

## Jaquemart IX- We In Our Coffins

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# **Jaquemart IX- We In Our Coffins**

by [alanharnum](#)

JAQUEMART

by

Alan Harnum

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## IX. We In Our Coffins

\* \* \*

"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. All the world was wild in those days, for the race of man had not yet come to dominate. They shared the world with creatures such as are never seen in these days, when the magic has ebbed to its lowest point; with the spirits of the land, with the elemental hosts, and with darker things.

"The land the brother and sister lived in could be called Arcadia. Their palace was the light against the darkness; Arcadia, once the fairest land in all the world, lay divided into two parts. In the west ruled the Witch-Queen, who had come long ago from over the sea, leading a host of darkness; in the east, the Rose Prince and his sister ruled. All the girls of Arcadia were as princesses to the Rose Prince, except for his sister, who was only an ordinary girl. When the Rose Prince rode out with his knightly host to battle the servants of the Witch-Queen, the sister would stay behind and keep the fires of his hearth burning. When he returned, she would tend his wounds, and those of his warriors.

"It seemed as though things would continue like that forever, with half the land ruled by the darkness, and half the land ruled by the light.

"One day, however, the Rose Prince began to grow ill and weak. Still he led his knights to battle, however, until he grew so weak that he could no longer even mount his shining steed. Then he stayed behind, while his knights went to battle the darkness without him.

"One by one, they began to fall to the darkness.

"The sister used all of the healing arts she knew, but the Rose Prince's sickness only grew worse. Soon, he lay at the gate of death, and his sister's heart was sorely grieved. In desperation, she left him in the care of her handmaidens--all of whom, of course, were princesses--and set out into the world to search for a cure.

"Firstly, she went to the lands to the north, where the mountains were numerous as blades of grass. But while she learned many things there, she learned not how to heal her brother.

"Secondly, she went to the south, where the brown cattle were herded through the green hills, and the grey-winged hawks soared overhead. But while she learned many things there, she learned not how to heal her brother.

"Thirdly, she went to the east, where the sands shifted like the waves of the sea. But while she learned many things there, she learned not how to heal her brother.

"She returned home without hope. The only direction left to explore was the west; but to the west lay the endless winter of the Witch-Queen, and beyond her lands, only the infinite black sea.

"As she wept at her brother's sickbed, news reached them that the last of the knights had fallen in battle, and the hosts of the Witch-Queen drew nigh.

"Under cover of darkness that night, the sister left the palace, and journeyed to the west, into enemy territory. She was soon captured; to her surprise, the host of darkness treated her with the utmost respect. She was brought before the Witch-Queen herself, who sat upon a throne of skulls in a cavern of ice. Pale as snow she was, and her hair was as the night.

"'I bid you welcome, sister of my foe,' said the Witch-Queen. And she waited for the sister to speak.

"Then the sister made her plea. 'My brother lies dying. I have learned all the arts of the lands north, south and east, but no thing I have learned can heal him. I come asking to learn your arts, for I believe that within them lies the cure for my brother.'

"The Witch-Queen looked at the sister with interest. 'And, in return, what shall you offer me?'

"For the life of my brother, I shall give all of our lands to you,' replied the sister. Some might call her a traitor, but she loved her brother more than any other thing in all the world; more than the land, more than its people, more than the sun, the moon, the stars.

"I accept,' said the Witch-Queen. With a wave of her hand, she dismissed all her guards and servants, and they were alone. 'First, you must come to understand why your brother lies ill. Why do flowers need night as well as day?'

"The sister, who had tended the roses of the palace for all her life, answered quickly, 'Too much sunlight would disturb their balance.'

"The Witch-Queen nodded, pleased. 'And so too it is with the soul of princes,' she said. 'So too it is with the souls of men, and with the world. To bear fruit, flowers must cast off their petals. Your land is one of eternal summer and light, and mine one of eternal winter and darkness. My wish is to join the two together, the darkness and the light, that the souls of men and women might bear fruit such as never before has been seen. I shall reconcile the light and the darkness into one.'

"And the sister understood then the wisdom of the Witch-Queen, and learned at her feet for many months. At last, she felt ready to return to the palace and attempt the healing of her brother.

"Remember the promise you have made me,' called the Witch-Queen, as the sister left. The sister called back that she would; for she believed in the wisdom of uniting the darkness and the light, and believed her brother would come to see it as well once he was cured.

"When she returned to the palace, the servants let out a great cry of joy, for they had thought her dead. But she spared no time for their welcomings and thanksgivings, and bid them leave the castle for one night and one day. They obeyed, although not without misgivings.

"For an entire night, she worked the arts she had learned from the Witch-Queen upon her brother. At the end, as the sun rose redly in the east, the Rose Prince fell into a deep sleep, and the sister prepared to begin the work of the day that would heal him completely.

"Then a great cry arose from beyond the gates of the palace. All the peoples of the land were gathered there, fleeing from the advance of the Witch-Queen's armies. They cried out for the prince to save them, so loud that it was impossible for the sister to do her work.

"She went out to meet them, bade them be still, told them that all was for the best. But they listened not to her, and she grew wroth. She said an awful thing to them. She told them a terrible lie, in her rage.

"The Rose Prince sleeps at my bidding,' said she, 'for he belongs to me and me alone, and will never awaken unless I will it.'

"Then the people knew her for a servant of the Witch-Queen, and fell upon her with swords. At her screams, the eyes of the Rose Prince opened. He left his bed and went to the gates.

"And when he saw what the people's hands had done... what the people's hands had done... what their hands had done..."

Saionji Kyouichi, hands white on the steering wheel, turned his eyes away from the road for a moment. "What then?" he asked, mouth dry.

Himemiya Anthy, sunk deep into her story as though into the ocean, replied in a whisper, "He killed them. He killed them all." Then she stirred, and shook her head. The fog lifted from her eyes.

"The fall from light to darkness," he said softly. "The death of innocence." He looked back to the road. It wouldn't do to get so distracted by the tale that they got into an accident. "That was you and Akio?"

"Called Dios then," she said with a nod.

"And what were you called?"

"I don't remember."

"The rest," he prompted. His mind was awl with the fantastical nature of it all; like a fairy tale, gone darkly wrong.

"The rest?"

"There's got to be something in between 'He killed them all' and Ohtori, doesn't there?"

Anthy took a deep breath and looked away from him, out the passenger window. "The greater part of my brother's power remains sealed away," she said. "Sleeping. He wants it back, has wanted it back ever since that day."

"Why?"

She shuddered, almost invisibly. "For revenge. For amusement. For power's sake, perhaps. I can't guess at his mind. He's not the brother I knew." She paused. "It took me a long time to see that."

"The Duels? The Code of the Rose Seal?"

"Rules for a game; an experiment to create a noble heart, pure, unsullied. One that would break the seal upon the Power of Dios."

He glanced suspiciously at her out of the corner of his eye. "And all of this is true?"

"As true as any other version I could tell you," she replied. "The elements are all there. The fall from light to darkness, as you say. I know other versions. I know a thousand other versions. I've forgotten which one is true."

"Why did you tell me that one?"

She leaned back in the seat, closed her eyes, ran one slim-fingered hand through her long dark hair. "I don't really know. Perhaps because I've only just now begun to remember who I am; to accept that I can't ever be an ordinary person. I'm a witch, and I always will be."

