

## Jaquemart XIV - La Rosa Roja

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# **Jaquemart XIV - La Rosa Roja**

by [alanharnum](#)

JAQUEMART

by

Alan Harnum

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

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#### XIV. La Rosa Roja

\* \* \*

The beginning is the backdrop, overwhelming grey. Pitiless concrete, slithering rain. Other colours--black wings of a crow, yellow pleats of a dress--trespass at their own risk.

The fragile cardboard box

(the basket, the chest)

slid down the concrete slope and settled almost gently upon the waters.

The scene paused, frozen in time, and began to warp. Precisely-delineated angles stretched and curved into long impressionistic streaks, and the sharp monotony of the colours began to muddy. Then it broke apart, spinning away in slivers into a field of stellar blackness, and each sliver held some singular image that pierced her heart: the eyes of a young girl full of tears, the flimsy cardboard box opening, the rushing waters.

--Why are you doing this?

In reply came the implacable will and hate, scything through her being like a razored wheel, disjointed and misordered bursts of raw, furious thought:

for what hurts you.

The memories so preciously painful

I shall achieve in time to let  
Orange roses and cats in boxes

I'm looking

I'm growing a garden,

My object all sublime

In the tongues of all men  
nurtured on your fears, blooming  
watered with your sins,  
places in your heart.

Seeking the hidden  
So for you  
with your pain.

the  
punishment fit

find out the things that  
from you.

that you've locked them  
away.

your name is flower.  
I got the idea  
nurtured on your fears

To go inside of people's and piano songs.

the crime the punishment

heads and

the punishment fit

tear their hearts out. the crime.

--But this one isn't even mine.

LIAR!!!

Lying witchcuntalienwhoredemon oneofthesedays I'lljustwrap  
thisscarfaroundyourneck. Until. You. Turn. BLUE!

mama, please, go back to sleep, everything is fine...

They thinkIdon'tsee butIdoseeI seethrougheverything  
yourbrokenbottlegreenglasseyes thesamescentonmother  
allthoseprivateconferences. Don't. Think. I. Don't. KNOW!

--Kanae-san?

For a moment there was sharp clarity; she saw, out of other  
eyes, a tall room, five-walled, full of false sunlight. Someone  
was holding her. She could not see their face; only hair the  
pale-rose colour of a faint blush, and black-jacketed shoulders.  
Then it was gone, and she was left crying out Utena's name, over  
and over again, as she spiralled down into darkness.

Cold water, dashed in her face, woke her--how much later,  
she couldn't say. She was lying on the bobbing deck of a small  
ship, within the shadows cast by its voluminous grey sails.

"Ahoy there! Up and at 'em, lubber!" said the girl who (on  
evidence of the pail in her hands) had just thrown the water on  
her. "I am Pirate Captain A, and this is Pirate Mate B, and we  
will not be tolerating any lazy-bones on this vessel."

"That's right," agreed (presumably) Pirate Mate B.

Slowly, Anthy sat up, closed her eyes, and shook her head to  
try and clear it. Wet hair slapped against her cheeks and  
shoulders, and water droplets flew. The air was full of the  
clean sharp salty-fishy smell of the open sea. She took a deep  
breath and let it scour her lungs clear, then looked up at the  
captain. "Excuse me," she began as politely and calmly as she  
could manage, "but could you please tell me where I am?"

"Chu," said someone down near her ankles, before they could  
answer.

"And this be the cabin boy, Mr. C," Captain A informed  
her. "We did take him aboard under similar circumstances to you  
yourself, and he has become a loyal asset to our crew."

Anthy looked down at her small friend, from whom she had,  
it seemed--though it could not have been more than two hands of  
days--been so long parted. Someone had put a tiny eyepatch on  
him, and tied a white-checked red kerchief around his head, but,  
other than that, he seemed the same. Almost not daring to

believe his reality after so much disjunction, she picked him up in steady hands (they would have shaken, had she been any other than who she was) and cradled him against her cheek.

"Hello, dear one," she whispered to him. "It's been so very long. How have you been? Where is Utena? Oh, you must have so many things to tell me..."

"Chu-chu," he commented, before emitting a rum-scented belch against her ear that caused her to wrinkle her nose and move to holding him at arm's length, where he promptly passed out in the cup of her hands.

"Mr. C did find his way into our grog stores shortly before we pulled you from the sea," Mate B explained, somewhat unnecessarily.

Anthy put the unconscious creature in her lap and turned her attention to her apparent saviours. "Pulled me from the sea?"

"Aye, both of you," Captain A said, nodding. "Him shortly before you."

Mate B tossed down a water-wrinkled cardboard box, the lid flapped open with torn streamers of silver duct tape still clinging to it. "Floating in this, he was, the poor unfortunate beast."

Captain A hooked a thumb towards the forecastle of the ship, indicating where a large oaken chest bound in iron and marked with the Rose Crest stood. "And you were curled up inside there."

"A regular Dana♦," Mate B added.

Anthy stood up, holding Chu-Chu carefully in her arms as he snored. They were sailing on a vast, open sea. The sun was going down, painting the sky and the mirror of the sea bloody. In the distance, she could see blots upon the ocean; distant lands?

"Where are we?" she asked after a moment.

"We are sailing on the Seas of Setebos," the captain informed her solemnly.

"Called also the Sea of Stories," added the mate.

The captain nodded briefly to the mate. "We should reach the land soon enough."

"What land?" Anthy asked, squinting towards the distant blots as though they might reveal themselves.

Captain A proffered a slender, compacted brass telescope, which Anthy accepted gratefully and extended to make use of. Instantly, an island snapped into view, dominated by huge primal forests and swirling mists obscuring domed hills.

"That first one, to your left, would be the Island of Spring," Captain A explained. "The spring of life, the island of rebirth, regrowth, old ends, new beginnings, new ends, old beginnings."

She turned her gaze to the right, and there was another island. Tropical rainforests and white sands, with curls of smoke that bespoke habitation or raging forest-fire rising from the centre.

"Right in front of you, that would be the Island of Summer. The summer of man's youth, the island of red rose and yellow fire, red fire and yellow rose."

Next was an island of bare trees, whose branches twined together like the linked hands of skeletons. Amidst their roots, fungi and lichen grew rampant in the shadows.

"The Island of Fall. The fall of innocence, the island of secrets under leaf-piles and shadows in the garden."

Anthy closed the telescope and turned. "And last would be the Island of Winter, yes?" she asked languidly. "The winter of frozen love, the island of stasis and stagnation?"

Captain A looked embarrassed, put her hand behind her head, and laughed nervously. "Well, yes."

"I want to know what you are," Anthy said softly, but with a gathering power in her voice like the first turnings of the air that begin a storm, "and I want to know your intentions."

Suddenly, there was something else where Captain A and Mate B had been, two black holes in space in the shape of girls, towering above her, far too vast for the deck of the small ship, and yet there all the same.

--we are the fates,

--the norns,

--the eumenides,  
--the maidens,  
--the mothers,  
--the crones,  
--the three faces of the moon,  
--the earth,  
--the sea,  
--the sky,  
--the graces,  
--the furies,  
--the three-in-one,  
--the one-in-three,  
--we three are--

"There's only two of you," Anthy pointed out.

"Oh," said Captain A, looking embarrassed again. "Well, I guess we can't be any of those things, then. Ha ha."

"We just like stories," Mate B said quietly but assuredly.  
"Just a couple of girls who really like stories."

"If you like stories so much," Anthy said, "perhaps you ought to let them play out to their end without interference."

"We tend to consider ourselves as participants in the creative process rather than merely passive consumers," Captain A said haughtily. "Besides, any observer both changes and is changed by what they observe. It's unavoidable."

Mate B shuffled her feet. "And if we take things a little too far sometimes, well... we're enthusiastic. No reason to get mad."

"Were you always with us?" Anthy said out loud, more to herself than to them. "From the very beginning? It's so very hard for me to remember, you see... you are the Theatre of Shadows, yes?"



"That got old," Mate B said. "We decided to be pirates for a little while instead."

"Pirates on the Sea of Stories," Captain A added with a nod. "We've already acquired a marvellous bullion of archetypes, several kegs of a particularly distinctive vintage of bathos, and some extremely rare and valuable metaphors."

Mate B coughed and raised one finger. "Don't forget the synecdoche."

The captain nodded enthusiastically. "Right, right. It's a gorgeous synecdoche. We should show it to you later."

Anthony looked at them for a moment, and then away, at the reddened waters. She wondered where Saionji was, and how she had gone from sitting in the car with him to floating on this ocean with these two. A great deal of what lay between that was fragmented, a mirror smashed to flinders in the midst of reflecting some apocalypse. She hoped he was all right, but, not at the moment having the knowledge or power to do anything about him, moved him backwards in her thoughts. If Chu-Chu was here, though, then Utena could not be far...

"I know a story about pirates," she said after a moment. A plan was beginning to form in her head.

Captain A clapped her hands gleefully. "Really? Tell us!"

"There is a condition."

"There are always conditions," Mate B said dismissively. "Tell us the story."

"You will help me bring my story to a happy ending," Anthony intoned quietly. "I am looking for the one that I love. Tenjou Utena. Help me to find her, wherever she may be in this place."

They looked at each other briefly. "Deal," they echoed in unison.

Anthony nodded and stepped over to the chest. She sat down on the edge of it with Chu-Chu in her lap; the pirates settled down on the deck, crossing their legs and regarding her with the eager hunger for the new of children.

"This is a story from after the Rose Prince fell," she began quietly, "but not from long after. It comes from the days just after he had stopped being the Rose Prince, but before he became

the Ends of the World. For his fall, you see, was a slow one. In those days, when darkness enfolded the world from every side, the one who had been the Rose Prince and his sister wandered alone, bereft of the lands they had ruled and the palace they had lived in, and glad to be bereft of them. They had walled off their hearts, you see, and ceased to live for anyone beyond each other."

Mate B nudged Captain A with her elbow. "She's telling it wrong," she hissed.

"I am not telling it wrong," Anthy said primly, fixing them with an imperious stare. "I am telling it my way. Now please be quiet, or I won't be able to tell it."

"It's only that the preamble isn't really necessary," Captain A said gently. "One ought to begin in the middle of the action. In media res. For example..."

--One day in the first autumn of the world a brother and a sister were walking by a river that fed into the sea.

--oniisama! (squeakily)

--yes, dear sister? (gruffly)

SUDDENLY!!!

"Stop that!" Anthy snapped, half-rising from her seat and nearly tumbling Chu-Chu onto the deck. "Sit down. This is my story. You've got no right to take it from me."

"Sorry," they said in unison, sitting down again. They did not sound very sorry.

"No right to take it from me," she repeated, settling back down upon the chest. They watched her hungrily. Nakedly.

"As I was saying," she said, resuming in a more calm voice, "one day they were walking together by a river that fed into the sea..."

\* \* \*

"Have you ever been here before?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. But it looks nice enough, and this is where he said he'd meet us."

"It will be good to see him again."

Juri nodded, and held the door open for Shiori, who smiled and thanked her. The moment she followed her inside, Juri began looking around the bar. It had a pleasing feeling of being both old and new at the same time: something of the delicate permanence of a dream clung to everything, from the scarred, heavy-legged wooden tables to the soldierly rows of glass bottles on the shelves behind the long oaken bar.

"Good evening to you both, ladies," said the man behind the bar. He put down the glass he had been polishing and sketched a slight but obviously respectful bow. "Welcome to La Rosa Roja." He was young and dark and very handsome, his straight black hair cut collar-length.

"We seem to be your only customers this evening," Juri said, for, though the tables were gleamingly polished and the bar well-stocked and the atmosphere undoubtedly inviting, they were, indeed, the only ones in the place beyond the proprietor.

"Only the first," he said cheerfully. "I only recently took over this establishment, to run it for a friend whose business required him to be absent from it for some time. It has only just reopened, you see, after quite some time without an owner at all; but in its day, it was a most popular establishment. Word shall spread and they shall come--fear not."

"There is a table reserved for us," Juri said, somewhat stiffly. Something about his manner disturbed her, though she could not say exactly what.

"We're meeting a friend," Shiori added softly.

"Everyone shall be," the man murmured, so quietly that Juri barely heard him. It was clearly more for himself than for either of them.

"Juri Arisugawa and Shiori Takatsuki," Juri informed him, struggling to put a name to the reason every glance or word from him made her feel strange and cold. Without a rational reason, she told herself in the inward voice she used to try and defuse this kind of behaviour, you ought not to act this way.

The man appeared to think briefly, then said, "The table in the corner."

"Look at the roses, Juri!" Shiori said with almost childlike delight. Roses there were indeed, a half-dozen of them, pale

orange in hue and arranged symmetrically as wheel-spokes in a white china vase standing in the centre of the table.

"They're nice," Juri agreed, managing an outward smile for Shiori that she did not feel inside. "He must have arranged for them. I remember; sometimes, he could be very thoughtful like that."

They sat down across from each other, and the man headed smoothly out from behind the bar to stand beside the table. "Now that you are seated," he began, "I am Christopher Leo Cano, more generally called Leo." The name made something surface in Juri's mind like a fish leaping briefly from the water; a silver flash in sunlight, then gone again, leaving only ripples.

"Juri? Juri? Are you all right? You went all spacy. I ordered us some wine. I hope that was all right." Shiori leaned forward conspiratorially. "Isn't he handsome, Juri? And charming?"

"He seems very nice," Juri murmured. Leo Cano returned, set down a bottle of white wine and two glasses, smiled at them, then turned to move away again. As he did, the ring he wore caught the light and Juri's eye, and she suddenly grabbed his wrist to prevent his leaving.

