

Archimage

a post-Ohtori fanfic

by Jude McLaughlin

Part One: Salvage

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. *They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*

-- "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" by Audre Lorde

Anthy stirred the tea in her cup, the spoon clinking delicately against the sides. I fell back onto the floor and stretched.

"Do you work today?" I asked, staring at the cracks in the plaster ceiling.

"No." C-clink. C-clink. C-clink. Clank. "Your class today was cancelled?"

"Yes." Nanami, our large, round, mostly gray cat, glanced at Chu-Chu with some irritation as he fell asleep on her flank. She slithered out from under him and hopped heavily off the sofa onto my stomach, where she dug for a moment with small, white-gloved paws, then settled. Chu-Chu remained asleep in his new position. The room was silent, except for his snoring, all of us motionless. It was a soft day outside, gray and drizzly and just a little chilly, which made the pinks and reds and magentas of the cherry blossoms at the window glow.

The phone rang. I jumped, Anthy jumped, and Nanami levitated off my stomach. While Nanami licked her shoulder, Anthy and I gazed at the clanging thing with loathing. She resigned herself more quickly than I did, and answered.

"Hello?"

Even now, it was jarring. The shift from Japanese to English, I mean. Anthy had lifted the ban on Japanese at home years ago, during college, once she decided that my English was good enough. It was spring then, like now. Maybe she did it because she knew I felt homesick. Spring always does that to me, with the cherry trees in bloom.

"Yes, I am Himemiya Anthy." That in Japanese. I sat up hurriedly and watched Anthy's back. Her shoulders were back, trembling with tension under my t-shirt.

She murmured some other agreements and a single, "I understand," and then she hung up. I swung myself to my feet and stepped behind her, laying one hand on her shoulder.

"He's dead." Her voice was very flat. She said it in English.

I pressed myself against her back and felt her lean into me. She drew my hands around her and held them at her waist.

"The flowers are very lovely, aren't they?" she asked after a moment, staring at the petals that were snowing down from the branches of our ancient cherry tree.

If I'd been a genius, like Miki-kun, or good at everything, like Juri-sempai, our lives would have been a lot easier. Fortunately, I was a jock, and that saved things. Sort of. For a while. Maybe.

Going to college in the US was hard in many ways: I had to learn the language, I had to catch up on the academics I claimed to know already, and I had to learn the culture. For the first couple of years, I wanted nothing more than to go home. I didn't care about consequences.

But I got through it, because that was the least I could do.

It happened first six years after Ohtori, while I was on the T. I was enjoying the view as the Red Line briefly surfaced to cross the Charles River. Outside, it was a bright fall day with a gem-like clarity to the sky. The river reflected that vivid blue, and the trees lining it were just beginning to turn yellow. I could nearly feel the brisk breeze flowing over the water and I was consumed with a longing for it. The car was overheated and very crowded. Some jerk was holding onto the bar over my head, and only my backpack was keeping him from pressing up against me. Most everyone else was reading or drowsing.

And I saw it. Where the Science Museum had been yesterday, there was a tall, white tower, gleaming in the sunshine. A familiar tower. I could see the balcony that used to be the site of the Student Council meetings. I could see the tall windows at the top, those windows that slid shut to hold in the stars. I gaped, I guess. It was reflecting in the river, too.

Then the train slid into the station and I couldn't see it any more. I shoved through the crowd, throwing an incidental elbow into Mr. Rude as I went, and leaped off the train as the doors shut. I ran to the edge of the platform.

The Science Museum's friendly, familiar dome shone in the autumn sunshine.

I think I sat down and shook. I know I missed the lunch appointment I had with a professor in town, because I walked down and around and back up to the other side of the platform, and got on the train going back to Davis Square. I sat with my back to the Science Museum, staring out at the sailboats that speckled the river on the other side. I did have to look over my shoulder, once, just before the train plunged back into darkness.

My memory of the time after that last duel is very fuzzy. I remember pain, and the smell of antiseptic, and playing clapping games with a group of gray, lifeless people. There were restraints and needles. Hazy, nightmarish days and screaming nights filled with too much lucidity. The constant sound of clanging, slithering metal.

Anthy came home from work and found me in the dark. She knew that I wasn't asleep as I lay on the couch with kitten Nanami curled in the crook of my elbow, pink nose tucked under a feathery gray plume of tail. The floor lamp by the door went on. I heard her shoot the deadbolts, put away her keys, and set her things down on the piano bench. Then she knelt at my side. She'd been sweating, hurrying home I guess, and her scent, always very slightly floral, but with an acrid edge now, drifted over me. Anthy was afraid.

"You saw it too," I said.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Downtown. Over Faneuil Hall."

"Science Museum."

We sat silent. Nanami stretched and recurled herself in a new position that was just as impossibly cute as before.

"What does it mean?" I asked after a few minutes.

Anthy didn't answer. Her hand slid into mine and she lay her forehead against my shoulder. We breathed together.

After a little while, she got up to make us dinner. I stayed on the sofa until Nanami decided I wasn't comfortable enough for her to ignore dinner-in-the-making anymore. Her mistake. Anthy may have somewhat expanded her menu options beyond the days of takoyaki and shaved ice, but I still did most of the cooking.

I got up and did some aimless lunge-stretches to uncramp my calves. "Anthy," I said, watching her in the tiny kitchen. When she finished breaking the noodles into the pot and looked at me, I asked again, "What does it mean?"

She dropped her gaze back to the flavor packet in her hand. "It means that he's regrouped enough to be searching for us again." Her voice was nearly inaudible. "It means that we have to decide: move or stay."

I froze. I guess I'd known that all along, but it took Anthy and her inimitable courage to say it. "But... you said..."

"I said that I didn't *think* he could find a way to extend himself so far. But he has, that's clear. And we have to decide."

My brain stopped grinding gears. "He stole two years of my life, Anthy. More than you'll tell me about from you. I'm not going to let him steal any more."

She nodded, and then remembered to pick up a fork and stir the noodles before they permanently adhered to the bottom of the pot.

My first coherent thought, after the last duel and all the time in the hospital, was, "What am I doing here?" A man with a needle showed up shortly after, and that was my last coherent thought for a long time.

Fear and desperation operate strangely on me. Fortunately, Anthy often has the same reactions I do. Late in the night, when we'd finally exhausted ourselves, she lay with her head on my shoulder, tracing gentle fingertips over the old scar on my abdomen. I enjoyed the cooling of my sweat.

"So we aren't leaving," Anthy said, not questioning but stating.

"We have one more year of college, love," I said, examining the outer edges of the ceiling for water stains. "I'm not transferring now."

"What will we do when he sends for us?"

I wondered if she would have nightmares tonight. It had been a while since the last one. "I... I'm not going to wait for that."

Her hand froze, then crumpled onto my sternum. She looked up at me, wide green eyes full of alarm. "Utena, you can't!" she exclaimed.

I heard a loud, overbearing voice. I didn't really take especial note of it, because I heard a lot of loud, overbearing voices all the time. What the voice was saying caught my attention, such as it was.

"See here, Miss..." Flustered pause. "Himmee-MAI-ya, the patient is not receiving visitors."

"Himemiya," I muttered to myself, annoyed.

"... can't take those in there, Miss Himmee-MAI-ya..."

"Himemiya," I muttered, louder.

"... regulations, our treatment plan, Miss Himmee-MAI-ya..."

I leapt out of the chair I was curled into and ran into the hallway, gown flapping. The pig-faced doctor stood there, astonished, as I screamed, "HiMEmiya, HiMEmiya, HiMEMIYA!" I started to go on, but then I saw her and my legs folded under me. "Himemiya?" I asked.

Floors in those places are hard and cold.

Over the next week, I saw the tower twice more: once replacing the domed building at MIT, and once in Harvard Yard. Anthy couldn't tell me what she thought he was doing. I suspected that he'd discovered some sympathetic link between Ohtori and other academic institutions which made it easier to "project." She mentioned that Faneuil Hall could hardly be considered academic. I chose to ignore logic, not that it made a difference one way or another.

What the hell could he want? Revenge. To reclaim Anthy.

We hadn't been so sleepless and wanting since our first year together. When we slept, we held each other tight. Half the time, Nanami poked us with cold little paws, trying to get us to move out of the way so she could sleep. The other half, she thought we'd left half the bed just for her.

Anthy hadn't mentioned my intention to go on the offensive since that first night. It was all I could think about. I nearly failed one of my exams because I was so distracted, which is when I realized that I needed to pull myself together, finish the semester, and *then* worry about Ohtori Akio. It would not do to help him ruin my life again.

I've gotten to like some US television shows over my time in the States. My favorite is an old series: the wife is a witch who has married a mortal man, and she has promised him that she'd live like a mortal woman. Except she can't. And her family keeps coming around.

I feel like Darrin Stevens sometimes.

Anthy has a surprising knack with computers. Search engines always manage to find exactly the things she queries. Online newspaper archives always carry the articles she wants. Newsgroups just happen to be talking about the things she needs to know.

At the end of the week, she came home from school with a stack of papers and dropped it on top of my homework. The top sheet was a printout of an obituary from a newspaper online. "Ohtori Kanae, age 24, wife of the chairman of Ohtori Academy," I read. Then I looked at the date. A week before. I frowned and looked at Anthy, who cast herself into our single, battered, overstuffed chair. Nanami leaped into her lap. Chu-Chu contentedly munched a cracker on her shoulder.

"He's desperate," she said, answering my unspoken question. "She was his last defense, inadequate as she was." Anthy's face rarely held anything as powerful as the panoply of emotions that skidded over it now. "He's got someone as a stopgap, but he using her... or him... up very fast. To be able to search so far."

I had just been reading my psychology text. I had an exam the next day. "Dammit," I muttered. "Couldn't this have waited till the end of the semester?"

Anthy smiled sympathetically and I sighed. "I guess that was selfish," I admitted. "I wonder who he's gotten?"

She shrugged. "One or more of the kids at the school. Or..." She stared out the window at the bare cherry tree, waving its branches against a sky of iron. "In his situation, I would find someone who... I was familiar with. Who had borne some of the burden before. The sympathy would already be there. That's why..." She shrugged, losing the words, and gestured mutely at the stack of paper.

I frowned again and began to flip the pages of Anthy's printouts over. "Juri-sempai?" I asked, stunned. There was Arisugawa Juri, older and more mature, marching and shouting with a group of women on Daiku no Hi. From a webzine article. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised," I said, rubbing the back of my head. Next page. "Miki-kun." He'd grown and filled out some, but was still a lean whipcord of a man. He was wearing a graduation gown and stood solemnly with a group of much older men and women for the photo. From someone's personal website. I stopped flipping and looked a question at Anthy.

"The most recent group of Duelists," she said by way of explanation, offering a slight shrug as well. "They were much more involved in the game than most previous groups."

Saionji Kyouichi, hair cropped short, in a uniform, one hand resting on the side of an airplane. From a JASDF site. Kiryuu Nanami in a high school graduation that looked like Ohtori but wasn't. From her own web page. Kiryuu Touga in suit and tie, apparently involved in difficult business negotiations with a group of other men. A corporate

website.

I looked up finally from the array of photos in front of me. "Who?"

Anthy shook her head. "I don't know."

I sighed. "Then I guess I have to start hunting."

"Utena."

I looked at her. "What?"

"We..." She paused, licked her lips, started again. "We could take a year off. Travel. Come back here after... after he's stopped looking."

I set the papers down carefully and knelt in front of her, taking her hands. "Anthy, if I don't face him, we'll be running for the rest of our lives. And a lot of other people will be hurt. I want a life with you, my love, and I don't want Akio's whims to determine where our home will be and when we move on. We can't keep running."

Tears slid down her cheeks and her head fell forward. She wept silently, even when I gathered her against me and held her. Chu-Chu patted her ear sympathetically. Nanami squalled a complaint and escaped from between us, taking up residence on my warm spot on the couch.

Anthy started having nightmares again that night.

The nurses in the hospital had discovered that the scent of roses sent me into a frenzy, and that information had followed me to this place. It was anyone's guess which one I'd choose that day: fight or flight. They did their best to keep me away from other patients' rooms, where people got flowers fairly regularly, or the main doors, where those flowers came in, but it just wasn't possible all the time. Once they couldn't find me for an entire day; I eventually emerged, nearly dead of hypothermia, from the refrigerated pantry of the kitchen.

Yet there Anthy stood with an armful of roses, and all I did was fall over and whisper her name. The first "appropriate" verbal reaction I'd had in two years, according to my records. Maybe they just couldn't understand my Japanese.

She said something softly to the doctor, who reluctantly withdrew. She waved off the orderlies and helped me to my feet one-handed. "Hello, Utena," she murmured.

Think of the swords as symbols (said Anthy) of "karma" in the simplified Western sense: when you send bad energy out, bad energy comes back to you. Dios spent untold years, defending the princesses of the world. One could consider the princesses to be symbols as well, but that gets too complicated. The important thing is that Dios attracted to himself negative energy intended for the princesses. When he became weak and ill because of it, I interposed myself, taking on the burden of his "karma." But when someone doesn't receive punishment for doing something bad, he doesn't learn not to do the bad thing -- he learns that he can get away with it.

And so it began.

Part Two: Parallax

When someone tells me a piece of the truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, sharp wash of relief.

--*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose* by Adrienne Rich

The rest of the papers that Anthy gave me had information, incidental or otherwise, on the Duelists. Miki appeared on several personal websites as this or that friend, mentor, tutor, helper... he did so much for so many people. He'd graduated the year before from the University of Tokyo with a Master's degree in mathematics and had gone to Oxford for his doctorate. Juri was a detective in the National Police Agency; Saionji, a pilot in the JASDF; Touga, a vice president in the Hong Kong division of his father's company. Nanami was taking a few years off, apparently travelling, before attending college. Kozue, Tsuwabuki, Shiori, and Wakaba had dropped into obscurity so dense that even Anthy couldn't find mention of them online.

I finally finished rifling through the papers and sat back on the couch, thinking. What would we do? The best thing I could think of was to storm into Ohtori and rescue whoever he was using. But somehow, we had to make sure that he couldn't get anyone else to take the vacant position of the Rose Bride. I knew that whatever we did, it involved walking into the dragon's mouth.

It had been six years since I played prince. A prince faces things herself, protects other people, saves the day and the world and everything else all by herself.

I'm not a prince any more, I thought, because I want someone to watch my back.

When I put my key into the lock, I could hear the wailing strains of David Bowie through the door. I smiled, even as I worried. *Labyrinth* became Anthy's favorite movie when we came to the States. Even though she'd seen it hundreds of times since then, she was sitting forward eagerly to catch every word from the time that Sarah begins her "Through dangers untold..." speech. I watched Anthy's lips follow every word, and at the end, her voice spilled out to join Sarah's:

"You have no power over me."

The phone calls were exhausting and exhaustive. I managed to track them down to their general locations: Yes, Detective Arisugawa was in the United States right now, involved in an exchange program with the Chicago Police Department. No, Lieutenant Saionji is on maneuvers right now, but I can give you his address here so you can write him. Yes, Mr. Kaoru is in Oxford right now, you may write him at Holywell Manor. No, Mr. Kiryuu is not available right now, but the business address is sufficient to reach him.

Nanami remained elusive, but I managed to send her an email via her website, and I could track her movements in a general fashion through the travel accounts there.

I didn't think that Juri or Miki would have been Akio's choice for his ersatz Rose Bride. No, Touga and even Saionji had been much deeper into his schemes, according to Anthy. Judging by who was readily available and who wasn't, I wasn't very hopeful about getting responses from the ex-President and Vice President of the Student Council. But I wrote to them all anyway.

Anthy took me into my room and closed the door, shutting out all the strident voices of doctors, nurses, and patients alike. I was still staring at her. It was like I hadn't seen another human being in my life until I saw her, like there wasn't a color in the world except her, like there wasn't a scent in the world except that of the roses she carefully set on the nightstand. And yet, I'd known that humans and colors and scents existed, and I'd been starving for them all along.

I sat on the bed and watched her, feeding on the vision of her.

She turned and smiled at me. Her dark hair was long and caught back from her shoulders. She wasn't wearing her glasses. "Utena," she said again, and the name that I hadn't heard in so long dragged at something deep inside me.

Her hand was warm and soft against my cheek, smelling faintly of roses. "Do you remember, Utena?" she asked. "Do you remember anything at all?"

Something broke inside, somewhere near my solar plexus. It hurt, made an audible (I thought) snapping noise, and there was a rush of sensation that made my legs tremble. In a hoarse voice that wasn't mine, yet was, had been before, I replied, "You."

I didn't have to grope for her more than once before she pulled me against her and held me. I think she was saying my name over and over. I think I cried.

Anthy held out an envelope to me as I came in the door from school. "Wha-?" I asked, looking at it. "Already?"

"No return address," she said. I took it from her and examined it. She was right; no return address at all.

I opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, and written in large characters was, "Leave us alone!"

"What the hell?" I exclaimed, turning it over, vainly hoping for more identification.

She peered over my shoulder. "I wonder who 'us' is?"

"Hell if I know," I muttered. "Posted from Japan. So it's probably not Nanami." The kitten chose that moment to pounce on my foot. I yelped and danced aside as the tiny needle teeth and claws dug into my toes.

"So... Saionji?" Anthy suggested.

"Or," I said in what I hoped was an off-hand voice, "Akio."

There was a leaden silence.

"That seems unlikely," she said in a strained voice. "Since he's the one seeking *us* out."

"Agreed," I replied, and things relaxed again, a little. "Let's assume that it's Saionji. 'Us'?"

"Could be talking about all the Duelists."

"True. But how would he know that I'd written everyone? I was very careful in my wording."

"What exactly did you say?"

I thought about it. "Just... asked him to contact me about discussing a matter in our mutual past of utmost importance."

"Perhaps you were too circumspect."

"Possibly." I stared at the writing again. "Or... could it be that he doesn't remember me and has me confused with some other matter?"

Anthy scooped up Nanami and allowed her hand to be seized and gnawed upon. "It could be," she admitted. "It could also be that he's the one involved with... with him." Even now, she was reluctant to say Akio's name, as if it might summon him. "All you can do is try again."

I nodded. "I'll try to be less vague this time."

Luckily, neither Anthy nor I are short of money, thanks to Anthy's financial wizardry (possibly literally) during the two years she was searching for me. When Miki's letter came, we made a few hurried arrangements by phone, then flew to England.

It was easy to spot Miki across the quad. Still slender, he moved with his accustomed athletic grace and a self-confident stride I think he learned from Juri. His black academic gown fluttered in the breeze, and his hair was a little longer than seemed fashionable at Oxford. When he got closer, his thoughtful face opened up. "Tenjou-san!" he called, breaking into a wide smile. "Himemiya-san!"

"Mi... Kaoru-san!" I caught myself.

"Utena," he said fondly once he reached us, taking my hands and looking me up and down. "I'm so glad you wrote." He hugged me, which startled me, and then let me go to gaze adoringly at Anthy. "Anthy," he said, forcing the familiarity which was so hard for him before. "You look lovelier than ever." He quickly stooped over her hand and brushed it with his lips. When he stood up, he looked a little startled, then blushed.

"It's good to see you too, Miki," she said, pressing his hand warmly with both of hers.

The initial awkwardness slipped past. "Your letter said you needed to talk in person, and privately," Miki said. "I've been worried, wondering what it was all about. Though," he added, with a quick sideways glance at Anthy, "I have some vague guesses. Why don't we go back to the Manor? There's a lovely garden out there, and no one will be around this time of day."

We assented and followed him. A few people he knew called his name and waved to him as we walked on. "I'm reading for my DPhil in mathematics," Miki replied when Anthy asked him what he was doing these days. "And I'm one of the Blues in the Fencing Club. And those two things pretty much take up all my time."

"Yes, they certainly do. I'm in a position to say," a deep voice interrupted from the side, in English. We all turned to face the tall, broad-shouldered man striding to intersect our route. He had short auburn hair that tossed a lock into his eyes, and wore the academic gown with a rakish style. "These the ladies you said you were to meet today, Miki?" His glance slipped sideways to Anthy and a brief flash of fear passed over his features.

"Ye-es," Miki said, blushing slightly. "Ah, Anthy, Utena, this is Robert Denver, my..." His blush went deeper.

"Boyfriend," Robert helpfully supplied, extending a hand to me. I shook it and was pleased by the warm, firm grip.

"I'm Utena Tenjou," I said. "And this is my partner, Anthy Himemiya." Miki and Anthy traded startled looks. There was relief behind Robert's grin as he shook Anthy's hand.

"Miki's still getting used to *having* a boyfriend," Robert confided with a wink that brought a wry smile to Miki's lips and (mostly) drove the blush away.

"Anthy and I never go anywhere, so I never have the opportunity to introduce her," I replied, getting a playful elbow-jab from Anthy. I looked over at her and we both laughed.

Robert fell into step with us as we followed Miki. "Miki and I have been together for a little over a year," he told us. "Just enough time for me to pick up some small amount of Japanese."

Miki rolled his eyes. "Robert has a natural knack for languages. I have no idea why he's a literature man rather than a linguist."

"Because I prefer to read while others speak," the Englishman said sagely.

Miki's raised eyebrow indicated that he didn't believe a word of it.

We walked on, chatting amiably, until we came to the massive stone edifice that was clearly the Graduate Center at Holywell Manor. Robert stopped at the front door. "Well, I'll leave you two in the capable hands of Kaoru of Balliol." He smiled and bowed. "Shall I come back later for less serious socializing? Shall we perhaps take a punt out on the river? Or will you come with me in the car and fly to the world's end?"

I had, fortunately, been turned away from Robert and my body was blocking Anthy from his view. I felt ice form in the pit of my stomach and watched her face freeze. Miki's voice held just the faintest trace of quaver as he said, "Ah, thank you, Robert. Come back for dinner, I think."

Anthy caught my hand furtively and gripped hard as Miki and Robert said goodbye. When Robert was gone, I turned my head, finally, to look at Miki. He was pale, and his hand shook as he reached for the door. "It was a quote," he said. "That's the kind of voice he uses when he quotes something. I don't know what it was. And I don't remember why it... scared me."

We nodded, and the three of us passed silently through the building into the garden behind. Miki removed his academic robe to reveal a blue sweater and matching tie underneath. Under a massive horse chestnut tree, Anthy and Miki settled on a bench while I sat cross-legged on the flags. We sat, letting the breeze ruffle through our hair and the leaves overhead, lessening the visceral blow that Robert had inadvertently dealt. "Miki, how much do you remember? About me? About my time at Ohtori?" I finally asked.

He leaned back, staring up into the branches for a long moment. Without looking at us, he said, "I remember being fond of both of you. I... remember duels. They're very... vivid. I don't remember what for. No, I do." He looked sidelong at Anthy. "For you. We fought for you. But why?" Miki gnawed his lower lip thoughtfully. "A car. A man in a white uniform. Kozue..." He blushed suddenly, then shook his head, averting his eyes to some distant object in the garden. "I can't put it all together. It's all in bits. Juri-sempai was there. I was in the Student Council. I had... I had a stopwatch?" He swung his gaze back to me. "Why the hell did I have a stopwatch?"

I shrugged, smiling. "No one else ever knew either."

He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. "One does strange things in high school sometimes." Another long moment as he stared at the flagstones under his feet, and then he shook his head again. "I'm sorry, that's it. I can't make any sense of it. I left Ohtori not long after you did, to go to college and live with my mother."

"What happened to Kozue?" I pressed.

"Kozue... Kozue stayed at Ohtori because she wasn't going to college yet, and our father

wouldn't hear of her transferring. He wanted to stay there, even after his engagement fell through."

I shot a look at Anthy at this comment, but her face was perfectly composed. She had told me about that particular little scheme of Akio's after she'd woken screaming three times in the same night. Something in one of the dreams had reminded her of it.

"Where is Kozue now?" Anthy asked.

Miki looked up at her, as if surprised that she'd spoken. I suppose that knowing Anthy, rather than the Rose Bride, takes some getting used to. "She and I lost touch. Well. That's not true. I stopped writing to her. And opening her letters. They were just so... persecuting. Painful to read, really. She blamed me for everything that had gone wrong with her life, and I... and I..." His head dropped into his hands. "I wasn't sure whether she was right or not. She was having so many problems at Ohtori. I thought that maybe it was because she'd gotten dependent on me or something, and I'd let her, and she didn't know how to live by herself. I mean, our father was never home when I was there, I don't suppose he was there any more after I left..." He stopped, aware that he had lapsed into nervous babbling. When he raised his head, his brow was drawn tight with his feelings and he looked appealingly to first me, and then Anthy.

Anthy and I traded looks, took deep breaths, and started at the beginning, doing our best to knit his fragmented memories back together.

Anthy took me out of the "care facility" where I'd spent the last year and a half of my life and brought me home with her. "Home" was a tiny, one-bedroom flat in London. It was immaculately neat, and the furniture nearly nonexistent, but there was a vase filled to bursting with white roses at the center of the card table in the kitchenette.

I walked into this place in my thrift-shop pants and sweatshirt and too-small ski jacket. "Himemiya?" I said, faintly afraid that she wouldn't be there anymore and the door would slam shut behind me with a clang.

"Yes, Utena?" she asked, perfectly at ease as she passed into the little place, pulling off her coat, gloves, and scarf, dropping them onto a straight chair.

I watched her hungrily for a moment, then remembered I was going to say something. "I... I won't have to go back there, will I?"

She shook her head. "Not ever again."

Relieved, I looked back at the roses. "Why roses?" I asked after a moment.

Instead of answering, she retrieved a large, thick envelope from the kitchen counter and started to pull things out of it, scattering them onto the table. Fragments of clothing: black fabric, gold braid, a red sock. A tank top with ragged holes and old bloodstains. Lastly of

all, a ring.

Without knowing it, I had drifted to her shoulder, raptly watching each object as it emerged. She didn't look at me, but stood, examining the rose signet in the palm of her hand. "These things were all yours, Utena. They were taken from you at the hospital."

"I remember the hospital, a little."

"You'll remember more when the drugs cycle out of your system." She turned the ring over and over, not looking at it. She was looking at something far, far beyond it.

"Himemiya," I said again, savoring the flavor of that familiar name.

Her green eyes flicked back from gazing on eternity and she smiled at me. "Make yourself at home, Utena. This is where we'll be living for a little while, until I can make other arrangements."

There was something in the way she said the last word that made me cock my head.

"Where are we going then, Himemiya?"

"Eventually," she said, dropping the ring back into the envelope, "the real world." She flashed another smile at me, but this one was sad. She ran a gentle hand along my jaw. "But first, you need to find any world at all that you remember."

The End of the World (said Anthy) is the boundary at the limit of his power. Inside those bounds, he can give anything to anyone, and he commonly does. Suddenly, the quest for a shining thing isn't so paltry - it takes on the shape of legend and myth. The desire for miracles is not some pathetic, childish wish - it is the essence of the heavens and the earth. Grasping eternity is not a pipe dream - it really can save the life of one's dearest.

Everyone wants to be important. Everyone wants, in some way, to save the world. Everyone wants to think that they will achieve every dream. But at the End of the World, everyone realizes they aren't, they can't, they never will. At the End of the World, the immensity of the universe and the puniness of oneself is borne in upon you. At the End of the World, you meet despair.

Part Three: Candor

This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then. But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so - I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

-- "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Robert didn't show up for dinner, and it turned out to be a good thing. It took us much longer than I'd expected to fill in the gaps. I was amazed, again and again, at how much Anthy knew about Miki's family, and how those things tied back into Akio's schemes.

At last came the moment I'd half-expected all along.

"Miki," Anthy said, as he sat digesting our news and his partly restored memories. Tears trickled through his fingers as he held his face in his hands. "There's something you need to know."

Miki laughed, and it had an edge of hysteria. I shook my head at Anthy, afraid we'd pushed him too far with too many revelations. Akio's powers of mind-alteration were substantial and left deep scars, as both of us knew from experience. But Kaoru of Balliol responded with surprising bitterness and composure, and Anthy just nodded sadly at me.

"Your brother, the deputy chairman of Ohtori, manipulated the entire Student Council into dueling and scheming against each other so that they could possess you, the Rose Bride, by playing off each person's weaknesses and difficulties. In the meantime, if I'm not mistaken, he sexually entangled at least two of the Student Council, Utena, and a whole host of our loved ones, including Kozue. He has some kind of bizarre magical powers that derived primarily from you, and now he's hunting you again, and you're afraid he's gotten hold of one of the old Student Council, or one of the people otherwise entrapped by him at that time, and is draining that person of... what? Life, I suppose, like a vampire?" He laughed again, but it was deeper and the edge was anger. "What **else** could I possibly need to know, what else could possibly top this story?"

"I was the woman engaged to your father."

He froze, and it felt like the air froze around him. There we sat in the still light beneath the motionless horse chestnut, flies caught in an amber afternoon.

Then his shoulders slumped. "So even Father was involved? I guess he didn't escape when the opportunity came because whatever it was he was getting from that bloody bastard was too good." The trickle of tears renewed. "Oh, Kozue," he breathed.

I reached for Anthy's hand and she squeezed mine but didn't take it. She laid a hand on Miki's shoulder, and I watched him stiffen. He silently bore the contact for a moment.

"Anthy?" he said, finally.

"Yes?"

"I made a right fool of myself over you, didn't I?"

Her mouth quirked in a sad little smile. "No, Miki. No, you didn't. You were looking for something, and didn't know how to put words to it. And you were always very sweet and honorable about it. I can't say that about everyone."

He gave a short blast of derisive laughter. Finally, he looked up at her, face still wet but concerned. "Anthy, I can't remember. Did any of them ever hurt you?"

Her expression grew sadder still. She replied, "Some tried. But a master had been there ahead of them."

There wasn't much room in the little flat, so I spent the night on the fold-out sofa, and woke Anthy up in the morning with tea and an omelet.

"I couldn't find much to put into it," I said as I stood in the doorway of her bedroom, holding the rickety bed tray with the plate and cup on it. I scratched the back of my ankle with my other foot.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and she wasn't wearing anything. I hadn't expected that. I gaped for a second... until she noticed and smiled at me. Trying to look anywhere but at her, blushing furiously, I took the three steps that brought me to the side of the bed and set the tray down over her legs.

"I... um... I'll go... um... eat," I stammered, staring at the window.

"Utena," she said, and the way she said it made my eyes slew back around to her. Was my heart really beating so fast? I suddenly had flashes of nights when we slept on beds in a room together, facing one another, me in pink pajamas, her in a white nightdress with a great window silhouetting her.

She smiled, and I came back to the present. "Thank you, Utena. I don't... cook much." Was there a little flush across her cheeks? Had I surprised her too, and she was just trying to make the best of it?

"Um, well, you're welcome. It's... it's nothing, really. I mean, you came and got me out of that place. I don't even really know you, and..."

"Is that true?" she interrupted, in between bites of omelet.

Another image: me holding her wrist desperately at the top of a tall building, her

nightgown and hair whipping around her, the cold numbing my fingertips so that only by gripping as hard as my muscles allowed could I be sure that I was still holding her. A terrible despair shone in her eyes as we screamed at each other over the roar of the tower winds. I felt my shoulders strain as I fought to bring her back from the brink, tapping some reserve I only sometimes knew I had.

My throat felt raw and parched, like it had the morning after that. "No," I said. "Not not entirely."

She finished her omelet and sipped her tea. "No," she echoed, "Not entirely."

We stayed in Oxford a couple more days so that we could answer any questions Miki had once he'd sorted out things in his head enough to see the remaining holes. It turned out that he filled in most of them himself, so he didn't need us much for that. We didn't see Robert again.

"Mother hasn't heard from Kozue in at least a year," he told us over dinner our last evening there. "I called and said I wanted to try to get back in contact with her, and Mother was so happy. She couldn't understand why I'd stopped writing Kozue in the first place. It was a little hard to explain."

I counted on my fingers, thinking. "She should be... what, in her second year of college now?"

Miki shook his head, viciously poking holes in his salmon with his chopsticks. "Her grades fell apart after I left. Another thing she blamed me for." His mouth twisted in a way I'd never seen on him before. It was almost a Juri expression. "At least now I know who's really to blame for it." Then he shrugged, and the tweed jacket resettled on his shoulders. "She was held back a year, and never actually graduated. Mother has been afraid that she'd just dropped out. That's what it sounded like to me. Now, I'm beginning to wonder if she ever left. Did he keep her back, against a time he might need her?"

"As long as someone stays in this garden, they never become adults," Anthy murmured.

"A bright, sunny garden, indeed," Miki said savagely.

"It's possible," I said, remembering that I'd liked Kozue, even as I thought that perhaps she was a little scary from time to time.

He stuffed rice into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed, all with a startling rage. "Utena," he said, leaning across the table toward me. "What do you intend to do?"

I dropped my gaze. "I'm not quite sure. I think in terms of frontal attacks, but that might not serve in this case."

He nodded. "But, actually, it probably would." When I cocked an eyebrow at him, he shrugged and gestured with his chopsticks. "If he can find you in Boston, he can find you when you're sneaking into the heart of his power. Walking slap up to the tower and into his office seems like the most logical approach."

"I may have a different way."

Both Miki and I looked up, startled, at Anthy. "What?" we said, at the same time.

She ate a mouthful of noodles, staring hard at the tabletop. She looked up from her distraction and gave us a faintly surprised look. "Can't I have ideas?" she asked with a smile.

"Well, what is it?" Miki burst out.

"I have to think about it some more... I'm not sure it will work yet." She dropped her eyes back to the table, back to eternity. "I'll need all the help I can get if we decide to do it."

Miki and I, again, in stereo, "You know you have me!"

She laughed at us, and we all ended up laughing.

When Miki saw us to Heathrow the next day, his parting words were, "Just call me when you decide to move. I'll be there."

I suddenly became dizzy a few days after leaving the "rest home," and stayed dizzy for weeks. I hated it. I couldn't walk without support; the world kept spinning out from under my feet when I tried to walk to the bathroom. Every second of whirling reality enraged me with my helplessness. I spent days and days lying in bed, praying to whatever it was that listened - if there was such a thing - that it would stop.

Anthy bore my illness and ill-temper with endless patience. "It's just that you've stopped being on their medication and your body doesn't quite know how to get back to equilibrium. It will pass, it will pass." Her cool hands soothed away the worst of my rages and my random weeping.

She would have to go out to shop or to take care of some business. During those hours, as I wobbled restlessly from chair back to sofa to counter to floor, I pried at the fragments of my mind. My memories had surprisingly sharp edges, like buried and broken glass. Anthy would usually come home to find that I had slashed myself on a hidden razor in my mind and I was helpless to staunch the bleeding.

During those times, she would hold me and rock me and tell me fairy tales.

Juri was willing to come to Boston to meet us. I got the impression from her terse letter that she was grateful to take a few days' vacation. She gave us just enough time to clean house and adjust our schedules for the visit. I dusted and straightened and culled the stacks of clutter obsessively, nervous about meeting Juri again after six years. I even mopped the floors. Anthy thought it was cute.

As I leaned against the wall at the gate in Logan Airport, I wondered if I would actually be able to recognize Juri. If she would recognize me. When she stepped off the ramp into the waiting area, I wondered how I could ever doubt that I'd recognize her.

Tall, spine ramrod-straight, she strode through the crowd like they weren't there and cast one glance around the room before walking directly for me. Despite the years, my garbled memories, and her butched hair, Arisugawa Juri was unmistakable.

"Utena," she said, stopping about six feet in front of me, her right eye narrowing slightly. There was a very small question in that word.

Self-consciously, I straightened up from the wall, bracing myself against the force of her personality by planting my feet firmly. "Juri-sem... Juri." I had to catch myself, like I did with Miki.

Her face broke into a smile that never quite touched her eyes. We shook hands.

"Do you have any luggage?" I asked.

She shook her head, tugging the shoulder strap on the leather overnight bag I hadn't even noticed. "No need to brave the crowds," she said with a flick of her eyes toward the busy baggage return.

"I hope you don't mind taking the subway," I asked, leading her toward the exit.

"Not at all." Her head and eyes raked warily from side to side as we moved. When we stood, just the two of us, at the shuttle stop, those eyes settled on me. I bore the stress of her regard as well as I could.

"I remember everything," she said, watching my reaction.

I don't think I reacted. Well, I may have. I confess I was surprised. "Did you talk to Miki?"

One side of her mouth smiled. "Quicker than you used to be." Then the bus arrived.

On the bus, I asked her, a little tentatively, how things had gone for her since high school. She studied me for a long moment before saying, "I graduated, with the honors you might expect. I went to college in Kyoto, started in liberal arts and ended up in criminal justice. Got political. Stopped being political. Got political again and stayed that way. Despite that, I'm one of the youngest detectives in the country. So, what are you doing?"

She used to be eloquent and self-conscious, if brief. This change to bullet-like phrases startled me so much that it took me a couple of moments to realize that she'd asked me a question. "Um, uh, I'm at Boston University. Basketball scholarship."

"Major?"

Suddenly, I was ashamed. I dropped my eyes. "Physical education," I nearly whispered.

There was a pause where I expected her to start laughing. But she didn't. And she didn't say anything either. I looked up finally. She was watching me with those incredibly beautiful, cold eyes.

Then she smiled, and it shattered the ice in her gaze. "Dyke," she muttered, shaking her head. "You're gonna take me around, aren't you? I've been hearing all about New Words."

I grinned and breathed for what seemed like the first time in hours.

We settled into a routine, Anthy and I. I cooked almost all the meals; she didn't even try to cook those first several months, although she did take me out to dinner a few times. She did all the shopping and went on ever more frequent morning and afternoon errands. During that time, I started to watch the telly and discovered just how much English I'd managed to pick up during my sojourn at the hospital and the institution. BBC television was remarkable for teaching me pronunciation and inflection, although Anthy still corrected me frequently. We started having our English Evenings, where we spoke nothing but the language of this rock I'd been stranded on by persons unknown.

From time to time, Anthy would bring her little car out of the garage and we would drive out of London into the countryside. The landscape and architecture was strange and lovely on those trips. She knew the geography of Britain remarkably well. But then, she spoke English fluently with a very cultured accent.

One day, we stopped and walked into what seemed a perfectly average moor. Up one rolling hill and down into a gentle valley I followed her. Her dress didn't seem to get caught on any of the vegetation we brushed past. The temperatures were a little chilly to start, and the wind made it downright cold. I wished I hadn't left my coat in the car.

"Himemiya?" I asked.

She continued to walk, and I kept falling behind. I started to jog.

"Himemiya?"

I glanced aside as a hare, flushed by my heavy tread, darted away through the heather. When I looked up again, she was on the next hilltop. I broke into a run.

"Hey, wait! Himemiya!"

I had the strangest sense of déjà vu as I dropped my head and started to sprint as hard as I could.

A half mile off, she stood in a circle of ragged, gnarled trees.

"Himemiyaaaa!"

Panting, I finally caught up to her. She had stopped walking at the far edge of the trees, facing a low chunk of granite that was half overgrown. A river wound by the base of the hill on the other side.

"Here," she said as I caught my breath.

"What?" I wanted to know.

"I've been looking for it for months now and, at last, I sensed it," she murmured. She knelt next to the stone and brushed it off. She gently peeled away moss and lichen and began to dig at the earth that covered the near side, revealing more and more of the gray rock. At last, a shallow carving came to light.

I crouched and peered closer. "It... it..." I had to stop. My throat constricted so painfully that it brought tears to my eyes. A flood of emotion and memory welled up in my chest.

Anthy traced the lines with her fingertips. "One of the earliest versions of the symbol used at Ohtori, yes."

I blinked. Ohtori. I hadn't actually recalled the name until she said it. The flood hammered against the blockage in my throat and a cry burst past. I tasted blood and felt a ragged edge of skin where I'd bitten my lip.

She was saying something else, not looking at me. "It was my symbol, long, long ago. I had almost forgotten it, because he wanted me to remember it as his symbol. For me to reclaim it would steal a little more power back from him. He never wanted that, even if I did manage to escape."

My nightmares were stalking me by day now. I could hear them, see them. It had been months since I left the institution, and it had been at least that long since my waking hours were so terrible. I think I screamed once before falling to the heath, clutching at my face, trying to block the sights, the sounds. I was weeping.

Anthy still didn't touch me, though she turned to me at last. "Listen to them, Utena. You can hear them. You can hear their cries, feel their anger. A thousand million points of unending rage."

I gasped, looking up at her. I couldn't see her as she was, standing on the heath. I saw the figure who had haunted my forgotten dreams since childhood: the Rose Bride, impaled

on the millions of swords of hatred meant for the Prince. There was a river of blood, pouring from wounds old and new, twining around her feet and away to the horizons. The body was wracked and twisted with agony. The fingers, clutching helplessly for freedom, for succor, for anything but this everlasting twilight.

And then I realized that the face I was seeing was mine.

"Nice place," Juri said as she walked into the sparkling apartment.

Anthy had set out vases of flowers in strategic locations, drawn all the blinds open, and straightened up the last of the clutter. It didn't look at all like my home.

I took Juri's bag to our guest room, leaving Juri to prowl the perimeter of the living room and peer out every window. Anthy emerged from our bedroom at the same time I returned.

Juri turned to face her and Anthy bore the scrutiny with, I thought, far more equanimity than I had. "Himemiya-san," Juri said at last.

"Arisugawa-san," Anthy replied with a smile. "Please make yourself at home."

The detective's eyes flicked to a vase on a nearby table. "I would've thought both of you would be so sick of roses that you couldn't stand the things."

It was overflowing with multi-colored roses: red, white, yellow, green, blue, and orange. I wondered if Anthy had done that on purpose. I glanced at her, caught the mischief in her eyes, and knew she had.

"Would you like something to eat? Or some tea?" I asked as lightly as I could, moving toward the kitchen.

"No shaved ice for me, thanks," Juri said, still watching Anthy. "But I'll have tea."

I opened my mouth to say something, but I caught Anthy's smile and shut it. I went about making the tea.

"So, Rose Bride, what have you been up to with the Prince here?" Juri asked, still prowling, still watching.

Anthy seated herself demurely in her favorite chair. Nanami immediately took advantage of the lap afforded by this and settled into a perfect little purring circle. "I am no longer the Rose Bride, Arisugawa-san, but I am gratified that your memory is so clear. You even retain your dislike of me."

"Not the Rose Bride," Juri mused. "What are you, then?"

"I am myself, nothing more or less. What are you?" I could almost hear the explosion as Anthy raised her eyes to Juri's.

"I am Juri, at all times and in all places."

"And what is Juri?"

"What is the Rose Bride?"

"A victim. A sacrifice. It does not have to be me. It never will be me again. It is a mantle which changes with the person that wears it. Can you say the same of Juri?"

Juri barked a laugh. "Touché, Himemiya-san. Next."

Anthy smiled. "I think that you are the one with questions, Arisugawa-san."

"True enough. Why couldn't I find you and Tenjou when I looked?"

"I have some small talent for not being found."

"Why can't I find anything about your damned brother?"

"Because he doesn't exist."

"Au contraire. I know he does."

"Do you? Are you really trusting your memories so much, Arisugawa-san?"

Juri scowled and froze. "What are you playing at?"

Anthy stroked Nanami's silky puffball fur. "I am saying that if my brother were to leave Ohtori tomorrow and you looked at the records, you would discover no Ohtori Akio. You would find that for the past several years, a perfectly normal young man had been the chairman of the school. In fact, you would be able to find the young man, living a perfectly normal life in some perfectly normal town." Nanami looked up at her and blinked before curling into an absurdly cute fuzball again.

The detective's lithe body snapped back into agitated motion as she began to pace the room. "The time at Ohtori seems more like a long, bad dream than reality," she admitted. "Now you tell me that some sinister magic is - and, presumably, was - at work." Her fingers raked the crest of copper hair that sprang forward across her forehead. "I live in the real world, Himemiya-san. I had to wait to escape from Ohtori the usual way, and it took me five years to fully emerge from that nightmare. Just seeing you threatens that in ways I never dreamed of."

"I understand, Arisugawa-san. I am sorry."

Juri dropped onto the couch with a sigh. "Let's stop being so formal. Call me Juri."

"Only if you call me Anthy."

They eyed each other for a moment, and then Juri nodded.

Victories, large and small, need to be celebrated with tea. Fortunately, it was ready.

"Himemiya," I gasped as she drove us back from the moor. "Himemiya, please, I can't live like this."

She drove with a grim intensity. I don't remember how she got me back to the car. For all I know, she waved her fingers and I simply appeared there. If she responded to me, I couldn't hear her over the noise of the swords.

They clashed together, making long, singing cries of metal on metal. Every sword touched another, every sword struck different notes. Behind the deafening crashes, I could hear mutterings. Words punctuated the rare pauses in the phrases of the swordsong, words that I sometimes understood and usually could not.

Sometimes I felt myself suspended in a dark place, listening to them growling closer. Sometimes I felt them gliding silently through my skin, every motion a streak of pain across my vision, a scream that grated along my back teeth and never quite emerged. I was helpless to fend them off; I could see them, but couldn't touch them, although they pierced me effectively enough. No blood. I kept wondering at the lack of blood. Where was the river then?

Still, Anthy had not touched me, had not tried to comfort me as she had so many other times. In fact, she refused to look at me. Was I so horrible to look upon? I wondered. Perhaps she sees me as I am, as the Rose Bride. Maybe I've disappointed her, becoming the Bride rather than being her Prince...

"No, Utena," she said. "No, never disappointed. You are not the Rose Bride."

I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud. Or had I? And what was I saying? It was slipping out of my mouth past my consciousness and I couldn't even hear it when it emerged.

"You know what the Rose Bride was. She took the swords for the Prince." Anthy spared me a glance. "I can't do that for you. I won't."

What was that sound? Oh, I was grinding my teeth. I stopped. "I... wouldn't ask you to."

"Once upon a time, Utena," Anthy said, in a gentle voice that penetrated my haze. "Once upon a time, there was a Prince, and she was cast into the Wasteland, without memory of who she was, or even what she was."

"Why?" I asked, gritting my teeth against the feeling of my skin stretching and parting

under the assault of another blade. It slid into my gut, then began to twist as it emerged from my back. The plastic of the armrest cracked under my fingers.

"Because she had foiled the plans of a king of a small kingdom. Because she had sacrificed herself in a way that he could not imagine she might. In fact, she had acted contrarily all along, and he was angry and frustrated and tired of her interference."

"What happened to her?" That one came out the same way it had gone in, but another pushed in just under my left breast, skidding sickeningly over a rib before finding the space between bones. I was detached enough by now to wonder that my lung didn't collapse.

Anthy stopped the car and looked at me for a long moment. Then she shook her head. She finally touched me, my face, and I felt drowsy. As the world, the pain, and the sounds slipped away, she said, "She had to learn to send what belonged to him back to him."

He always said that he wanted to open the Rose Gate (said Anthy), but every time he got close, he destroyed his own plans. He would seduce the potential Prince, using all his power to destroy the noble heart within. I suppose it was a form of selection, but there were some who could have opened it, had it not been for him. One does not require a will of tempered steel to open the way. One requires dedication to a cause beyond oneself.

But why did he always destroy his chances? Because he didn't really want to open the Gate. Behind the Gate, as you found, was me. My life, my power, my Self, held in a coffin full of roses. I suppose, like a child, he wanted to look in on me to make sure I was still there, would still remain there even though the free sky was above me. But at the last moment, fear would take him and he would not trust me to stay.

I loved him. I love him. I can't get away from that. But love without trust erodes into a new shape.

Part Four: Lancel

"Give us a good-bye kiss," said the host[...]. I pushed him away. "What's a matter, you some kinda prude?" he said and enfolding us in his powerful arms, et cetera - well, not so very powerful as all that, but I want to give you the feeling of the scene. If you scream, people say you're melodramatic; if you submit, you're masochistic; if you call names, you're a bitch. Hit him and he'll kill you. The best thing is to suffer mutely and yearn for a rescuer, but suppose the rescuer doesn't come?

--*The Female Man* by Joanna Russ

"I still haven't gotten any real answers out of her."

Juri and I were lounging in the living room, drinking tea. It was quite late, and we were both wearing sweatpants and t-shirts in prelude to going to bed. I shrugged. "She'll answer real questions. I know she will. You just have to ask them."

She nodded, stretching back over the arm of the sofa. I heard her spine crackle, and she sighed heavily. "You know I don't know what became of Shiori, don't you?"

I caught myself staring at her shoulders, which had always fascinated me in school, and where the muscles glided down against her ribcage. "I didn't know for sure. Mostly I was worried about you, but other information would be welcome, of course."

"Shiori joined the fencing team after you left." She cut a glance at me, as if measuring the truth of Anthy's abbreviated story of my abrupt departure from Ohtori. "She was fairly decent, but no Miki. Won some matches. I never spoke to her outside team events, even though that made a buzz with the team."

"You and Miki left about the same time, right?" I asked, unsuccessfully trying to look only at my teacup as she scratched her belly, lifting the shirt somewhat to do so.

"Yes, which left the team without a likely candidate for captain, but at that point, I didn't care. I wanted out, without any little strings the Chairman might think to attach to me or my friends. I didn't want another Ruka."

Ruka was part of that tangled jumble that still hadn't sorted itself out in my head. I'd had very little to do with him, although I'd dueled him once and he'd played Bride for Juri another time. Juri had said that he died after that. I had no real emotions attached to him, so I mostly felt sorry for Juri.

"The last I saw of Shiori, she cornered me at my graduation party - of course I'd invited the whole team - and tried to apologize to me 'for everything.'" Juri's voice piped high on the last words, mocking Shiori's lighter voice. "I told her no, that I ought to thank her, because I'd learned a lesson that many people don't learn until much later. Never fall in love with your best friend."

I thought guiltily of Wakaba, who I'd not even *tried* to find in the years since the institution.

"She tried to say that she'd realized she loved me too, but wasn't sure it was in 'that way.' I told her not to bother figuring it out, because she was far too much of a bitch for another woman to want anyway." Juri laughed as I gaped. "Then I walked away. And that was the last I saw or heard of her."

"Ah," I said, still startled.

Juri rolled up to her feet, and I stood too. "Anyway, at this point, I don't much care if Akio chews her up and spits her out. I'll send her a locket to wear his picture in." She rubbed the back of her head and yawned. We were standing a foot or so apart. Our eyes met accidentally.

We stood for a long moment, and I was remembering the moment by the fountain, when her hand, so warm, traveled by my face and down my arm, and I could feel her breath on my face.

She stooped quickly and brushed her lips along my throat. "Now is not the time, Utena," she said, smiling. "But maybe, sometime." Juri turned at her door to look over her shoulder at me. "Good night."

As she closed the door behind her gently, I caught Chu-Chu by the tail to keep him from following her. I stared at the door for a very long moment, and then turned out the lights. When I entered our bedroom, Anthy was sitting up in bed, reading.

"That was very strange," I commented in a low voice as I dropped Chu-Chu and stripped off my shirt.

"She kissed you?" Anthy asked, turning her page.

"Yes... No... Not exactly," I stammered. "How are you so calm about it?"

Anthy closed her book and looked up at me, smiling. "Utena, you've been radiating raw lust ever since you got back from the airport. How could I miss it? I know that you love me, and that Juri would never be anything but a fling, so why should I worry?"

I climbed into bed, grinning. "I'm too predictable, is that it? Maybe I should run away with her and drive across the country, fighting crime and breaking young girls' hearts. That'd fix you."

"I don't think Juri does 'sidekick,'" Anthy grinned, "but I should remind you why you like me best, anyway." She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me close.

At some point, we got home that night. Anthy had to help me into the flat: every time I took a step, there was a good chance that I would step on a sword point, or be hamstrung, or feel a knife edge driving into the side of my skull. She very nearly carried me, I think.

I didn't want to let her go, so she let me stay in her bed that night. I needed the feeling that I wasn't alone in the world. I tried not to make any noise.

"Why did this happen, Himemiya?" I whispered after she'd turned the lights out. In the dark, I could hear the swords more clearly.

"Because I couldn't hide you forever," she replied. "Not without becoming a target myself. Again."

"Am I crazy?"

"No."

"Will it ever stop?"

There was a long pause, during which something corkscrewed through my left thigh. "If you believe that you can send them where they belong, yes."

Later that night, a particularly bad one made me cry out. Anthy gathered me close and stroked my back until it stopped. I buried my face in her neck. A few minutes later, in a brief respite, I found myself kissing her throat.

She gently deflected me, but I was hurt and worn thin by pain, and so began to cry. "Why not?" I asked.

"Because you're in no shape to make this kind of decision right now." Anthy brushed my tears off my cheeks with the back of her hand. "And you don't really remember me. Yet."

"But... but I love you," I whimpered.

"No," she said with a small quaver in her voice. "You're grateful. It's different."

I emerged from the bathroom in the morning and nearly ran Juri down. As we danced apologetically around each other in the hallway, Anthy, stark naked, hair still in a braid, and carrying a towel, slipped past both of us and closed the bathroom door. We stopped and stared after her. The shower started.

I shook my head and motioned Juri back to the kitchen, where I put coffee on for us. Juri thumbed thoughtfully through Anthy's copy of *The Complete Hothead Paisan* for a moment before saying, "Huh."

"What?" I asked.

"That scar," she replied, nudging Chu-Chu out of the way and pulling two mugs down from the cabinet.

"Scar?" I'm never very awake in the morning.

"On her back. And chest. It went clean through. How did she survive?"

"Oh. That scar." I poured the coffee. "I don't know."

"What's it from?"

"I don't know." Teaspoon. Sugar.

Juri blinked at me. "Maybe it's just because I'm a cop, but one of the first things *I* do with *my* lovers is compare scars. How long have you been together? And you haven't asked?"

I shrugged and continued to pile sugar into my coffee. "It has something to do with her brother. That's all she'd ever tell me." I tasted the coffee, then added some milk. "Do you have many scars to compare?"

She stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up with a mischievous smirk. "Do you?"

The days and nights after Anthy found the stone were a monochrome fever dream for me. It was worse than the weeks I'd spent shaking off the drugs. It didn't matter whether I moved or stayed still, the pain still came. Sometimes, single thrusts, and sometimes, a jangling attack of many. Anthy gave me what relief she could in a special sort of sleep, but she couldn't keep me that way indefinitely.

But then, one night, I dreamed.

I was standing on a vast floor of brightly polished tile. There seemed to be no ceiling, just a starry sky above. Walls that were no more than a loose framework of tall windows or French doors stretched up to try to meet it.

People were all around me, moving in a slow, spinning waltz. The walls seemed to shift with them. Only the floor and sky remained constant. There was a humming sound in the air.

The tiles were of a curious design. I stood on a section that was a mosaic of white and red ceramic triangles. When I stepped back to the edge of the square, I could see that the red pieces were arranged to produce the outline of a stylized rose. The next section was gray with a black rose. And then another white square with a red rose.

I looked around me. A girl with burgundy curls and a matching uniform grinned viciously from the black square next to me. "Hello, Utena," she said, and stabbed at me with a broadsword.

I leaped up, back, and to one side, flipping midair to land on a black square. A girl with two pigtails and a katana stood on the nearest white square. "You can't keep it up, Prince," she snarled. "We have a million swords. You just have the one."

Indeed, I had a sword - a very familiar sword - in my hand. I was wearing a black uniform jacket and red shorts, and I felt very... comfortable suddenly. And confident. But the humming noise was becoming a buzzing, growing louder with each second. I glanced up at the sky and saw a million points of darkness coming down.

I was on the far side of the board from "my side." I could see two katana-wielding men standing back to back, fending off a small boy with sword and dagger and a girl with an elegant rapier. A woman with orange curls snarled in irritation at a lanky man who matched her sword with noticeable effort. A fine-boned boy clashed blades with a pony-tailed girl. A blonde girl in a yellow and black uniform called something from where she was chained to the wall.

Past them all, I glimpsed Anthy, wearing a shimmering, iridescent gown, reaching for me and calling my name.

A very tall man in a white uniform leaned across from two squares away. "Just because you've stolen my Bride, Prince, don't think you'll be able to get away. You're trapped here in this castle with me." He laughed, and several duelists near me laughed as well.

I snarled and started for him. "No, no, no!" cried a shadow from the wall. "The Prince is the most mobile piece, but to attack him, you'd have to move into check! That's illegal!"

"Illegal!" cried Shiori, slashing at me.

"Illegal!" hissed Keiko, lunging.

"Illegal!" roared Tsuwabuki, charging across the board toward me.

"Utena!" Anthy screamed.

I reacted on instinct to the warning in her voice. My leap took me diagonally across the board, between Touga and Saionji, to land next to Miki. Behind me, over the sound of metal striking into stone, Akio cursed.

"Wakaba!" I exclaimed, looking over at Miki's opponent.

"I'll kill her!" she replied, a desperate tone to her voice.

"No, Wakaba," I told her, ducking under her wild thrust, catching her hands, and reversing the sword, as I'd done once before. Miki snapped his sword out of the way with

cool expertise. The black rose petals exploded upward and I caught her in my arms. "No, Wakaba, I've had enough of him using you against me."

"Utena, you need to go!" Miki told me fiercely, moving to block my back.

"Go?" I looked around quickly.

Juri glanced over her shoulder as she locked swords with Ruka. "Go!"

"Utena!" I could hear Anthy clearly now that I was closer.

The shadow - or maybe it was a different one - said, "Isn't it a shame that the Bride's movements are so limited?"

"Oniisama!" Nanami shrieked nearby, seeing Touga's rose go up in a flurry of red petals.

Wakaba stood on her own now, and held her own sword: a plain, durable longsword. "Go, Utena," she said. "I'll cover you."

I made a split-second decision as Kozue charged. I leaped. My sword crashed down and split Nanami's fetters in a shower of sparks. She stared at me, amazed, and then ran out onto the board. My feet touched the wall, and I sprang away again, sailing over Juri's head to land on a white square just behind her.

Mikage was silent as his sword trimmed some of my hair. I spun and blocked his second swing. "You!" I said through gritted teeth. "You were never real!"

He laughed. "You sound like someone crying, 'Don't take my precious memories away!'"

"You're wrong," I replied, and I drove my sword through him. He looked very surprised for a long moment. "I just want them back." As I pulled the blade back, he dissolved into a shower of pink rose petals.

Akio cried, "Stop her!" The buzzing was a whistling roar now. I didn't look back.

His minions abandoned their targets and moved to head me off. I had one narrow alley of movement left and took it. Up, two squares back, one square over, leaving Juri and Ruka behind, leaving Shiori, Tsuwabuki, Keiko, Kanae, and Touga to tangle up and block each other.

I landed on a black square and turned, slowly. Anthy stood there, smiling at me. "Utena."

"Anthy." I fell into her arms and held her, never intending to let her go again. The game dissolved around us.

"You are my prince," she murmured into my neck.

I pulled back for a moment to stare at her and, my eyes stinging with tears, said, "As you are mine."

"So, do you have a girlfriend now?" I asked as we stood in the used book section of New Words the next day.

Juri glanced at me from the corner of her eye and smiled. "Why? Aren't you and Himemiya getting along?"

I didn't mean to blush, but there it was. I turned my back to look at the mysteries on the wall. "Just curious," I said, over my shoulder.

"Not right now," she admitted. "Akane and I decided to call it quits when I got the exchange program offer. And I've not met anyone worth coming out of the closet for in Chicago."

"Oh," I replied, feeling very young and innocent, just as she always made me feel back at school. "Um. Do you still fence?"

"Oh, yes. Not recently, of course. All my teachers and sparring partners are back home." She pulled some book off a shelf. "Why is it that Naiad covers are so boring?"

"They publish a lot of stuff on a low budget, at a guess," I said, glancing over at the very plain cover. "That one's not bad."

"You read a lot?"

"Not really. Anthy goes through books like the wind, though, and sometimes I pick them up to read on the train."

"Ah. I see."

I had to look at Juri's face again, just to make sure I hadn't missed a joke at my expense. Didn't look like it. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, really. I'm just interested in learning more about your girlfriend." Her mouth quirked an ironic smile. "There's more to her than met the eye, once upon a time."

We wandered toward the front of the store, carrying our books. Juri asked the woman at the register for one of the "I'm not a feminist..." posters. "I've got a co-worker in Chicago who says that all the time," she confided. "She probably won't get it, but what the hell, right?"

I watched Juri flirt outrageously with the woman and shook my head in amazement as we left the store. Juri caught my expression and grinned. "What?"

"I guess... I guess I don't even notice other women being attractive most of the time. I

mean, I don't cruise," I amended hurriedly, trying to head off the sarcastic comment I could see on Juri's lips. "I just don't think about them. It's... being out with you seems to light up a whole different view of the world."

"And you also didn't expect Arisugawa-sempai to cruise the incredibly cute women you seem to have in this town," Juri added, flashing her teeth out the corner of her mouth at me. "You've never been with anyone but Himemiya, have you?"

My face burned crimson. Juri stopped dead at my expression. "Oh. Utena, I'm sorry."

"It's... it's all right." Damn, damn, damn, she *always* catches me off-guard and she *always* notices. "I don't actually... remember it that well."

She watched me keenly. "Uh-huh."

"It was... just the once. Or twice."

"Ohtori?" Meaning the man, not the school. I could tell by the snarl she put into it.

I nodded, not able to get any words out of my mouth.

She nodded back and put an arm around my shoulders as we walked down to the T stop.

It wasn't really that bad.

(It was.)

I mean, he was nice about it and he knew what he was doing.

(At whose expense?)

I guess I felt guilty about Kanae-san, though.

(Especially when he accused me of going along with it without a protest, later, during the duel.)

It wasn't that bad.

(I was fourteen and I had no idea what he was doing. He just kept going, even when it was clear I really couldn't say "yes" or "no" because I didn't know what I would be saying it to. I mean, I had this warm, fuzzy dream of romance. Those little fourteen-year-old dreams rarely involve the sweat and smells and terror and pain of the real thing.)

I guess I must've loved him...

(Despite the fact that even as he was doing what he did, I kept wishing that it was Anthy's face I was looking into, Anthy's lips I was kissing, Anthy's hands touching me there and there and there...)

...and maybe he loved me a little.

(The same way he "loved" Anthy?)

It was kind of scary...

(I was terrified.)

But it was all right.

(Yeah, right.)

Part Five: Gaslight

I could never cry after that day for His loss. Since I was made marble, wax, sculpted wood, gold, ivory, I've had no tears. I had to carry on living this way, with a lie of stupid smiles painted on My face. Tristan, I was not what they have painted. I was different, certainly less beautiful.

--"The Fall" by Armonía Somers (reprinted in *What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction*, edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson)

"No," said Juri.