"And what is a witch?"

Her smile was thin, and bitter. "One better than most at working her will upon the world."

They passed a highway sign, and he slowed the car slightly. "Higashikawa, right?"

She nodded.

"The exit's coming up in two miles." He changed lanes to prepare for the turn-off. "I can't say I'm entirely satisfied

with these answers, Anthy. I still feel like you're keeping me in the dark about a lot of things."

"There isn't time to tell you all of my story," she said. She paused, then laughed softly. "Kyouichi, you know, you are the first person \_I've\_ ever told the story to. The first one ever."

A warm, tight feeling began in his chest. He felt, oddly, profoundly honoured, even touched. "You never told it to Tenjou?"

The smile that had accompanied the laughter vanished. "We never talked about it at all."

"Not for seven years?" He couldn't imagine that; Anthy had lived so much longer than he, undoubtedly known so much more pain. To have no one to share that with... or, more plausibly, to be unwilling to share it. He remembered how obstinate he'd been in the early years with Wakaba, resisting as she tried to draw him out of his cave, to get him to share his secrets with her, the past pains... When he'd finally done it, it had felt so good, so cleansing, but before, he'd hated the very idea of letting anyone get that close to him.

Wakaba, his beloved wife, more important than anything to him. Why, then, something whispered, aren't you at her side? And why do you feel this glow at kind words from Himemiya Anthy?

"No," she said eventually. "Not for seven years."

They reached the exit, and he guided the car smoothly onto it. "Why are we here, Anthy?"

Suddenly, the smile was back, completely different from before, when it was soft and melancholy. Now it was fierce, like a lioness baring her teeth in anticipation of the kill. "We're going to raid my brother's trophy hall," she said softly.

You should never have agreed to come, something whispered. Saionji Kyouichi, you're just a big damn fool. Beside him, Anthy kept on smiling.

\* \* \*

With a creak and a jolt, the gondola began the ascent. At first, it swayed a little, like the rolling deck of a ship at sea, but the ride soon steadied.



"We're the only ones without skis," Kyouichi murmured, hands gripping the bar at the back of the cable car as he watched the landscape of gleaming white crags and towering pine trees pass below. "And we certainly don't look properly equipped for mountain climbing." He shrugged one shoulder, adjusting the position of the backpack he wore.

"So?" Anthy ran her gloved fingers lightly across the cool metal of bar as she glanced over at him.

"I'm just saying that we look a little suspicious."

"Has anyone bothered us?" She smiled faintly.

He thought about it, then shrugged and admitted that no one had. No one had even glanced twice at them.

Behind them, a group of students decked out in colourful ski wear laughed raucously. A middle-aged couple by the front of the car frowned in disapproval.

"Explain to me exactly what we're doing." He paused, and looked at her with slightly narrowed eyes. "And please don't be cryptic."

"My brother has a place in which he keeps trophies. Souvenirs of past failures and near triumphs." Far beneath them, skiers raced down the slopes, colourful insects against the vast white expanse of the mountainside. "There are items of power within it." Items of my power, she thought, taken from me long ago by him, locked away because he could not turn them to his ends; but she said only, "They will be of use in combating him."

"How?"

She pursed her lips and thought carefully. "There is a mirror of gold, that reflects the truth and shatters lies, and a dagger of silver that pierces the hearts of even immortal things."

His eyes narrowed further. "And you think they're just going to be lying around for you to take?"

"Of course they will not," she said dryly. "But my brother reckons not with my power. He believed the witch-hunters would slay me; he may believe that they have done so." That Leo Cano had come very close to slaying her did not matter to her in that moment; ascending the mountain in the cable car, rising into the sky, she felt free and vital and full of power. "You and I shall

penetrate the halls, overcome what guardians and wards may be there, and obtain what I wish."

"Oh." He paused, and scratched his cheek, frowning. "I hope we do it in time that my car doesn't get towed."

She laughed, lightly; a few heads in the car turned towards her at the bell-like sound, then turned away again.

"I honestly don't know what good I'm going to be to you," he said after a moment, quietly bowing his head.

She softened her voice slightly, and briefly touched his arm. "The one who undoubtedly hunts me still is proof against the great body of my power," she said, despising the admission but making it all the same. "I am no warrior; I need one to guard me. A knight at my side."

He stiffened visibly, mild shock passing across his face for a moment. "Again, I'm not sure what good I'll be. You should have told me you could make us inconspicuous; I would have brought a sword."

"You shall have a weapon, if a weapon is needed." She smiled at him, and he again looked suddenly stiff and uncertain.

He touched one hand to his breast, over his heart. "Shall I?" he murmured.

"You shall."

"I fear the blade of my spirit may be decidedly flawed," he muttered. "I'm not the fighter I was at Ohtori."

She nodded. "You are other things, though, and no less worthy. More, even."

An obvious glow came upon his face at the words; he turned slightly away from her, as though not wanting her to see his eyes. Anthy almost, but not quite, frowned.

\* \* \*

"That's very disconcerting, you know."

The sky, endlessly blue, yawned above Kyouichi as he walked heavily along the steep trail. Each step sank his feet a good six inches into the upper layer of the snow; beneath it was at least another six inches (so he estimated), so hard-packed and frozen that it was like solid ground. The constant nagging fear

of stepping into a hidden crevasse or hole assailed him, and the backpack on his shoulders was a dead weight like a corpse.

"Oh?"

Ahead of him, Anthy walked barefoot over the snow, arms held out to her sides with the fingers spread wide, as though she wanted to experience the biting cold wind as much as possible. She didn't even leave footprints on the snow. As soon as they'd gotten away from the skiers, she'd taken off all the winter clothes she'd been wearing; they were currently in his pack.

"Yes."

She looked back at him, and smiled, as one might at a child one feels affection for. The wind pressed the white dress (a hotel bedsheet, once, the part of his mind still trying to deal with so much irrationality in rational terms reminded him) tight as a glove to her body; up this high, the air so thin, wind felt like a cutting knife, attacking from one direction, then another, a foe deadly swift, invisible, impossible to fight.

"I'm sorry. I'm being inconsiderate."

Something... \_shifted\_, like a minor movement of a vast and complex machine working in the backstages of reality, and he smelt roses, spring water, heard the buzzing of fat black-striped bees and the voices of swallows; the hard sunlight turned snow-draped pines into towers of diamond. And he didn't feel the cold or the wind any more. In fact, in his jacket and gloves and hat and scarf, he felt downright hot.

He didn't take them off, even though it was uncomfortable. Up ahead, Anthy pirouetted across the white and sang out, softly and sweetly:

o/` Mark my footsteps my good page,  
o/` Tread thou in them boldly;  
o/` Thou shalt find the winter's rage  
o/` Freeze thy blood less coldly.

He took off his gloves and hat, and checked his watch. Just about time for his afternoon pill. He thought about skipping it; he \_knew\_ they made him groggy, even though the doctors said they didn't, and Anthy had said he might need to fight. It was a good enough reason, he needed to be as alert as possible...