"That ring," she hissed. "Where did you get it?"

He looked down at her questioningly. "It is the Rose Seal. Only those who wear the Rose Seal are allowed entrance to La Rosa Roja."

"Juri, please," Shiori said, clearly embarrassed.

embarrassed as well by her own outburst and the seeming lack of motivation behind it, Juri released his wrist and mumbled an apology as he drifted away. What was she thinking? Of course the Rose Seal was upon her own ring finger, and Shiori's too.

"What's wrong, Juri?" Shiori asked in a low voice.

"I don't know," Juri muttered, staring at the table. She took up the wine bottle--a good vintage and a good year, she noted, looking at the label--and poured a glass for each of them. "Have you ever had the impression of having been somewhere before, even though you know you haven't?"

Shiori took a moment to answer, then said with a soft little hesitant laugh that Juri always loved to hear, "How funny. For

me, it's as though I've always been here before." She drank her wine, and Juri observed worriedly how even that made a mild pink flush come into her cheeks. It was rather fetching, but Shiori had a low tolerance for alcohol even in excess to her slight frame, and had to be watched carefully whenever they were out like this.

"He'll be here soon, won't he?" Shiori asked, obviously trying to disguise her nervousness.

Juri looked at her watch, hoping she was hiding her own trepidation better than Shiori was. "We are a little early."

A clink of glass from behind the bar made Juri look up. Humming quietly to himself, Christopher Leo Cano was rearranging the rows of bottles into some new order known only to himself. She recognized it--not from her own habits, but from observations of others--as needless busywork to occupy the mind and hands.

"What are you going to say to him, Juri?"

"I don't even really know yet," Juri replied after a moment. "I guess I'll decide when I see him again."

The brass bell over the big wooden front door rang as someone opened it and stepped into La Rosa Roja. They both looked up, of course, almost simultaneously--but it wasn't the one they were here to meet.

"Leo, you fuck!" the man bellowed cheerfully, slamming the door closed behind him. "How the hell are you doing?"

The new proprietor of La Rosa Roja looked up from his ordering of bottles. "Franklin," he said with a measured, wary smile. "I should have expected, but..."

The newcomer, who had short, stiff hair the colour of egg-yolk and rough, almost brutal good looks, like those of a statue that the master sculptor had never quite completed, grinned widely. "Well, shit, you're still the same. Polite even to people you hate. Got anything proper to drink round here? I'm dry as bone, old friend; dry as bone." Juri hated him on an almost instinctual level from first sight.

Leo threw a brown glass bottle of beer through the space between him and the other man. Too hard and too fast, Juri thought; she was picturing it shattering in a damp, glinting explosion on the yellow-haired skull of the big man, and then, at the last moment, as though the two of them had rehearsed it, he

shot up one powerful hand, caught the bottle, twisted the cap off, and gulped half of it down in one swig.

"Could be colder," he said critically, lowering it from his lips with a frown. Then, seeming to catch sight of her and Shiori for the first time, he raised the bottle to them in a kind of salute. "Good evening, my fair ladies."

"Don't bother them, Franklin," Leo said quietly, but with a clear warning in it.

"I'm not bothering them," Franklin said in a mock-wounded tone. "Am I bothering you ladies?"

"If you were," Juri said coldly, "I'd make sure you knew."

He laughed, almost loud enough to disguise the lack of true humour in the sound. "Spitfire, spitfire," he muttered caustically. "Quite the little spitfire. I like her, Leo. What's her name?"

Juri spoke before Leo had a chance to. "If you want to know my name, ask me yourself."

He turned towards her and Shiori, crossed the floor in a few long strides until he was beside their table, seized a nearby chair, swung it around so that the back faced them, and then seated himself on it in a loose-legged sprawl with his arms crossed on the top slat of the back of the chair. Up close, she could see that his eyes were a dark, swampy green, almost black. "Well, I'm Franklin Harold. What's your name, sweetie?"

The urge to strike him right in his smirking face was almost overpowering. She had little experience in dealing with this kind of point-blank rudeness. "Juri Arisugawa," she said tightly, perfectly measured and polite in order to make her distaste clear. Before he could ask, she added, "This is my friend, Shiori Takatsuki."

"We're waiting for someone," Shiori said quietly. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Well, whoever they are, they aren't here yet," he said with arrogant cheerfulness, leaning back and casually draining the rest of his beer. "You can call me Frank," he said, as though offering them a boon. "Only people who don't like me, like Leo, call me Franklin."

He stuck out his hand to her and his grin broadened. When she didn't take it, he simply shrugged and dropped it to his side.

Leo coughed from nearby, where he was wiping down a table. "Just tell me if he's bothering you," he said, almost pleadingly. "If he is, I can--"

"You can't throw me out of here, Leo," Franklin said softly. All the false cheer and mocking humour were gone from his voice suddenly. He raised his left hand, balled tight into a fist, and the Rose Seal on his finger stood out like a black eye. "I \_belong\_ here."

And, with a feeling that was somehow terrifying, Juri knew that he was entirely right and entirely truthful in saying that. She looked briefly from one man to another, sizing them up; Leo was smaller and slighter, but there was a tight, coiled rage smouldering in him, barely visible. If it came to blows, she wasn't sure who would win.

It did not, however, perhaps only because the brass bell rang again, the door opened again, and a third man came into La Rosa Roja. The tension between Leo and Franklin seemed to ebb a little at his presence, and Juri even felt herself grow a little calmer. He was slender and dark, with a thin mustache and melancholy grey eyes that sparkled with a layer of defensive humour. In his left hand, he carried a black guitar case.

"Benjamin," Leo said warmly. "Welcome." Franklin raised a hand in greeting.

"Hello, Leo," Benjamin said. His voice was soft, but much deeper than Juri had expected. "Frank, too. It's good to see the two of you again."

"Been a while, yeah," Franklin said with a chuckle. "Pull up a chair. Talk to the ladies. Unless you're the one that they've been waiting for." He glanced to the two of them, then chuckled again and shook his head. "But I can read in their face that that isn't so."

"I'll get you something to drink, Benjamin." Leo headed back towards the bar, as Benjamin came over and looked inquiringly down at one of the empty chairs.

"May I?" he asked after a moment.

Juri suppressed a sigh. "Go ahead."

He pulled it out and sat down, still holding onto the handle of his instrument's case, and smiled almost apologetically. "Benjamin Silber."

She made herself smile back, liking him in the same instinctual, almost familiar way that she had immediately disliked Franklin Harold. "Juri Arisugawa. This is Takatsuki Shiori." Shiori smiled as well, shyly.

"Nice pair of birds, aren't they?" Franklin said to Benjamin in a stage whisper. "A regular hawk and dove."

Benjamin's smile acquired an edge to it, but he laughed; clearly, a man who preferred to avoid confrontation. "You must excuse Frank, Miss Arisugawa, Miss Takatsuki," he said politely. "His exterior is rough, but he has a heart of gold."

"Cold and heavy?" Juri asked sweetly, and they all laughed.

"Spitfire, I tell you," Franklin said, shaking his head and smiling broadly. "I can tell we're going to be great friends, Miss Arisugawa." Suddenly, he swung his head round, laughter and smiles gone, and fixed his gaze almost threateningly on Shiori. "But you, Miss Takatsuki, you don't talk much, do you? It's almost as though you're afraid of me."

"Leave her alone!" Juri snapped, nearly rising from her chair. Shiori put a hand on her arm, tightly, eyes desperate and almost trapped, and she stopped herself. Benjamin, in turn, gripped Franklin's shoulder with one hand; Juri noted that his fingers were almost disproportionately long and powerful compared to the rest of him.

"Enough, Frank," he said, quietly but forcefully.

Franklin snorted and acquired a sulky expression: a spoiled, scolded child. "Nobody's got a sense of humour any more," he complained. "I'm just kidding around."

There was a silence even more uncomfortable than their conversation had been, during which Leo appeared with a half-full bottle of dark rum and a shot glass, which he set down before Benjamin.

"This is still your drink?" he asked.

Benjamin nodded, poured himself a shot with practised skill, tossed it back, and repeated. The two shots, taken in rapid



succession, had no visible effect on him whatsoever. "Still my drink," he said quietly.

"Grab yourself a drink, Leo," Franklin said, with the same strange mixture of hostility and friendliness with which he'd addressed Leo with before. "Sit down and join us. We're the only customers in the place, for God's sake."

Leo shook his head. "I am the new proprietor," he said, almost mechanically. "I have to care for La Rosa Roja." As he turned and walked away from the table, the light hit him in such a way that he suddenly seemed ancient, old and stooped, his dark hair turned a negative of itself, stark white. How the light plays tricks upon our eyes, Juri thought; we think of light as illuminating, the revealer of truth. But sunlight on desert sand creates water where there is no water, and staring fully into the brightest light will kill sight forever.

"He doesn't see," Benjamin said, distantly.

Equally distant, Franklin echoed, "But he shall."

"What do you mean?" Shiori asked hesitantly.

Like a reflection and its caster, the two men turned simultaneously towards her, smiling, no malice in either one, but an old, sad kindness. "You remind me of Flora," one of them said, and Juri couldn't say which one. "So quiet, made weak by belief in your own weakness, in your own existence as a moon which can only reflect the light of the sun if it is to have any beauty or worth at all. But so much venom in you still."

Juri had, suddenly, a sense of terrifying wrongness in everything she saw, heard, felt, tasted, touched, believed, as though a curtain had been pulled back and beyond it gaped the mouth of hell. Then, like a brief muscle spasm, it was gone. Someone--Frank or Benjamin or Shiori or maybe she herself--had produced a deck of cards, and they were playing a game whose rules she knew by heart, but whose name she couldn't remember.

"You're Japanese?" Frank asked as he dealt the next hand.

Juri nodded, and picked up her cards to look them over.

"Did my major in Japanese History at Columbia," he said. "For two years, I mean. Before I dropped out and came here. To La Rosa Roja." He chuckled. "You wouldn't know it by looking at us, but I'm a more educated man than the Wandering Jew here."

"Not all that's useful is learned in the ivory tower," Benjamin said quietly, not sounding angry at the possibility of an insult. "I came to La Rosa Roja because I had no more of use to learn in the world beyond it."

"I'm a history major as well," Juri offered after a moment. "Working on my master's. Or I was. Somehow, it seems like a very long time ago. Not really important any more." She stared at her cards; red hearts, black diamonds. Numbers seemed to blur senselessly together, creating combinations nonexistent under proper mathematics.

"Got into it when they dropped the bomb on you," Frank said, and something mad and dangerous and brutal glinted suddenly in his eyes. "I was five years old when they dropped it. Saw the pictures in the papers. Damn, what a sight; even back then, even though I didn't understand it, I thought, damn, what a sight. Mushroom cloud. What a name to give to it, too; like they just planted a seed, and, boom, mushroom. Big beautiful white mushroom."

"Five years old," Shiori murmured. "But you... I..."

"That's what it'll be like, you know," Frank said intensely, not seeming to hear her. "When the Revolution comes. The real Revolution, not this bullshit Castro's up to in the hills. When Lucian gets his Revolution, it'll be like someone dropped an A-bomb on this whole goddamn lousy world."

"Frustrated idealists make the worst cynics, for they don't even really believe in their own cynicism," Benjamin commented casually. He had taken his guitar out of his case and was carefully tuning it. "I have not yet lost my hope, you see. I believe in beauty. I believe in the power of art to capture beauty, however imperfectly. I believe in the power of art to redeem man."

Frank yawned. "Ben, if I were to break all your fingers, you wouldn't be able to ever play that guitar again, would you?"

After a moment, Benjamin chuckled, dryly and bitterly. "You have a point," he agreed softly, his expression suddenly clouding. He ran a calloused thumb across the strings briefly, and the sound was sharp and dark. "Indeed, you have a point."

"My mother had a book," Shiori said quietly. "There were photographs in it. Of the cities after they dropped the bombs, I mean. Once, when I was seven, I looked through it without her

knowing. I always had nightmares after that about the shadows. Not about anything else. Just the shadows."

"The shadows?" Benjamin asked softly.

Juri spoke quickly, before Frank could, in a dry recitation of lecture facts. "People close to the centre of the blasts were vaporized instantly by the heat. Nothing was left of them but the shadows cast by their bodies, imprinted upon the walls and the pavement." It was not at all difficult to keep emotion out of her voice, as she knew it was for some other graduate students in the department when they spoke about Hiroshima or Nagasaki or the war. She was herself, and Japan was merely the place she happened to have been born.

Frank had acquired another beer at some point. He gulped it down, and tilted his head back to stare up at the ceiling of La Rosa Roja. Overhead, old ceilings fans swung in sluggish blurred circles. "That was when I saw the world for what it was," he said quietly. His eyes were muddy with memories. "That there is no God, no justice, no providential hand. All that I can be certain of is my own being; all else in existence stands arrayed against me like endless legions."

Juri could not seem to breathe. Everything seemed to have disappeared except for Franklin Harold. Once again, she was struck by the knowledge that all of this existence was somehow incorrect, and then, as before, the knowledge passed away into some darkness in her.

"Leo wants to save the princess from the dragon; but he doesn't see, as I do, that the princess is the dragon. Benjamin loves her; not as a woman, but as a symbol. Elena wants to change the world; or change herself to fit the world, I'm not sure which. But me... I just want to see what happens. I had the Rose Bride at my side for a while. Decent lay, though more passive than I like a woman. But I could see the past in her eyes. Like staring into some black gulf. None of us are going to get the power Lucian promises; but if I ever did get it, I'd tear this whole damn world apart."