I glanced over at Anthy, feeling guilty for bringing the subject up at all. Anthy's eyes were on the Boston skyline, several miles south of us. Juri was looking north out of the tower, over the fiery autumn foliage of the Winchester Fells. The air was crisp. My legs still tingled from the flush of hiking up here and, without thinking, I began to stretch.

Juri glanced over her shoulder at me. "You still have *that* nervous habit, do you?" She smiled, and it froze me with such bitter sadness that I stayed in my lunge for several long seconds until she looked away.

I straightened up, rubbing the back of my head. "Why not?" I managed to ask after a moment.

"Because, as I told Hi... Anthy the other day, I live in the real world now. To go back... it's unthinkable."

I stared at the floor. My throat ached with a suppressed cry of frustration. I couldn't figure out why it mattered so much to me that Juri come with us. I wouldn't have been so unhappy if it had been Miki.

"Utena," she said in a surprisingly gentle voice that drew my head up. "The things that happened... you had help... processing. But I had to do it alone, and, unlike Miki, I'm far too much of a control freak to forget." A corner of her mouth twisted up. After another second, she turned back to the view.

We stood silently in the tower for several long minutes. Then I heard Juri gasp.

My head snapped up and Anthy spun around. There, jutting out of the treetops a mile or so off, was the Ohtori Academy tower, the late afternoon sun gleaming on its western face. The three of us gaped for what seemed an eternity before it faded from sight, leaving a purple after-image on my retina.

Juri swallowed hard and clenched her fists. Just before she did, I saw that her hands were shaking. Her voice was surprisingly steady. "Was that... what I thought it was?"

I nodded. Anthy frowned at the place the tower had been, but I saw the sheen of

perspiration on her forehead and the way that her hands still clutched the window sill.

Wind lashed at us from the north suddenly and a whirlwind of leaves whipped into the open tower. I raised my hands and closed my eyes against the dust it carried, but opened them again when I heard someone - Anthy, I think - make a noise like a small animal in pain.

The floor was strewn with red rose petals.

I sat up on the sofa after dreaming of the chessboard, free of pain, free of the sounds that haunted me for the past two years. The sun shone in the window, spilling over the kitchen table, the floor, and my blankets. The rosebuds in the vase were bursting open, adding their splash of color to the dour little flat. I spotted the manila envelope on the counter, and, before I thought too much, got up and retrieved it.

The pathetic red sock. I examined it and found a spot that had been mended in the heel. I remembered, suddenly, Wakaba darning it for me, smiling and chatting the whole time. We were sitting under our favorite tree.

The remains of my uniform, cut to ribbons. That poor uniform. I sorted through the black fabric. The cuts reminded me of a time when I had been tempted to give up the uniform by defeat. Nothing was as crushing as losing Anthy that time; it changed my whole perspective on the duels.

The uniform looked different than it did when I usually pulled it off the hanger. The gold braid... I realized that this was my "dueling uniform," which I'd never actually seen clearly. It had always reverted to my regular uniform before I took it off.

The ring. The Rose Signet that started it all for me. It had acquired no tarnish in the time it hadn't been on my hand. I turned it over and over. It felt strangely heavy.

The front door popped open and Anthy slid through it. She slammed it shut behind her and threw all the locks. Then she turned to face me. She was breathing hard, but she smiled. "Here's your passport." She handed over the little book. When I just stared at her, she said, "We're leaving on a noon flight."

I took the passport from her slowly. "Um. Where are we going?"

"Oh, I thought Cairo might be nice. Have you ever been?" she asked, moving toward her room. She stopped, realizing that I was holding the ring. She gently it took it from me and examined it, turning it this way and that so the sunbeams struck it in various ways. Then she tossed it back to me. Startled, I fumbled briefly before getting a grip on it. It felt heavier than before.

"Are you going to put it back on?" she asked. "Do you still want to be a prince? It *is* a hard habit to break."

I stared at it. "I... remember what it is now. And what it was. And what it meant." I looked up. "Why are we leaving?"

Anthy's face shifted through several different emotions before she finally looked away. In a voice heavier than the ring had become, she said, "You sent them home."

When we descended the stairs to hike back to our car, Anthy made me stop for a moment. She bent down, raised my foot, and peeled one of the rose petals - crushed and bruised - off the heel of my boot. She looked down at it, face unreadable, then dropped it and continued on. Juri and I both self-consciously checked our shoes for more, but there weren't any.

We drove back to town in silence, Anthy demonstrating her driving at its most aggressive for Juri's edification. Juri, for her part, clung white-knuckled to her shoulder belt and stared straight ahead for a long while before asking, "Anthy, what's your job?"

"I'm a courier in downtown Boston."

"Ah," Juri said, as if this explained the mysteries of the universe. "So you drive. In downtown."

"Yes."

"Ah," Juri said.

After Anthy managed, in her inimitable and unexplainable manner, to intimidate a speeding tractor trailer into the slow lane, Juri asked, "So, have you had much anger-management therapy since leaving?"

Anthy grinned aside at her. "Just a model mugging class."

Juri cast a glance back me with a raised eyebrow. I just smiled and shrugged.

It was a subdued afternoon around the apartment. We talked of inconsequential things, read newspapers or books, or read email. Finally, Juri asked, "So, what's that contraption in the back yard?"

I blinked and thought. Realization came to me. "Oh, you mean the greenhouse!"

"Greenhouse?"

I smiled, remembering the day I came home to find the living room knee-deep in metal

tubing, with Anthy curled up on the sofa in the middle of it all, reading, "How to Assemble Your Dome." She'd ordered it online. It was a beautiful, clear-paneled geodesic dome with plenty of ventilation and exposure to the sun and such, but it was a nightmare to put together. We managed it in the end, though I suspected that we may have gotten a few of the pieces exchanged here and there. (The passage in Jane Wagner's "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe" that talks about building a dome home made us howl.) Most importantly, it looked nothing like the rose garden at Ohtori.

I led Juri through our bedroom, where she eyed Anthy's O'Keefe posters on the walls. As I struggled with the latch on the door to the back yard, Juri picked up the book on the nightstand. "*We Have Always Lived in the Castle?*" she read with a tone of horror.

The lock opened. "Shirley Jackson. Anthy's book. I haven't looked at it yet."

We went outside, into the clear dome that was Anthy's garden. Juri stared. She reached out and touched one blossom. "But blue roses don't exist," she said, dazedly.

"Really?" I asked. I knew that. I'd mentioned it to Anthy when I found out. She admonished me not to believe everything I heard.

There were roses, all kinds, all colors. A riot of irises and calla lilies and pansies and tulips filled the air with scent. There were dozens of other flowers and plants I didn't know. It was warm and humid in here, as always.

Juri stared at one corner. "Himemiya... grows tomatoes?"

"Purple heirloom tomatoes," I confirmed. "They're awfully good."

"And other vegetables and herbs, I see," she said, bending to read the neat little signs at the front of each row.

"It makes for some great meals. I do most of the cooking these days," I added, bending to sniff my favorite lavender rose bush.

"So I gathered," she replied, pausing in front of one of the largest rose bushes, with enormous blossoms just the color of her hair. Gently, she cupped the nearest flower in her hands and stared into it. She stood very still for a long time. At last, she asked, "Did she take clippings when she left?"

"Not that I know of." I passed a reflective hand over the green roses that Anthy had trained over and around a concrete garden gnome, then winced as I speared myself on one of the lengthy thorns.

"I suppose she didn't need to." She laughed softly. "People keep finding these roses, you know. Shiori gave me one once. Himemiya offered them to me around the time I first dueled you. Akane, Junko, Tama... they all found them and somehow knew to give them to me. Every time I see them, I think of the locket. And again I'm grateful to you for breaking the chain that bound me." Juri cast a smile over her shoulder to me. "Who

knows what depths I would've sunk to without you and those damned duels?"

I shuffled. "You would've realized sooner or later, Juri."

"Would I?" She released the flower finally and stepped back to regard the entire plant. "Or would later have been too late?"

"It's never too late."

Juri grinned at me. "The unbeatable optimist. Here, let's go back inside, I can't possibly argue pessimism while surrounded by beautiful things."

I took her to the airport that evening. "Be careful of your carryon bag, Juri," I grinned. "I put some tomatoes in there."

She gave me a mock-horrified expression and made a show of carrying the bag gingerly. Then she slung it over her shoulder. "Thanks. They'll come in handy for my own cooking experimentation."

We looked at each other for a very long time. The flight announcement came while we were still feeling awkward.

"Thank you for coming, Juri," I said, feeling subdued and regretful.

"Thank you for having me," she replied. "It's been a nice little vacation, really, despite the weirdness."

We hugged for a little longer than we ought to have, I think. I felt a little flushed when I stepped back, and my eyes were threatening alarming, embarrassing things.

"None of that," Juri laughed. "We'll see each other again, Utena."

"But you said..."

She tossed me a smirk over her shoulder and boarded the plane.

From Cairo, we went on a tour of the Mediterranean. I was working my body back into shape after two years of atrophy, enjoying the sun and the wind and the sea.

I went out for a morning run at one sunny Greek resort after spending a restless night. Although my conscious mind had sketched itself an outline of my memories, my subconscious was still turning up unexpected things at the least convenient times. Anthy had, at last, fallen into an exhausted sleep, but my head was still spinning in tight little circles. I crept out of the room carefully in the predawn dark, not wanting to wake her after keeping her up for most of the night.

It was a beautiful dawn, pink and gold light reflecting off a light mist and the ocean. I was running along the beach, my feet thudding on the wet, white sand of the lovely, lonely beach. It's never quiet near the ocean; the crash of the waves and the calls of seagulls filled the air.

And then, another sound - the roar of a car engine.

Cars are not so unusual around Greek resorts, but the sound seemed awfully loud. I turned around and saw a red convertible racing towards me along the coast road.

Adrenalin surged into my bloodstream, setting my heart hammering. I lengthened my stride and pushed my muscles to their utmost. The car gained on me inevitably.

The beach club. I'd detoured around its high fence earlier, but now I leapt at the chainlink and levered myself over it, flinging myself at the ground on the other side. The gate to the private drive was still firmly shut and locked. Too early for beachclubbers to be about, I guessed.

I sprinted madly along the wet sand of the beach. After a moment or two, I managed to look behind me, only to see the red car speeding along the private drive. I spun away and ran for the other side of the beach - a jetty of piled boulders - and scrambled up it.

On top of the jetty, I paused to glance back, only to see the car idling at the beachward side, facing me as though about to drive over the rough stones and run me down.

I leapt off the top of the jetty and landed on all fours in the sand on the other side; I don't know why I didn't break something. Pain shot up all my limbs and I hovered there, gasping for a moment. Then I pushed myself to my feet and started to run again, angling over the dry sand (panting with effort, the sand slipping and sliding underfoot) towards the town.

Damn it being too early for other people - except for an elderly couple with a small dog - to be on the beach. I ran as hard as I could. It had been a long time since I'd run flat out, and my chest hurt. My side was threatening me with a stitch if I didn't stop soon.

The mist had lifted and the scoured white buildings of the Greek town fairly glowed in the early morning sunlight. The sky beyond the buildings had deepened to an impossible blue. One stray vine of green leaves crept over the corner of a wall, and I slowed involuntarily, staring. White, white walls, with the blue sky arching overhead. My steps stumbled to a walk.

A skinny black cat, one of the strays which were so common in the town, leapt down from a roof to the top of a wall and sat down there, in the sun. It turned its head to look at me curiously, then it raised a paw and started to wash.

The daydream - trance, whatever it was - shattered on the yellow eyes of that scruffy cat. This was Greece, and there was someone I really didn't want to meet behind me. I sprang forward in a dead run towards the main street of the town as I heard the engine roar again

behind me.

The fruitsellers and other market stalls were absent or closed. Apparently it was still too early for business. There was almost no one around. I heard the car scream around a corner and dashed at random down a narrow alley to the left. Anything to get off this wide open street.

At the end of the alley was a small, expensive-looking hotel. I looked briefly at the shallow steps and the huge glass doors leading into the lobby and shuddered. I darted through an archway into a small courtyard instead, and leapt for an ornamental balcony covered with some kind of purple flowering vine. I kicked for a moment, then managed to haul myself up.

Fortunately, the patio door was unlocked, so I slipped into the cool darkness of the room beyond. No time to wait, I bolted through the room, startling awake the sleepers there. Shouts followed me - conveniently announcing my passage - as I left the room and sprinted down the hall.

Where to go? Where to go? I ran for the elevator first, then changed my mind and headed for the stairs, which I hoped might lead to some back rooms and kitchen areas. Instead, I emerged into the lobby.

I threw a terrified glance at the big glass doors - easy enough for a car to drive through - and then my gaze was caught by the mirrored wall. There was Akio, looking down at me with a pained, disappointed expression. Clad in that white uniform I'd only seen once, he stood with one hand extended, his expression falling easily into wounded nobility. For some reason, the family resemblance between him and Anthy was especially strong just then, which made the reproach in his eyes all the more pointed.

I turned and fled blindly, away from the mirror. I passed through a surprisingly busy kitchen and burst through a back door accompanied by a medley of shouted Greek exclamations. I felt a brief wave of gratitude as I saw that the back alley was far too narrow for a car to negotiate, and started to weave my way around overflowing garbage bins.

I got lost, mostly because I was determined to use only the narrowest of alleyways, but I finally recognized a side-alley Anthy and I had taken a few days earlier and ended up on the doorstep of our small bed and breakfast a few minutes later.

My hands shook as I fitted key to lock and staggered through the door into our room. "Anthy!" I rasped, falling to my knees at the foot of her bed and gasping for breath.

She was up in an instant, examining me carefully for damage. There was a bloody scrape on my shin that looked worse than it was, and my hands were raw from my various climbs. I managed to get my breath back while she cleaned me up. I told her the whole story in one long sentence, stopping only when her fingertips touched my lips, gesturing me to be quiet.

Anthy's eyes unfocused for a long moment, and then she hugged me. "He hasn't pinpointed our exact location. We just won't go out again today, and tomorrow we leave town. I'll change our next reservations this afternoon."

"Damn," I muttered, pettily hating to be cooped up in the room. "I didn't realize that this was what we were running from."

"He'll do this for a while. Then he'll try something new. We just have to keep running."

"When will he give up, do you think?" She looked down at me and I caught a glimpse of sadness and terror in her eyes. I pulled her into my arms. For the first time, really, she slumped against me, and I knew that she hadn't any plans beyond running. All of her plans, in fact, had been geared toward running. And running. And running. "Oh, no, Anthy. No, no. We *will* have a real life, in the real world. I'll be *damned* if I'm going to keep running." She shivered slightly, but didn't reply.

I gently tilted her chin up to me. A tear trickled down her cheek. "I promise," I said. "I'll do my best to keep that promise."

"Utena," she whispered. A shiver shot down my spine. "I'll try to believe."

When I kissed her this time, she didn't push me away; she returned it with a ferocity that surprised me. We tilted backward onto the bed. Her skin was hot and smooth under my hands, and her nightshirt fell away as if by magic. She very nearly clawed my clothes off.

We didn't go out for the rest of the day. I didn't mind.

"Is this Utena Tenjou?" the male voice on the other end of the phone line asked in heavily-accented English.

"Yes, speaking," I replied, even as the familiarity of the voice tugged at my memories. It had been only a few days since Juri left.

"Saionji here," he said, slipping into Japanese. "What do you want?"

After a moment, I regrouped successfully. "I wanted to talk to you about something regarding Ohtori Academy."

"As I have said before, I've no interest in talking about or seeing that place."

"Has someone else tried to contact you regarding it?"

A pause. "Yes. Aren't you calling regarding the alumni event?"

That was interesting news right there. "No, I'm not. I'm not an alumna, remember?"

Another, longer pause. "No, I don't remember you at all, actually. Should I?"

Time for me to pause. "I knew you when you were Vice President of the Student Council."

He laughed. "Ah, that explains it. There were an awful lot of drugs that year."

I blinked. "Drugs?"

"Yes, the entire Student Council spent most of the year high," he said. "It was a bad year."

"I see."

"I'm sorry to tell you that you're so forgettable. No one likes to hear that."

Jerk. "No, no, it's quite understandable. I've talked to others who don't remember me well either, like Kaoru Miki."

"Ah, you've talked to Miki then? He always was a good kid. A shame he got caught up in all that trouble." Saionji's voice was flat-out jovial now. He really didn't remember me. Or he was hiding something.

"Yes, it certainly is. Do you know anyone else who might recall me from that time?" I was trying to think of how to bring the conversation back around to the alumni event, or how I might jog his memory without having him hang up on me.

"Well, if you've spoken to Miki, I suppose you've talked to Arisugawa-san, then? Yes? Well, that's about it, really." He paused, and then spoke in a far less cheerful tone.

"Unless, of course, you're interested in speaking to the Kiryuus."

"You don't think much of the Kiryuus?"

"Well, the brother was the source of the trouble that year, and the sister isn't much better than he is. But my wife could tell you more about her."

"Wife?"

"Sonoda Keiko. Do you remember her? Spent a lot of time around the Kiryuus. Let me see... ummm... no, sorry, she's sleeping now. She's not been well recently, you understand. It's been a hard pregnancy."

Anthy wandered into the room and regarded my face with a bemused smile. I suppose the bug-eyes were funny. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I certainly wish you both well, Saionji-san." I suddenly had an idea, and without tilting my face away from the phone, said, "Oh, Anthy! Would you like to speak to Saionji-san? He was good enough to call..."

There was a pause from the other end of the phone while Anthy peered at me

suspiciously. Then Saionji exploded, quietly. "Anthy?!"

"Yes, do you remember her? Himemiya Anthy? I think you two dated for a while."

Harsh breathing sounded in my ear. "Anthy is there? I want to speak to her."

"Certainly." I pressed the "privacy" button and extended the receiver to Anthy. "He's married to Keiko, she's pregnant, and he was contacted about an alumni event recently. And he doesn't like either Kiryuu. Can you get anything else out of him?"

She glared at me - if looks could maim, I would've been hauled away in a basket - before reluctantly taking the phone, turning the mute off, and saying, with forced cheer, "Saionji-san, it's good to hear from you..."

I tiptoed out of the room.

Later, she stubbornly refused to discuss it until I offered to take her out to dinner and dessert to make up for the dirty trick of handing her the phone. I deserved that, I supposed, but necessity is the mother of invention. So we were having an evening in Harvard Square: a Vietnamese dinner, followed by oodles of chocolate down the street at Anthy's favorite coffee/chocolate shop.

"He was so appalled when I told him that I had a girlfriend." Anthy laughed into her hot chocolate. "When I told him it was you, the silence was almost worth the rest of the conversation."

I grinned, imagining Saionji's face on the other end of the line.

She toyed with the apple pastry on the plate in front of her. "He's been in the Air Defense Force since he graduated, and he's a pilot. Based at Chitose, in the 2nd Air Wing. Very proud of what he's accomplished. I suppose he may have some reason to be proud." There was a trace of warmth in her smile. "I think the military is probably good for him. He always was very honor-bound. I never could see him as a salaryman."

"Like any of the Student Council would really be on that path," I commented, sipping my own hot chocolate. It's quite bitter and powerful at this place. I knew I wouldn't be sleeping much that night.

"No, that's true," she replied. "But if any of them could have been, it would have been Kyouichi. He's just not very... bright? Creative? Imaginative?" She sought for the correct word, and finally shook her head, giving up. "His family has never been very present. So he really had to make it on his own."

"Or on Touga's coattails, if either of them permitted it."

"Yes. And he's very bitter about Touga." Anthy took a long drink of her chocolate. "Somewhere along the line, he became convinced that most of his junior year was one long, drug-induced hallucination. Whether that's the doing of... the natural effects of

Ohtori, or the result of some time in the care of a psychiatrist, I'm not sure. He told me that he'd been seeing someone for his 'difficulties,' but didn't elaborate beyond that."

"However did he end up with Keiko?" I wondered.

She shrugged, running a hand through her ponytail aimlessly. "I think it's another reason he doesn't care for Touga. Apparently, Keiko dated Touga for a while, and Touga eventually dumped her."

I blinked. "And Saionji was there to catch her?"

"Something like that." She soaked a fragment of apple in its white-and-dark chocolate sauce and ate it. "Madly in love. Married her a little less than a year ago. She's eight months pregnant."

"Fast work," I muttered unkindly. Anthy just quirked a smile at me, impelling me to explain, "I have problems envisioning a little Saionji running around."

Anthy shrugged again. "Anyway, that's pretty much it for the conversation. He brought it around to me, I told him, he went into shock, and the phone call ended awkwardly."

"Well." I couldn't think of what to say. "Well, I guess that he and Keiko are out of reach of any machinations. Which shortens the list of unknowns." I sighed. "I wish..."

"You could think of what to do?"

"Yes." I stretched. "Listen, you said at Oxford that you had an idea. Have you thought about it any more?"

"Every day. But I don't know... if you and Miki are enough."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I can't explain. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

We settled into an uncomfortable and unhappy silence. She finished her pastry and chocolate. I couldn't. After a few moments of staring at our cups, we got up and left.

It was a short walk up the street to the T station. Both of us stopped short as a heavy scent of roses hit us full in the face. I spun around, looking for the source. I spotted the nearby florist shop, but it was closed and there were only green plants in the window, no roses visible at all. Anthy was stock-still beside me. When I turned back to her, a trickle of blood came from where she'd bitten her lip. I roughly turned her toward me and dabbed the blood off with a tissue.

"What happened?" I asked in a low voice.

"Didn't you see it?" Her gaze drifted back to where it had been locked for such a long

moment. "Utena, didn't you see it?"

"No, Anthy," I said gently, pulling her chin back toward me. "No, I didn't see it. What was it?"

She let her forehead fall onto my shoulder. "But you smelled it, didn't you?"

"Yes. Roses. A lot of them." I put my arms around her and glared down an idiot who was sneering at us.

"I want to go home."

"All right."

She still wouldn't tell me what she saw. I suspected that it was a view of the birdcage, just for her.

"Why is he chasing us all over the world?" I asked one day in a restaurant in Washington, D.C. "Why won't he give up?"

"Because he wants you," Anthy said, sipping her coffee. "He can tell where you are."

I stared at her. "Why?"

She shrugged gently. "You're the Prince."

"What?" I exclaimed. "I'm no prince. And besides, this is the real world, Anthy. That sort of thing doesn't make any difference."

"It does, real world or not. And you are."

Anthy paid the bill and we walked out of the restaurant. "So how do we hide me?" I growled finally.

"That's a good question. I've been thinking about it."

"How do we know he's not following you? You're the one he really wants, aren't you?"

"He can't follow me. I know how to hide myself." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the Metro station. "Let's go to the Smithsonian."

I resisted briefly, then followed her. When she got these tourist notions, it was nearly impossible to change her mind. Her enthusiasm was infectious most of the time. But it was a hot day and I was cranky.

The escalator was unbelievably steep and long. I saw people looking up, sideways, backwards - anything to avoid staring down that incline. I privately thanked my experience with the dueling arena stairs for steeling me against heights like this.

The station itself was humid but not particularly hot. And it was crowded, so crowded that we couldn't hear each other to speak for the hum of conversation around us. A train pulled into the station and we decided to wait for the next one after watching people cram inside like sardines in a can. Anthy was peering closely at one of her guidebooks. I let my gaze drift randomly along the platform as the train rolled out.

Then I was moving, leaping without knowing why quite yet. My arm caught the old woman around her midriff while my other hand gripped her cane. I spun us both away from the train, and our combined weight tore the trapped end of the cane loose from the closed doors of the train car. My shoulder took the brunt of our fall and I rolled us both back to my feet.

"Are you all right?" I asked her, setting her on her own feet. She barely weighed anything, a tiny bird of a woman, and there was a loop of cord on the cane that was wrapped around her wrist. At that moment a middle-aged woman and man ran up, exclaiming over her. With adrenalin making me lightheaded, I did my best to fade into the background.

Anthy caught my hand and pulled me into a side passage, where we hurried along for a short while. Then, when we were far enough away, she turned to me.

"Do you need any more proof?" she said, after kissing me hard. "That kind of thing doesn't happen to everyone. And when something like that happens, most people can't move. Motion is the quality of a Prince."

I stared down at her and shook my head slowly. "I... just did what..."

"Comes naturally," she finished.

"The Prince is the most mobile piece," I quoted thoughtfully.

Anthy looked at me sharply. "Yes." She lay her hand on my chest. "This is the key. This is how he follows you."

"My heart-sword?" I said, disbelieving. "But I thought that was an illusion."

"Were the swords an illusion?"

I was silent. Then I said, "But, Anthy, it broke. He broke it. I remember the pain when it happened. Doesn't that mean I don't have one any more?"

"Oh, you have one." She turned to start walking again. "Come on, Utena. I changed my mind. Let's go back to the hotel."

I went along willingly enough. I had some questions that needed answering.

I have a lot of vivid dreams these days, since the chessboard dream. The whole situation of contacting the Duelists was doing wonders to my subconscious. I had one the night after taking Anthy out.

I was in a bar with a stage. There was someone playing guitar really badly, but everyone applauded her anyway. Then she got off the stage and someone else came on. She was wearing black and a beret, but I couldn't see her face, if she had one. She stood at the microphone with an open book in one hand.

"Welcome to poetry night," she said in a husky voice.

Everyone applauded again.

"'The Friend' by Marge Piercy," she said.

"We sat across the table. He said, cut off your hands. They are always poking at things. They might touch me. I said yes."

As if I were watching a television set or movie screen elsewhere, I saw Anthy at the center of the circling, predatory swords during the duel called Revolution, and watched them pierce her in slow motion, watched the blood run into a lake at her feet.

The poet was reading again.

"Food grew cold on the table. He said, burn your body. It is not clean and smells like sex. It rubs my mind sore. I said yes."

Anthy, lying across the couch, looking dead. Rising from the couch and looking at me with eyes so full of pain I had to flee and yet couldn't. Lying under a dark man whose scent I knew, both watching and in that body trapped there. A shimmering, iridescent butterfly with her hair spread around her, pinned dead under glass.

"I love you, I said. That's very nice, he said. I like to be loved, That makes me happy. Have you cut off your hands yet?"

Anthy screamed and woke me then. She was wild-eyed, tears streaming down her face, screaming hoarsely and flailing. I had a bloody nose and a split lip before I managed to get hold of her, to shout her name, to remind her of where she was and who I was. Then she dissolved into screaming, shaking hysterics, speaking in a language I wish I knew.

I didn't ask what she'd said. I never did.

Anthy stopped at a convenience store on the way back to the hotel. She emerged with large bottles of V-8, Gatorade, and spring water. When we got back to the hotel room, we were both soaked with sweat from the unbearably hot, humid day outside. I was unspeakably grateful for the cold Gatorade, and chugged that in equal quantities with cold water. She downed an entire glass of V-8 and went back for a second.

When we were better hydrated, we climbed into the shower. Despite my determination to ask her about things, one thing led to another and it was a few hours before I remembered to bring up my questions.

"Anthy," I began, wrapping myself in one of the hotel's monogrammed robes against the fierce air-conditioning.

"Yes?" she asked, stretching lazily.

"You said I have a sword. But..."

She smiled and chuckled at me, then sat up and reached for her one frivolity: a silver hairbrush. "You have a sword, love. What do you think we spent six months in England doing?" She winced as the brush hit a tangle, then gave me a pleading look.

I took the brush from her. "What were we doing, then?" I sat down on the bed as she sprawled face-forward and nearly purred. I began to carefully sweep bristles through one handful of the dark, silky mass.

"Reforging your sword. Giving you time to recover your health and memories slowly, before re-exposing you to the Swords." She winced, then reached up to hold the very base of the handful I was working on.

"Is it really so easy to remake a heart-sword?"

"Goodness, no," she smiled over her shoulder, her bangs tumbling forward into her face. "But handled well, the individual shouldn't ever realize what she's doing for herself."

I laughed and moved on to brushing the next section. Anthy's hair is surprisingly fine for such length. "Okay, I'll concede that you handled it well. I didn't know what was happening. Did it really take so long?"

"Do you think I spent six months living with you in perfect celibacy for my health?"

"I wasn't too happy about it, as I recall."

She sighed, a combination of the brushing and the comment, I think. "No. But it was necessary. If... if you'd started a new life, with new emotional commitments... a whole new history, a new life... you would have continued to be broken. You would have heaped all that on top of the work that needed to be done, that should have been done immediately after the duel. But wasn't. So I did my best to keep you in that limbo state

you were in all that time in the hospital and the institution." Her voice went very soft. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done."

I didn't know what to say, so I just kept working. We were silent for a few minutes, and when I got to the next handful of her hair, I had to say, "Anthy, this tangle is the size of both my fists."

"Your fault."

"Why mine?"

"You wouldn't wait for me to braid my hair last night."

"Oh." A few more minutes of patient untangling with my fingers as the brush failed. "Anthy, do *you* have a heart-sword now?"

That gave her pause. "I... I don't know."

"I mean, you always had the Sword of Dios, so I assumed that there wasn't really *room* in there..."

"Yes."

"Did you lose it?" I stared down at the ragged scar next to her spine that had just become visible as I shifted her hair. "Or is that where..."

"I don't remember." Her voice was thick.

I finally worked the rat's nest loose with my fingers and changed the subject. "So, if he's tracking us by my sword... what do we do? Break it again?" It was a very feeble joke.

"I think," she said slowly, "that a disguise is in order."

"I'm finished." I sat back. "What do you mean?"

She rolled over to smile up at me from the ocean of her hair. "Like in all the stories," she explained. "The Prince hides in plain sight."

I hate answering the phone. I was being so good, doing homework, too.

"Tenjou-san?" Saionji hissed when I answered. I confessed that it was, in fact, me. He whispered, "I hate you, Tenjou-san, you know that, don't you?"

"I'm not exactly fond of you, either." I looked at the clock. It was nearly 2 pm here; a quick calculation brought me the realization that it was nearly 4 am there.

He exhaled sharply. Or maybe it was a laugh. "As much as I hate you, you've never lied to me. So I have to ask you something."

I wished Anthy were home.

"Do you remember the dueling arena in the sky?"

"Yes."

"And the duels?"

"Yes."

"And the... the time it all fell apart... on top of the two of us?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause, during which he breathed in ragged bursts. "Damn." He took a long breath, and I heard the sobbing shake to it. "Damn. Keiko denied it all, she said it never happened, that I must be mad. I had... I was almost dismissed from service... I had to say it was all drugs... hallucinations... I..."

I didn't know what to say. He sounded so different from the man I'd spoken to a few weeks before. Worn. Exhausted. Broken. As much as I disliked him, he didn't deserve what had been happening to him. "No, Saionji-san," I said as gently as I could. "It all really happened. The duels. The arena. The castle in the sky. You were expelled, do you remember that? Because Touga got between you and me when you were trying to kill me."

He laughed bitterly, his voice catching on some sadness. "I remember that. Yes, I remember. It was so devastating. You'd beaten me before, and I had to... I didn't mean to kill you... I don't think... but Touga..."

"Who is that?" a woman's voice broke in behind him. "You're on the phone with him, aren't you? Aren't you?" The pitch was rising, the volume rising. "Touga-sama! I hear you calling him at night, when you think I'm asleep. You're telling him how his baby is doing, aren't you? Giving him reports? TOUGA-SAMA!"

"Keiko-san! Stop that! I'm not speaking to Kiryuu! Go back to bed! This is none of your business."

I clutched the receiver, frozen to inaction as I heard the crack of open hand on face, right next to the phone. Some tiny part of me laughed, remembering how I'd first seen Anthy and enjoying the reversal. Most of me felt sick. The phone crashed to the floor.

"This is all my business, Kyouichi-san," she said dangerously, so low I almost couldn't hear. "Why should you be the only one to speak to him? You won't let me, will you? You're keeping him from me so you can keep him to yourself. *I've held his heart in my*

hands, and you can't change that he loves me as much... more!... than he loves you. I won't be left alone while you take him away. All you ever talk about is Touga-sama, Touga-sama, Touga-sama... you call him when you think I can't hear... talk to him about the things you'd never talk to me about... You only married me as a replacement, a substitute. But this is his child... HIS... never YOURS... all you love is that damned plane... you don't even return Touga-sama's feelings, couldn't, can't, never, not if you WANTED to..."

There was another slap, and from the gasp, I gathered it was him striking her this time. I felt guilty for not hanging up, for not refusing to witness this domestic exchange. But I couldn't set the phone down. I couldn't stop listening.

"I took you in when he left you, a weeping, sopping little tramp," Saionji hissed. "You vowed to be mine for all time. Not six months ago, you swore to me that our love was eternal. You were so pathetically grateful. I made you special again, but I was never good enough, was I? This is my child, mine and no one else's, and I won't hear any more lies about Kiryuu from you."

"Lies?" she shrieked. "Lies? I'll tell you about lies... I'll tell you about the great macho man, Lieutenant Saionji, lover to Kiryuu Touga-sama for years and years and years. His pathetic shadow. Even if your wilting manhood did father this child, it *is* Touga-sama's because he's the man behind you, holding you up, supporting you, you impotent freak. You could no more father a child than a woman could."

A frozen second, during which I heard two people breathing hard: angry, rasping inhalations and exhalations.

Finally, Saionji's shaky, exhausted voice. "You're wrong. You're ill. I haven't talked to Kiryuu for four years. Neither have you. And you know it. Go to bed, Keiko-san. Please."

"You're drunk again," she spat. "I don't believe you. You've spoken to him. You've slept with him. I know. I hear, despite anything you do."

"You hear wrong," he said. "I haven't been drinking. I don't talk to Touga. Please go to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

There was a rending animal noise and Saionji yelped. I heard bodies hit the floor with furniture. From the ensuing seconds, I gathered that Keiko had leaped on him. I heard struggling, and Keiko cursing him, and Saionji pleading with her to think of the baby. After a minute, maybe more, all was quiet again.

"Why did you lie to me about the duels, Keiko-san?" he asked.

"I didn't lie," she snapped. "I didn't know. But I know now. I know about Touga-sama. I know about the Chairman."

A long moment. "What?"

She laughed, a high, thin laugh that made my teeth hurt. "We have so much in common, Kyouichi-san. Touga-sama was the end of both our worlds."

Keiko kept laughing as Saionji hung up the phone.

I wandered the house for a few hours afterward, feeling nauseated, restless, and distracted. I couldn't finish my homework. Anthy found me staring into space when she got home.

It was hotter and even more humid than the previous day on the way to the National Cathedral. The cool darkness of the building did nothing to calm my irritation with the world in general, though. It was enormous, and echoing, and gorgeous. But I wasn't in a mood to pay attention. Churches make me twitchy.

Anthy was staring at one of the giant rose windows with a kind of fixed attention when my patience finally broke down.

"About hiding me," I began in Japanese, trying for a modicum of privacy among the trickle of other tourists.

"I'm thinking about it," she replied.

"What did you mean about 'hiding in plain sight'?"

"We'll hide you in plain sight, just like in the stories. Oh, look, there's the moonrock window!" She began to move away.

"I don't care about the stupid moonrock window!" I exclaimed. I suppose I was being whiny. Anthy stopped, facing away from me. "I'm tired of being chased. I'm tired of going from tourist trap to tourist trap on a day like this. And I'm so damned tired of your elliptical crap I could spit!" I don't know whether I've gotten more tolerant of her tendency to be elliptical over time, or whether she's gotten less elliptical - probably both. "All you'll say is 'hiding in plain sight.' It doesn't make a damn bit of sense." I started to draw some disapproving glares for the noise. "You have such a talent for hiding things in words. I feel so bloody stupid, like I should be picking something up that I'm missing, but then I realize that you haven't told me anything. Or I think so. Tell me the plan. Tell it to me in plain words, dammit."

She still didn't turn around. People moved away from us and drifted on out, talking and pointing as they went. After a long moment, in a voice I fancied was ever-so-slightly strained, Anthy said, "There is no plan. It's just a vague idea. Let's go back to the hotel so you can stop being tired." She turned toward the entrance.

I followed, feeling angry at her for no good reason - I guess I'd wanted to stay angry and

the energy was all dispelled. I was also frustrated by the lack of plan, embarrassed for the outburst, and my head was starting to hurt.

We didn't talk.

That damned phone. Damned, damned, damned phone. I hit pause on the remote and glared at the ringing thing. After three rings, I picked it up. I wished I'd never started all this.

"Utena, this is Miki."

What a relief. "Miki! How're you doing?"

"Fine, just fine. Say, I got a mailing for some alumni event today."

Ah, the alumni event Saionji mentioned. "Really? What's it about?"

"Some building dedication or other. And asking for money. All schools seem to ask for money."

Wasn't it grand that I'd never actually graduated from anywhere? "I suppose so. You going?"

He laughed. "Not a chance. They can dedicate away. But it's in a week or so. I thought you'd want to know in case you were thinking of anything to, you know, do."

"Thanks!"

"Have you thought..." A door opened in the background. My gut clenched, thinking of Keiko, then relaxed. Certainly not Keiko. I started dangling a cat toy for Nanami to stalk.

"Miki, darling, you aren't *dressed!*" Robert's voice in English.

Miki turned from the phone. "Robert? What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember? We're going to the opening of the show!"

"What show?"

"What show? Oh, Miki, your memory is getting worse every day. I asked you about this three or four times in the past *month!* Eric's new show, *Pygmalion*. He'll just *die* if I'm not there for the first time he plays the lead!"

Miki paused. "I don't remember that. Or, well, maybe I do. Um, I'm on the phone though. Why don't you just go ahead?"

Robert's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Because *I'll* just die if I have to face him without you on my arm. I'll just wait in the hall for you to finish up your call, and you just see if you can get into your good suit quickly enough. Really, Miki, perhaps you ought to see a doctor about your forgetfulness. It's happening an awful lot." The door shut again.

Miki sighed quietly and spoke back into the receiver. "Sorry about that. He always gets like this when he's going to see an ex anywhere. Anyway, I saw Nanami the other day too."

"Nanami?" The kitten pounced, landing on the phone and very nearly disconnecting me. There was a brief scramble as I scooped her up, determined that Miki could still hear me, and deposited her on the sofa.

"Yes, she invited me out to tea."

"Did she tell you anything interesting?"

"Oh, yes," he said, sounding pained. "A great deal. I could barely get a word in edgewise. But she sounds really happy. She said this 'world tour' thing was her 'self-therapy' after too many years at home. Not sure what she meant by that."

"Ah. Anything about Ohtori?"

"No, nothing. I asked her point-blank, and she brushed it off, saying she hadn't been back to Japan for years now."

"Well, I suppose that leaves her out of it, anyway."

"I suppose." We both fell into silence for a moment. "I've not heard anything back from Kozue. I sent her a letter, via Mother, right after you left."

"Well, maybe she's busy," I said.

"Or Mother can't locate her," he suggested glumly.

"When will you hear from your mother?"

"I'll try calling her tonight."

"But you're going to a show...?"

"Uh, damn, not tonight. Tomorrow, then. Listen, have you or Anthy thought any more about what to..." Someone knocked loudly on the door. "What?"

"Miki, hurry up! We'll be late!" Robert bellowed through the door.

"All right, all right," Miki snapped, then turned back to the phone. "Listen, I'd better get going. The natives are getting restless."

"That's okay. Drop me email sometime. I've got things to tell you, and you forgot to give me your email address."

"All right, I'll do that." He paused. "I'm really sorry about cutting this short. It's been good talking to you."

"It's good to hear from you."

I hung up gently.

Why do we keep having such vivid dreams? (said Anthy) Some scientists say that dreams are some side-effect of fatigue poisons in your body. Some psychologists say that dreams are your mind working out important issues while you sleep. Certainly, the things we lived through require some working-out.

But there's more to it. Oh, yes.

Ohtori was... is on a cusp, a border, a boundary. It bridges the world of dreams and the world of "reality" and acts as a kind of sink for the essence of both. Things spill in from both worlds. Sometimes there is mutual annihilation. Sometimes there is a mingling of substance. Usually, they pass by and back out, each touching the other and leaving marks.

So, in entering Ohtori, the wall between you and your dreams was gossamer-thin, but tough. It took effort to get you to expend yourself enough to breach that gap. That's why so many could enter there and exit apparently unchanged: they didn't have the drive, the desire to cross the bridge, leap the gorge, meet their hopes and fears head-on. But the Duelists were different. To you, the swords of the heart were real and sharp. Each rose had a meaning. The Prince existed.

But it works both ways. Ohtori is a sink, but can also slide sideways into one realm or the other. It can dive into dreams, and in dreams, there's both less geography and more. We're not vulnerable to it. We're just closer. And farther. That's all.

Part Six: Masquerade

I rage out there, out and away, because as long as I'm far out in the stroke zone I don't have to step into here, the abandoned nursery, where I might trip over some old yellow bones and fall through a hole into the basement where I'll be face to face with the storage vault, which will disappear me! I'm caught in a loop of wanting and stunting short. The loop is getting sickeningly small and I'm wearing my stomach for a hat. Mostly, I fight with myself, wrestling over a magic trick that I was just about to solve but got interrupted. I'm too tired to run and I know that if I sit still, gleaming surgical scalpels will come singing out of a black sky in perfect formation to fillet me...

-- "The Complete Hothead Paisan, Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist by Diane DiMassa

The small, tinny tone was unexpected, the name at the top of the window even less so. "Anthy!" I exclaimed over my shoulder. "It's Nanami!" The kitten, discomfited by my sudden turn, leapt off my lap, leaving sixteen perfect bloody punctures in my thigh.

Anthy came into the living room, stretching sleepily. "What?" she asked.

I patted a tissue over my leg briefly. "Messaging me. Online." I pointed at the window where "PRINCESS_00001" had just written, "Utena Tenjou?"

"Ah," Anthy said, taking the tissue from my hand and gliding into the kitchen. Chu-Chu chased after her, hoping for food.

BSKTBL_ace: Yes!PRINCESS_00001: You sent me email. What do you want?BSKTBL_ace: I wanted to talk to you about Ohtori.PRINCESS_00001: I'm on a three year world tour and you want me to talk about -that- place?BSKTBL_ace: It's important. PRINCESS_00001: I left Ohtori after my freshman year. I don't know what I could tell you about it.BSKTBL_ace: Do you remember me?PRINCESS_00001: How could I forget? You were all over my brother all the time. But then, so were all sorts of other girls. You couldn't stay away from him.BSKTBL_ace: I didn't write to ask you about your brother.PRINCESS_00001: What do you mean?BSKTBL_ace: Do you remember the duels?PRINCESS_00001: Yes. A stupid game, played by stupid children.BSKTBL_ace: How much do you actually remember?PRINCESS_00001: What does that have to do with anything?BSKTBL_ace: Some people can't remember some stuff.PRINCESS_00001: So? I remember it all.BSKTBL_ace: Do you know anything about Tsuwabuki?PRINCESS_00001: I haven't heard anything from Mitsuru for some time now. We parted on bad terms.BSKTBL_ace: I'm sorry.PRINCESS_00001: Whatever. Anything else?BSKTBL_ace: I also wanted to know if you were in contact with the Chairman.PRINCESS_00001: NO. Goodbye.[PRINCESS_00001 just hung up]

I sat back, running a hand through my hair. "Well, that was abrupt," I mumbled.

"What happened?" Anthy asked, carrying her hot chocolate into the room. Chu-Chu sat on the kitchen counter, overlooking us all happily, drinking hot chocolate from his own

mug. He squawked as he burnt his tongue and ran to the faucet to run cold water into his mouth.

I shrugged. "She hung up on me."

Anthy peered at the screen. "Interesting."

I shook my head and shrugged again. "Well, she said she didn't have any contact with him. She's probably telling the truth."

She sipped her cocoa. "Probably."

I twisted around in the chair. "What do you know?"

She frowned at the screen, then smiled at me. "Nothing. I suspect it will be interesting what you hear from Touga."

"Anthy..." I began, dangerously.

Her grin was disarming. "No, I have nothing to tell you."

I sighed and pulled her into my lap, ignoring her yelp of protest. "You are *such* a difficult woman." With her face in my neck, she just nodded.

I thought New Orleans was an ugly, dirty, hot, humid place when we first arrived. I couldn't believe we were going somewhere even more disgusting, temperature-wise, than Washington, and the drive from the airport just confirmed all my fears that Anthy had dragged me to the worst hole in the States. But when we stepped out of the taxi in front of our Victorian bed and breakfast, I felt like I'd crossed some intangible threshold into a place like, and yet utterly unlike, Ohtori.

Anthy threw herself onto the big bed as I drifted around the bedroom, examining old Mardi Gras masks, furniture, shutters, and the ceiling fan. She smiled at the ceiling dreamily. "You'll get used to the heat."

The toaster-oven and microwave in the little hallway distracted me for half a moment, and when I turned to peer into the bathroom at the claw-footed bathtub, I finally thought to ask, "Have you been here before?"

She bounced to her feet and moved past me into the first room of our suite, pointedly failing to answer my question. "Oh, good! They do have chocolate croissants," she exclaimed on examining our "pick list" of breakfast treats.

The next day, we got up early, had our croissants and orange juice, and headed out. It was a fine, hot morning, with clear blue sky showing before the humid brass of day set in.

Palm trees and ferns waved in the breeze in every garden. Explosions of color - in the form of flowers - poured over the ironwork of balconies all along Bourbon Street. Anthy started pointing to rainbow pride flags and pink triangles all along our route, and for the first time, she and I walked hand-in-hand in public. It felt really good to exchange knowing grins with a pair of middle-aged men walking in a similar fashion in the opposite direction.

As usual, I'd left the itinerary to Anthy, and this time, I was more surprised than usual. Our first stop was a coffee shop for café au lait and beignets, and then on to the Voodoo History Museum. I wasn't sure what to make of what I saw there, though I did find it interesting. Anthy spent a long time peering in at the snake on display, and bowed to the altar in the back. I got absorbed in watching a video on voodoo while Anthy went to talk to someone. I emerged from the museum a little weirded-out, but she was exhilarated.

"Let's go get something to eat and then walk a bit," she suggested.

Anthy wanted to window-shop at all the antique stores along Rue Royale. We only stopped in one store, where she sorted through and bought some old coins. I felt like I was melting in the mid-day heat, unable to appreciate the street performers or the antiques. Finally, she steered me back to our rooms. Both of us fit into the tub for a cold bath, and with a quart of Gatorade in me, I felt nearly human again.

Out again into the late afternoon heat, which wasn't so bad as earlier without the sun directly overhead. We walked up to Rampart, a big boulevard that's one of the boundaries of the French Quarter, crossed it, and wandered into St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.

"Uhhh, Anthy? Didn't our guidebooks tell us not to go here alone?" I asked, staring around at the crowded miniature city. I couldn't see beyond the first line of mausoleums, which stood raggedly shoulder-to-shoulder along a more-or-less straight path.

"Yes," she said, turning left and walking to the next intersection. I hurried after her.

"Then why...?"

"I don't think anyone will bother with us," she said, after considering her options and turning right.

"Oookay," I said hesitantly, and then stifled a yelp. We rounded a hitch in the path and came full on to a tour group. We couldn't hear them twenty feet earlier at the intersection, nor could we see them. Anthy looked annoyed.

The group gathered around a simple mausoleum like many others, but it had flowers and other small items left in front of it. Red "x" marks marred its surface here and there. The guide was talking about Mademoiselle Marie Laveau, a woman renowned as the "Voodoo Queen of New Orleans." It was an interesting little spiel. Unfortunately, the thing I noticed most was the glaring heat of the cemetery; there was what seemed like miles and miles of blazing white marble and concrete, and absolutely no trees.

Anthy watched with narrowed eyes as a trio of women our age took turns posing in front of the monument for each other's cameras. When the tour group had moved off completely, she turned back toward the entrance. "This is no good. We'll come back later." We passed another tour group that was just coming in.

I was just as glad to leave and follow her into a park with trees, where I spent some time boggling at the huge, voluptuous live oaks that circled the place. Anthy sat on a patch of grass to drink some water from the bottle she'd brought in her pack, and I flopped down next to her.

"Do you like it?" she asked after a few minutes.

"The square? The trees are amazing."

She shook her head. "No, the city."

I shrugged. "It's nice. I wouldn't mind coming back sometime."

"But you wouldn't like to live here?"

I blinked at her. "You mean, you're actually thinking of settling somewhere?"

Anthy ducked her eyes away from me, but her voice was casual. "Have you noticed that since we came here, we've had no encounters?"

I hadn't realized. "That's weird. We usually have at least one little one, where we spot the car early. It's like he's letting us know that he knows where we are."

"Yes." She examined a blade of grass for a long moment. "He likes to do that. But he can't reach here."

"Why?"

She gazed around the square a little wistfully. I looked around with her and caught my breath. The square was full of people, people of all colors, shapes, and sizes, wearing clothing a hundred years out of date. And then it was empty again of all but a few tourists in modern gear. I turned to ask her about it.

Anthy smiled and laid her finger across my open mouth. "History," she said, and got up to move on.

When the doorbell rang, I snatched up the cash on the desk, hollered, "I'll get it," and galloped out our apartment door to the front door of the building. I hauled the heavy wooden door open and looked up, saying, "That was faster than usual for pizza..."

Kiryuu Touga leaned gracefully against the porch rail, one hand in the pocket of his immaculate chinos, the other carelessly set against one of the uprights, showing off the perfect line of his jacket. His sleek profile, backlit by streetlights, came into full view as the yellow light of the hall fell over it. The blue eyes turned upon me, peering through a lock of red hair. "Tenjou Utena," he breathed.

I looked at the bundle of cash in my hand, then back at him. "Not enough to bribe you to go away, is it?" I sighed. "You'd better come inside, Mr. President."

He straightened up and smiled. "Not very hospitable. After all, you contacted me." He entered the hallway as I gestured him in. "And, sadly, it's only Vice-President these days. My father is the President of the company."

I made sure the outer door closed and led the way to our apartment, slipping into Japanese. "Didn't expect you to show up on the doorstep. How the hell did you find us, anyway?" I paused to examine his face.

"You're very hard to miss at the post office." He met my gaze evenly, still smiling. I sighed, and opened the door.

"Company!" I bellowed irritably, although Anthy could see him come through the door clearly enough from the kitchen. I closed the door after him, then stooped to shove my gym bag further under a table.

"Ah, Anthy, what a pleasant surprise!" he said in a tone that clearly indicated it was no surprise at all.

"Kiryuu-san. I wish I could say the same," she replied, pushing the sleeves of my old flannel shirt further up her arms and continuing to do dishes.

"What a charming apartment," he said, looking around. His gaze fell on a vase of roses and stuck there, transfixed.

"So, what brings you to Massachusetts, Kiryuu-san?" I asked, recovering some of my hospitality if none of my good grace.

He shook himself, and smiled at me. "You and your letter, Tenjou-san."

I gestured for him to sit in an armchair while I folded myself into the sofa. "So you flew to the other side of the planet just to answer my letter. A note or phone call would have been equally effective."

"But I always enjoy a good, dramatic entrance."

"So you do," Anthy commented from the kitchen.

He paid no attention to her. "I happened to be in New York for a meeting, and thought I'd just buzz up."

"I see," I said, trying to gather my scattered wits. Damn him and his charming smile and his devastating charisma. It seemed to have only gotten more refined in recent years. I guess I'd hoped that he wouldn't be quite this much of a devil. I mean, the night before that duel with him, he was so... nice. Decent. Sweet. Sad. Dammit. I had wanted to free Anthy, yes, but if I'd revolutionized the world while I was at it, it would've been nice. Juri seemed to think I had. Here was evidence that I hadn't.

"So you wanted to chat about old times?" Touga smiled. "Why don't I take you to that dinner I was always offering you in high school?"

I glanced at Anthy, but she seemed engrossed in the dishes. Some of her hair had come out of its braid, making a fuzzy halo around her face. "Keep it platonic... Kiryuu-san. I'm involved."

He stared at me for a moment with several emotions trapped on his face, including something like anger. Then it vanished and he laughed. "Of course, of course. After all, I have a fiancée." There was a sharpness to his voice that set my hackles up. I saw Anthy's head snap up from the sink, so I knew I wasn't wrong.

"Besides," said Anthy in a penetrating tone, "we're waiting for our pizza. You're welcome to join us, of course, Kiryuu-san. For dinner."

He paused for a moment before laughing uncomfortably and saying, "Certainly, certainly, thank you, Anthy. It's been a long time since I had pizza."

"I'm sure it has." I heard her return to doing the dishes.

I felt like I had to try to salvage the conversation, though I didn't really want to. "So, I gather from what you've said that you remember a great deal of your time at Ohtori?"

Touga's eyes settled back on me. "I have no gaps in my memory, Tenjou-kun. Is this not what you have found in your contacts with the other Duelists?"

I tried not to grind my teeth at his familiarity. "What makes you think I've talked to other Duelists?"

He smiled. "I remember you."

I reached down and removed the fork from Chu-Chu's paws. He made a disgusted noise and ran back to the kitchen. "It depends on the person," I admitted.

He resettled himself in the chair and sprawled one arm along its back, looking at me. "Exactly. And I am a dependable person. What do you need to know about the past, Utena?"

Kiryuu Touga was a very beautiful man in that instant, and he knew it. My eyes, however, didn't want to stay on him. Something about him disturbed me deeply. Maybe it was memories. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was something else. I found myself looking

elsewhere, anywhere, especially while he fixed me with that attentive gaze. I reached down and removed the chopstick from Chu-Chu's paws. He jumped up and down, squawking with such frustration that he disturbed Nanami from whatever secret corner she'd curled up in. "I don't need to know about the past," I said, and saw him startle very slightly from the corner of my eye. "What's happened to you... since?"

He smiled and leaned closer. "Such interest in me. Should I be flattered? Hopeful, even, that you recall that last evening we had together?"

Once upon a time, Touga was better than Juri at flustering me. Years later, he still had a great facility for it. Lesser than in the old days, perhaps, but still significant. My fourteen-year-old's feelings surged up, remembering that evening when, somehow, I had moved through despair and confusion to a new resolve. The clarity of the feeling was still there, a peculiar rightness that pushed aside all the obfuscation laid over me in the previous months.

But, dammit, I was blushing.

"Did you attend college then?" I asked, fighting the blush down.

"After you transferred, I continued my senior year and graduated on time. How was Seiran Academy for high school, anyway?"

It took me several long seconds to process what he'd just asked me, trying to remember the name. Then I glared at him, recalling that Anthy had somehow gotten me listed as a graduate of that school. "What did you do? Walk through my school records?"

He smiled. "Why, yes. Did you expect anything else? Physical education? Really, Tenjou-san, I thought you had a knack for mathematics..."

"Have you been in contact with Ohtori since graduating?" I pursued doggedly. I watched, silently and vindictively, as the kitten stalked and attacked his ankle. When he yelped, I scooped her up and said, "Bad Nanami."

That seemed to give him more pause than I expected. "You named the cat... Nanami?" He rubbed his ankle above the trendy loafers he affected.

I looked up at him, putting as much innocence into my face as I could. "I found her sitting in the rain, in the middle of the street, howling her lungs out one night. I brought her home and, as I was saying that I could call the shelters in the morning, Anthy picked her up, towed her off, and said, 'We'll call her Nanami.' And that was that."

Touga peered at the little gray and white face and shook his head. "She's very... cute."

Nanami spat at him. "Yes," I agreed. "Have you?"

He cocked his head. "Of course. I *am* one of the wealthier alumni, so I've donated a scholarship, monies for buildings, that sort of thing. You know how schools love that sort

of thing. They invite me to all the soirees and Chairman's dinners." I looked up involuntarily at the mention of the Chairman, and he leaned toward me to say, "He looks just the same now. His voice is the same. He and I, we've been friends for a long time, you know. He's very lonely without Kanae-san, and when we're all alone together, he sometimes mentions you..."

My face burned and my throat tightened. He knew. *He knew*. Everything.

"Stop it," Anthy snapped.

"Ah," he said, laughing over his shoulder at her. "Gotten all protective, have we, 'Aunt Anthy'?" His voice was mocking and had a strange edge to it.

My own discomfort slipped away as I looked over his shoulder at her. Anthy was angrier than I'd ever seen her. The muscles of her neck stood out, fine cords of indignation, her mouth a thin line of suppressed rage.

My hand drifted down of its own accord and removed the hatpin from Chu-Chu's paws.

Anthy growled, "Get out."

Touga glanced over at her negligently. "I'm not done speaking to Utena," he informed her peremptorily, then stood up and walked to the door. He paused there, confused.

Anthy advanced from the kitchen. "I remove my permission. I revoke my hospitality. I do not want you in my home."

"But..." They were only a couple of feet apart, a tiny slip of a woman in baggy sweatpants and an old, paint-stained flannel shirt, staring down an extremely tall man in expensive, tailored clothing. It should have been ridiculous. It wasn't. It was as if she'd grown somehow, her shadow looming over Touga so that he looked like something I'd never imagined him being: a terrified schoolboy. He tossed a silent, desperate appeal toward me.

I shook my head. I didn't know what had set Anthy off, but I certainly wasn't going to defy her wishes for *him*.

Anthy followed him to the front door and shut it firmly behind him without a word. She returned a few moments later, shaking with the aftermath of her anger.

"What was wrong?" I asked, making her sit down and going to make tea.

She shook her head and bent forward to lay her forehead on her knees.

The doorbell rang.

As I picked up the money and started for the door, she said, "Make sure you only bring back pizza this time."

I only brought back pizza. We ate in silence for a while, giving our crusts to a disgruntled Chu-Chu. Finally, bitterly, I said, "I wish I'd really revolutionized the world."

Anthy turned my face to hers, one hand under my chin. "Oh, love," she sighed. "You did. You just didn't revolutionize all the people in it."

It was close to eleven o' clock when Anthy and I left The Court of Two Sisters after the best dinner I think I've ever had. Anthy was delighted by the wisteria vines that twined overhead, forming the ceiling of our dining room, and by the strings of small white lights tangled in among the vines. We emerged onto Royale and looked around. The sidewalk was crowded, but the streets were even more crowded with cars, taxis, and people. A constant roar rolled down from Bourbon Street. Anthy turned that way.

"But... didn't our hostess say we shouldn't walk after nine...?" I asked, elbowing past a mob of drunken men to keep up with her.

Anthy reached back, seized my hand, and dragged me bodily into the Bourbon Street mob.

I was suddenly surrounded by people who had no notion of "personal space." All of them seemed to have a plastic cup in hand, usually filled with beer, but sometimes filled with substances of more questionable color and identity. They bumped into me, belched in my face, and occasionally remembered to say, "Excuse me." I could feel my temper rising.

The neon signs smeared an orange glare over Anthy's dark hair and skin. We wound through the crowd, passing behind a bikini-clad woman standing outside a sex club. She was flipping a sign that said, "Topless women," on one side and, "Bottomless men," on the other. I've never seen someone so bored. The blast of cigarette smoke and music from the open doorway nearly bowled me off my feet. Anthy glanced back at me, an enormous grin lighting her face, and kept us moving fast.

Blocks and blocks of people, packed elbow to elbow. Some were removing clothes, some dancing, many smoking, most drinking. Then, suddenly, it ended. We broke through the crowd into another street, and this one was well-lit, but empty and quiet. I sighed with relief.

Anthy was breathing hard and her eyes were a little wild. Her hair was snaking out of its braid of its own accord. She turned to me and threw herself into my arms. "I have it, Utena. I know how to hide you now."

Before I could do more than hug her, she was running down the street, towing me behind her.

We didn't stop until we had crossed Rampart, six or more blocks later. Anthy lay her

hands and forehead against the wall of the cemetery while I gasped for breath. I kept looking along the street, expecting a horde of muggers at any moment, or at least a police car. Despite all the traffic in the French Quarter, here it was nearly silent.

"All right, come on," Anthy said, walking resolutely around the corner to a side gate and opening it.

I hurried after her. "We aren't supposed to be doing this, Anthy. What are we doing? We can't go in there..." I trailed off, realizing we were inside, and the gate had swung closed behind us.

It was like we'd just walked into a black-tie party where no one knew us, and we were dressed in pajamas. Everything just stopped and stared at us. In a not-particularly-friendly manner. I could feel the pressure of this cold regard across the back of my neck. I felt like I should smile awkwardly, wave, and apologize, but I was too busy keeping up with the pale flash of Anthy's shirt.

I tripped, and something tickled at the edges of my perception, like a wave of titters around a room. I recovered my feet and kept moving, but I'd lost Anthy.

Dammit.

I couldn't see the walls of the cemetery or hear street noises. All I could see was the maze of dimly lit tombs. Everything was weirdly quiet. Clenching my jaw to keep it from chattering, I walked ahead as confidently as I could and turned the way I thought Anthy had gone. It was a dead end.

Then I started to hear things. Muttering voices. Breathing. Hollow knocking. Something scurrying. A sharp hiss of indrawn breath - no, wait, that was me.

The air suddenly felt like ice. Cold, clammy ice that groped at my skin, drenched my clothes and hair. I tried to walk calmly out of the dead end and find the turn that Anthy had taken, but I found myself running, throwing looks over my shoulder, caroming off marble monuments, tripping on the uneven pavement and displaced brickwork. Shadows flitted along beside me and across my path. I heard a thin wail, like that of a small, bereft child.

I stumbled on Anthy a few hours - no, it was actually only minutes - later. She was standing in front of the monument from earlier that day, speaking to it in a low voice. I leaned against a nearby mausoleum to try to catch my breath and quiet the shaking of my hands and knees.

"I know we never really got along, Mam'zelle," Anthy was saying, "but I need this favor badly. I've brought you the usual payment." At that, she slid a stack of coins onto the upper ledge of the crypt. "We may want - or need - it back someday. But I'll owe you a great deal." The entire attention of the place centered on Anthy now. The tension gripped my stomach, the back of my head. I held my breath. Silence reigned.

Anthy extended her fist, turned it to face up, and opened it. My Rose Signet lay in the center of her palm.

"Will you?" she asked.

There was a long, considering pause, and then a single sigh of warm breeze played over our faces. Anthy nodded. She turned her hand to let the ring drop. It flashed in some stray beam of street light as it fell into the darkness. I never heard it hit the pavement.

Anthy gripped my elbow hard and guided me unerringly to the gate through which we had entered. The gate fell open as we approached and drifted closed behind us after we reached the street. She turned to face it and bowed, gesturing me to do the same. I gave the gate as respectful a bow as I'd ever given anyone in my life.

It took me a few minutes to identify the voice on the answering machine as Saionji's: "I will be in the US in a few days to take two weeks of training with the USAF. May I visit Boston to speak to you?"