"You promised Wakaba," he said. These days, even before he'd got his memories back, he often thought of himself as two

different men; Saionji, who'd been the kendo team captain and the one who thought it was a good laugh to post a silly but sincerely-felt love letter (and the one treating Himemiya like dirt, and the one walking out on Wakaba after she took him in...), and Kyouichi; Kyouichi, who was calm, who didn't get angry, who treated people well, who loved his wife... Most days, he was Kyouichi, liked to think he was, but Saionji was always there, always under the surface, because he couldn't change being what he'd been--

He shrugged off his coat and pack, and paused to rearrange things so his winter gear was stowed atop Anthy's. She was about a dozen feet ahead of him, moving across the snow like an ethereal thing.

I am halfway up a seven thousand foot high mountain in Hokkaido during the middle of winter, he thought, walking around as though it's summer, in the company of a woman bearing only a vague resemblance as far as personality goes to the girl I knew (that I thought I loved) at Ohtori.

Saionji would have been horrified. Himemiya, this exuberance is shameful! Kyouichi was delighted; she had smashed her shell, she had recovered herself. It was a little frightening, admittedly, because he was quite certain that whatever she was, "human" in the conventional sense wasn't a part of it. Like a goddess or a spirit, human in form, perhaps only for convenience, but...

"But which one," he murmured, digging through his backpack for a water bottle and his pills. "Kannon, Amaterasu, or Izanami?"

She suddenly looked back at him, and he started; he hadn't meant for her to hear him. If she had, though, she made no acknowledgement of it. "Stay with me," she chided. "It grows more difficult for me to keep you warm the further you are from me. And you don't want to lose sight of me, or you'll get lost."

"I need to stop for a moment," he said, embarrassed. He shouldn't have been, it wasn't as though she didn't already know. "Take my pill." But he didn't like taking them in front of Wakaba, either; samurai bullshit ideology, he tried to think scornfully, pretend for long enough that the bad things, the hurtful things, the shameful things, don't exist, and maybe you'll eventually believe they don't.

She nodded, and headed back towards him. "All right. We're nearly there."

He fumbled the pill into his hand, not looking at her, and swallowed it with a swig of icily-cold water from a bottle. "It lies within the mountain?"

"The entrance lies upon the mountain," she said, looking up at the sky. "The hall itself lies elsewhere."

"Ahh," he said, not understanding at all. "Any idea what we can expect in there?"

"Little," she said. "I have not been there in..." Her eyes clouded, suddenly distant as stars... "...in some time. We used to go there together, but as time passed, he chose to go alone... he does not go often, at least he did not when I was last with him... the entrance moves with us... always in a remote place, a high mountain, a desolate swamp... once, in a sea-cave, revealed only during the spring tides..." She shook her head, as though with the motion shaking off the memories she had fallen into. "Let's keep moving."

They continued along the snow-packed trail (his footsteps, like hers, no longer broke the crust of the snow) that wound up the mountain, defined on either side by stands of tall pines. In the warmer months, it was probably a pleasant, albeit bracing hike--if the snow ever melted up here, which he wasn't sure about. He and Wakaba did a lot of camping in the summer, but they'd never camped in Hokkaido.

"And after we finish here, we'll head to Houou?"

"Yes."

He ducked beneath a pine bough, high enough for her to walk beneath, just slightly too low for him to do so. "I may... you know. If it's convenient, I'd like to go back to Sapporo and see Wakaba. Maybe... stay, if you don't need me any more after this. I should be with her."

She stopped, so abruptly that he nearly ran into her.

"If that is what you wish," she said neutrally, without turning.

"Only if you don't need me any more," he said quickly. Too quickly, he thought as soon as he said it. "I want... I want to put an end to this too, but she's my wife; if I'm not necessary, I should be at her side."

"Every sword will help." She began to walk again.

"Tenjou is in Houou now?"

"Yes. As I understand it, she was going to look for others; Arisugawa Juri, in Tokyo, to begin with. From the impressions I receive from my familiar--he is with Utena now--there are three others with her. I am not certain whom, for the distance between us is long, and he has not been well."

Familiar. Chu-Chu, undoubtedly, the strange little monkey-mouse thing. His mind reeled a little at all the new information it was trying to process. "If Juri went with her, Takatsuki Shiori probably went as well." He paused. "They're roommates."

"Oh? Roommates?" He couldn't see, but he thought she was smiling; she moved off the trail, into a copse of trees, and he followed.

"Roommates," he said, and coughed into his fist. "Nanami's in Tokyo as well, I believe."

She turned as they moved between the densely packed trees, and he saw that she was, indeed, smiling. "Oh, how nice. I've got fond memories of Nanami-san."

He quirked an eyebrow. "The two of you never seemed to get along that well, from what little I saw of your interactions."

Anthy's smile broadened, and she said nothing. They moved on in silence, with Kyouichi trying (and failing) to figure out exactly what she'd meant by the comment about Nanami. Not that it mattered much to him; his falling-out with Touga had, of course, equated to a falling-out with Nanami. Something he'd regretted, really, since he'd always been fond enough of her, silly though she was--certainly, she was better at heart than her brother, but that, indeed, damned with faint praise.

After a few more minutes of walking through the thin, crisp, invigoratingly pine-scented air, the trees had begun to thin out, while at the same time becoming larger. The broad outswept skirts of their boughs turned the walk into a passage through a profusion of shadows. Anthy called a halt by raising her hand.

"We are here."

He looked around for some distinctive feature, unable at first to see anything different; then his eyes fastened on two ancient pines, gnarled and huge, each one a mirror of the other.

"The trees?" He indicated them, left and right.

Anthy nodded; he thought that perhaps she looked rather approving, as though she'd expected to have to point them out to him.

"So, what now? Do we just walk through?" He gestured vaguely at the space between the trees.

In response, she raised her hands and held them palm-out before her, fingers spread wide, thumbs touching; flat and even, as though she were pushing against some barrier he couldn't see.

"Light of shadows."

The shadows doubled, trebled, as though the sky above were filling up with darkness; he didn't dare look up.

"Light of darkness."

Night was everywhere, and she was the centre of it, the axis upon which the shadow-world turned; how had the sun moved so quickly across the sky?

"Light from the ends of the world."

No; she was stealing it, she was the thief of light, drawing it all into her, so that only she would be glorified by its presence, the only one in all the world the light would touch--

"Stand revealed!" she cried, and threw her hands wide; captive light streamed forth in curving ribbons, dancing sparks, rippling curtains, and gathered upon the twin trees like swarming locusts upon crops.

Sunlight came back as though it had never left. The parasitical light wormed its way beneath the thick bark of the trees, which began to lose its shape and definition; it smoothed out, becoming blank and flat and unformed, like water. Needle-draped branches began to slide across the liquid surface, climbing upwards and forming into thick clusters at the top. Anthy had lowered her hands to her side now, and was only watching; whatever she had set in motion no longer needed her as a participant to finish.

The boughs twisted and intertwined, creating a graceful arch overhead like that of a gateway. White roses sprouted from within the clusters of green needles.

Kyouichi took what felt like his first breath since it had begun. Like a blind being raised, the view of the space between the trees--more trees, more snow, more mountain--rolled upwards and out of the way in an instant, revealing a huge tunnel, with massive carved steps leading down into it. Carved from ice, or some translucent crystal; he could not tell which. It was as though someone had hung a huge tapestry between the trees, so real-seeming that it could almost be stepped into--

"Come," she said, and beckoned.