"Then why do you take part in the duels?" It did not seem to be her voice. And of course it would not be her voice, she thought, suddenly panicked, for this was not her story, this was not the place she was meant to be, not the time she was supposed to be--

He laughed. "Got nothing better to do."

"Juri? Juri?" Shiori's warm hand over hers brought her back, brought her safe to shore. "What's wrong, Juri?"

"I--" They were alone by themselves at the table. Carefully, almost mechanically, she folded her hand around Shiori's. "Where did they go?"

"They went to get a table by themselves when their friend arrived," Shiori said, frowning quizzically, clearly wondering why Juri was bothering to ask the question when she'd been there to see it herself. She indicated another corner table with a glance, where Leo and Frank and Benjamin sat with a tall, slender woman in white with a black silk scarf tied round her neck. They were all talking quietly together; as Juri watched, the woman threw back her head and laughed, and Juri saw a beautiful, sad-eyed, light-skinned dark face beneath the tousled short brown hair.

"Elena," she murmured.

"Yes, that's her name," Shiori said, frowning more. "Are you sure you're okay? You're really spacy tonight." She tisked. "I'm nervous about seeing him again too, you know."

She nodded and squeezed Shiori's hand. She poured herself another glass of wine and drank it down. The strange feeling would not leave her.

"La Rosa Roja," she said.

Shiori nodded dubiously. "Yes," she said, taking her hand back and putting it in her lap.

"What year is it, Shiori?"

Shiori laughed, a little nervously. "Now you're just being silly, Juri. You know what year it is as well as I do."

"I suppose I do," Juri murmured, staring up at the ceiling fans. The droning hum of them was soothing, almost like a lullaby. "I suppose I do. You're right. I'm being silly."

After a while, she looked at her watch again.

"He's late," she said.

Shiori nodded, and bit her lower lip. Her eyes were shadowed and unhappy. "But he's going to come, isn't he?"

"He wouldn't break his promise," Juri said, surprised at her own fervency. "That's not like him."

Again the bell. They both looked up hopefully, but the new entrants were two other women. The taller one spotted them and strode over, long braid swaying with each agitated movement.

"Arisugawa Juri-san, Takatsuki Shiori-san," she said shortly. "What is this place?"

"It's La Rosa Roja, Akami," her companion said quietly as she followed.

Familiarity with the names came after far too long, as though they had had to be mined from some dark concealing vein of rock. Akino Akami. Hozumi Mari.

Akami turned as though shocked and stared at her friend. Mari had raised her left hand, and was smiling as though at the way the light shone upon the Rose Seal she wore.

"La Rosa Roja," she repeated.

"La Rosa Roja," Akami echoed. She put up her own left hand and stared at the ring upon it as though it were some monstrous wound. "But..." She trailed away, looking suddenly very young and very lost.

Mari took her arm and glanced questioningly at Juri and Shiori's table.

"Go ahead," Juri said. "Sit down."

Akami, looking pale and scared, was guided to a seat at the table. Juri poured her some wine. "Have a drink," she said, pushing it toward her. "You look as though you could use it."

"How terrible of you, Juri-san," Akami murmured, grinning and drawing herself up straighter, trying to hide her shakiness. "I'm not old enough to drink yet."

Juri laughed. "Just don't tell on me for corrupting the young."

Akami nodded, sipped; she was calm again, icily so. "I won't."

Mari sat down beside her friend, put her elbows on the table, and looked at Juri and Shiori over her clasped hands. "Are you waiting for someone too?" she asked.

Juri nodded. "Who are you waiting for?"

"Who are you waiting for?" Mari repeated in reply.

There was a long, terrible silence, when the only sound was the whirring of the overhead fans and the drifting murmur of conversation from the four people at the distant other table, which seemed so far away suddenly that it might as well have been in another world.

"May I have some wine as well?" Mari asked finally.

"Yes," Juri replied, staring at the label on the bottle as though it were some apocalyptic text. "Yes, I'll pour you some."

\* \* \*

"In the beginning there was the Quiet..." he said, and then he stopped.

"There was the Quiet...?" Utena prompted.

Kanae... Cali... shifted nervously. "I'm not sure how to tell the story."

Beyond the glass walls of the solarium--"outside"--a flight of black-winged birds dipped briefly into view, then vanished.

Utena scratched her chin thoughtfully, then said gently, "Tell it however's easiest for you."

"No. That won't work." He--she--it made her head hurt trying to keep the pronouns straight--shifted nervously again, fumbling with the teacup in her--his--hands. Here's a grammar question for the books, she thought vaguely: when the unborn son of a fallen prince is speaking to you from his mother's mouth, what is the proper gender of the pronoun by which to refer to him? "There's a right way and a wrong way to tell the story. The way you tell the story defines the story. If I tell it the wrong way, you won't understand."

"I'll try and understand no matter how you tell it," Utena said, forcing herself to be patient. There was no telling what could happen if she upset him, and if she did that, she'd never find out anything at all--about what had happened to Anthy, or what had happened to the world.

"All right," he said in a small voice. "In the beginning there was the Quiet. And the Quiet was like... it wasn't like anything I can describe that you'd understand. Like the empty space inside a box, but there wasn't anything like a box. Just the empty space. But it wasn't like that either. Anyway, there was the Quiet. And one day something changed, because one day there wasn't just the Quiet any more, there was Setebos too. And he came from the Quiet, because there was nowhere else for him to come from. And one day he was walking around on the earth, because after there was something other than the Quiet, like Setebos, it meant there had to be all kinds of other things, too. Like trees and rocks and rivers. And Setebos made them. Anyway, he was walking around on the earth, and he met a snake. The snake was the wisest creature in the world, and Setebos wanted to learn from him. So he did. He learned at the feet of the snake. Because in those days, snakes had feet. The snake told him all the secrets in creation, except for one, but I don't know which one that is, because it's still secret. And at the end, Setebos decided he didn't need him any more, so he cut off his feet and threw him into a garden ringed by bushes that grew so high and so thorny that he would never be able to get out."

Garden and snake, Utena thought. Always with the garden and the snake.

Something must have shown on her face, because Cali paused and asked worriedly, "Am I telling it all right? You're not bored, are you?"

"No, no," Utena said hurriedly. She poured herself another cup of tea, even though she didn't feel like one. "It's very interesting."

"Anyway, one of the things that Setebos learned from the snake was how to make creatures who'd be like him. Creatures who could think in a way different from cows and horses and elephants and chickens. He cut off the little finger of his right hand, and made a man out of it, and then he cut off the little finger of his left hand, and made a woman out of it. So soon he had a lot of little men and women. Little like your size and Mother's size, I mean, because next to Setebos they were little. Because he was a giant. He was taller than the tallest mountain; when he stood on the land, his head touched the clouds, and he could walk from one end of the ocean to the other without getting his shoulders wet. They were the first people, and because they'd made from the body of Setebos, they were perfect. Because Setebos was a god. They were the most beautiful people ever, and they built great cities and did great wonders. But one day Setebos

grew worried that they would become greater than him. So he went to the great bird of the mountains and said, great bird of the mountains, I, Setebos, command you to draw down the moon from the heavens and the clouds from the sky, that great rains may come upon the earth and destroy these people that I have made. So the great bird of the mountains did as she was told, and it was as though a gate had been opened in the sky through which the water poured. Could I have some more tea, please?"

Utena poured him another cup; on impulse, she took the lid off the teapot and looked inside. It was still nearly brim-full.

"Thank you. Anyway, so all the people that Setebos had made died. The animals survived, because the great bird of the mountains hid them all under the earth. But they didn't all die. Two of them, a brother and a sister, they lived. Because when the floods came, they found a tiny gap in the bushes surrounding the garden Setebos had thrown the serpent into, and they crawled inside the garden, and so they lived while all the other people died."

"What were their names?" Utena asked in a whisper.

"They didn't have names," Cali replied, as though that were the most obvious thing in the world. "The only one who had a real name in those days was Setebos."

"Oh," said Utena. "So what happened next?"

"Well, they were inside the garden, and the waters couldn't get in there. They were very young, and they were crying a lot, because their mother and father and aunts and uncles and sisters and brothers and cousins had all died in the flood. They cried so loud that they woke up the snake who Setebos had thrown into the garden long ago, who had been having a nap in a big bamboo tree, and--oh."

"What's wrong?" Utena said. Something was stirring in the depths of Kanae's eyes; she half-rose from her seat. The faint background hum of the solarium's projector suddenly seemed to grow to an overwhelming volume, buzzing like a swarm of insects.

"Father is coming." "Akio-san is coming."

"I can hear him riding." "I can hear his car pulling up outside."

Which voice spoke inside her head, and which voice spoke from Kanae's mouth, Utena could not say. But she felt fearful;



of what Akio might do, or of what she might do to him. What was she to do or say? Akio-san, you don't have to stay like this; if Anthy can leave her coffin, so can you. You don't need to dream of the castle; there's a whole world out there, full of beautiful things. And then he would call her a foolish child, and say she did not understand.

But she did understand. That was the terrible thing; she understood in a way that no one else possibly could. She always had, but she hadn't let herself see. It had been easier to hate him and think him different from her, just as she had with Mikage. But how was she to make him understand? And there were still the swords.

There would always, after all, be the swords.

"Will he be here soon?" she asked quietly.

"Very soon." "Very soon."

"Where's your bathroom?" Utena asked. "I'd like to get--" She took a deep breath. "I'd like to get cleaned up before he comes."

"Through the door." "Right through that door, Tenjou-san."

"But that door just goes back to..." She trailed away with a quiet laugh, shaking her head. "Never mind. Thanks. I'll be right back."

"When Father comes, we'll "Will you being have tea with all have tea together." Akio-san and I, Tenjou-san?"

"Sure. That would be nice."

She hurried through the door which had formerly led to the room where Kanae had been painting; to her complete surprise, it now opened into a marble-dominated bathroom roughly the size of a concert hall. Golden chandeliers swaying high overhead cast their flickering light across the tiles.

"Well, hell," she said, upon seeing that all the sinks were at the distant other end of the bathroom.

\* \* \*

The women's bathroom in La Rosa Roja was small and cramped, but very clean, with a white tile floor, heavy-looking porcelain

sinks, and two stalls divided from the sink area and from one another by walls of dusky red wood

She splashed cold water on her face, then raised her head to stare at herself in the fingerprint-streaked mirror above the clunky white sink. Beaded droplets slid down her cheeks and chin, fell to burst in the basin. Frowning, she raised a hand and pushed at the tightly-curved bang at her left temple.

"There was a time," Juri said calmly, addressing her reflection as though it were a stranger, "when you did not curl your hair like this."

She touched the mirror briefly, tracing two circles around her reflected eyes, leaving her own prints on the glass where so many others had left theirs before. Then she sighed and turned away. As she reached for the handle of the door leading back to the bar, it swung open with a hard shove from the other side, forcing her to step quickly back to avoid being hit.

"Be careful," she said, as Akami stalked in with her fists clenched tightly at her sides.

For a moment, it seemed as though the younger woman would snap something back, such was the look on her face; then she took a deep breath and inclined her head respectfully. "I apologize, Arisugawa-san."

"All right," Juri said casually. She moved to go around Akami and out the door, then stopped. "Is everything okay?"

"Don't pretend you don't feel it as well," Akami said softly, stepping over to the sinks. She started the water running in one, but made no move to wash her hands or face. "I'm not sure if Mari does. She hides things from me; she doesn't think I know, but I do. I don't know if your lover does, either; she seems as accepting of... all this... as Mari is."

Juri didn't say anything.

"Not even a 'how do you know?', Arisugawa-san?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me whether you know about Shiori and me or not. Thus, neither do I care how you know."

But there was a time when you would have cared, she whispered to herself. What if your parents find out? What if

your sister finds out? What if Shiori's mother finds out? What would they say? What would they think?

"Like calls to like, they say," Akami said with a smile. Her voice was low, sultry, inviting.

Juri looked back at her steadily. "They also say that opposites attract. 'They' say a lot of things, Akino-san. Now, please excuse me."

"When is her birthday, Arisugawa-san?" Akami called quietly as Juri turned her back to her. "What did you give her on her birthday last year? What did she give you on yours? \_What year were you born in?\_"

Juri stopped. On the handle of the door, her knuckles were white. Then she sagged slightly. "What is this place?" she murmured quickly. "I know something's wrong, I know that everything's wrong, but I try to think of \_why\_, and it just..."

"Slips away," Akami whispered in a desperate, almost frightened voice into her ear--she was suddenly right behind her, though the water running into the sink could still be heard in the background. "You try to grasp it and it slips away and you don't even \_remember\_ grasping it, but I \_won't\_, I \_won't\_ wear his shackle..."

Juri abruptly found two slim arms wrapped round her waist, found Akami's tall body pressed against her from behind.

"Help me hold it." Akami's breath was warm against the back of her neck. "Help me to hold it, and I'll help you, and we can--"

"Get off," Juri said warningly. When Akami didn't, she reached down, pulled the arms away, and twisted her body round while stepping back. Unfortunately, in the limited space available to her, she ended up with her back pressed against the wall--a position she did not like at any time, particularly in circumstances such as these.

Akami made no further move towards her, however, but simply stood watching her, impassively, any sense of desperation or fright utterly gone from her face. Juri realized that the entire manoeuvre had been as calculated and free of true emotion as that of an actor in a play.

"I thought you liked it when they needed you," Akami said finally; the curvature of her smile brought to mind cats' claws,

fisherman's hooks. "The tall beautiful tree, so strong, with the pretty, delicate flowers growing in your shadow."