He was so polite, so careful of his English enunciation. His voice was hoarse, like he'd been spending a lot of time screaming recently. The tone was one of someone who'd been beaten repeatedly. Even Anthy was sympathetic. So sympathetic, in fact, that we went over and above his request for discretion in our reply. I called a Japanese-speaking man I knew from school who owed me a favor, and he called back with our affirmative message, doing his best brusque, impersonal, military voice.

Anthy and I were extremely suspicious, to say the least. One Duelist happening to be in the States and convenient for consultation is one thing. Three of five Duelists just "happening" to be in the States is quite another. When he called back, we agreed to meet him in a park along the Charles. Touga's visit had left us feeling very invaded; our home was therefore not an option.

He was sitting on a bench, watching the flock of white geese that frequents the river edge there. We spotted his crisp blue uniform from a block away. As we drew closer, he noticed us and stood, removing his hat with precision. His hair was cropped quite short, although its distinctive waves still showed in the shock of hair on top. He wore mirrored Ray-Bans.

"Saionji-san," I said, offering my hand.

"Tenjou-san," he said, not taking it. His head turned slightly. "Himemiya-san." To her, he bowed.

"Saionji-san," Anthy replied, not offering her hand *or* bowing.

"What a pretty picture." We all spun from our little formalities. Kiryuu Touga glided toward us from wherever it was he'd been watching. "Kyouichi, it's been a long time."

Four years? I thought.

"Ah, Kiryuu. I wondered if you would show your face." Saionji betrayed no emotion, no surprise. As if he expected Touga to show up all along. Maybe he had. I wondered if maybe Keiko wasn't as crazy as she'd sounded, and Saionji did call Touga to give him periodic reports.

They stood face to face, only a few feet apart. Saionji had turned out to be the larger of the two men: more muscular, more vividly athletic, with broader shoulders and more capable-looking hands. Touga retained his adolescent grace of body and features, a more stylized figure than the solid Saionji.

Mirrored Ray-bans looked into red-lensed John Lennon sunglasses. Touga smiled. Saionji's lips pressed into a thin, pale line.

"And how is Keiko-san these days?" Touga inquired smoothly.

"Couldn't be more radiant," Saionji replied flatly. "She's expecting, you know."

"Ah."

"Are you married yet?"

"No, no. I'm afraid that the lady I was engaged to when last we spoke went her own way," Touga breezed, finally turning from the face-on confrontation. "I am engaged, though."

Saionji smiled grimly. "Does this one look like Nanami too?"

Touga froze, just for an instant, then swept a bow to us. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Is this a private meeting?"

"Yes," Anthy replied without too much acid. "But I suppose I can't be rid of you this time."

He smiled sweetly. "No, I suppose not."

She looked away, toward the flock of geese. "It's a shame you don't have the same problem your sister does," she said, almost wistfully.

He chose to ignore that and looked at me. "Shall I take you to dinner then, while Anthy and Saionji talk over old times?"

I asked, with forced cheer, "Why don't we all go together?"

"I'll treat for you, then," Touga informed me.

"I'll pay for Anthy," Saionji said.

"Now, hold on," I began.

"I," said Anthy in a ringing voice, "will take us *all* out to dinner."

The three of us stopped and stared at her. I shrugged and grinned. "Okay." And started to follow her as she stalked toward the street.

Both men took a step after us and immediately stopped, looking down at the ground with dismay.

"You should watch your step," Anthy said. "Geese wander all over this park, you know."

The day after the adventure in the cemetery, we decided to tour the Garden District. Well-supplied with water, sunglasses, and hats, we took the St. Charles Streetcar out of le Vieux Carré. Many blocks of clanging and rattling later, we emerged onto a tree-lined street. Anthy led the way, carefully examining the guidebook for the walking tour we'd take.

The District contained huge houses, surrounded by live oaks, ironwork, and an even thicker atmosphere of history than I'd already felt, though it wasn't as... alive as the air of the Quarter. At an old chapel, Anthy stared in at the delicate lattice of an ironwork gazebo. It resembled the rose garden of Ohtori in a general sort of way.

"Our Lady of Perpetual Help," I read from the iron sign over the gate.

"A very Catholic city," Anthy said. "I love the feeling I get from the devotion here. It's almost enough to make me feel the religion as it was first intended to be experienced."

"Not me." I shook my head and she smiled at me. "But I guess it is... special somehow. More alive. I'm sorry we didn't get to Rome, to compare."

She laughed and leaned against the enormous trunk of one of the live oaks. For an instant, she looked like a queen on an ornate, living throne. Then it passed, and I saw Anthy with her sunglasses pushed up onto her head, flirting at me with her eyes and the curve of her mouth.

In front of a house with Gothic windows, we stepped aside for an extremely dignified, well-dressed, elderly man who leaned heavily on an ebony cane with a crystal head. His close-cropped, curling, silver hair contrasted with the wrinkled mahogany of his skin, and I thought him very handsome and striking. He looked up from watching his step on the uneven pavement and stopped, transfixed, staring at Anthy.

"Akycha," he breathed.

Anthy looked up and smiled kindly. "I'm sorry?"

He shook his head, as if to clear it, and said, "I apologize, Mademoiselle. You remind me of someone most... she would be quite old by now... but you are her image as a young woman. Do you happen to have a grandmother by the name of Akycha Sagrario?"

She grew very still and I thought I detected a very slight emotion in her voice as she said, "Yes. Yes, Monsieur, I am related to her."

"Really?" His face broke into a beautiful smile, and it was suddenly easy to see the young man he must have been. "I attended school with her... was engaged to her, actually..." A cloud passed over his face, leaving the smile troubled. "Perhaps you are a niece? She had a brother..."

I felt a combination of sinking and elation in the pit of my stomach.

"Henri," Anthy murmured.

His ears were sharp. "She has spoken of me then? But of course, I no longer resemble the portrait now."

She summoned a smile with effort. "She has spoken of you, yes."

"Might I impose upon you - and your friend, of course - by inviting you to lunch with me?" he asked hopefully. "I would like to know more of her, if you can tell me. I lost touch with her after the Academy closed."

Anthy looked to me inquiringly and I gestured that she should choose. "We would be honored, Monsieur." I managed a smile and a bow.

Instead of a restaurant, as I'd rather naively expected, he led us around the block, into one of the sprawling, sumptuous homes. It was yellow with a great deal of black ironwork around the first and second story. Yellow and white flowers spilled over large pots hung along these porches. The front door was of dark wood and stained glass, and the foyer matched. I saw more antiques furnishing this gallery and the adjoining rooms than I'd seen in all the antique stores of Rue Royale.

A maid in a crisp black uniform greeted us. "Two guests for lunch, Consuela, please," he said, indicating the two of us. She nodded and ushered us into a cool, shuttered parlor. Ceiling fans turned lazily above us. The room was filled with mementos: stuffed antelope heads, books, strange, foreign knick-knacks. Several antique swords graced the mantel.

Henri gestured for us to sit, which I did carefully in the newest-looking chair I could see. He moved to a rolltop desk in the corner and opened it. "I keep my old photographs here."

Anthy sat on the edge of her chair and shot me an unreadable look. I smiled at her reassuringly.

He retrieved a thin leather photo album of significant age from a drawer and moved to a well-worn chair near Anthy. "As I said, I was engaged to Miss Akycha for a time, Miss..." He looked at Anthy inquiringly through his bushy white brows.

"Himemiya," she replied. "Anthy Himemiya. And this is Utena Tenjou."

He nodded to both of us. "Henri Trepagier. What nationality are your names?" he inquired as he turned the pages of the album.

"Japanese," she replied. "After leaving here, Akycha and her brother moved to Japan."

"Times must have been difficult there for Americans during the War," he said. "I assume she married there. I hope he was worthy of her."

Anthy remained silent.

Henri frowned. "I cannot seem to find the portrait of the two of us. I know that I've never removed it. Where can it be? Ah, well, here is a photo of me in the rose garden, anyway." He offered the album to Anthy. She took it, and I got up to look over her shoulder.

The black and white photo showed him as a very young man in a dark suit and tie, a straw skimmer tucked under his arm. His cheekbones were high, his nose straight and fine, his jaw a clean, sharp line. Black eyes looked out hungrily from the photo. The rose garden of Ohtori stood just behind him.

"That was, of course, not the school uniform," he explained.

I felt dizzy as I placed the age of this photo.

Anthy turned the page. Young Henri and five other young men in dark, brass-buttoned, high-collared uniforms looked out grimly from the page. Anthy's hand trembled.

Henri leaned forward. "Ah, yes, the..."

"Student Council?" I finished.

"Yes," he acceded, eyeing me with some interest. "I was the treasurer. I had a great rivalry with Antoine." His finger indicated the tallest man, who was devilishly beautiful, as Kiryuu Touga could only dream of being. Dark hair waved, shining and sleek, back from his face, his uniform somehow hung more interestingly on his graceful frame, and his black, black eyes pulled the gaze to them like magnets. Henri's voice filled with deep sadness and old pain.

"You were good friends," Anthy said softly.

"From boys," he agreed. "Like with Daniel." He indicated a smaller man who I quite took to. He stood out from the rest not only because of his spectacles, but his skin was several shades darker than the other men. He stood just a little apart from the men on either side

of him and his eyes were sad and dreamy. "Daniel, he died in the War. They say he saved his men. I would not have believed him a soldier, much less an officer, but there it is. Antoine... Antoine did not see the War."

Consuela came in to announce lunch at that moment. I cursed mentally, sure I'd never hear more about Antoine.

Monsieur Trepagier, as Anthy addressed him, apparently employed a chef of remarkable quality, because we had a truly phenomenal lunch made up of items I couldn't name. Our conversation derailed for a while, as Anthy asked about a certain antique and he waxed eloquent about its history. I think she did it on purpose.

"So," he said when we retired back to the parlor, "you said that Miss Akycha went to Japan? Is she... is she still alive?"

Anthy looked up at his hopeful face. "No, Monsieur, I'm sorry. She passed on many years ago."

He sighed. "I should not have hoped. I am very old myself. And I should not keep you ladies here with an old man's maundering on such a beautiful day. You have been very kind to humor me."

"No, Monsieur," Anthy replied with a small bow, "it has been an honor... and very educational."

We made polite conversation for a while longer, laced liberally with appropriate expressions of gratitude. Finally, he escorted us to the door.

"Thank you for an afternoon's pleasant company, Mademoiselles," Monsieur Trepagier said in farewell. "I wish I could have found that photo. You would see the resemblance is truly remarkable."

We sat in the restaurant, looking at menus, all of us patently uncomfortable except for Touga, who seemed perfectly at ease. I glanced at Anthy, but she seemed disinclined to start the conversation. To my surprise, Saionji spoke first.

"So, what brings you to Boston, Kiryuu-san?"

"So formal, Kyouichi? You don't need to be. I came because of Utena, of course."

"Don't look at me," I said, anticipating Saionji's glare. "I wrote him a letter, just like I did the rest of the Duelists, but I didn't invite him to - or tell him about - our meeting."

Saionji swiveled his suspicious gaze between Touga and me for a long moment, then said, "So what were the letters about, then?"

"I wanted to ask you about Ohtori," I said, then bit down on a yelp as Anthy pinched my thigh under the table. Hard. I rubbed it surreptitiously and darted a questioning glance at her. She studied the menu serenely.

"What about it?" Saionji growled.

"What use could our fond memories be to you?" Touga inquired simultaneously. After smiling at Saionji, he continued, "Although I'll share them willingly."

I groaned internally. It would have been so much easier to talk to Saionji without Touga around. Not that I had expected the interview to be hearts and flowers, but I certainly didn't need Touga to raise his hackles even further than I did normally.

"Um, I wanted to... a lot of people have trouble remembering some of the things that happened there..."

"Including you?" Touga, concern dripping from his voice and expression, leaned across the table.

"No, I..." Dammit, what to say?

Anthy interposed, so smoothly I'm not sure anyone even heard my response, "No, Utena recovered her memories without problems. We wanted, though, to see what might be correlated with other people's memories."

They both stared at her. Well, I suppose she does take some getting used to, especially for people who only knew her as the Rose Bride. I hid a grin behind my menu.

Anthy continued, "Some of the memories seemed so unbelievable, we felt we needed confirmation of some events."

They were both still gawping, though Touga showed signs of recovery. I felt I ought to put my own two cents in or Saionji, at least, was going to be staring openmouthed at my partner all night. "For closure," I said.

Touga turned to me, almost gratefully. "For closure?" he drawled, and I wondered for a moment just what I'd said to make him sound so self-satisfied. "But you had each other, didn't you?" Damn him, he had no right to say things in that tone of voice! "Surely, you could compare..."

"My memories are not like those of other people," Anthy said flatly, her tone of voice indicating that his line of reasoning was ended and that particular discussion was closed.

Saionji leaned forward, eagerness showing in his voice despite his obvious effort to remain detached. "I would like confirmation as well. And closure, if what you mean is not needing to think about that place ever again." He glowered at Touga. "I got out, and I mean to stay out."

Touga leaned back gracefully in his chair, the menu held negligently in one hand. Saionji's gaze was pinned fast. "Yare, yare," he drawled. "Aren't we vehement? Was it so bad, after all? To be so important..." He trailed off meaningfully. "Ah, here is our waitress."

I fumed internally while we ordered our food. It was pretty clear that Touga's presence was going to sabotage any possible help from Saionji. Damn! And Saionji didn't deserve this, either.

As the waitress left, Touga said, "Well, I remember the duels. I recall that Utena began her career as a Duelist by fighting Saionji over some love-letter or other."

Wakaba. The memory of her tears hit me hard, somewhere around my solar plexus, and I decided that I needed to find her.

"And," Touga continued, "Utena beat you, Kyouichi. That time and every other time you fought."

Saionji sipped the glass of wine the waitress had just brought him. "As I recall, you only beat her by trickery."

"You remember correctly," I put in before Touga could deny it.

He sighed and smiled down at the table through his red hair. "Ah, Utena. Trickery is in the eye of the beholder."

"Exactly," I said.

An awkward silence fell that even Touga couldn't evade. Finally, Saionji asked, "So what has become of Nanami?"

Several emotions flitted over Touga's face before he could get a grip on them. "I don't know," he said with far less assurance than he'd had previously. "She left... went to a boarding school in France. I don't... contact her."

Saionji glanced at him sharply. "Why not? Could it be that she's outgrown her beloved oniisama?"

Touga remained silent, taking a long drink of his Black Russian.

"Ohhh," Saionji pursued, smiling coldly. "Could it be that little sister has managed to pierce your armor, Kiryuu, and actually do some damage?"

"Shut up!" Touga exclaimed, glaring at Saionji. "Yes, things have happened. And they're none of your business, Kyouichi. Not since you decided we were both demons and hid away with your blushing bride."

"I decided that long before I found Keiko weeping in the snow outside your door,

Touga," Saionji snapped. "The way you treated her only confirmed it for me."

"You watched me treat dozens of women the same way, Kyouichi," Touga purred, back on his own ground. "Why was Keiko-san any different?"

Saionji shifted uncomfortably and finished his wine.

"In fact, shortly after I discarded Keiko, I dated and discarded Aiko and Yuuko in turn, Nanami's other henchmen. Why didn't you rescue them?"

I glanced aside at Anthy. She was folding her napkin into a floppy origami shape of some sort.

"Could it be that you felt a certain kinship with Keiko at that moment, Kyouichi?" Touga had leaned closer to Saionji, was murmuring nearly into his ear. And he just barely managed to pull back in time to avoid Saionji's fist.

Diners around us stared and Saionji subsided quickly, glaring sullenly at the centerpiece. Touga tossed back the remains of his drink. Anthy set a sagging white origami rose next to my plate. When I glanced at her, she gave me a small, reassuring smile, and a moment later, I felt her hand on my knee. I sighed and settled in for a very long dinner.

We abandoned our tour of the Garden District. On our way back to the streetcar, however, we passed another cemetery and Anthy turned in the gate. I stopped and stared after her, but she kept going. So I followed.

This graveyard was far less claustrophobic than the one we'd been in the night before, and certainly had less of a sense of Presence. There was grass, trees laying shade over the back and sides, and long, straight, wide lanes of traffic. A few tourists wandered here and there. Anthy headed for the less-populated rear of the cemetery. When I caught up to her, she was sitting on a low wall that surrounded a family plot and staring at the ground between her feet. I sat down too.

"You okay?" I asked finally.

She nodded slowly, distracted.

"Really?"

There was a long pause, but then she quirked a small, sad smile at me over her shoulder. "He was very sweet, wasn't he?"

I nodded and laid a hand on her lower back. "Wistful. Sad." Then, "Why didn't you tell him the truth?"

She shrugged. "Truth? Why make his life more difficult? He's lived sixty-odd years of believing that everything that happened was perfectly normal, that Akycha was a normal girl, that her brother was a normal man. What good would it do to tell him that he's wrong?" She laughed softly. "Besides, do you think he would've believed me?"

"No, I guess not." A light breeze lifted some of the humidity and made the shade quite pleasant for a few moments. "I wish he could've found the photo, though."

"Why?" she asked, almost angrily, and my hand retracted from her tensed back as if it had been shoved away. "So you could have some proof?"

"No. Anthy." I was hurt, and there was a pleading tone to my voice that I hated at that moment. "I believe you. I believe everything implicitly. Don't you know that?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Utena. I was just... he took me by surprise."

I slid my arm around her waist and pulled her against me. "It's all right. I was just... curious, I guess."

"You have every right to be. I haven't told you very much at all."

"No, you haven't." We enjoyed another breeze and each took mouthfuls from my water bottle. "What happened to Antoine?" I asked as casually as I could.

She sighed. "He," and I could hear Akio's name underlying the pronoun, "thought to try an... experiment. With the duels. Reverting to a more barbaric past."

I blinked and tried to understand, then took another mouthful of water to cover my distress. "The duels... were to the death?"

Anthy's shoulders shrugged, but I could see her hands trembling. "Just that one. It cost him the school here. I'm sorry that Henri remembers it so clearly." She looked away, squinted at the tomb across the path. "The dress was white there. I always hated the places where the dress was white. The worst things seemed to happen."

There wasn't much I could say to that. After a few moments of silence, I said, "If one were to look up the school in the records..."

"You would find a small Catholic boarding school where the nuns failed to manage the secular side and therefore employed a man of the world to keep the books and administrate and deal in local politics. He had a younger sister who informally attended some classes there among the young men." Anthy stretched, lifting her braid off the back of her sweaty neck. "They liked to hear her play the piano."

I nodded and leaned over to kiss her cheek. She turned her face to meet me halfway, and we sat there in the cemetery, making a spectacle of ourselves.

A few breathless moments later, Anthy pulled away and stood. "Let's go eat. They'll be

closing soon."

We walked up the street to the streetcar and had to stand, uncomfortably, the whole way back to the French Quarter. She'd made reservations at our restaurant of choice that morning, arranged with her inimitable sense of timing, so we just limped off the streetcar and up the street a bit for dinner.

Feeling much more human, we left the restaurant and strolled back toward our b&b along Rue Royale. The sky was star-speckled above the city lights. Sounds of revelry began to drift down from Bourbon Street, and we passed several late street musicians playing jazz and blues. Anthy dropped a ten into the cup of a wheelchair-bound woman who was playing an electric keyboard and singing energetically in a voice made of gravel. We exchanged grins with her and kept going. The sounds of activity faded behind us. A few people still moved along the street, but quietly, in pairs or small groups. Gossamer-winged insects - termites, we'd been told - drifted up to cluster around the streetlights and periodically, bats would swoop through the clouds.

Some movement that wasn't a bat caught my eye. I looked up at a large, grey, square, surprisingly unattractive building to see a dark-skinned little girl wearing grimy scraps of fabric appear at the edge of the roof and teeter on the very edge. She looked back over her shoulder in apparent panic, heaving sobbing breaths.

My hand tightened on Anthy's, my body coiling, and Anthy said, "You know there's nothing for you to do, Utena." The girl leaped off the roof, the tattered rags around her fluttering in the breeze. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she plummeted... and never reached the ground. Anthy didn't even look. "It happened a long time ago." My heart pounded with adrenalin that had no vent.

I exhaled sharply and kept looking over my shoulder at the building. I caught a glimpse of a group of sullen-looking men in very old-style clothing, standing around in front of a house, smoking pipes. They stared at me and vanished. "Can we move over to Bourbon?" I asked, turning my face forward again.

Anthy smiled. "We should be past the crowd now. Come on."

We cut up the next street. The crowd was a block or so away, and there were more people moving along this street, including an elderly couple. We strolled, more relaxed, enjoying the cooler air of the evening. Dark alleys led to slightly lit gardens where I could see the palms waving in the breeze. A full moon broke over the rooftops.

Anthy's hand tightened on mine this time and she quickened her step. "What?" I said out the corner of my mouth, glancing around for the Car.

"Don't you feel it? Don't run, just walk. Faster."

There was... something. Yes. A cold prickle across my back, a sense of something heavy moving behind us. Following us. Malignant, aggressive. I heard a footstep. Another. I thought, It mustn't catch us. I walked faster.

Faster. Faster. We weren't quite running, but it was closing. I cast a glance over my shoulder. There was nothing there. I heard another footstep while I looked. Suddenly, I didn't want to see. I turned my face forward and tried to lengthen my stride just a little more.

We gave up appearances and broke into a run. We bolted across Esplanade, the border between the French Quarter and the Marigny neighborhood... and it was gone. Anthy stopped and looked back, and a moment later, so did I. Bourbon Street was empty of anyone or anything. Nothing. No feeling. No footsteps. Not even a shadow out of place.

She shook her head. "Enough," Anthy sighed. "Let's go home."

All through the appetizer and main course, Touga cheerfully narrated the tale of how he saved me from the maddened Saionji's sword, and expanded upon Saionji's expulsion. Saionji and I exchanged identical embarrassed looks. Touga seemed to become more animated in his storytelling the more Saionji cringed.

Finally, Saionji interrupted Touga's "humorous" retelling of the party that Nanami had thrown for him and the "clever" things he'd said to me when I showed up. "Kiryuu. I was readmitted to school..."

"Yes," Touga cut him off smoothly, "After spending the duration of your exile in the room of a younger girl."

Saionji's lips thinned and his hand tightened on his fork, but he fought the anger down. "How did I get readmitted? I don't remember the details."

Touga barely missed a beat. "My intervention, of course."

"You were permitted to return," Anthy put in quietly, "to further the game." She didn't speak loudly or with any particular emphasis, but both of the men were silenced. "You were a necessary catalyst. You were impulsive. Your choices worked to impel the more cautious Duelists into the arena."

They both stared at her, Saionji in amazement and Touga with annoyance. Saionji finally looked down, finishing his glass of wine, and said, "We were all no more than pawns. I'd forgotten. Important? Kiryuu, your head's in the clouds if you think we were important."

Touga made a graceful gesture of dismissal. "Well, perhaps some of us were more important than others."

Saionji glared, but remained silent as the waitress replaced his empty glass with a full one. Then he seized it and drank half of it. "Perhaps some of us have delusions of grandeur."

Touga simply smiled.

I glanced aside at Anthy and found that she was staring hard at Touga, as if memorizing every line of his face. She was concentrating so intently that I couldn't draw her attention and, in defeat, I returned to the last of my pasta. What had happened to Touga to change him so? When last I'd seen him, he'd been so completely changed and I had sat with him under the stars in the dueling arena, almost comfortable. When he challenged me the next day, I felt my first qualm, but he seemed so intent on "saving" me and "being my prince" ... It had been moving, almost charming, though six years later, I could be angry about the fact that he had utterly dismissed me as an equal, and had, in fact, wanted to shove me (pound me, crush me) into the same passive role, that same damned pink dress that Akio had prepared for me. Only he hadn't been as good as Akio at convincing me that the dress was what I (and every girl) truly wanted.

They could all take their pedestals and shove...

We were done with dinner, Anthy was paying, and we were all getting up to leave. Touga seemed blithely unaware - or uncaring - of the glares of hatred coming his way from Saionji or the intensely considering stare of Anthy. He smiled beautifully down at me. His charm rolled off him in waves. I felt nauseated suddenly in looking at him. There was something very, very wrong. I wondered why Nanami had left for France.

"So, Kyouichi, can I drive you home?" Touga inquired once we got outside, out of the way of passerby.

Saionji looked askance at him, then sneered. "I can walk, thanks, Kiryuu. I don't trust your driving. What sort of car did you get? A red convertible?"

Ouch.

Touga smiled unflappably. "You trusted my driving for many years, Kyouichi. Perhaps being married has made you more assertive, though."

I blinked as Saionji turned on him with a snarl. No time to wonder why, because Saionji had him by the lapels of his designer jacket. Anthy's hand held me back as I moved forward. When I looked at her, she just shook her head slightly, eyes fixed on the men.

"You bastard," Saionji hissed in Touga's face, and Saionji's hands were white-knuckled with rage. I fancied there was a hint of fear under the faade of amazement Touga had plastered on his face. "Traitor. Bastard. Go home. Go home to your pathetic little trophy wife-to-be. Go home to your mistresses. Go home, Touga. No one wants or even likes you here." With visible effort to tame a raging temper, Saionji set him back on his feet. "You're not worth my disgracing my uniform over."

Touga twitched his jacket free of wrinkles. "No, you do that quite well enough on your own. Your poor wife."

Saionji very nearly turned again. I could see the vein bulging in his temple as his face

passed from livid to pale. In a tight voice, he said, "Keep away from my wife. Don't even mention her name again."

"Oh, I don't go near Keiko-san, Kyouichi," Touga said deliberately. "I don't need to."

The lapels again. "Who has been calling her?" Saionji snarled. "Who has been telling her stories then?"

Touga effortlessly removed Saionji's hands from his jacket and took a step back. He raised an ironic eyebrow.

Anthy had been staring off into the distance, and said, sadly and with deep compassion, "Akio."

Touga's facade of calm shattered with sudden violence. There was a flash of motion that I couldn't follow. Then Anthy was standing over Touga, holding his right arm in an awkward and painful position. He was face-down on the ground, his long hair trailing into a puddle, his left arm bracing his face away from the cement.

"You never struck me at Ohtori, Mr. Student Council President," Anthy said calmly. "Something I can't say for Saionji-san." Saionji had the grace to look somewhat uncomfortable, even as he was digesting Anthy's revelation and action. "But no one will do it-" she shifted her grip on his arm slightly "-ever-" she twisted until he made a sound "-again."

He made an abortive attempt at escape, then thought better of it and lay still.

"Do I make myself clear?" Anthy inquired.

Touga just nodded, and she released his arm. He stood and dusted his slacks off. His Italian leather boots were scuffed. He resettled his jacket and gently flexed his arm, rubbing it at the shoulder.

Saionji looked away from him and turned to Anthy, face serious and calm again. "I will be in touch, Himemiya-san." His voice carried a new respect. He glanced aside at Touga once, and I thought I saw pity there for just an instant, and then he turned his steps toward his hotel.

Kiryuu Touga had mostly resettled his dignity back on his face in the interim. He smiled, but it was colder now, indicating that there was a burning humiliation behind it. Perfunctorily, he inclined his head to Anthy, then extended a hand to me. Reluctantly, I shook it.

"It has been a... valuable evening, Tenjou-san," he said. "I, too, will be in touch. And tell Nanami... tell her that her brother misses her, no matter what she thinks."

With that, he turned and stalked off into the darkness of a side street.

When we reached the New Orleans airport the next day, Anthy suddenly got distracted. She was looking everywhere: corners, heights, down at the ground. Craning her neck as if she were searching for something. When I asked what was up, she shrugged and shook her head.

We hadn't gotten much sleep the night before - we had a tradition of celebration on our last night anywhere - so I was tired and not very interested anyway. After we'd checked our luggage and gotten our boarding passes, I went to the bathroom. When I came out, I went to find Anthy where I'd left her. Gone. Of course.

Cursing quietly, I stomped around, looking for her. Usually, I have no problem knowing where to look, but I failed to get my usual hunch, and she wasn't in any of the bookstores, newstands, or coffee shops. I sat down, annoyed, in one of the hard, uncomfortable chairs, and watched as Anthy emerged from a coffee shop I'd just checked.

"Where were you?" I asked irritably.

"Meeting a friend," she grinned, and produced Chu-Chu from a pocket. He gnawed happily on a giant cookie and grinned a cookie-crumble grin up at me.

Until that moment, I'd forgotten his very existence. He hadn't been around in London, and we certainly hadn't had him traveling. "Chu-Chu!" I exclaimed. "But... but... where has he been?"

She shrugged. "He's had things to do. Helping."

I shook his paw and he went on eating. He no longer wore a long tie or a gold hoop earring; they'd been replaced with a spotted black-and-purple bow tie and a small amethyst stud. Otherwise, he was still the strange, ugly-cute monkey-thing he'd always been.

"Helping?" I asked.

He nodded. "Chu."

Anthy smiled down at him fondly.

"How are we going to get him on the plane?" I wondered.

"Oh, don't worry," Anthy said. "I always manage."

I was drifting in a pleasant state of half-sleep, enjoying the softness of the bed and Anthony's warmth. I was sleepily reviewing the (mostly annoying) events of the day, when suddenly I sat bolt upright, tossing the covers (and kitten) off both of us, and said, "Shit!"

Nanami, who had been drowsing in the hammock of comforter stretched between us, landed, of course, on her feet on the foot of the bed and immediately licked her left shoulder. Her tail flicked ominously. Anthony opened her eyes and regarded me with some concern. "What?"

"Touga," I said, staring uncomprehendingly at the weird shape that O'Keefe's "Calla Lily" took on in the dark. "He realized. He knows. He's going to tell... him."

I heard Anthony sigh, and she rolled towards me to lean on her elbow. "Yes," she agreed calmly, while the kitten bit my toes.

"He probably already knows where we are," I said, shivering. I reached for the sheet and pulled it up over my chest, making something of a tent.

"Yes," said Anthony again. I looked down, but her face was shadowed by the sheet.

"We'll need to move fast," I said weakly, feeling inadequate.

Anthony sighed again and sat up. "Love," she said, as she pressed against my breastbone and pushed me back down onto the bed, "worrying about this in the middle of the night is not going to help." She pulled the comforter back up over both of us, eliciting a squeak of protest from the kitten attached to it, and snuggled up against my shoulder.

"But..." I said, not really sure why I was protesting.

"Go to sleep," she said to my shoulder. I sighed, kissed the top of her head, and did my best to take her advice.

When I woke the next morning, the apartment was filled with dim, watery light from an overcast sky. Anthony was standing at the window of the living room, staring out at the rain, one hand flat against the glass.

"Anthony?" I asked, pulling on my bathrobe and padding out to her. "What's wrong?"

I peered over her shoulder at a world made curiously two-dimensional by a dark curtain of steady rain. As I put my arms around her waist, Anthony rested her head on my shoulder, still staring out at the bare trees and gloomy street. She didn't answer, but then, we both knew the answer anyway.

"I'm glad it's Saturday," I said inconsequentially, thinking of the walk from the T to my classes. Then: "What shall we have for breakfast?"

Anthony made a sound then, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, very quietly. Emboldened by this, I continued: "I could make French toast, if you didn't want rice. We

have some eggs."

Anthy let the curtain drop, turned, and buried her face in the front of my robe. I hugged her hard. "Look, love," I began. "If you really can't... I mean, we don't have to..."

She put her hand over my mouth to stop me. "Don't be silly," she said, and kissed me, standing on tiptoe. "I'll make the tea and you can make French toast." She pulled me toward the kitchen by the sash of my robe.

So we had breakfast, with all the lights in the kitchen on. Chu-Chu upset the syrup onto his plate and we laughed.

There was this nightmare I had, back while we were running. I had it a few times and the bones stayed the same, though the details changed. But I always woke up screaming. This is the most vivid memory I have of it:

I was in a rose garden that was the dueling arena and Dios was there, standing on his monument. He scowled down at me and said, "You can't be a Prince. You're a girl. Only a boy can properly wield my Sword." He pointed. I looked around and saw that Touga and Saionji were in the garden with me. They opened their pants and out sprang these swords. They started jumping around each other, exchanging witty repartee and clashing the swords together. Then Dios turned into Akio and he told them that they could only duel while doing this intricate little folk dance step. So they started dancing; it was a seven-beat step that Touga managed easily, but Saionji couldn't keep up.

Juri and Miki made disgusted comments next to me. Then Kozue showed up and yanked Miki's pants down and stuck his sword hilt there. Despite his protests, she dragged him off and pushed him into the fight with the others. After just a few crashes of blades, his sword fell off and he ran away, zipping up his pants. Juri ran out and tried to fight too, holding her sword in her hand, but she came back to where I stood, looking exhausted, and said, "I just can't take it anymore." She had two locket brooches and used the pins to tear her eyes out. Then she dropped the locket brooches because she couldn't see them any more and staggered away. The locket brooches shattered on the roses without any sound.

Akio stood over me and pulled my sword from my chest, which both hurt and was pleasurable. He opened his fly and affixed my sword there. Then he smiled at me, said, "In the end, all girls are like the Rose Bride," opened his arms, and came for me.

I don't like to remember what happened after that.

Part Seven: Conventicle

VII

*At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
and my own spirit for light;
and my spirit with its loss
knows this;
though small against the black,
small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;
before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass.*

--from "Eurydice" by h.d. [1917;1925]

I was annoyed when I realized that Miki had never emailed me. I called his room, got his answering machine, and left a short message for him to call or email me, whichever he preferred. I reflected sadly upon that month's telephone bill for a moment after hanging up. Then I went to class.

My head was full of cotton all morning and afternoon. I couldn't think my way out of a paper bag, and my lab partner was particularly cynical about it. So, after class was over, I stopped by the gym, changed into sweatpants and sweatshirt, and went for a run to try to clear some of the cobwebs.

Jogging over the BU bridge, I could see the spot where we'd met Saionji and Touga the day before, and my thoughts naturally turned to considering the events of that evening. The sky turned a crystalline blue as the sunset faded, and the moon was high and fat. I turned my face toward Boston, away from the little park. With some effort, I coaxed my mind to stop spiraling around the whole incident. I took a deep breath and kept running.

The Charles River rippled strangely, something about the light and wind combining to make it look like it was flowing backwards. Or maybe the tide was coming in. The vast red triangle of the Citgo sign was growing and shrinking across the river, and near it, the Hancock building's weather tower flashed red.

Flashed... red?

I wasn't on the path along Memorial Drive. I was running through a vast hall, dimly whitewashed by moonlight from the high windows. There were archways watching me, silent spaces that gaped above and beside me. I had walked this hall before. Some part of

my mind realized that my footsteps were ringing on marble floors, not thudding onto the path. My feet faltered naturally at the point the guidance counselor usually stopped me when I was coming in to class.

Echoes of feet and voices, murmuring all around me. It was cold, like a damp basement, and smelled musty. I heard a drip of water, breaking through the sounds. I shivered. I heard distant voices cry, "Utena-sama!" It was joined by others that churned in a weird distortion. I thought I heard Wakaba's voice.

Crisp footsteps clicked across the marble tiles in the darkness yawning ahead of me. I glimpsed a white boot in a stray beam of moonlight. I backed up slowly.

A flash of red satin and white.

I turned and ran for the front door, but skidded to a halt on the slippery floor when I saw that it was closed.

The footsteps stopped. Not even voices hung in the dank air.

I turned again, sharply, to look behind me.

Looming over me was the tall white uniform, high-collared and decked with gold braid. A white cloak, lined with red, flapped in a nonexistent breeze.

There was no one in it.

One of the glove-tipped sleeves reached for me.

I screamed and threw myself backward -

-- and I was on my backside and one elbow on the path by the Charles. I looked around wildly, garnering a concerned look from a fellow runner.

Sweat was pouring down my back.

The Hancock tower was a steady blue. Good weather. The heavy moon hung in a sky unmarred by the Ohtori tower.

I ran all the way home.

I lounged on the bed in the hotel, looking out the window at the sluggish, brown Mississippi and the soaring, gunmetal-gray arch. Anthony sat next to me, rifling through our maps and guidebooks.

"London, Cairo, Istanbul," she recited, sorting through our travels. "Athens, Venice,

Munich, Paris, New York, Washington, New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, St. Louis..." She stopped, holding a stack of maps in one hand and looking at me. "Utena, what do you want to do?"

"I was just thinking about dinner..." I began.

"No. Where do you want to live? What do you want to do?" She moved to sprawl on her stomach between my legs, leaning her arms across my hips to look up at me. "You're free now. We haven't seen a sign of him since New Orleans."

"Well," I said, "I guess I'd always thought I'd go to college someday."

She nodded, chin on her hands. "Any ideas where?"

"Uhh. I never gave it much thought beyond, you know, local stuff."

She smiled. "Then where would you like to live?"

"Somewhere that's not hot all the time," I said quickly, and she laughed. Abashed, I continued, "What about you?"

She shrugged. "Everywhere is the same to me." Her eyes dropped to Chu-Chu's latest dilemma with map-folding on the floor. "As long as I'm with you, I'll be fine."

I reached down and pulled her up onto me, so I could lie with my arms around her. "Just someplace... nice, then. I really liked it when people didn't, you know, stare at us in New Orleans."

Her arms slid around me and she lay her head on my chest. "San Francisco? You liked it there, right?"

"Except for the scare." We'd spotted a tower that looked just like the Ohtori tower one day. I'd hyperventilated until Anthy pointed out that it didn't have a balcony on it, nor a school attached to the bottom.

"Or Boston, maybe. There's lots of colleges around both places."

"Y'know, there's this issue of me not graduating from high school."

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said, her smile crinkling the corners of her eyes. "I'll help."

Anthy caught me around the waist as I staggered into the apartment and nearly fell flat on my face. "What...?" she asked, a little startled, but already becoming cool and competent.

I didn't remember much of the run. But I started to gasp out what had happened beside the Charles.

Somehow, sometime later, I was sitting in a hot bathtub, hands clasped around a hot mug of tea, and I was saying, "But, Anthony, it was just like a dream, except it wasn't a dream, I was awake and running and knew exactly where I was and it wasn't like a dream at all except for the uniform -" my voice broke against my remembrance of the thing - "I mean, no one started singing or turned into a car or anything..."

She finally laid a hand over my mouth to stop me. My babbling ground to a halt reluctantly, but I suddenly discovered that I could breathe again.

"Drink that," she said, rising from her crouch.

"What is it?" I asked, drinking obediently.

She quirked a smile. "Do you really want to know?" Then she walked out to the living room.

"Tastes funny," I muttered after her, suddenly in a foul mood.

The kitten came in at that moment and distracted me by hopping up onto the edge of the tub and patting at the surface of the water. I warned her about falling in, but she didn't pay any attention to me.

Anthony came back in a few minutes later. "I called Miki. He's on his way. Just needs to get tickets." She laid a hand on my forehead, then leaned down to kiss my nose. "It will be all right, love. It just confirmed what we knew last night: Touga has told him."

"How did he find me, though?" I asked. "I thought... I thought that thing you did hid me."

She sighed and looked out the bathroom window. "I think it must be on its way back to you. And he knew where we were. It was just a lucky guess."

"It was damned creepy. Like... like walking in a haunted house. And the uniform..." I shuddered.

"I know. Things have certainly changed." She continued to stare out the window.

Nanami pushed Chu-Chu into my bath with a clumsily affectionate headbutt, and barely avoided tipping in herself.

I put the stamp on the envelope and set it in the stack of outgoing college applications. "There. Finished." I looked out the window over Seattle and the vast grey-blue stretch of Puget Sound toward the craggy, snowy peaks of the Olympic Mountains. "I hope I get

into Berkeley. I really liked it there."

We'd settled temporarily while I applied to colleges. I'd been fretting for weeks. Was I doing the right thing? Should I just get a job slinging coffee at Starbucks?

Anthy's hands rapidly moved through the length of her hair, twining it together. She said, distractedly, "Of course you'll get into Berkeley. We should start looking for apartments now."

It took a few moments for her comment to sink through the daze of essay-writing that had built up over the past few days. Then I looked around at her sharply.

"Anthy, you can't! You can't just make them accept me!"

She looked at me with a startled and puzzled expression. "What do you mean?"

I sighed and unclenched my hand before I broke the pencil. "It's cheating. It's bad enough that I'm telling them I graduated from some school I've never heard of before, without any ... influence. Do you see what I mean?"

Anthy finished braiding her hair and sat on the edge of the desk, the braid trailing into my lap. She looked down at me. "No, actually, I don't."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. How to explain? She watched me patiently. "It... it wouldn't be fair," I said finally.

Her brow furrowed. "None of it is fair, though," she pointed out. "Other people use their parents' money, or a knack for those tests, or plunging cleavage. Everyone uses what influence they have. Why are you trying to be fair in a system that's not?"

I gnawed on my knuckle for a moment, feeling sad and confused and frustrated. "Anthy, I'm just... it just doesn't feel right." I looked up at her. "It's just not right."

She studied my face gravely, and I could see her trying to piece together my meaning. Then her eyes widened and she looked away quickly, staring out the window over the water and mountains. "Ah. It's one of those things, isn't it?"

I didn't understand what she meant. At least, I couldn't put it into words. I stood and turned her chin gently toward me. For just an instant, I saw an infinitely deep sadness in her eyes. She blinked and it was gone, and she stretched up to kiss me.

When she pulled back, she flashed a smile. "I should have known, Utena-sama. I'm sorry."

"Hey," I protested, sitting down again, "don't call me that."

She laughed and looked back out the window. Several large, white ferries were laboriously churning over the Sound to and from the peninsula.

"I'm still not used to living with a prince, you know." Her voice was hollow.

"Anthy," I said, reaching for her again, trying to find something to say to make her sound less... distant - no, not distant, but I couldn't think of a word for it. "I love you. Please don't -"

She slid off the desk into my lap and pressed her face into my neck. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. We sat like that for a long time.

I got a rejection from Berkeley a few months later, but got into Boston U, so we moved to Boston.

Miki emerged from the gate looking grim and travel-weary. His gray slacks were rumpled and his white shirt - probably crisp when he put it on - had long since wilted into wrinkles. He carried a long leather case in one hand and a leather bag over his shoulder. Pausing just out of the lane of traffic, he swept rather limp bangs back from his forehead, looked behind him, then looked around the waiting area. His eyes lit on us with considerable relief.

As I stepped toward him, I stopped dead and stared. A slender blonde woman with a high forehead and pixie face - incidentally looking fresh as a daisy in her own khaki slacks and pale yellow blouse - emerged from the gate and strode up to Miki. He turned to smile nervously at her, said something, and gestured our way.

Nanami looked at me.

Her eyebrows arched, contemplating my well-faded jeans, my flannel shirt, my BU t-shirt, my ragged hair that needed cutting. The sharp (yes, definitely knife-edged) gaze swiveled to Anthy, taking in her black skirt and leggings, the peasant blouse I'd bought her at King Richard's Faire, and the length of her frowsy braid. Then she sighed heavily, shook her head, and murmured something to Miki. His smile grew more nervous by several degrees.

Finally, I managed to make my feet work. Anthy paced me exactly, and even took my hand (which act drew Nanami's eyebrows even higher than I thought possible), though for my comfort or her own, I didn't know.

We stopped about six feet from them. Miki exploded in a cloudburst of anxiety: "Tenjou-san, I thought it best... I called... I was afraid..." He paused, took a deep breath, and said, "Tenjou-san, Himemiya-san, you, of course, remember Kiryuu-san."

Anthy found her tongue before I did. "Of course we do. A pleasure to see you again, Kiryuu-san." I strained, but couldn't hear a single note of sarcasm in my lover's voice.

Nanami, for her part, scowled, then sighed again and extended her hand. "Himemiya-san, I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to you and Tenjou-san. Miki-kun has been telling me things..."

"Yes," Miki broke in, "and we probably shouldn't stand around here and talk."

I put a companionable arm over Miki's shoulder. "It's all right, Miki-kun. You're here and we're here and it'll be all right. So why don't we go downstairs --" I glanced at Nanami. "- to pick up your baggage, and we'll get on home."

Nanami was eyeing Anthy critically. "You're older," she said. "I didn't expect you to look older."

Miki gasped, but Anthy smiled a thin Mona Lisa smile. "Everyone gets older, Kiryuu-san."

But Nanami's comment made me look at Anthy again. We'd been together continuously for years now, so I hadn't actually noticed, but of course she did look older. She looked like a 20 year old woman. Like we were the same age. I'd just taken it for granted. I noticed Miki, once he'd gotten over his horror at Nanami's apparent rudeness, studying Anthy's face too.

Nanami looked satisfied by the reply, though, and she and Anthy shook hands with a certain formality that made me suspect an unspoken truce. A little cajoling got Miki into motion - I guessed that there was more to his nerves than a trans-Atlantic trip in Nanami's company could account for. We needed to get him home and some tea into him.

"I'll apologize in advance, Kiryuu-san, for our apartment," I said as we moved to the baggage pickup. "We're students, and, well, we live like students."

Nanami's smile turned on me, and I wondered that I couldn't find any malice buried in it. "It's all right, Tenjou-san, I'm very familiar with student life. Though I'm not one myself yet, my boyfriend and his friends all are. I spend a lot of time in little flats with art posters to cover bare brick walls and such. I'm sure it will be fine."

I smiled back too broadly, inheriting a bit of Miki's nervousness. "Do you mind cats?"

There was a tiny tic at the corner of her eye, a slight rictus in her smile, but she said, "Oh, no, not at all. Do you have a cat?"

"Yes," I replied, suddenly embarrassed.

"Her name is Nanami," Anthy said innocently.

Nanami's cheeks flamed red, then just as suddenly paled. "I... see." She cleared her throat. "I'm sure it will be fine. Just don't get us mixed up." She laughed, and it was a laugh I hadn't heard in a long, long time, the formal, upper-class, Japanese laugh behind her hand. It drew attention from nearby bewildered Americans. My realization that Nanami,

of all people, was just as nervous as I was did much to relieve my feelings.

It took us less than a week of hunting to find the perfect apartment. It helped that the landlord's wife was Japanese, I think, though I did have to ask her what schools she'd attended. Thankfully, Ohtori wasn't on the list. Talking to her made me homesick. I suppose I hadn't really thought about the fact that I hadn't seen my country for years, and hadn't exactly had an opportunity to say goodbye.

I stared at the old cherry tree outside, wondering what it would look like with flowers on it in the spring, as Anthy wrote the check to the landlord.

We were alone, finally, in the echoing, empty apartment. Anthy put her arms around me from behind and lay her forehead between my shoulder blades. I squeezed her hands. I heard Chu-Chu squawking in the kitchen: he'd gotten caught inside a cabinet.

The running was over. This was our home for at least the next four years. I...

"Anthy?"

"Yes?"

"How are you paying for everything?" I turned in the circle of her arms and looked down at her. "I never thought about it... what a spoiled idiot I am! Going along, with you paying for everything..."

Anthy laughed into my chest and I stopped mid-rant. "What?" I asked finally, a little irritated.

"Utena," she said between snickers, "just don't worry about it. We have plenty of money."

"From where?" I asked. When she looked at me blankly, I said, "It has to come from somewhere! Not even you can *make* money out of thin air. So whose money do you end up with?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "You really don't understand, do you?" she asked softly, but I think it was more to herself than to me. "Money isn't *real*, Utena. It doesn't come from anywhere or go anywhere, not really. It's just... a polite fiction. Especially these days," she added thoughtfully.

I didn't understand - to be honest, I still don't, not really - so I frowned and looked thunderous until she patted my cheek. "If it will make you happier, I'll get a job."

That disconcerted me. "But... but I should too..."

"No," she said, and I had a sudden feeling that it would be unwise to argue this point with

her. "This is your time for college. For enjoying yourself. Let me take care of you for this time. Later, when you're done, we can renegotiate."

"But what will you do?" I asked. "Take care of roses, like you said once?"

"No." She turned away to go rescue the by-now-hoarse Chu-Chu, but I caught a mix of mischief and... something else... in her face as she said, "I think I'll drive."

It was a long ride in the car back to our apartment. Our course took us around Boston rather than through it, and we were passing through ugly industrial regions bordered by strip malls and somewhat shabby blue-collar neighborhoods. Nanami was silent, but I could feel an escalating tension from the front passenger seat. I sat in back with Miki, occasionally pointing out items of interest.

I had just commented on the Mystic River when Nanami said, "Why are we here?"

I blinked, having to bring my mental train around to the correct station. "You mean, why are you and Miki here, in this city, or why are we driving through Medford?"

The younger Kiryuu favored me with her most withering glare and, apparently, she'd been working on the quality of her glares.

"I called Miki," Anthy supplied, passing another car precipitously and making us all grab for support. "I called because Utena wants to do something about stopping the duels."

"You think the duels are going on again? Without us?" Nanami asked incredulously.

Anthy proved herself no slouch in the glare department, and threw a dollop of condescension on top. "Kiryuu-san, the duels were going on for a *long* time before you showed up. I assure you that they've continued."

Miki winced and stared out the window. Nanami gaped for a moment, then shut her jaw with a snap. "All right. But weren't you integral to the game?"

"The Rose Bride is integral to the game," Anthy said.

"And you aren't the Rose Bride?"

"Not anymore."

"Who is?"

"That," I said, "is what we need to find out, Kiryuu-san."

Nanami lapsed into silence again, staring out her window.

Back at the house, I made some tea while Anthy got Nanami settled in the guest room. Miki was sprawled carelessly in our one comfortable chair, cheek leaned on fist, staring off into space. I set the tray down on the table and myself on the couch.

"So," I said, "what's wrong?"

He jerked his head upright and blinked startled blue eyes at me. "I... what? What makes you think something's wrong?"

I just gave him a look. He looked guilty. "Okay, so I guess I'm not very good at hiding things," he admitted.

"So," I repeated, "what's wrong?"

He shrugged with one shoulder, trying for nonchalance. "Robert and I had a fight just before I left."

"I bet you two have a lot of fights," I guessed. "What's different about this one?"

Miki blinked at me again, so I understood that my guess was shrewder than I'd expected. "Well, he never walked out on me before." He sat forward, dangling his hands between his knees and hanging his head forward. "I... he didn't want me to leave, to come to America. He pleaded and shouted." Miki rubbed one hand over his face, into his hair. "I told him I needed to go, some people were counting on me, that I'd promised. I finally said it had to do with high school, hinting that it was related to Kozue, and he just exploded. I don't understand." His shoulders shook, and I put a hand on his back. His voice was ragged with the tears he didn't dare shed on the trip over. "When I wouldn't stay, he threatened to leave me. I said it was too important not to go, that if he-" Miki swallowed hard "-loved me, he'd understand that. He said I didn't care a bit about him, that I was doing this just to test him, that I was some terrible passive-aggressive, manipulative neurotic and I'd been just teasing him along because I needed to feel superior to someone. And then... then he stormed out."

"Oh, Miki," I said, at a loss for words. I hesitated for a moment, then knelt next to his chair and hugged him. He cried almost silently into my shoulder. I could hear Anthy talking with Nanami in the guest room, and I was thankful for my lover's preternatural perceptions.

I petted his hair and stroked his back and let him cry. The kitten came over to investigate, and she gently patted his shoulder with her tiny paw. It made him laugh and reach out to scratch her under the chin. Finally, he sighed and pulled away, still keeping his head down and rubbing his eyes. He asked, in a small voice, "Utena, I'm not like that, am I?"

I pushed a tissue box over to him and sat back on the couch. "No, Miki, you're not."

He blew his nose, then sat with his head down, dangling his fingers for the kitten to play with. "I haven't heard anything from Kozue. I tried calling there for her, and I got her dorm but was told that she was out. So she's there, Utena." He looked up enough for me

to see his eyes through his bangs. "I have to get her out. Away from him. Now."

I exhaled slowly and raked my fingers through my hair. "That's the plan, Miki-kun. That's the plan."

"Anthy," I began, as I wiped down the big window in the living room. The tree outside had fulfilled all my fondest dreams of furious blooming. White and pink petals covered the ground like a very late snowfall, and more drifted on the cool April breeze. Tulips and daffodils that Anthy had put in the ground the previous fall put up spikes of fiery reds and clean yellows among the petals.

"Yes?" She sat back on her heels from scrubbing the kitchen floor.

"When is your birthday?"

She stared at me, startled, for a few moments. Then she smiled. "Oh, we used to celebrate it on February twenty-ninth."

I raised an eyebrow. "So you only had to celebrate once every four years?"

"I was used to celebrating every four years, with a very big celebration." She paused, smiling, staring into space. Then she shook her head.

I gazed out at the tree for a few minutes, and I could feel Anthy watching me. Then I heard her start on the floor again.

She said, "After the big celebrations ended, I had a regular yearly celebration. On... oh, what would it be now? July... July... sixteenth? It's hard to remember now. It may have been June or May."

I frowned at her. "Why did you stop?"

A smile quirked the corner of her mouth and she said, tone dripping mischief, "Oh, you know, it gets less important as you get older, and I was getting sort of tired of it all anyway. Then the empire fell, and no one had time anymore."

"Anthy," I said dangerously.

She gave me her best blank, innocent look -- which, considering all her years of practice, was good indeed -- and said, "What?"

I grumbled into silence.

But I took her out to dinner on July sixteenth.

"So," said Nanami, drifting over to the window with her tea. "What exactly is all this about? Miki says you've got a lot to tell me." Both her voice and her back were stiff.

I looked at Nanami's back and wished heartily that Anthy hadn't decided to go out to the garden. How was I supposed to answer this?

Miki helped unexpectedly. "Nanami, decide whether you're going to believe them or not right now. Don't waste their time and mine. I remember enough of what happened to believe them."

I snagged the kitten out of mid-air as she launched herself at Miki's shoulder from one of the bookcases, and cuddled her under my chin.

Nanami turned around to look at Miki, eyes narrowed. "I remember more than you do," she asserted. Her eyes flicked to me for just a second, then went back to Miki. "Yes, the whole thing is unbelievable. But we lived through it, so we must believe it, or... Well, we have to believe it."

Miki nodded curtly, an expression which reminded me of Juri suddenly. I wished she were here. Nanami would have listened to her. Maybe.

I heard some noises from the greenhouse and knew that Anthy was singing in the garden. I thought it was a vast improvement from her days of silent contemplation of the flowers, but I know that not everyone agrees with me.

Nanami turned back to the window and put her cup of tea down on the windowsill. "That said, what are you planning, Utena?"

The challenge in her voice was unmistakable and I couldn't help sighing. Nanami - the kitten Nanami - bit my chin, and I put her down absently. "I'm not planning this all by myself--" I started to point out.

I was interrupted by Anthy's voice -- not entirely on key, but certainly clear enough -- drifting in:

*"Qui chante pour les filles qui n'ont pas des amies
Qui chante pour les filles qui n'ont pas des amies
Pour moi, je chante guere car j'en ais une jolie!
Aupres de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Aupres de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormi!"*

Nanami turned around to stare at me with an expression of outrage, and I felt my face burning. Anthy sang this song to me when she was feeling mischievous, insisting that I was "her blonde" despite my protests. I didn't speak French, but she'd translated it for me, and her expression while she'd done so convinced me that she meant every scrap of innuendo.

Miki laughed suddenly. "Nanami, don't look like that. It's not as if you didn't know."

"That's not it," she said thickly, turning away so that we couldn't see her expression. I looked at Miki, wondering what was going on, and got a look of sympathy from him, which was nice but didn't tell me much.

There was an awkward pause. Anthy came around the side of the house and was visible from the window for a moment, a white rose tucked behind her ear. She found the trowel she was looking for, waved it at me (and Nanami and Miki) through the window, and went back to the greenhouse.

"Well," Nanami's voice was suddenly mocking, familiar. "But you *are* the winner of the Duels, the unbeatable Tenjou Utena! Surely *you* know what to do." I stared at the well-dressed woman standing in my living room and suddenly saw the arrogant girl, dressed in her black and yellow uniform, in her place.

"Look," I said, trying to speak to both the woman and the girl. "That's all over. We have a new situation to deal with now, and we need to work together."

I wished Anthy would come back inside. She's so much better at this sort of thing than I am.

"Together!" said Nanami sarcastically. "I wish I knew what you think you need *us* for."

"Look," I said again, nearly losing my temper. "Do you want to get Touga out of there or don't you? I wrote to you because I thought you cared about him."

At this point, Anthy's song rang through again from the garden:

"Que donneriez-vous, belle, Pour avoir votre ami? Que donneriez-vous, belle, Pour avoir votre ami? Je donnerais Versailles, Paris et Saint-Denis! Aupres de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon, Aupres de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormi!"

Nanami turned to glare at me again, but her gaze shifted to something distant. Her eyes widened and her face went nearly gray. I set my tea down hastily.

"All right," she whispered, girl and woman together. "I'm... I'll help." She sat down heavily in a chair, then looked up at me, her blue eyes narrowed again with some of the old expression of sharpness. "I think I see why you need me."

I heaved a sigh of relief and sat down myself. "Good." I could still hear Anthy's singing, but could no longer make out the words.

Miki seated himself on the couch next to me.

Anthy interrupted us at that moment, coming in from the back bedroom with an armful of chrysanthemums in fall colors, yellows and oranges and reds and browns. She passed into the kitchen, still humming, and arranged them in one of her many big vases. Then she

carried them out to the living room and set the vase on the low table, where Nanami, Miki, and I all stared at the flowers as though they might bite.

"Anthy," I said, regaining the use of my voice first. "Where did those come from?"

"The greenhouse," she answered, She was still wearing the little rose behind her ear.

"But there aren't any--" I started.

"Aren't there?" she answered.

"I hate history," I snarled, throwing my book on the floor. "It's boring, it's complicated, and it's boring."

Anthy looked up from her own book, which was far slimmer than mine. "What are you reading now?"

"The American Revolution." I slammed back into my chair. "Like I care."

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Can't help you there, I'm afraid." Her nose was back in her book. "If you ever need to know about the court of Maria Theresa, though, let me know."

I stared at her for a few moments, then said, "Who?"

"Maria Theresa, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire. Great family woman. Terrific wardrobe." Anthy turned a page.

"Ah," I said. "Been reading about her then?"

Anthy gave me a strange look over the top of her book, then went back to reading. "No."

"Ah," I said again, then picked up my textbook and returned meekly to reading about the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

We drank tea and chatted quietly for a while, though Nanami was unusually quiet. I was content to let everything settle for a while and let the conversation travel over lighter subjects than Ohtori. But then the doorbell rang.

Anthy rose to answer the door as if she'd expected the summons. I frowned as she stepped out the door of the apartment. Miki glanced aside at me. "Utena?" he said.

"We'll see," I said.

The door opened again and Saionji stepped into the room, wearing civilian clothing: jeans and a JASDF t-shirt. Miki shot to his feet. "Saionji-san!" Nanami rose more slowly, and didn't say anything.

Saionji glanced around the room quickly. Cool violet eyes settled on me, and he gave me the barest sketch of a nod. Then he stepped forward with a surprising smile to shake Miki's hand. "It's good to see you, Kaoru-san."

"Good to see you, Saionji-san," Miki replied. "I didn't know you were in Boston."

"I came to talk to Tenjou and Himemiya-san," the big man said. "I'm planning to leave tomorrow, but I needed to talk without Kiryuu butting in..." Then his eyes caught on Nanami.

"I assume you mean my brother, Kyouichi." Nanami was standing -- no, posing -- near the window, arms crossed in a manner both imperious and casual.

Saionji opened his mouth, then closed it. My eyes fell back on the chrysanthemums. There was an awkward silence.

Chu-Chu screeched distress as the kitten Nanami, who had evidently been stalking him as he sat peaceably on the kitchen counter eating crackers, pounced. The two of them went rolling over and over, with Nanami biting his head and thumping him with her back paws. They tottered off the back of the counter, which opened into the living room. I made a dive for the entwined pair.

Unexpectedly, Saionji snatched them up. The kitten, offended by everything and everyone, bounded off, leaving Chu-Chu in the palm of Saionji's hand. "You!" he exclaimed, staring down at Anthy's oldest friend.

"Chu?"

I could see a wave of rage gathering behind Saionji's brow and started to move. Anthy cleared her throat.

Saionji shook himself all over and gently set Chu-Chu back on the counter.

Nanami watched all this with narrowed eyes, then relaxed minutely. "Well, you have excellent timing, Kyouichi. We were just going to talk about the Victor's plans."

Anthy and I sighed, quietly, at the same moment. Our eyes met, and hers were positively dancing with amusement. She enjoys the strangest things.

Thunder crackled in the distance. Startled, I scrambled to my feet. "Anthy, we should get down from here."

Anthy sat on the stone outcropping, watching the storm moving in from the west. The sun was in danger of being blotted out by the thick black cloud. We'd both been sitting there, watching the thunderhead boil up to the jet stream and flatten out as it hit it, marveling at the majesty of the thing at a distance and speculating about the rain and lightning and wind happening beneath it. She looked up at me. "Why?"

I blinked at her stupidly for a moment, then said, "Because we'll get wet if we don't!"

She shrugged gently. "We'll get a soaking whether we're here or running down the hill. We can't get to the car in time now."

Thunder made me jump. I glared accusingly at the great looming thing, then looked back to Anthy. "We'll get struck by lightning!"

"We won't."

"How can you be so --- um? Uh? Anthy?"

She distracted me as the storm skidded toward us over the landscape. Trees rolled away from us on both sides of the hill, and a few stood a good fifty meters away on the hilltop with us. Thunder cracked and rumbled more and more often until even Anthy couldn't distract me any more.

"Anthy, we're gonna die up here," I said faintly, my breath being sucked away by a shuddering chill wind from the storm.

"Hardly," she whispered in my ear as large, cold drops of water began to splash against my bare back. I yelped, and she laughed.

"Someone's going to *see* us," I said through gritted teeth, my fingers tangled in the grass on either side of her shoulders.

"During this storm?" she teased. "Nonsense."

I could hear the hissing rain moving along the hilltop toward us, and then we were inundated. It was cold, and there were tiny pieces of ice coming with the rain.

"Hail!" I complained, moving to cover her more completely.

"Here, let me help..."

I was so thoroughly distracted that I barely noticed the storm after that, and only registered its existence again when it had passed. The sky came out blue again, with the sun shining hot down on us. Wet, chilly, and grinning like a pair of children, we dressed each other and began our descent from the hill.

A half mile further, we encountered an old tree that had been split by one of the near lightning strikes. Steam still curled from its sundered center, and flinders were scattered as far as a football field away. Anthy moved to the blasted trunk and ran her hands over it gently, humming something I couldn't catch. After a moment, she reached into the broken place and pulled out a splinter of wood as long as her forearm, darker wood than the rest of the pieces and charred along one edge. I looked down near my feet at the shattered limbs -- heavy bunches of tiny green apples sprawled out from them.