He followed, able to do nothing else.

\* \* \*

The steps were as she remembered them: high, wide, almost monolithic, curving left at a slight incline. To sight, they appeared icy, crystalline, but the traction upon them was like stone. The towering walls and high ceiling were of the same material, and all of it glowed a faint, luminous blue, creating enough ambient light to see by. All of it seemed to have been hewn out of the same single great mountain of crystal.

For perhaps half an hour, they descended the stairs, in silence broken by comments from Kyouichi ("Quite a long way down, isn't it? Rather like the path to the Duelling Arena. Your brother has a thing for long flights of stairs, doesn't he?"), made only with the intent of breaking the silence. The curving of the stairs increased, then lessened, then disappeared altogether, and they found themselves in the antechamber of her brother's trophy hall; vault-ceilinged and cavernous, the floor here was more transparent than translucent, with a stylized red rose design identical to that of the Duelling Arena visible deep down within it. Opposite the stairs, a huge archway dominated the massive entirety of one wall, curving slowly to a point, so that taken from some distance back the effect was similar to the tip of a gigantic broadsword. Lintel and frame bore seeming infinitudes of ornamental carvings: roses, thorns, leaves, curlicues, c-scrolls, arabesques, arcades, acanthus, anthemion, bellflowers, cartouches, cinquefoils, crockets, festoons, fleurs-de-lis, kylixes, lyres, fans, paterae, trefoils, quatrefoils, reedings, rosettes, roundels, swags, reliefs, whiplash curves, and many more beyond those she took in on her first glance.

"Remarkable," Kyouichi murmured, craning his head back to stare at the archway.



Anthy glanced over at him. "It's changed a lot since the last time I was here." She ran her eyes up and down the frame and lintel again, marvelling at the sheer profusion of ornamental styles, and also at the fact that she knew she could name them all, given time to sift through the memories.

"Take no offence at this," Kyouichi said, "but it's one of the ugliest things I've ever seen." He cupped his chin, and eyed it with critical appraisal. "Part of design is knowing exactly when to stop, and while fusions of styles can be quite appealing in the right hands--"

"Yes," she interrupted, "it's hideous. It's even worse than it was the last time." She paused. "Then again, it's not really a conscious design. This place..." This place I made long ago for you, brother, at your bidding and command, and as you shift, so shifts it, mirror of crystal and ice to your nightmarish dreams. "...changes."

anthy?

She froze, unhearing of Kyouichi's next question.

anthy, are you coming home to me?

"Go away," she whispered, clenching her fists at her sides. Reality simplified to consist only of a long-gone boy's voice, echo of a dead prince speaking from his tomb, a tomb he built himself, though the foundations were laid by others.

oh, anthy, please, it's so lonely without you so dark  
without you i love you forgive you forgive me anthy my love my  
darling my flower my rose my treasure my shining thing my miracle  
my eternity my heart my world my bride.

"You're dead. You died a long time ago. I know what you really are, now and forever."

anthy, i'm so sorry for all he's done.

"You're dead!"

She whirled, fist striking for the wall that must be there. Pain always made the voice leave her. Her blow smacked solidly into a cupped palm; she heard a grunt, a mix of pain and effort, and opened her eyes. Kyouichi had interposed himself between her and the wall, caught her blow before it could land.

"What are you doing?" he asked, as she lowered her hand to her side. "You could have broken your hand." He grimaced and shook the hand he'd caught the blow with. "You were swinging hard enough to almost break mine."

"Pay it no mind." She turned away from him and headed towards the archway.

He grabbed her shoulder and forcefully spun her around to face him again. "I won't pay it no mind!" he half-snarled, scowling fiercely. "You're hiding things from me, just like at Ohtori, and I won't allow--"

Suddenly, he looked horrified, and took two quick steps back from her. "Forgive me," he murmured, casting his eyes towards the floor. He drew a deep breath. "I only mean to say that it's hard for me to help you, to be your knight, if you won't trust me."

She hesitated, then reached forward and tilted his head back up with two fingers beneath his chin; faint downy stubble from at least two days without shaving tickled against her skin. "I'm the one to ask forgiveness," she said, drawing her hand away as soon as his green eyes would look into hers again. "I'm so used to keeping secrets that it's hard for me to tell them, even when I should." She looked over her shoulder at the architectural monstrosity that was the archway, as an excuse not to look at him. "Ever since I left Ohtori, I've heard a voice. Not often, every few months or so. The voice of Dios--more precisely, Akio, using Dios's voice--trying to call me back."

"But why would he try to call you back if he sent these... witch-hunters, you called them, to slay you?"

She started. "That had not occurred to me," she said after a moment, and frowned.

The hesitancy in his voice was obvious as he asked his next question. "Who are they? You mentioned a leader. The 'one who hunts you still'?"

"Leo Cano," she murmured. "A shadow out of my past. A broken heart, who could not open the doors to the Power of Dios, but escaped destruction at my brother's hands." She paused, then laughed softly. "At least, such destruction as my other 'princes' faced; he is little like the man he was. His life's work has apparently been to slay those in whom he sees my image reflected."

"And he was the one who tortured you?" Kyouichi asked, with slow, deadly softness.

"He had me tortured," she replied, still not looking at him.

"Then I will make him pay, should our paths cross."

"They may, but I hope they do not."

There was a long pause. "I do."

No doubt he was imagining the horrors done to her, and the vengeance he would mete out for them. She almost smiled. A better knight than a prince, indeed.

(No! I am not Prince Dios, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool, / Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious, and meticulous; / Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed almost ridiculous-- / Almost, at times, the Fool.)

She laughed softly, and hoped Eliot would forgive her.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, faintly embarrassed. "Private joke."

He frowned.

"You can leave the backpack here," she said. "We'll get it on the way back out."

"We won't need anything from it?"

She nodded. "Despite appearances, it's warm in here. Although I suppose I should put my shoes back on." She did so, Kyouichi put the backpack down on the floor of the antechamber, and they stepped beneath the archway into the huge hallway beyond. Rough-hewn tunnel walls became smooth as glass and perfectly straight, and a great barrel-vaulted ceiling loomed high overhead. For nearly half-an-hour, they passed by intaglio carvings depicting the triumphs of a faceless prince over a seemingly endless variety of monsters: fiery dragons, hideous chimeras, deadly-eyed basilisks, double-headed amphisbaena, giant serpents, poisonous cockatrices, grave-robbing ghouls, blood-craving vampires, hell-spawned demons, water-dwelling kappas, winged tengu, towering giants, one-eyed cyclopes, bale-eyed gorgons, scorpion-tailed manticores, cow-headed sea-monsters,

fish-headed men, woman-headed lamia with the bodies of snakes, snake-headed women with fish-tails, and a multitude of further monstrosities whose names and natures lay buried in the depths of her memory.

They reached a massive circular chamber, great as any cathedral upon the earth, with eight tunnels leading into and out of it: to the north-west, to the north, to the north-east, to the east and west, the south-west, the south-east, and to the south, from which they had entered. Upon the ceiling was the world, a terrestrial ball of green land and blue sea and white clouds, and to either side were familiar dark hands, cupping it as a child might cup a ball. Green land, blue sea, white clouds, and black cracks--black cracks in the shell of the earth, jagged, gaping lines that threatened to rive the planet from pole to pole.

