly faces,
o/ Home was home then, my dear, happy for the child.
o/ Fire and the windows bright glittered on the moor land;
o/ Song, tuneful song, built a palace in the wild.

"I do," she answered at last. "I said I'd give you answers."

o/ Now when day dawns on the brow of the moorland,
o/ Lone stands the house, and the chimney-stone is cold.
o/ Lone let it stand, now the friends are all departed,
o/ The kind hearts, the true hearts, that loved the place
of old

"And?" The road began to rise to crest a hill, and they and the car rose with it.

"I'm trying to think of where to begin," she said, trying to decide what pretty guise to cast the story in. "It's such an old tale..." Story and fact had become so contradictory and intertwined within her memory that she couldn't say which was which. Whatever story she told, she'd put enough in to satisfy him.

o/ Spring shall come, come again, calling up the moor-fowl,
o/ Spring shall bring the sun and the rain, bring the bees
and flowers;
o/ Red shall the heather bloom over hill and valley,
o/ Soft flow the stream through the even-flowing hours.

"Why don't you just tell me why we're going to Daisetsu first?"

"Because to tell you that, I've got to tell you other things."

He sighed. "Then just start at the beginning."

"At the beginning?" she mused. "Very well... once upon a time, when the world was young, there was a brother and a sister, and they lived in a palace in the wild..."

o/` Fair the day shine as it shone on my childhood--
o/` Fair shine the day on the house with open door;
o/` Birds come and cry there and twitter in the chimney--
o/` But I go for ever and come again no more.

* * *

They meet in a sunny room with high arched windows, two women older than they look, and greet each other with the meaningless cheek-kisses of former friends.

"Tokiko-kun."

"Hoshimi-kun."

Bow, break apart, to sit across from one another in high-backed chairs. Tokiko takes her hat off and puts it in her lap. Hoshimi pours tea.

They sip.

"It's been a long time."

"Hasn't it?"

"I knew that you came back annually to visit your brother's grave. I always meant to invite you over for tea before."

"I never stayed more than a day."

"So hostile."

"My nephew is dead."

"He and his sister were your wards, were they not?"

"Their parents died shortly after I was widowed. It seemed the proper thing to do."

"You never did have children of your own, did you?"

"No."

They sip again.

"You've aged well, Hoshimi-kun."

"You've aged better, Tokiko-kun."

"I really do think your hair looked better when it was longer."

"And I think yours looked better when it was shorter. Very chic."

"I could have mine short again easily enough. But you'd have to wait some time before yours would be as long as it was when we were younger."

"So I would."

And again.

"How goes your work?"

"It nears completion."

"And how is... he?"

"Different."

"Different, you say?"

"You should have stayed, Tokiko-kun."

"After what happened, I lost my stomach for advancing such work."

"They had a contract."

"And it was in their contract to die like that?"

"It was implied that was a possibility."

And again, in perfect unison, they sip.

"Implied possibility. How vague."

"Contracts are often vague."

"And yours?"

"Mine is very specific."

"No fine print?"

"None that concerns me."

"And do you sleep well at night?"

"Very well."

Again. Teacups, nearly empty, rattle against saucers.

"I think sometimes you were more upset by the vehicle than by the fuel, Tokiko-kun."

"Fuel... That was what he called them, too."

"And was it not what they were?"

"I don't sleep well at night, Hoshimi-kun. Not lately. I have dreams. I dream about a lot of things. I dream of a statue with a hundred arms, each arm bearing a sword. I dream of something made of pure light, so beautiful it makes me weep. I dream of a woman in a shroud, with blood upon her lips. I dream of a warrior made of wire with a stone for a heart. I dream of a hole in the air in the shape of a man. I dream of an old lion with no teeth whose claws are yet terribly sharp. I dream of a skeleton holding in one hand a woman's mask and in the other a beating heart. I dream of a woman suspended from a gibbet by her hands from a rope of gold. I dream of red, red eyes. I dream of a black angel holding in his hands a shaft of sunlight."

"Have you tried sleeping pills?"

The teacups are empty now.

"It saddens me that these walls have come between us, Tokiko-kun. However did it happen?"

"I am uncertain. Perhaps it was when you became an evil bitch willing to sacrifice even your own daughter for your own selfish dreams, Hoshimi-kun."

"Such harsh words. They wound me. But it's merely that you can't understand. You've never had any children to call your own."

"I had two of them."

"And yet so confident were you that you sent them here, even though you knew what awaited them."

"I did not think that he would dare. Perhaps he has changed, as you say, to dare so much. But I have not."

"Indeed, you have not. More tea?"

"No."

Tokiko stands and places her hat back upon her head.

"I am going now. I have other matters to attend to. Believe me when I say that if Hasuichi died to suit his plans or yours, there shall be a reckoning."

"Such callow threats. You're not used to making them, are you? You must remember, Tokiko-kun, I have not been your student for many years. I've been learning things without you all that time."

"And I have not been your teacher for many as well. I've learned things as well."

Tokiko is at the door now, ready to leave.

Hoshimi smiles.

"When shall we two meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

Tokiko, after a moment, smiles back. It is no nicer a smile than Hoshimi's.

"When the hurlyburly's done, when the battle's lost and won."

And she's gone.

Hoshimi pours herself another cup of tea, and drinks it down. She lowers her head into her hands. She does not weep, but thinks merely of red, red eyes, and shudders; with fear, but also with something of ecstasy.

End of Jaquemart - Part VI

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