We made our way along silently for a long time, until I noticed another storm cell moving toward us. "Aw, damn," I muttered.

"What?" she teased. "Didn't you enjoy the last one?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Of course I did. I just... I'd rather get to the car, and it's going to be another hour at least of hiking." I paused to shift my jeans, which were sticking to my thighs in uncomfortably stubborn folds. "And these wet clothes chafe something awful."

Anthy held my gaze solemnly for a long moment before shrugging. She turned toward the stormclouds and raised the splinter of wood aloft in both hands. Her hair streamed behind her in the breeze as she stood motionless.

For a long time nothing happened. Then something disrupted the darkest part of the storm -- it twitched, rolled... then shredded like cotton candy. The bits of grey cloud scattered into small, puffy clouds on a blue sky.

I stared at Anthy. I don't think I'd ever been more terrified.

She lowered the wood and cradled it in the crook of one arm. She didn't look at me. She just said, "Even broken things have power. Sometimes, I forget."

Nanami's hands were trembling around her teacup. Miki stared at the floor. Saionji eyed the flowers. I took a long drink of my now-cold tea to wet my throat after retelling the story of my life after the Duel Called Revolution, as well as a detailed account of recent happenings in Boston and what we'd been able to discover about current affairs at Ohtori.

"So," said Miki, "what we don't know is who is now the Rose Bride."

"Or how he plans to retake you, Himemiya-san," Saionji added, turning his gaze out the window.

"The point," I said, "is to avoid finding that out by going to the source of the problem before he makes his final move, which will undoubtedly kill or maim the present Rose Bride."

"Whoever it is," Saionji said distantly.

"Whoever it is," Miki agreed.

Nanami carefully set her cup on the table. Then she raised her eyes to look around at us. "I don't care who the Rose Bride is," she said in English, with clear enunciation. Slipping back to Japanese, she added, "But it is clear that my brother is in this deep, and he is being used. I want to get him out."

Anthy looked up from her own teacup. "I don't think you realize, Kiryuu-san, that your brother is one of the people most likely to be the Rose Bride."

After a short, startled silence, Saionji began to laugh, although a slight hysterical edge crept in. "Touga... the Rose Bride! Oh, that's rich! I want to see him in the dress." He continued to laugh.

"What do you mean?" Nanami snapped. "My brother can't be the Rose Bride. The Rose Bride is a woman!"

"A man or woman can play the role," Anthy said. "All that's required is... willingness. Just because I'm female doesn't mean that the next person will be."

"Kiryuu-san is deep into the situation, no matter what," I said hurriedly. "And it sounds like Kozue is likely in a similar situation. I agree that we need to extract them both, if we can."

"I will kill him," Saionji said suddenly. "I will kill him for what he's done to my family."

Anthy rubbed her eyes. "He knows what's happening. He knows we're gathering. We need to act quickly."

Miki leaned forward in his seat, finally looking up. "The plan you were working on, Himemiya-san?"

"My plan is... hard to describe," Anthy said, turning her teacup over on the saucer and turning it counter-clockwise three twists. "Mostly, it consists of getting to Ohtori via... a route that he would not expect." She picked up the cup and gazed into it for a long moment. With a nod, she set the cup back on the saucer. "But I think we'll succeed."

"The Chairman," said Nanami, "is going to be pissed." She sounded pleased.

"Well..." I dangled the kitten in a hammock of my shirt-front to amuse and distract her (er, the kitten). "Yeah. Probably."

Miki looked worried. "Nanami is right, Utena. What can we expect him to do?" Although he was addressing me, his gaze slide over to rest on Anthy, who was letting the kitten bite her fingers through my shirt.

There was an awkward pause in which we all waited for Anthy to pick up the thread of the conversation. "Well, he's been... pissed - " I inserted the English word - "at *us* for a while now, and as I've said, it's been mostly threats. Intimidation. But I don't think..." I trailed off, looking helplessly at Anthy. I knew what I wanted to say, I just didn't know how to say it.

Anthy looked up as though only just now becoming aware of the subject matter (I frowned, as the mannerism -- entirely illusory -- reminded me a little too sharply of the Rose Bride). Then the illusion shattered as she said, rather gently, "We haven't been an active threat to him until now. That's changed."

"It certainly has," said Nanami. "I am NOT going to let him keep my brother," she finished, and I realized, with a sharp inward jerk, that she had not once referred to Touga as "oniisama."

"People are his... support," said Anthy (leaving me wondering what word she was originally going to use). "His strength. He's not going to let anyone go without a fight."

"That's *obvious*," snapped Nanami. "Tell us something we *don't* know."

"He'll try to do the same thing to us," I interposed suddenly.

Miki looked away. Anthy reached over and put a hand on his. Nanami sighed. There was a long pause.

"So," Nanami said a little querulously, "Is there a decent Japanese restaurant in this town?"

I was awakened one night by... something. A conviction that something wasn't right. I lay there, listening for a sound, watching for a flicker of light, trying to sense anything that might explain my sudden surge of adrenaline. All I could hear for several seconds was my heartbeat thudding in my ears. Nothing else.

Nothing else at all.

Nothing...?

I reached over for Anthy, swallowing a sudden sick feeling in my stomach. I touched her shoulder. Her skin was like ice. I groped for the light, fumbling desperately, knocking over a glass of water on the bedside table before I could finally turn the switch. Anthy lay wide-eyed and staring. Still. Very, very still.

I caught a glimpse of something moving in the mirror.

At first I couldn't understand what I was seeing. The mirror was perfectly black,

reflecting nothing -- not the lamp, not the bed, not even me staring at it. Then I saw the stars.

They were moving, ever so slowly -- or else so fast they became only curved streaks of light spinning around an unfathomably empty center. The galaxy in the mirror rotated on an invisible axis, and amidst those stars struggled something, a shape, a shape that could shine like the sun if only I were close enough...

Anthy! I tore myself out of the hypnotic revolution and shook her. Her skin was still cold and oddly resistant to the touch.

"Anthy!" I took her by both shoulders and shook her hard, screaming her name in a voice which tore my throat.

Something exploded within me, a bright light that seared my nerves and flooded my eyes, but I heard Anthy gasp. She was alive. Her arms closed around me spasmodically, as I sobbed my relief. She held me tight against her, turning her body to meet mine, and I crumpled against her shoulder. After a moment, I realized that she was crying too.

I held her and tangled myself with her and we lay together as she cried for a long time and I trembled quietly into stillness. Finally, she lay quiet and I dared to ask, "What happened?"

She was silent for a long moment and then said, "A nightmare."

"But, Anthy--" I had to stop and steady my voice. "You... you weren't breathing."

"I was suffocating."

I swallowed. She took a deep, careful breath and then spat out some of my hair. She laughed weakly, but her voice was still frightened.

"I was dying."

"What?" I half sat up, so I could see her face. "You were?" My voice broke again. "Anthy..."

"Haven't you ever heard that if you die in a dream, you die for real?"

I mulled this over. Then, cautiously, "But... *can* you die, Anthy?"

She sighed. "No."

Dinner was finally over. At Anthy's suggestion, we'd gone for a bit of a walk around Davis Square so Miki and Nanami could have a chance to stretch their legs and we could

all digest our meal. It turned into a longer walk than I expected, I guess because everyone was fairly distracted with their own thoughts. As we stood on the island in the middle of the Powderhouse rotary, though, I wondered how we'd gotten there.

Anthy drifted around, inspecting the plantings as if this little spit of land were a botanical garden. Nanami and Miki seemed to have just come to the same realization I had and were looking at the cars rushing around and through the complicated intersection. I hated to be in the car when Anthy drove through this thing. I opened my mouth to suggest heading home, when I noticed someone coming toward us.

She was a tall, large-boned, rangy woman with skin several shades darker than Anthy's. Some of her black hair was caught into a few shoulder-length, beaded braids, though the majority of it was short and natural. She wore a flowing, tiered, blue and white skirt and a large, loose white blouse. Her stride was determined and graceful. Besides all that, there was some quality about her that drew the eye, some confidence and power in every line of her that made me want to know her, to talk to her, but which scared me a little at the same time. The clean line of her jaw was determined, her dark eyes sharp and lively. She gave me a little smile as she passed me, and I had the feeling that she knew everything there was to know about me.

She came to a stop in front of Anthy, who had turned as if she'd expected her all along. They both bowed to each other very slightly.

The woman held her closed fist out in front of her, palm up. "La Sirene gave me this for you. And so it returns to you." Her voice was deep, touched around the edges with the flavor of the West Indies.

Then she turned her hand, opening her fist, and I knew that I'd seen that motion before. Something sparkling fell.

Anthy caught it neatly, then held it up to inspect it. My Rose Signet.

I heard Nanami whisper to Miki, or maybe to herself, "The mermaid gave...? What the hell does she mean by that?"

"Thank you," Anthy said. "I appreciate your help."

The woman shrugged eloquently.

Anthy looked over at me. "Utena, give me your hand."

I took the few steps to her side, which drew me into the other woman's aura of presence. I'm afraid I stared at her for a few moments. She smiled at me kindly and gestured my attention back to Anthy.

Anthy took my left hand and gently pushed the ring onto my third finger. I shuddered once when it settled in its old, accustomed spot. The other woman watched gravely.

I swallowed hard and looked at my hand. "I... I never thought I'd be wearing his ring again."

The woman laughed suddenly, startling me. "Oh, child," she said, grinning mischievously, "it was never about him. It was her. It was always her." With that, she bowed slightly to Anthy again, turned on her heel, and sailed back the way she'd come. I could hear her laughing until she crossed the street.

"Shall we go home?" Anthy asked. "We've had a nice walk, but it looks like there's a storm coming."

The crowd, my teammates, and the other team all applauded as I was carried off the court.

"If this is as bad as it looks, Tenjou, you're out for the season," Coach said, looking up from wrapping ice around my rapidly swelling knee.

"Dammit, I'm fine!" I protested, not feeling fine at all, but not wanting to let the team down.

"Look, it's all well and good for you to pull this Japanese stoic routine with the other girls," he said kindly enough, though I wondered again how he had managed to keep his job so long making comments like that. "But you and I both know it hurts like hell... you're pale as a sheet, for pete's sake. I know you want to sit through the game, but I'm sending you to the hospital."

I could feel the blood drain out of my face at that. "No! No, Coach, please, I'll just call my roommate and have her pick me up. I'll go home and keep ice on it."

He scowled. "Look, Tenjou, don't give me trouble. Terry's gonna drive you over to MGH to get that x-rayed and checked. You look like hell." He stood up and signaled the team manager.

Terry was a tall, thin, platinum blonde who knew exactly how to hook my arm over her shoulders to help me out of the gym. She was unusually silent as she mostly carried me out to the street.

I hopped along, every motion blacking my vision with pain. The idea of going to the hospital twisted my stomach into a tight knot. Not a hospital. Not a hospital.

Little fireworks went off occasionally in the darkness of my sight. I watched my good foot hit the ground. Hop. Hop. Hop.

"Wait here while I open the door, Utena." She gave me a long, considering look and, I think, a smile. My vision was blurry, but I did my best to focus on her face. She seemed

even taller once I was slumped against the car. "Then I'll carry you over. Don't worry. I'm used to carrying girls."

I nodded again, and looked up at the car.

It was a red convertible.

I screamed and tried to throw myself backward, succeeding only in lunging sideways onto the next car in line and sprawling over the trunk. There was a bright blaze of agony and everything went black.

When I woke up, I was in the emergency room and Anthy was holding my hand. "Your knee will be fine," she said. "You just need to take it easy for a few weeks. You also have a mild concussion from where you knocked yourself out on the car."

I remembered everything. "Anthy?" I said, surprised at how weak my voice was. "It was... the car... my ankle..."

Anthy smiled gently and smoothed my hair. "You really *were* in a lot of pain, love. It was a Volkswagen."

The day dawned bleak and cold. I know because I saw it. Anthy and I had been up much of the night, unconsciously invoking our old celebration of our last night in any place. She had finally fallen asleep. I knew I needed rest, but my mind just wouldn't settle down. Her head was pillowed on my shoulder, her body half-draped over me. I was warm and comfortable... and terrified that this was going to be the end. I couldn't bring myself to sleep through a single second of her soft breathing or warm skin or vivid scent.

It was a long morning.

At some point, the sun came out, filling the room with a wan golden light, and Anthy opened her eyes. And smiled. She always smiled when she woke up and saw me, and I always loved her just a little more for it. This time, I pulled her closer and kissed her hard.

"You've been fretting," she accused a few minutes later.

"Yes," I said. "Did you expect anything else?"

She sighed. "No, not really, though I wish you wouldn't."

"Aren't you worried?"

"Yes. But 'worried' and 'fretting' are two very different animals."

"All right. Yes, I've been fretting and I shouldn't."

"You are who you are."

"But you cleaned the grout in the bathroom over the past three days."

"I am who I am."

She rolled on top of me and we lay shrouded in her hair, which had come out of its sleeping braid four hours earlier.

"Do you think Juri will come with us?" I asked.

"We'll have to wait and see. I left a message on her machine the same time I called Miki."

"We should get up and make breakfa - oh, hey, don't do that! We have guests..."

By the time we finally got up, both our guests were up and dressed. I was grateful for Miki's tact in defusing the fuming Nanami: when we got to the living room, it was obvious that she'd been regaling him with travel tales for quite some time.

We took them up the street for brunch, where Nanami startled all of us by paying. When we got back to the apartment, Saionji was sitting on the stoop, waiting for us. Anthy, Miki, and Nanami went inside, and I was just about to run upstairs to ask our neighbors to look after the kitten for us for a few days, but Saionji caught my arm.

"Tenjou," he said. "I... want to apologize."

I paused and blinked at him. "For what?"

His eyes didn't want to meet mine and he was patently uncomfortable. "I... I'm sorry for the phone call I made to you. The one that turned into... that Keiko walked in on."

I tried being breezy about it. "That's all right, Saionji, unavoidable problems in light of..."

"No," he said. "That's... the argument was embarrassing, yes. There are things that she said... that I should tell you, or Himemiya-san. But I can't. Anyway. That's not the part I was apologizing for. It was... the first part."

I started to say something, but stopped. He was clearly trying to say something important to him, and it would be rude for me to try to deflect him again.

"I don't hate you, Tenjou." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry I said it. It's just... I couldn't understand... you and Anthy. But now I've seen... and I could never treat her as well as you do. I know that. So. Just... keep doing it. Okay? And maybe I'll learn something by watching you." He turned abruptly and entered the apartment.

I had to force my jaw shut. As I went upstairs, all I could think was, "Well, well, well."

"Anthy, are you sure you want me to come with you?" I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, trying to loosen the black tie and adjusting the matching jacket and waistcoat Anthy had chosen for me. "Are you sure you want to *go*?"

She came to the door. My eyes widened. She wore a floor-length, black sheath dress that shimmered iridescently as she moved. It was held up by a strap at her right shoulder, where a bouquet of miniature roses bloomed crimson. "Yes, I want to go. And I want you with me. Why else would I have gone to this trouble?"

The company she worked for as a courier was holding a holiday gala at one of the downtown hotels. Anthy told me that it was company tradition to dress to the nines.

I tweaked the tie uncomfortably. "All right," I said dubiously.

"Come on, the limousine is waiting."

"Limo --?" I said, startled, as she dragged me by the wrist out the front door.

When we got settled in the back of the big car, I half-joked, "So, does everything vanish at midnight?"

She made a face at me and stuck out her tongue.

We rode in silence for a while.

"Anthy," I began, cautiously. "Are you *out* to anyone at your company?"

"No," she replied serenely. "Not yet."

The limousine pulled up in front of the hotel and the driver held the door for us. I stared up the stairs at the doors.

"Do you remember the dance party at Ohtori?" Anthy asked softly.

"Of course." My voice was a little ragged. "You were terrified -- hated to be around that many people, the center of attention. It was terrible... and wonderful at the same time."

"The terrible part is behind us now," she said, and I turned to meet her eyes. She smiled up at me and the world melted away. "Just behave like a prince, my love. It comes naturally to you. We can face anything together."

I lent her my arm, and we went up into the crowd, which parted before us and let us into the grand ballroom. Light shattered on the vast crystal chandeliers and spattered the dark ceiling with spots like stars, and a sea of music swept us onto the floor. Together.

"Bring your weapons," Anthy told us. "If you have any, that is," she added with a glance aside at me.

Of course, Miki had his rapier. Saionji had a katana. Nanami had the dagger of her sword-and-dagger set. I felt a little naked. I wondered how they'd all gotten those things through customs.

"Food? Water?" asked Saionji.

Anthy nodded. "Bring water. Do not, under any circumstance, drink water or eat food of the place I am taking you."

"Then I'd like to take some food, just in case someone gets separated, or we get lost," Saionji said.

She looked at him sidelong. "If someone gets separated, they won't need the food. And we won't get lost."

We all exchanged worried glances, but followed her out the door.

I was a little surprised to find us getting off the bus at the front of Mount Auburn Cemetery. I turned a puzzled - and a little alarmed - look upon Anthy when no one else was looking. She smiled and squeezed my hand.

"It's chilly," Nanami said, looking around at the trees that had been so beautiful just weeks before, but were now bare grey sticks. Without a word, Saionji draped his denim jacket around her shoulders. She looked surprised, but smiled at him hesitantly. He looked away.

Miki glanced aside at the stone building with the Information booth. "Should we get a map?"

"No," Anthy said. "Follow me."

"Well, then, I suppose I've arrived just in time," said a familiar voice.

"Juri-sempai!" Miki exclaimed joyfully.

Juri hugged Miki, shook Saionji's hand, and exchanged nods with Nanami. Then she surprised me with a bearhug. "All right, all right," she said. "Greetings are over. Let's get on with this."

Anthy set off down the road that runs parallel to the street, and we all followed.

I said, "Thought you weren't coming?" to Juri in a low voice. She smiled, shrugged, and

shook her head, which I took to mean that she didn't want to discuss it.

We passed a large monument consisting of a polished granite ball. It made memories stir, vaguely, but nothing rose to the surface. A couple of people with binoculars strolled by.

Anthy turned toward the interior of the cemetery.

Nanami, looking around, said, "What kind of place is this, anyway? This doesn't look like a usual cemetery."

"It's a botanical garden, too," I said. "It's really beautiful when things are blooming. Right now... well, it's pretty still, but..."

"They have roses twined around every signpost," Miki noted.

"And some very large trees." Saionji pointed to one vast, spreading purple beech. It was too big for two people to put their arms around, and ragged clusters of leaves still clung to its branches. We crunched through leaves piled up to our ankles.

"Looks like someone put up a piece of Greek temple there on the lake," Miki said, pointing ahead to tall, white pillars and platform, overlooking a small lake. Though it was bleak, a single white swan swam on the lake, his neck in a beautiful arch as he seemed to meditate upon the water, making the scene strangely serene.

Anthy turned to skim past that memorial. I craned my neck to spot the name on it, but couldn't find it.

"Is it getting warmer?" Juri whispered to me.

A flash caught the corner of my eye. A brilliantly orange bird streaked around in front of us and then disappeared into the woods.

The sun came out. Anthy turned again toward the interior of the park.

No more people appeared. We crested a hill and descended into a little vale with a pond. I frowned. I didn't remember that pond at all, and I'd thought that Anthy and I had visited every body of water in the garden.

Anthy turned to glare back at me. "Stop it, Utena. You're making this more difficult. Just go with it."

I obediently tried to make my mind blank.

Miki pointed. "None of these stones has anything written on them."

Nanami frowned and squinted at one. "I can almost see something written there, but it's not like it's been eroded off the stone. It's more like it's on another stone that happens to be in the same place."

"That doesn't make sense," grumbled Saionji.

The sun was hot. I squinted ahead through the glare.

Anthy pressed through the place where two yew bushes came together. I let everyone go before me - though I had a little disagreement with Juri on who would be last - and finally pushed through into full summer.

Red and orange poppies flamed around me. My eyes burned with the color of the vast field and the blazing sun overhead. It stretched to all the horizons I could see.

"How...?" Saionji was saying.

Anthy shrugged. "If you try to figure it out, you might knock us all out of here. It's an in-between place, and not very stable. I wasn't sure I could reach it."

"Where to now?" Juri asked.

Anthy turned and pointed. Just beyond her, a raw wound gaped in the earth. Clots of red clay were burst out beyond the edges, torn roots thrust out of the walls, and poppy plants were dangling and wilting sadly in the opening. The wind whispered of mourning through the flowers.

Nanami looked at it, then around at the field. "If there are chariot tracks in the dirt, I'm not going in."

Anthy turned and walked towards it. "I doubt you'll find those in this day and age. More likely tracks from Goodyear tires."

Why did I say no? (said Juri, much later) I explained as best I could, at the time. I'd been living in the real world and didn't want to go back. I guess I didn't say *why* I didn't want to... but there, I've never been very forthcoming. Not about things like that.

Everything... seemed so real there. More real than reality, I suppose. Even now, although by all rights it should seem foolish and dreamlike, I remember what it meant to be a Duelist, to have Revolution before me as the prize I might win. To know that anything might happen. Anything.

But... the Duelists were so young. They were all so vulnerable in so many unexpected ways. All of them dreaming of the one thing they could never possibly have. But the impossible seemed so real. (She glanced aside at me, and raised one ironic eyebrow.) And no one could work through the wanting... no one could learn how to face that hope on real ground. That hope was the flame and the Duelists were merely moths drawn into it.

Well (she laughed gently, stretching and glancing at me over her shoulder), I guess that goes for me too.

But I left. I got out. I grew up. And I learned about vulnerability, and strength, and... other things. It doesn't mean that I desire nothing in the world. All it means is that I'm not willing to be led by that desire.

And I don't like to be defenseless. Who does? (She shook her head and leaned back against the sofa, stretching her arms along the back and tilting her head back, to gaze meditatively at the ceiling.) Although in the end, we're all vulnerable somewhere. All of us.

Part Eight: Psychopomp

*Underland is not a place like
"your land and my land," hinterland,
Herland, Thailand.
or even run-'em-out-of-here-land.
It's neither Disneyland nor Prisoner land,
Nor of course Fantasy Eye-land.
It's not a movement
to go back to the land,
followed by "get off my land,
go back to your Ownland."
I know you've heard of Homeland and
Strangers in Strangeland, Wonderland,
Funland, Finland, Sunland, and Overland,
and you're not in any of those places.
You're in Underland.
Here, take my hand.*

--*The Queen of Swords* by Judy Grahn

We descended into the wound in the hillside carefully, watching every step. The bright, hot, summer sunshine dimmed behind us as we walked into the dark, hot, humid depths.

The dirt underfoot was loose. There were no tracks there, just roots, stones, and clumps of clay. Roots like hairs stretched out of the walls and dripped clots of dirt as we passed.

On one steep part, a stone rolled under my foot and I started to fall. A strong hand caught me under the arm and held me until I scrambled my feet back under me. I turned in the heavy silence to thank my rescuer, expecting Juri. It was Nanami, however, who smiled grimly and nodded when I made a sheepish face at her.

No one spoke. It was as if a blanket had settled over all of us, as if we were afraid of what might come from the darkness ahead.

I thought vaguely of the cemetery we'd left behind, and wondered if, somehow, we were still under it. Then the ground under my feet slithered away like a living thing and I slid - - irrecoverable by any of the others -- down the slope in a small landslide.

I scabbled for a hold, any hold, but everything was loose, slippery, rumbling down the slope in great, soft thumps. It was abysmally lightless.

Something abruptly -- and painfully -- caught my feet and stopped them. My upper body, still traveling at some speed and being impelled by the force of gravity to continue doing so, heeled over so that I was plunging headfirst. I crossed my arms in front of my face, sure that I was about to die.

I landed hard. The impact knocked the breath out of me so that I didn't notice much detail about my landing place for several moments. I saw purple and blue flashes of light before my eyes in the blackness that enfolded me. Finally, I managed to inhale.

Roses.

Many roses.

I panicked and tried to get up. I hit my head on a long, low piece of wood. There were walls. Sharp pains pricked me all over as I thrashed, deafening myself on rustling noises. I finally stopped, in agony, and tried to conquer my hyperventilation.

I was in a coffin.

I was in a coffin full of dried roses.

I was in a coffin full of dried roses with long, vicious thorns. Or short vicious thorns. I couldn't quite tell. I just knew I was in a lot of pain.

I closed my eyes. There was no difference in the darkness. I inhaled, trying to ignore the dry smell of the roses that caught at the back of my throat and made me want to cough. I exhaled.

Surely they'd be coming after me any moment now. Any. Moment.

"Don't open it. Please don't open it."

The voice came from far away, and was slightly muffled. But I could hear it clearly. A little girl's voice. Blood rushed in my ears as a rush of adrenaline surged to my heart. My voice.

A young boy's voice: "Why have you been hiding in a place like this?"

The girl: "Because this is where I belong. There are coffins lined up next to mine, right? My father and mother died today. And there was one coffin left over. It must have been meant for me."

No! I thought. *I'm* in one of these coffins! Let me out! Let me out! But my voice wouldn't respond. I couldn't move.

"Being alive is kind of sickening."

A different boy: "I see..."

"It's sickening... Why does everyone go on living knowing they'll end up dying anyway?"

Because that's what we do! I screamed inside my head. We live! We fight and we live and... and...

"I wonder why I never realized that until today. Eternity couldn't possibly exist, could it?"

Yes, it could. I live with Eternity.

Then I thought, with some surprise, Eternity is my lover.

"And so, it's all right now. I will never leave this coffin."

I gritted my teeth against the pain and pulled my legs up so my knees were against my chest. With some work, I got my feet flat against the lid. I took as deep a breath as I could, planted my arms against the bottom and sides, and shoved with all my might. For a moment, it seemed like it wouldn't open, and I had a flash of panic that I was really buried alive... but then the heavy wood screamed away from the box, and the lid fell to one side with a crash.

Eternity is my lover.

"Anthy!" I roared with my first lungful of humid cave air, which smelled nothing at all like roses. "Anthy!"

"Utena!" I heard back in several voices, from a distance.

"Stay where you are!" ordered Saionji's voice. "We'll come to you!"

I stayed still and, after a few minutes, I heard stones skittering and spotted the dim circle of someone's pocket flashlight above me. I scrambled up the steep slope, grabbing hold of Miki's hand as I neared the top. Juri held the flashlight, and skimmed over me with the beam. "You look like hell," she said.

"Bruised, but I'll live," I replied, prodding gingerly at myself. There were tiny spots of blood along my arms and hands. "Well, okay, bleeding a bit, too." Then I peered around. "Hey, where's Saionji?"

Everyone looked around then, but he was nowhere to be seen. We called for him without getting any reply. Anthy finally interrupted us. "We have to keep moving. Don't worry, he'll be returned to us."

"Be returned?" Nanami echoed sarcastically. "Who took him?" She still wore his jacket, and one hand was plucking anxiously at the buttons.

Juri scowled. "Utena, did you see anyone when you vanished?"

"I fell," I said. "I heard voices but... but they weren't voices in the present."

"Memories?" Miki asked.

"Who cares?" snapped Nanami. "Kyouichi is the one to worry about now."

"We'll be tested," Anthy said. "All of us."

"Even you?" Nanami inquired with a saccharine twist to her voice.

"I've already passed my test." Anthy turned away.

We all exchanged looks and fell into line after her. The path was rocky and wet, the air stifling. Climbing was an effort. Staying upright while descending an incline was an effort. Just walking was an effort. My clothes were soaked with sweat.

Suddenly, Saionji hurtled out of a crevice. He collided with Nanami, who cried out and might have fallen off the path into a dark pit but for Miki's quick catch. The three of them ended up in a tangle on the ground. Juri and I hurried to extract them from the heap.

Juri hauled Saionji to his feet. He was muddy and his face dripped blood from a slash across one cheek. Nanami produced a handkerchief and reached up to dab at the wound. "Kyouichi, what happened to you?" she asked. There was genuine concern there, which startled me again. A lot about Nanami was startling me these days.

I saw the snarl on his face as Saionji started to shove her away. Then he caught himself and forced a smile, which was more a gritting of teeth. "I don't really want to talk about it," he said. "Ow!"

"Sorry," Nanami said unrepentantly. "Just getting some of the mud out of it. Now you can let it bleed clean."

"Thanks," he replied dubiously, touching the blood with one hand and then staring at it.

"Miki!" Juri swung the light around wildly. "Dammit, Himemiya, how much more of this?"

"As much as is necessary," Anthy said unhelpfully. "If we don't get through this cave soon, it will start all over again."

That was enough to get me moving. I noticed that Saionji limped a bit and clutched his katana tightly.

We walked for a long time. I started running over things in my head, what little we knew about the people we expected to find at Ohtori, the people who might be there, the one person who was certainly there, would always be there...

Miki dropped from the darkness above. Only Juri's reflexes saved her from being underneath him. He managed to make a decent landing on his feet, though he staggered. As Saionji caught his shoulder and steadied him, I saw blood on Miki's fingertips. So did Nanami, I think, because she gasped just before the light went out.

"Damn," I muttered. "Juri!" I fumbled around on the ground where I heard the flashlight fall.

"Miki, are you all right?" Nanami asked.

"Yes," he replied in a dazed sort of way. "Now it's got sempai."

My fingers encountered the light and I fumbled with the switch. Nothing. "Damn, damn, damn. And took out our light at the same time." I slid the broken thing into my pocket and reached out a hand for the last place I saw Saionji. "Need to hold hands, I think." What if Juri didn't come back? What happened if people failed their test?

It was Miki I found, and I felt him wince when our fingers collided, but he held onto me with a sure, if suspiciously sticky, grip. "Are we all together?"

Anthy's voice seemed very far away in the pitch blackness. "Yes. Follow me. I can see just fine."

That last bit of data rattled around in my head for a while. Finally, I just shook it out. "Nothing should surprise me anymore," I muttered to myself.

Miki squeezed my hand for a moment. "Maybe not, living with her."

The silence made my ears ring. I was desperately grateful for any noise my companions made, any drip of water that echoed through the cavern. Miki and I each twisted an ankle at different points in the hike. Saionji's step was getting heavier and wearier -- he even staggered occasionally. Only Nanami's step, firm and light, remained steady. Of Anthy, I could hear nothing.

I jumped when the sound of a sharp, hard inhalation ripped through the dark, followed by a pained roar. Despite the raggedness of the voice and lack of words, I knew...

"Juri?" I reached my free hand out, groping for anything. I found Juri's jacket and seized it. Miki planted himself firmly to help me haul. Juri finally turned and grappled at me, and all together we managed to get her back onto the path. I kept an arm around Juri's waist for a moment longer than was strictly necessary, I think, but I was grateful for her return. Flustered, I backed off until I found her hand.

"All right," she said, voice ragged and hoarse. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"The light broke," I told her.

I felt her shrug. "Just a matter of time." Her voice did not improve with use.

Miki and Nanami cried out simultaneously, and I couldn't brace Miki in time. He fell, and I staggered to one knee. "What happened?" I shouted.

"Saionji-san," Miki said, and I heard him scrabbling at the ground. "It was like the ground opened up and swallowed him."

"There's no hole here!" Nanami said. "Nothing! Himemiya, he's already been tested -- that should have been me!"

Anthy sighed and said, gently, "He failed his first test. He gets tried again. You'll have your turn, have no fear."

"This is a horrible place!" Nanami screamed. "Why did we follow you here? You're probably still working for him! Why should we trust you at all? You've brought us here to kill us!"

There was a scuffle happening. I started forward, but Juri and Miki kept hold of me. I heard the crunch of gravel, a soft grunt and thud as a body hit the ground, harsh breathing. Every muscle strained to launch me forward. When there was the sound of metal scraping on hard leather, I couldn't stay quiet anymore. "Nanami! No!"

There was no reply, just a harder thump as another body hit the ground and more scuffling. Then Nanami's dagger skittered across the stones to my feet. I stepped on it. Then I heard the sound of a fist striking flesh, and the skirmish ended.

"If I'd wanted to kill you," Anthy's voice was weary, "I would've dropped you into the first pit we came across, Kiryuu-san. But you're alive, and I didn't break your neck just then. So start walking, because we're behind time already and I don't know what will happen if we stay here much longer."

Juri picked up the dagger and tucked it into her belt, then the three of us moved forward until we found Nanami. Miki helped her to her feet and put her between himself and me. Then we walked on.

We encountered Saionji lying on the path. When he didn't stir to our calling his name and shaking his shoulder, Juri moved forward and lifted him bodily. I smelled blood. "He's hurt!" I exclaimed.

"Badly," Juri said, voice harsh as a raven's. "The front of his shirt is wet... there's the wound. Stabbed, I think."

Nanami began to weep angrily. I heard Juri grunt, and then she reached for my hand again. "Fireman's carry," she explained. "Let's go."

"Come on, Nanami," Miki said gently. "We've got to go."

"Did he fail again?" she snarled.

"No," Anthy said, "he passed."

"Passed!" She barked a laugh. "Great, maybe I can be incinerated for my test. Be sure to give my ashes to your oniisama."

Anthy laughed bitterly and continued to lead us on.

A few minutes later, with no warning, Nanami tore loose from our hands. I heard her leap off the path to my left.

"Nanami!" Miki shouted.

"Steady on, Miki," Juri rasped. "Keep going. She'll be back."

The darkness and exhaustion was beating my senses down. It was all I could do to keep marching. The hands I held periodically squeezed my hands, and I squeezed back. Some kind of reassurance. I was becoming a disembodied pair of feet that somehow related to a disembodied pair of hands. Nothing else was there. I was vanishing into the darkness.

We came into a thin patch of sunlight from a hole high overhead. It was blinding, but we paused briefly to have a look at Saionji. He groaned as Juri examined his wound, which did indeed look like a stabbing. I was bloodier than I thought I'd be, with a few dark patches spreading slowly on my jeans. Miki's hands... his fingertips were swollen, raw, and bloody. Juri showed no blood except where Saionji's had seeped onto her jacket, but there were livid bruises coming up around her throat.

Anthy stood just out of the circle of light, watching us. I stepped toward her, but she shook her head and glanced away. Just then a noise and motion drew my eye to the same place.

Nanami was on hands and knees on the floor, gasping, coughing, and spitting. Her clothes were soaked and her hair streamed water. I crouched next to her, one hand on her back. She looked up at me through her hair suspiciously, then coughed again.

"How the hell does... it... know?" she asked faintly, eyes on the floor.

"Kiryuu-san," Anthy said with a sigh, "all we meet in here are ourselves."

Nanami bowed her head and said something else, too quietly for me to hear. But I thought I caught at least, "Oniisama."

"Come on, Nanami. Almost through," I said, trying to be encouraging.

"The dyke is cheering me up," she said, with some attempt to regain some of her sarcasm and bravado. "I must be in a bad way."

"Yup," I said cheerfully, hauling her to her feet with a hand under her arm. "That's it, for sure."

The rest huddled close to us. Miki had a hand on Nanami's shoulder, Nanami was touching the front of Saionji's shirt, Saionji had his arm around Juri's shoulders (since she was propping him up), Juri had a hand at the small of my back... we were all together in a way we'd never been before. I turned to look at Anthy, and she looked small and forlorn in the shadows. With some effort, I stepped away from the group and toward her.

For just an instant, I saw the Rose Bride, impaled on the Swords, and I screamed Anthy's name...

I was falling. I was in pain. Run through in betrayal, stabbed a thousand times by hatred for what I embodied, suffocating in the wind of millions of flying things that sucked the air from my lungs.

Not. Again.

The noise wasn't just outside me, it was inside too: in my head, rattling my ribs, shaking the flesh off my bones.

I was falling past clouds and shattered bits of stone. The sky beyond was eerily still and beautiful, silver gossamer clouds stretched over a bright blue vista. Around me sang the swords, a cacophany of hatred. Periodically, one would shoot out of line, punching through my skin with a wrenching pain that was all too familiar.

Not again.

I reached out, caught hold of a big piece of the shattered castle. I pulled myself close to it, remembering a time when the castle broke apart and was miraculously whole again moments later. I clung with one hand.

With my free hand, I took hold of a swordhilt that protruded from my side. There were a lot to choose from. This was the jeweled and gilded one with the gracefully latticed guard.

It hurt. It hurt like hell. It burned. It scraped against bone. But it came free.

Hot blood surged out of the wound; I could feel it running down my side and soaking the top edge of my jeans. I managed to step on the sword blade so that it was braced against the stone. Then, with one sharp, agonizing motion, I snapped the blade.

I landed hard, on my back.

I heard a thin whispering sound all around me, like the wind blowing through trees. Small pieces of metal rained down, pattering gently into the dust.

The sun was bright in a brassy sky. Anthy knelt over me, pulling me into her lap.

I think I was crying. Everyone was staring at me. I buried my face in Anthy's neck until I could breathe again.

"It's over," Anthy whispered to me again and again. "It's over." Then, finally, "This part is over."

"There's more?" I asked, my voice weaker than I'd expected.

"Oh, yes. But no more tests." She smiled down at me. "And you'll all feel better soon."

"Good," Juri said, the sardonic accents of her voice ruined by the hoarseness. I looked up

at her with a wan smile, and she smiled back. There was an echo of horror in her eyes, though, that made me suspect that perhaps the last test wasn't as invisible as the earlier tests.

Silver splinters littered the ground, shining.

"So all we have to do is follow you and keep breathing?" Miki inquired, a little disbelieving.

"Keep breathing, and keep focussed on what we're doing," Anthy corrected.

"We could lose our way?" asked Juri, her voice still ragged but sounding a little better.

"More," Anthy said cryptically, and led us forward again.

My feet crunched on the pale path we walked on. I looked down and found that it was paved with small bones. About the same time, the others discovered this as well. We stepped more carefully as we advanced. I felt particularly superstitious about the tiny rodent skulls.

Our road wound through bizarre territory where the grass grew in dusty patches and the trees were short with round clusters of leaves at the tip of every branch. The sun had parched this land bare. Every breeze engulfed us in choking gusts of sand. Every plant was thin and withered. The sky was full of blinding glare. I swallowed and my throat hurt.

So the vast lake stretching to the horizon was the last thing we expected to see.

The path of bones led straight to it. And into it. I could see it through the clear water. We followed Anthy -- it was surprisingly cold -- until we were up to our waists, and then Saionji balked.

"We can't just walk into this lake," he protested. "That's insane."

Anthy turned to look at him, then glanced at the rest of us. "Insanity," she said, "is relative. Keep walking or we'll never get out of here."

Nanami was not looking happy as the water lapped gently at her belly. "I don't want to," she said quietly.

"Then you'll remain here forever," Anthy said, then continued to walk.

Juri and I urged Saionji forward, and Miki did the same for Nanami. They went reluctantly. We walked. Saionji winced as the water touched his wound.

The water reached our chests. Then our shoulders. Then our chins.

I watched as Anthy continued on, completely submerged, with no sign of floating. In fact, I felt nothing lifting me. It was like the water wasn't there. Yet it was.

The water closed over my head.

I had to will myself to take my first breath, but when I did, it wasn't any different from air. A little moister, maybe, than the desert atmosphere we'd just left.

We looked at each other, amazed, as we all breathed.

Anthy kept walking.

So did we.

Deeper in the lake, my vision started to do funny things. It was dimmer here than at the edges, and whatever it was I was seeing through seemed to get thicker. It shimmered, wavered, and blurred any time I looked anywhere but straight ahead at Anthy's back.

At the edge of my vision, something changed. I glanced aside. Saionji was walking there, but not Saionji. A lithe young man slunk along at my side, decked in tight black leather with rhinestone-studded chains draping his hips and shoulders. His hair stuck out stiffly and artistically in front of his face, while the back of his hair fell in art nouveau ripples to the backs of his thighs. Stark white face makeup, airbrushed into a flame design, startled me most though. His thickly lined eyes darted toward me, then away, then back for a surprised double-take.

I looked down.

I was wearing a pink dress... no... THE pink dress. Sleeveless, with cuffs. I could feel the weight of the crown on my head. I could feel something at the back of my mind that had... expected to see this.

My hands, of their own volition it seemed, tore at the gown, clawed at it, trying to shred it, to get it off my shoulders, away from my body. I heard fabric tear... but the dress slipped through my fingers, insubstantial, and I was left trying to tear my own clothes off. The seam under one arm gaped open. I let go of my shirt, confused.

Anthy continued to move, unchanged.

Someone staggered into me from behind.

It was Juri.

She wore a white uniform with a half-cloak thrown over one shoulder and white gloves on her hands. But the front of the uniform was torn open, her old locket flashing in the light, her undershirt soaked with blood. There was blood elsewhere, too: down her legs

and one arm. All the edges of the cloak were tattered and torn. With one hand, she clutched a broken sword to her chest. She limped. Long, tangled hair hung to her waist.

Her horror-filled eyes were fixed on Anthy.

Anthy glanced back once, I think.

Juri's hand rested on my shoulder and, back to her normal appearance, she shook her head as if to clear it.

We kept walking.

This... road of possibilities... did not give over easily. Nanami fell to her knees at one point, clutching a blind old teddy bear and whimpering, her hospital gown barely covering her. Miki helped her up, the gold braid and tassels on his tight-fitting red uniform vest shining, his trousers immaculately creased, his long hair caught into a knee-length ponytail, bound round three times with wide golden bands etched with roses. Large, round glasses flashed when he turned to gaze at me dispassionately.

Saionji strode next to me in a fancy black uniform jacket, draped with braid, and white slacks. Juri walked along on the other side in a ragged gi and hakama, a katana in her sash, and her hair pulled back and up into a ponytail. When she turned her head toward me, I saw an X-shaped scar on her cheek. Nanami stomped past in hiking shorts and a tank top. There was a suspicious bulge at the small of her back -- something tucked into the waistband. Miki ended up in some strange giant mecha thing with a horn on the front of its head -- he walked very carefully for a while, so as not to crush any of us. I clanked along for a while in cumbersome black armor that was crested with a rose.

With every change, I could feel the whisper of someone who knew or expected it, the edges of powerful emotions that were mine... and yet not mine.

We broke the surface. It was bitterly cold, and we crunched into hard-packed snow as we waded out of the lake. Fortunately, we weren't actually wet. The pine-dotted snowfield stretched away to meet the grey sky at the horizon.

Anthy smiled. "We've come more than halfway now."

"Oh, *damn*," Nanami groaned. "I was hoping we were done."

"Feeling better?" Anthy asked innocently.

We all looked at Saionji. Saionji looked down. His shirt was unbloodied and his chest unhurt. The rest of us examined ourselves and found no hint of the hurt we'd taken in testing.

"How...?" Miki began.

"Possibilities," Anthy said. "I thought I might as well use the possibility that none of you

had been hurt."

We all blinked at her.

She smiled again.

Anthy chose a direction and led us through snow that occasionally reached my knees. It was the kind of snow that squeaked underfoot, a dry snow that blew wildly in the gusts of the bitter wind. I regretted my t-shirt and jeans, envied Nanami and Juri their jackets. Saionji marched onward manfully, though I did catch him glancing wistfully at his jacket once. Miki shivered unashamedly along with me.

"How much further, Anthy?" I called over the roar of the latest blast of wind. "We can't keep on like this much longer!"

She glanced back at me from her position on a small hill and looked a little surprised. She seemed unaffected by the temperature. "Not much," she said, and pointed.

I scrambled up on her hill, which had been nearly scoured bare of snow by the wind, and followed her finger. About a kilometer further, the snow reached a black, frozen river that was lightly dusted with snow.

Beyond that was a lush green field, populated with huge, lazy butterflies, that led up to a green and brooding forest.

Juri cursed over my shoulder. "Something tells me that's going to be one of the longest walks we've ever had."

She was right. It went on forever. Anthy no longer made any sort of pretence at plodding along like the rest of us. Somehow, she walked on the surface of the snow, as if she weighed nothing at all. The rest of us staggered along, huddled together. Nanami and Juri each put an arm around me with half a jacket over my back -- I guess that they noticed when I couldn't control my chattering teeth any more. Miki walked in front of us, since we provided a windbreak for him, and I noticed Saionji taking advantage of it too, near the end.

We finally reached the broad line of the frozen river, and Anthy signaled for us to stop at the edge. She stepped out onto it in her bare feet and crouched down, laying her hands flat on the surface. There was a long moment of her being absolutely still, and then she stood up and came back to us, wiping her hands along her arms.

"We can cross now," she said. "But it *is* ice. You must step carefully. Follow me." She turned back and strode confidently out onto the ice.

Nanami and I started forward, but Juri stopped dead. She was staring at the ground. I

looked down and saw Anthy's footprints on the snow... perfect bloody prints. Then I remembered the reddish streaks on her arms, and looked, horrified, at the river.

Miki cleared his throat. "It's, um, common in myths and legends. It seems logical that we'd encounter it. Come on. I'm freezing and so are you. Let's get on across."

After much slipping and sliding and falling, which left our clothes bloodied with the melt of the river, we dragged ourselves ashore in the field. A strange, twilight world tilted weirdly all around us. The shapes of the trees and stones and hills struck the eye as distorted, but when I focused on any one object, it looked completely normal. The air was still and thick with heavy, green scents. The forest ahead was dark and hung with moss, the grass under our feet was lush and springy, and everything seemed to be blooming.

I looked to Anthy as the others stared. She seemed to be looking for something, squinting into the dim distance. Then a look of combined relief and fear flooded her face. "We must go through this land as fast as we can," she said at last. "Keep moving and keep to the path, no matter what seems to be happening. The path will wind through the woods and cross a plain on the other side. If you leave the path, I won't be able to bring you back to it, and you won't be able to leave this place."

The others nodded. My stomach tightened. I looked ahead at the path. It seemed clear enough, a well-packed dirt road.

I looked back to Anthy and saw only a tiny streak of brown and grey feathers. Behind me, the others surged forward and I had to leap ahead to keep from being knocked aside. I ducked my head and fell into the regular beat of the run.

I lifted my head after a moment to look around. Juri was pacing me, Saionji was in front of us, Miki was on Juri's heels, and Nanami had slipped behind. A small raptor - an owl? - flew just ahead of and above us.

My feet seemed to be flying along with the owl, barely touching the ground, although I could hear them thudding firmly against the dirt. My breath began to move freely, as if I weren't actually running as fast as I could. The wind rushed past my ears, streaking my hair out behind me and giving me a dizzy sensation, although I continued to run along the path without a stagger. The world blurred dreamily with the speed.

Juri flowed out of her clothing... or maybe the clothing just vanished. She ran beside me, grim and oblivious, a pale, smoothly muscled shape. I watched her from the corner of my eye, envying that un-self-conscious grace, the curve of her hips, the rippling muscles beneath her hide, the long legs reaching, the sailing stride that ate the seeming miles...

I blinked. Where Juri had been now ran a lean, beautiful, white hound with ears the color of her hair. I looked ahead and a young stag leaped and sprinted, the whites of his eyes

showing. Unfortunately positioned on the path ahead of the Juri-hound, Saionji seemed to be fighting the instincts that would take him from the path. I turned my head to look behind.

A handsome white and black bird with a long tail shot past me. Dragging in the rear, Nanami stumbled along. She was exhausted, bedraggled, and naked, pale in the thin light of the wood, but kept doggedly putting one bare foot in front of the other.

Then I realized that I could see a long, pale tail streaking out behind me...

My hooves beat the ground under me, consuming the distance. I had to duck and dodge within the woods, losing strands of my streaming mane. Juri had no such problems: being smaller and more agile, she dodged between and through and under things I had to avoid completely or jump. Saionji seemed to have himself under better control and I envied him the effortless springs over forest debris. The magpie danced ahead through the branches, only brought into our line as the little owl ducked ahead and screeched a rebuke. I quickly lost sight of Nanami in the woods.

The path did wind, and wind more than I had feared it would. But I could follow the white flash of Saionji's tail and the pale streak that was Juri, trusting to their better vision in the darkness.

Eyes in the trees peered out at us suspiciously. There was a curious malevolence there - distant, though, hating for the sake of hating, not because we were a particular target.

We crossed a bridge, my hooves and Saionji's clattering heavily. The atmosphere of the forest was getting to me. I could feel panic rising in my chest and throat, lengthening my strides. Every shadow threatened, and it was all I could do to keep from veering into the woods at random.

We broke out of the trees at last into the summer twilight of a broad, grassy plain. The perfumed breeze, warm and soft, lifted my feet and let me forget the hateful dread behind. I began to outstrip Saionji, built as I was for greater endurance than he.

I suppose it was a long road. I suppose that it wound over rolling hills and down through the dales between. I felt like I was running forever. But when we reached the end of the road, a broad, flat, bare hilltop, I wanted to keep running. Somehow, though we were in the middle of a wide green land, there was nowhere else to run. Anthy suddenly stood before us and we all stopped. We milled about, Saionji, Juri, and I. Miki perched upon Anthy's extended hand.

Juri sat down and scratched her ear. I nuzzled Anthy's shoulder and nibbled on her hair. Miki preened. Saionji eyed the tall green grass that ringed the hilltop greedily. He stretched down to taste it -- Juri snarled and snapped at him, driving him back. It reminded me of Anthy's seemingly long-ago admonition not to eat here.

We waited.

It should've taken longer, I think, but I wasn't really perceiving time all that well. The sound of running feet reached my ears and I turned to look...

I was filled with rage -- unreasoning, blood-searing rage. I think I screamed. I know I wheeled back toward the road and began to plunge back along it.

Anthy leaped onto my back and looped something over my head. And then... it was gone. Just gone. Anthy was on my back, holding my mane. I could see Saionji and Juri charging a shrieking Nanami, who was desperately trying to figure out how to avoid these enraged creatures without leaving the road.

Anthy cast something over Miki, who shot off her hand, and thudded my ribs with her heels. I leaped forward as fast as I could. It was clear that I couldn't catch up with Saionji and Juri in time, but we got about halfway there when I felt her weight shift. She threw something after Saionji. I couldn't see it clearly, as if it were blurry or partially invisible.

Then I saw Chu-Chu run up Saionji's back and neck to hold on for dear life between Saionji's ears. There was one long moment, as Saionji lowered his rack to impale Nanami, as Nanami shrieked and fell, covering her face with her arms. And then Chu-Chu did something...

I think he bit Saionji's ear. In any case, Saionji screamed, reared, plunged, wheeled, completely forgetting Nanami in his fury at the pest on his head. This effectively kept Juri from getting to Nanami until Miki caught up with her and flapped in her face, driving her back toward us.

In a few minutes, the flurry was over and we were all standing around, looking normal, back in our clothing, feeling out of sorts. Miki was attempting to comfort Nanami. Saionji was rubbing his ear and shooting evil looks at Chu-Chu. Chu-Chu, for his part, was sitting innocently on Anthy's shoulder, nibbling a cookie. Anthy looked relieved and pulled something from around my and Miki's necks. I peered closely.

"Hairs?" I asked, disbelievingly.

"Mine," she said simply, rolling them up and putting them in her pocket.

In the distance, I heard a horn. The call rose and fell and rose again. The eerie wails that rose after it made gooseflesh rise on my arms and the back of my head. I saw Juri's head snap around to face that direction.

"No, Arisugawa-san," Anthy said quietly.

Juri's whole body strained. One foot lifted... and she put it back down again. She turned away, and the tension drained out of her form. "I... know."

"Perhaps someday."

Juri took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No. I think not."

There was a silence.

Saionji looked around restlessly and said, "Where to now?"

"We rest a bit," Anthy said, "and wait for the moon to rise."

Twilight eventually faded to full night. Weird noises drifted up our hill from time to time, and the horn call came several more times, always a little farther away. Juri sat on the ground, fists clenched, head bowed. Saionji, Miki, and Nanami spoke together quietly. I napped, curled on the grass with my head in Anthy's lap.

When the moon rose, a strangely blank white face shaped like an egg, the rays played over the countryside, transforming the landscape. Trees became arches and grand halls of pale lace. The grassy slopes were patterned grey silk, rippling in gentle breezes. Between the moon and our hilltop stretched a straight, shining road paved with tiles of silver filigree through which a bright, clean light shone.

We all rose and stared at it. Miki seemed drawn to it, gazing, rapt, up at the featureless moon.

"No," Anthy said sharply, just as Miki's foot was about to come down on the path.

He turned, tearing his eyes from his intended destination. "What?"

"That's not the road for us." Anthy swept her hand out, indicating the other side of the hill.

An equally straight road stretched out from our hilltop, but it was a path of shadow, dark and paved with rough stones. Only a hint of moonlight dusted over it, making it glow faintly around the edges of the slates.

"*That?*" Miki said, unbelieving.

"Yes." Anthy took my hand and stepped off the hilltop onto our road. The others followed; Miki dragged behind, looking over his shoulder until we lost sight of the moon and the moon's road.

"So, this is the road to Ohtori?" he asked, finally. "Where did the other one go?"

"Oh, they both lead to Ohtori," Anthy told him. "This is just the one we must take."

It was a long walk. Nanami was exhausted, and it took all of Saionji's efforts to propel her forward with anything like speed. Juri walked along behind me silently, responding in monosyllables if I happened to speak to her. None of us were very talkative, I suppose.

We emerged, suddenly, into watery gray light.

I inhaled sharply -- for a moment or two I thought we had gotten turned around somewhere, if such a thing were possible. It looked as though we were back in Mount Auburn Cemetery.

But the gentle rolling hills of dead grass, the leafless trees, and the tombs seemed to slope strangely upwards on all sides. If it was Mount Auburn, it was a part that I'd never seen before. Then I noticed the single word carved across the marble and iron door of the nearest tomb.

PRINCE.

Above the word, a tiny stained-glass window depicted a rose.

I backed away from it hurriedly, glancing around. On a pediment under a weeping angel: PRINCE. And the obelisk carved with vines of some sort -- PRINCE was the only word on its pedestal. A formless panic rose up in my throat and I backed into Nanami as I turned around, trying to see in all directions.

"Sorry," I muttered.

Nanami shot me a poisonous glare. "We need to be careful," she said, only a trifle sarcastically. "The Chairman could find us at any moment."

"No," said Anthy quietly. "He prefers to forget this place."

I turned toward Juri, mouth open to ask... something, and saw that she wasn't paying attention. She was staring at Anthy, with something dangerously close to pity in her eyes. I glanced aside at Miki and Saionji, only to see them both also staring at Anthy. I turned.

Anthy's hair had come down, and hung in long tangled waves down to her knees. She stood with her arms wrapped around herself, as though she found the breeze more bitter than we did. That same gentle breeze picked up the hair around her face and delicately pulled it back.

She looked so young and sad. She looked as young as she must have back when we were at... Then the breeze flung her hair across her face and back again, and for a moment she looked terribly, terribly old, not wrinkled or worn, but old and hurtfully beautiful. Then the illusion -- if it was one -- faded, and it was familiar Anthy, still beautiful and still sad, but it didn't hurt to look at her anymore.

Anthy sighed. "We're underneath Ohtori now."

I glanced apprehensively up at the gray, distant, clouds.

"Where *are* we?" asked Miki tentatively, after a pause.

Anthy stared upward distractedly. "Can't you tell? This is Ohtori's foundation."

"Buried hopes," said Juri abruptly, in a low voice. Anthy turned to look at her, but Juri turned away, apparently looking towards the curiously close horizon. "We ought to move on."

Anthy sighed and ran her fingers through her hair as if she were considering braiding it again. She apparently decided against it and dropped her hands. "He won't be expecting us to enter this way," she said, "but he'll know when we enter the campus itself. Let's hope that something will distract him, at least for a while." She looked away.

I walked over and hesitantly took her hand. Anthy smiled.

"Let's go," said Saionji.

We're such a pack of selfish children (snarled Juri). Every day, I deal with people who are lost, people who are poor, people who are homeless, people who are insane, people who are sick, people who are devastated, or people who are dead. The real world is pain and fear and madness and death. And here we are, bemoaning the fact that we were, for a few months of our young, rich, privileged, pampered lives, the pawns of something that enjoyed twisting our emotions like knives for its own pleasure. A few *months*, Utena. How does it cause such scars? Why do I still wallow in self-pity over it sometimes? It can't compare with the pain of the woman who has just seen her husband of forty years stabbed to death before her eyes, or the mother whose child has been stolen, or the children whose bodies are sold and sold and sold...

Yes, I understand Himemiya's pain. I understand how terrifying it must be to be used, hunted, stalked. But why am *I* so frightened? Why am I so self-absorbed? What can he possibly do to me that has me this paralyzed?

And then I think, What if he offers me the power of miracles again?

Part Nine: Palimpsest

*Here then at home, by no more storms distrest,
Folding laborious hands we sit, wings furled;
Here in close perfume lies the rose-leaf curled,
Here the sun stands and knows not east nor west,
Here no tide runs; we have come, last and best,
From the wide zone in dizzying circles hurled
To that still centre where the spinning world
Sleeps on its axis, to the heart of rest.*

-- from *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L. Sayers

We climbed a long, familiar spiral staircase, but these steps were of black marble that was dusty with something like ash. The steps were deeply worn in a narrow path down the center, as if hundreds or thousands of feet had walked exactly the same road.

As we rose, clouds obscured the strange horizon and the graveyard it enclosed below.

Water hung in the air all around us, coalescing on our faces and hands and clothing. It didn't rain so much as manifest. The winds were still, thankfully, but the last leg of our trip was still chilly and clammy.

I noticed that the sky wasn't sky at all, but a flat, grey plain that hung above us. The stairs led up to a white marble slab, laid over a large, square hole in the sky. The slab was wide and flat and without features, except for a tiny replica of the school's rose carved in the very center.

"It's sealed," Nanami whispered. "So nothing can get out?"

"No," Miki said slowly. "So he can't get in."

"Then who comes down here?" Saionji asked.

"Who buries the dead?" Juri responded with a pointed look at Anthy.

Anthy studiously ignored them and examined our latest obstacle. Finally, she turned. "He hasn't sealed it from the outside. As I said, he prefers not to remember this place. I think we can move it."

The steps were wide, and we all stepped up to get our shoulders under the marble. Once all of us were braced, Juri said, "All set? One, two, three, lift!"

We heaved. We strained. Just as I was beginning to see spots before my eyes, there was a creak of protest as the slab ground against something else made of stone -- the sky? We paused, took a breath, and tried again. This time it slid noisily backward. Daylight poured in.

After a few seconds, Miki called, "Stop!" When we obeyed, he crawled up the last remaining steps and peered out the narrow opening at the top cautiously.

"Okay, okay," Miki said. "We're in the woods behind the school. There's no one around."

"One more heave ought to do it," Nanami said. "Kyouichi has got to be able to get through."

"Hey," Saionji said, a little annoyed.

"Well, you *are* bigger than the rest of us, Saionji," Juri said. "What have you been doing, weightlifting?"

"Keiko liked it," he muttered.

I saw Nanami give him an uncomfortable sideways glance.

We moved it a little more, and we all stepped up into the light.

It was high summer at Ohtori, a hot afternoon thick with the scent of roses and pine trees. The blue sky soared overhead, and a distant jet left a con trail through the otherwise cloudless vault. Trees, tall and brooding, struck skyward all around us. Through the trees, I could just see the sparkling white parapet of the tower.

I shivered.

As one, we looked to where we remembered the stairs to be, but there was nothing but trees and grass and bushes. We stared for a few moments, searching.

"Where is it?" Miki asked, almost indignantly. "Where's the arena?"

"Maybe," Saionji began, unsure, "maybe it's only there if you open the gates from the outside?"

Nanami snorted. "Didn't either of you listen to Utena's story? It was a projection, an illusion, from that big machine the Chairman keeps in the tower. It was only there when he wanted it there."

There was a silence. Then Miki said, "I admit, that's a part I can't quite follow. If it was an illusion, how did we climb up it? Here, in the woods? If the top of the arena was really supposed to be the top room of the tower?"

"Magic?" I suggested. "I mean, come on, we just *walked* from Boston to Ohtori."

"She's right, you know," Nanami said. "Don't try to apply logic, Miki. It's real and unreal at the same time. We just have to live with it now and argue about it later."

Anthy asked, suddenly. "Who has their rings?"

We all looked at each other, then they all looked at me. "Um. Well, *I* do, you know," I said.

"Anyone else?"

Nanami scowled, but she drew the necklace she was wearing out of her blouse. Her signet was strung on the gold chain with a small, gleaming diamond pendant. Saionji dug in one pocket. He came up with a handful of change, a Swiss Army knife, and his signet.

Juri said, "Mine's at the bottom of the Pacific." She ignored our stares.

Miki blinked and said, "Um. I lost mine. A long time ago. It didn't seem important, then."

Anthy nodded. "So there are three of you who can get us back in here when the time comes." She walked toward the gate to campus. "Come on. He's distracted with his current game right now. We have a chance to look around."

Yet again, we began to follow her, but Saionji exclaimed and we stopped. "It's gone!" he said, pointing back at the green lawn behind us -- lawn that showed no signs of the staircase we'd just come up, nor the heavy marble slab we'd worked so hard to move.

Nanami laughed, just a little. "Of course it is, Kyouichi."

At the gate, we were faced with a new conundrum: how to get out. Before, when we were leaving the dueling arena, the gate was already open, left that way by the second combatant to enter the forest. (How did it know to stay open the second time anyway? Why didn't other students stray inside?) But now, it was closed and locked, and the mechanism to unlock it was on the outside.

"I could boost someone over," Saionji suggested. "How about you, Arisugawa? You're used to hopping over fences when you chase crooks, right?"

Juri favored him with a sour look. "Oh, and what would I do on the outside, Saionji? Tickle the gate open?" I inadvertently glanced at Anthy, then blushed. I don't know why. Juri displayed the back of her hands and wiggled her fingers. "No ring, remember?"

Saionji had the grace to look abashed, but he looked at Nanami and me. "One of you then?"

Miki stepped back from examining the gate. "Hush! There's someone coming from the other side!"

We all stared at him, and then, to tell the truth, we scampered like scared rabbits deeper into the dark woods. All except Anthy, who somehow was *in* the woods when we got there.

"Is it him?" Nanami wondered as we all settled behind a low shrubbery.

"Shhh," Saionji hissed, his hands tightening on his katana.

I heard the familiar noise: a click, followed by the rushing of water. I knew exactly when the grinding of the stone gate would start, how long it would take to swing open and up, becoming a massive marble rose over the portal.

"Duck!" hissed Miki.