Those were new.

Have you been busy, brother, she thought, while I slept in the coffin I made for myself, named Happiness, Contentment, Friendship, named No-More-Pain? I left you behind, but you went on without me, and what have you done, my brother, while I was gone?

"Which one?" Kyouichi asked.

"The northern," she said shortly, stirred from her thoughts and slightly annoyed to have been. "It will lead us where we need to go."

They took the northern route, leaving the world behind them on the ceiling.

\* \* \*

Far too big. This place wasn't built to the right scale to make a human being feel comfortable. It wasn't merely the size; he and Wakaba had toured Rome last year, and the best of the cathedral architecture he'd seen there had made him feel raised up to its scale, not dwarfed by it.

Everything here--the massed and overly-ornate carvings, the singular construction material (no visible joins anywhere, so it was either from a single piece or incredibly well-constructed), the sheer size of everything--seemed intended to make him feel puny, inadequate; seemed to call down "you are nothing" at him in a titanic, mocking voice.

Departing the Hub of the World (so he named it to himself, secretly), they passed into the Hall of Coffins (so he named it); after a short distance, the northern passage widened still further. The once-clear floor became punctuated at even intervals by paired pillars of the ubiquitous icy-crystalline material, rising almost organically from floor to ceiling in graceful, spiralling curves like the bits of a drill. Relief carvings of thickly-twisted thorn-bearing vines covered the surface, roseless.

At the base of each stood a coffin; tall, wide, more than big enough to hold two large men. Crystal, of course. The one to the left of the entrance entombed an upright suit of full plate armour, empty of wearer; gauntlets held a heavy broadsword, point resting on the floor of the coffin. The one on the right held a curve-bladed, red-handled sword and a small round shield.

And beyond them, slowly descending out of sight (for he realized now that they had been heading downwards, ever downwards, so subtly that he hadn't realized it before) were more pillars, and more coffins, an uncountable number...

Anthy walked with stately grace towards the left-hand coffin, and put one dark hand to the glassy surface. "I remember you," he heard her say softly, "the name of your coffin was Pride." Then, to the right-hand one, bowing her head, raising her hand to caress the surface. "And the name of yours was Rage."

He approached her hesitantly. "Anthy--"

She turned, and her eyes were shining. She stretched out her hand to him, wordlessly.

"What?"

"You must take my hand," she said softly, "and close your eyes. Run, and let me lead you, and do not open your eyes. You may hear strange things, but do not open them unless I release your hand."

"I don't understand--"

(And there was a stir of iron.)

He started.

"Close your eyes," she said urgently. He did so; her cool, slim hand settled into his, he wrapped his fingers around it, and

she led him into a run. Their footsteps echoed with the volume of cannon shots on the floor.

"The name of your coffin was Despair, and the name of your coffin was Lust--"

(A vibration, deep in his bones, as though he had become a tuning fork.)

"--name of your coffin was Fear, and the name of your coffin was Hate--"

(From the host arose a voice that spoke with a cloven tongue of iron.)

"--was Doubt, the name of your coffin was Grief, the name of your coffin was Dream--"

("The witch," it cried; echoed back, "The witch, the witch, the witch...")

"--was Desire, was Jealousy, was--"

("Tear the witch! Slice the witch! Cut off her nose, cut off her fingers, cut off her ears, cut off her toes, cut out her eyes, cut off her nipples, cut off...")

"--Love, Longing, Power, Possessiveness, Obsession--"

("Cut her! Slay her! Gut her! Flay her!")

"--Denial, Deception, Forgetfulness, Greed--"

("The witch, the witch, the cursed witch...")

They ran on, Anthy leading him, naming the coffins one by one. Sometimes repeating a name, eventually repeating them all, by which point he had ceased to try and count their numbers--had realized it was impossible, that this was not a place where a thing so logical as mathematics, as the simple equation of one and one and one again becoming three, applied. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to let the iron voices in his head drive him mad.

How they hated, how terrible their hate in their impotence, their steely dreams of vengeance and spilled blood, desire for a death that could never come, knowledge that it would never come--

She had stopped the naming. She had loosed his hand. His heart, in his chest, throbbed painfully as an open wound; his

legs and arms trembled, and he was uncertain of why he was still standing. He had never run so hard or so far in his life. He had never been this exhausted.

There was a wall. He was leaning against it. That was why he had not fallen. He slumped down and rested against it; only then did he open his eyes.

They were in a narrow (for this monolithic place) passage; Anthy sat beside him, knees hugged to her chest, forehead resting on them as she pantingly gulped air. Her breast heaved with each desperate breath.

He winced, and looked away. That would be what you'd notice, Saionji Kyouichi, he thought chidingly. He forced himself to breathe in a slow, even rhythm, though the urge to take in and expel as much air as he could with each cycle of breath was strong.

"What was that?" he asked eventually, when he had recovered his voice.

"A gauntlet," Anthy murmured, head still lowered. "The place through which my brother was undoubtedly certain I would not dare to go. Beyond this passageway lies the Chasm, which we must cross to reach the treasure room."

"No--the voices." She raised her head and quirked an eyebrow at him, and he flushed slightly. "You heard them, didn't you?"

"Not at all," she said slowly. "What did they say?"

"They called you witch," he mumbled, looking away. "Spoke of their desire to wound you."

Startlingly, she laughed, and stretched out her long legs as she leaned back against the wall. "I'm beyond their reach now, poor things," she said--half with pity, half with contempt. "Are you rested enough to go on now?"

He tried to rise to his feet, found it easier than he'd expected. "I'm ready." He offered her his hand; she took it, and let him help her up. They began to walk, and soon the passage widened again, leading into an immense rough-hewn cavern. The evenly ambient lighting of before was absent; shadows lay clustered thick about the twilight chamber. Like the wound of a great sword, a chasm split the cavern down the centre, spanned in the middle by a narrow bridge no wider than a tall man's height.

From the darkness of the abyssal depths issued a cold-lit, blue-tinged mist, like the gaseous form of the ever-present crystal.

"Beyond the Chasm lies the treasure room. We need only cross the bridge."

They walked towards the edge. "What lies below?" he asked, watching the stirs and spirals of the mist. He passed a hand through it, and found it neither warm nor cold.

"I know not," Anthy said after a moment, "for I have never been below."

They approached the bridge; then, they stopped, for, from the other side of the chasm, in the darkness of the shadows and the obscurity of the mist, they heard footsteps, hard-soled boots that rang like hammers on crystal floors.

"The sword, Anthy," he said urgently, straining his eyes to try and see who was approaching.

"Wait," she replied.

A chance movement of the mist showed a tall figure for a moment; a rippling cloak, flashes of limbs sheathed in black and white, and only black and white, but the two colours shifted and flowed across the surface like oil and water, never mixing, ever-changing--

"The sword," he demanded, almost a snarl.

"Do you recognize him?" she asked calmly.

The figure stepped out of the thicker banks of the mist and onto his side of the bridge; his form solidified, black garb, white cloak. He drew the katana at his side one-handed, and brandished it loosely, with the tip pointing down into the depths.