"You don't know the first thing about me," Juri said coldly.  
"Don't pretend you do."

"I know all about you, Juri-san. Miki-sensei talks about you a lot." She paused briefly and crossed her arms. "And, of course, we are very similar people."

"Of course." Juri crossed her own arms, refusing to allow herself to be intimidated or made uncomfortable. "We both have fingers, eyes, and toes. We both breathe and bleed. I was the captain of the fencing team; you are the captain of the fencing team. Perhaps, looking at our surfaces, we have certain similarities of character." She paused, and inclined her head slightly to one side as though it would allow her to study Akami better. "But surfaces mean little, and depths mean much. And I don't think--you're not even listening to me, are you?"

"The woman," Akami said distantly, staring over Juri's shoulder. "The woman in the mirror." And she pointed over Juri's shoulder with one rigidly-extended finger.

Juri almost didn't turn, but then she did, and there was, indeed, a woman in the mirror--and not her. Not Akami, either: a tall woman with long hair the colour of... pink, she thought, just call it pink, Juri, that's the colour it is... a tall woman splashing water on her face, then blinking her eyes to clear them and daubing herself dry with a white towel. Behind her was another bathroom, obscenely opulent, vast to the point of parody.

The sight of the woman in the mirror just about cut her heart out. The blue eyes were warm and friendly, but so sad; she wanted to reach out through the mirror and hold her, because she looked so alone. She loved her. Not like she loved Shiori--well, perhaps some of that too, for she was beautiful--but with an almost embarrassingly childish devotion. Not at all the way a cool, detached person like she imagined herself to be was supposed to feel, about anyone. It frightened her, how the sight of this unknown woman tore at her, how a stranger made so many different feelings rise up in her, as though she were seeing an old friend or lover instead of someone she had never met, never known...

And the memories abruptly began to clamber upwards, each raising a sword, cutting the air, and down, down, down, fell the rose petals, red rose petals, perfumed beyond compare, and up, up, up came the swords inside her head, hewing them, cutting at

them as they were buried, and it hurt so \_much\_, and she grabbed her head and screamed, or tried to scream, but screaming was impossible, the woman, the woman in the mirror, the woman who she knew and did not know, who was distant as the stars and as intimate as her skin, the woman, the woman... La Rosa Roja, the red rose, blood-red rose, fire-red rose, wound-red rose, nightmare-red rose, rose of dreams, rose of shadows...

Oh, God, she thought, with a sudden pain-sharp moment of clarity amidst it all, I cannot bear this, I will break beneath this or go mad; the ice has been drawn over the sea, but the sea still surges below, the cold, the bitter, biting cold blowing from the dark side of the moon, from the northern reaches where the icebergs' clockwork clash is the hammer of the heart and the surge of the sea... and I am not what I am, I am not what I disbelieve myself to be, my body, mind, soul, heart, being disremembered, caught upon the thorns of La Rosa Roja, the terrible garden, the garden of blood and fire.

Above it all, the tower, the one hundred towers, the tower with one hundred sides, clockwork and gearwork and bellwork and fretwork, and every gear is Fortuna's wheel, and round and round it goes! Spin round, wooden dolls, spin round! Spin round, you ghosts in the machine!

She felt her being, her self, everything that was Arisugawa Juri--the taut muscles from fencing, the way she clung to the immaterial impartiality of the past as though it were an heirloom, a long lazy day two winters ago where she and Shiori skipped all their classes and just lay in bed talking and watching the snow fall, a duel in an arena and the rain falling--dissolving, being torn away from her, and it was as though a voice spoke to her, and said:

You will be in this story what I want you to be or you shall not be!

And she shouted back:

I will not!

Then she heard glass breaking, and a sound, a muffled cry of pain stifled and pushed down, of an agonized scream transformed into a grunt through sheer force of will, and everything snapped back into the reality of the women's washroom of La Rosa Roja. There was her image, caged a dozen times over in the cracked shards still clinging to the edges of the mirror's frame around a central void of dark, dull metal backing; there were jagged splinters in the sink, some of them bloody; there was Akami,

clenched fist streaming blood, spears of mirror-glass glinting through the red where they were driven into her knuckles and fingers. Juri could not even begin to imagine the pain, or how hard she would have had to hit the mirror to do that much damage to it and herself.

"I thought I could get to her," she said dully, looking at her damaged left hand as though it were some separate thing from her. "I really thought I could, Arisugawa-san. But all I could do was shatter it." Then, ignoring Juri completely, she began very calmly and without any apparent discomfort to pluck the glass from her freely-bleeding hand. The blood ran down her fingers and turned the pale rose of her ring a dark crimson; for a moment, Juri had the illusion of it seeping into the metal band, and particularly into the enamel face, darkening it from the colour of a new pink scar to a fresh bloody wound.

"Do you want--" Juri began.

"No," Akami said. "I don't want your help." She finished fishing the last of the splinters from her hand; despite her words, Juri had already pulled down a wad of paper towels from the faded metal mouth of a dispenser. Akami took them without a word and wrapped them round her hand.

"Wouldn't it be best to take your ring off?" Juri asked.

Akami looked at her blankly. "You can't take the ring off," she replied.

Juri nodded. "Only those who wear the Rose Seal are allowed to stay in La Rosa Roja."

"Why did you come here, Arisugawa-san?"

"To meet old friends. Why did you come here, Akino-san?"

"To meet old friends."

The door swung open, and the woman from the other table stepped in. Elena. Tall and well-shaped, with incongruously blue eyes for her dark features, and the eyes set above a long, slim nose and an expressive mouth. One of those people of indefinable race, Juri thought, like... like someone or several someones she had met before, but...

"Am I interrupting?" she asked crisply, putting her hands on her hips and looking at the two of them with a questioning but not unfriendly expression. Neither of them answered, and she

shrugged, glancing at the mirror, and then at Akami's hand. "You should learn to hit things that won't hurt you so much when you break them."

"I will be sure to keep that in mind in the future," Akami said, in a way that made it clear that she was considering punching another mirror simply to be contrary.

Elena shrugged, then reached up and unwrapped the long black scarf she wore. "Bandage yourself with this. Those towels are already soaking through."

Akami actually looked startled for a moment, then took the scarf and made an awkward bandage of it, leaving the bloodied paper towels in the sink with the broken shards of the mirror.

Juri stared at Elena's neck. Obviously too intently, for Elena turned a sharp gaze to her, then smiled--it didn't reach her eyes--and stuck out her hand. Juri took it automatically, shook the other woman's hand lightly.

"Elena. La Rosa Amarillo," the woman said; now the smile crept, surreptitiously, into the corners of her eyes. "At least, that's what Frank calls me. He's a big one for nicknames. The Wandering Jew. Saint George. El Diablo. La Bruja." She paused, then laughed lightly. "The only one he doesn't have a nickname for is himself."

She brushed by Juri, who smelt her perfume as she passed--light, but telling. Roses and the sea. At the sink beneath the other, unbroken, mirror, she ran water and rinsed her hands. "Your friends are here, by the way."

Juri started. "What?" Akami was already hurrying back out to the bar.

Underneath the stream of water from the tap, Elena kept on rubbing her hands together, without soap. "Aren't you going too?" she asked.

"Your neck," Juri said quietly.

Elena shook water from one damp hand and touched her throat. "Yes, it's been a great help to me. Keeps my head on my body."

Juri couldn't manage to laugh. "It's an impressive scar."

Elena shrugged; bent over the sink as she was, Juri saw only her profile, and the edge of her sad, tired smile. "From a long

time ago," she said eventually. "When I was still a child."

"I'm sorry. For prying."

She turned off the water. "Don't worry. I don't mind."

There was a brief pause, and when she spoke again, her voice was harsher. "Be wary, Arisugawa Juri. Roses--all beauty--must die. Even this one. And the world beyond La Rosa Roja..."

"The world beyond?" Juri murmured, staring blankly straight ahead. The words, Elena's words and her words in return, rolled off her without leaving any impression at all.

"Never mind," Elena said kindly. Like a mother.

Juri turned to go, then stopped and looked back. "How old are you, Elena-san?" she asked. "What year were you born in?"

The eyes were quite ageless, and blue like the sea. "Go and see the friends who have come."

Then she was out in the bar again, and she could not recall the action of walking there; could not recall a hand raised to open the door, the raising of feet, the movements of hips and knees that would have been required to take her from A (the bathroom) to B (the bar). Could not recall, did not care.

There were four people now at the table with Shiori, and one of them she did not recognize. A wooden floorboard squeaked beneath her heel as she joined them; the sound, faint though it was, suggested rot, decay, the impending eclipse of time that awaited all things. Once, she thought, this floorboard did not squeak; now it does. Therein lies time.

None of the new faces were the one she was waiting for. But she sat down at the table all the same, poured herself another drink.

"Welcome back, Juri," Shiori said brightly. There were enough of them at the table now that it was getting a little crowded. Hard to find room to place her elbows. "These are Tsuwabuki Mitsuru and Akino Hasuichi."

Mitsuru smiled shyly at her and ducked his head respectfully, tugging at his blond ponytail with one hand. "Arisugawa-san may remember me from years ago."

"I do," Juri said. I do, she thought in mute repetition--but how? How many years ago was it that I knew him? What did he



look like then? What did I look like then?

"And I'm Akami's brother," the other new arrival said. He flashed her a grin another woman probably would have found charming; his teeth were even, white and straight, and his hair was as dark as his sister's. With the same strong but finely-wrought features as Akami they could have been--perhaps even were--twins. "Nice to meet you, Arisugawa-san. Miki-sensei's told me a lot about you."

"Who?" Juri almost said, and then, as the words marched towards her lips, she thought: of course, Kaoru Miki, my dear friend from school, my right hand when I was the captain of the fencing team.

"Has he, now?" she asked, finally managing a smile.

Shiori looked from one face to the next. "Well," she said, laughingly, "we're getting quite a little party here, aren't we?"

"Quite a little party," Mari agreed.

At the distant table, Franklin Harold sang three short stanzas of a moderately obscene song. Elena let out a muffled, embarrassed shriek of laughter. Leo muttered something derisive about inappropriate language. Benjamin, who said nothing, plucked a quick series of chords on his guitar; it took Juri a moment to realize that they were the same tune as Franklin's song.

Akami sat by herself, managing to look alone despite being between her brother and Mari. Brow wrinkled and lips pursed, she studied her hands, laid flat on the table. Dark eyes stared at the dark scarf wrapping her injured hand as though into a deep pool of water.

Hasuichi glanced over at his sister, a mere flicker of his eyes, and Juri saw his expression change subtly. Concern--perhaps even fear--crept into the edges of his cheerful smile, and his eyes lost a little of their sparkle.

"Hey, oneechan," he said jokingly, nudging his sister in the ribs, "what's with the long face? Smile a bit, you're much better-looking then. Right, Mitsuru?"

Mitsuru simply blushed.

Akami, to Juri's amazement, tried and briefly managed a smile that looked genuine. Then it collapsed upon itself, undermined by whatever stirred beneath it. "Something's wrong, Hasuichi," she said quietly. "You're here, and I'm here, and... why? Why are we all here?"

"Does it really matter?" Mari asked, reaching out and putting her hand over Akami's. "The important thing is that we're all here, isn't it?"

Shiori said, softly, "You come to La Rosa Roja to meet again with old friends." The old sadness in her smile--it did not seem entirely her own--made something tremble deep inside Juri, and threaten to break. "To say the things you haven't said, do the things you haven't done."

"But--" Juri lowered her head, letting her hair hide her face from the sight of others. She tried to remember when her birthday was, and what year she'd been born in. For some reason, it was desperately important that she remember these things.

"It's all right." Shiori reached under the table and took one of Juri's hands between both of hers, squeezing tightly with one, caressing the back with the fingers of the other. The touch was heated and desiring, promising of things to come later. "He's coming. You said yourself he wouldn't break his promise."

Juri looked up. Now they were alone at the table. Three tables of people: four, four, two. She was not sure how much time had passed. Hasuichi was telling some story, one arm around Mari, the other making emphatic gestures to add to his narrative; across from him, his sister smiled a small, tight, secretive, pained smile, and Mitsuru, beside her but somehow miles distant from her at the same time, listened politely and occasionally laughed. Directly above their table, a ceiling fan spun, chopping the falling light into striations.

"Yes," she said finally, "he wouldn't. It would be a miracle if he didn't come."

"And there are no such things as miracles, right, Juri?" Shiori asked teasingly.

"I don't know," Juri whispered, suddenly feeling terribly lost. "Perhaps it would be better if there weren't, if there are. Have you ever really thought about miracles, Shiori, what it means if they really do exist?"

Shiori blinked quizzically. "Juri--"

"I mean, if miracles are real, then things can just \_happen\_," Juri said, cutting her off, desperate to get the words out before they could be lost. "Things can just happen--terrible things and wonderful things alike--and there's no way for us to ever understand \_why\_."

"But if you don't believe in miracles, they won't work for you," Shiori whispered disconsolately. "You have to believe in miracles, or your wish won't come true."

"No!" Juri said sharply. "That's not true. That's not the only way for--"

"You're hurting my hand, Juri," Shiori said, almost a whimper.

Juri let her hand go, shaking, not having realized until Shiori spoke that she'd been clenching it painfully hard. "I'm sorry," she murmured, looking away from her. "I didn't mean to. I wouldn't... I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about, Juri?" Mystified, Shiori put her hand into Juri's again. "Of course you didn't."