We all did, even me, despite my burning curiosity to see who was coming through. Fear and caution made us all stay down a little too long. When Miki, Juri, and I raised our heads, we all gasped. The path lined with tall white urns overflowing with roses had appeared, and so had the dueling arena. It stretched up to the azure sky, looming overhead as if it were about to teeter over and crush the whole campus. A thousand memories flooded over me -- the feeling of mounting those endless stairs, the space of the arena, the castle hanging over us all like the Sword of Damocles...

"Damn," muttered Saionji as a small door in the base of the arena pedestal slid shut quietly. "All I saw was red fabric and gold braid. No face. But that was the Rose Bride."

"Boy or girl?" Nanami demanded.

"Eh?" Saionji responded. "I don't know. I told you, I didn't see."

Nanami sighed in exasperation.

"How does the Bride get *in* anyway?" Juri wondered.

I blinked. "You're right. She doesn't have a ring."

We all looked at Anthy, who looked back at us. We sighed and shrugged.

"That's not the openwork gondola," Miki said, peering. "So they're not *that* far along in the duels, anyway."

A moment later, Nanami realized, "Hey! There was an elevator there all along!"

We all turned accusing looks on Anthy, who just smiled enigmatically and said, "Shall we go? At least the Bride opened the gate for us -- for a moment. If we don't hurry, we'll be stuck here until the Victor comes."

We stood and started on, but Nanami hung back. "Wait," she said. "Shouldn't we stay and find out who the Victor *is* now?"

"We probably won't know him -- or her," Saionji said, adding the last hurriedly with a look around at the rest of us. "Let's get out and see if we can find anyone we *do* know."

We ran through the gate, and it closed behind us a few seconds later, shutting down the flow of water that obscured the outer gate. We jogged down the steps, through that

second gate. Then we all stopped. And stared.

It was perfect. It was unchanged. Gleaming white buildings shone in the sun. Lush, springy, green lawn stretched between the white concrete walkways. A few students in Ohtori turquoise drifted here and there in the distance, talking among themselves, not noticing us. The familiarly shaped buildings brought a cascade of memories.

We all stared up at the tower.

Finally, Juri cleared her throat. "We won't find anything by standing here gawking until he comes to find us. Let's go."

That got us into motion. We drifted along the walks and byways into the campus proper.

I wasn't sure where to go. It was so overwhelming. I glanced around at the others interrogatively. Only Miki seemed to have an idea, so we followed him toward the music rooms, along the fence dividing the campus from the woods around it, and the town beyond that.

Outside the building, we could hear the piano, and we all stopped. The music was magnificent, resounding, somehow orchestral despite being rendered by only a single instrument. At the same time it was eerie and funereal: a dirge for a god.

We found ourselves at the door, looking in. The person at the piano wore a uniform that momentarily made my heart stop: white, high-necked jacket with tails that trailed the floor behind the piano bench. But an avalanche of unkempt white hair was trapped by a tangle of leather at mid-back and waterfalls of lace poured from the cuffs and throat. It wasn't him.

The music crashed to its conclusion, and we all stood, frozen, amidst the echoes of its grand finish.

A woman's bitter laugh shook the pianist's thin shoulders, and she stood, turning to face us. Bereft of artificial colors, bereft of her own color, her heart-shaped face drawn oval with hunger, her blue eyes icy and hollow...

"Kozue?" Miki breathed.

"Welcome home, oniisan," she replied, draping herself decoratively over the piano. "To what should I owe this visit?"

Her uniform wasn't entirely white. There was a slash of pale blue across her left sleeve and a thick, silver braid looped from the left shoulder to the sapphire clasp that held the lace cravat in place. The waist was cut long to emphasize her hips and breasts.

"Kozue," he said again. "Kozue, your playing..."

"Yes." His twin reseated herself at the piano and began to play again, skeletal hands

flowing lightly over the keys. Rich chords and amazing improvisations did not obscure the familiar tune of "The Sunlit Garden."

Miki drifted over, entranced. He aimlessly took up one of the many battered notebooks stacked on the piano and looked down. His eyes scanned over the notes scribbled there, and he gasped.

The music crashed in an angry discord. "Don't look at that," she snapped. "It's not done yet." She snatched the book from Miki's apparently nerveless hands.

"But, Kozue," he said, "it's brilliant."

"I know," she replied, glancing lovingly into the book, as if to make sure he had not, somehow, altered the notes there. "But it's not done. So you see, my dear brother, what Akio-san has done for me." Kozue's hand swept dramatically to encompass the room. "He has given me dominion over your kingdom." She leaned toward Miki menacingly. "Did you know that Mozart had a sister too? That they were a team, like us? And that she died in obscurity, despite the fact that even *he* knew she was better than him?"

"But you stopped playing... on your own." He drew back from her, puzzled and horrified.

"Miki's playing is so beautiful, Kozue, why can't you play as well as him?" she rapped out. "Miki's such a good boy, Kozue, why can't you be good like him? Miki's such a dutiful child, Kozue, why can't you learn from him?" I could see six silver hoops in her right ear as her hair shifted back. "Well, I am myself now, Miki, dear. I *am* brilliant. I *am* better than you. I've bested you at everything now." She took up the notebooks and strode past us to the door. There she turned back, striking a pose in the doorway -- hipshot, her right hand draped high on the doorframe. "At everything," she repeated, and held up her left hand.

A rose signet gleamed in the dim light.

"Did you miss it, dear brother?" she mocked. "Or did you just... forget?" And with that, she was gone, leaving behind the fading sound of her boots striking the tile and more of her bitter laughter.

We picked our way around to the cafeteria next, avoiding the main quad. As the others occupied a table, Juri and Anthy pushing Miki gently into a seat, I fetched some tea. Students glanced aside at us, but no one reacted. No one asked us who we were, or why we were there. After living in America for so many years, it struck me as odd that I shouldn't have to defend my presence anywhere I was out of place. I couldn't really pin down whether it should be odd at Ohtori or not.

When I got back to the table, Miki was saying, "Well, I mean, I guess it was mine. It

could've been. But... I can't remember whether I lost it before or after the last time I saw Kozue. I *think* it was after. So how could she have gotten it?"

Saionji accepted tea with a nod, and said, "Like he doesn't have plenty of rings to just hand out. She's probably bluffing."

"We may have misunderstood her," Juri pointed out. "She could have simply noticed that Miki wasn't wearing his."

"She's so *changed*," Miki said despairingly. "So angry. At me? I don't understand." I pressed a cup of tea into his hand and he stared into it.

"Miki," Nanami said quietly, "let me tell you something. She's angry at the whole world. Not you."

"But *why*?" he asked.

"Because," Nanami said, laying one hand on his shoulder, "you're brilliant and she's not. Because she feels she's always lived in your shadow. And this is what the Chairman can give her: a spotlight."

I glanced at Anthy. Her eyes, fixed on Nanami, were full of old grief.

"Tenjou... Utena?"

I suppose I was a little over-reactive, wound up as we all were. I spun up out of my chair at the sound of that tentative voice.

"Wakaba?" I stared at the slight figure in her skimpy little Ohtori uniform ("Nice, fluttering skirts," I thought viciously), holding a stack of books in front of her.

"Utena?" she said again, a little louder, a little more sure. "UTENA!"

The next thing I knew, I was on the floor in a heap with Wakaba. She had already gone through colliding with me and hugging me and saying my name over and over, and had now taken hold of my shirt and was shaking me furiously. "What happened to you? Why didn't you write? Why didn't you say goodbye? Are you all right? You look terrible! What school are you at now? There were such rumors! Did you really get hurt? Were you really expelled? Why are you here? Who are all these people? What's going on?"

I managed to get hold of her hands and stop her from rattling my teeth out of my head. "Wakaba? What are you doing here?" I asked, dazed. "You should have graduated two years ago!"

"What are you talking about?" Wakaba sat up on my stomach and looked down at me carefully. "Why do you look... so old?"

I stared at her. Shinohara Wakaba, exactly as I remembered her. Exactly. From the

exuberant ponytail to the spicurl over her high forehead, from the voice to the uniform. "Oh, god," I whispered. "He didn't let you graduate."

"I'm a junior, Utena, you know that," Wakaba said, puzzled. "You are too. Or... are you?" For the first time, she looked up at the group at the table.

I peered up at the table. I could see Anthy smiling down at me sadly. Juri and Nanami were still calmly drinking their tea. Miki was picking up the books that Wakaba had flung aside, and Saionji was rubbing the side of his head angrily.

"Sa-sa-sa-saionji-san!" Wakaba stuttered. "What happened to your hair?!"

Juri drained her tea and stood up. "Come on, we're attracting attention. Let's get outside. We can explain to Shinohara-san a little more freely there."

We stepped out into the quad, where hundreds of students were milling around, walking, talking... I'd forgotten the thunderous din that their voices made, echoed back by the high, white walls of the school. It was like walking into a wall of noise. Only Saionji, Miki, and Wakaba didn't wince when it hit us.

Wakaba clung to my arm, just like the old days. I felt suddenly naked without my uniform. Anthy took my free hand. I smiled at her gratefully.

Juri led the way around a corner where the noise was somewhat less and we were at least partially out of sight. We all stood around awkwardly for a moment, and then Juri said, "Shinohara-san..."

Wakaba looked up at Juri suddenly and went pale. "A-a-a-arisugawa-sempai?" She looked around more carefully. "Micky?" she asked, using the nickname the girls used to use for him. Then, in a somewhat flatter voice, "Nanami-san?" Her eyes settled on Anthy... and there was no recognition. But there was a small flare of anger when she saw that Anthy was holding my hand.

"Wakaba," I began, feeling at a loss, "about what happened..."

"Oh, Utena!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I forgot to tell you! I'm engaged!"

My stomach flip-flopped. My eyes flicked to Anthy, then back to Wakaba. "En... gaged?"

"Yes! Isn't it exciting?" She clasped her hands together and she looked up at the sky, her eyes wide and dreamy. "We've been engaged for a whole *month* now! He's so handsome! So kind! My very own prince!"

I glanced at Saionji. He refused to meet my eyes. "I'm, er, very happy for you, Wakaba.

Who is...?"

She looked back at me, then past me at the students in the quad. "Oh, no! I have to get to class! Utena, you find me later, okay? I want to hear everything, everything! Oooooooh, my own Utena-sama is back!" She hugged my arm tightly and ran off.

I shut my mouth firmly.

"She always *did* fly around like that," Saionji said vaguely.

"What do you mean?" I asked, angrily.

He looked taken aback. "Just... she was... enthusiastic." I narrowed my eyes at him. "Oh, come on, Tenjou, the girl's a ditz, stop looking at me like that."

I glowered. "She's *not* a ditz. I'll thank you not to speak that way about my best friend."

"Really?" he inquired, his temper rising to the occasion. "If she was your best friend, why is she still here? Why didn't you care enough to rescue her *years* ago?"

"Enough!" snapped Nanami and Juri at the same time. Saionji and I stared at them, but they were staring at each other in surprise.

"Seitokaichou!"

"Seitokaichou!"

"Seitokaichou!"

We all spun as we heard the exclamations. I was expecting, of course, Kiryuu Touga. I think we all were. But we saw...

The crowd of students parted like the Red Sea before Kozue, who strode along the white pavement confidently, smiling and waving at her fans. I heard sighs of, "Kaoru-sama," and, "She's so beautiful," and, "I wish I could be like her," from some of the girls nearby.

We watched until she disappeared into one of the buildings.

"So," Juri said finally, "we know who the Student Council president is."

Anthy put an arm around Miki and led him back around the corner, speaking to him softly.

"Do we... know who the Rose Bride is now?" Saionji asked. "I mean, 'engaged,' it's got to be..."

"No," Nanami said. "It's not her."

We all stared. "How do you know this?" Saionji asked.

Nanami smiled smugly. "The Rose Bride never wore a half-carat diamond engagement ring."

Juri barked a laugh. "Good eye, Nanami," she complimented.

I slumped a little with relief.

We drifted around a bit after that, back away from the quad where there weren't so many people. We briefly stepped in to look at the fencing salle. It was empty, but Juri stared down blankly from the balcony to the workout floor. It took us a few moments to get her attention. Saionji wanted to stop in the dojo, nearby, but the door was locked.

I was hot and tired and thirsty and trying very hard not to look at the tower. My head hurt from the bright sunshine, and finally, I said, "Look, let's find someplace to sit down for a bit and think. We aren't accomplishing much this way."

"Really," Nanami said, mopping her forehead with a linen handkerchief. "It's so hot. I don't remember it being so hot here, do you, Miki?"

"I don't," Miki said, then turned a self-deprecating smile on her. "But, frankly, I don't remember noticing the weather much at all while I was... here."

"Look!" said Nanami suddenly, looking past him. She pointed to a slender young man who was sitting underneath a tree and reading a book. "He's wearing a Student Council uniform!"

I exchanged a look with Juri.

"Well," growled Saionji -- maybe his head was hurting too. "Let's go talk to him."

We all went over, Nanami striding ahead in eager curiosity. When I saw how Saionji was walking -- bringing his feet down heavily, fists clenched -- I fell into step beside him, hoping to moderate how much he vented his stormy temper on this (relatively) innocent student.

The student was very much absorbed in his book. His short, pale hair, dappled by the lights of the tree overhead, and the flash of his glasses were all we could see of his face. But it was a Student Council uniform, clearly enough: pale green trousers, white tunic, and braid.

Nanami walked right up to him. He turned a page of his book. She cleared her throat.

He looked up, startled eyes going wider as he took her in, then the rest of us, and scrambled to his feet. He bowed. "Um, can I help you?"

"Yes," said Saionji in a voice of thunder. I stepped on his foot, and Nanami cut in neatly in the interval thus afforded. I missed whatever she said as Saionji turned to glare at me.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Saionji hissed.

"We're not going to get much out of him if you scare him half to death," I whispered.
"Sorry."

"Tenjou-san --" he began dangerously, then stopped and contented himself with another glare. We both turned back to the conversation in progress.

"I am Akimoto Toshiro, Kiryuu-san," the student said with another bow. "I am honored to meet you. If you will forgive my asking, are you the sister of Kiryuu Touga-san?"

Nanami looked considerably surprised. I *felt* considerably surprised.

"Yes," she said cautiously. "Do you know of him?"

"Of course," said Akimoto. "He is the kind advisor to the Student Council."

Nanami, for once, had nothing to say. I said, a little inanely, "So you're a member of the Student Council?" My eyes dropped involuntarily to his hand, which still held his book, one finger marking his place in it. He was wearing a Rose Signet.

"A minor associate only," he said politely, but his eyes dropped to his hand, following my gaze. He glanced over at me, down at my hand -- and froze for a split second. "So, you are... alumni, then?" He stared at my ring.

"Um, yes," I replied, caught off-balance by his quick deduction. "Back for a visit."

"How extremely kind of you," he said formally, using the opportunity for another bow to tear his eyes away.

Nanami gave me a brief sidelong glance, but if she meant to tell me something with it, I missed it. She said, "Akimoto-kun, who..." She let the sentence trail off, shaking her head. "I hope that we will meet again," she said formally. "Perhaps when we visit the current Student Council. Good morning."

"Um, good morning," said Akimoto, looking around at us. He picked up his bookbag and looked wistfully at his comfortable reading spot before walking off. No one else moved.

"Why didn't you ask him who else is on the Council, Nanami?" asked Saionji bitterly.

"I didn't think of it," she snapped. "Why didn't *you* ask him who the Rose Bride is? And you, Utena, what the hell did you mean by letting him know that we were alumni?"

"I didn't let him know," I said, trying not to sound too defensive. "He figured it out from the ring. And anyway--"

Saionji cut me off. "Great, now the Student Council will know that we're here for sure. Kozue might've kept her mouth shut, but that means he--"

Anthy cut him off. "I doubt very much that he'll find out from the Student Council. He won't be ignorant of our presence *that* long."

There was a little silence. Then: "He looked so young," said Miki, his voice full of surprise. I had thought the same thing.

Juri said, suddenly, "If you want to know who the current Rose Bride is, I can think of an easy way of finding out. We could go to the rose garden--" her eyes slid sideways towards Anthy, "--and see who's taking care of it."

We paused in one of the nearby buildings to get some water, cool off, and rest for a few minutes.

"I don't remember this building," I said, looking around at the high, vaulted ceilings and arched windows so common at Ohtori. It was beautifully cool, hidden away from the sun by all the grey stone here. I had a brief sense of how old this building might be, all these perfect white buildings standing like so many tombs, each with the same word written over the door... It did make me wonder. "Was this here when...?"

"Yes," said Nanami. "I used to take dance lessons here. Look, you can see the windows of the music rooms in the main building through the doors over there."

Juri raised her hand for silence and we all heard footsteps clicking toward us. She gestured sharply for us all to hide. I slid into a narrow niche with her and Anthy. I glimpsed the other three stepping quietly into a broom closet.

Click, click, click, click.

Then, from the other direction: click, click, click, click.

"President Kaoru," said a male voice, deep and ironic, but not at all familiar.

"Vice President Fujiwara," Kozue said, just coming into view and stopping there. We pressed further back in the niche, back against the wall, trying to be as thin as possible. The stone I'd been blessing moments before felt like it was freezing the sweat in a cold line down my spine, and it was all I could do to keep my teeth from chattering. Anthy's body heat pressed against my side. I could just see Juri's scowl by a thin line of light from the hall.

The other stopped walking just out of sight. "You don't normally come into this part of the building," he observed casually.

"We have visitors," she replied, equally casual.

"I know." He sounded bored.

Kozue smiled thinly. "They're old friends of Ends of the World."

"Failed duelists then?" Now he sounded vaguely interested

"You could say that," Kozue drawled, folding her arms and leaning against the wall. "Or, perhaps, not."

There was the slightest of pauses before he replied. "Does it matter? They're past it, Madame President. I spoke to Toshiro, too. They're *old*. They missed their chance. It's kind of pathetic that they're even here, don't you think?"

Kozue shrugged with one shoulder, tilting her head at the still-unseen Vice President. "One of them reached the duel called Revolution. Of course," she added, ironically, sweetly, "that was before your time."

A footstep sounded on the marble floor. "You *can't* mean that..."

Kozue shrugged again, smiling slightly. "I know what I know."

He laughed, shortly. "I wonder." He paused again, then: "You don't *really* think any of them have the power to take the Bride from me, do you?" he drawled.

"I don't think you should worry about them," Kozue said. "Perhaps you won't have the Bride when they get to you."

"Oh, really?" That piqued his interest and a little warmth rose in his voice. "Maybe you'd like to try?"

"Perhaps." Kozue produced a rose -- an intense, dark red, so dark it looked nearly black -- and extended it to him. "The arena, after school."

"Hmph." He took the rose and walked past her, dropping it casually to the floor at her feet. He was a tall, slender boy with broad shoulders and long, dark hair, one side of which hung forward to partially veil his face. His Student Council uniform had black trousers and his right sleeve was black to the elbow. At the edge of my vision, he stopped and turned back to face Kozue. "Oh, and Kaoru-san? Stay away from Hoshiko." His voice was perfectly level and conversational, but there was an edge to accompany the verbal warning. "I have as many eyes as you do." Then he turned and continued on his way.

Kozue remained leaning against the wall, watching after him, her smile fading with each passing moment to an ugly sneer. When we could no longer hear his steps, she pushed off from the wall. We heard her walk a little way down the hall and open a door. "Hello, Hoshiko-chan," echoed her voice with chilly clarity. "How are you today? Just stopping

by to give you a little Student Council news..." The door closed, presumably behind her, and we couldn't hear her any more.

Juri stepped cautiously from the niche and peered around. Satisfied that the hall was empty, she gestured us out and opened the door to the others' hiding place. We hurried toward. The only available door for Kozue to have passed through read, "Dance Studio."

Outside, we leaned against the shaded but still warm wall at the back of the building and sighed with relief.

"That was close," Miki muttered.

"At least we know who the current Victor is now," Saionji said. "It was worth it to find that out."

"Interesting that it's the Vice President," Juri said, peering speculatively at Saionji.

"Equally interesting that Kozue is challenging him now," Nanami commented.

"We could sneak into the forest and up the stairs, I suppose," I said, a little dubiously.

"We could put a stop to the whole thing!" Saionji said, nodding furiously and shaking his fist, which happened to be holding his katana. I stared momentarily at his hands, fascinated by the realization that no one had questioned him about carrying a weapon around the campus. "End it all right there."

"It won't end that easily," Anthy said gently.

"No," Juri agreed. "I know a place we can watch the whole thing and not be seen." She smiled grimly. "We don't have any opera glasses though."

"Then we'd best be getting over to the rose garden," Nanami said. "I want to know who the Bride is once and for all, dammit. We're finding out everything *but* that."

"If it's not... your brother," Miki said slowly, "will you stay and help us anyway?"

Nanami turned an outraged look upon him, but her face softened almost immediately. Her mouth twisted into a wry smile. "He's here, and involved, so it doesn't matter whether he's the Bride or a Duelist or something else... he's part of it, and I want to get him out."

Miki matched Nanami's smile with his own, then sighed. Then he looked up at Juri. "Juri-san... why did you come with us? I mean, Nanami and Saionji-san and I... we all have people we need to help. But you were free."

Juri leveled her gaze at him, then looked away across the grassy field toward the woody

outer verges of Ohtori. "Ending things. My job is all about ending things. It's just part of my personality, tidying up loose ends."

We all stood in silence after that, listening to the calls and voices of students in the distance.

Nanami looked around. "Let's move on. I don't really want to stay still under the many eyes of either Fujiwara or Kozue."

"Or..." I began, then trailed off, looking upward.

"Nor him either," Nanami muttered, then strode off to find the rose garden. We all followed.

I dropped back beside Anthy and took her hand. As we entered the hall that housed most of the classrooms, I looked over my shoulder automatically for the guidance counselor, but thankfully the halls were empty. We hurried past the classrooms and into the shadowed arches of the cloister walk which surrounded the greenhouse of Anthy's old rose garden. I felt Anthy's steps growing slower and more reluctant on the stone floor of the arched arcade and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

We stepped out onto the lawn and there it was, the glass gleaming in the sunshine. I looked up at the cloudless blue sky and thought of Greece, of the glass-hard reality of that clear, brilliant sky. This sky was brighter, but more distant. When I moved toward the greenhouse, following the others, the pull of Anthy's hand in mine stopped me. Anthy didn't move. She stood frozen to the spot, staring.

I looked at the Birdcage. It hadn't changed. Even the spray of red roses near the door looked exactly as I had remembered. I thought, suddenly, of watching Anthy remove dead blooms, prune branches and leaves, and pluck spoiled fruit from the plants in our garden at home. I tried to remember seeing her do that here, but I couldn't. I remembered her watering, cutting roses to put in a vase, and... not much else.

Anthy still hadn't moved. I turned to her, wanting to tell her that it was all right, that she didn't have to... She looked up and smiled at me. "I know," she said.

I squeezed her hand again and we started walking forward again, slowly. The others were already at the door. Saionji pushed it open.

Anthy and I walked slowly up to the Birdcage. She dropped my hand, and went forward, but not to the door. She laid the palm of her hand on the glass and looked inside. Then she looked at me. "I'll wait out here," she said, simply.

I nodded and went inside.

There was someone watering the roses. Or, rather, he had been watering the roses. He stood still now, the graceful watering can (the same watering can) held suspended in one surprised hand.

It was Akimoto Toshiro.

He looked from one to another of us with an expression of calm bafflement, but said nothing.

I could hear Nanami say, in an undertone, "Well, he does wear glasses..."

Saionji was not so subtle. "*He's* the Rose Bride?!"

Akimoto heard this -- indeed, could not help hearing it. "Oh, no," he stuttered. "I'm just... helping out. I mean, the... Rose Bride... is always so busy. Are you looking for...?" He let the sentence trail off, looking at us uncertainly. "I mean, outsiders aren't supposed to know about... but you're not really outsiders, are you?"

"Not really," said Juri. She stood looking out at the green lawn of the cloisters. After a thoughtful pause, she asked, "Akimoto-san, how long have you been on the Student Council?" Her voice was gentle, detached.

"Oh, only for a semester..."

"Arisugawa Juri."

"Arisugawa-san."

"I see. I suppose it's a great responsibility."

"Oh, yes, Arisugawa-san. I am very honored to have been chosen."

"And have you dueled yet?"

He flushed uncomfortably and carefully set the watering can on the little bench. "No. I have not... I haven't yet."

"But you attend the meetings."

"Of course! I attend, and listen. When it is my turn, then I will duel." His voice trailed off a little.

"How many people are on the current Student Council, Akimoto-san?"

"Five," he replied uncertainly. I saw Nanami and Saionji exchange a puzzled look. "Arisugawa-san, I am not sure that I should be telling you this..."

Juri turned to look at him, catching his uncertain gaze. "I was on the Student Council, once," she said.

He nodded.

"Take my advice," she said, suddenly harsh. "And get out of it." Then she turned and

walked out of the greenhouse. The rest of us followed in a ragged group, pulled along in the wake of her exit. There seemed to be nothing else to do.

Juri walked past Anthy, into the building and through to the quad on the other side. It must have been in the middle of the hour; the lawn was deserted although we could hear distant voices from the windows of the buildings. We had to run to catch up with her.

Saionji and Miki both spoke at once when we caught up. "Arisugawa, why didn't you ask--" "Juri-san, are you--"

Juri shook her head once, sharply. "It would have been no good, bullying him. We learned something, anyway."

"Even if we still don't know who the Rose Bride is," Nanami snapped.

Juri shook her head again.

We were sitting in a group under the tree where we found Toshiro earlier -- the same tree, I recalled, that Wakaba and I sat under for lunch many days. Saionji and Juri had gotten us all cans of iced tea. The sun had become unbearable after the rose garden, and we needed to cool off again before our already short tempers began to flare.

Students went by: chatting, running, shouting, jumping around on the masonry -- all the things one does between classes in high school. Heat waves shimmered up from the pavement, distorting everything slightly.

"Damn, it's hot," Nanami muttered. "I wish I'd dressed for this, rather than real November weather."

"Shall I throw you into the swimming pool?" Saionji inquired sweetly.

"*NO!*" Nanami snapped, eyes wide, starting up from her seat. When we all stared at her reaction, she settled back down and put up a huffy veneer. "What a stupid thing to say, Kyouichi! How childish!"

He eyed her sidelong. "Oh, right, you had a dip already today," he commented, taking a drink.

She glared at him. "Well, you're all ready to fight, despite the fact that you were obviously beaten not once, but twice today."

He bristled. "That's different."

"Oh, stop it," Juri said tiredly. "We've all had a very long day -- or several days, or something -- and we don't need to make it worse by poking each other's sore spots."

Into the ensuing silence, Miki said, "My fingers still hurt, Anthy. Is that supposed to happen?"

"Only when you think about it," she said, although she took the cryptic edge off with a smile.

We watched the students again. I spotted Wakaba in the crowd, chatting cheerfully with a number of other girls, but I couldn't summon the energy to call out to her. I thought I glimpsed Kozue again, moving among a mob of admirers, but I wasn't sure. There were other faces I thought I recognized, scattered here and there among the crowd. Were they just people who looked like my friends from six years ago? Or hadn't they been allowed to graduate either?

I had expected it to feel familiar. I had, I told myself. But I hadn't expected it to feel so unchanged. As though we had never left, or had never been here...

Nanami proved herself more observant -- or, perhaps, less distracted -- than the rest of us again. "Hey, look. It's Fujiwara."

Miki raised his head and peered into the late afternoon glare. "There's... someone walking with him, I think. Well, several people."

Juri's head snapped around from contemplating the ocean. "Let's get closer. The Bride may be there."

Saionji sprang to his feet and began to walk fast. We all fell into step with him. I gripped Anthy's hand tightly. When I looked over at her face, her lips were pressed tightly together and she was frowning.

Fujiwara stopped, and the gaggle of students around him stopped as well. He turned toward us slowly. We all stopped about twenty feet from him... all except Juri, who continued another several steps before halting. She wasn't looking at him.

I looked where she was staring. A girl, dressed in the standard Ohtori uniform, stood there with her hands clasped modestly before her. Her hair was captured into a traditional bun at the nape of her neck. She looked down at the ground through large, round, wire rim glasses.

"*Shiori...*"

Juri's voice sounded like it hurt her to use it, and her hand drifted to her throat, just under her chin, where the bruises had been earlier. Takatsuki Shiori raised her head and peered up at Juri without a single hint of recognition.

"I didn't think he'd try to put them on someone else," murmured Anthy in a shaking voice. I glanced at her involuntarily, unable to read the rising flood of emotion in her eyes. "I left them behind."

Fujiwara stood with one hand resting on his hip, watching Juri's face dispassionately. "I gather that you know my fiancée?"

Shiori smiled vaguely at Juri. "Excuse me. I am Takatsuki Shiori. And your name...?"

An expression of... horror? fear? anger?... flickered briefly over Juri's face before she mastered herself. "Pardon me," she said, bowing. "Arisugawa Juri."

Some kind of recognition made Shiori's eyes widen slightly. "Arisu...?"

Fujiwara's eyebrow rose. "Well, it's very nice to meet you, Arisugawa-san," he said perfunctorily. "Unfortunately, Shiori and I..."

"I was under the impression," Juri said, ignoring Fujiwara, "that you and I had graduated together, Shiori-san."

Shiori blinked owlishly at Juri, her mouth opening and working. "Arisugawa?"

"I have a pressing appointment," Fujiwara pressed on, sharpening his voice and taking Shiori's hand.

Juri locked eyes with Shiori.

A light went on behind Shiori's eyes. She suddenly burst out, "Juri-san!" Then she covered her mouth with her free hand and looked guiltily at Fujiwara. With visible effort, she recomposed her expression into the sweet blankness it had when we had approached.

"Didn't we, Shiori?" Juri pursued hoarsely, not even sparing a glance for the Student Council Vice President.

Shiori's eyes were large and innocent as she said, "But you left me behind, Juri-san. You always left me behind in so many things. Why should it have been different this time?" And she allowed Fujiwara to lead her off, though she kept watching Juri's face for a moment, almost greedily.

Juri's face remained blank as the Rose Bride turned away. Then she turned and stalked blindly back through us, moving inexorably through students who had, apparently, gathered round curiously.

I looked at Anthy and she shook her head, very slightly, and let go my hand. When I looked at her, confused, she just nodded after Juri. I blinked, looked at Juri's departing back, and jogged after her. Miki had started toward Juri, but had stopped, his conflict evident in his face. I passed him with a pat of reassurance (that I didn't really feel).

Once free of the students, Juri had left the path to return to the tree. She stood, one hand resting on the trunk, staring at the spectacular sunset. Ohtori always did have spectacular sunsets.

I approached cautiously, and laid a hand between her shoulder blades. Her shirt was damp with sweat -- her jacket lay at her feet, where she'd left it in her hurry to catch up to Fujiwara. We stood like that for a few moments.

Juri finally looked around at me, eyes stormy, and bitterly snarled, "Loose ends."

Have you ever really thought about the two of them? (asked Miki, while Anthy was elsewhere) What are they? Who are they? How old are they? Where do they come from? Why are they here? Why is he wasting his time in some boarding school in Japan? Why is she working a regular job, living in an apartment in Boston? What did they do before Ohtori? Did Ohtori exist before them, or did they create it? Does Ohtori exist without them? Without him?

And what is this game he plays, where we still wander the edges of the board? We are pieces, colored by the hand that touches us, set against whoever his pawns and knights and princes are now. Colored by *her* hand, really.

I so want to believe that we're in the right, that we're coming to the rescue, that we're really the princes this time. But can we? Can any of us really be a prince, after all? What is a prince, anyway?

Part Ten: Calenture

*and the loveliness of your laugh, which--ay me!
flutters my heart in my breast.
For when I look upon you for a brief moment,
it's not possible for me to speak a single word still,
but my unwilling tongue breaks, and suddenly
a thin flame has run under my skin,
and I see nothing with my eyes, and hear
a thrumming noise, and cold sweat takes hold of me, and a tremor
seizes all of me, and I am greener than grass,
and I seem to myself to be barely short
of dying.
But all must be endured*

--Sappho, translation by Ellen N. Brundige

"What time is it?" Miki asked, craning his neck to see if any of us was wearing a watch. "Isn't it almost time for the duel?"

Saionji and Juri both checked their wrists and looked puzzled. "I never forget my watch," Juri muttered.

"Me neither," Saionji said, searching the pockets of his jeans. Change, pocket lint. He sighed. "Guess I did this morning."

"Miki's right though," Nanami put in. "The sun's setting. It's the right time for a duel. Where's this place you talked about, Juri?"

Juri didn't reply, but turned her face toward the tower. Only Anthony's hand squeezing mine stopped me from objecting. I glanced at her. She smiled.

No one else objected -- though we all looked grim -- and made our way into the now virtually empty main building at the base of the tower.

I gripped Anthony's hand tightly as we stepped into the elevator. This elevator wasn't the one I was familiar with, but all the same I was fairly sure that this wasn't a good idea.

Juri turned and looked at me for a moment before saying, "It's all right, I don't think there'll be a Student Council meeting. They're usually held during school hours. We'll stop on that floor."

Did I look that obviously uncomfortable? Juri went on, "There's a staircase from the Student Council chamber up to the viewing balcony. We can't take the elevator up that far."

"Why not?" demanded Nanami.

"This elevator doesn't go that far. You'd have to take the elevator to the Chairman's rooms for that," said Juri flatly.

No one proposed doing this, to my relief.

There was a brief silence. I looked around the elevator. The others seemed utterly at home, like they'd fallen into place automatically: Juri leaning against one side pensively, Miki against the other, Nanami standing in the middle. Saionji stood to one side of Nanami, clenching and unclenching his fists. A chime sounded, and the old-fashioned metal grillwork doors slid open.

"I still don't see why going up two floors will let us see the Dueling Arena when it's not visible from the Student Council balcony just below," said Miki. "Besides, I don't remember a staircase... oh." The last was said as Juri stepped out of the elevator, turned to the left, and opened a door in the same wall as the elevator. On the other side were white marble steps. "I guess I always thought that was a closet," said Miki uncertainly.

Juri started to climb and the rest of us straggled out behind. "How come the *rest* of the Student Council never knew about this?" wondered Nanami.

Juri shrugged. "Touga came up here all the time. He regarded it as more of his personal perk than a Student Council thing."

"You don't think he might be..."

"Could be," replied Juri shortly.

Nanami was silent after that. After two flights of stairs (during which my heart raced faster than it should have from the exertion), we pushed through a door and emerged onto a balcony considerably smaller than the Student Council balcony, edged with a low wall and crenellations rather than a railing. I looked straight out and, sure enough, there was the Dueling Arena, rising from the forest below. It leaned toward us precipitously. A movement above it caught my eye.

The castle hung in the sky with a strange, brooding, threatening serenity. Its needle-sharp towers pointed directly to the Arena below. It was spinning slowly and ponderously, like a slow-motion top.

After staring at it for a moment, I tore my eyes away and looked around the balcony. Touga was not there. Behind the balcony was a series of glass archways with French doors, one of which was slightly ajar. I couldn't see anything of the room behind that because it was obscured with several layers of translucent red and white draperies.

There were three little wrought-iron café tables arranged neatly along the side of the balcony nearest to the dueling arena. Each table was accompanied by two chairs, and they were all composed of elaborate iron scrollwork, which stood out in clear black tracery

against the white crenellated wall.

On each table, a simple white vase held a single red rose.

Juri walked over to the end table, pulled out the chair, and sat down, leaning one elbow on the wall. Miki sat down opposite her, and Nanami and Saionji took the next table. A pigeon landed by Nanami's feet and started to wander about under the tables, cooing and pecking at the ground hopefully.

I looked aside at Anthy, who was still standing, shading her eyes with one hand and staring towards the Dueling Arena.

"Um," I started. "Am I the only one who thinks it's a little weird that there should just happen to be three tables and six chairs up here--"

"The Challenger just came in," interrupted Saionji. "The duel's about to begin."

Anthy drifted towards the last table and sat down without saying anything. Bells suddenly rang, a clangorous cascade of familiar sound.

The figures looked so tiny on the vast white platform of the Arena. I could see from here that the red lines did form the school's rose crest, as I'd vaguely recalled. The red of the Rose Bride's dress showed out clearly, as did the black-and-white of Fujiwara's uniform. Kozue was harder to see, dressed nearly all in white. It was very strange to be watching the duel from over here, instead of being on the platform itself. A strange panicky feeling rose up, nearly choking me with sudden urgency: I should be there, not here, there in the Arena...

I turned away from the duel in progress, trying to calm myself down. I took a few steps towards the other side of the platform and took a deep breath.

"Like the view?" asked a man's voice, amused, rich, edged with familiarity.

I spun. Ohtori Akio was standing in the open doorway of one of the French windows.

He stood casually, one hand on the door handle, dressed in the same dark pants and red shirt. A lock of his pale hair hung into his face. He smiled slowly at me and ice seemed to crackle on my skin.

"It is strange, is it not," he said, voice dropping to an intimate tone, "that after avoiding me for all these years, you come and perch on the balcony outside my bedroom window." He paused a moment, then added, with an affection that made the ice on my skin freeze deeper, "Like a little bird on my windowsill."

I took a step backwards, my throat tightening. I couldn't think of a reply, and if I did, I doubt I could have said it.

He took a step forward, leaving the shadow of the doorway. "Never mind, you are free to

it. I wonder..." His voice trailed off and his eyes flicked to something beyond my left shoulder. He stepped back into the doorway. "Well, you should be watching, you're missing the duel. I look forward to meeting you later." He bowed, then turned and entered the darkness beyond, pulling the door closed behind him with a decisive click.

I stood there for a moment, utterly frozen, until Anthy placed her hand gently on the small of my back. "Did... did you see?" I stuttered to her.

Anthy nodded. "It's all right now," she said cryptically. "Come sit down."

We went and sat down at the third table. The other four, staring intently at the duel, had not even noticed.

The duel was nearing its height. Kozue and Fujiwara were darting in and out, feinting, slashing at one another. I could almost hear the ring of their swords. I looked around at the other old Duelists and thought of the times I fought them, and defeated them. It all seemed so long ago: Saionji's shattered fury, Nanami's desperation, Miki's sadness, and Juri's... actually, I thought, I hadn't ever *defeated* Juri. I had won the duels, after a fashion, but I hadn't taken her rose, not like the others.

Sitting there, I found no sense of accomplishment connected to those old memories. No pride. No triumph. Only a distant sense of bitter sadness and futility.

I looked back to the arena in time to see Fujiwara stagger back, free hand going to his face. Kozue paused a moment, as though for effect, then lunged and neatly sliced off the rose he wore. Bells rang again, pulling at my memory, an avalanche of confusing sound and emotions.

They stood there, facing one another. Fujiwara still pressed the palm of one hand to his cheek, the other hand holding his sword, pointing down. Kozue tossed her head and I imagined her scornful laugh.

Then she turned to the Rose Bride, offering her arm. Shiori took it, and the two of them turned their backs and walked off towards the stairs. Fujiwara stood and watched them go. I suddenly felt something twist inside me, remembering...

I looked across at Anthy, who set the white teacup down into its saucer and smiled at me, a sweet, intimate smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes with tenderness. I reached across the table and she put her hand in mine.

"They didn't draw the sword," said Saionji. "Both the Victor and the Challenger brought their own." He stood up, abandoning his beer, as I craned my head around to look at him.

Nanami looked up at him. "Well, they can't be using the Sword of Dios, anyway, because..." Her eyes slid meaningfully to Anthy, and she tapped her chin thoughtfully with her fork.

Miki, behind her, said with his mouth full, "But remember, Nanami, that there was that

time when other people were drawing our swords..."

"Obviously, they haven't got to that yet," snapped Nanami, setting her fork down with a sharp clink. "Shouldn't we go?" She stood up, pushing away her plate with the remains of the omelette on it.

Miki sighed and set down his ice cream spoon. Anthy and I stood up as well. Juri remained sitting where she was, staring at the empty Duel Arena. Her coffee cup looked untouched.

Anthy went and put a hand on Juri's shoulder. "Juri," she said softly. "We should go."

Juri pushed her chair back, the iron screeching on the marble. She didn't say anything as we walked towards the stairs.

I looked back as we left the balcony. A flock of pigeons settled on the tables, and I thought I saw something -- or someone -- twitch the fabric of the curtains behind the windows. But that was all.

Fortunately, Juri had taken the lead as we descended toward the Student Council balcony -- I doubt any of the rest of us would have avoided bursting in on the conversation happening there. As it was, she held up her hand sharply and we all froze. Voices rang up the staircase perfectly, despite an intermittent thumping sound that punctuated the whole conversation. I wondered idly if Akio had used this stairwell to listen in on the Student Council meetings.

"Hoshiko-sempai, it's like they're following me!" a distraught young voice said. It took me a moment to identify it as Akimoto Toshiro. I hadn't yet heard him so agitated.

"Following you? Now, Toshiro-kun," a silken young woman's voice replied. "I'm sure they're not following you -- it's simply unfortunate coincidence."

"A coincidence, perhaps," he replied uncertainly. "But it was so strange. They knew about the Rose Bride and everything! I thought grownups were supposed to forget!"

"Supposed to forget, yes, but Kozue-san seems to feel these are not just any former Duelists," Hoshiko replied. "Yukio thinks they're here to try to join the Duels again. Tell me, Toshiro-kun, what are they like?"

"What they are like?" he began, then paused. "Well, they're dressed quite shabbily..."

"Shabbily," Hoshiko echoed thoughtfully. "You'd think they would have at least *tried* to dress appropriately if they wanted to duel."

Saionji managed to get his hand over Nanami's mouth before she exclaimed. As it was,

she turned an interesting shade of red. I glanced over her neat, fashionable black slacks and cornflower blue silk blouse, then eyed my own t-shirt and jeans (as well as Juri's and Saionji's) a little sheepishly. The jeans certainly didn't compare to the uniforms. I remembered my old uniform a little wistfully; I always was partial to it. Anthy smiled at me in the dim light and I paused to enjoy the sight of my lover in her ragged skirt, leggings, and one of my ratty old t-shirts.

"If they want to duel," Toshiro went on, "they might do it without permission from Ends of the World. They were tall, and very grim. I was," he added quietly, "a little scared of them."

"Scared? Oh, Toshiro-kun," Hoshiko said kindly, and I could almost imagine her patting his head. "They can't hurt you. You're a Duelist, and they aren't."

"Though they aren't, one of them is Kiryuu-san's younger sister," he said, still quietly.

"Sister?" Hoshiko laughed gently. She had cultivated a lovely laugh. "It will be interesting to see if they're at all alike."

"No," he commented. "Not at all."

They were silent for a few moments.

Then Hoshiko said, "That's forty-love, Toshiro-kun. Will you concede?"

Both their chairs scraped the floor, and two pairs of footsteps crossed the floor toward us. A moment later, we heard the elevator chime, their steps enter it, and the doors close.

We emerged from the stairwell cautiously. The Student Council chambers were empty.

"That was," I ventured, "a very strange conversation."

"Shabby???" Nanami exploded. "That little..."

"I'm sure he doesn't know what he's talking about, Nanami-kun," Miki began, conciliatory.

"Well, aren't those shoes about four years out of date?" Saionji prodded.

"How would *you* know?" Nanami shoved her face upward pugnaciously. "You into wearing girl's clothes now as well?"

"As well as *what*?" rumbled Mount Saionji as it approached eruption.

"Perhaps we should get downstairs...?" I suggested at the same time Miki said, "Now both of you are getting too personal...!"

"ENOUGH!"

We all stopped and stared at Juri, who wasn't looking at any of us, but stared out toward the balcony, her face frozen with the calmness of anger. "Bickering like children," she said quietly, turning to look at the three other former Council members. "Bickering like the children we once were *here*. If you don't act like the adults you are *now*, you'll just be playing into his hands."

Nanami opened her mouth to say something, and Juri turned to look at her. After a moment of silence, Juri turned away and Nanami shut her mouth again. Juri hit the call button on the elevator with the side of her fist, and I winced.

Something moved toward me across the floor in the fading light. I bent down and picked it up. It was a tennis ball.

The inside of the building was quite dim by the time the elevator let us out on the ground floor. The main doors were locked, so we began to search the hallways for a side door that would let us out. One of our first tries brought us into a broad area with a wall of lockers and large window. I remembered having a locker there, next to Wakaba's. I peered as we walked, trying to recall exactly where. I wondered, uncomfortably, whether Wakaba's locker was still in the same location.

"Extra! Extra! Extra!"

I must have jumped a meter straight up. "Who's there?"

"Extra! Extra! Extra!"

Juri and Miki were looking around, but the rows of lockers were bare, and no one appeared to be lurking in the shadows. "Sounds like a student," said Miki uncertainly. I wondered why the voice sounded so familiar. I couldn't link it to a name, or even a face.

"Tell me what you want, and I will tell you who you are! Once upon a time, one man's dream became reality. Chairman Kage wanted to taste fresh new food from all over the world, so he created Ohtori Stadium. Welcome, one and all!"

At the end of the hall of lockers, against a stained-glass window depicting roses, the shadows of three girls in regular Ohtori uniforms appeared. One stepped up on a box, while the other two bowed to the sudden sound of thunderous applause.

We stared. "What the..." said Nanami, but she was cut off by the voice.

"Welcome to... Iron Chef! Here at Ohtori Stadium, a whole team of challengers has just arrived to take on our own Iron Chef!"

"How exciting! Look, the Chairman is unveiling the secret ingredient!"

"And the secret ingredient," said the third girl, forcing a man's deeper voice, "is... Passionfruit!" as she whisked a cloth off another box, revealing the outline of a vase of roses.

More applause. "Now, can our own Iron Chef take on six challengers at once? Let the cook-off begin!"

Two tables and two shadows in chef's hats (although still obviously in girl's uniforms) appeared. One shadow in a chef hat began flinging bowls and roses and eggbeaters and knives and spoons and spice jars about in front of a table. The other shadow in a chef hat leaned negligently against the other table, ostentatiously doing nothing.

"Looks like we're out of time! Let's see what the judges think!"

One shadow in a chef's hat began serving the other two, who were now sitting down at a table adorned with a candelabra and the vase of roses. Plates heaped high with food steamed lightly in front of them.

"What has the challenger done with our ingredient? Curried passion, preserved passion, scorched or cajun passion, broken passion over forbidden rice, and a beautiful dessert of frozen passion ice! An impressive line-up! What do the judges think?"

The two seated shadows nodded and whispered to each other.

"Now for the dishes of our own Iron Chef!"

The "chef" served the two judges with empty plates. The judges pressed their hands to their hearts. One swooned out of her chair.

"And the final score is... A perfect score for our own Iron Chef! The Iron Chef is triumphant!"

One girl-shadow earnestly went and shook the hand of the shadowgirl in the chef's hat. The third shadowgirl leaned forward with a microphone. "Tell us, Iron Chef, what is your secret?"

The shadow in the chef's hat leaned forward and gave the interviewing shadow a rose. "Only illusion can match the taste of the heart."

The shadows froze, then faded away, leaving only the rose pattern on the arched window.

"What the *hell* was that?" asked Miki.

All the doors we tried were locked, so we wound our way back toward the heart of the main building, seeking another way out. The lights were very dim, almost the level of

moonlight, and we proceeded cautiously -- and quietly. For some reason, none of us felt much like talking.

One of the doors in one dark hallway creaked ajar, letting a sliver of light lance out into our path. Curious, Miki and I moved forward to peer in.

The room was full of roiling, undulating fabric, like dozens of settling parachutes. There was a queasy sort of pattern to the motion, but I couldn't pin it down. Then I glimpsed tousled silver silk -- Kozue's hair -- moving with the waves. Suddenly, I knew what was happening.

She was so starved as to be skeletal. I could count her ribs from where I stood, despite her hair hanging down. I wanted to look away. I couldn't. Her smile held me there, the long, feral, white teeth, and I could feel Miki struggling to flee the way I was. I kept hoping that the fabric would settle and praying that it wouldn't, because I had to know, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to look into Akio's face while he was with her...

Kozue fell forward, rolling to one side, and then a man rose up over her. He looked up, looked directly at us, at Miki, and smiled lazily.

Not Akio.

Miki uttered a broken little cry. "Robert!"

The brown-haired man stared insolently for a long moment before bending his head down to whisper something. Kozue sat up and twisted around to see Miki's face.

I pulled him away from the door as Kozue's laughter rolled out to us. "Everything, oniisan!" she crowed. "Everything!"

"What was it?" demanded Saionji when we'd all stopped running. "What did you see?"

Miki leaned against the wall, staring up at the vaulted ceiling. His eyes were desperately sad.

Nanami watched him for a long moment, then laid a hand on Saionji's arm. "Stop. Leave him be."

"We'd better keep moving," I said, looking behind us. For a moment I half-expected to see billowing white sheets following after us, snapping out to entwine us, smother us... I shook my head sharply. "Come on," I said.

Juri walked over to Miki and placed a hand on his shoulder. He smiled wanly at her, but straightened up. We continued down the hall.

As we turned a corner, we froze. Near the end of the hall stood a boy in a Student Council uniform and a girl in a regular uniform. As we watched, she slapped him hard -- the sound rang down the corridor -- and, voice choked with sobs, cried, "Idiot!" before running away, down another hall.

The boy turned toward us, one hand on his cheek.

"Tsuwa... buki?" Nanami said, dazed.

Tsuwabuki Mitsuru dropped his hand and faced us squarely. A shock of light brown hair didn't quite hang in his eyes in front, while the length in back was apparently caught into a tight braid that reached his waist. His white uniform tunic had a double row of rose-shaped, brass buttons up the front and shining epaulets enhancing his broad shoulders. His left sleeve was half tan to match his slacks, and golden braid looped from his left shoulder to his collar. His left earlobe was pierced twice with silver hoops.

He clicked a stopwatch and looked at the face. "Nanami-san."

"Tsuwabuki, who was that?" Nanami asked, a little more sure of herself.

"Oh, nobody, nobody," he drawled. "So you *are* here. I wasn't sure whether to believe Toshiro or not." He casually tucked the stopwatch into his hip pocket.

"Yes," Nanami said, and paused, apparently at a loss for words.

"You shouldn't be on campus so late, Nanami-san," Tsuwabuki said, walking toward us, one hand in his pocket. He'd grown quite tall, I noticed. His cheek glowed red from the slap. "*Visitors* should leave by sundown, you know. Campus policy."

"Since when?" Saionji asked gruffly.

Tsuwabuki didn't spare him a glance. "The Student Council this year made that decision." He stopped in front of Nanami, looking down at her. "Shall I escort you off campus, Nanami-san?"

"I don't require a guide, Tsuwabuki-kun," Nanami said, her eyes narrowing angrily.

"But I'm sure your brother would like me to extend this kindness to you," he replied evenly. Then he lunged, seizing her wrist and pulling her against him. Gripping her around the waist with one arm, he held her left hand up with his free hand. "So, you thought you could just waltz back onto campus and join the duels again, did you, Nanami?" he hissed, eyes blazing. "There're new Duelists now, and one of *us* will gain Revolution -- one of *us*. Your Council *failed*, Nanami. *Failed!*" He stared down into her startled, upturned face. "Maybe you thought you'd get your brother back, eh? But you left him, and he's with us. Helping us. You can't stop us. You can't have him. And you can never have me again!" He shoved Nanami away hard, very suddenly.

She staggered, but before any of us could get there to steady her, she caught herself and

stood, back ramrod straight, fists clenched. "Tsuwabuki!" she snapped, hands on hips, light flashing on her epaulets and the metal pips on her collar. "Don't touch me again! I've come to see my brother, and no matter what you do, you can't stop me. You have no right to even try!" She held up her left hand to show him her ring again. "*This* is the only ticket I require to be on campus. Remember, Tsuwabuki, I'll *always* be your elder!"

He stared at her, his eyes wide in horror, and backed up, one step, then two. For the first time, he seemed to notice the rest of us. He glanced over us briefly, then darted down another hallway. Saionji and Miki started forward to catch him, but when we reached the mouth of the hall, he was nowhere to be seen.

Miki paused and said, "My stopwatch! He had my stopwatch!"

Saionji looked at him strangely. "Yeah. You gave it to him. Don't you remember?"

Miki blinked at him and said, very quietly, "No."

Nanami straightened her yellow and black uniform irritably. "Come!" she snapped. "It's time we got to the bottom of this. Back to the elevators. We're going to see the Chairman."

We reminded Nanami that going back down the hall we were in immediately would probably lead us back to Kozue, and she agreed, after a moment, that it would be a bad idea. So, Nanami in the lead, we began down another corridor she said led back to the central hall. Saionji and I exchanged dubious looks.

We came to a widening in the passage that none of us remembered. As we cast around for something, anything to give us a clue as to what direction we should take, Saionji froze and looked around. "What was that?" he asked.

I listened intently, but, like the others, shook my head. Then...

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?" said two girls' voices, echoing eerily along the walls until the two voices broke into laughter.

We all jumped and looked around. "Who's there?" barked Saionji. My pulse pounded in my ears from the sudden adrenaline.

"I wonder, I wonder," whispered another voice, a woman's voice.

I was searching -- all of us were -- for the source, but the sound echoed in the high ceiling, making it impossible to track.

"Do you know what *I* wonder?" whispered the woman's voice.

Saionji seemed especially unnerved. "Who are you? Identify yourself!" he roared, a note of helplessness entering his voice.

A shadow detached from a deeper shadow near the wall and Keiko stepped in front of him. She was holding a doll in her hands, a marionette-type with jointed limbs, although there were no strings. The doll was dressed in a girl's Ohtori uniform, complete with red tie and puffed sleeves and patent leather shoes, but it had no face. Where the face should have been was a plain back oval.

The doll had little brown pigtails.

Keiko wore a white suit trimmed with red borders, tailored closely to her figure and clearly showing the high bulge of her pregnancy. Although she was wearing short, professional skirt, her jacket was cut like a tunic with a high mandarin collar, reminding me of Student Council uniforms. Her hair was cut short and stylishly, and a red purse dangled from one of her elbows.

Saionji stared down at her. "What...? What are you doing here, Keiko-san?"

Keiko ignored him, cradling the doll like a baby. "The grass of summertime grows long and green," she sang to the doll, "but it withers before autumn's cold, harsh wind..."

"Keiko?" asked Saionji. "Keiko!"

She glanced up at him, one flash from her dark eyes, before looking back down at the doll again. "Winter covers all with a blanket of snow," she half-sang, half-whispered, "but lo how they reappear with the spring thaw." Keiko rocked the doll in her arms. The jointed limbs swayed grotesquely.

He gritted his teeth so hard I could hear them grind, and I watched his knuckles go stark white on the hand gripping his katana. "Keiko-san," he repeated in an amazingly quiet and civil voice, "why are you here?"

"All has its seasons, life is a cycle, it goes round and round..." She twirled around, holding the doll up like a small child, so that its arms and legs flapped up and down. "Round and round!"

Saionji struck the doll from her hands. The doll crashed into a nearby door, then clattered to the floor. Keiko looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"Why, husband," she said, mock-innocently. "What are *you* doing here?"

I grabbed for his arm but missed. Juri jumped forward at the same time and we both watched helplessly as he struck --

-- and slammed sideways into the wall.

Yuuko and Aiko stood on either side of Keiko now. They had exactly the same hairstyle -

- long, straight hair cut to frame their faces -- and wore exactly the same suit: grey wool skirt and jacket over a low-cut red blouse. Both wore small, wire rim glasses with red lenses, and appeared to be the same age as Keiko.

It took me a moment to realize that the two of them had thrown Saionji.

"I wanted to bring the baby to his daddy," Keiko said sweetly.

Saionji picked himself up slowly, dusting off his white uniform tunic. Gold lieutenant's bars glittered at his collar. He tucked the hat under his arm and stood with his back very straight, staring down at the trio.

"So I came here," Keiko added. "And guess what? Akio-san said that he can come to Ohtori, as soon as he's old enough!"

He stared down at her wordlessly. She smiled up at him, patting one hand on her curved belly. "I know I'll be so proud of him."

"Keiko?" Nanami asked, with just a hint of uncertainty in her voice. "Is that you?"

Keiko's face lit up. "Nanami-san! How nice to see you! Isn't it wonderful that you'll have a nephew soon?" She laced her hands over her belly proudly. I thought I caught a glint of malice in her eyes, and in the eyes of her cohorts.

"No, she won't," Saionji said in a peculiarly dead voice. I heard steel sing from its scabbard, and all of us -- except Nanami and Anthy -- leaped on him.

When we'd wrestled him to the ground and taken the weapon from him, I looked up. Keiko, Aiko, and Yuuko were gone. Nanami was glaring at the wall, her fists clenched.

Anthy helped us up. Juri held Saionji's katana, Miki held the scabbard, and Saionji remained on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

Juri sheathed the katana and tucked it through her belt. With a cynical twist to her mouth, she said, "I seem to be collecting blades. Miki-kun, if you think you're going to go mad, maybe you ought to hand me your rapier right now."

"I'll try not to, Juri-san," he replied in the same tone.

"I wonder, I wonder," whispered a little girl's voice.

We all looked around, but there was no one else in the hall, except for the broken doll lying limply on the floor.

The door opened onto a sultry evening, and we stood around for a moment, puzzled.

a *date*." She twirled away from me. "And you remember, Utena. A date is something two people do by themselves!" Then, with a wave, she ran off into the gathering darkness.

Despite the heat, a cold chill ran down my spine. I gave Anthy a worried look, but she was watching after Wakaba, brow furrowed.

"Well, that idea was a bust," Nanami said smugly. "How about we get back to trying to get into the tower? Hey, you --" she turned to Anthy, "-- isn't there a way into the tower that's never locked?"

Anthy eyed her coldly. "It will be locked if he wants it locked."

"Damn, it's hot," I muttered, wiping sweat off my neck.

Juri hissed, "We're being watched!" and took off toward a niche. A figure bolted out of the shadows.

We all ran after Juri, though Saionji and I outstripped the rest in catching up with her. Our quarry was pretty fast. I managed to make out that it was someone in a pale uniform, possibly a Student Council uniform, and that it was probably male by the height and shoulders.

There was one turn, another, another, and then... open space and no sight of anyone. The three of us paused, listening. We could hear the others following us and nothing else.

Robert's mocking voice rang down from above. "Still with unhurrying chase,/And unperturbed pace./Deliberate speed, majestic instancy./Came on the following Feet./And a Voice above their beat-/Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.""

He leaned over the railing of a level above us, smiling until the others came into sight of him, his white uniform, plainer than those of the Student Council and somehow more martial, glowing in the light of the just-risen moon. He blew a kiss to Miki. By that time, Juri had found the stairs up, and he bolted again.

We lost him again in the labyrinth of white buildings, which all began to look the same. As we stood, swinging our heads back and forth as if trying to catch a scent, his voice echoed along several passages: "On with the dance! let joy be unconfined;/No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet/To chase the glowing Hours with flying feet."

Juri and Saionji bolted down one shadowy arcade. I was about to follow when Chu-Chu yanked my hair. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, pointing frantically down another way. I followed his direction, the English of Robert's quotations jarring on my ear in this place that was, for me, ineffably tied to my life in Japan.

"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.I learn by going where I have to go.We think by feeling. What is there to know?I hear my being dance from ear to ear.I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow."

I turned a corner, turned again, sprinted up a set of stairs, Chu-Chu steering me like a horse by the reins of my hair. At one point I heard Saionji curse somewhere nearby, but I never saw him.

With some effort, I jumped, caught a railing over my head, and hauled myself up. Robert's voice was very close and hardly echoing at all, so I did my best to land on the balcony quietly. I missed whatever he said next, but as I crept forward, I heard,

"This shaking keeps me steady. I should know. What falls away is always. And is near. I wake to --"

I tackled him at the waist, bringing him to the ground and knocking the breath out of him in a whoosh. He turned, quick as a snake to attack me. I grappled with him. A second or so later, Juri and Saionji joined the struggle. Saionji managed to catch Robert on the jaw with his fist, and I worked on twisting the arm I had...

And then Juri did something I didn't see, and all the fight went out of Robert with a pained squeak.

We hauled him to his feet and he managed to say, "Huntsman, rest! thy chase is done." I shoved him face-first against the wall. The others caught up with us at last.

"You know, I could lose my job over this," commented Juri, without heat. She took handcuffs out of her coat pocket and snapped them professionally over Robert's wrists, which she held in an easy one-handed grip behind his back.

Robert looked disdainful and a little amused. I wasn't sure how much of that was an act and how much of it was for Miki's benefit. I glanced over at Miki, who turned his back to this little scene. Anthy put an arm around his shoulders and spoke to him in a low voice. Robert said, "'But popular rage./*Hysterica passio* dragged this quarry down./None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part/Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.'" Nanami snorted derisively.

We moved off the balcony, down some nearby stairs, Juri shoving Robert along. I looked around. We'd ended up in a disused part of campus, next to the ruins of a burned-out building which, I was quite sure, had spawned rumors of some sort of a haunting. I couldn't remember any details of the stories, but we were not in a mood to be frightened of rumored ghosts, in any case.

We studied one another's faces in the dim light, wondering what to do next. Juri tactfully interposed herself between Robert and Miki, absently -- or perhaps not so absently - twisting Robert's arm a little in her firm grip, so that he had to turn away.

"Tenjou-kun."

I spun around at the voice, as did Saionji and Nanami. There was a... man leaning against the steps of the ruined building. He hadn't been there a moment before, I was sure. He was wearing a school uniform, although he seemed a little old for it... As I stared at him,

convinced that I remembered him from somewhere, he turned his face towards me in the deep blue light of the Ohtori evening.

"Mikage-sem-- san!" I blinked, trying to sort through a cascade of memories. "What are you doing here?" I looked up at the blackened ruin suspiciously, which I was remembering as a tall white building, although I knew perfectly well that it had been burned down long before I had started as a student at Ohtori.

He laughed a short, humorless, laugh. "I'm not," he said enigmatically.

I glanced aside at Nanami, who frowned ferociously, evidently struggling with memory as well. I was relieved that I wasn't the only one.

"But... you graduated, didn't you?" I asked. He'd certainly been older than me, and had left, rather suddenly -- I rocked back on my heels as the memories impacted. The duel. I'd dueled him. The black roses.

Some of this must have registered on my face, because he nodded and started down the steps. "I did. But I'd spent too much time here, you see."

I could see the steps through him, faintly. Involuntarily, I looked down; he had feet.

He noticed this and laughed again, with more amusement this time. "No, I'm not a ghost in the way you think. Yet I am, really, a ghost of a ghost, worn as thin and brittle as a dead petal. Mikage left a long time ago. I am merely... memories."

"What do you mean?" Nanami demanded abruptly.