"Of course I recognize him," Saionji Kyouichi snapped. "He shot my wife. Now GIVE ME MY SWORD!"

"The witch and her attendant fool," called the Knight of Pentacles, advancing to the middle of the bridge, sword swinging casually at his side. "Well, isn't this an interesting coupling?"

Anthy placed her hand on his chest. He gasped and arched his spine as a wave of pleasure hit him; when Wakaba had



forcefully drawn the sword from him, it had been an unbearable agony. This time, drawn at his request, at his permission, it was near-ecstasy.

Handle and blade were unusually long for a katana; the blade gleamed with a hair-splitting sharpness, and the handle was a mottled pillar of pale- and dark-green jade. She drew it painlessly from him, turned it in mid-air without touching it, presented it to him.

It was in his hand. She was in his arms, cradled to his chest, as he raised the sword high. How small, how soft, how warm she was--

"Come now!" called the Knight. "Have you forgotten your wife already?"

He started, and broke away from Anthy, brandishing the sword in both hands.

"I didn't."

Wakaba, my love, my precious one--

"She seemed so lonely after you left that I went to pay her a visit." Dry, mocking chuckle. "Boy, was she ever surprised to see me again."

World turned red.

Saionji screamed and charged.

\* \* \*

"Kyouichi!"

But he was already locked in battle with the Knight of Pentacles in the centre of the bridge. Mists engulfed them like an arabesque; they were two dim figures, duelling on the narrow span, silver swords occasionally flashing out from the mist as they were raised overhead to cut, to slash, before falling back into obscurity again. The rasp and ring of blade on blade echoed in her ears, along with Kyouichi's enraged, grieving cries.

Anthy closed her eyes to the physical world and threw her mind like a spear, two-pronged; and let one point be called Who-Are-You?, and one point be called Retreat! Whomever the Knight was, they might have information, and, given Kyouichi's state of

mind, she didn't want to merely freeze him in place--it was quite obvious how that would end.

Wakaba was all right, of course; Anthy would not allow the possibility that she wasn't. The lance of her mind gained a third point in mid thrust; let it be called What Did You Really Do to Her?

She hit. Like diving naked into a pool of maggots with her mouth open. Like a bath in congealing blood. Like an injection of vitriol, straight to the heart.

Her mind recoiled, weak and shocked; at that moment, at her most vulnerable, another will clamped down upon hers like a fist brutally seizing a wounded bird. Be Still! Resist Me Not! The physical world intruded into hers as two hands wrapped around her waist from behind.

"Queen of the Witches indeed," a throaty, sensual, feminine voice whispered into her ear. "You're out of practice, leaving yourself open like that." One of the hands rose to cup her right breast, gently. "My, but you are a lovely thing, aren't you..." Warm breath and heavy, cloying perfume wafted against the side of her face. "So youthful... how \_do\_ you do it?" Soft, mocking laughter. "I'm terribly jealous."

Suddenly, the hand tightened painfully, revealing that the speaker had quite long nails. Anthy would have cried out, but she couldn't move a muscle; heavy fog lay upon her mind. Under normal circumstances, this one would have had no chance, but she'd struck at a moment of weakness (planned, no doubt; it would have been expected that she'd probe the Knight, expected that she'd recoil from that raw, sear-edged, bloodily cauterized abyss of a mind) and taken the advantage; the psychic higher ground, as such.

No matter.

Get Out!

Surrender to Me!

The grip tightened again; the physical pain made it hard to concentrate on the mental battle. That was another disadvantage.

What had she meant by "Queen of the Witches"?

Worry about that later; no distractions.

Get Out!

Surrender to Me!

Release Me!

Surrender--

Had she been able to move, she would have smiled. Mistake.

Then she could move, and she drove her elbow back, hard, into her foe's stomach. The painful grip on her breast released, and the woman behind her let out a pained exhalation. She opened her eyes, just as searing lines of fire ripped down her left calf.

Cat, as imagined by Picasso after a drinking session with Dali. A shimmering, melting, fluid thing the size of a large dog, jagged angles and broken symmetries, opaque, translucent and transparent by turns, full of glowing colours and oily darkness, limbs emerging and retracting constantly so that it had between three and nine at any time, with blue eyes that shone like the edges of razor blades.

She screamed with the pain; it flicked her blood from the needle claws of one whiplike limb, and snarled at her.

Surrender to Me!

Get--

Remember!

The floodgates opened.

(A million swords--)

Kyouichi's distant battle cries, sword on sword--

(--a million times over.)

Hands cupping her cheek, her hip, fingers brushing sensuously against her lips.

(And the hands of every prince, over and over again, and her brother's hands, merging, becoming one, every recollection bringing other recollections, she with a million faces, he with a million faces, numberless as the stars, whirlpool drawing her deeper, into the abyss, the salt-waters mingle with the fresh-

waters, Tiamat and Apsu, earth and sky uniting and dividing,  
Coelus and Tellus--)

Descend to her shoulders, as though to slip the  
white dress from her body--

(Her brother slipping the dress from her body, the  
prince with a million faces slipping the dress from her  
body, the prince without a face whose face is every face--)

"--yes, you are beautiful. And now, you are mine... you  
shall give up all your secrets to me."

"...who are you?"

"You may call me the Queen of Pentacles."

(Wielding a spear, stirring islands from the water, the  
salt-water, the fresh-water, I am Tiamat I am Apsu I am  
Izanami I am Izanagi I am the morning and the evening star I  
am Aether I am Hemera I am Aphrodite I am Hermes I am my  
brother I am my sister--)

"The name of your coffin is Memory."

("On earth and in the air, in water and in fire, / The  
spirits are subservient to her, / Her glance frightens and  
tames the wildest beasts, / And even the Prince must  
approach her with awe...")

Freeze.

\* \* \*

There was no existence beyond the blade.

There were no other people beyond him and his foe.

Time consisted only of the present. Past, future were  
illusions. His sword shone like lightning and struck like a  
snake.

He hadn't felt like this in years, and had forgotten how  
glorious it was. He was invincible, he was unstoppable, he was--

Was Saionji Kyouichi, and his wife, who he loved more than  
anything, who his life had no purpose or meaning without, was  
gone.

He fought on, but now his anger was cold. Hate settled thick and greasy into his belly, as much for himself as for the Knight. He should never have left her. He should have stayed at her side.

The Knight made an obvious feint, and then one that wasn't obvious; a thrust tore the left shoulder of the green sweater Wakaba had given him for his last birthday and drew a line of blood. Had he not been faster in his dodge, he might have lost the arm.

He brought his blade up, knocking the Knight's momentarily out of line; pressed the attack, bringing their bodies into brief contact before the Knight backed away in a swirl of white cloak. A big man, as big as he was; strong, and a skilled swordsman.

Again, they were separated by the length of their blades; he parried the Knight's sideways cut with ease, thrust back, was parried, slid his blade down the Knight's with a snarl, nearly took the hand off.

He had entertained the vague notion that the Knight might be Touga, but was now quite sure he was not. He knew how Touga fought, and this wasn't it.

The Knight's katana rose in a sweeping diagonal cut; he parried it, so hard that sparks flew. The blades locked; he strained, getting the upper hand for a moment, before the Knight shoved back with a burst of strength and nearly brought him to his knees. There was little room to manoeuvre on the narrow bridge; the chasm gaped only a little over three feet to either side. No fancy dodges or sidestepping, just pure blade work.