"I know," Juri said dully. She stared at the table. How had she not noticed before that the top was covered in names, carved or scratched into the wood by the tips of half a hundred knives? "Do you have a knife, Shiori? It seems a tradition. It seems a tradition to carve your name."

"Yes." Shiori nodded, almost wonderingly, as though realizing it for the first time, and as though the realization were incredibly important. She picked up her handbag from beside her chair, and put it on the table. "I do have a knife."

\* \* \*

"...and as the pirates dived over into the sea to escape the rose vines that had grown from every mast and every board, to escape the oars that had become serpents, the sister reached out with her power and changed them into dolphins, to swim forever among the rolling of the waves."

Captain A coughed into her fist. "And that's why dolphins give aid to drowning people, because they're still trying to make up for the wrong they did in the hopes of becoming men again." She paused briefly, then asked, more perfunctorily than anything else, "Right?"

"If it was right," Anthy said slowly, "I would have put it in the story, would I not?"

"It's a moral," Mate B explained helpfully. "Without a moral, the story isn't complete."

"What a ridiculously simple conception of what a story is supposed to be," Anthy said primly. "And what you said isn't even a moral."

Mate B turned to Captain A. "Perhaps the moral is embedded in the story, caught and obscured beneath the surface of the narrative, like a piglet caught in a briar patch?"

"You need to work on your similes," Captain A said kindly; when Mate B looked dejected at her words, she patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. "You're right, though. The moral is probably embedded."

Anthy looked away from them as they continued to chatter with one another about the meaning, symbolism, archetypes, themes, structures and (of course) the moral of her story. She stroked Chu-Chu's head and began to compose her next set of words in her thoughts. She did not like these sorts of dealings. The shadows were enigmas to her, and always had been; in their presence, she was remembering them vividly, their little plays and parables, their \_mockery\_.

How we hated them, she thought, drifting backwards into the past, as though she floated on her back in some slow-moving, cool stream, towards a vast, unknown sea. How we hated them, when we could recollect them. When they showed their faces to us, and told our story, with all the details different every time. Different and wrong--no, not wrong. Just not the stories we wanted to be true. How we hated them, but they slip away, like moonlight, like shadows, and you cannot even remember that there is something you cannot remember...

"To port, Captain! A vessel!"

The shout from Mate B shook her back to the present, to the ship upon the sea. The two pirates stood at the port railings, with Captain A peering through her telescope at a distant white blot upon the waves while Mate B shuffled anxiously from one foot to another beside her.

She left Chu-Chu sleeping on the lid of the chest and strode across the gently-rolling deck. How quickly I get my sea legs back, she thought; when was the last time I stood upon a boat on

the ocean? Again, the memories threatened--a hundred ships, all with names in foreign tongues (but what tongues, truly, were foreign to her, who had been princess of all lands?), and a hundred oceans, all surging, spiralling, spilling forth themselves upon the sandy spit and the wooded beach.

Then she found herself beside them, taking the offered telescope, thinking as she raised it to her eye (the glint of light upon the lens made her think of the glint of light on other lenses, lens of eyeglasses, star-projector lens): how long did I lose myself in reveries, for, lo! the white blob that they said was a ship is no longer a blob, but a triangle as of the shape of sails. And suddenly the distance receded, and she saw; a ship, with timbers white as the bark of the birch was white, and the high white sails were like great gull-wings upspread to snatch and seize the wind.

"The ghost ship," Captain A murmured, seemingly awed.  
"The ship of Dios. Raised from the sea by his sister, who cast her blood upon the waters to draw it back after it went down with all hands on board. Now it wanders, uncrewed, over the Sea of Setebos, seeking for and never finding a port, a safe haven."

Anthy lowered the telescope and turned on her, eyes narrowed, teeth clenched. "That's not what happened," she snapped. "It's a lie."

Mate B shrugged. "Well, as Byron said, a lie is just the truth in masquerade."

"Byron," Anthy said slowly, "was not so great a poet, or a man, that a quotation from him puts paid to all other arguments."

"Yet the ship is there," Captain A countered quietly. "If you look upon the hull, you will see what her name is."

Not wanting to look, unable not to, she raised the telescope again. There it was, in an ornate gothic script, along the hull: "Dios".

Then she understood, and she laughed, wondering why she had not realized before. "Of course. It was a car. And now it is a ship. Because I'm stuck here, playing pirates, with the two of you. You've seized control of my point of view."

"Of course we have," Captain A said patiently, letting out a sigh like that of a loving but exasperated mother. "It was the only way to save you. If you had to look upon what the world is \_really\_ like now, it would destroy you. You'd go mad. There's

only a few lynchpins left, keeping the whole thing from spinning away completely."

"Lynchpins," Anthy murmured. She stared at the telescope in her hands. The near-gold glint of setting sun on brass seemed cold and devoid of any sort of warmth. "The islands?"

"Islands in the sea," Mate B agreed with a nod. "Most people don't cling to their memories very tightly. So, over time, Setebos took them away and made them his. And everyone began to turn into people in Setebos's dream, and their dreams, which make the world what it is, just became a part of his dream. Now that he's waking up, the dreams and the dreamers are ending."

Anthy licked her lips. Setebos, Setebos, Setebos... there was something she had to remember, something so distant she could only recall that she needed to remember it. "But some people are still holding on to their memories, because they're so precious to them. And so long as they do that..."

"Exactly!" Captain A bounced a little on her feet in a display of almost infectious enthusiasm, nearly displacing her tricorn. "So long as they do that, Setebos won't wake up all the way! Until he manages to tear away their precious memories and make them his own, everything can still go back to normal."

"How?"

"Damned if we know!" Captain A replied cheerfully. "We're just hanging on as well as we can and trying to have a good time while it lasts."

"Liars," Anthy said, with something close to affection. "You'll still be around."

The pirates exchanged uncomfortable glances with one another. Eventually, Mate B said, "If you woke up one morning, and overnight had become a different person who was exactly the same as the person who went to bed in every way--would you know?"

"Of course," Anthy said without hesitation. "I wouldn't be me, if that happened."

"Uh-huh," Captain A said, nodding, as though that concluded the entire business. She licked her lips--which made Anthy wonder when she had acquired lips--and clasped her hands nervously behind her back. "Look, you want us to help you find your friend, right?"

Anthy shook her head. "It's not a matter of want. I demand it as my right, as per our pact. Whatever sort of things you may be, I expect that you are bound by the old laws."

Mate B squealed with delight. "Ooh, the old laws!" She nudged Captain A in the ribs. "We haven't heard someone talk about the old laws in years. Isn't it cute?" she stage-whispered.

Captain A looked thoughtful, then said, as though Anthy weren't even there, "I think it's meant to demonstrate that her movement towards the future is inevitably coupled to acceptance of her past."

Anthy looked from one to the other. "You two are both extremely odd."

They giggled nervously, hiding their mouths behind their hands. Their eyes, bright and dark and wide, darted back and forth, with something of the merriment of drunkards in them, and something of the panic of trapped beasts. Anthy tried to remember when they had not had faces, when the gaze had slid away from whatever it was that bobbed atop the column of the neck.

"Take a look through the telescope again," Captain A suggested. "The tower should be coming into view."

Anthy looked. There was indeed, a tower. Moving the telescope around in short sweeps, she was able to see that it lay at the centre of the four islands. Each time she looked at it, it was different: at first a tall, slender thing of white marble, instantly recognizable as the central tower of Ohtori; then, a precarious, shadowy construction of rotting bricks and broken windows, looking in real danger of falling over; next, a surreal, fractal construction of rose-coloured crystal, with stairways terminating suicidally upon empty space. It rose from the Sea of Setebos without any land to support it.

After a time, after she had watched it go through other changes, she dropped the telescope to her side. "It is impossible that I should not have noticed that before," she said.

"The tower stretches from sea to sky," Captain A said, as though Anthy had not spoken at all. "Hell, Earth, Heaven; these are the names of its dominions..."

"In the tower are three prisoners," Mate B picked up as Captain A trailed off, "the maker, the twister, the watcher, of dreams."

"Your friend is there, too, now," Captain A added, as though that was the least important thing of all.

Anthy's eyes were flinty and determined. "Then we go to the tower." She paused briefly. "Tell me, how did she get there in the first place?"

They uncomfortably glanced at each other again. Mate B coughed. Captain A said, "The Red King lured her and trapped her."

A cold chill chased up her arms and squatted in her shoulder-blades. It took little effort to guess who that was. "How did he do that?"

"The same way you always trap a prince," Mate B said. There was something accusatory in her voice--or perhaps Anthy was merely imagining it. "Innocents imperiled. A maiden trapped in a tower, waiting to be rescued." She sighed. "Princes always fall for that. Always \_have\_ to fall for that. There's no other way."

A prince... yes, Anthy thought. Utena is a prince. Was a prince. Became a prince. And I... of course I couldn't bear to be alone. I'm so sorry, Utena. So very sorry. I must tell you that to your face, and let you deal with me as you will.

She had the sudden sense of some distant machine, something with many gears in constant motion--a clock, an orrery--slowing to a stop, ratcheting into place, and freezing that way.

"She did it again," Captain A whispered, in fascination and in horror.

"Chu," said something down by her ankle. She reached down automatically and gathered her dear little friend up, nestling him in the crook of her arm.

Mate B frowned. "Dios's ship is coming closer."

It was, Anthy saw. Close enough that a telescope was no longer necessary to see the details. The beautiful white ship, with its broad sails, and its figurehead of a so-familiar prince, sword raised, cape flowing behind him. The golden railings, the diamond windows...

Mate B had pulled out a grapnel from somewhere. "Captain...?" she inquired. "Should we..."



"Do we dare?" Captain A said, pursing her lips and rubbing the tip of her nose thoughtfully. "You know the stories the ancient mariners tell, about those who--"

"Have you a skiff?" Anthy inquired sharply.

The two of them gave her a somewhat guilty glance. Mate B stowed her grapnel away.

"Yes," Captain A said eventually. "We've got a skiff. It's off the port bow."

"But you'll have to row yourself," Mate B added.

"Will I, now?"

Captain A nodded. "Princesses don't row boats, you see."

And Anthy understood, and smiled, feeling suddenly a kindness towards them that she had not been possessed of before. A memory came to her, bitter-sweet like all her memories were: a long gold barge on a sluggish green river; sluggish green crocodiles drifting in the waves alongside. And her brother at the prow, tall and strong and near-naked, a white sash round his waist and gold at his wrists and throat. And she lay on a couch in the shade, while the barge was poled by scarred slaves up the endless tongue of the river.

She had never rowed a boat before in her life.

"Tell me," she said to them, "where is your friend?"

They stared at her as though she spoke in a language they did not know.

"The third one," she prompted. "Come now, you were with us so very long, do not think I do not know how many of you there are supposed to be. I often wondered--in those moments when he allowed me to wonder--just what you were."

There was a long, deep silence, and then Mate B said, calmly: "He killed her."

Captain A let out a soft sound, a groan like that of a creaking door.

"Who killed her?"

"Captain Crimson," Mate B blurted, "Captain Crimson, master of the ship \_Caliban\_, most feared vessel on the Sea of Setebos.

He was a prince, once, or so they say, but on his wedding-night, his knights murdered his bride, drunk upon wine and on her beauty. Before his eyes, they used her... they used her for their pleasures, and then they tore her apart. Like a sacrificial animal. But the joke was on them, in the end: he stole their souls and trapped them in the heart of a ruby from a distant desert, and now they must serve him forever."

"As his crew," Captain A said, a catch in her voice. "They serve him as his crew, all one hundred of them."

"He'll catch up to us soon," Mate B said. "His ship is faster, you see, and now that he's killed our friend, he's coming for us."

Anthy stood quiet for a time, absorbing the information--the revelation. Had he found a way to destroy them? After so long a time of having to endure them? \_How\_?

Sometimes--rarely--in the aftermath of their nighttime play, he would whisper to her, or to himself, and she would overhear: when the Revolution comes... after the Revolution... when the Revolution comes to pass... in the Revolution's wake...

(when the Revolution comes to pass, Anthy, then things will be unlike they are now, just as the man is unlike the boy, or the flower like the seed... there will be no more laughter in the shadows, no more whispering in the dark... am I the sky and you the sea, Anthy, or you the sky and I the sea... do you remember, once, long ago, when they sang the wanderings of the moon and the labours of the sun... I do not remember that... I do not recall... I cannot recollect... could not foresee... when, where, why, we were born... they say that sky and sea once were one, until they were pulled apart, and now the sky may lie above the sea, and the sea rest below the sky, but they can never touch... it will all be different, Anthy, different from it is now... after the Revolution...)

It is difficult, she thought, to look back on something you have cast aside, as the flower casts aside its petals to bear fruit, and remember why you held it once. Why had it taken her so long to realize that the fragrance of his roses was the odour of the grave?

"You have to go now."

The voice stirred her from her thoughts, leaving a single string of words running through her head like a chain linked upon itself. She had no idea where they came from; she had never

spoken them, or read them, or heard them spoken: the greatest revolutions are the ones that no one realizes have happened until long after they have passed.

She stared at the two girls before her, dressed in their pirate clothing, standing on the rough wooden deck of their pirate ship, and felt a strange compassionate pity for them (she did not quite understand why). On the horizon, she saw red sails in pursuit.

"Listen," she said kindly, "it's easy for you to escape. You just have to become something else. You ought to know that better than anyone. I don't know what you are, but you aren't pirates; at least, you don't have to remain pirates."

They exchanged glances.

"She doesn't see," Captain A said.