I blinked. Behind him, the building suddenly reared up tall and white, almost glowing in the dusk, as though it had never been a ruin. He didn't look transparent any more, either.

He shrugged one shoulder at her, leaning casually against the suddenly solid handrail. "Too much time," he said thoughtfully, "Besides, he changed his mind and wanted me back. And I... I didn't have a way of refusing."

Nanami raised her voice. "You mean the Chairman?"

Mikage shrugged. "Who else? And even if I would be a ghost in the world outside, here I am eternal. Like everything else. I suppose he thought he had a use for me."

Robert murmured suddenly, in a dreamy tone, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st."

"The trouble with eternal summer," said Anthony sadly from behind us, "Is that it really isn't all that different from eternal winter."

Mikage looked at her with an expression of such bitter regret that I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. Anthony looked back at him, her eyes reflecting something only he could see.

Mikage dropped his eyes first.

"In any case," he said, "Here I am, still here. No, here I am not a ghost."

"Nor shall death boast thou wandrest in his shade," added Robert.

"Will someone shut him up?" demanded Nanami. "I've had it up to here with his stale quotations."

"Look," I said. "Mikage-san..." He turned to look at me, adjusting the little glasses down his nose. He wore a Rose Signet on that hand. "You're here on *his*... whim?"

He nodded. "And you aren't?"

"No," I said, although a cold chill passed over me as I said it.

"I see," he said politely. "Well, I dare say we shall not meet again. Farewell, Tenjou-kun."

I nodded to him, bitterly disappointed. I don't know what I had hoped, but surely Mikage would have reason to hate... the Chairman. He seemed so... devastated at the end of our duel. But that was a long time ago.

He said, "And farewell to you all. I hope I will not see you again. He," and we all knew of whom he spoke, "must be desperate indeed to be unwilling to let even me go."

I looked at him, startled, and he smiled. "You really *aren't* much like Tokiko, are you, Tenjou-kun? Good luck." And he turned and went up the steps and through the double doors of the building.

I stared up at the facade of the building for a moment, trying to make out where the flickering red light was coming from, before it faded and we were standing in the shadow of a dark, solid, ordinary-looking building which hadn't been there a few moments before.

"Well," said Juri thoughtfully into the silence. "That was weird."

A girl was leaning against the wall near the front door of one of the dorm buildings, a pool of light gathered around her feet. She stood under a tall streetlight, and far over her head, hundreds of moths swooped around it, circling the light in a dizzying dance, dodging in to brush the glass with their wings and then circling out into the darkness, always to come back again.

She wore a Student Council uniform: a white jacket, tailored to her long, slender waistline, left sleeve adorned with three chevrons of deep, royal blue along the forearm,

and slacks of a matching blue. It hung loosely on her ascetic, muscular body. She stood perfectly still with the sort of alert poise that speaks of intense training. After a moment, the sound of footsteps approached, and she thrust herself off from the wall with the controlled power of her hands.

"Where *have* you been?" she asked the boy coming up the walk in a mellifluous, but also peevish, voice. The heavy braid of her dark hair snapped behind her with irritation as she stepped onto the path to meet him. "I've been waiting here for over an hour. You know, if you hadn't insisted on moving onto campus, it wouldn't be so difficult for me to find you."

Fujiwara brushed his dark hair back from his face irritably. "What do you want, Hoshiko?" he asked in a tired sort of voice.

She stretched, spreading her arms out in a graceful pose and carefully arching each foot, before stepping forward to poke a long finger into the center of his chest. "I want to know how the *hell* you could let *her* win the Rose Bride, Yukio! What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking, I was dueling," he said shortly, running a hand through his forelock.

"Oh, always a clever comeback! Isn't that just like my oniisama?" The last word was said with the most overpowering sarcasm I had ever heard. Hoshiko tilted her head back on her almost impossibly graceful neck, as though addressing the moths that still swarmed around the light overhead. "Don't you have *anything* in you besides clever remarks and sarcastic comments?" She looked back at him, took another step, leaning in close. "That's why you couldn't keep the Rose Bride, Yukio, you just don't *care*! You have no drive, no passion! Isn't there anything, anything at all you *want*?"

Her brother stared at her, then took a step back, out of the circle of light. "Hoshiko, must you yell in my face? She cheated. We're not supposed to draw blood, you know." He indicated the thin slash along one cheek.

"Poor, poor Yukio. His beauty is gone forever," said Hoshiko in a softer voice, a parody of maternalism. She raised a hand and patted the slash with exaggerated tenderness, and Yukio froze in surprise. "Whoever shall love him now?" she added, turning away lightly.

Yukio closed his eyes. "Why don't we skip answering that question, Hoshiko? I don't really want to seem more pathetic than necessary."

"Pathetic! That's all you *are*! You're nothing but a pathetic poser. Why I ever thought you could keep the Rose Bride, I don't know. You don't care about anything! All you do is *pose*." She turned her back on him, hands on hips. "Are you ever going to move back to the house, or are you going to continue to *pose* here for all your little groupies?"

He drifted closer, back into the circle of light. "Hoshiko..." he began.

"Well," she said, spinning to face him. "I have better things to do than stand outside your precious dorm. I have to get up for practice at 5 am. Will you be sleeping in as usual?"

she finished with saccharine sweetness.

He said nothing.

Infuriated, she stood up on tiptoe to say into his face, "If *I* had the Rose Bride, I wouldn't have lost her! And do you know why? Because I have something I care about, something I want, something I desire strongly enough to revolutionize the world for! Isn't there *any* passion like that in you? Isn't there *anything* you *want*?" She shook her head with impatience, then, with a graceful leap, she left her pool of light and ran off into the gloom.

Fujiwara stared after her for a moment, then sighed and looked up at the light and the moths circling around it. "Yes," he said, apparently to the lamp-post. "Hoshiko..." He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small cell phone. Flipping it open, he stared for a long moment at the Ohtori rose on the mouthpiece, then pressed a button.

"It's me. Yukio. Are you free? Very well. I'll be right over." He closed the phone, stared at it for a moment, then slid it back into his pocket.

As he strode back down the walk, away from the dorm, the streetlight flickered out. As the moths began to disperse in confusion, a bat flashed through them, feeding.

I felt very hot and somewhat sick to my stomach after the chase. I leaned my forehead against the cool marble of the building that hadn't been there a few moments ago and took long, slow breaths. After a moment, I felt Anthy put her arm around my waist and press close.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

I turned my head, leaving the top of it against the wall, and smiled. "Yeah, I think I just got dehydrated or something. Feeling a little queasy. Running in this heat isn't a good idea."

She brushed my hair out of my face with gentle fingers. "You're looking a little pale. Why don't you come over here and sit down with me?" I nodded and went with her. She kept an arm around me as we sat down.

Juri nodded to us, then turned to Robert. The Englishman leaned back against a pillar, his manacled hands splayed flat against the stone, and his formerly neat auburn hair hung in his face, drenched with sweat. Juri crossed her arms and assumed an extremely patient expression. I could almost see her consciously slipping on her professional mask.

"So," she began, "I think you have a story you want to tell us. Why don't you get started?"

Robert laughed shortly. "You're awfully confident of that, Arisugawa-san."

She leaned close, forcing him to press his head back against the pillar behind him. "I'm a police officer, Denver. I have a great deal of patience with this sort of thing. And I'm also deeply aware of the... liquidity of reality here. It's entirely possible that anything I might do to you here just wouldn't ever have happened once I leave. I'm not sure what would happen. But think of the fun we could have finding out."

"Juri-san," Miki said softly. "I think I ought to handle this."

Juri stepped back and bowed to Miki. Robert smiled. Miki, back straight and head held high, stepped forward.

And decked Robert with a right cross.

Miki rubbed his knuckles and smiled grimly down at Robert, who had fallen to the pavement. "What say, old boy?" Miki said with a perfect imitation of an English accent. "Shall we settle this man to man? Or are you ready to tell me how you came to be here..." he used a broad gesture to indicate the whole of the academy, "and sleeping with my sister?"

Robert looked up at him, and for the first time I saw a little fear and respect mingled there. He laughed ruefully. "'That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend/Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.' Not that *you* really have that much force, Miki, dear -- usually -- but you know my habit, a quotation for every occasion... I guess you learned more at Oxford than we intended." He struggled to sit up, and none of us helped him. "I met Kozue two years ago, while I was teaching English at another school. She was living in an artists' enclave in Tokyo, and we went to the same nightclubs. One thing led to another." He shot a glance up at Miki. "Your sister is hard to resist when she's got her sights set. You were always delightful, Miki dear, but you just couldn't equal her *passion*. Her *hunger*." His gaze drifted off to the darkness and he murmured again, "Her hunger."

Miki's fists clenched, but he restrained himself. "So you got involved. What then?" he asked tightly.

Robert's attention came back from wherever it had wandered. "She was invited back to school here, and she was excited because she'd started teaching herself to write music and thought someone here would help her. I helped her move back onto campus. And I met him."

There was a gentle emphasis to the last word that brought my attention -- which had been focused on my own discomfort -- back to Robert's face.

"He offered me a job. The pay was good, I took it. He and Kozue became very... close. I got the feeling that there was something going on, some kind of planning. They asked me to go back to Oxford, find you, keep tabs on you. I owed him... and her, so I did. Besides, they were willing to pay pretty handsomely for it." Robert tossed his head to get the hair out of his face. "It turned out to be a rather pleasant job, anyway. You really are a dear. I

felt a bit bad about it all. But we had some fun, eh?"

Emotions tore across Miki's face, but he finally mastered his expression enough to favor Robert with a glare that would have done Nanami proud. He turned on his heel and walked away. "Hey, Nanami, why don't we go around this way and see if there's any open doors?" He glanced over his shoulder at Juri. "Do whatever you want with him. I'm finished here."

Juri motioned for them to wait a moment. She fished Nanami's dagger out of her belt and handed it over. "Just in case," she said, then handed Saionji his katana. Miki and Nanami moved off into the nearby quad.

Robert whispered, "Yet dearly I love You, and would be lovéd fain,But am betrothed unto Your enemy;Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;Take me to You, imprison me, for I,Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me."

I was following the poetry without too much trouble, my ear having been trained by my years in English-speaking countries. But I wasn't sure whether he was speaking to Miki or not.

Juri turned back to the Englishman. "So, what should I do with you, then? I suspect that we should at least keep track of you." She hauled him up off the ground by his lapels. Saionji stepped behind him. "Anything else you'd like to tell us about whatever the Chairman is planning?"

He shrugged awkwardly. "I don't really know much of anything. I know about the duels, I suppose."

"How did he choose the Rose Bride this time?" Juri asked, her voice amazingly steady.

With perhaps more perception than he ought to have shown, Robert said, "O Rose, thou art sick!/The invisible worm/That flies in the night,/In the howling storm,/Has found out thy bed/Of crimson joy,/And his dark secret love/Does thy life destroy."

Juri's jaw tightened, then she turned to Anthy and me. "Utena, you look like crap. Why don't you take a walk, find some water or something? See if you can find an open door. I agree with Nanami, it's time to take this to the top of the tower."

Toshiro practiced lunges against the wall in the fencing salle. Again and again, he struck and gathered himself, struck and gathered himself. After a few minutes, he wearied of this, and stood back, saluted the wall, and pulled his mask off to take a drink of water.

He sighed and set the water bottle down. With a touch of playfulness, he swung the foil a

few times like a broadsword. Then he straightened his glasses and stood to attention.

"So, Yukio-sempai! I have challenged you!" he bellowed (as best he could). He drew the sword up to salute. "Have at you!" He began to dance across the floor, driving his imaginary opponent before him. "Ha! Haha! There! Well struck! Ah, close, very close, sempai, but not close enough! There! Ha! Dodge this! And this! And so!" He lashed out and delicately sliced the air.

He immediately bowed. "Well fought, Yukio-sempai, but I believe the Bride is mine now, by right. Thank you, I enjoyed the bout. Yes, yes, I look forward to a rematch as well." Toshiro stepped back and extended his arm. "Come, Hoshiko-san."

With his imaginary Bride on his arm, he departed the salle.

I thought maybe the heat was doing something to my eyes. I blinked to clear them and, after a moment, I could see again.

Anthy was looking up at me, concerned. "Utena?"

I shook my head. "It's all right. Just a little woozy still from the run."

"Did you get hit?" she asked, reaching up to run gentle fingers over the back of my head.

"Not that I remember," I said, smiling sheepishly at the feebleness of my joke. She smiled back and continued to check my skull over with her fingers.

"Nothing," she admitted finally.

"It'd hurt anyway if I had," I pointed out. "And I don't hurt. I just feel kind of... thick. Like this air! God!"

Anthy looked around. "I'm not sure we're going to find a way in until he opens the doors for us. Although, I suppose, he might only open one way to make sure we go through his funhouse by the correct path."

"Didn't we just *do* the funhouse?" I asked.

Anthy sighed. She paused to test a door. It was locked.

Miki hurried along the side of the main building, opposite the great arched windows of the music rooms. "Where the hell did Nanami get to, anyway?" he growled. He strode along at his best pace, eyes scanning the darkness for his companion. And then he

cannoned straight into someone.

"I'm sorry, I..." he began, then stopped. Kozue stood in front of him, having just emerged from the building. Her jacket was open to her waist, and there wasn't a shirt underneath. The slight swell of her breasts were just barely visible in the shadow of the uniform.

"Well, Miki-chan, I'm glad I ran into you," she said. "We really haven't had a chance to talk, have we? Why don't you come inside?" She took hold of his wrist and drew him, stunned and unresisting, through the doorway. She glanced over her shoulder. "You can go, Shiori."

The Rose Bride, eyes downcast, hurried past the pair, straightening the tie of her uniform and tucking in the blouse. I noticed that she closed the door softly.

"W-why was she here?" Miki finally managed to say as Kozue drew him into the piano room.

Kozue smiled, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I'm the Victor, and she's the Rose Bride." She sat on the chair in front of the piano and pulled him down next to her. Her hands began to float over the keys, eliciting the beginning strains of "The Sunlit Garden" from the instrument. Miki's hands, as if by a will of their own, began to play his part of the duet.

"Why are *you* here, Kozue?" he asked after a moment.

"Reclaiming my birthright," she said, adding a bit of counterpoint that twirled gently around Miki's melodic line. "What about you?"

He was silent, and he improvised on his line, taking hold of her counterpoint and leading her firmly back to their usual sound. "I want to bring you out of this place," he admitted. "It's not healthy for you." He glanced aside at her, then looked quickly back at the keyboard. Her jacket was hanging more open than before.

Her counterpoint slipped away from his improvisation and sidled up next to it, following it with a flirtatious mocking air. "I'm happier than I've ever been before, Miki-chan," she said gently.

"Kozue-chan," he began, then drew both improvisation and counterpoint back to the normal line. "Kozue, why do you need to be here? You're brilliant. You could get into any music school in the world!" His fingers created an angry riff of chords that left her at the melody while he danced away into the wide world.

Her melody took on an almost martial air. "I need to finish it, Miki," she said. "I can't finish it anywhere else." She interpolated a theme from the music we'd first heard her playing, one that caught his wandering chords in a net and turned them to her own purposes.

"Why do you duel, then?" He struggled to free himself with a long, sliding cascade of

notes, but he just ended up against her line of the original song again, pressed there by the weight of her creation.

"Because that's how I'll gain the power to finish it," she whispered as her practiced fingers wrapped steely chords around his dancing improvisation, locking him against her in the surging melody that was now entirely of her own making.

"I..." He struggled in her grip, trying to find his way back, a way to finish the song, to get away from this duel before...

In a crash of notes, she turned suddenly and straddled his hips, ripping his uniform jacket open. He gasped as bare skin touched bare skin.

"I want *all* my birthright," she whispered against his mouth, "including you."

Juri turned to Saionji after we had been gone a few minutes. "I'm going to check a few windows I thought were ajar when we ran past them earlier. You keep an eye on Laughing Boy here." With that, she stalked off.

Saionji dropped onto a stone bench nearby, and Robert lowered himself to the seat with care. Robert watched Saionji's face carefully as he glowered at the locked building, his hands twitching from time to time around his restored katana. After a few minutes of silence, the Englishman ventured:

"In the desert I saw a creature, naked, bestial, Who, squatting upon the ground, Held his heart in his hands, And ate of it."

Saionji turned an angry, disbelieving stare upon him.

"I said, 'Is it good, friend?'" "It is bitter - bitter," he answered; "But I like it Because it is bitter, And because it is my heart." "

After a moment's silence, Saionji said, "If I hear another word of English out of you, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

There was a pause. Then Robert said, in Japanese, "Your English isn't very good, is it?"

"Where did Miki go?" Nanami muttered as she stomped along one main concourse. "I swear, I make one bathroom stop and he just vanishes..."

She stopped short, staring ahead, then said, "Wait up a second!"

The girl in the Student Council uniform turned to look at her. "Yes?" she said politely.

Nanami walked up to her and bowed slightly. "You're on the Student Council, yes?"

The dark-haired girl bowed in response. "I have that honor."

The blonde folded her arms so as to display her rose signet prominently. "I am Kiryuu Nanami, and I understood that I had an appointment with the Chairman, but I can't seem to get into the main building. Could I trouble you to help me?" This was Nanami as I most disliked her, very reminiscent of the old days.

"Kiryuu Nanami-san?" the girl asked, her violet eyes lighting up. "Really? I'm so glad to meet you at last!" She bowed. "I am Fujiwara Hoshiko, Student Council Faculty Liaison."

Nanami bowed to Hoshiko after a short pause. "Pleased to meet you."

"Have you seen Touga-san yet?" Hoshiko asked, smiling. "Have you heard?"

"Heard?" echoed Nanami, a note of confusion in her voice.

Dark eyes shone in the dim light. "I'm so pleased to meet you. You're the first person I will have told! Touga and I... well... we're engaged!"

One of the lights along the path behind Hoshiko sizzled briefly and expired. Nanami's eyes flicked to it for a second before her face settled into a wide smile. "Well! Such news!" She stepped forward and offered her hand, Western-style. "Congratulations!"

Hoshiko stared at her hand for a moment, then took it warmly. "For a long time, I wished that I could have been you. To have a brother as wonderful as Touga-san. My brother is so... cold. But now I'll have a husband like Touga-san!" She giggled, covering her mouth with one hand.

Another of the lights, a little closer, went out with a faintly audible pop. Nanami continued to smile, though the expression grew more... fixed. "Well, well," she said carefully. "I hope that you'll come to call me 'big sister' in time, Hoshiko-san."

The girl's face was radiant. "He talks about you all the time, but I never thought I'd get a chance to meet you before the wedding, you living so far away and all."

One after another in rapid succession, the other nearby lights blew out in showers of sparks. Hoshiko looked around in the sudden darkness, startled. "I wonder what happened?"

Nanami, her face invisible in the darkness, said, "A fuse blew, I suppose."

I found myself leaning on Anthy as we walked along, looking for unlocked doors. Periodically, we would stop and try a door, then leave disappointed. The night air was thick and sweltering. When I found a pillar, I embraced its cool stone to get some relief from the blinding heat.

"God, Anthy, I don't remember it being so damned hot here," I said, allowing her to lead me since it had become too much effort to keep my eyes open.

"Utena, it's just not that hot," she said as we shuffled along.

"How can you say that? It's so hot... and humid, Anthy. I can barely breathe." In fact, it was hurting my chest to do so, as if a great weight were pressing down on me and I was helpless to get it off.

"You're burning up," she said, her blissfully cool hand drifting over my face. "Damn." She evidently didn't enjoy the sensation of being puzzled. She was frowning ferociously.

"This door's locked too," I said after feebly twisting the knob.

Anthy tried it to no avail as well. "Damn, damn, damn," she muttered.

"I dunno how much longer I can walk like this, Anthy," I said. The weight was beginning to crush my chest. I coughed and my whole body hurt.

She eyed me for a moment, then said, "Let's find you a seat so you can wait for me to come back with water."

We walked in silence for a few moments, and somehow we came out of our current path into the courtyard that contained the Birdcage. "Look, Anthy!" I said dazedly, pointing. "The Rose Garden. D'you remember all the times we spent in there, just talking? It was always so quiet there. Cool. It'd be a nice cool place to sit. Why don't we, Anthy?"

She looked at me very dubiously, then attempted to lead me away. "Come on, Utena. I don't think that's a very good idea..."

"Aw, no, Anthy, 've gotta siddown." It was *so* hot and I couldn't breathe and my arms and legs felt like they'd been beaten. "Can't keep walking. It'd be nice in there." I started for the Garden door, towing Anthy with me by her grip on my arm.

"Utena, that would be a really *bad* idea," she said, trying to stop me by digging in her feet. I kept blundering along.

"Jus' a few minutes, Anthy," I slurred. "Just to sit a few. M'head hurts, m'eyes hurt, I can't keep walkin'..." I had the door to the Garden open now.

Anthy peered inside, then around us, and shook her head. "All right, fine. You sit down here." She helped lower me onto a little bench near the door. "Wait here. Don't go *anywhere*. I'm going to get you some water, okay?"

"Kay." I put my head on my knees. I heard her footsteps hurry away.

Silence reigned back at the stone bench.

Robert shifted. "My arms are starting to hurt a bit."

"Tough luck," Saionji muttered. "Arisugawa has the keys."

"Oh."

Silence.

"So," said Robert brightly. "I hear you know Kiryuu Touga really... well. He's quite a man, isn't he?"

"In what way?" Saionji inquired icily.

"I'm sure you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I don't," said Saionji repressively.

But it obviously took more than Saionji to repress Robert. "He told me himself what good... friends you used to be. Did you really invite Akio to--"

"SHUT UP!" bellowed Saionji, lunging up off the bench. "I don't have to take this from you!"

Robert, startled, retained enough poise to look innocently up at Saionji. "Was it something I said?"

Juri prowled along, her footsteps only a faint whisper on the walkway. She emerged from another arched walkway into a paved courtyard. She paused a moment to stare at the dry fountain in the middle of the courtyard, the formal sculpture reduced to a tangle of twisted shadows by the moonlight. She turned away from it toward yet another path.

"Juri-san!"

She jerked around. The Rose Bride was suddenly standing in the open courtyard, in front of the fountain. "Shiori!" Juri exclaimed.

"Juri-san," Shiori said, her sweetest smile shining happily upon her oldest friend. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Really?" Juri managed a relatively cool tone. "You didn't even remember me earlier."

Shiori stepped forward and gazed up into Juri's face. "It's just that you've changed so much, Juri-san." She reached up and touched Juri's short hair. "Your poor hair. I thought you'd keep it long forever, in those beautiful curls."

Juri stepped back a few feet, running a self-conscious hand through her cropped hair. "I looked like an idiot in those curls," she muttered uncomfortably. She turned away from Shiori and the fountain and started toward the opposite corner of the courtyard. "So, you... what are you still doing here?"

"What do you mean?" Shiori said, standing at her elbow. Juri startled back, turning to face the Rose Bride, whose eyes were concealed by moonlight reflecting off the lenses of those glasses she now wore. "I'm here because I'm always here. I'm the Rose Bride."

Juri took another step back, this time towards the center of the courtyard. "Now," she said gruffly. "There was a different Bride when I was dueling."

Shiori circled her thoughtfully, then stepped in close. "Are you going to duel again, Juri-san?" She seemed earnest, almost desperate. "Will you duel?"

Juri took another step backward and the heel of her shoe scraped against the fountain's basin. She half-turned to her left, but Shiori closed the distance and pressed against her, leaning her head and hands against Juri's chest.

"You could duel for me, Juri-san. And keep me! I'm so tired of being passed from one person to another." She looked up, tears brightening her eyes. "Kozue's so *cruel*, Juri-san. Look! She's hurt me." Shiori held up her wrists, displaying livid, finger-sized bruises in the pale skin there. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?" She laid her head against Juri again. "You would never be cruel."

Juri looked up at the star-studded sky. "I could never be as cruel," she said hoarsely, "as you."

Shiori slid her arms around Juri's waist. "I never meant to be cruel. Not really. Not to you."

"Yes," Juri said, her voice coming clearer now. "Yes, you did. Don't you remember the first boy you 'stole' from me? You did it to hurt, not knowing that I didn't care for him. And then... and then..." She swallowed. "I saw you kiss Ruka, standing here, by this fountain. You did that to hurt me, to try to steal someone else from me, although you got more tangled in it than you bargained for. And now, now you're still doing it, riding the coattails of power and convincing yourself that you're worth something because you can make people *hurt*."

Shiori raised her head now, startled. "What do you mean?"

With gentle but inexorable pressure, Juri freed herself from Shiori's grip and left her

standing in the shadow of the fountain. Shiori shouted after her, "What do you *mean*? Juri? Juri! You owe me an *answer*!"

Juri turned to face her. "You've found your power and your identity now, Rose Bride. How do you like it? You don't like being hurt? So stop doing it to yourself! Take off those glasses and tell Kozue to leave you alone! Don't come to *me* for rescue!" She whirled away, only to come face-to-face with Shiori again.

"It's not that easy. You know that." The Rose Bride reached up to touch Juri's face. "I liked the look in your eyes when you were hurt. I liked it."

Juri drew a ragged breath, but her voice was still firm. "Shiori. Don't."

Shiori took Juri's face in her hands and stretched up so that her breath fell across the older woman's lips. "You pretend to be stronger than anyone, but now you're here, the truth shows..."

"Shiori..."

Their lips hovered inches apart. "In dreams, I'm still the one you hold and kiss and touch, aren't I, Juri? One of your lovers left you because you called my name once instead of hers. You'll never, ever be rid of me, not so long as I am the face that you want to come home to."

Shiori sprang away, shoving Juri backwards as she did so. Juri staggered and caught herself, staring at the Rose Bride, whose expression was unreadable again, thanks to the reflections on the glasses. "But I am engaged to Kaoru Kozue-sama," she told Juri. "I belong to the Victor of the Duels." She turned and walked away slowly, calling, "Good night, Juri-san," over her shoulder.

Juri ran a hand through her hair, taking long, slow breaths. She mechanically buttoned the uniform jacket back up and straightened the braid. I saw her hand go to the front of the jacket, but she caught herself and yanked it away angrily. Then she walked off, her footsteps ringing crisply on the stone.

Tsuwabuki waited impatiently in front of the elevator, frowning at the rose pattern on the outside doors. As the bell rang and the doors finally slid apart, a voice called from behind him, "Hold the elevator, please."

Tsuwabuki stepped into the elevator and turned around, holding the doors open with one hand automatically. Fujiwara Yukio stepped into the elevator. Tsuwabuki stared at him, and let the doors close.

"Mitsuru-kun," Yukio said coolly as the elevator began moving up. "And what are *you*

doing here this time of night?"

Tsuwabuki looked away from Yukio. "I-I-I have an... appointment."

Yukio, in a faintly amused tone, said, "What a coincidence. So do I. To discuss Student Council matters."

"Yes," Mitsuru said, a little too quickly. "Yes, that's what mine is about too."

A pause, in which only the hum of the elevator was audible.

"I always find these meetings," Yukio said genially, watching Mitsuru out of the corner of his eye "very... educational."

Tsuwabuki looked away from Yukio, at the blank wall of the elevator. His one visible ear started to turn red.

"Also, of course, Student Council business is so... pressing right now."

Tsuwabuki's ear turned redder.

There was another pause. Then the chime sounded and the elevator doors slid open.

"Enjoy your meeting, Mitsuru-kun," said Yukio, as the younger boy stepped out of the elevator and turned, looking wide-eyed at him. Fujiwara Yukio smiled slightly. "I guess this is your stop. My... appointment's on the next floor up."

"Er, good evening, Yukio-sempai," stammered Tsuwabuki.

"Maybe we should get together afterwards and compare notes," replied the older boy, thoughtfully.

There was a long pause, as Tsuwabuki stared at Yukio, his face flaming crimson.

The doors of the elevator began to close. Just before they touched, Yukio said, "Just kidding."

At the stone bench, Saionji was sitting back, a small, satisfied smile twisting the corner of his mouth.

Chu-Chu stood between him and Robert, kicking Robert's leg again and again.

Robert glowered sullenly down at Chu-Chu, his own sock shoved in his mouth.

I raised my head and looked around. My throat felt tight, and while the weight on my chest seemed to have gone away, now I felt the air clinging to me. Everything was close and hot and motionless. The world was a blur. I couldn't stay here anymore. I lurched to my feet and staggered out onto the lawn.

The air outside was moving, at least, and I could look up and see the stars, those cool, clear points of light. I took my shoes and socks off when I realized I was walking on grass, and it was nice to feel the cool blades of grass slide between my toes as I wandered, shoes in my hand.

The fever was, I think, starting to recede. I could feel the breeze blowing my hair and cooling the sweat on my scalp and neck. I could take deep breaths and not hurt. Even the pain in my limbs was starting to fade.

I saw the shadow of a tree ahead and recognized it as the tree we'd been gathered around earlier. A motion drew my eye to the side of it, and I saw a familiar, beloved profile in the moonlight.

"Oh, hey, Wakaba!" I called, waving my arm.

She didn't respond, but she stepped toward the tree and stretched up on tiptoe, reaching for something.

I felt good enough to jog a bit, so I did. I called again, "Wakaba!"

As if she didn't hear me -- though she had to have -- she turned and ran off across the lawn toward one of the side gates.

I started to call her name a third time, but gave it up as useless. I continued on my path, wondering what she'd been doing.

Another shadow detached itself from the trunk of the tree.

Ohtori Akio stood, limned in moonlight, his red shirt open, his tie in his hand.

I stopped and stared. He smiled at me and walked closer.

"Wa... ka... ba..." I said slowly, sadly.

"Utena," he said, his voice silky. "That's right, you're an old friend of my fiancée, aren't you?" He stopped in front of me, one hand in a pocket, the other hand trailing the tie over his shoulder. "Would you like to be maid of honor? Or maybe best man would fit you better now?"

My vision clouded. Despite the fact I was feeling better, my head still hurt and my eyes -- something was weird with my eyes. I couldn't make them focus quite right, like I was looking at the world through heat waves. I blinked them clearer and glared at him as best

I could. "Leave her the hell alone, you pervert," I snarled.

He feigned surprise. "Can it be you're jealous, Utena? Really, I'm sure she'd be all right with you and I..."

"Stop it!" I snapped. "Stop it, stop it, stop it. I despise you. Leave my friend alone. Let her *go!*"

His hand caught my chin and drew me close to him. Suddenly, I was fourteen again and terrified and confused. "I never let anyone go," he whispered. "They may leave me, but given a chance, they'll always come back."

I stared at him, appalled, and couldn't make words come out of my mouth.

"You have a choice, you know," he continued, gently releasing me. "Give me Anthy. Give her back to me. I'm the only one who can give her what she needs. And you can have your little friend."

I laughed. Suddenly, right there, in his face.

He drew back, affronted, and covered it by buttoning up his shirt and retying his tie. "I don't know what you think is so funny about the facts. About a deal for your friend's life."

"As if I *would* give you Anthy," I said scornfully, "even if she was mine to give."

"You won her, Victor," he said, starting to walk off. "I'll win her back if I must. I hope you've brushed up your dueling skills. After all, this is *my* game."

"You don't understand anything, do you?" I asked. "No one can win Anthy or give Anthy or keep Anthy anymore!"

"Well, that's too bad," his voice drifted back to me. I was losing sight of him, one shadow in a wavering forest of other shadows. "Because once the current Rose Bride has done her job, I'll need another Bride. And it will be either Anthy or your friend."

I stared after him as he strode away. As he disappeared into the main building, Anthy ran up to me from along the fence. "Utena, are you all right?" She was breathing hard, and glanced after Akio once before focusing on me.

I nodded slowly and looked at her. The world was still strangely shimmery, but at least I felt better. She held up a cup of water that miraculously was still half-full. I drained it gratefully, then pulled her against me.

"He's... Wakaba's engaged to him," I murmured in her ear.

"Oh... damn," she replied. "Utena, I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It'll be all right." I looked up at the stars, then back down to her face. "The

good guys always win, right?"

The expression in her eyes was awfully sad as she looked back at me, but then she stretched up and kissed me. "Come on," she said after we broke apart, "We need to go round up the others." She didn't answer my question. Then she backed out to arm's length, still holding my hands, and looked me over. "Well," she said finally. "You still look hot in that outfit."

I looked down. I was back in my old uniform -- the black jacket and red shorts. I blinked. "But," I said faintly, "it doesn't fit anymore."

Anthy and I reached Saionji and Robert's bench first. She laughed at the Englishman's situation. He deserved every second of it.

Miki scrambled up moments later, looking back over his shoulder. He looked awfully ruffled. He was holding his uniform tunic together in the front with one hand. When he saw us, he skidded to a halt and fumbled to try to get the fastenings together.

Juri appeared from a dark archway and strode straight toward us. Miki hurried and fell into step with her. It was a little strange, seeing them like that -- I kept expecting Miki to be the shorter one.

They joined our little group. Miki's hair was in disarray. Juri was extremely grim. We all mumbled greetings to each other.

Nanami finally arrived, stomping her feet with an angry emphasis worthy of Saionji. "So, now that we've *found* each other, what are we going to do now?" she snapped when she reached us.

"Find some place to sleep," Miki said firmly. "I'm not going into *that* building again tonight."

"What?" Nanami asked. "You got inside?"

Miki just glowered.

Juri leaned against a wall and said nothing. I glanced uneasily at her profile, silhouetted against the building lights behind.

"I suppose we should try my old dorm, then," I suggested. "If things haven't changed, there should be plenty of empty rooms."

"The haunted dorm?" asked Nanami, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"This whole place is haunted," muttered Saionji.

"By the living," Miki added.

I looked askance at Anthy. "Can we get there?"

She nodded without hesitation. "It's part of campus. We should be able to find it without any problems."

I looked around. Everyone milled about in preparation to move along. Just as Saionji reached for Robert's arm, the Englishman spat out his sock. "Look, if you want me to walk," he said reasonably, "I need my sock and boot."

With sharp, angry motions, Miki snatched up his sock and knelt to put it on him. Robert smiled and said, "Thank you, Miki. Even though you're more used to taking my clothes off..."

There was a pause as we all stared at the two of them. Miki was frozen in mid-motion. Then he dropped sock and boot and stood up. "You never *did* know when to shut up," Miki snarled, and marched away in the direction of the dorm.

Saionji bared his teeth in a grin and gave Robert a shove to get him moving. "I'm beginning to like Kaoru an awful lot."

I drifted ahead of the rest with Juri. "Are you all right, sem-- Juri?" I asked hesitantly.

She shrugged, one hand drifting to the front of her jacket aimlessly. "We all knew we were in for some pain when we came along, Utena." Then she stopped dead.

"...Juri?"

Her hands tore at the jacket front until it came open. A golden locket tumbled out into the light. She stared down at it as if it were a live cobra. Then she reached for it and popped it open with one hand.

I was close enough to see a small photo of Shiori, face-on, in the Rose Bride dress.

Juri froze. I wasn't even sure if she was breathing. She stared at it for a long time; I stared at her, and was only peripherally aware of the others straggling to a halt behind us.

Then she closed her hand around the locket and pulled. I winced, thinking of the fine chain digging into her neck. It held for a surprisingly long time before it snapped, the tiny sound clearly audible in the sudden and eerie silence. A single golden link flashed in the light and was gone.

Juri tightened her hand around the locket until her knuckles whitened. Then she flung it to the ground and crushed it under her heel. The fragments remained a moment before melting into nothingness.

She tore the uniform jacket off and threw it across the grass, then stood there, breathing

hard, staring after it. "Bastard," she hissed. "Bastard."

She strode off after Miki.

I waited until Anthy, Nanami, and Saionji -- with Robert -- caught up with me, and we all followed in her wake.

When we reached the dorm, she and Miki had apparently regained something like humor about the situation. Miki was saying, "I wish *I* had the option of throwing away my jacket, Juri, but I've got no shirt underneath."

"Pure luck," Juri said, plucking at her tank top. She waved a greeting to the rest of us.

"Arisugawa-san," Robert said politely as he hobbled up the steps to the front door, "my shoulders ache dreadfully. Is there any way I can convince you to let me out of these things?"

"Sorry," she said, holding up her hands to display her clothing. "Keys in the other outfit. No pockets, even."

He sighed quietly and looked very pained. Saionji opened the door and shoved him through. Nanami followed.

"Uh, Juri," Miki said, pointing to her pants. "You *do* have pockets."

"I know," she said with a vindictive twist to her mouth. She pulled her ring of keys from her pocket and jingled them.

Miki grinned, then laughed out loud. Juri laughed as well, and walked up the steps. "I'll go handcuff Laughing Boy to a radiator or something."

"What if he gets away?" Nanami snapped. Her humor was not restored, evidently.

Juri shrugged. "If he gets away, he'll get away if he's bound hand and foot and guarded all night too. This is *Ohtori*, Nanami. And that little shit is a game piece that will behave as the player wants him to." She vanished inside.

Trying for a distraction, I said, "So, Nanami, I guess Hoshiko couldn't get you inside after all?"

Nanami froze, then turned a wide-eyed stare upon me. "Utena," she said slowly, "*what* did you just ask?"

I frowned. "Um, Hoshiko? Building?"

"How did you *know* I was talking to Fujiwara Hoshiko?" Nanami continued to speak very slowly and carefully.

"I... uh..." I stopped. I thought. "I remember it." I shook my head, trying to clear it. "But I

wasn't there... I mean, I was with Anthy..."

Anthy said something softly and vehemently. I didn't need to hear it to know that she was swearing. Nanami and I both turned to look at her expectantly.

"It's hard to explain," she said to both of us, and I knew that there was something she didn't want to say. "Utena... there are other things you remember, right? From this evening?"

I blinked. "I... I don't know."

"What happened to Miki after I lost him?" asked Nanami, suddenly.

"He ran into Kozue," I replied automatically. "Near the music room..." I trailed off and my eyes met Anthy's.

Anthy frowned. "I should have realized what was happening. Utena, I'm sorry." Her voice held enough apology to start me worrying again.

"What was happening?" demanded Nanami. "How can Utena remember things she didn't see?"

Anthy shook her head briefly. "It's too complex to explain. It's just another thing that this place is doing. Let's go inside."

We followed her into the dorm.

Juri and I emerged from our respective showers at the same time. She looked as tired as I felt.

"So," I said to fill the silence, "it's an interesting experience to be back in this bathroom again."

We both looked around at the shining white tile on the walls and floor, the showers with brightly polished brass fixtures, the matching sinks, and the occasional tiny rose crest interspersed in dramatic red.

"I had a private bathroom my last three years here," Juri said, rubbing at her hair with one of the white towels Anthy found for us in a linen closet. "It was a bit of a shock to go to college."

I laughed, a little uncomfortably. "I've never actually lived on campus during my time at college, so I guess I'm sheltered." I scrubbed at my scalp furiously, and when I emerged from my towel, I realized that Juri was looking at me. I met her eyes, but she didn't say anything. I felt heat radiating from my face as I started to blush, despite my struggle

against it.

After a long moment, she turned to rubbing down her long legs. "Where'd you get that scar?" she inquired offhandedly.

"Scar?" I looked down at myself. Scar, yes, that one. About three inches long, on the right side of my abdomen, just under the ribcage. "Ah. Yes. That scar. Um. A sword."

Juri looked up at my face as I said it, then slung her towel over her shoulder and walked over to me. She looked at my back. "Clean through, I see. This side looks a little ragged. You fell with the sword still in, perhaps?"

I clenched my fists in the towel. "Something like that. Yes."

"During the last duel?" she asked quietly.

Why...? "Yes."

But you can't become my Prince. Because you're a girl.

Juri gently placed a warm hand on my back, jolting me out of my memories. I half-turned toward her, startled.

I think I expected her to say something, but she didn't. After a very long moment, I stepped closer, leaning my forehead against her shoulder. I felt her arm tighten around my waist, and drew a careful breath.

The bathroom door popped open and we jumped apart. Nanami stomped in wearing Saionji's uniform jacket as a robe. "Sharing a bathroom," she snarled as she passed us, peering critically into each shower stall before choosing one and stepping in.

Juri and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. We wrapped our towels around ourselves and headed out of the bathroom, Juri saying, "Hey, Utena, look at this one! This is the first scar I got on the police force. I was breaking up this knife fight..."

I pressed my face to the nape of Anthy's neck. "I never thought I'd be sleeping in this bed again." Light from the courtyard streamed through the white curtain, limning the heavy furniture of the eerily familiar room in bluish light and casting stark shadows on the floor some distance below. We were in the top bunk, the one that had been mine.

Anthy laughed, almost silently. "And you never expected to share it with me, either."

I kissed the back of her neck, then spat out a mouthful of her hair. "Well... no."

"At least it's big enough for two," said Anthy. There was a strange note in her voice that

wasn't entirely laughter. I levered myself up on one elbow to try to see her face, but she didn't turn toward me.

"Anthy?" I asked, reaching out to touch the line of her jaw.

She turned towards me then, her eyes dark and luminous as a cat's. "I remember," she said softly, and a chill ran down my throat.

I curled my arms around her shoulders and held her tightly. "Remember," I said, and swallowed. "Remember when you made me lunch the same day that Wakaba did? If it hadn't been for Chu-Chu's appetite, it could have been embarrassing..."

Anthy's shoulders shook and I held her tightly as I babbled. After a while, she turned her face up to mine, and I stopped. She whispered, "Thank you."

I kissed her.

"Hey, Anthy," I said, much later. "Why am I... remembering things when I wasn't there?" I nuzzled her shoulder, enveloped in the comfortingly familiar scent of her hair.

She sighed deeply and I thought I could feel her reluctance to talk about it through her skin. "It's an effect of being here."

It was my turn to sigh. "Why aren't the others affected, then? No one but me seems to be doing this. We asked."

She stroked my back absently. "It's because of your... unique relationship to this place, I think."

I stiffened a little against her, and then relaxed again, slowly. "You mean... the last duel? The swords?"

"Maybe." She slid a hand up to gently pet the back of my neck. Despite the conversation, I relaxed a little more. "I think it might have more to do with... things that happened before."

I considered this for a moment, confused. "What things?"

Anthy continued to pet me. "It's because you have a tie to him. I think you're seeing what he's seeing."

I froze. "Is he...?"

"I don't know whether it's deliberate. I suspect not, but I don't know."

After a moment, I leaned back to look at her. "But... doesn't that mean... I mean, you... shouldn't it be happening to you, too?"

Anthy reached out and touched my forehead, lightly, then slid her hand gently down the

side of my face. "He's locking me out. And I'm locking him out. He's afraid of me, I'm afraid of... of history. Remember New Orleans?"

I nodded, and pressed my cold hands to her waist. "Anthy," I said into her hair.

She held me tightly, and we didn't say anything more.

That night, I dreamed.

There was a strangely geometrical garden, all lines and angles, with flowerbeds and bushes sculpted to within an inch of their lives. Along one path, there were rosebushes clipped to look like small trees: a slender stem culminating in a roundish spray of leaves and flowers, about five feet tall. The current Duelists, all five of them, were standing in front of the rose-trees. I couldn't see what they were doing, so I walked closer.

I saw that most of the rose-trees were red or pink, but there were several with white roses along this stretch of path. The roses on all of the trees were very strange, some of them tiny, and others as large as soup plates, even though they bloomed on the same plant. The Duelists stood in front of the white rose-trees, busily at work. Each of them held a slender brush, as if for calligraphy or painting, in one hand, and they used it to paint the roses red.

The scene looked oddly familiar: the sweep of the brush through the palm of the left hand, and then the careful application of the deep, pure red to the white petals of the rose. All the same, it was so strange that I had to ask.

"What are you doing?"

"Painting the roses," said Kozue. "I suppose you wouldn't recognize such an *artistic* pursuit." She turned around, accenting the sarcasm of her voice with a flip of her left hand, which was filled with red. The scent of the pigment reached me as a few drops sailed past, and I realized that it was blood.

"But why?" I asked. "I think the white ones are pretty."

"You *would*," snarled Tsuwabuki. "White is the color of death."

"The color of bones," murmured Hoshiko.

"The color of the Prince," said Yukio. He turned to face me, absently putting the tip of the brush in his mouth, and I flinched. I realized that each of them had carefully slit one wrist, to use the blood for painting. Yukio's cupped fingers dripped red as he paused.

Toshiro said, "We have to paint these over. Some traitor must have planted them."

"It's true," said Kozue, turning back to her task. Her long hands went back to painting -

quick stroke of the brush against her left palm, then several strokes on the rose - with exaggerated grace. "The King of Towers doesn't like white roses. He says there should only be one white rose." She stopped and turned again to look at me.

They were all staring at me, and I felt terror grip the back of my neck, although none of them moved or said anything more. I backed away, then finally turned and fled, across the path, over a waist-high hedge, and across a lawn. I stopped, panting.

I was on a small hill. It seemed to be near the center of the garden; all the paths converged on it. I could even see the edges of the garden, where the neatly-trimmed roses turned into dark bramble beds ringing the lawns around. As I looked, I could see several places where white roses grew. In the center of a bed of red or pink roses, for example, a single white rose flourished, and the bushes near it seemed to be losing their color, fading, bleaching to white. It occurred to me that the Duelists had a big job to do. Wouldn't they run out of blood?

I felt very cold. Turning around, I saw that a tower of pure glass sprang from the very crest of the hill I had run up. I hadn't seen it before, I reasoned, because it was so transparent. I went up to it and almost placed my hand on it, but then I felt the cold. It was ice, not glass. I was suddenly grateful that I had noticed - if I hadn't, my hand might have frozen to it.

But the sides were perfectly clear, and I could see that the bottom of the tower was filled with dolls, lying in heaps. They were all girl-dolls, all sizes, all dressed in the Rose Bride dress. The dresses were every color of the rainbow, although it seemed to my shocked eyes that most of them were pink or red. Frost covered them.

I leaped back from the side of the tower in horror, so suddenly that I lost my balance and rolled down the green grass of the slope. Lying on my back at the bottom, I could see the top of the tower, with the sun behind it, breaking into a dazzling haze of rainbows. I looked away.

Set into the side of the hill, underneath the bright tower, was an archway of stone, and in this archway of stone was set a stone door. It was the door of a tomb, I knew that, but when I went closer to read the inscription, I saw:

NO ENTRANCE. EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY.

Then I woke up.

Part Eleven: Anamorphosis

*I knew loving her would terrorize me with the demons of jealousy I watch them as I have watched other demons, until acceptance is possible
One could not call it peace*

-- from "Dare" by Chrystos, *In Her I Am*

Sun was streaming into the room when Yukio opened his eyes. He lay on his back for a few moments, staring fixedly at the enormous Ohtori rose seal that consumed the ceiling of the large, round room. Then he sat up, sheet slipping from his bare chest and shoulders. The room was furnished with only him, the bed, and a small bathroom alcove of glittering glass. The windows dominated all: twelve windows, twice as tall as a man, elevated two feet from the floor and arched at the top.

He slid into the red silk robe that had been cast carelessly on the floor next to the bed and rose silently to stand at one window. Beyond the curve of the planetarium dome immediately below, the observation deck was just visible, and halfway down the tower, the edge of the Student Council balcony protruded slightly into view. Green grass and shining white pavement led to the serene darkness of the forest. Straight out the window, the castle rotated in a stately manner over the empty dueling arena, neither seemingly touched by the sun.

The Vice President of the Student Council moved slowly from one window to another, gazing out each thoughtfully before moving on. He finally stopped in the alcove, where one window was slightly occluded by a nearly transparent shower stall. There was a long pause, and then he stepped up to that window and hesitantly touched the glass with his hand.

The light in that window went out. It was filled with a velvety black field studded with drifting stars for just a moment, and then another image took shape over it: a vast, barren hall, floored with richly aging hardwood and walled with mirrors. One girl, dressed in black tights, pink leg warmers, and a loose, black shirt, stretched carefully, leaning one hand, from time to time, on the barre.

Yukio smiled bitterly. Eyes fixed on the window, he cast off the robe and turned on the shower.

Hoshiko worked her toes, feet, and lower legs slowly, then moved her stretches up to the long muscles of her thighs. Her face was composed in an expression of deep, tight concentration; she was apparently wholly entranced with the feel of her body.

When she had stretched all of her leg muscles thoroughly, she worked through the rest of

her body. She was somewhat cursory in these movements, as if impatient now to dance. At last, she approached the barre again, and began her morning exercises.

"You seem unperturbed," said Kozue from the doorway, "by the developments last night."

Hoshiko's movements only hitched for a moment at the sound of the voice. She didn't bother to turn toward the speaker, but addressed her comments to the mirror before her. "Should I be?" she inquired lightly.

Kozue gave a small shrug. "Your brother lost. And we have interlopers."

"So Toshiro-kun informed me," Hoshiko replied, bending serenely over her leg, which was laid along the barre. "And I'd rather duel you for the Bride than my brother, Kozue-sempai."

"Oh, really?" Kozue arched one thin, pale eyebrow as she leaned against the doorjamb and watched the dancer. "Why is that, Hoshiko-chan?"

Hoshiko paused, one hand on the barre for balance. One leg was pointing delicately toward heaven as she stood on the other. As she looked at Kozue, she rested the raised leg, trim and taut, against her cheek. "We each have a desire, a passion. It would be a fair fight."

Kozue laughed and pushed herself away from the wall to stand upright. "And you think your brother lacks passion?"

"He lacks any passion at all." She released the leg from its tense point toward the ceiling, almost flinging it down in an impatient yet controlled gesture.

Kozue snorted as she turned to depart. "You don't know him very well, do you?" She paused and looked back. "It looks like you stepped in something, Hoshiko-chan."

Hoshiko didn't even pause to examine the brown stains on her slippers. "They're my old slippers."

Kozue shrugged and passed through the doorway. Hoshiko continued her exercises. The old brown stains were soon occluded by bright crimson blossoming through the thin silk.

Mitsuru sat sullenly on the steps before the gate to the forest, idly tossing small stones into the pools of water. A set of bagpipes lay discarded next to him. A rooster strutted past, its feet clinking on the stone paving with a bright, merry sound.

"Tsuwabuki-kun," Kozue said, climbing the steps toward him. "You look depressed."

He looked up at her and a sudden sunrise smile burst across his face. "Kozue-sempai!" He scrambled to his feet and bowed slightly. "I... I'm not depressed. Just thinking."

"Good, good," she said, reaching up to touch his shoulder lightly as she walked past, seemingly to inspect the gate. "I would hate to think that you would be depressed after spending such a night."

Tsuwabuki blushed just as suddenly as he had smiled. "Oh," he said in a very small voice. "You know then?"

She looked surprised as she turned back to him. "Oh, Mitsuru, of course I know." Kozue's hand stroked his cheek gently. "It's all right. It's a good learning experience. Everyone does it. Everyone, that is, who truly wants revolution."

His eyes widened. "Even you?" he breathed.

"Oh, yes," she said carelessly. "It's just one step on our way to the Rose Gate. There are others. You'll learn *more* from those." There was a touch of contempt in her voice.

"Kozue-sempai, I..." he began, turning more fully toward her, then stopped.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"Yukio-sempai... he... he's further along, isn't he?"

Kozue's hand closed around Mitsuru's chin, holding him captive as he gazed down at her with desperate eyes. "Mitsuru-kun, it means nothing. If you are meant for revolution, you will defeat him when the time comes. In the meantime, you will have to defeat me."

His eyes closed, as if against pain, and his shoulders slumped.

Kozue seemed to understand. "She's an old weakness come back to test you, my beautiful boy. But she won't interfere. She can't. She's lost her road."

"He might set her aright." His eyes opened again, a little too bright.

"He might," she admitted. "And the others... they may interfere too."

He snorted. "I don't fear *them*."

She smiled, then stretched up to kiss him lightly on the lips. As he reeled back, blushing and wide-eyed, she laughed, though the sound was more pity than scorn. "Oh, Mitsuru, you've not really started your lessons, I see. We aren't friends. We can't be lovers. We are, and always will be, Duelists."

Mitsuru stormed across campus, oblivious to the looks of admiration he drew from many of his fellow students, and ran down Toshiro on the quadrangle in front of the main building.

"Watch where the hell you're going!" he snapped at the younger boy.

Toshiro scrambled to his feet among the armload of carrots he'd just dropped and bowed. "Yes, Tsuwabuki-sempai. I am sorry, sempai. I was just on my way..."

"Just get away from me," Mitsuru snarled. And he sailed onward, the crowd parting before him.

Toshiro watched him go, a look of hurt passing briefly over his face and flickering, for a fraction of a second, to searing hatred, before returning to his usual myopic good nature. He turned dispiritedly to consider the mess on the floor, and a man's hand dropped gently on his shoulder from behind.

"That's all right, Toshiro-kun," a deep, familiar voice said. "I don't think we'll be needing them."

Toshiro turned to look at the speaker and smiled. "Yes, sir, Kiryuu-san."

Kiryuu Touga sipped his tea as the doors of the rose-adorned elevator opened with a chime, then closed again. Footsteps rang crisply on the smooth, shining floor as Ohtori Akio walked around the large planetarium projector toward the rug and couches which constituted the room's only furniture.

As he lounged on one of those couches, his back was to the approaching footsteps. Despite this, Touga said, "Good morning, Mr. Chairman."

"Good morning, Mr. Deputy Chairman," replied Akio, still walking toward the couch. "Did you have a pleasant evening?"

"I always do," replied Touga, ineffably smug.

Akio laughed. "I imagine so, Mr. Deputy Chairman. You have exactly the right kind of temperament to appreciate the pleasures of my lovely garden." He walked around the couch and smiled down at Touga, who had his feet up on the coffee table.

Touga squinted up at the Chairman's tall form, which was outlined against the morning splendor of one of the enormous windows which looked out from all sides of the room. "My possession of such a temperament is hardly surprising, Mr. Chairman," he remarked lazily, although his eyes watched Akio carefully for any kind of reaction.

"Not surprising in the least," agreed Akio with great equanimity. "What do you think of

the new influences on the game?" he asked, walking over to the nearest window.

"Hardly *new*, Mr. Chairman. Rather old influences, don't you think?"

"Have our sins of the past really come back to confront us, then?" murmured Akio, looking out the great window at the white buildings of the campus far below.

"It doesn't matter if they have," replied Touga, indifferently.

"True," answered Akio, without turning around. "We are both... skilled in dealing with our own particular sins."

When I opened my eyes, sun poured in through the window, Chu-Chu was snoring on the bunk below, and the bed at my side was empty (but warm, so she hadn't been gone long). I sat up, stretching and peering around, remembering where I was and trying to repress a sense of loathing.

I slid down to the floor, noted that Chu-Chu was sleeping in a tiny grey and red dome tent in the middle of the lower bunk (and decided to just not ask how he found such a thing), and put my shorts and tank top on. I was just starting to stretch out a bit when I noticed Anthy's book lying on the edge of the top bunk: *In Her I Am* by Chrystos. It was very cheering to think, *Ah, she's in one of those moods...*

A resounding crash echoed down the corridor.

I was out the door and into the hallway before I could wonder what it was. Apparently, so was everyone else. Before I could see the cause of the noise, I stopped, staring, at the assortment of people staggering into the hallway: Saionji, hopping as he desperately tried to pull his trousers up over his (no doubt regulation) white briefs; Miki just ahead of him, somewhat more dignified in his green paisley boxer shorts; Juri in her tank top and plain cotton underwear; Nanami in things that were black and lacy that she tried very hard to cover with Saionji's jacket.

We all, in fact, stared at each other. After a moment of immobility, though, Saionji broke the tableau by finally managing to match foot to trouser leg and pull his pants up. Then we all looked down the hall.

Anthy was sitting up, looking sheepishly down at the tray which had spilled cereal, milk, tea, and orange juice along the carpet. When she looked up, she gave us a rueful little smile and said, "Tripped. Sorry."

Everyone exhaled at once, and Miki and I, at least, laughed.

Saionji turned to Nanami and, in a voice both irritated and plaintive, asked, "Can I have my jacket back *now*?"

"Tenjou Utena-san. Tenjou Utena-san. Please report to the Guidance Counselor's Office."

I stopped in my tracks. We had all had breakfast after our morning wake-up, found Juri's empty handcuffs lying near the radiator (Juri had philosophically pocketed them and said, "We didn't really expect him to be here, did we?"), and here we were, in uniform, wandering the halls of the school, hoping for enlightenment. Apparently, it had come.

"Tenjou Utena-san. Tenjou Utena-san. Please report to the Guidance Counselor's Office at once."

Miki turned around and stared at me. Juri, who had been walking some distance ahead of us, stopped and said, "What the hell?"

Nanami walked around me and said, waspishly, "Leave it to Utena to draw attention to us."

I closed my mouth and looked helplessly at Anthy, who smiled up at me. "Well," she said. "It's not as though they don't know you're here."

"Tenjou Utena-san," demanded the loudspeaker, tinnily.

"I suppose I ought to go," I said. "It might... tell us something. I don't know. At least it'll stop the announcements." I turned and walked back towards the Guidance Office, feeling a little lightheaded. The others straggled after.

Outside the office, I looked at Anthy, who was holding my hand reassuringly. "This is so surreal," I told her. She just smiled and shrugged. "At least," I said to her, "this is one person I feel confident I can manage." And I opened the door.

"I'm Tenjou Utena," I started, "The announcement--"

I stopped. I stared. I couldn't help it. There, at the desk of my old adversary, sat Keiko, resplendently pregnant in her white uniform (with red trim--it looked so familiar). The desk was festooned with decorations: pastel frills around the edge of the desk, a trio of ceramic kittens perched on her computer, and a voluptuous glass vase overflowing with pink roses. A coffee mug sat near a small poster of a large, sad-eyed puppy, but all I could see of the English logo on the mug was, "Id's," "st," and "er." An oval looking glass with an ornate bronze frame hung on the wall behind her. Nearby, at identical but smaller desks, sat Yuuko and Aiko, wearing their grey suits with red blouses and their strange pink glasses.

"Tenjou," said Yuuko--or perhaps it was Aiko.

"Utena-san," said Aiko--or perhaps it was Yuuko.

"It's about your attendance," Keiko announced, bouncing a file, clearly labeled with my name, against one hand.

"My... attendance?" I asked. The others began to crowd into the tiny office behind me, but when Miki and Juri saw Keiko, they immediately forced their way back out to block Saionji. Nanami and Anthy, however, flanked me.

"It seems that you've been absent," Aiko --I was just going to call her Aiko-- informed me.

"It seems that you've been missing," Yuuko added.

"It seems that I've been done with this place for some time," I finally managed. "Six years."

They all nodded at the same time and said, "Mmm-hmm."

Aiko looked up at me and said, "Weren't you betrayed by a friend or lover and switched schools?"

"Well, I..." I glanced aside at Anthy, who shook her head and smiled faintly.

Yuuko glanced slyly at me. "Didn't you get in trouble with the Chairman and get expelled?"

"I..." I tried. Nanami, out of the corner of my eye, was getting more and more stiff and upright, a sure sign that she was getting annoyed.

Keiko leaned forward, steepling her fingers over my file. "Weren't you hurt badly and hospitalized?" The edge to her voice made me wonder how much she knew.

"Now, look," I started again, as reasonably as I could. "I've not been a student here for some time..."

"Then what are you doing here?" Keiko asked, not moving.

"Yes," Yuuko agreed. "What are you doing here?"

"Yes," Aiko echoed. "Here?"

"She's here with us," snapped Nanami imperiously, and their eyes swiveled to look at her. After a moment's regard, they apparently dismissed her, because they looked back at me. Nanami's face went deep red.

"What do people like you, who abandon your education, want on a decent campus like this? Corrupting the students, perhaps?" Keiko mused.

"Now, see here..." I began.

"She's with me," Anthy said. Her voice was quiet and forceful, in her peculiar way, and it brought dead silence to the room. She turned her back on the trio. "It's time to go, Utena."

As Nanami and I backed out of the room, Keiko recovered enough to smile at me and drop a student handbook on the front of her desk. "We've added rules about girls wearing boys' uniforms, by the way," she said primly as she turned away to gaze in the mirror.

Outside the office, I slumped back against the wall, pressing one hand against my forehead.

Nanami peered down the hall, where Juri and Miki were engaged in a heated discussion with Saionji. Anthy drifted over to the window and looked down at the rose garden in the quad.

A student --a girl, judging from the uniform-- ran up, calling, "Utena-sama!" Startled, I straightened up and took what was pressed into my hand. I didn't even see her face before she was gone. I looked down into a full-blown white rose.

Nanami turned back in time to see me staring stupidly into this rose. She laughed harshly. "Another day, another challenge. Just like the old days, eh, Utena?"

Anthy turned around, silhouetted in the window. "No," she replied, before I could. I looked up at her, but all I could see was her outline against the brilliant glass. "Not quite."

Hoshiko paused outside the library door and tugged nervously on her uniform, her long fingers fiddling with the braid looped from her left epaulet to the fastening at her throat. Then she shoved the door open impetuously and strode in.

Most of the scattered students in the broad, open room turned to look. As she walked purposefully towards the staircase to the upper floor, two girls leaned toward one another and whispered something about "amazing talent" that penetrated the quiet air. The talent pretended not to have heard, but straightened her back and hurried on. She took the stairs two at a time, leaping lightly from step to step.

Upstairs, there were even fewer students than below. Hoshiko ignored them as well, wending her way purposefully through the stacks until she reached a set of isolated study carrels. Leaning over one, she said, her voice low but sweetly clear, "What a momentous occasion! You're actually working!"

Yukio looked up lazily from his notes, not bothering to raise his chin from his propping hand. "And what an astonishing surprise, to have you seek me out."

She looked almost abashed for a moment, then tossed her head as if to shake off the accusation. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Of course," replied her brother, looking back down at his notes and scribbling something near the bottom of the page. "You certainly don't search me out for the pleasure of my company."

She chose to ignore this. "We can't talk here. Come outside."

Yukio looked up with apparent mild interest, but simply followed her and said nothing until they had both exited the library. "And what can it be that you need to speak to *me* about?" he asked, sarcasm edging his voice. "Surely you can't be in any situation which requires a brother's advice."

Hoshiko, who had been walking beside him, spun angrily half-away at this. "If my brother had any advice worth listening to," she replied, pressing her back to the ornate ironwork railings which closed the archways in the wall, "perhaps I would ask."

"Not advice, then," said Yukio thoughtfully. "It must be an invitation to one of your eternal performances. I'm terribly sorry, Hoshiko-chan, but I simply cannot bear the ennui of two hours of 'Excerpts from Swan Lake' merely for the sake of the appearance of family solidarity. You know I never attend those things."