"She called for you at the end, you know," the Knight said quietly, trying to twist his blade out of line as they fought for dominance. "She was expecting you would show up and save her; just as foolish as you, your wife."

With a howl, he pushed up, using his legs, his arms, every ounce of skill and rage he had. The Knight's blade flew wide; he smashed his own against it like a hammer, sending it spinning down into the darkness of the chasm, a gleam of silver soon lost to the mist. No sound of it hitting bottom, but, then, reality did not extend in this moment beyond himself, and the Knight, and the sword.

Part of him winced as the katana entered the Knight's chest, impeded not at all by the dark, flowing garb, grating on bone.

Most of him exalted; vengeance was his. All of him grieved, but distantly.

There was no blood. He swung the Knight around, impaled on the upper half of his sword, and hurled him over the edge. The blade was nearly ripped from his hands as the Knight slid off it and plunged down into the mists and the darkness.

He stood, panting, sword lowered--

And spun just in time, severing half of a jagged, surreal, needle-clawed limb as it slashed for his back. The creature howled and scampered back towards the end of the cavern he and Anthy had entered from, trailing oily, multicoloured blood.

Slowly, the broader world came back into focus, one sense at a time. His heavy breathing, the yowling of the beast, faint drips of moisture--a low, nearly inaudible hum, similar to that of an electrical generator. Salty sweat, a smokey-bloody odour from the cat-thing's steaming blood. The cool, slick hilt of his sword, the painful drawing of each breath, the ache of the light wound on his shoulder. The cavern; Anthy, in a coffin of crystal. Facing the coffin, a masked woman in robes of black and white, hands caressing the translucent sides as though they were the body of a lover.

As the wounded creature ran towards her, screaming piercingly, she turned; he was already in motion, sword drawn back over his shoulder, preparing a blow that would cleave her in half--

The mists suddenly thickened, to the point where he could barely see his own feet running before him. He skidded to a halt just as he left the bridge, looking blindly about, trying desperately to see through the mists where the foe might be.

"You'll pay for that," a woman's deeply pained voice snarled from somewhere within the pale, bluish mist. "Oh, my poor baby... come here--" The voice abruptly cut off.

The mists lifted, and it was only he, Anthy, and her coffin. In his hands, the sword shimmered once, and dissipated in a cloud of jade sparks.

Suddenly, he felt exhausted and grieving and not at all triumphant. He'd won; so what? It wouldn't bring Wakaba back, and it wouldn't bring Anthy out of her coffin. He hadn't had much success with saving girls in coffins. That was a job for

a prince, not a knight--and he wasn't even a knight. Anthy was in her coffin, Wakaba--

He was nothing. Worthless. The wound upon his heart felt too grievous to bear. To live now would be to live for nothing.

Behind him, the chasm, the abyss, awaited.

He turned, took one step, then another. Stopped, sat down, into the deep darkness gazing. Mist drifted down upon him, wreathing his body. Cold it felt now.

"Wakaba," he whispered. "I wasn't living for myself these last few years, but for you. I can't--"

He could just imagine what she'd say. \*"Don't be a dummy, Kyouichi-chan. You're getting mopey again, and you know that's no good. There's nothing wrong with being sad, everyone gets sad sometimes, even me--but, geez, don't wallow in it."\*

He put his face in his hands, realized then that he was weeping. "Wakaba, my angel, my love--"

\*"And why are you even \_believing\_ him? Jerks like that lie all the time, don't do something stupid just because of something he said. You've still got to help Himemiya and Utena-sama and..."\*

Of course. She'd be furious with him if he did something like that. She'd never forgive him. What would Wakaba want?

He got up, and went to the coffin. Anthy stood within, hands at her sides, eyes closed.

"Anthy?" he said softly, tapping on the surface. "Can you hear me?"

She moved, spoke, answered not.

"I'll save you," he murmured in a low, dark voice that frightened him. "For once, I'll be the one to save you..." His hands explored the cool, glassy shell of the coffin, seeking a crack, a catch, a hinge, anything. There was a lid, he could see the dividing line of it, but whatever force sealed it was beyond him. Futile.

"For once, I'll save someone..." He gripped the edge of the coffin lid tight with both hands, staring into Anthy's blank face as he did. "For once... I can do it, just this once..." He

pulled, muscles straining; his hands slid upon the slick surface, unable to get traction, and he snarled and tried to dig his nails into the seam dividing lid and coffin. One of them tore off bloodily as he scrabbled for a grip, but he was beyond caring. His wounded shoulder ached with dull fire. "I'll be the one... just this one time... please..."

\*"Hey, you're Saionji Kyouichi, right?"\*

"Please..."

\*He's used to getting approached by admiring girls when he goes out for a walk on the weekend like this, but there's something different about this one; not on the surface, but beneath. Like a light, that only he can see... like he's seen that light before... but... "Yes. Have we met before?"\*

"Oh, God, please..."

\*She takes it the wrong way, like he's being dismissive. "Oh, no, no." She's cute when she's flustered, waving her hands and looking dreadfully embarrassed. "Umm... I just saw you fight in that kendo meet last week, you were really cool. Umm... sorry to bug you. I'll go now."\*

"OPEN UP!" He ceased trying to open it, and began to hammer his fists against it, bloodying his knuckles. "WHY CAN'T I BE THE ONE, FOR ONCE? WHY?"

\*"Wait." She stops, and looks back, hopeful, a little frightened. "What's your name?" Yes, the rational part of his mind says, there's nothing different about her from any of the other girls, none of whom interest him... but in his heart, he knows she is different, even if she doesn't realize it herself. "Shinohara Wakaba? I'd introduce myself, but it seems you already know me." How he knows, he doesn't know, but he knows; and she really is rather cute. "I was about to go get lunch. Want to come along?"\*

Chest heaving with sobs and exhaustion, he drew back for a moment, then threw himself forward with his fist raised, screaming. Couldn't save her... couldn't save anyone... just once, please, only once, then even if never again, it will be all right, I won't complain--

At first, he thought the cracking sound came from the coffin, but then the pain hit, and he realized it was the bones of his hand breaking. The agony was almost unimaginable; he fell to his knees, cradling his broken, bloody right hand to his



chest, clawing, fully aware of the uselessness of the act, with his left at the coffin lid.

"Anthy, I'm sorry," he murmured. Existence seemed an unbearable bleakness again. "Wakaba, I'm sorry... I couldn't save either of you... I'm not like Touga or Utena or Akio... I ruin everything I touch..."

Faintly, a soft, sighing creak, barely audible over the scrape of his hand pawing at the coffin.

He looked up. Anthy's eyes were open. Silently, in her coffin, she mouthed a word; three syllables, mere movement of her lips.

The coffin exploded. For a moment, everything became a shining, white expanse; he felt crystal shards, each one sharp as a razor, pass without pain through every inch of his body.

He fell forward, catching himself with his hands. His broken one sent fiery, screaming protest up through his entire arm at the contact with the floor.

Someone touched his hair; moved their hand down to cup the side of his face. Cool, soft, comforting. Whisper of cloth, the movement of a body. He blinked his eyes, trying to clear the spectres of light that blinded him. Hot tears still coursed down his cheeks.