Mate B nodded glumly. "It's our own fault, you see," she said to Anthy. Her lip curled slightly. "And a bit of yours. But really ours."

"We made the same mistake you did, you see," Captain A explained. "We let her into our hearts. We fell in love with her. And, thus, we lost our objectivity. We didn't realize it at the time, but that was why we asked her to join us. We were trying to save her, and that was the only way we knew how."

B took over as A left off. "But it didn't work. Couldn't have worked. She was so brave, and so heroic, and so \_stupid\_."

Tears bloomed in their eyes. Anthy watched; her pity had suddenly drained away, as she realized that this, like everything else, might merely be an act, a part of their endless grand guignol.

"At first, we thought we could get it back. But it never worked, not really. And then, when Setebos tore the world apart, when our.... friend died, we stopped being objective at all. We got trapped like everyone else. So we became schoolgirls, and tried to hide your friend away from all of them. From everyone who wanted to use her and hurt her. But that didn't work. So we became pirates, and dragged you from the ocean... because you can save her, you see, and we can't. It's symmetry, you see."

"Please save her. We love her so very much."

"I think," Anthy said slowly, "that I would like to leave now."

"Of course," A said, snapping to attention.

And so they took her to where the skiff hung on rails off the port bow, and she stepped carefully within it and sat down on the rowing bench, with Chu-Chu in her lap. She removed the kerchief and eye-patch they had put upon him, and dropped them overboard; they floated briefly upon the waters, then sank out of sight.

Their hands worked quickly on the locks that secured the skiff to their boat. Chains clanked against the wooden sides as they operated the winch and lowered her down to the water.

She shoved away from the ship with one of the oars, placed them both into the water, and, as though she had done it a thousand times before, began to row towards the distant white ship. She wondered what they were saying as they watched her go, and, as she wondered that, she heard voices, too many voices, the same voices speaking words that stood in opposition to one another, whose meaning was such that to accept the truth of one set negated the possibility of truth in other sets... a mandala of words, and she at the centre...

She didn't understand... I'm glad she understood... she'll never save her... she has to save her... I'm glad we lied... I'm glad we told the truth... I'm afraid... I'm not afraid... this is the end... this is the beginning... I hope she succeeds... I hope she fails...

Dios's ship had weighed anchor for her. As she approached, it seemed to flicker before her eyes, and she saw a white ship, a white horse, a white car, all at once... and there was a ladder of filigreed gold extending down for her, like a hand offered in welcome... so Chu-Chu perched on her shoulder and she seized the rungs of the ladder in hands that ached pleasantly from the long effort of rowing... and up on the deck was a silver wheel to steer (a silver bridle...), and in the distance a tower, struck endlessly by lightning and endlessly rebuilt... and she sailed/drove/rode towards it, towards Utena...

"Symmetry," she said to Chu-Chu, and smiled. "They're right, you know. Utena saved me, and now I'll save her... I'll be her prince... appearing on a white horse to rescue her."

"Chu," her companion said, clinging to the bridle as the trees rushed by beside them, and the horse's hooves drummed on

the path.

"You sound concerned, dear one. Is it because of what happened the last time?"

"Chu."

"I don't really understand it myself, when I think about it... was Utena a prince, and I made her stop being a prince, and sealed her power away?" Anthy bowed her head for a moment. "Perhaps it was. Or maybe I just offered her a choice... to go on with being a prince, or to be with me... and she chose me... it's not that I don't want to remember exactly what happened, but that I can't remember. And whether that's because of something I did to myself--making myself forget, so I wouldn't have to bear the burden of stealing another prince away from the world, even though this world \_needs\_ to learn to get along without princes--or because of something that was done to me, or just because of the nature of the story... I don't know. So if I can't know, why should I worry about it? It's more important that I rescue Utena. She's what really matters."

Chu-Chu nodded, but still seemed troubled. The horse thundered on. In the distance, above the pines, white tower rising. Behind them, from the sea, echo of ship's cannons.

\* \* \*

Juri rotated her wrist and let light-gleams swim along the knife's blade in long liquid spikes. "It's beautiful," she said softly, flipping the hilt in her fingers so that the narrow tip angled down at the eponymous scars left on the table by previous customers. "Where did you get it?"

At the same time, she thought: it is not beautiful at all. It is terrible and ugly. Forged all in one piece, out of a metal that she was certain was silver. Not even a knife, in truth; a dagger. And not a weapon for fighting. Too unwieldy, too clumsy. The pommel was too large. She stared at it and saw that it was, crudely, primally, a face: bulging-eyed, fang-mouthed, slit-nosed. No, not a fighting weapon. Ceremonial. Sacrificial. Ancient. Kith and kin to the labrys of Crete, to the first flat stone stained with blood and brains that a rude fist lifted to the sky.

Martyrdom--dying for one's gods--was, she thought, a newer and less popular concept than killing for them. The eyes of the pommel seemed to be locked with hers. Light was moving in them and hacked as it was by the overhead fans into light, shadow,

light, shadow, it made them flicker (open, closed, open, closed) like the eyes of some sleeper in the midst of REM. She tried to think back to what she'd read: did dreams come during REM, or during the deep sleep, when the eyes did not move at all? If the dagger is dreaming, then what is its dream?

"From my purse, of course," Shiori explained slowly. Then, she added, with one of those little laughs that had always made Juri's throat go tight, "Silly."

"Yes, of course, your purse." Juri nodded and moved it down to touch the point to a clear space on the wood. She tried to estimate how much room she'd need to carve the five characters legibly. Ari-Su-Gawa Ju-Ri. Or perhaps it would be better to spell them phonetically. A dagger-point was much more imprecise than a calligraphy pen. Perhaps to render it into the Latin alphabet? Juri, Jury, Juli, July. Did she need to provide her last name? How many other Juris (or Jurys or Julis or Julys) were ever likely to come to La Rosa Roja, anyway?

"Hey, Juri, will you carve my name too?" Shiori asked, with an almost childish eagerness. The same kind of eagerness with which she'd asked for things in elementary school. And Juri had always been glad, so glad, too glad, to give them, and so distressed when it wasn't within her power to do so. Right from the start, she thought--right from the start.

"Surely you can carve your own name, when I'm done?" she asked with a light laugh.

Shiori coloured slightly. "I suppose. I just thought..."

A little heart, she thought. I could draw a little heart, with her name and mine. Something stupid and silly and romantic and childish. Whatever she thought of it, it would make Shiori happy, and that was what mattered.

She wondered sometimes: was it completely wrong or utterly right to be so in love with someone you'd known since before elementary school, someone who you'd had sleepovers with, summers on the beach with; kisses, embraces and touches, from the very beginning, entirely innocent, before sex even became a known concept, a thing in theory, much less a reality? Was there something wrong with her, that she felt that way? No, no, of course not. She loved Shiori. Had always--she had concluded this years ago--loved Shiori, and it had only become clear in exactly what way when she'd been old enough, just as the meaning of some events of childhood only became clear years later, when seen through an adult gaze.

"All right," she said. "I'll carve for both of us."

She began to draw the point downward, towards her, scratching a thin line. She would do this carefully and methodically--shallow scratches as guidelines, to make a full blueprint before filling it all in full. Even as she cut with the knife (the knife that had been so horrible moments before, but now was safe, familiar, friendly, proper; the face on the pommel smiled at her), she was not sure exactly what she was making: the beginning of the curve of a heart, or the first swoop of kanji or katakana, the sloped side of an A, the straight downward plunge of a J before its barbs...

Never found out, either. The door banged open, bounced off the wall, and was stopped from slamming shut again as it rebounded by the interposition of a hand--as though it had been trying to keep the new arrival out, but futilely. The bell above it rang discordantly.

The sharp sound as the door hit the wall had cut through everything: the strumming of a guitar, the murmur of one, two, four, a dozen separate conversations (too many conversations, Juri thought vaguely, as though La Rosa Roja is filled with an endless whispering of ghosts). The gentle turbine thrum of ceiling fans: steady rhythms recalling clock- and metronome-tick, recalling the even endless ratcheting of gears. All overcome by the opening door.

For a moment she thought the woman from the other side of the mirror (whom she had forgotten and was now remembering, but how, how did you forget such a beloved, unknown face glimpsed through the looking glass?) stood in the doorway. The colour of the hair was similar, the height was about the same, and there was an identical sort of determined, implacable weary devotion to something.

But the figure was, she saw on a second glance, paler and shorter of hair, and male. And Juri felt no love at the sight of him. Rather, fear, disgust, anger, and, finally, bafflement, for she knew him no better than she'd known the woman in the mirror. Thus, why fear, disgust, anger?

"Don't give it your name," he said quietly. "Give it your name, and you'll never be able to escape."

Next to her, Shiori pushed her chair back and stood, opening her mouth and pointing her finger at the new arrival. A thin sound, made somewhere deep in the throat, crawled out from between her lips. Juri realized that she was trying to say--to

scream--a name, but couldn't remember either the name or the reason she had to say it.

The floorboards of La Rosa Roja groaned in protest, and a sound like hundreds of marching feet was suddenly in the air, immense, overwhelming. Juri looked wildly about, but the only ones on their feet were Shiori and four others: Hasuichi, Frank, Benjamin, Elena. Those last four were moving towards the stranger. Their expressions were identical in blankness. Juri had an impression of masks, veils, cauls.

"I'm merely passing through," the stranger said, crossing his arms and looking about the interior of the bar with a mixture of sympathy and contempt. "I'm not going to stay. You can't trap me here, nor can you make me leave. She's given me freedom from such things, now and forever. She's shown me the way." He stretched out his hand towards them; there was a gleam in his eyes, like an inspired artist. Or a madman glimpsing visions. "We're the makers of our own chains. But just throwing them all away isn't enough. Someone without any chains has nothing to hold them to this world; they might as well be a ghost. It's about being allowed to choose what you'll let bind you, and how, and why."

He paused for a moment. His eyes narrowed; he was looking directly at someone, but, amidst everything else, Juri couldn't say who, beyond that it was neither her nor Shiori.

"Stay away from her," he hissed. "Both of you stay away from her. I'm going to save her this time. Like I should have before. And neither of you are going to get in my way."

Akino Hasuichi licked his lips, and said, "But..." Then he looked down at the floor, and Juri wondered how she ever could have thought his face was blank. Now it was full of emotion: torment, guilt, confusion, fear, each fighting for dominance.

"How cruel you are." Benjamin's voice was quiet and sad, but resolved. There was no fear in it. "To try and tear all of this away, just because your own precious memories have been torn away."

"Those who cling to false things should be shown the truth," the stranger said, nonplussed. "The petals... the petals must be cast off. Or no fruit will ever grow."

Frank laughed. "Not everyone's memories are like petals," he sneered. "Sometimes, they're like bark. Strip a tree of its bark, and the tree will die."



"I'm merely passing through," the stranger repeated. "Make your own choices. Now that you have the right to make them."

The door closed, and he was gone.

"May I see that?" Akami asked quietly, from behind Juri.

Juri looked up and blinked. "See what?"

Leo Cano's friends sat back down, and they all began to play dominoes.

"The knife." Akami indicated it with one long-nailed finger.

"I was going to carve my name."

The whirling fans sent shadows flying across Akami's tall body and pale face. "I'll only need it for a moment. I want my brother to see it."

Her brother was still standing in the centre of the room, eyes fixed upon the floor, hands dangling limp at his sides. He looked utterly alone. At their table, Mari and Mitsuru were talking quietly. They took no notice of his desolate state.

"All right." Juri handed it over; glad, in truth, to have it leave her fingers.

"Thank you."

She remembered Shiori, then. "Sit back down. He's gone."

Shiori sat. Her tongue darted out briefly and moistened her lips. "Juri, who was he?"

"I don't know. Some nut." She shrugged, and poured them each another glass of wine. "He'll be here soon."

She raised the wine glass to her lips, and watched Akami approach her brother. Perhaps, she thought, this is voyeuristic. Perhaps I should tactfully turn my eyes away, and let whatever scene is going to play out play out without my observation. Yet she did not look away.

"Oneechan?" Hasuichi asked, raising his head as his sister came closer. Juri heard his voice as clearly as though he were right next to her. She had the sense that she was watching something on television, both intimately close to the action, and incredibly far away from it.

"Yes, Hasuichi?"

He smiled ruefully. "Sorry, Oneechan."

Akami put her arm around him. The gesture had something of affection in it, but also possessiveness, control. "For what? You have nothing to be sorry for to me. To anyone."

"I'm not going to be able to walk you back to the dorms tomorrow after school," he said. "I..."

"You were always so stupid," Akami said dully. "So very stupid. I didn't \_need\_ your protection. I didn't need you to save me. I was the one who saved \_you\_, when you were too weak to save yourself. I was the one who protected you, when no one else would."

Mari suddenly threw herself to her feet. "NO! Akami, no, don't--"

Akami's free hand rose in a blur of glinting silver, and buried the blade of the dagger in her brother's neck. He fell to his knees, choking and clawing at his throat, blood pooling on the floor before him as he crouched, pouring in seemingly endless amounts from the terrible wound.

Mari reached them then, but, rather than aiding Hasuichi, simply pulled her hand back and slapped Akami as hard as she could. The other girl staggered at the force of the blow.

"What have you done?" Mari whispered, horrified. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" she repeated, voice rising into a high scream.

Akami turned, shoes moving unheedingly through the spreading puddle of her brother's blood, and slapped Mari back. "Idiot!" she snarled, as the smaller girl lifted a trembling hand to her face. "Don't you realize what's happened to us? What he's done to us?"