His sister gripped the iron rails behind her. "Never?" she asked, looking away. "You said you wouldn't come last time, but you were seen, you know. I don't understand," she went on in a softer voice. "You know it means so much to me, why do you pretend not to care?"

Yukio looked at her, then turned his own face away. "Your friend must have been mistaken. I was busy that evening."

"*I saw you!*" burst out Hoshiko. She sprang away from the railings and landed, poised as a bird on a branch, on the path directly in front of Yukio. "*I saw you there!* After you said you didn't care, after you said that my... hobbies," she drew in her breath angrily, "were of no concern to you! I don't understand! Why would you be so cruel and indifferent and still go to the performance? And then pretend--" She choked off her own sentence, shaking her head. "And now you won't even look at me, you coward! I just don't *understand!*" She leapt backwards from him, a few feet down the path, and stood there, panting and stretching one foot absently.

Yukio covered his face with one hand. "That's really just as well," he muttered.

"That's all I get from you!" said Hoshiko, flinging out her arms dramatically. "Cryptic comments and angstful *posing!*" She looked away from him at a patch of tall nettles growing inexplicably out of the well-manicured lawn.

Her brother laughed shortly. "Be grateful, Hoshiko." He wiped the back of his hand across his face and went on, "And this little scene, dramatic and, perhaps, amusing

though it is, serves no useful purpose. Tell me what it was you were going to tell me." In response to her openmouthed surprise, he added helpfully, "Was it student council news?"

Recovering from her startlement, Hoshiko laced her fingers together and stretched her back, arching her neck and tilting her head back. Yukio sighed and looked away again. "No," she said to the sky. "Not student council news."

Yukio placed one hand on his hip and waited, his school satchel dangling from his free hand.

After gazing at the sky for a long moment, Hoshiko looked back at her brother. She took a half step forward, balancing herself perfectly on her feet, took a deep breath, and smiled shyly at him. Before he had time to do more than blink at this, she said, "Oniisan, I'm engaged to be married."

"Engaged," he repeated, stony-faced.

She took another half-step closer to him and looked down at her foot, which she pointed at a dandelion growing out of a crack in the concrete path. "Yes. I..."

"Who?" he asked flatly.

She looked up at this. "Kiryuu Touga-san," she replied, smiling a little again. "You see, we--"

"*Touga-san?*" he repeated. "*Touga-san?*"

"Why, yes," she replied. "We..." she stopped, staring at him.

Yukio, who had been staring fixedly at his sister, threw his head back and gave a whoop of laughter. "Touga-san!" he repeated again. "You're engaged to..."

"I don't see what's so funny about it," she snapped.

Her brother took a step towards her, smiling down at her upturned face. "So, Hoshiko-chan, you're engaged to the famous playboy. Does this mean you've consented to give him your *all*?"

Staring up at him, Hoshiko flushed angrily. "How dare you..."

"Oh, I see. You're saving yourself for marriage," sneered her brother. "Well, when you do, be sure to ask him which of us he likes better."

Yukio turned, leaving the furious Hoshiko to stare after him. Still laughing bitterly, he walked away down the path, slinging his school satchel carelessly over one shoulder and taking off the heads of the nettles with a vicious sweep of his hand.

I shook my head and blinked hard. "Dammit," I muttered. When Anthy glanced over at me, I said, "It's happening again."

She lay her hand on my forehead and nodded. The halls were mercifully empty, it being the middle of a class period, as Nanami and Saionji were getting rather strident and shrill right now. Juri looked bored and annoyed, Miki had a half-embarrassed twist to his mouth. This was getting us nowhere, and the newest Ohtori weirdness was setting in on me again.

"Come on," I said finally. "She's probably not even in the office anymore, Saionji." He opened his mouth to object and I held up my hand. "We've had some downtime to recalibrate, but it's over now. We're at Ohtori, and we have to cope. The question is: what are we trying to do today?"

Juri said, seemingly grateful for a new topic, "Nanami wanted to get to the top of the tower."

Miki stared out the window blindly. "Perhaps we ought to try to approach the members of the Student Council who are... less involved? If they've reached a state of rebellion, as I recall some of us did --" he nodded to Saionji "-- they may be willing to tell us more about what's been going on."

Saionji sighed angrily. "Less involved? Than who?"

"Than Kozue... or Shiori," Juri replied.

"We're all involved," said Anthy into the silence. "No one is detached. All you can do is use your involvement."

Everyone looked at Anthy uncomfortably. "And what are you --" started Nanami, but she stopped, took a breath, and said instead, "I think... I need to find my brother."

"We can't do anything as a traveling mob," Saionji pointed out.

Nanami laughed, a self-deprecating tone edging the sound. "I've always favored traveling in groups."

"You aren't the leader of *this* pack," Saionji pointed out.

"No," Nanami admitted. "We're a group of leaders." She turned and began to walk down the hall to the head teacher's office. "Duelists. That's why we all have to go our own ways." She knocked briskly and went into the office.

Juri said flatly, "I am not a duelist." She spun on her heel and walked down the hall. Just before she turned the corner, she said, over her shoulder, "I'll see what I can gather about

the Student Council."

Saionji looked oddly lost for a moment, then straightened his uniform and said, "Right. I'll, er, gather information."

Miki nodded, twitching his uniform uncomfortably. "Right, then. Shall we all meet for lunch?"

"Oh!" I said, remembering the day before. "I'm having lunch with Wakaba. So I'll catch up to you."

Miki said, suddenly, "What if there's another duel this afternoon?"

Anthy looked back and replied, "I think if there's another duel, we'll hear about it. Let's meet at the same place we watched the duel from yesterday."

Juri stepped off the elevator and began to cross the cavernous and empty room that was the antechamber to the Student Council balcony. She stopped midway, in the dimness, to examine the person sitting at the table in the dazzling sunshine outside.

The arm supporting the dark head sported a white sleeve slashed with royal blue. The girl's hair was bound into a tight, wide braid that swayed gently in the breeze, the only moving part of the tableau. A plastic fashion doll sprawled on the chair across from her, clothing and stiff limbs askew.

After several long moments, Juri resumed her stride. The sound of her boots on the marble floor brought Hoshiko's head around so fast that her braid snapped the air. The younger woman rose, scraping the metal legs of her chair over the stone, drawing herself up gracefully.

They faced each other, old Duelist and new. Juri was several inches taller than Hoshiko. Hoshiko laced her fingers behind her back and stretched to make herself just a little taller, a little broader. Juri hitched one hand on her hip carelessly, her mouth twitching with the suspicion of a smile.

"Arisugawa-san, I presume," Hoshiko said at last. "Only Student Council members are permitted here."

Juri's eyebrows raised slightly. "Well, I *was* a member of the Student Council the last time I wore this uniform. If the ruler here wishes to see me in it, he'd best not object to my use of its privileges."

The harshness of Juri's tone propelled Hoshiko back several steps as if it carried physical force. She frowned up at Juri, perplexed. "'Ruler,' Arisugawa-san? I am not sure I understand your meaning."

Juri cocked her head to one side and gave Hoshiko an ironic, thin-lipped smile. "Surely you realize the situation you're in, Fujiwara-kun. Following the commands of someone who sends you letters signed 'End of the World'? Who is that, if not your ruler?"

Hoshiko looked down at Juri's hands. "So," she said finally. "A failed duelist, then."

"I wouldn't say that," Juri replied with a snort.

"Of course you wouldn't." Hoshiko continued to stare at Juri's hands for a moment, then looked up suddenly. "Of course you wouldn't," she said louder. "We have the object of your duels. She's *our* Bride."

Juri cursed harshly. "Does *everyone* in this hellhole *know* about Shiori and me?"

The vulgarity apparently sent Hoshiko skip-hopping backward. She ran on tiptoe to the far side of the table and leaned back, balancing herself neatly with one hand on the back of a chair. One foot, as if of its own accord, pointed and flexed idly.

"If you know so damned much," Juri continued, "then you ought to know that she wasn't the object of my duels. Being rid of her was."

"Have you found your passion, then, Arisugawa-san?" Hoshiko said suddenly.

Juri looked away.

The doll in the chair was sitting up straight, neatly composed.

"Is that what being an adult means, then?" Hoshiko asked softly. "Losing your passions? Telling yourself that you never really wanted them at all?"

Juri's eyes narrowed as she turned her head to look at Hoshiko again.

Hoshiko rose on point, stretching her graceful arms above her head, arching her back with perfect form. "Who is your ruler, Arisugawa-san? I am ruled by one thing alone." She resumed a normal posture slowly, almost turning the motion into a dance. "All other things are merely means to an end."

Hoshiko strode into the darkness toward the elevator, and Juri watched her go, hands clenched into fists.

The doll perched on a little stand that locked into the arch of one foot and supported the other leg outstretched. The stand began to turn slowly and jerkily, playing a tinny little song.

"Not seeing your brother yet, Nanami-chan?" Kozue inquired innocently as Nanami

entered the music room.

"The head teacher wasn't in his office, so I left a message," Nanami replied, voice dripping with saccharine. "Kozue-chan." She drifted across the room, where she leaned against the grand piano familiarly.

Kozue struck a series of discords, then carefully noted them on a composition sheet of her notebook. "So, Nanami," she said finally, her left hand playing over keys, and her left foot holding down the pedal to mute the sound. "Come back to join our merry troupe of Duelists?"

"You know I haven't," Nanami replied, studying the ceiling. "I like actually feeling and looking nineteen. You look like you stopped somewhere around sixteen."

Kozue laughed, harsh as a jay. "Yes, but when you're a sagging old woman of sixty, I'll still be sixteen. Because I --" she punctuated this with an arpeggio"-- will never leave this little garden of delights."

Nanami raised an eyebrow inquiringly. "So, is *that* revolution for you? To sit in your hole and stagnate?" A creaking sound caught her attention at that moment, and she stared briefly and uncomprehendingly at the dusty spinning wheel sitting in the corner.

The Student Council President bounded to her feet and waved her notebook under Nanami's nose. Nanami jerked her startled gaze back to Kozue. "Stagnate? Stagnate?! I'm creating great music here, Kiryuu, in *case* you hadn't noticed. Better than Miki, who hasn't written a line since leaving here and going off to his beautiful shining college. Better than you, mighty world-traveler, whose biggest accomplishment is buying a new outfit in every country you visit, and whose boyfriend is screwing his roommate as... we... speak." She flashed a vulpine grin. "Have a thing for the bi boys, don't you, Kiryuu? Could it be... that they're like your dear, darling oniisama?"

The sound of the impact was like breaking glass. Kozue reeled back, one hand going to her cheek. The notebook hit the floor. Nanami remained poised in her follow-through, then drew herself together again. She growled, "Next time, Kozue-chan--" She raised her hand and tightened it into a fist. "I'll break your nose."

Kozue glared through the silver tendrils of her hair, then grinned again, showing pointed canines. "What's the matter, Nanami-chan? Can't handle a little bonding over having brother complexes? We ought to be like sisters, Nanami. We're in the same boat; always have been. You tried leaving in a cardboard box -- won't you come back to the ship?"

They matched stares for a long, silent moment. Then Kozue straightened, brushed down her uniform, and smiled at Nanami -- without teeth this time. "I have a class now, Nanami. But perhaps we'll continue this conversation later?" She turned on her heel and as she left the room, she reached out carelessly with one hand and set the empty spinning wheel spinning.

Nanami glowered after her, but waited until she was out of earshot before saying, "Like

hell. I'll drown first."

Saionji entered the kendo dojo wearing a gi and hakama he must have found in the locker room. He stopped short to stare at Yukio, who was similarly dressed and practicing suburi. The boy kept his eyes forward, raising the shinai high over his head, then stepping forward with each downward swing. Saionji's eyes narrowed, and he seemed to be evaluating Yukio's form.

After a few moments, Yukio paused, shinai raised over his head, and looked at Saionji. After a long scrutiny barely verging on insolence, he relaxed his stance and bowed tardily to the man in the doorway. Saionji returned the bow, removed his shoes, and stepped onto the mat.

"Are you the captain then, Student Council Vice President?" Saionji inquired, selecting a shinai from the rack and subjecting it to careful scrutiny for damage.

"I am. Sempai." Yukio let a lock of his dark hair drop into his eyes, and considered Saionji through it. "As you were. Do you still practice?"

"Of course." Saionji took an experimental one-handed swing with the shinai that had apparently passed his visual inspection. "I'm captain of the team at my air base."

"And your team was no doubt champions of the JASDF competitions last year," Yukio said, voice dripping sarcasm. "Tell me, Saionji-sempai, have you decided to do *anything* that you didn't excel at while you were here?"

"I fly," Saionji said briefly, moving out to the center of the mat opposite Yukio. He drew his shinai up over his head into the upper ready position.

Yukio regarded him with a one-sided little smile. "Still trying to reach the castle then?" He assumed the middle ready position, tsuka of the shinai held at his waist level, tip of the shinai pointing at Saionji's chest. "You know there's only one way in."

They stared at each other for several moments, motionless.

All at once, they both exploded into motion, their kiais filling the dojo.

Yukio's shinai quivered slightly, just short of Saionji's throat. Saionji's shinai hovered just above Yukio's skull.

They stepped apart, lowering their weapons. Saionji scowled at the floor. Yukio smiled again, sketched a bow and moved toward the door.

"You're holding back, Saionji-sempai," he commented. "Perhaps you shouldn't have given up your bouts of swordplay with Kiryuu-san. He can be a most... freeing

opponent."

Yukio was gone before Saionji could whirl on him.

Anthy and I wandered into the library to get out of the sun and heat. As soon as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I spotted Tsuwabuki at one of the reference tables. I gestured toward him and raised my eyebrows to Anthy. She shrugged, and headed that way.

"Tsuwabuki-kun?" I said by way of greeting.

"Utena-san," he replied, clicking the stopwatch in his hand, peering at it, then looking up at us. "Himemiya-san," he added, sounding a little surprised. He set aside the book he had been studying.

I glanced down at the open book and saw a drawing of a hedgehog. "What are you up to?" I inquired, trying to be friendly and casual. "Zoology?"

He shrugged, tucking the stopwatch into the breast pocket of his uniform. "Studying, I suppose. What are you doing here?"

"Just, er, seeing the campus," I said.

He raised an eyebrow disbelievingly, and looked at Anthy. She smiled. "Why don't you guess why we're here?" she offered.

"I told Nanami-san yesterday," he commented, ignoring Anthy, "if you're here for revolution, you're too late. You lost your chance. It's our turn now."

Anthy shook her head absently, more to herself than to him. He noticed, however, and turned on her. "What?" he asked harshly, and a little too loudly. "You don't think we can achieve revolution without you? We have a new Bride."

Anthy looked down at him. "Nothing's new."

He scowled. "What?"

"None of this is new, Tsuwabuki-san. It's all been done before." Anthy rested one hand on the table and he recoiled as though it were something dangerous.

"You were the Bride before," he blurted out.

She sighed. "Yes," she said. "But he's used mortals before as the Bride."

This was news to me. "What?" I said, astonished.

"Mortals?" asked Tsuwabuki in the same moment. A couple of people shot irritated looks in our direction.

"It was a long time ago," she told me, then looked back at Tsuwabuki.

He stood up, tossing his hair out of his eyes. "A long time ago," he drawled. "Are we all children to you, then, Anthy?"

I stiffened at his familiar use of her name, but Anthy ignored it. "No," she said coldly.

"What is the difference between a child and an adult, then?" he asked, tossing off the question with a strangely desperate air.

"Less than you think," replied Anthy.

He stared into her eyes for a long moment. She looked back with, as far as I could see, no change whatsoever on her face, but he blushed and looked away. He snatched up his book satchel and turned toward the door.

"You forgot your candy bar," said Anthy, taking a chocolate bar away from Chu-Chu just as he picked it up from the table. I noticed that there was one bite taken out of it.

He turned and nearly snatched it from her hand. "It's not mine," he said. "Food's not allowed in the library."

Nevertheless, he took it with him as he strode out.

Anthy touched my hair as he went. "You should hurry, Utena. Wakaba is waiting for you."

I looked at her, surprised, then smiled. "Thanks. You be careful, okay?" Despite the stares all around us, I bent and kissed her before running out in Tsuwabuki's wake.

The Student Council archives looked cool and dark where Miki sat, watching Toshiro at work.

"I bet people compare you to me," Miki said, a little bitterly.

"All the time, sempai," Toshiro agreed amiably, pushing his glasses up his nose and peering at Miki. "Except they say I'm not as odd." He carefully dusted a smudge off the nose of the life-sized wooden horse that stood next to the filing cabinets.

"Odd?" Miki asked.

Toshiro held up his hand and made a series of exaggerated little motions with this thumb.

Miki raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and Toshiro said, "Your stopwatch. Tsuwabuki-sempai still uses it sometimes."

"Ah." Miki leaned his chin on the back of the wooden straight chair he was straddling. "Has Tsuwabuki-kun ever said... why he uses it?"

"No, sir," Toshiro replied, returning to the file he was flipping through. "He wouldn't say anything when Fujiwara-sempai asked."

"Ah," Miki repeated. After a moment, "What are you doing?"

"Filing some archival material that someone apparently left out," Toshiro said disapprovingly. Then he frowned. "The problem is, I can't find the proper place for it."

Miki leaned back and cocked his head, considering the boy. "If it's old material, then it should already have a section to itself."

"Yes, sempai." Toshiro's voice was long-suffering. "But look here, it's your own writing. It must have a section, but I can't find it."

Miki rose and examined it. "Ye-es, that's my writing, certainly. Are you sure there's no section already numbered?"

"Positive." Toshiro removed himself respectfully and let Miki flip through the drawers himself for a few moments.

"Huh." Miki rubbed the back of his head. "What's the information about, anyway?"

Toshiro looked closely. "Nemuro Memorial Hall."

"That was a really nice lunch, Wakaba," I said, remembering when we used to sit under the tree and eat lunch together, just like we were doing now. It didn't seem so long ago.

"Thank you, Utena! I wanted to make a really, really nice lunch because it's so wonderful that you came back to visit me!" Wakaba, who was lying on her stomach in the grass, rolled over and pointed at me. "And now you have to tell me *everything* about your new school, and what happened when you left! People said the most *awful* things! I heard you were in the hospital, and some people said you'd been expelled, and..."

"I really liked the way you cut everything into little cherry blossoms," I said inanely, completely unable to cope with her questions. I was overwhelmed with the cowardly desire to not explain anything at all. I felt sure that she wasn't going to believe me.

"Cherry blossoms are easier to cut than roses," said Wakaba, distracted. "Don't you think I'm a good cook, Utena? Don't you think I'll make a perfectly *wonderful* wife?"

"I think you're a great cook, Wakaba," I said, steeling myself. "But about this 'wife' business..."

"Yes, Utena?" asked Wakaba, wide-eyed and thoughtfully nibbling a blade of grass. "Hey, are *you* engaged now?"

I blinked, a little startled by the change of subject. "Er," I said. "Not exactly..."

"Oh, I hope you find someone as wonderful as I have, Utena!" said Wakaba, staring dreamily up into the leaves of the tree overhead. "He's so romantic! He's so *kind* to me! He's just like a real prince..."

I closed my eyes briefly, suddenly unable to cope with the flood of images. My throat constricted with pity. I didn't know what to say. I never knew what to say. I felt even younger than Wakaba, utterly helpless.

"Ah, I see you have company."

"Akio-san! This is wonderful! I can introduce you to my very best friend Utena!"

Akio's voice froze me to the spot, my feelings of despair nearly drowning me. But what echoed in my mind was not what he was saying -- he was saying something now about already being acquainted with me -- but what Wakaba had said. "My very best friend Utena!" Her... very best... friend. I opened my eyes.

Wakaba was just standing up. "I didn't know you had met before!" she said. "Utena, you never *said!*"

I was, just at the moment, too wrapped up in my own thoughts to remember how things had changed. "But Wakaba, I introduced you to him. And a few days later you two went out in the car without me." I was on my feet, although I didn't recall standing up. I could feel that my face was flushed, and I drew the back of my hand across my forehead. It felt hot.

Wakaba was looking puzzled. "That's... right. I remember. How could I have forgotten that? You were friends with... with..."

"My little sister," Akio cut in. "Anthy's away at another school right now. I'm not surprised you don't remember her -- she always was shy. Ah, there's the school bell. You should get to class. Utena and I will talk over old times, and I'll see you this evening, as usual." He smiled at Wakaba, then took her hand and kissed it. She blushed.

Wakaba stepped back, looked from Akio to me, then leaped forward and hugged me impulsively, almost knocking me off my feet. "This is so nice! I'll see you later, Utena, I promise!" And she ran off to class, her ponytail flying in the wind.

"Such a... lively girl," murmured Akio. "Really, being engaged to her has been such an interesting experience."

My hands clenched. "How can you say that?"

"Really, Utena," he said, reaching out and taking me by the hand. My hand was balled up into a fist, so after a moment he had to settle for a grip on my wrist. "Should I be jealous? She seems so glad to see you."

I shook my head, not so much at what he said as at his tone of voice, and pulled my hand away.

"Well, why don't you come for a ride..."

"No."

"A walk with me, then? We have much to discuss, you know."

I looked up at him. "What? We don't have anything to discuss. I already told you."

He smiled, slowly. "My, my, aren't you defensive? I want to talk with you about why you're here. You may find that our interests are not as much at odds as you think."

"What?" I was finding it difficult to think, again. I wondered if I was running another fever, and desperately tried to clear my head. I knew that I needed to be able to think.

"You're flushed, Utena." I wanted to hit him for saying my name like that, but I didn't. I felt him touch my forehead, but he removed his hand before I could knock it away. "I don't think you're feeling quite well. Why don't you sit down inside, and have a glass of water?"

I shook my head, but that made me feel worse. I realized that we were walking, in fact, we had just passed under a doorway and were in one of the school buildings. I stopped, confused.

"Utena," said Akio. "Utena, you need to sit down."

"How did I get here?" I asked.

"The usual way," he said, amused.

I was staring at a wall covered with small framed photographs. I couldn't make out the subjects of any of them, as my eyes were still dazzled -- the room was dark and the sun outside had been very bright. I turned and looked down a corridor, which was also very dark. I could just make out the white papers on the reception desk, and a point of light reflecting off a little call-bell.

It all looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place the familiarity. I knew this wasn't one of the buildings I'd had classes in.

"Sit down," said Akio, after a moment, and I realized that he'd been watching me. Instead

of sitting down in one of the chairs which lined the wall, I walked over to the reception desk and leaned on it, warily watching him out of the corner of my eye.

He strolled casually after me. His outline loomed in the light from the doorway, and seemed to take up all the available space. I closed my dazzled eyes again, trying to force them to adjust.

I opened my eyes when something clinked. Akio, now standing behind the reception desk, set a wineglass in front of me. "You need some water, Utena," he said kindly. "You don't want to get heatstroke."

I stared at the wineglass, which appeared to be filled with champagne. My hesitation seemed to irritate him, and he said impatiently, "It's just sparkling water, Utena. Drink it."

The slender stem of the glass felt cold and fragile in my fingers, and the bowl was dewed with moisture. I was terribly thirsty, and I could feel the sweat on the back of my neck, damp and hot. A drop ran down my spine, a ticklish and uncomfortable sensation, like having someone standing too close behind me.

I could feel the spray of the effervescence on my face. The water even smelled cold. My hand jerked uncontrollably and the glass slipped through my fingers and shattered across the floor. I stood there panting and staring at him, dry-mouthed. "Just how stupid do you think I am?" I demanded.

Akio sighed, shaking his head pityingly. "Utena, you're not feeling well," he said gently. He stretched his hand across the reception desk, placing it on my fingers, which were clenched around the edge of the desk.

"No," I said, looking up at him.

"You need to--"

"No," I repeated.

His eyes narrowed, and he took his hand away. I suddenly realized that the building was rather cold, after the heat outside; the sweat turned clammy on my skin. After a moment, Akio produced an affable smile, and pushed a little cut-glass bowl which had been on one side of the desk towards me. "Now, Utena, be reasonable. We have to talk. Have a caramel?"

I stared at the bowl. A little gray jewelry box was sitting on the pile of chocolates. I looked back up at Akio and he smiled a deeply knowing smile at me.

"You *bastard*," I spat out. I pushed myself off the desk and marched down the corridor.

I started out walking. But I could hear his footsteps behind me -- leisurely, confident, enjoying the chase -- and the sense of pursuit prickled on the back of my neck. I started to hurry. By the time I reached a door, grasped the elaborate brass knob and entered another

corridor, I was almost running.

His footsteps were quiet and unhurried, but the sound of them seemed to fill the air. I panted in my fever-driven panic, and ran down another endless-seeming hall lined with chairs on either side. I went through another door, and down another hall -- or was this the first one all over again? The chairs, the carpeting, the darkness were all the same. But this corridor seemed disused -- a dead end, the furniture draped in white dust cloths.

I grabbed a handful of the dust cloth and pulled desperately. It fell away from the wall, disclosing another door. Without hesitation -- Akio's footsteps were very close now -- I darted in.

It was a very small room, seemingly containing only a chair and a... mirror? The door slid shut behind me and I heard distant machinery start. Apparently, this was an elevator.

"What the hell?" I muttered, and heard, as if in reply, Akio's distant laughter.

Nanami looked up at the front door of the imposing, Western-style house. The front garden was immaculate, the windows clean, and the brassware of the door polished to a perfect gleam. The house itself was silent; no movement or voices indicated any life.

She stared at the house's facade for a long moment before ascending the front steps, her footsteps clear and hesitant in the silence. She fumbled in her pocket and produced a ring of keys. Selecting one, she unlocked the front door and went inside.

Glancing aside at the telephone table in the front hall, she walked through to a large, nearly empty room which I recognized as the room she favored for holding parties. It looked as though nothing had changed. The gleaming parquet floor stretched down to the great French windows, which looked onto the garden, but they were heavily curtained; a bit of the golden light of afternoon trickled through bravely. A few overstuffed chairs and small tables loomed through the dimness. Nanami closed the door and walked through the room, then opened another door and went through it.

This was the dining room. The table was set with candelabra and flowers, and two place settings in silver, crystal, and china. Nanami absently ran her fingers along the polished antique buffet, as though looking for dust, and glanced into the empty kitchen.

The carpeted staircase muffled her footsteps as she ascended to the second floor. She looked left and right at the top of the stairs, hesitated, and then turned and opened a door which gave on a beruffled bedroom.

The bed was made and the room looked freshly cleaned. The French windows which led onto an ironwork balcony were slightly ajar and the curtains pulled back. Nanami walked through the room and looked into a little bathroom, reaching out to touch the fresh white

towels which were piled on a small bamboo table next to the claw-footed tub. She turned and walked back to the large windows, throwing them open and standing there for a moment. A breeze blew the curtains aside and made the door to the closet drift ajar. Nanami turned at the slight noise it made and saw that a long ruffled nightgown hung on a hook on the inside of the closet door.

She walked over and lifted it off the hook, holding it up against herself as if to test for size. It reached to her ankles.

Throwing the nightgown at the bed, she strode to the door and wrenched it open, marching out.

Across the hall, she flung another door open, entering a shadowy bedroom. There was a four-poster bed, draped in mosquito netting and filmy curtains. Heavy draperies shaded all the windows. This room, unlike the one she just left, had a dusty and unused air about it.

Nanami glanced about quickly, as though the room made her uneasy. She paused for a long moment, looking around the blue-shadowed room, then strode quickly to the bed and shoved the curtains aside.

There was no one there. The bed was unmade, no sheets, coverlet, or pillows -- empty except for a black cell phone sitting incongruously in the center of the bare mattress.

Nanami reached out slowly and picked up the phone, holding it so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

The phone rang.

After a few moments, when the door didn't open again, I sat down on the dusty chair in the elevator. I felt sick and dizzy, and it was terribly hot in the tiny room.

The hum of the elevator machinery seemed eerie in the silence. I could tell that the elevator was moving downward and I wondered vaguely when it would stop. I hoped it would be cooler wherever I was going.

I leaned forward and set my elbows on the little ledge in front of the mirror (what was a mirror doing in the elevator, anyway? For that matter, what was the chair doing in here?), and rested my head in my hands. Where was Anthy? She always made me feel better when I was sick.

My forehead touched the cool glass of the mirror.

Anthy strode quickly along the long gallery next to the Birdcage. She didn't look around at all, keeping her eyes fixed on the archway and doors at the far end.

Shiori, standing apparently idle in the Rose Garden, turned her head to watch Anthy pass. One of her hands strayed to a nearby blossom. She wrapped her fingers around the bowl of the rose and squeezed absently. With every step Anthy took, her fingers tightened until she finally jerked her hand sideways and tore the rose from the stem.

The regular beats of Anthy's footsteps paused. Her shoulders sagged slightly, and she glanced back, somehow looking directly at me for just a moment. Then she turned and walked, slowly and perhaps reluctantly, back to the Rose Garden.

She stopped on the walk, about ten feet from the doorway. Shiori stood in the door, clutching the rose she had torn off the center column. They stared at each other.

Anthy finally said, in a peculiar voice, "You know, you can leave him at any time. Take the glasses off and just walk out the gate."

Shiori's eyes widened with... shock? Outrage? I couldn't tell. Her hand crushed the flower and a few bruised petals drifted to the floor.

Chu-Chu approached the discarded watering can next to the door. He peered curiously. "Chu?" he said into the echoing interior.

"It's true," said Anthy, her eyes following the fallen petals with a curiously detached look.

Shiori said nothing, but her fingers ground the rose into a shapeless mass. The scent of it drifted up and was lost in the heavy perfume of the other roses.

"Has he even told you," said Anthy after a moment, in an even and almost monotonous tone, "what you will be called upon to do after the last duel?"

"Shut up!" Shiori shrieked, flinging her arm up and trying to dash the rose to the floor. It fluttered down in a shower of broken lavender petals. "Just shut up," she wailed. "You... you're pathetic."

Chu-Chu shrieked in horror and ran into the bushes as a frog hopped out of the watering can, landing neatly where he had just been standing.

Anthy gave Shiori a pitying look and turned on her heel. She rapidly crossed the remainder of the gallery and disappeared into the building beyond.

Shiori stood perfectly still, staring after her with an expression of such jealousy and hatred that she looked quite unlike the Rose Bride. Finally, she looked down and opened her fists. Then she inhaled sharply as she saw a thorn deeply embedded in her finger.

The frog made a noise like a waterlogged tuba.

I jerked back, nearly tipping the chair I was sitting in over backwards. My breathing sounded loud in the tiny room, even over the hum of the elevator.

Trying to look anywhere but back at the mirror, I turned and looked around the elevator. I examined the tiny framed picture over the chair, but I couldn't figure out what it depicted. Something green.

What was I doing here?

Juri stood in the strangely deserted fencing salle. The afternoon light from the long windows stretched her shadow almost all the way across the floor and gilded her silhouette. She stood quite still, staring at something on the floor in front of her. Then she bent and picked it up: an abandoned foil.

She examined the guard gravely and ran her fingers along the flexible blade. After testing the button on the end, to make sure it wouldn't come off, she slid her hand into the grip. She stood there for a moment, pressing the blunt tip of the sword against her opposite palm, curving the blade into a delicate arch.

At the sound of a tiny creak, she snapped her head around toward the large double doors that opened onto the main hallway. One of them was ajar, and a girl, awkward in the Ohtori uniform, was standing cautiously in its shadow. She gasped as Juri looked toward her, and pressed one hand to her mouth, dark eyes wide.

It wasn't Shiori. The strange girl stared shyly at Juri for a bare second more before turning and bolting down the hall, her footsteps receding into stillness.

Juri flung the sword down. It hit the floor with a high metallic clatter, skittering away from her across the parquet. She turned and strode away toward another door.

It was so hot. I felt like I was in an oven. Shouldn't it be cooler underground? I'd been traveling downward; surely the elevator was underground by now.

Miki's hand idly struck the A key above middle C on the piano in the music room. He

stared around the high-ceilinged, gloomy room restlessly, and struck the key again.

"Out of tune again," he muttered.

His eye fell upon a notebook lying on the floor under the piano, and he got up, walked around to it, and picked it up.

The cover was blue-green, and Ohtori roses had been doodled all over it. Miki looked around the room, as if expecting someone to step out of the shadows at any moment, then opened the notebook.

The characters for "Kaoru Kozue" were carefully etched into the inside of the cover with several hundred passes of the pen, it seemed. Miki stared at them for a moment, then turned a page.

The first several pages appeared to be a pencil draft -- or several pencil drafts -- of a composition. Miki traced the line of the music with his finger, turned the page, followed it again. I could see that it was roughly the same music, but in development. The dates started over two years earlier, and progressed, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly.

Finally, he reached what seemed a fair copy of the composition, and he seated himself at the keyboard to run through the first few phrases. It was the music Kozue had been playing when we first encountered her. The date, written carefully in the top left-hand corner, was about a year before.

He began turning pages again. Another copy, date about a month after. He paused to play it -- it sounded exactly the same, except for a note or two. He turned the page. Another copy -- he traced this one with his finger, stopped at another single-note change. Another page, another copy, this one two notes, changed back to the way they were in the first fair copy.

Page after page, copy after copy. There were several phrases that she was obviously trying to get right, but her changes would cycle back to the original composition, no matter what she tried. Miki's brow contracted into a puzzled frown.

He paused, his finger resting on the date at the top of the page. He flipped back to the page before, and the date was the same. He turned back a few more pages to see the same date yet again, and finally flipped to the end of the book, where the final page was also marked with the same date.

Poor Miki. I leaned my head against the mirror again; at least it was cool against my skin.

Saionji looked up and down the hall, then knocked lightly at the guidance counselor's door. When no answer came, he looked around again, and tried the knob. The door opened and he slipped inside. The office was empty.

He approached the center desk with a wary tread. In front of the desk, he craned his neck to get a better view, as if Keiko might be hiding under it, then finally walked around it.

The pink-and-white ruffles were somehow more profuse on this side. I suppose the pink ruffly pillow on the chair didn't help. Saionji reached out a hand cautiously and picked up a glitter-covered pen. He examined it with a perplexed expression and set it back down. The "Hello Kitty" notepad, pink art glass vase full of roses, and baby-carriage-shaped tea cosy were all treated to a similar examination. Finally, he lifted the coffee mug -- still half-full of cold cafe au lait -- to better read the front: World's Best Lover. A red lipstick stain at the rim punctuated the message.

His hand shook a little as he set the mug back down amid the kitschy clutter, and he braced himself for a long moment of contemplation on the edge of the desk.

I blinked, and my breath condensed on the mirror for a moment, obscuring my vision. Shaking my head, I leaned back. It was still stiflingly hot in the elevator.

The elevator was also still descending. I wondered dizzily what I was going to find at the bottom. The thought precipitated a sudden chill over my skin, despite the heat. I wrapped my arms around myself and shivered uncontrollably.

Saionji breathed deeply and slowly, eyes closed, for a few moments, leaning heavily on Keiko's desk. Finally, he opened his eyes and was confronted by the trio of ceramic cats on top of her computer: slender black figures, one tall, one medium, one small. The medium-sized cat had a pink bow behind its ear, and all three were linked together by slender gold chains at their collars.

He stared into their smooth, sightless faces. Then, with a roar, he lashed out one hand and swept them from their perch.

The two smallest landed unharmed on a thick carpet. The largest, at the end of its golden tether, struck the tile floor next to the carpet and, with a tiny sound, smashed into a hundred pieces.

How could the room - well, elevator - get cold so quickly? I huddled in the chair, wishing that I could think more clearly.

Miki stared at the notebook's last page. A series of chords -- or something -- was scribbled there in pencil. He played through them quickly. They were terribly discordant, with nothing like a melody to them.

His eyes dropped to the bottom of the page, where words were scrawled: "The Real Garden."

He flung the notebook across the room with enough force that it slapped into the wall near the window, and then stood up so fast that the chair fell backwards onto the floor with a bang. His head swung from one side to the other, like an angry dog, taking in the room.

With a wordless snarl, he threw himself out of the room and stormed down the corridor.

I was still shivering, my arms wrapped around myself. I had to understand what was happening, I thought. I had to try to understand.

Juri walked quietly around the edge of the mansion and peered into the twilight darkness of the garden. A few fireflies rose here and there, glinting green-yellow for a second, then vanishing. Red lanterns hung from lines run between trees and the house, revealing a small, open pavilion of white canvas. Two pale figures occupied a raised dais in this shelter.

Kozue's uniform jacket sprawled on the grass with the lace-cuffed shirt she usually wore under it, and Juri paused to look down at it -- a little dubiously -- before regarding the two women in the pavilion. Kozue herself, dressed in her uniform slacks and a kimono made of ice-white silk, looked up at her approach.

"Ah, Juri-san," she said, selecting a long, dark, hair-fine needle from a little cup on the low table next to her. "It's always a pleasure." The round heads of the needles suggested a vase of tiny flowers.

Juri squinted to see more clearly in the strange shadows. "Kozue-san. I wish I could say the same."

The Student Council President smiled ferally and turned to continue her task. The Rose Bride knelt there amidst the sea of her red skirts, clasping her sleeveless jacket to her bare bosom, head bowed. Her bare back curved voluptuously, presenting its soft surface to the Student Council President. Kozue carefully set the point of the needle against her Bride's back and pressed gently. The tip slid into the pale flesh easily. Shiori's body trembled very slightly. Kozue adjusted the depth of the needle with an artist's flair, then let go. The head of the needle was a tiny black rose.

"What are you doing?" Juri asked, taking an appalled step back.

"I will achieve Revolution, Juri-san," Kozue said, reaching for another needle. "I have the Bride, and there seems to be no one who wants to challenge me."

Juri said nothing, just watched as the new needle passed into Shiori's skin. The Bride twitched infinitesimally.

"Unless, of course," Kozue continued conversationally, pausing to examine the length of the latest needle, "you are here to challenge me?"

Juri failed to answer Kozue again, staring at the scattered bouquet of black roses growing from either side of the Bride's spine.

"Perhaps not, then." The needle slid in and this time, Shiori didn't tremble at all. "Ah, I've found it."

"Found what?" Juri's voice cracked.

"Where she doesn't feel pain." Kozue stopped fiddling with the needle to look up at Juri. "You do know that the proof of a witch is that there are places on her body where she doesn't feel pain, don't you?"

Juri finally tore her eyes from Shiori to look at Kozue's mad glacial eyes. "A witch?"

Kozue laughed. "The Rose Bride is a witch, Juri-san. My Bride is a witch. Do you still want her?" She picked up another needle and inserted it with great care a few centimeters below the last.

Shiori arched her back, shooting an agonized look at Juri as her mouth opened in a soundless scream. After a moment, she dragged her eyes away from Juri and back down. Juri's jaw set; her face whitened.

Kozue tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Ah," she said. "I seem to have touched a nerve."

I shook, not so much with the cold (although the elevator had gone from being an oven to being an icebox) as with shock.

I clenched my hands on the narrow sill below the mirror. Or window, or whatever it was.

Anthy stood for a moment in front of the wide rose window in the locker area, limned in the cool evening light that filled it. Then she moved to the nearest locker and examined the name plate. Trailing her hand over the name plates, she walked along the locker bay. Near the middle, she paused and examined one more closely: Shinohara Wakaba.

After a moment's consideration, she opened the locker and stared in. She considered the locker's contents and shook her head, rather sadly.

She reached in and pulled out a small green ball. It took me a minute to recognize it as the usual hair bauble that Akio used to contain his ponytail. She examined it minutely, then drew a single silver strand of hair out of it, and replaced it in Wakaba's locker.

She sighed, looking down at the near-invisible thread in her fingers, and murmured, "Well, I guess we'll have to do things the old-fashioned way."

The room was dim in the evening light; suddenly, one last ray of the sunset struck through the large, arched window with its pattern of roses. Anthy's figure was thrown into silhouette as she stood at the bank of lockers with one hand on Wakaba's locker door.

"Extra! Extra! Extra!"

The figure of a girl in an Ohtori-style uniform and a ponytail appeared on the window in black silhouette. "Oh," said the girl's voice, "someday I will be *famous*! Limousines," (the silhouette of a very long car drove across the scene), "riches," (the outlines of jewelry and paper money showered around her), "and screaming fans!" (hands holding out autograph books and cameras surrounded her).

The figure changed into a girl wearing what looked like a long dress, with shoulder length hair, holding a microphone. "This singer," said the girl, "is *so* talented, and beautiful, and sweet that everyone loves her! Someday, I'll be famous and beautiful and everyone will love me, just like that!"

The figure changed back into the girl with the ponytail again. "I'll sing, and make myself beautiful and..."

An admonitory hand held out a piece of paper from the side of the window. The girl's voice changed, became deeper like a man's. "Your grades in Music are not satisfactory. You do not have any singing talent."

The voice became higher, and the hand shook an admonitory finger. "No, you may not dye your hair!"

Another hand rattled a newspaper irritably, and the voice became deeper again. "I am not made of money! You don't need another fancy outfit."

The girl in the middle of the window covered her face with her hands. "What am I going to do? They won't let me be like *her*! She has everything I want!"

"It's not fair!" the girl's silhouette cried out, throwing her arms apart. "Why should she get everything!? I hate her!"

She wept for a moment, and then said thoughtfully, "Maybe I should kill her."

"Maybe you should consider a different career," said Anthy irritably, and closed the door of Wakaba's locker with a bang.

"I suppose that it would be a stretch for a monkey to become an idol singer," replied the shadow in the window.

I smiled involuntarily at Anthy's comment, but then slumped forward again, shaking my head. I was still shivering. Where was I going?

There weren't any buttons by the door. Apparently, this elevator had one destination.

The head teacher was sweating profusely and fiddling with his collar as he walked Nanami down the hall. "Of course, Kiryuu-san, we would have notified your brother of your visit and prepared a more proper reception for you if we had been informed of your arrival..."

"My brother knows I'm here," Nanami said, her fingers going to the phone in her pocket.

There was a long, tense silence as they proceeded down the length of the hall and entered an elevator. The head teacher stared, unseeing, at the buttons for a moment, then poked one hurriedly. His hand shook. He cleared his throat and attempted to fill the quiet of the gliding elevator. "Your family has always been so very generous to Ohtori. We were very lucky that Kiryuu Touga-san agreed to join our staff."

Nanami wheeled suddenly upon him. "Has he then?" she asked, focusing narrowed eyes on the nervous official. "Joined the Ohtori staff?"

"W-w-why, yes, Kiryuu-san. I thought you knew." The head teacher's collar was clearly too tight. "Kiryuu Touga-san has been most gracious in accepting the position of Deputy Chairman."

At that moment, the elevator chimed, and the door opened upon a terribly familiar vast cavern, ringed by tall windows and dominated at the center by a dark mass of machinery. Both Nanami and the head teacher stared into the room for a moment. Then Nanami said, "I see," and stepped out of the elevator without thanks or further comment. Taking that as a dismissal, the head teacher pressed another button and the doors closed.

On the long white couch that faced the elevator, Kiryuu Touga sat, arms sprawling along the back of the sofa. He wore a wine-red blazer over an open-necked, pale grey dress shirt, with tight-fitting black slacks and black Italian loafers. His red hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, like he used to wear for kendo, that still allowed stray locks to drop romantically over his eyes.

He smiled. "Nanami," he said in that husky way he always addressed her in high school.

"Touga," she replied, her face perfectly composed. Her hands caught briefly behind her back, like a schoolgirl, and then she seemed to force them to her sides.

"I haven't seen you in that outfit for a long time," he observed, indicating her yellow and black uniform.

Her eyes narrowed and she said, sardonically, "You haven't seen me at all for a long time."

"True, oh, princess," he said, rising gracefully to meet her. He paused an arm's length from her and eyed her appreciatively. "You've grown into a beautiful woman, Nanami."

The expression on her face failed to change for the better. "You *would* say that, I suppose." She shrugged and strolled away a few paces. "So, you've come up in the world. The top of the tower. I guess this is where you always wanted to be."

He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Not the top of the tower, precisely. There have been... changes."

Nanami inspected the planetarium projector minutely. "Trying to reclaim lost glory? Or just sleeping with the pretty young girls?"

"Come now, Nanami," he began.

"Engaged to a high school sophomore?" she countered. "Really, Touga, I expected better from you. Though, I suppose it's something that *this* one doesn't look like me."

He actually winced at that and looked away. "So, have you come for any other reason than to heap infamy upon my head, Nanami? I didn't expect this to be a cheerful family reunion, I admit, but I'd hoped to find you less..."

"Enlightened? Emancipated? Independent?" she supplied harshly.

"Bitter. I was going to say," he replied without rancor.

She turned and looked him up and down. "You look just like him," she hissed.

He inspected the lapel of his jacket. "I rather think I've got somewhat better fashion sense..."

"What did you expect me to do, meeting you here? Fall at your feet and rip off my clothes? Just like *her*?" Her voice was a low snarl.

His blue eyes locked on her through his romantic lock of hair. "Such things you say about your friends, Nanami." Carelessly, he glanced aside at the coffee table. "The tea will get cold. And my assistants went to such trouble for your visit."

Nanami's gaze fixed on a pair of pink glasses neatly folded and laid aside on a small table nearby. "I see. One of the... perks of the job."

"Indeed."

Several minutes of silence passed before Nanami drifted to rest on the edge of the opposite couch.

The pair confronted each other steadily. Then Nanami cast the cell phone onto the table.

Touga smiled. "Why are you here, Nanami?" he asked gently.

"Why are *you* here, Touga?" she inquired huskily. "Why did you come back to him?"

"For family," he said. "For you."

She shook her head. "Me? I cut all ties to you. We aren't even siblings by blood."

"Ah." He took up his cup and saucer and sipped his tea. "You're wrong."

"What?"

"I let you think that," he continued, staring down into his cup. "You *are* my sister, Nanami. I *am* your brother. We were adopted. Together."

Nanami's eyes widened. She stared at the table for a long moment. "You... let me think... all this time..."

"It was necessary." He continued to look into his tea.

She was on her feet in an instant. "Necessary? *Necessary*? Do you have any idea how much... how long... I *can't* believe you did this to me! Driving me away with your disdain... your hatred!"

Touga set down the cup hurriedly, splashing tea over the table, and rose to face her. "I did it for your own good!" he told her, voice intense. "I wanted you well away from here! Not caught in the web anymore!" More quietly, he added, "I wanted my beloved little

sister to be safe."

"Oh, really?" Her voice oozed disbelief. "My noble prince, sending me off for my own good. Not even having the *stones* to tell me why, just manipulating me, just like he manipulates everyone *else*."

He gripped her shoulders and said through gritted teeth, "I had to play it his way, Nanami. It was the only way."

She executed a neat little double-strike on the meaty parts of his forearms and his fingers opened in response to the sudden pain. Eel-like, she slid from his grasp and backed away toward the elevator. "And *what*, dear oniisama, were you saving me from?"

Touga glowered at her, rubbing his left arm. "Ohtori Akio." He bared his teeth at her. "Our father."

The elevator reached the bottom of the shaft, and the doors slid open.

We never really had parents (said Anthy in response to my question). And we never really needed them. But one day, he just sort of... became my parent. It was all very confused and confusing. He said it would look better, you know, if I had someone older acting as my protector.

(She sighed.) We weren't originally all that far apart in age, really. But I got younger and younger. He said it was necessary.

Part Twelve: Panopticon

*On a snug evening I shall watch her fingers,
Cleverly ringed, declining to clever pink,
Beg glory from the willing keys. Old hungers
Will break their coffins, rise to eat and thank.
And music, warily, like the golden rose
That sometimes after sunset warms the west,
Will warm that room, persuasively suffuse
That room and me, rejuvenate a past.
But suddenly, across my climbing fever
Of proud delight - a multiplying cry.
A cry of bitter dead men who will never
Attend a gentle maker of musical joy.
Then my thawed eye will go again to ice.
And stone will shove the softness from my face.*

--"Piano After War" by Gwendolyn Brooks

I stepped cautiously out of the elevator into a corridor so short it might as well be called an alcove. Then I turned and saw a room...

To be honest, it wasn't the dim, square room I saw first. The only detail I could see was the white couch facing me. It was a short couch, with an elegantly curved back and scrolled arms, the surface sheened with a velvet nap. A very incongruous object, I thought faintly, to find in a basement.

I stared at the couch for a few long moments and then focused on the figure occupying it.

He wore his white prince's uniform, which half-vanished into the white cushions. One white-booted foot was propped up on the couch, and one arm was draped over the angle of that knee. In the fingers of that hand he carelessly dangled a black rose. His other arm was draped over the back of the couch, the elegant curve of his hand thrown into stark relief.

I forced myself to look at his face. He was, of course, smiling.

"Ah, Utena," said Ohtori Akio. "You've finally arrived."

Miki leaned on the windowsill in the hallway, watching the sunset paint the clouds with colors of fire. A few students chatted or played on the quad below.

"So, I..." said Robert from behind him, in English.

Miki turned slowly, deliberately, all his movements suggesting languid boredom. At last, when he met the Englishman's gaze, his eyebrows rose in something like surprise and he said, also in English, "You again?"

Robert again wore a white uniform, but this one was somehow more formal than before -- perhaps it was made so by the tunic that reached his knees or by the tiny line of silver braid at each shoulder. "Afraid so." He fiddled with something in his hands -- a sky-blue hat, sort of derby-shaped -- and he spent at least half his time looking down at it, only glancing up occasionally to check Miki's face.

"What do you want?" Miki inquired, resting his weight against the side of the windowsill. He cast a glance out at the quad. "Have you come up with some new way to insult or offend me?" When Robert opened his mouth, Miki held up one hand. "And if I hear one word of some hackneyed quotation, this conversation will end in defenestration."

"Look, Mick," Robert said persuasively, "I don't have anything against you. Honest. You're a sweet chap, and if I'd known it at the beginning, I'd never have agreed to help them."

Miki closed his eyes and swallowed hard, but he shortly settled a blue gaze almost as cold as Kozue's upon Robert's earnest expression. "You're trying to get me to forgive you? You're even *apologizing* in your own, backward way, aren't you?" Miki leaned forward slightly, causing Robert to lean back in equal measure. "Screw you."

Robert ran a hand through his thick auburn hair. "Mick, I'm honestly..."

"Honest is something you aren't," Miki replied, looking back out the window, his expression oddly similar to Juri's best arrogant dismissal.

The Englishman stepped up to the window as his hands aimlessly rolled and unrolled the brim of the hat. "Look, your sister's a bloody maniac..."

"Whose fault is that?" Miki snarled, his voice almost-but-not-quite catching in the back of his throat.

"Not mine," Robert replied in a low voice. "The man in the top room is the cause; you know it as well as I do."

"What's his game?" Miki's gaze slewed around to pin Robert like an insect.

Robert wriggled uncomfortably in his uniform. "I don't really know, but I'm guessing he staged this whole damn thing to get himself more... more 'Brides' he calls them."

Miki's eyes flickered wider for just a moment, then narrowed. "You don't know why he needs more than just Takatsuki?"

The crown of the blue hat was crushed now and Robert struggled to round it out again. "Because... because they die, Mick. That's God's own truth." He looked up through a lock

of hair. "That's how Kan... Mrs. Ohtori went. I think." He shuddered, a little theatrically, I thought. "The last time I saw her, a few months before it happened, I knew it wouldn't be long anyway."

"I see." Miki looked down at Robert's hands. Robert started a little and wordlessly offered the hat to Miki, who shook his head, jaw tight. Then Miki pushed himself upright and walked away from Robert without another word.

Robert watched after him a moment, then tossed the hat out the window and turned to walk down the hall the other way.

The hat landed in the quad, where Wakaba picked it up and put it on, much to the delight of five of her friends. She grinned, twirled on one foot, and posed; the other girls cartwheeled away from her in precisely matched movements, to somersault into the waiting arms of several boys.

A flashbulb lit them all briefly.

I took a single step into the room and looked around. The room was oddly decorated with strange square metal plates, each about two feet wide and embossed with a black rose sigil, fastened in a seemingly random pattern to the otherwise empty, extremely high walls. There was, as far as I could see, no other door. Pairs of plain school shoes, neatly placed with toes to the wall, lined every wall of the room. Whose shoes were they?

It was cold, but that wasn't the only reason I shuddered.

Finally I looked back at Akio. His smile hadn't changed. "Sit down," he invited.

I wrapped my arms around myself and didn't move.

He laughed. "You know, Utena, your independence is a great deal of your unique charm."

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked. "That... that elevator thing..." A memory stirred in the depths of my mind, but I was unable to hold onto it, and it vanished again.

"I told you I wanted to talk to you," he said.

"Here?" I asked, shivering.

He smiled again, tilting his head to one side. "Shouldn't you be asking why Anthony brought you here? Back to me?"

"You know why we're here," I said impatiently, pressing the back of one hand to my head.

"Yes," he replied. "I do."

He turned his head slightly to look at the black rose, then he brought it up to his face. As he inhaled the scent of it, his eyes slid back to me. "I wonder," he said, letting the rose drop into his lap, "Whether *you* know."

Nanami and Touga sat, each on a white couch, facing each other silently. The tall, arched windows of the observatory showed growing indigo darkness in one direction and the deepening red of sunset in the other.

"How did you find out?" Nanami asked.

Touga's eyes flicked away. "He told me."

Her eyebrows raised. "And you *believe* him?"

"There is other... evidence," Touga admitted, seeming both a little irritated and a little reluctant. "Back at the house."

"I don't see any family resemblance," she commented, "other than a certain similarity of *modus operandi*." She had reclaimed some of her edge in the wake of the shock. It heartened me to hear it.

Touga's mouth wavered halfway between a smile and a snarl. "I'm not the only one who has manipulated people, 'Nanami-sama.'"

Nanami looked over at the rose-colored glasses folded on the side table. "At least I was straightforward about it," she replied, and I thought I heard regret there. "I'm a bitch, but I'm mostly an honest bitch." Her eyes drifted back to Touga. "Unlike you, oniisama."

Silence descended on the room.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked, finally.

She looked down at the teapot, then mechanically lifted the lid. "It's empty."

Touga frowned distractedly. "I thought there was plenty there."

"No," Nanami replied. "You drank it all."

The elevator chimed and the doors opened. Tsuwabuki trotted into the room, but slowed and stopped when he came upon the familial tableau. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Touga-san. I... thought we had an appointment."

Touga looked over at him, while Nanami continued to regard the teapot. "Mitsuru-kun.

You're... early."

I shook, pressing the heels of my hands to my forehead. "What's happening?" I asked desperately. "I can't think... why am I seeing all this?"

"What do you see?" he asked in a lazy voice. I was aware of his eyes on me, and my own gaze slid away, towards the edges of room, where the shoes stood in neat little rows.

"I..." I shook my head, denying his right to ask me that question as much as anything.

"Oh, Utena," he said. I could tell that he was smiling, although I wasn't looking at his face. My eyes focused abruptly on the hand which was holding the black rose. It was perfectly still, like something carved in marble. "You weren't the only... brilliant star in the sky."

I raised my eyes to the ceiling, automatically, but there was nothing there, just shadows.

"And you left this garden. A star loses brilliance over time. You remember that, don't you?"

I shuddered, more from the memory of his arm around my shoulders than from his words, and dropped my gaze to the floor. "The others... no time..." I muttered, more to myself than to him.

"Or perhaps you could say that here there is only the... perfect time," he said, and I knew, without looking up, that he was no longer smiling.

Anthy stood, hands on her hips, looking at the large tangled rosebushes which grew just outside the gates of the Dueling Forest. She tilted her head to one side, considering, with the slight frown that I knew well; she was about to do something which she considered a little risky.

The rosebushes here were not the small, controlled, well-tended plants of the greenhouse. They were huge, sprawling hedges armed with tearing thorns, more effective deterrents to wandering students than the fence. I wondered what Anthy was doing; surely it would be easier to get inside the Forest via the Gate.

Anthy dropped to her knees and crawled inside the nearest rosebush.

Despite her loose leggings and skirt, she seemed to have little trouble sliding neatly between the jagged, toothy briars. Glancing briefly aside at the buds and blooms which

drooped, heavy with scent, she moved into the dark heart of the formidable tangle of branches.

Once inside the rosebush, Anthy carefully examined all of its flowers, turning them back to inspect the stem behind the sepals. Each time she touched one, though, she shook her head and moved on to another, occasionally shifting her position further into the thorns and outflung branches.

Finally, she seemed to spot what she was looking for. She smiled and reached out, gently turning back a few leaves until it was revealed: a few dry petals still clinging to the curled green sepals, the withered stem, and the red swollen fruit of a rose hip.

Anthy sighed. "I knew you couldn't resist me," she whispered. Her fingers closed softly around the fruit and it fell from the branch into her waiting hand.

Seeing Anthy steadied me. I took a deep breath and shook my head, refocusing on where I was: the basement, the couch in front of me.

Ohtori Akio sprawled on the couch. What was I doing here again? I turned away, back toward the elevator.

"Utena," he said softly. "Don't go. We haven't really had a chance to talk yet."

"You don't talk," I replied, irritated, scowling over my shoulder at him. "You just leer and hint."

He laughed, but his eyes glinted unpleasantly, and I took an involuntary step away from him. Annoyed with myself, I stepped closer again, slowly.

"Utena," he said again, in that caressing tone I particularly hated. "Is that really all I do?"

"Stars," I said, scornfully. "And other hints. Time lets people *grow up*, you know. Your hints don't tell me anything I didn't already know."

"And this?" he asked, holding up the black rose. "Does this tell you nothing, as well?"

"Juri-san!"

Juri turned from regarding her reflection in the pool to watch Miki approach. He was thin-lipped and grim.

"Miki," she said, an interrogative raise to her eyebrows the only indication of her

curiosity.

"I just spoke to Robert," he began, then quirked one corner of his mouth at her expression, which became disdainful -- almost as if she'd smelled something bad. He shrugged, rolling his eyes heavenward, and then settled back into a serious expression. "Juri-san, he told me something that... well, I believe him, at least."

Juri remained silent, though she set her hands on her hips in a "this ought to be good" sort of attitude.

"Juri," Miki said, then paused, frowning. Finally, he said, "Robert told me that the Brides die in doing... well, doing whatever it is the Bride does. He said that he saw Kanae-san before she died, and I got the impression it was almost a kind of wasting disease. And that... that all this with us --" he gestured widely to include Juri and himself and all of us who travelled to Ohtori "-- is just a way to get more Brides. For when... when..."

Juri's face was stone and her voice, gravel. "When Shiori dies," she finished.

Miki nodded, watching her face carefully.

Juri turned away to look out over the pool for a long, silent moment. Then she sighed. "I have to try to talk to her, at least. I suppose I owe her that much."

Miki shook his head behind her back, but said nothing.

At last, she turned to him. "Could you help me find her? I'll write a note so you can just... you know... hand it to her."

"Yes, Juri-san," he said, and Juri sat down on the marble wall of the pool to write a note on Miki's clipboard with his pen.

I stared at the rose, then back up at his face, at that confident smile, at the lock of pallid hair which always fell into his face at exactly the same angle, as if painted there.

"Mikage-san wouldn't..." I started, but the words died in my throat, as I remembered Mikage's ironic tone and shadowless figure. He wouldn't have a choice.

Akio's smile deepened at one corner. "Don't play the innocent any more than you have to. Utena."

I *really* wished he would stop repeating my name. I clenched my hands at my sides and half-turned away from the pale figure reclining on the couch, to stare into the dark corners of the room. "There has to be a way," I muttered to myself.

"Yes," he replied, twirling the black rose absently between his fingers and looking down at it. "I have provided a way."

Saionji walked into the seemingly-empty and silent dojo, which was striped with red-gold late afternoon shadows. He looked around at the shinai neatly ranged against the far wall, at the spotlessly polished floors, at the equipment racked in its place, and at the sunlight shining serenely in through the high windows. He glowered and shut the sliding door behind him with a bang.

After a moment or two, perhaps the space of a breath, Toshiro brushed aside the fabric hangings and entered from the dojo's other room. He was wearing a black hakkama and white gi, and his hair was pulled back into a ponytail with a white strip of cloth. With barely a glance at Saionji, he went over to the far wall and racked the bokken he was carrying.

"I would have taken you for a fencer," said Saionji after a long pause, with a contemptuous glance at Toshiro's short, slender stature.

"I fence as well, Saionji-sempai," replied Toshiro serenely.

"I hope that you're more useful to the fencing team than you look like you are here," said Saionji belligerently. "I wouldn't let a useless-looking little runt like you on my Kendo team."

Toshiro turned to look at Saionji fully, eyes shining. "Perfect!" he exclaimed.

There was a pause, then Saionji took a couple of uncertain steps toward Toshiro, his footsteps ringing on the wooden floor. "What?" he asked, bewilderment uppermost in his voice.

Toshiro looked up at Saionji, his eyes wide and brilliant and dark with shadows. "You know your lines so perfectly, Saionji-sempai! It's so wonderful!"

"What?" said Saionji, if anything sounding even more confused than before. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," said Toshiro pityingly. He took a few steps closer and laid a comforting hand on Saionji's arm. "But don't worry. It'll all work out in the end. I've seen to it."

Saionji stared down at Toshiro, outrage battling with fear on his face. "What are you *talking* about?" he said, pulling his arm away from Toshiro. "Make sense or I'll pound some into you."

Toshiro laughed a little. "You are *so* perfect as the Kendo bully."

"Kendo bully'?" repeated Saionji, his mouth hanging a little open with shock.

"Oh, yes," said Toshiro. "You're the older Kendo bully who is mean to me until I beat you. Then we'll become best friends and you'll protect me and watch my back. That's how it always works."

"Always... works..." repeated Saionji disbelievingly.

"Of course," said Toshiro. "After I beat you, we became friends because you had to respect someone of my determination and skill."

"Wait a minute," said Saionji.

"Anyway, I have to go because I have a lot of homework. I'll see you around, won't I, Saionji?"

"I..."

"I'm sure you'd like to hang out with me some more, but I don't have time right now. I'm so glad that we can be friends now, though!" Toshiro smiled at Saionji, a bright, dazzling smile.

"But..." said Saionji helplessly, as Toshiro turned away. "We didn't even fight! We never stepped on the mats!"

"I'll see you later!" called Toshiro as he hurried out the door.

"Who are you talking to?" asked another person, invisible in the blinding sunset beyond the dojo door.

"Oh, nobody, no one at all," replied Toshiro's voice hastily.

I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering in the chill room and shaking my head. "I don't understand," I said, more about Toshiro than anything else. "I don't understand."