Lips; left cheek, right cheek. The tears stopped. Roses...

He opened his eyes, and looked upon Anthy's radiantly beautiful face as she moved it back from his.

"Don't cry any more," she whispered. "Please, Kyouichi, it's all right. You're nearly there. You're going to come out of your coffin, just like I did."

"Did I save you?" he asked, quietly, not really daring to hope at all.

She shook her head. "No," she answered, kindly, with affection. "But you helped me remember, so I could save myself. That's what you have to do; you've got to save yourself. Others can help you, with their love, their friendship... but you've got to save yourself."

She stood up, bringing him to his feet. She cupped both his hands over his injured hand; warmth suffused him, and it hurt no

more.

"You've got to save yourself," she repeated, stepping back from him and turning towards the bridge. "Come on. We're nearly there."

"Anthy--"

She looked back as she set foot onto the bridge. "Yes?"

"Wakaba," he said, half-choked. "You have... you have power. You called me to you... surely, you can... you can tell, if she's--"

Her eyes softened; she smiled at him, gently, sadly. "Not from this place. It's very distant from where she is. But once we leave, yes."

"Do you think--"

"She lives," Anthy said, suddenly fierce, as though she could change that if it wasn't true. "She lives, Kyouichi. Let's finish this journey. Together. My knight." She extended her hand to him, and, after a moment, he took it.

\* \* \*

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes."

"Architectural variance, in this place. I don't believe it."

Kyouichi laughed dryly, and pushed his dishevelled bangs out of his eyes. Strands of short jade hair were plastered to his sweaty forehead, overhanging his pained, half-wild eyes.

Anthy turned her gaze away from him to regard the small door at the end of the hallway. Plain and wooden, with a simple iron handle, it was as dwarfed as the two of them by the massive crystalline wall it was set into.

She gripped the handle, and pulled it open with a soft protest from the hinges. Wakaba was all right, she told herself; she would not allow it to be any other way. I do dare to disturb the universe, she thought; Wakaba was all right.

The room beyond was long and low, oak-panelled, granite-ceilinged, torch-lit, utterly incongruous after the extended

reign of the titanic crystalline architecture. What could be seen of the floor was granite as well--but little could be seen, for gold and silver covered most of it, glinting in the torchlight and filled with fire. Piles of coinage, and heaps of jewelry: bracelets, anklets, necklaces, earrings, rings, armlets, diadems, crowns, circlets, belts, torque, and more, studded with emeralds, rubies, diamonds, sapphires, topazes, aquamarines, amethysts, and more.

Kyouichi followed her in, looking around disinterestedly. "Quite a collection," he commented. "Worth a lot."

"Touch nothing," she warned.

"I wasn't intending to," he replied.

She went to one pile of gold and silver coins, a pile seemingly like a hundred others, searched through it, and pulled out a flat, circular object wrapped in cloth-of-gold.

"The mirror?" he asked dully.

"The mirror," she whispered back, rising and hugging it to her chest. "It is unwise to unveil it casually."

They walked for a time, past more piled treasures, until she came to a pile of golden jewelry decorated with turquoises, in many different styles. She knelt and reached within, emerging a moment later with a silver-pomelled dagger in a plain leather sheath.

"The dagger?"

"The dagger. It is unwise to unsheathe it casually."

"Good," he said, hollowly. "Let's get out of here so we can find out whether my wife is alive or not."

"She is."

Wrapped mirror under one arm, dagger at her waist, she began to walk towards the end of the treasure hall. Kyouichi followed, grabbing her arm. "Where are you going? We have to go out the way we came--"

"No," she replied. "Come."

He followed without another word. They passed by treasures such as had filled the dreams of greedy souls for thousands of years, both uncaring.

"I have realized something," she said as they walked. The hall might well have been miles long, its treasures limitless. "While I was in that coffin, named Memory."

"Oh?"

"I understand why I can't remember which story is true."

"Why's that?"

Light, glinting upon gold and silver, recollects light gleaming and running down a blade, recollects moonlight upon water, recollects the opaque glint upon her glasses--

"Because they all are."

"What?"

"The Tale of the Rose is not played out on a single stage, but upon many. I understand now; I do not know why I did not before, for how could such a grief be contained in only one story?"

"I don't--"

"This is only one story, through which you and I are travelling as characters."

"Is that why we're--"

"Look." And she pointed; they had reached the end of the hall. It bulged out here, into a circular chamber with a curved ceiling, and upon that ceiling was the Rose Crest, black upon the grey stone. Below it, on a raised dais, was a shifting thing, black and white and every colour in between, every colour of existence; and it was a horse and a car and a train and a boat, it had endless legs wheels treads--

"That's--"

"One of my brother's Chariots," she said softly. "Unformed."

"No, it's--"

"You see it as a red car," she answered. "I see it as it is." She raised her hand. "Now I make it as it shall be."

Swept her hand down, and the colour became white--

Forced her will upon it, gave it shape: four wheels, a low-slung body, upholstery of fine red leather to contrast the white body--

--put the steering wheel on the right-hand side--

--and make it an automatic, of course, since she didn't know how to drive a stick-shift.

Almost finished now, except--

--of course--

--front and back, the license plates were blank, and that wouldn't do:

\*DIOS\*

--much better.

White, white like snow, white like a perfect pearl, white like the purity of light itself. It gleamed. It was beautiful.

She walked up the short flight of steps to the top of the dais, opened the door, and got behind the wheel. Kyouichi was still some distance away, watching dumbstruck. "Coming?" she asked.

He took a few steps forward, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Of course," she replied. "It's the quickest way out of here. It will get us to Houou in no time at all." She smiled. "We can stop off and check in on Wakaba along the way."

Hope lit up his face; he took more steps. "Then you know she's all right?"

"Yes," she answered, "I do."

He opened the passenger-side door, and got in beside her.

"Nice car," he said after a moment.

"Isn't it?" she agreed, beaming. She opened the glove compartment, found the key, turned the ignition. The engine purred to life, happy and willing to serve. Her Chariot now, not her brother's--hers and hers alone.

"You're just going to drive it out of here?"

"Of course." She put her foot down on the gas; the car shot forward, leapt off the dais, hit the long stretch of floor leading between the piled treasure with a gentle thump--excellent shock absorbers--grabbed the stone with its tires, and raced off back towards the exit.

"Very fast!" Kyouichi called over the wind of their passage. Anthy's hair was blowing back straight behind her like a flag. Gold and silver blurred into shimmering walls to either side of them, as the speedometer crept ever upwards.

"Doesn't that wall look awfully close?" he asked worriedly.

Anthy's smile grew, and she pressed the pedal all the way down.

Saionji covered his eyes with his hands.

Anthy laughed joyfully as reality dissolved away into an endless expanse of light.

\* \* \*

Silver and gold, gleaming.

Black and white, walking from the shadows.

Pearly fire, burning in two pale parallel lines all along the stone, right to the wall.

A hand, black and white, flow and mix, endless flux. Tosses a gas cap up and down; white of course. Mere metaphor also.

"Hey, you dropped th--oh, too late."

Laugh.

"Have a nice trip."

Wave.

"Hope you see lots of interesting sights."

Gone.

End of Jaquemart - Part IX

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