"We had him back," Mitsuru said dully, still seated at the table. And he put his face into his hands, and wept.

The blood kept on spreading; it seemed as though it would cover the entire floor, eventually. Hasuichi lay like a child's discarded doll, unmoving.

Juri came out of her detached state then, and moved to seize Akami as she raised her hand to slap the disbelieving and unmoving Mari again. "That's enough!" She could feel memories

building up in her head like water held behind a dam, leaking through in trickles because they would wash her away if they came all at once. But she understood--horribly, inexplicably--why Akami had done what she did. The terrible path of her logic: my brother is already dead. This is not my brother.

Akami smiled at her. "No. It's not enough. It's only the beginning." And her wrist slipped through Juri's grip as though she were made of fog, and she and Mari and Mitsuru and her brother's body and her brother's blood were gone, utterly.

Juri stood there for a moment, struggling with all the new things--names, events, reasons, meanings, connections--running through her head. Except that they were none of them new, of course.

"Is this all some kind of dream?" she murmured under her breath; then Shiori's arms came round her from behind, and Shiori's head was laid against her back.

"What do we do now, Juri?" she asked. "How do we get out of here?"

She clasped her hands over Shiori's down above her waist and sighed. "I don't know."

"Why didn't he come, Juri?"

For a moment, Juri couldn't think of whom Shiori meant; then, when she did, she simply said, "I don't know."

"They got their friend back. The one Mitsuru accidentally..." She trailed away. Her breath was hot against Juri's back, and it sounded as though she might be crying. "And those other people, they must have been friends from Cano-san's days, when he was the Victor."

"Not friends," Juri said, somewhat sadly. She turned around and embraced Shiori tightly. "Never friends, really. In the end, you're only Duellists."

"The rings!" Shiori said suddenly, starting in Juri's arms.

Juri pulled back from her, keeping her hands on her shoulders. "What?"

"It's easy." She laughed, and raised her left hand between them. "He said it himself. Only those who wear the Rose Seal

are allowed to be here. So..." She tugged at it, then frowned. Her eyes widened. "Juri, it won't--"

"Let me try."

The ring slid off easily and smoothly. Juri cupped it in her palm and stared at it. Such a small thing. So insignificant, if one did not understand what it represented. Perhaps insignificant even then.

"I wondered what it would be like to wear one," Shiori murmured, rubbing the spot on her finger where the ring had rested. "A real one, I mean. Like you and Tsuchiya-sempai had. Because even if it is a shackle, it means that you're special. It means that you're somebody important."

"And how did it make you feel?" Juri asked softly.

Shiori looked up at her and smiled broadly. "Just the same as I always do."

Juri laughed, leaned down, and kissed her briefly on the lips, darting back before Shiori could even try to respond in kind. "Have I ever told you--"

But when she opened her eyes, Shiori was gone, and the ring in her palm had become dust.

"Shiori?"

No answer. She tugged on her own ring, frowning, trying not to be afraid--or at least not to show it, to even think about it, but the ring might as well have been a part of her finger for how much it moved, and she was the only one left in La Rosa Roja, the only one except for whatever ghosts might linger...

It occurred to her to wonder where Leo Cano and his own ghosts had gone. But why wonder about a question she couldn't answer? It was like wondering why Ruka hadn't been here. Although perhaps that had been a blessing, given what Akami had done to escape La Rosa Roja. The image in her mind of him had been rose-coloured, false; she still, as Touga had understood, felt a great deal of anger towards him, whatever his motivations had been.

Perhaps it was simply a matter of wanting to wake up from this phantasm, wanting it hard enough. She pulled at the ring again, wishing with all her heart to be gone, to be back in the real world with Shiori and everyone else.

No luck. Something was keeping her here. If what Mikage had said was true, then it had to be something in herself. But, of course, nothing he said was necessarily the truth, even if he believed it was.

"Hello?" she called hesitantly, pacing around the wide interior of La Rosa Roja, weaving between the wooden tables beneath the movement of the fans. "Is anyone still here?"

There was a creak from across the room, but it made Juri jump and chills run up her spine, such was the silence that had dominated before it. It came from a door that she hadn't noticed before, back behind the long bar itself. As doors sometimes did, it had become unlatched and swung slightly open.

Pulling it open further showed her a long alleyway, moonlit, stretching on until it faded into darkness. The walls were worn red brick, and whatever buildings the alleyway ran between were so high and so long that she could not see an end to them.

With some trepidation, she began to walk down the alleyway. In her experience of alleyways (admittedly somewhat limited) they did not tend to be this clean. Overhead, the moon was full, a sickly dark yellow-white in colour, barely visible in the long, narrow slice of sky allowed to her eye by the rise of the walls. The door leading back to La Rosa Roja disappeared into the shadows behind her; after that, it was easy to imagine that she walked a road without end or beginning.

Rose vines, unblossomed, began to appear on the walls, descending from above as though they'd overflowed some abandoned rooftop garden. Sparse at first, then thicker, until eventually hardly any bricks could be seen at all.

She quickly found herself walking without thinking. About anything, past, present or future. At one point, she looked down, and saw, completely without surprise, that she carried weapons at her belt: two long curved knives in plain black sheathes. She wore dark slacks and a yellow blouse.

The darkness pressed in close, like a partner in an antiquated dance. Eventually, the cobblestones of the alleyway became a set of high stone stairs. She ascended them, passed beneath an archway stretching between the walls of the two buildings that created the passage, and entered into a wide diamond-shaped arena. The vine-draped walls of the buildings (the infinitely high buildings) had simply widened, then joined up to compass the entirety of the arena. Not buildings, then; simply walls.

Above the arena, the castle hung. It was smaller and less ethereal than she remembered it. More solid stone than spun-sugar stained-glass fantasy. Nothing even vaguely resembling a minaret. Nevertheless, there was still something alluring about it. The arena floor was a tessellated mosaic, an endless interlocking of green vines and roses of all colours.

There were two people in the centre: an old man with long white hair holding a woman's head in his lap as she lay unmoving. He looked up as she entered. His eyes were empty, endlessly dark.

"Cano-san," she called, moving swiftly towards them.

"Elena." He looked down at the body of the woman whose head he cradled. "But..."

"No." She drew the long knives from her belt and dropped them to the arena floor. "But I understand now. When we met, you said I reminded you of someone you'd known once." She paused, both in speech and in movement. Leo was only a dozen steps away. She could see blood on Elena's throat, dark and long-dried, covering the slight but fatal wound. "What happened, Cano-san?"

"I didn't mean for it to happen," he said. He reached down and smoothed dark hair away from Elena's forehead. "But... I was going to be replaced. She was going to be taken away from me. I'd never lost before. Not against Frank, or Benjamin either. Then she came along, and..." He trailed away, and when he resumed, she could barely hear him. "It was an accident, Arisugawa-san."

"I know," she said softly, as kindly as she could manage. "Just a terrible accident."

"So I ran away," he continued. "Ran away and thought for a long time about what it meant. Until I understood what the two of them--the devil and his witch--had been doing to all of us all along." He hung his head. "And that meant it wasn't my fault, you see. I ran away, and--" He laughed softly. "You know, I never believed in any of it at all when I was your age. Immaculate conceptions, virgin births, transubstantiations, resurrections, revelations, saints, miracles, heaven, hell, angels, demons. All that. It drove my grandmother mad. Every day--or so she always insisted--she prayed for my soul." He caught her eyes with his. "Do you think she prayed hard enough, Arisugawa-san?"

Juri took a while to answer. "I'm not the kind of person who has an answer to that sort of question," she said finally.

"Even now, I'm not sure that I believe it all. Some of it seems so... impossible. Or unjust. Or unfair. But I try. I've been trying so long, Arisugawa-san, so hard. To believe what I'm supposed to believe, be a righteous man, do God's work, keep my soul safe from the fire... They say that man can't have enough faith on his own. That God grants it to him, if he wants it hard enough; God will grant him grace." He sounded as though he might weep. "But where is my grace? How hard do you have to want it?"

She looked away. It was... unsightly, this display of pain and self-pity. She wondered how many he had killed over the years, calling them witches and believing himself righteous as he did. She hated the fact that she could not quite manage to hate him. To turn her back and walk away, and leave him to his justly-deserved desolation.

"We need to leave this place, Cano-san."

He stood up slowly, after laying Elena's body out in the middle of the arena and carefully folding her hands over her breast. The dead woman (decades dead, Juri thought vaguely) looked at more peace than her killer would ever be.

"You need to leave this place," he said, as though correcting a student. "I..."

He was before her, lifting her unresisting left hand and pulling the ring from it, casting it to the arena floor. It rolled for a while, then stopped, fell over on its side, and turned to dust.

"I still have things I need to do," he said slowly. "At La Rosa Roja."

"Cano-san!"

She reached out for him. Three times, she did. And each time, her fingers passed through him, as though he were a ghost. Or as though she were. Everything was swimming around her, as though it were dissolving, or her eyes were filling with tears.

The sea. She could smell the salt of the sea. Hear the cries of gulls. Taste vanilla ice cream on her tongue, and feel Shiori's hand in hers. They had been six years old. She'd forgotten about it completely. The walk on the beach, when

Shiori had giggled and playfully kissed her on the lips, "like people do on TV". And her lips had tasted of strawberry ice cream.

The memory was so beautiful, so innocent, so pure, that it hurt. It cut her deeper than any blade ever could have. Things had been so simple. So happy. So much...

So much what? Better?

No.

Different.

Only different...

But still...

Such a beautiful...

Memory.

\* \* \*

"He's very good about calling."

"Pardon me?" Utena stepped back into the solarium, hands and face still pleasantly cool from washing them at the sink.

"Akio-san," Kanae said pleasantly, toying with the handle of her teacup as Utena sat back down. "Something came up at work, so he called to tell me he'd be late. But he's very glad to hear that you came to visit, and is looking forward to seeing you again."

"Umm... okay," Utena replied. She tried to peer speculatively at Kanae without being obvious about doing so, hoping (fearing?) to see some flash of Cali within her eyes.

Kanae ate a tea biscuit and began a cheerful, slightly rambling monologue about what a wonderful and considerate husband Akio was. Utena listened vaguely; after a while, she began to doubt her own memory, wonder if Cali had simply been some kind of hallucination or dream.

"...except when he fucks around."

Utena blinked, yanked back into full attention by the obscenity, which was spoken in the same cheerful style as the rest of the monologue. "Excuse me?"



Kanae looked back, and frowned slightly. "Yes?"

"Did you just...?"

The frown deepened. "Did I just what?"

"Did you say..." Utena trailed away, shaking her head.

"Never mind. Go on, Kanae-san."

Kanae's watch beeped again. "Oh!" she said, starting slightly. "Time to read to the baby." She reached down and picked up the red-clad edition of "The Tempest" with one hand, placing the other affectionately on her swollen belly.

"I read somewhere once that reading to your children before they're born helps them learn to read earlier," Utena said lamely. "And, umm, so does listening to music."

Kanae raised her eyes from behind the open book. "We could put on some music," she said speculatively. "It might be conducive to the reading atmosphere. Would you like to put some on, Utena-san? The gramophone is just over there."

She looked. There was, indeed, a gramophone, over in the corner where Kanae indicated, with records stacked beside it.

"That's all right," Utena said after a moment. "Why don't you just read to the baby?"

Kanae cleared her throat, stroked her stomach once as though soothing a nervous cat, and began.

"Caliban, you taught me language, and my profit on it is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language! Prospero, hag-seed, hence! Fetch us in fuel. And be quick, thou art best, to answer other business. Shruggest thou, malice? If thou neglectest, or dost unwillingly what I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps, fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar that beasts shall tremble at thy din. Caliban, no... pray thee aside. I must obey. His art is of such power it would control my dam's god, Setebos, and make a vassal of him, Prospero. So, slave, hence! Would you like to feel the baby kick?"

The only personal experience Utena had had with pregnant women up until now had consisted of being introduced to one of Anthy's co-workers at the last workplace Christmas party, a large, pleasant and extremely pregnant woman named Yuri who had also invited her to feel the baby kick, as though it were the

most casual thing in the world to put a hand upon her body and feel the small violence of the other life within her. When had that been? She counted backwards in her head; a month, slightly less, slightly more.

It might as well have been in a previous life, or a dim memory of her childhood, for all the relevance it bore to her current situation. And yet...

"If... if that's all right?"

The words were echoes. Or perhaps, if an echo could reach backwards, the earlier ones had been echoes, because this moment, this moment was infinitely more important than the remembered one.

"Of course it's all right, Utena-san."

Kanae took her hand and placed it upon the soft warm swell of her belly, leaving her own atop it. Utena closed her eyes and let out the smallest of shudders. She remembered the painting out in the other room: the black-clad executioner, holding child in one hand and sword in the other.

"Kanae-san?" she asked softly, "that painting you were doing, when I came... does it have a name?"

The baby kicked, and she felt his strength against her palm.

"The Duty of a Prince."

"What's that?"

"That's the name my painting has."

"Oh."

He kicked again. Utena wondered if it hurt.

"A little."

She started, but managed to stop herself from taking her hand away. Don't think, she reminded herself; don't think of certain things... the colour of Akio's eyes, or the texture of his lips, or the hot silken feel of his skin...

Kanae's hand atop hers was gentle, but in the same way that Akio's touches had been gentle. That, she supposed, the touch of any lover was: the pleasure, in part, came from the restraint of their ability to hurt you. The son had power, clearly--no

surprise, given his bloodline--and that was shared, in part or whole, with his mother. What a hideous thing, to see the inside of any heart beyond your own, and look into the dark places that were another's by right.

"It hurts a little," Kanae continued, "but not too much. And he is my baby. So I don't mind, because I love him."

"When is he... expected?" Utena asked, relieved that Kanae didn't seem to be picking up on everything she thought.

"Oh, you can never really predict when a baby will actually arrive," Kanae replied, smiling. "He'll come when he's ready, I suppose, and we'll just have to deal with that as best we can."

"You and Akio-san?"

She nodded. "He's very excited about the child. A lot of his hopes are with him." For a moment, her face clouded; she looked away from Utena, and her eyes were held in shadow. "Akio-san hasn't lived his life in quite the way he wished, you know. Neither have I. I think one of the reasons people have children is because they hope the children won't make the same mistakes they did. As though that would somehow change anything." Her voice was cold and bitter, and Utena had the sense of something rising in her from dark depths, clawing for the surface and the light. "A son, a daughter... as though they have the power to make things right for their parents. As though they even have the responsibility!"

With some difficulty (for Kanae's grip was tight and agitated), Utena turned her hand over beneath Kanae's and squeezed gently. "I don't really know," she said with a sigh. "You're supposed to honour your parents, though. And obey them, too."

"If only it were so easy," Kanae said quietly, squeezing Utena's hand back. She sounded more lucid than she had since Utena had come upon her, and different also from the pleasant, facile young bride-to-be that she'd known in her Ohtori days. Sad and old, with the kind of wisdom brought by sadness and age. "But what if they're not worthy of honour, Utena-san, and if the things they ask you to do are evil?"

Utena did not reply. The baby kicked again against her hand. She began to wonder if he had ever spoken to her at all. Cali had said it was as though there were two parts to his mother--was Cali himself only some other part, craving rescue and

succour, another fragment of Kanae displaced onto her unborn child to voice the fears and desires she could not?

"Kanae-san," she said finally, "would you like to leave this place?"

Kanae's hand clenched round hers, painfully--she had to hold back from crying out. Some of the light fled her eyes. "I can't," she half-whimpered, clutching Utena's hand until it felt as though the bones might grind against each other. "I can't, I can't, I can't. The baby... he wouldn't be safe... there's so many people who want to hurt him..."

"You'd be safe," Utena said hurriedly. Her hand, oh, God, her hand... "I wouldn't let anyone hurt you. I'd be right there with you."

The grip relaxed. She pulled her hand away.

"You'd protect me?" Kanae was quite clearly suspicious of either Utena's sincerity or ability.

Utena nodded.

"And the baby?"

"And the baby. I swear." She massaged her pained hand and wondered if it would bruise. Kanae was far, far stronger than she looked.

Kanae thought on it for a while, then asked, quite seriously: "Are you a prince?"

For a moment, Utena froze. Cali had called her a prince, and had expected her to save them because of it. What was she supposed to say? What Kanae (or Cali) wanted to hear, or what was true? She almost laughed; she didn't even know what was true. What made someone a prince? If anything, she was a bride, hauling around the swords within herself.

"Are you a prince?" Kanae repeated. And then, when she did not answer, instantly, a third time, like the intonation of a chant: "Are you a prince?"

"I don't know!" Before anything else could be said, she went on. "I don't know. Sometimes I think I might be. Some people have said I'm a prince. But others just say that I'm not, that I couldn't possibly be. There are days I feel like I'm a

prince, and days when I feel as far from that as can possibly be."

Kanae watched her, statue-still, and the words kept on coming: "But what is a prince, anyway? I mean, I'm certainly not of royal birth, and I can't 'become' of royal birth. Even by adoption; how many royal families are there to be adopted into? So when I say 'prince', I must mean something else. 'Prince' is just a name I gave to a way of being, when I was very young. But maybe giving a name to it was the wrong idea. Names can get in the way. They can make you forget what's really important. I didn't want to be a prince, I wanted to be strong and brave, and help people in trouble, just like the prince who comforted me after my parents died. If being a prince doesn't mean being any of those things, then who wants to be a prince anyway?"

She laughed, and a part of her heart felt free after being long in chains. Kanae was silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"I understand exactly what you mean," she said. "The first time I saw Akio-san, I knew that I wanted to be his bride. You probably know that he's older than me, but you probably don't know by how much. The first time I met him, I was only a very little girl, but all I could think about was wearing a wedding dress and standing at his side... funny, how I don't ever think about that... I didn't remember that I'd been so young... and his sister, she was--" For a moment, she looked terrified, and then swiftly recovered. "But there are other things to be than a bride. A bride is something you are on your wedding day, and maybe a little after... and then you have to stop being a bride, and start being a wife. A mother, too." She touched her pregnant belly affectionately, then slowly stood up. "I'm ready to go now, if you are." She pointed. "That door there leads to the outside world."

"There are a lot more doors in this solarium than I thought," Utena declared. She stepped over and reached for the handle; as her fingers touched it, a knocking came from the other side. Behind her, Kanae strangled a scream in her throat, and its dying left a high moan with a keening edge like a razor's. Out beyond the remaining glass walls of the solarium, the hundred-winged shadow of a flock of small birds passed over the river.

"Who's there?" Utena asked, casting what she hoped was a reassuring glance back at Kanae, who had dissolved into a state of silent, trembling fear.

Again came the knocking. "U-Utena?"

"Shiori!"

She pulled the door open. Shiori stood on the other side. She had been crying, and recently.

"It really is you," Shiori said, putting her hand to her mouth. She looked as though she wanted to embrace Utena, but wasn't sure if it would be all right. "Have you seen Juri-san? I got separated from her, and now I can't find her. I don't know what to do." She began to weep; Utena saw that her blouse and skirt were torn, as though by thorns or brambles, and there were angry red scratches on her face and hands. Forgetting Kanae for the moment, she drew Shiori to her in a tight hug; she obviously needed it, and Utena had to admit she wasn't entirely undesiring of the comfort such contact could give.

Shiori stiffened in her arms. For a moment, Utena feared the touch was unwanted, that she'd completely misjudged the situation, gone too far; then Shiori hugged her back, almost desperately, and sobbed against her, mumbling words that Utena could not decipher. After a few moments, it began to become clear they were embarrassed, humiliated apologies: I'm sorry for being so weak, I'm sorry for crying like this, don't think badly of me (that last said almost as a kind of threat)...

Utena wondered what kind of person Shiori was, what darkneses she carried, that made her hate so much to let a friend see her vulnerable. "It's okay," she said. She hesitantly stroked Shiori's hair, soft beneath her fingers. "Really, it's okay."

Eventually, Shiori took a deep breath, calmed herself somewhat, and pulled back from Utena. Briefly, the look in her eyes was almost resentful, and then it was only quizzical. "Why are you in your old uniform?" She looked over Utena's shoulder. "And isn't that...?"

"Hello," Kanae said, cheerfully and dangerously, "are you here to hurt the baby?"

\* \* \*

When he at last came back inside, they were both waiting for him, smoking cigarettes and surveying the bar. Dark green eyes, light grey eyes.

"Welcome back, Leo," they said.

He raised his sword and pointed it at them. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," he intoned, trying to make the words fervent and living, to elevate them into something beyond mere ritual, "and the Blessed Virgin, and all the angels and the saints, I deny you and all your kind, and all your power, and your master's power."

They laughed. He strove to hear something cruel in it, something demonic, but there was nothing. It was only human laughter, amused and sad.

"I know what you are doing," he said softly. "You, witch, or you, devil. You seek to drive me mad with memory, and destroy others with my madness. But I am beyond your power. You can do nothing to me."

"Ahh, Leo," Benjamin said kindly. And to all appearances it was Benjamin, a small dark quiet man who looked older than his years. "You're always beyond their power, if you want to be. You don't need God to protect you. No one can do anything to you that you don't want them to, somewhere deep down."

He stared at the ring on his finger, as though it would dissolve to dust if he looked hard enough, even if he had not been able to tug it off, and said nothing, telling himself that he would not stoop to arguing with demons or ghosts.

"You're looking at the ring." Frank's voice was snide, and his laugh was as brutal as Leo remembered. "Appropriate. You chose to put it on, you see, and once you do that, you're never really free." He raised his left hand high, so that it caught the light falling in intervals through the cutting of the fans. On his finger, the ring gleamed black as a beetle's shell. "All roses came, in the beginning, from one seed. When the time comes, they decay; turn to dust, and return to that one seed."

"Carrying memories of the earth they were planted in with them," Benjamin added. "The bricks of this place are your flesh, Leo, and they were mortared with your blood. The timbers of La Rosa Roja are your bones. Her door is your mouth, and your eyes are her windows."

Silent for a time, he said at last: "Then what are you?"

They replied: "Leo, those who wear his ring are never free. They become stars in his sky. Moons to his sun. He holds them in his heart, which is the heart of the world. Take the ring off your finger. The ring lingers all the same."

It all came about in one seeming motion; an impulse, in his mind, although of course the answer had occurred to him long ago. If the ring will not come off the finger...

His left hand hit the oaken bar flat, and in his right, the sword rose, fell. There was pain. Blade bit flesh, bone, flesh, wood. For a moment, there was an impossible superimposition: two rings, one upon a bloodied twitching alien lump of flesh, and the other upon the ring finger of his left hand. Then there was only the latter--nothing on the bar, no blood, no pain--and he turned, shuddering and pale, to face his tormentors.

"In the name--" he began.

"God is the resort of the man with too much hope, and the man with too little." He recalled the first time Franklin had said that to him, and recalled his response.

"And which of those am I?" he asked softly.

As before, Franklin fell silent.

"Do you know what we did after it all fell apart, Leo?" Benjamin asked conversationally. He was by the bar, with a heavy bottle of brandy in hand. "After Elena died?"

"After the first death there is no other'," Franklin quoted. "It's not a game any more once someone dies. Can't ever be a game again."

"I had wondered," he admitted after a moment. "We were none of us friends, but--"

"That's right!" Benjamin said sharply, and he smashed the bottle upon the bar with a sharp crack. Glass splinters scattered across the wood amidst a spreading pool of dark brandy. "We were Duellists. Fighting for our heart's desire."

"Some of us," Franklin said, casting a derisive glare in Benjamin's direction. "Some of us knew perfectly well that we'd never get it."

Leo came over to join them by the puddled brandy. It had begun to drip onto the floor from the edges of the bar. There seemed an impossible amount of it. The sharp reek filled the entire building.

"You're wrong," he said quietly, not sure why he was even daring to speak. "You're wrong, Franklin. He will give you your



heart's desire. How else to punish you, if you spoil his game? He will give you your heart's desire, even if it is the most terrible thing in the world."

They stared at him in silence for a moment, and then Ben offered him a cigarette. He took it, lit it from the glowing tip of Frank's, and inhaled. He had given them up after the troubles with his heart began; the tobacco was bitterly sweet as he inhaled its smoke into his lungs.

"Do you know what we did, Leo?" Ben repeated.

"Yes," he said slowly, drawing again on the cigarette. "I know what you did. Thank you. It was the right thing to do."

As one, the three of them flipped their lit cigarettes into the pool of brandy, and La Rosa Roja caught fire once more.

"Didn't matter to me that it was the right thing," Frank said, snorting. "I just wanted to see if the damn place would actually burn."

"How did it burn?" he whispered, closing his eyes and smiling at the feeling of the heat against his body.

"Like a candle," Frank said, and he could hear him smiling, cruel and world-weary. "It burned like a fucking candle, Leo."

"It was quite beautiful to watch," Ben added. "Fire is both so absurdly beautiful, and so terribly dangerous."

Leo nodded and opened his eyes, and saw that they were gone. He stood alone in the midst of La Rosa Roja as it burned, as the fire clawed at the solid wooden tables and the dark curtains.

Lord, he prayed quietly, Lord, I have done evil in your name, in the hopes that greater evil might be averted by my hands. For the lamb is also the lion, and the Son did not shirk at hurling the moneylenders out of the temple, just as I have not shirked at casting the sorcerers and witches out of your kingdom on this earth. If even the blood of the lamb cannot wash me of my sins, then let the fire be my lot. I put myself into your hands; make me your instrument, direct me as you will.

He closed his eyes again. Nearby, the ceiling warped and bulged; timbers fell, shaking the building. He stood still, refusing to move despite all instinct crying out for flight; he felt flames touch his hand, touch the hand that wore the ring, and the pain was like nothing he had ever felt.

Walk, something said. Walk, and it was clear as church-bells in his head. So he began to walk; the fire was everywhere, but he walked through it despite the agony.

"Alma Redemptoris Mater," he recited. Something crashed down to his left-hand side, missing him by mere inches. "Quae pervia caeli porta manes, et stella maris, succurre cadenti, surgere qui curat, populo. Tu quae genuisti, natura mirante, tuum sanctum Genitorem, Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrielis ab ore, sumens illud Ave, peccatorum miserere."

His hand touched a doorknob, a point of impossibly cool metal amidst the inferno. Turned, and the door fell open; stumbling, choking on smoke, beating at the flames that had caught the tails of his coat, he fell into the snowbank beyond and lay still. Looked up, and saw, once more, the stars, as La Rosa Roja burned for the last time.

"Loving mother of the Redeemer," he panted. His gaze assembled the constellations. "Gate of heaven, star of the sea, assist your people who have fallen yet strive to rise again..."

As the stars swam together, cohered, and then vanished into the darkness overtaking the sky and overtaking him, he had the comforting feeling that, somehow, he was forgiven, although he did not know just what for. Footsteps crunched on snow; the shadow of a woman fell across him, long in the twilight; and then he slept.

END OF PART XIV

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