Akio was no longer sitting on the couch. For one dizzy moment I thought I was alone in the dim room, alone with the walls studded with metal rose plaques and the empty shoes lining the walls. Then Akio's voice murmured in my ear: "Ghosts, Utena."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up and I flinched. He laughed, low and darkly amused.

"You're not making any sense," I said, stepping away from him hastily and turning around. "Why won't you just *tell* me?"

"Always so blunt," he said, absently placing the black rose in the pocket of his jacket. From his other pocket he took a fruit knife and a small apple and began to peel it

carefully and expertly, the peel curling away in a single continuous spiral. "What happened to the art of conversation?"

"What happened to actually saying something that means something?" I replied, a little weakly. I felt odd, and my head hurt again.

Akio sliced the apple neatly in half, dividing the top and the bottom. The peel still clung to the bottom half and had unfolded nearly to the floor. "It's so much more entertaining this way," he said, shaking a few drops of juice from his spidery fingers, and bit into the upper half.

"Oh," I said, pressing my hand to the back of my neck. I was so thirsty.

Fujiwara Yukio leaned on his elbows on the hallway windowsill, staring moodily out at the quadrangle, a shock of his dark hair falling romantically into his eyes. Below his sardonic gaze, students hurried around the shadowed courtyard, oblivious to the brooding Student Council member above them. The only exception was Mikage, who paused to aim his camera at the window. The flash lit Yukio briefly, and then Mikage was gone.

Among the sea of aqua and white uniforms, two more striking uniforms came into view: a pair of Student Council members. Tsuwabuki paced alongside Kozue, his pen racing over a page of his notebook while she spoke to him. As she spoke, she gestured casually with the peach in her hand, then bit into it.

The pair paused where the white paths crossed in the center of the green lawn, and the Rose Bride, with perfect timing, arrived at Kozue's side, though I didn't see from where she came. The Student Council President glanced aside at her, said something to Tsuwabuki, then handed him the bitten fruit before walking away with Shiori. Tsuwabuki stood transfixed, staring after them, holding the fruit in one hand and his pen and notebook dangling, forgotten, from the other. After a moment, he turned and entered the building.

A few minutes later, Tsuwabuki and Toshiro leaned against the wall on opposite sides of the window, flanking Yukio.

Yukio glanced aside and up at the Tsuwabuki, and found him staring at a peach with one neat bite taken out of it. Yukio snorted. "Her fangs aren't *literally* poisoned, you know."

Tsuwabuki Mitsuru didn't answer him. Toshiro said, "What's wrong, Tsuwabuki-sempai?"

In the courtyard below, the Deputy Chairman appeared, his red hair floating on the breeze as he drew admiring glances from the crowd. Hoshiko emerged from an archway at that moment and nearly collided with him. They paused apologetically, smiled brilliantly at

each other, and began to chat.

Mitsuru continued to stare at the peach, the clear toothmarks in the juicy flesh. "Isn't this like... an indirect kiss?"

Yukio froze. "An indirect... kiss?" he whispered.

Toshiro said, "What do you mean, sempai?"

Mitsuru said, "I've always heard that if you bite into something, you know, after a girl has touched it with her mouth, you're kissing her indirectly."

Down in the courtyard, Touga gently brushed a hair away from Hoshiko's lips. She smiled and dropped her eyes.

Toshiro put his head to one side thoughtfully. "Or maybe she's kissing you indirectly?"

Yukio's eyes were locked on Touga and Hoshiko, and a desperate hunger washed over his face. "An indirect... kiss," he repeated again.

Mitsuru glanced down at Yukio. "Yes, that's the issue," he said, with a slightly puzzled tone to his voice.

Toshiro frowned, apparently puzzled. "So, sempai, if you were to eat something I had just been eating, would that still be..."

"... an indirect kiss?" Mitsuru finished. "I don't know."

After another lingering look, Touga and Hoshiko parted, with him walking toward the main building and her running after a group of friends going to the dorms.

Yukio gave no indication of hearing Mitsuru or Toshiro. He repeated, "An indirect kiss."

Mitsuru and Toshiro looked at him expectantly, evidently thinking that he had a contribution to the conversation. When nothing was forthcoming, Tsuwabuki shrugged at Toshiro and bit into the peach. The two of them walked away, leaving Yukio still leaning on the windowsill.

I took a step backward and sat down involuntarily, as the couch was right at the backs of my knees.

Akio, still standing in front of me, took another bite of his apple half, then another. I shook my head, blinking. "What was that about?" I muttered to myself.

"You've never heard of the indirect kiss?" Akio asked casually. He looked down at the

remaining apple half, cupping it in his gaunt hand, and pulled out the fruit knife impaled neatly into the apple like a sword. Then he lifted the half-apple and took a bite from it, and the coil of peel unfurled from the cage of his fingers, trailing down in a lazy spiral from the slice of apple. It looked oddly like something I had seen before, many times, but I could not remember what.

"There," he said, then offered it to me. "Now, if you take a bite, you are kissing me indirectly. Or so some people think."

I stared at the apple in confusion. What did this have to do with anything?

"The Americans have a blunter description for the concept; perhaps you know it, since you have been living in the United States for so long," he remarked.

I shook my head mutely. Akio sighed deeply and set the apple aside on a little end table. "Still," he said, taking another step closer. "There is no need for us to be coy. After all, it is not as though our kisses have always been... indirect."

I pressed a hand to my mouth, gagging on a sudden rise of bitter bile.

Anthy moved through the dim corridors and over the pathways with the assurance of one who has done this many times before. Her feet were nearly soundless on whatever surface she walked, and none of the stragglng students she passed ever turned to look after her.

She hesitated at the sight of Miki hurriedly leaving the birdcage. The rose garden was lit from within, the various roses glowing softly as they pressed outward against the walls. For several breaths, she watched it, pupils dilated in the darkness, as a cat watches a hand moving under a blanket. Then, reluctantly, she detached herself from the shadows and crossed the grassy quad.

Inside, Shiori stood very still. Her school tie dangled from one hand, the glasses from the other. Her head was bowed and her eyes were fixed on the watering can, which lay on its side on the ground, its contents spilled out long before and still spreading over the floor. A piece of paper lay in the puddle, Juri's handwriting slowly expanding into an illegible stain.

Anthy's face never changed, never moved, but she laid her hand gently on the glass of the birdcage.

Silently, the pane cracked.

"You," I said, carefully enunciating each syllable, "are a bastard." I stood up, ignoring the wave of dizziness. "And I am wasting my time."

Faster than I would have thought possible-- I didn't even see him move-- Akio caught hold of my jaw. His fingers froze to my face like metal on a bitter winter day. "Utena," he said, and the threat and affection in his voice made every muscle in my body tense with angry adrenaline. "What makes you think you can go?"

I tore myself free, raising a hand to touch my numbed cheek. "What makes you think you can stop me?"

He laughed a hollow and rattling laugh. "I don't need to stop you."

Juri stalked down the hall, fists tightly bunched, eyes fixed on a point about ten feet in front of her feet. She came up short when she found a pair of boots standing directly in her path. There was a long pause.

"Juri," a husky male voice said. I vaguely recognized it.

She didn't look up from the shoes. "Didn't you die in the hospital?"

"Juri," he said again, this time with an affectionate, admonishing tone, "didn't one hundred duelists die in Nemuro Memorial Hall?"

She frowned. "I don't remember that."

He chuckled. "You should, Juri. And you shouldn't."

There was a momentary look of realization on her face, then it went stony again. "You're dead, Ruka. Leave me alone." She turned on her heel and walked back the way she'd come.

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Can't you see it yet, Utena? Are you still so innocent? And here you were boasting to me that you had... grown up."

I looked wildly around the room, as though I might see something here in this strange basement, but I saw nothing but shadows and the endlessly repeated black rose seal.

Akio laughed again, and pulled the black rose from his pocket. I stared at it, my eyes widening. "I don't want that!"

"It's not for you, Utena. You are still too brilliant for a shadow-rose. After all," he added, putting his hands on my shoulders and pressing down until I sat down on the couch again, "remember what they were for, when you saw them the first time." The chill of his hands sank through my clothes and I scabbled backwards.

Two dim, orange lanterns lit the room where Juri and Shiori stood at a wooden table. A painting lay pinned to the table: the Rose Bride impaled on the swords, in silhouette. Neither of them seemed to notice the subject. They each held a calligraphy brush that they solemnly dipped into a glass student inkwell.

Slowly, calmly, Shiori bent over and began to write carefully at the top left corner of the painting. Juri leaned against the table with one hand, head bowed as if exhausted. A thin trickle of sweat ran from her temple down the side of her face.

After a long moment, Shiori stood back. I read her careful black characters: Fireflies in the marsh rise Like the soul's jewels

Juri bent to her own task, writing in the top right corner. Her hand shook slightly. She wrote: This feeling night after night In the dewdrops of the mountains

The lanterns reflected on the Rose Bride's glasses, making it impossible to tell what Shiori's expression was as she wrote: Like a watch fire I smolder by day

The short hairs on the back of Juri's neck were dark and damp, and she wiped small beads from her upper lip when she continued her work: Night after night, Wringing the dew from my sleeves.

Shiori stared for a long moment at Juri's trembling calligraphy, and regarded her own -- less elegant, but steadier. Then: Aflame by night Against the azure sky

Juri didn't even look at Shiori's side. Their characters were beginning to sprawl over the centerpiece of the painting. Through the patches of snow, Glimpsed, Ice closes over the river and the sea.

There was a change to the set of Shiori's jaw, and she gripped her brush more tightly. Like mandarin ducks We are at ease on the water.

Shiori stepped back and pressed her body against Juri's. They stood like that for a long moment, fitted together. Finally, moving slowly, like great weights were tied to her wrists, Juri stepped to the side and forward with her brush. She wrote across the center of the painting: The waves that never break on Matsuyama Toss us in a storm

Shiori snatched the brush from Juri's hand, splashing ink in a spray along the bottom of the painting. She stared at it, then wrote: In the Autumn mountains The colored leaves fly

in the storm.

Juri breathed hard like she had just run a long way, and wiped her forehead with the heel of her hand. She carefully retrieved her brush from Shiori's hand, not touching the other woman at all. If I could hold them back, I could still see her.

She straightened and watched Shiori's face, then reached out to the glasses. Juri tugged gently and they slipped forward...

But Shiori broke away from her and ran from the room, clutching the glasses to her face desperately. As she went, she knocked against the table, and the inkwell overturned. Juri watched the black pool of ink spread over the poem and the Rose Bride's fate.

I shook my head, slowly at first, then more violently. "No! It's wrong! It was wrong when you did it before and it's wrong now!"

Akio watched me with an interested expression, urbanely amused and faintly smiling. Shadows collected around his eyes, turning that dark face--strangely paler now?--into a hollow-eyed mask.

Nanami turned one of the black pages in the big, leatherbound volume, one of several that were stacked next to her on the bed. She bent to squint at one photo, neatly affixed in the top right corner of the page, and frowned.

The photo depicted the very recognizable lower half of Akio's face, smiling tolerantly, his shoulders and chest and one arm -- holding a young toddler with wide blue eyes and a fringe of red hair.

Photo after photo, from infancy through very early childhood, showed that child. He was well-dressed and seemed well-behaved for the camera. Scattered throughout, one could see Akio in the background, sprawled in a chair, or on the lawn, or on a white leather couch.

Nanami turned the page again and covered her mouth to stifle her gasp.

A large portrait, set in the center of the left-hand page, depicted the young boy, his red hair cut into a shoulder-length bowl. He stood stiffly upright in a white uniform with a high collar and tails and gold buttons on the front. He held a small, wooden sword in his hand, and he was smiling -- no, he was beaming, exuding enthusiastic charm. But there was a similar portrait on the right-hand page...

Akio stood behind him in precisely the same uniform, in precisely the same pose, dwarfing young Touga in both stature and beauty. At first glance, I couldn't see an iota of family resemblance. And the next moment, I could.

Nanami must have seen the same thing, because she shuddered and quickly turned the page.

A small, hairless infant began making an appearance with Touga, and she grew into someone recognizably Nanami within a few pages. Then the album ended, and Nanami closed it and laid it to one side pensively.

The sound of murmuring voices drifted through her door, and she got up and opened it. After a moment of listening, she stepped into the hall and walked through the darkened house, following the sounds. Standing in the dark hallway, she looked into the dining room.

Touga and Hoshiko sat at opposite ends of a long table hung with a white linen tablecloth. Tall, silver candelabras were the only light, and their flames were a vivid, brooding blue that made the hair rise on the back of my neck. Neither of the diners seemed to notice. They ate silently, even their silverware striking bone china with muffled, discreet rings. Touga still wore his suit and Hoshiko wore her uniform. The graceful, straight line of Hoshiko's back was unusually stiff.

At length, Hoshiko said, "I told Yukio."

Touga's eyebrows rose very slightly. "About what?"

"Our engagement."

"Ah." Touga chewed a mouthful of food thoughtfully, swallowed, then said, "He was overjoyed, I presume?"

Hoshiko choked slightly, and took a sip of her red wine to clear her throat. "Hardly," she said in a hoarse voice. "My brother is never overjoyed about anything."

"I see." Silence fell again.

Nanami stepped into the room and paused for acknowledgement, but neither of the others even twitched to show that they knew she was there.

Then, "He said some... things. About you." Hoshiko seemed to be very carefully not looking at Touga.

"Did he?" Touga set his silverware down and leaned back in his chair, swirling the wine in his glass.

Hoshiko's hand shook, and she set her fork down forcefully, which made the eerie candleflames jump, and looked down the table at Touga. "After a few typically coarse

remarks," she began in a brittle voice, "he said that I should ask you which of us you liked best."

Touga met her gaze and smiled indulgently. "I suppose that I will have to wait until after our wedding to decide." When she stood up, face flushed with outrage, he added, carelessly, "Unless you'd like to find out sooner."

Nanami snapped, "Touga!" But still, neither of them looked at her.

Hoshiko strode to his end of the table, eyes wide and angry, back very straight. Once there, she paused before him and looked down into his amused eyes.

She dashed her half-full glass of wine accurately in his face.

Hoshiko carefully set the glass back on the table and then stormed out, still not seeing Nanami. Touga blinked wine out of his eyes and carefully tugged a handkerchief from his pocket.

"You're such a bastard," Nanami hissed at him, standing in the position Hoshiko had just abandoned. "No better than *him*."

Touga patted wine from his face and the front of his shirt, never looking up at his sister. Finally, he tossed the stained handkerchief onto the table and drained his wine glass. "Why," he mused, "are women so hard to live with?"

Nanami stared at him for a long moment, then her eyes widened with dawning horror. She covered her mouth with her hand and backed away from the table.

Her face settled into anger by the time she reached the door. "I have to find the others," she said aloud, watching Touga carefully to see if he reacted at all. When he didn't, she shook her head. "We have to *do* something." And she turned on her heel and bolted from the room.

Behind her, Touga continued to sprawl in his chair as the blue of the candles faded slowly to the usual orange-yellow.

"Do you really think she can make a difference any other way?" asked Akio, courteously interested.

"Any other way," I said, grimly. "Your way... is a road with no turns, and a dead end." I looked around the room, to illustrate my point.

Kozue stormed across the quad and entered the main building. She passed Robert, who was lounging along a wall, arms wrapped around one knee, chin on that same knee. He watched her go with a raised eyebrow, and murmured, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."

Mikage, sitting next to him, simply nodded.

Chu-Chu attempted to poke Mikage's apparently less-than-substantial backside with a large hairpin.

Akio laughed that rattling laugh again. "Eternity is hardly a dead end, don't you think?"

"In your game, there is only one winner," I shot back.

"Oh, Utena," he said indulgently. "This from you. And you were always meant to be one of the brilliant ones, one of the shining stars. You *know* where your destiny lies."

He was leaning over me now, trying to transfix me with the intensity of his gaze. "The castle..."

"That castle is illusion," I said.

"The Rose Gate is not illusion," he replied, low and intense and nearly angry.

I glared back at him, one hand going involuntarily to my chest, where a twinge of pain reminded me of just how callously he was willing to treat others to get to the Rose Gate.

Akio placed his hand over mine. On my chest. It was still inhumanly cold, but it didn't burn with frost, the way it had on my face.

"Utena," he said, while I blinked in amazement at his effrontery. "I have not forgotten the nobility of your sacrifice..."

Yukio stood on the front step of the Kiryuu house, glaring up at Touga, who leaned languidly against the doorjamb. "Leave her alone," he hissed. "Wasn't one of us good enough for your plans?"

Touga looked at him through a lock of hair. "You were most unkind when she told you about our engagement."

The boy stepped back, paling. "She told you."

"Of course," Touga said, still watching him. "She and I are very close, Fujiwara-kun. She tells me everything. I am, after all, her future husband." He leaned forward. "She will be my *bride*, Fujiwara-kun."

"Bastard," Yukio snarled, then turned and fled down the walk. Touga watched him out the gate, then went back into the house and softly shut the door.

Yukio pounded back onto campus and almost immediately came face-to-face with Juri, who, with admirable reflexes and economy of motion, sidestepped his unintentional charge. He managed to stop himself before he skidded into a stand of bushes, and turned on her with a growl.

"Why are you waiting?" he demanded.

Juri drew herself up straighter and narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you waiting?" Yukio repeated. "Go for what you want. I can't. I never can, and I watch people take it away from me every day. But that's my sin and my punishment. What you want isn't wrong. And being honorable will just get you hamstrung and gutted by the dirty fighters you're up against." He paused for breath.

Outrage ripped through Juri's usual mask of calm. "How..." she began.

But Yukio was going again, shouting her down. "What do you think the duels are *for* anyway? The duels let us engage ourselves, just a little bit, to our fantasies. I know I can never have her, but there's a little part of me that will never let go, *can* never let go, and that's the part of me that's a duelist. That's why you're still a duelist."

"I'm *not* a duelist," Juri said, her facade settling back into place now. "Look, no ring. Not a duelist, not ever again."

"Don't show me your bare hand," Yukio replied scornfully. "That ring will come back to you. You can throw it away all you want, but it will *always* come back to you, Juri-sempai."

"Why do you think you know what I want?" she asked stiffly.

"It doesn't matter what, exactly, you want." Yukio ran a hand through his forelock carelessly. "But I could tell, that first time you walked up to her. Everyone wants something different. All that matters is that you think it's impossible." A strain of desperation entered his voice, and he gripped Juri's wrist urgently. "You're closer than I am. You're more honorable, and you want her. And you're closer to her. I can't have it, but I... I want to see it. Just a little. *You have to try.*"

Before she could shake him off or respond, Yukio let go of her wrist and backed away. He took a step toward the heart of campus, then looked up at the tower despairingly. With a cry, he turned and ran back off campus the way he had come.

"My *sacrifice*?" I said, and the slight rise in my tone alerted him too much, I think. He took my hand, drew it to him, then clasped it in both of his. My fingers stung, then started to go numb.

"Only the heartsword of one truly noble can open that Gate. That you did open it-- if only for a moment!-- bespeaks such courage and sacrifice of yours that I should not speak of it. But the Gate must be truly opened so that we can pass through." His hands were shaking, I noted clinically. His hands were actually shaking, just a tiny bit.

"Anthy passed through," I said.

"That was what *appeared* to happen," he said. "But we must open the Gate all the way, so that we may emerge into Eternity which is on the other side." A very light film of sweat had appeared on his forehead. "Eternity, Utena. It is infinite power, and all that anyone could desire. How could you abandon it now? It is what Anthy really wants, why else would she bring you back here?"

"You wouldn't understand," I said, not unkindly. I tried to get my hand away, but he clung to it with surprising strength.

"You cannot achieve Eternity without me," he said, his bony hand closing painfully around mine. "I have seen to that."

"I don't want to," I said, randomly, finally giving up on politeness and just trying to pry my freezing fingers loose. "The idea of Eternity with you--!" My hand slipped loose, and so did the black rose, which he was also holding.

Akio reached for the rose and caught it before it hit the floor. When he looked back up at me, his eyes were narrow and dark.

Saionji walked along a path, frowning, hands shoved into uniform pockets. He was apparently so lost in thought that he didn't notice the quartet of girls -- some of them women, I suppose -- talking under a nearby tree until his name was mentioned.

"Saionji-san?" Wakaba exclaimed, sitting in the grass with her legs tucked up against her. "You're really married to Saionji-san?"

Keiko nodded, one hand resting on her swollen belly, the other toying with a frosted glass on the arm of her lawn chair. "Yes. He gave me quite a nice ring at the wedding too. I wonder what happened to it." She glanced aside at Aiko and Yuuko, who stood, a little stiffly, to either side of her.

One of them bent forward. "Don't you remember, Keiko-san?"

The other bent forward. "You threw it in the pond."

The first said, "Or perhaps you tossed it in the incinerator."

The second said, "Or maybe you just gave it to Touga-san."

Keiko nodded sagely. "Yes, I remember now."

Saionji stared for a long time, taking in this exchange, then straightened his uniform jacket and strode across the grass toward them.

Wakaba said, "I think I dated him once. Or maybe he humiliated me. I don't remember."

All three women nodded at this. "He's like that," Keiko said. "And it doesn't matter."

Saionji stopped.

"Really?" Wakaba asked, rising to her knees with interest. "Why not?"

Keiko shrugged. "He's like training wheels. Once you learn about real men, you take him off and throw him away."

"Keiko!" There was a note of hurt and shock in his voice. At that point, Saionji noticed that none of the women were reacting to him in the least. Aiko and Yuuko continued to bend forward at the waist confidentially to listen to the discussion between Keiko and Wakaba.

Wakaba sat back on her heels, giggling. "I suppose I did move on to a *real* prince, after all."

All three women nodded again, perfectly synchronized.

Wakaba cocked her head to the side, one finger tapping her chin thoughtfully. "I guess I've been moving up all along, though. From Saionji-san to Utena to..." She gazed lovingly down at her left hand, where a large diamond ring glittered in the twilight.

Saionji's jaw tightened and his hands clenched. A second later, he lashed out in his usual fashion at Wakaba, who, just at that moment conveniently leaned to the side to move her ring into a stray beam of light from a nearby building. His hand sliced air where she had been, and its passage didn't even disturb the curl on her forehead.

Keiko sat forward, leaning to one side to prop herself on her elbow. "Wakaba-chan, do you remember how you moved from one to another?"

Wakaba looked up at the guidance counselor with wide eyes. "What do you mean?"

Aiko -- I'm just going to call her Aiko -- said, "Who took Saionji-san away from you?"

Wakaba frowned. "I don't really remember all that clearly."

Yuuko handed something to Keiko, who examined it in her cupped hands, and then held it up for Wakaba to see: a wood-carved leaf barrette.

Wakaba's face went pale.

Keiko nodded.

Saionji staggered back a pace. "I... remember that..."

Aiko said, "Who took Utena-san away from you?"

Wakaba shook her head dazedly.

Yuuko said, "Remember the Rose Bride and the duels."

Tears trickled down Wakaba's cheeks. I wanted to call out, to hold her, to explain...
Saionji was back on the path, holding his head in his hands.

Keiko whispered, "Who was she?"

Wakaba said hoarsely, "Himemiya Anthy."

Aiko and Yuuko both said, "And who is she?"

Wakaba looked down at her ring again. "Akio-san's sister." A tear glittered like her ring as it dropped from her chin to the grass.

Keiko reached out and laid her hand on Wakaba's head gently. "She is here."

Saionji wheeled around and stared back at Keiko. Wakaba bounded to her feet with a cry.

Then Saionji and Wakaba ran off blindly in opposite directions. Keiko leaned back and sipped her lemonade, and Aiko and Yuuko resumed their watchful stances.

"Wakaba," I breathed, then looked at the black rose Akio was twirling absently in his fingers. "You don't ever stop, do you!" I yelled.

"There's no need to shout," he replied, mildly reproofing.

"Let Wakaba go. What you're doing... it's just indecent," I said, struggling to stay calm while I surreptitiously tried to rub some life back into my frostbitten fingers.

"You are the with the group of people who have, without invitation, trespassed on my campus, interefered with my students, and made doubtful use of school property. Not to

mention harassing and threatening school employees. You're a fine one to talk about indecent," said Akio, sounding more amused than ever.

Near the steps of a building I recognized as the one I had entered that afternoon, Nanami encountered Saionji.

They were both running and both came to a halt as soon as they saw each other. They started to talk at once. After a jumble of words, they ground to a halt.

"You first," Saionji said grudgingly.

Nanami bit her lip and said, "We have to do something."

He scowled. "How do you mean?"

"I mean," she replied, stamping her foot, "that if we *don't* do anything except talk and listen, we're going to slide out of this reality."

Saionji took a few steps nearer, still frowning. "You're talking in riddles."

Nanami rolled her eyes. "You're thinking in riddles. This place is all like... like a play, you see? There's room for some improvisation, but there are fixed roles. And right now, none of us is fitting any of those roles."

He looked shaken and a little ill. "Or people are fitting us to roles."

"Exactly!" She stepped within normal conversational distance of him, eyes a little wild. "The only improvisation we're allowed is... to find roles and take them for ourselves."

"Or," he said bleakly, "we'll get the worst walk-on parts."

Nanami looked up into his pale face and stepped forward to lay a hand on his arm. "Worse," she said, "we could fade away. We're already doing it."

They looked at each other for a long moment, dread filling their eyes, and then awkwardly embraced, their long estrangement evident. Saionji sighed very slightly. "We've both been shadows before," he said quietly.

Nanami nodded against his chest. "I won't do it anymore, Kyouichi. But..." She pulled away just enough to look up at him. "But I don't know what to *do*."

Saionji nodded, then looked startled. "I do," he whispered. One of his hands drifted to touch the katana he carried in his belt. He stepped back from Nanami. "I know what to do. We need to find Kozue."

She considered him for a moment, then said, "You check the music room. I'll go check their house."

With a mutual nod, they headed off in their respective directions.

I took a deep breath and bit down on what I was going to say. That argument-- I knew from experience-- would only give him a weapon against me. Even if it was indecent for a school administrator to seduce a student.

Or to be engaged to one.

Akio watched me, still amused. "There's only one way to change what's going on, Utena. Why won't you accept it?"

"Because it's your way!"

"But if it works for you..."

"It won't work. It will only work for *you*. That's the way... the duels... work..." I trailed off, lost in thought.

Akio watched me, sardonically.

Yukio seemed to be walking aimlessly, so it was a little surprising when he ended up in front of his family's home, staring up the walk at the front door, which glowed slightly in the moonlight. After a long pause, during which the light in one downstairs window went out and another went on, he began to step hesitantly up the slate walkway. His foot brushed a small bag that lay in the center of the path, and it jingled. He stopped -- mid-step -- and looked back down at it. As the light went off in the downstairs window, he bent to examine the sack.

Nanami paused nearby at the sound of jingling. Yukio drew a handful of dark metal rings from the bag and began to count them. She drifted closer to the Student Council vice president and peered over his shoulder.

He muttered softly to himself, "... nine... ten... eleven... twelve..."

"What are you doing?" she inquired.

He startled, juggling some of the objects briefly. "Who are you?" he demanded, scrambling to his feet.

"I am Kiryuu Nanami," she replied curtly. "You are Fujiwara Yukio?"

He scowled fiercely at her name. "Yes. What do you want?"

She gestured with her chin imperiously. "This is your house?"

Yukio tossed his head so that his dark forelock fell back from his face. "Yes. What of it?"

"Does your sister live here too?" Nanami demanded.

"Yes!" he snarled and turned his back on her. A determined set to his jaw, he began to count the rings again.

Nanami watched him silently as he hunched over his find in the moth-shadowed light of the walk. "You know that she's engaged to my brother?"

"... ten... eleven... twelve... Tch! I miscounted. Yes, I know. What of it?"

"What do you think of it?"

He glowered up at her through his hair. "Of course, I'm delighted. What about you?"

Nanami crossed her arms and favored him with a withering glare. "As am I, naturally."

"Naturally," he repeated. He looked back down at his hands and began to count again.

"What's that you have there?"

"... eleven... twelve... Htch... why do you care?" he hissed.

"They look like rings."

"They are. Look." He held out his hands, which held small heap of black rose signets.

"What are you doing?"

"Counting them." He looked down, momentarily forlorn in his annoyance. "But I keep having one left over."

There was silence for a moment. Then Nanami said, "What, are you stupid? Can't you count to thirteen?"

Saionji opened the door to the music room and looked in. Kozue stood in the light of the window, fiddling with a small pyramid made of rosewood that rested on the windowsill. As he stepped into the room, the door shut behind him, and Kozue looked over her shoulder.

"Ah," she said. "Saionji."

"Kaoru," Saionji grunted, the family name the only measure of respect he seemed willing to give her.

"If you're looking for your wife," she said in deceptively light tones, her long fingers finding some hidden spring that allowed her to lift one of the faces off the pyramid, "she's up in the tower." Under the face was a flat, narrow metal arm with a trapezoidal slide, and metered lines on the backboard. She gently nudged the top of the metal arm, and the metronome started to rock back and forth, ticking slowly.

Saionji opened his mouth to respond, then bit down on the angry remark. He stood stiffly, one hand resting on the hilt of his katana, for a long moment. Then, apparently having mastered himself, he said, in a low, steady voice, "Meet me in the dueling forest."

Kozue regarded him briefly over her shoulder again, her hand sliding the weight further down the arm of the metronome, increasing the tempo. Then she laughed.

Saionji glowered. "Duel me, Kaoru," he said, his voice gravelly and intent.

Kozue ran the weight all the way to the fulcrum, and the metronome arm careened back and forth, ticking wildly. "Go back to the real world, Saionji. Go back to your job, go back to your salary, go back to your car and your house and whatever it is you do for a living." She stopped the metronome. "You missed your chance at revolution."

She whirled on him, advancing predatorily. "You can't duel me. Nanami can't duel me. Miki can't duel me." He was pinned in a corner, staring down at her. She smiled up at him, licked her lips, and ran her hands up her body from her hips, over her hollow belly, her nonexistent bosom, her skeletal shoulders, and up through her pale, fine hair. Still smiling, now at his grimace of horror, she said, "I don't have *anything* that *any* of you want to duel for. Particularly not Utena-chan. She has everything her little heart desires, doesn't she? What's she doing, slumming with the rest of you?"

Saionji whispered, "You're mad."

Kozue laughed, this time sharp and bitter, and turned away. "You'd know, wouldn't you, Saionji?"

He sagged as she walked back across the room.

Kozue slid the metronome weight all the way to the tip of the arm and set it into motion. It rocked over slowly. Tick. She watched it go, then said, "Get out, old man. Take your family sword and get the hell out of here." Tick.

With slow, painful steps that matched the metronome, Saionji crept out of the music room.

Two fencers saluted each other in the salle and then assumed their positions. One feinted, the other parried, then feinted, to be parried in turn. They continued, gently probing each other's defenses, almost casually practicing their moves. Then, abruptly, one darted forward, knocked the other's sword aside with contemptuous ease, and scored at the heart.

They paused like that for just a moment, the foil forming a bridge between them.

Then they stepped apart, pulling their masks off. Miki's hair was pulled back into a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. Tsuwabuki's long braid came free dramatically.

"You're much better than I remember, Mitsuru-kun," Miki said, checking his foil tip absently. "I'm glad you've continued to improve."

"Thank you," Tsuwabuki said. "You haven't lost your edge, Miki-sempai. That was a very smooth score. I never saw it coming."

Miki set mask and foil aside. "So have you dueled for the Bride yet?"

Tsuwabuki shook his head, taking a long drink from a water bottle. When he was done, he said, a little bitterly, "No. The End of the World hasn't seen fit to ask me to."

Miki considered him for a moment, moved closer, took the proffered bottle. "Why not, do you think? "

Tsuwabuki shrugged sullenly, watching him drink. "Maybe everyone knows I couldn't beat her."

"What is it you want, Mitsuru?" Miki asked suddenly. "Everyone, all the Duelists, *want* something. Something unattainable by any other means. Something they're searching for."

Tsuwabuki's face froze, clearly showing pain. "I... thought I wanted to grow up," he said hoarsely, looking away from Miki. "To *be* grown up, you know? If I had that, I could do anything. I could wreck the world, if I wanted."

Miki watched him as he paused, then prompted, "But?"

"Growing up comes with its own set of wants, doesn't it?" Tsuwabuki asked.

"Yes."

Tsuwabuki turned, seized Miki by the shirt, and pulled his face close. He stared into Miki's startled blue eyes. "You're so very like her," he hissed angrily. "You say simple things and strip layer after layer off my soul. You're *just* like her. And I want her so much."

The words echoed against the salle's high ceiling as they stood there, poised as if to fight or kiss.

Tsuwabuki finally mastered his anger, licked his lips, and released Miki, backing away from him hurriedly. "I want someone to beat her, take the Bride away, so she'll just be *her* again, be free of this game so that I could approach her as an equal. But I can't do it. And," he said, picking up his foil and mask and turning away, "you can't do it either. Because you're *just* like her, just as good as her, but without the drive, the reason, to win that she has."

Juri strode down the walkway that cut through the center of campus, ignoring the few students who were about at that time of the evening. Several of them turned surreptitiously to watch her after she passed by, and some of the looks were openly admiring. However, she never turned or acknowledged any of them; the campus might have been deserted.

As she approached the main building, Toshiro came into view, carrying a large bag full of fencing equipment, as well as his usual bookbag and a pile of extra books. Absorbed in managing all of this stuff, he did not observe Juri's approach until she stood in front of him, her hands on her hips.

Juri looked down at him "Would you like some help with that, Toshiro-san?"

Toshiro startled, and dropped a green notebook embossed with the Ohtori rose seal, and a red-bound library book. "Arisugawa-san!" A couple of girls passing by slowed down to watch the interaction, hiding laughter behind their fingertips.

Juri bent down, picked up what he'd dropped, and glanced at the cover of the library book. "*Hana Monogatari*?" she asked, with a raised eyebrow as she handed it and the notebook back to him.

Toshiro blushed slightly, and said, "It is for a project."

Juri said nothing, glancing over his shoulder at the rapier hilts protruding from the overfull duffel bag he was carrying. Toshiro added hastily, "I hope that your visit to campus has gone well, Arisugawa-san."

Juri jerked her gaze back to Toshiro's face, but Toshiro looked back at her with open, innocent politeness. Juri took a deep breath, and asked quietly, "Why did you become a Duelist, Toshiro-san?"

Toshiro glanced down at the strap of the bag he was carrying. "I have always enjoyed practicing the sword arts."

Juri continued to look straight into Toshiro's face until he reluctantly looked back up. "That is not what I meant," she said, evenly.

He took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "I had to, you know. I have always wanted to be..." He swallowed. "It is not very heroic to sit around and do nothing, you know? So I must become a Duelist." He raised his chin with sudden confidence and looked at Juri. "So I have my path, to do what I must. We are all destined to become Duelists."

Juri took a step backward, her face suddenly very pale. "Destined?" she asked.

"Of course, Arisugawa-san. Of course, only one of us is destined to reach the goal. But in our own ways, all of us who wear the ring are heroes. We change things." He looked briefly at the tower in the center of campus, then gave Juri a smile of stunning sweetness before bowing politely and continuing on his way.

Juri stood there, stunned, for a moment. I thought I heard her whisper, "Heroes?" scornfully under her breath, but I couldn't really be sure. She strode up the steps into the main building, pulled open the door, and went inside.

Touga detached himself from the angle of a nearby wall, where he had seemingly been leaning, and lounged over to Toshiro, where he reached over and relieved the boy of the pile of books he was carrying. "Beautifully done," he said. "Perfect." With his free hand, he reached out and ruffled Toshiro's hair.

"What was well-done, Kiryuu-san?" asked Toshiro, looking up at the taller man.

"Everything," replied Touga. "You have shown her what it is to be a true Duelist."

"Oh," said Toshiro, looking up at Touga with bright enthusiasm. "Thank you."

Anthy walked slowly along a familiar darkened hallway, running her fingertips lightly along each windowsill and wall as she went. She turned a corner and came abruptly face-to-face with Wakaba. Anthy seemed startled.

"Shinohara-san?" she said cautiously, watching Wakaba's face, which was tilted downward so that her features were in deep shadow.

"Himemiya-san," Wakaba said slowly, almost questioning.

"Yes," Anthy replied, resting her hand on the nearest windowsill.

"You were engaged to Saionji-san a long time ago," Wakaba continued, not questioning at all.

Anthy closed her eyes briefly, then looked out the window at the birdcage garden. "Yes."

"You live with Utena."

Anthy's shoulders tensed. "Yes."

Wakaba turned away from the window, staring into the darkness. "Once upon a time, there was a princess whom no one ever noticed because she was poor and plain and had no kingdom. Until one day, she met a prince."

Anthy closed her eyes again, and I recognized the look as one of pain.

Wakaba turned her head to look at Anthy, and all I could see was the glint of her eyes in the light from outside. "But the prince was already in love with a more beautiful princess, and when she turned her face toward him, he forgot all about the poor and plain princess."

Anthy stood very still, a breeze from the open window stirring her skirt and the hair that had escaped her braid.

"Two times the poor princess met a prince. And two times the beautiful princess took her prince away."

Anthy looked up at Wakaba from under her long lashes, her expression blank and resigned in a way that I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

"You're Akio-san's sister, aren't you?" Wakaba asked, staring at her intently.

"Yes."

There was a long, tense pause. Then Wakaba broke into a brilliant smile. "Then that will make us sisters!" she squealed, hugging Anthy hard.

Anthy stayed still for a moment, her eyes wide and baffled. Then she tentatively hugged Wakaba.

"It will be soooooo nice, Himemiya-san!" Wakaba bubbled, still clinging to Anthy. "You can help me shop for clothes for the honeymoon -- you have such a wonderful sense of style! -- and we can go on long walks around campus, looking for *just* the right place to hold the wedding! Where do you think Akio-san and I should go for our honeymoon? I've got a lot of travel pamphlets and things in my room -- there are so many places, I just can't decide!"

"That will be... fun, Shinohara-san," Anthy replied, trying to be enthusiastic while being somewhat unable to breathe.

Wakaba turned to look out the window, eyes shining upward at the starry sky, arms still wrapped tightly around Anthy. "It will be so wonderful to be married to Akio-san, Himemiya-san. He's the kind of prince I've dreamed about all my life. I've tried so hard to be the kind of princess he wants -- and he tells me that I'm doing very well at it." She

squeezed Anthy tighter. "I know that there's a type of dress he prefers for the wedding. I've worn it once now. He said it used to be yours, but it fits me perfectly."

Anthy's expression turned ineffably sad.

"And you know what, onesama?" Wakaba said, cheerfully.

Anthy managed to shake her head.

Wakaba shoved Anthy out over the windowsill, one hand on her throat and one on her chest. Her smile was quirked up at one corner, eyes large and staring and strangely delighted as Anthy scrambled to catch herself on the edges of the window. "You're not getting that dress back."

Anthy caught the windowframe with the fingertips of one hand and gently took hold of Wakaba's wrist, removing the hand from her throat. Then Wakaba's face turned maniacal, and she screamed with incoherent rage.

They struggled there, in the darkness.

There was a moment when I thought that Anthy had to either allow Wakaba to pitch her out the window or throw Wakaba in her place, but I heard Anthy whisper, "Hold on, and I'll save us both now," just before she did something I couldn't follow that landed them both on the floor of the hallway.

Wakaba went limp as soon as she was pinned to the tile floor, and silent tears ran from the corners of her eyes. Anthy leaning over her, holding her wrists, said, "Utena didn't let you fall, and therefore neither will I."

Then Anthy rose and passed down the hallway into the darkness, back to running her fingertips over every wall and window. Wakaba curled into a ball and hid her face.

Juri cannoned angrily down the darkened sidewalk. Crickets creaking in the rose-twined shrubbery stuttered into silence as her determined steps tracked past. Then Saionji stepped into her path and she lurched to a halt.

Before she could do more than open her mouth, Saionji snapped, "What do you think you're doing? *What* do you *think* you're *doing*?"

She reeled back a step from his vehemence, and he advanced, bellowing, "We're not *doing* anything! We don't *have* to, because it's all established for us -- this whole *place* operates on a script. If we don't *do* anything... take *some* control... we'll all just fade away into names and lines spoken on cue!"

Juri managed to recollect herself at this point. "Yes, well, it's Ohtori."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You never take control, do you, Arisugawa? You give all the indications of doing it -- you're the captain, the detective, the one whose brain is supposedly running things... but you don't *actually* take control. How long did you wait, Juri?"

She blinked and took another step back, found her back set against a lamp post. "What?" she asked, seemingly confused.

The lamp flickered on above them, hissing and buzzing gently.

Saionji's voice was bitter with experience. "How long did you wait for your act to start? How long did you hide your feelings, hide your impulses -- the hand extended to touch and quickly withdrawn? *How long did you wait with your heart at your throat?*" He thrust out his hand and opened it; the colorless light above bleakly picked out the mended seams and dents in golden metal, on the delicate rose. The broken chain ends dangled to either side of his palm.

Juri gasped involuntarily, one hand groping at her collar.

"Days? Weeks? Months? *Years?*" Saionji asked ruthlessly. "Waiting for her to change, to come around, *to say the things that you wouldn't.*" His voice changed, curiously pitying. "How long did you wait for your miracle?"

She managed to slide sideways, away from the post, back onto the path. She watched him from the corner of her eye as she said, voice ragged, "I don't believe in miracles."

The golden chain slithered from his hand, falling quietly into a heap on the sidewalk.

"You do," Saionji said, and the locket opened, revealing the portrait of Shiori as the Rose Bride. "Here is your miracle, Arisugawa. Are you going to stand around spouting your assigned lines? Or not even bothering because everyone takes your passive role as given? Or are you going to take control?"

Juri stared at the photo in horror. He turned his hand sideways, letting the battered locket fall to the pavement, where it bounced once off the heap of chain and dropped into the grass. Clenching his fists at his sides, he said, "It's your choice, Arisugawa. But you're the only one who *can* take control this time. Utena can't do it. I can't do it. None of us can, except you. Don't wait for the script that will never come."

With that, Saionji turned his back on Juri and strode off across the grass.

Juri stared, frozen, at the little heap of gold on the ground. Finally, she moved, bending closer to peer at it, almost reaching out... then snatching her hand back as if burnt.

I could see her visibly summon her resolve, turn her back, and walk away, doubling back in the direction from which she had just come.

A little way along this path, Miki stepped out of the darkness. "Juri-san," he said,

urgently. "Juri-san, I can't do it. I can't, and someone has to."

"What?" Juri said, almost affronted, but perhaps a little afraid.

"She needs to be defeated," Miki explained. "That's the only way to get her away from here. But she's as good as I am, so I can't do it. You've always been better than me, sempai." He shoved his rapier into her hands. "You have to do it."

Juri took the sheathed sword automatically, opening her mouth to object, but Miki turned and ran away into the darkness whence he came.

Nanami was waiting at the top of the long set of stairs that led down to the path to the forest. Juri emerged from the archway and looked down at her. Nanami looked at Juri's confused face, looked at the sword in her hand, and said, "What did we come here for, Juri?"

Juri swallowed hard and blinked. "To stop... all this?"

Nanami shook her head and walked toward the archway, then paused, just past Juri, and said, "I came here to rescue someone I loved. To be the Prince for a change. But I'm not sure I can, not without someone else... a better Prince than I... to lead the way."

They stood, transfixed, posed, like that for several long moments. And then Juri began to walk slowly down the stairs, toward the forest and the dueling arena.

I turned on Akio, nearly snarling. "Make them leave her alone! Why won't they leave her alone! It's none of their business! You did this!"

Akio leaned back on the couch, brushing the black rose against one sunken cheek. "What am I supposed to have done? Have I told anyone who to love or what to say? I have not."

I clenched my fists. "You. Have. Arranged. This."

Akio laughed softly. "Be grateful. Otherwise you would all be useless, unable to play in the duels at all."

"We didn't come here to duel." I was shaking with anger now, waves of heat traveling over me from my knees to the top of my head.

"Oh. You did." He twirled the rose again, the black petals stark against the whiteness of his clothing.

"No," I said.

"Yes," he said, gently, inexorably.

"No," I panted. "No. No! I won't let you give it to her!" I leapt forward and snatched the rose from his fingers, turned, and dashed back to the elevator in two leaps.

Fortunately, the door was still open. I hit the button-the single button-with the side of my fist, bruisingly hard, and as the doors slid shut, I heard Akio laughing again.

"Utena," he murmured. "You're so easy..." But I didn't hear the rest of the sentence.

The elevator began to creep downward.

"Extra! Extra! Extra!" said the shadow on the wall of the locker room.

Anthy paused in her slow peregrination of the school to watch with polite interest.

The shadow of a girl in a police-type uniform appeared on the wall, sitting on a wheeled desk chair with her feet up, facing right. The shadows of nine large square frames -- stacked three by three -- loomed over her, and she seemed to have her feet propped up on a table or desk at the base of these frames. Within the frames, something like shadow-static eeled over their "screens."

The girl sipped from a coffee mug. "Yeah, everything's right here, rookie," she said in a rough, gravelly voice. "We just have to watch the monitors."

In the center screen, the static cleared and Juri's shadow appeared, walking and walking and walking.

The girl appeared, sitting primly upright and facing left, still in the uniform. "We watch everything?" she asked in a worried, higher-pitched voice.

In the top left screen, Toshiro's shadow appeared, practicing fencing lunges against a wall, again and again and again.

The "veteran" appeared again, sipping from her coffee mug. "Oh, yeah. It's pretty interesting."

In the center top screen, Saionji's shadow appeared, sitting at a desk adorned with shadow-ruffles. He didn't move.

The rookie said, "But it doesn't seem... right to spy on these people."

In the top right screen, Hoshiko's shadow appeared, resting one hand on a bar and performing plie after plie in a slow, measured rhythm.

The veteran replied, setting her mug down and gesturing, "It isn't *spying* exactly. We're protecting them."

In the left center screen, Tsuwabuki's shadow appeared, sitting on a low wall with chin in hand.

The rookie asked, "We are? How?"

In the right center screen, Kozue's shadow appeared, plucking one flower petal off a rose and tossing it aside, then moving on to another petal. And another. And another.

A small cactus-shadow passed Juri on the center screen.

The veteran wrestled with a small bag. "By watching. And learning everything about them."

In the lower left screen, Nanami's shadow appeared, pacing back and forth.

The rookie casually took the bag from the "veteran" and stuck her hand inside, rooting around. "But what do we do to protect them?"

In the bottom center screen, Yukio's shadow appeared, leaning on a windowsill.

The veteran leaned back again, arms behind her head. "We watch. We write reports about everything they do and file them over there." She pointed to a stuffed-to-bursting file cabinet.

In the lower right screen, Miki's shadow appeared beside a grand piano. He lifted his hand, pressed one finger down on the keyboard, and returned his hand to his side. Then repeated the action. Again and again.

The rookie paused to stare. "How does that protect them?"

The veteran shrugged. "We keep those reports around in case anything goes wrong. So we have everything. Everything that's ever happened, here."

The rookie extracted a small tire from the bag and said, "I can't eat *this*." She tossed it aside, where it bounced off the desk and up into the center screen. The tire began to turn under Juri's walking feet. "For how long?"

The veteran laughed. "Eternity."

The wheel under Juri's feet became a shadow version of the Ohtori seal, spinning slowly.

The rookie looked out of the wall and threw up her hands. "Is *that* eternity then?"

Anthy snorted delicately. "That's... one kind of eternity."

Where had I seen her last? Walking towards the Forest. I had to stop her. Mikage would be there; he would give her the black rose ring and then she could open the gates to the Dueling Forest--but still, there would be no Duel without the rose. I clutched it hard in one hand, and a thorn pricked.

I shot out of the elevator and stumbled through the empty, echoing, vaulted hall of the main building, found the front doors, and wrenched them open. Outside it was night, and crickets creaked gently.

I headed for the Forest at a dead run.

Robert lolled indolently on a wall near a back entrance to the main building. He watched Saionji, then Nanami pass by, and softly recited, "Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace /And rest can never dwell, hope never comes/That comes to all,/What though the field be lost? /All is not lost--the unconquerable will, /And study of revenge, immortal hate, /And courage never to submit or yield: /And what is else not to be overcome?"

Miki saw him there and began to steer a course far around him, but Robert added, "The mind is its own place, and in itself /Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." And Miki started toward him with an angry expression.

As Miki approached, Robert continued, "He, above the rest /In shape and gesture proudly eminent, /Stood like a tower. His form had yet not lost /All her original brightness, nor appeared /Less than Archangel ruined, and th' excess /Of glory obscured: as when the sun new-risen /Looks through the horizontal misty air /Shorn of his beams, or, from behind the moon, /In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds /On half the nations, and with fear of change /Perplexes monarchs."

With a sardonic expression, Miki quoted, "A sister or a brother can never, unless indeed such symptoms have been shown early, suspect the other of fraud or false dealing, when another friend, however strongly he may be attached, may, in spite of himself, be contemplated with suspicion. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone." He paused. "'Man,' I cried, 'how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom! Cease; you know not what it is you say.'"

Miki stood silent, regarding Robert's serious and somewhat confused face.

At last, Robert said, "You say that as though I should recognize it. What is that from?"

Miki looked bored. "It's Shelley."

Robert looked blank, then said, "That's not Shelley."

Miki arched one eyebrow and sighed. "*Mary Shelley*. You know, Robert, you're not half as well-read as you pretend to be." With that, he strode away into the building.

The music room was dark except for the wan light from the streetlamps outside. Kozue sat at the grand piano, her hair and uniform glowing, pale and colorless. She was staring straight ahead, past the unlit three-armed candelabra atop her instrument, automatically working through finger exercises on the keyboard. Near her feet sprawled the Rose Bride's eyeglasses.

I could just see Shiori huddled in the far corner of the room, her face turned toward the wall and her arms wrapped around her knees. Her Ohtori uniform seemed badly disarranged, and her tie trailed from one hand. Her hair was down, and it trailed on the floor around her. There were dark places, like finger marks, on her forearm.

"Poor Shiori," Kozue sang along with the scales she played. "Poor Shiori, poor Shiori, poor Shiori." All at once, she struck a discord and stopped playing. "Despite everything I do to you, have done to you, will do to you, you can't let Juri-san touch you." Her voice tripped mockingly over Juri's name, imitating Shiori's voice. "You can't let Juri-san save you."

Shiori didn't move.

Kozue stood up and ran her hands over her body slowly in the light of the single lit candle. "For all you struggle and protest and cry, Shiori," she said in a husky voice, "you prefer what I do to you to anything that Juri-san could offer."

The door of the music room opened, and Mikage walked in, a bouquet of red roses lying along his arm and over his shoulder. Kozue turned to him with a raised eyebrow and received the bouquet from him. With one dramatic flick of her hand, she extricated the card from the mass of flowers. I could see the card, and immediately recognized it as the one I had seen so many times. "To the One Engaged..."

Kozue laughed and cast the roses to the floor near the glasses. "Get up, Shiori. Put on the dress, put on the glasses. Time to be the Rose Bride again."

Shiori's hand clenched around the school tie, but that was her only reaction.

Kozue eyed her coldly for a moment before turning impatiently to Mikage. "Can you do something about this little mess?" She gestured over her shoulder at Shiori.

Mikage smiled, thin-lipped and chilly, and picked his way fastidiously around the heap of flowers on the floor. At the piano, he struck a match that he used to light a second candle on the candelabra.

Boots clicked across the floor from the darkened doorway, and then a male voice said, "Now, now. Where's the girl who polished my sword every day when I wasn't here?"

Shiori's head snapped around to look up at Ruka, wide-eyed, pupils dilated in apparent terror.

He leaned forward from the waist, extending one hand to her. "Don't you hate her? Doesn't the idea of her wanting you all those years, all that time, *looking* at you that way, make you want to crawl out of your skin?"

Shiori flattened against the wall, staring at him with horror. She clutched her torn uniform blouse closed with one hand.

Ruka watched her for a long minute, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, then straightened up. "You know what all the other students say. The only reason anyone likes Shiori is because Juri talks to her. Shiori gets around. Shiori is a little slut..."

Shiori flushed and leaped to her feet angrily, opening her mouth to protest, but Ruka held up a hand to stop her. "You and I know the truth. You wanted people to notice you as anything but an extension of Juri. You are an excellent actress." He turned away from her and began to stroll back toward Mikage, who leaned lazily against the piano, and Kozue, who had seated herself at the keyboard again. "And that's really all you'll ever be."

The piano began to sound under Kozue's hands again. I recognized the music as the magnificent theme from our arrival that Miki had exclaimed over, but this time she made the tempo faster and twined minors through it.

Mikage watched Shiori for a long moment. She stood with her head bowed, hair dragged down around her. The school tie slipped from her hand onto the floor. He made a casual gesture and the roses writhed on the floor, then heaved upwards, becoming the Rose Bride dress. It hovered there, empty, reminding me chillingly of the empty Prince's uniform. The cuffs, tiara, and, finally, glasses assumed the places they would if they were being worn by someone.

The dress glided across the floor. It stopped when Shiori looked up.

She blinked at it, then turned away sullenly, pressing herself against the wall.

The dress slid closer.

Shiori's shoulders twitched and she snapped around to face it. As she did so, the dress stopped, but it was only about five feet from her. The blood drained from her face and she began to slowly back away.

The dress began to move after her.

Her eyes went wide. She backed away, backed away, stumbled, then fell, but she kept scrambling backward, mouth open in a rictus but only her frantic breathing audible over

the music.

The dress followed, skirts now rustling along the floor.

Shiori crammed herself into the corner, watching the inexorable approach.

Faster and faster the music went.

The dress stooped upon her in a thundering crescendo.

Shiori was wearing the dress, the tiara, the cuffs... and the glasses. Her hair was caught fast in a bun.

Kozue lifted her hands from the keyboard.

Mikage said, "The music was lovely, if a trifle overdone. And your timing was off."

Kozue sneered at him. "Missing Mamiya much these days?"

Mikage shrugged with one shoulder and struck a match, lighting the third candle.

Akio stood behind Shiori, resting his hands on her shoulders. "Such a good little Rose Bride you have here, Madame President."

Kozue stood and faced him, the ice-blue rose at her breast glowing in the candlelight. "Yes, she is, most of the time."

Akio stroked the side of Shiori's face with one thumb, then placed two blood-red roses in her hands.

Juri reached the midpoint of the stairs by the time the sky was entirely dark and all the lights were lit along the campus sidewalks. Under one streetlight on that landing stood a thin, dark figure. She hesitated, then said, "I suppose I've been expecting you."

Mikage stepped forward, slipping out of the strange shadows as easily as if he were letting a cloak slide from his shoulders. She looked away and began her descent again, Mikage walking beside her.

"Begin at the beginning," he said.

Juri shook her head. "I don't want to duel. I'm not a duelist. But everyone needs me to. Saionji's right, I don't take charge, I wait. Miki's right, Kozue needs to be defeated. And Nanami's right, she can't save Touga without a leader."

They took the next several steps in silence.

Mikage said, "Deeper. Go deeper."

Juri's head dipped, her gaze on her feet as they steadily left one stair after another behind. "I came here not because they're my friends... they aren't. I came because I knew she would be here. And I hoped she would need me one last time."

More silence.

Juri paused on the last step and looked at the dueling forest. Then, hoarsely, "I came to kill love."

At the foot of the steps, Mikage turned to her. "I understand. I suppose you have no choice but to revolutionize the world."

Juri shook her head. "Not the world."

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "The way before you has been prepared."

Mikage held out his hand. In the center of his palm lay a black rose signet.

I rounded the edge of a building and ran, panting, under the archway. The Forest, with people in front of the gates, and that had to be...

"Juri!" I panted, sliding to a stop and catching hold of a stone railing to avoid cannoning into her. "Juri, you can't..."

Juri turned to look at me and I stopped. It had been a long time since I had seen that utterly closed, remote look on her face, but I knew it, I remembered it. She stared through me as though I were an insignificant younger student, and for a moment, I felt like one. My gaze dropped to her hand.

She was wearing it. The black rose ring. I jerked my gaze back up to her face and something in my expression made her smile bitterly.

"No, Utena," she said. "I am still myself."

I slumped with relief against the railing. "But Juri, you have to know, you can't do this, it's exactly what he wants-"

She raised a hand and I stopped again. "I don't care what he wants," she said, each word clipped and even. "I am doing what I..." Her gaze dropped to my hand. "Oh, good," she said. "You have it." She stepped forward, plucked the rose from my hand, and turned towards the gates to the Forest.

"No," I said, suddenly breathless. I felt as though I had just fallen from a great height, as

though the wind were knocked out of me. "Juri, *no...*"

She put her hand on the lock and the water-gates began to move.

Up on the observation deck, a long table had been laid with tablecloths and candelabras. The cloth blew in the wind of people passing close to it, and there were the sounds of a party going on around it.

The three old Duelists stood together at the rail, staring off at the dueling arena.

"You think she'll really duel?" Saionji asked. "She didn't seem convinced."

"Oh, you didn't see her at the end," Nanami said.

Miki frowned and idly stirred the ice in his glass with the stem of the black rose arching out of the drink. "I don't know if this is really a good idea."

Nanami accepted a tumbler from Mikage, who joined them. "Well, we can't just stand around doing *nothing*, can we?"

"That's not what we came here for," Saionji affirmed, sipping his drink absently. His eyes popped open, startled, and he exhaled loudly. "That's strong!" he squeaked.

Miki tried his, and set it aside abruptly with a distasteful expression. "That's bitter!"

Nanami eyed him and sipped her glass. "Pfaugh," she said, tipping her glass out over the edge of the balcony. "Sour!"

"Funny," Touga said, arriving at the group with his own glass. "It tastes like water to me."

"Oh, look," Mikage said. "Here's the Champion and her Bride now."

I wordlessly followed Juri up those familiar stairs. All those damned steps. It made it worse to know that there was an elevator we could have been using, if only I knew how to get to the thing.

We were both a little winded at the top. Kozue posed there, her long hair and the tails of her immaculate coat flying in the wind. At her hip, a silver filigree hanger suspended her sheathed rapier.

Shiori stood, hands clasped in front of her, the broad skirt of the Rose Bride dress flared

out around her. Yet... there was something in the way she was standing that was almost a mockery of Anthy's pose. It was *too* still. *Too* demure.

There was already an ice-blue rose on Kozue's chest. Shiori looked somewhat disappointed that Juri's rose, the black rose, was already in place. I wasn't sorry to miss whatever she'd planned to say.

Juri saluted Kozue with Miki's rapier. Kozue drew her own and eschewed a salute.

The bells were more deafening than I remembered, and so was the clash of metal on metal as Juri sprang at Kozue.

"So she's fighting a duel," Hoshiko said, examining her long, narrow cards.

"Apparently," Tsuwabuki said, plucking two cards from his hand and laying them on the table, face-down. "Hit me."

Toshiro, wearing a plastic dealer's visor, immediately tossed two cards, face-down, in front of Tsuwabuki, who picked them up.

Yukio growled. "It should have been one of *us* to fight her for the Bride." He stared for a while at his cards, then chose four and slapped them onto the table. "Hit me."

Toshiro immediately dealt him four new cards.

There was a long silence as the three players continued to study their cards. Finally, Hoshiko said, "There's something wrong with these cards. They've been replaced with something strange."

"You think so too?" Yukio asked, then shoved his cards together and put them down on the table under his hands. "I fold."

Tsuwabuki frowned. "Well, we can still play with them." He laid his cards on the table, face-up, revealing a full house of three Fours, one of Swords, one of Towers, and one of Arenas, with two more cards depicting Jacks, one of Swords, one of Towers.

"Really?" Hoshiko asked, then she laid her cards out. They appeared to be strange Tarot cards: the High Priestess, the Emperor, the White Tower, the Empress, and Death.

All three players peered at Hoshiko's odd hand for a moment, and then Toshiro said, "Dealer wins," and laid down five aces.

Sparks flew from the blades as they crashed together again and again. They leaped apart, panting, then raced each other to one side, each trying to flank the other. Kozue danced in, danced out, leaped to the side; she spun, dodged, ducked, and raked a trace of a line across Juri's sleeve.

"Come on, old woman," she taunted Juri, who paused for a breath. "Surely I haven't worn you out yet. Let's go around a bit more."

The slender point of Kozue's sword danced just inches from Juri's face, forcing her backward several steps, but then Juri's sword snapped up and dashed the lighter rapier away like an annoying fly. Juri's teeth flashed in a wordless snarl as she charged. As graceless as she appeared next to Kozue's ballet, I suddenly remembered all the concentrated power in Juri's sword, and saw it in every step of her charge.

Kozue found herself backing up, struggling to hold her delicate sword against the fury of Juri's slashes. She attempted to retaliate once and I winced, knowing exactly what was going to happen. Kozue thrust at Juri -- who suddenly wasn't there -- and stumbled. Juri caught the current fencing captain over her arm, then heaved her away. Kozue staggered back, tripped, and ended up on the ground.

Long experience -- or simply rage -- kept Juri from the mistake she'd made with me years before. Her sword drove forward to take Kozue's rose...

There was a flash of steel at the same moment, and black petals flew with the equally impossible blue petals.

The bells pealed out their cacophony as Juri and I both turned to the origin of the rose-hilted dagger that clattered to the floor after accomplishing its task. Shiori smiled and drew her hand back. I saw a gleaming line of metal above her upraised hand.

I collided with Juri before I registered that the second dagger was flying toward us. I felt the breeze as it passed us by.

Kozue was standing next to Shiori when we sat up. We stared at her as a few cut strands of my hair drifted to the polished floor of the dueling arena. "My Bride doesn't have the special... skills that yours had, Utena," she said as they progressed past us. "So I have to use what I have." She smiled almost gently at Juri. "And what would you have done with her anyway? Tried to set her free? Where's the revolution in *that*?"

They turned their backs on us and walked out the gate. Shiori glanced back once, her expression blank and unreadable, as they descended the stairs.

Juri tore the rose holder from her breast pocket and hurled it across the arena.

I had this friend in Paris (said Nanami, staring moodily into her miso soup). She was sweet and funny and very talented. I met her when she came to one of my boyfriend's parties, and she and I started meeting every morning before class for coffee. I suppose it took me a while to realize what everyone else had known forever. I started, you know, asking her about it, then being more insistent. Everyone was smiling indulgently behind their hands at the *japonaise*. "Oh, Nanami!" she would say. "Just like a hen with her chick!" And they'd all laugh.

Some of the girls took me aside to tell me how it was. None of them would *do* anything. And *she* wouldn't do anything. She eventually just avoided me. And then... then she turned up dead. Her body just stopped working, they said. Wasn't it *romantic*, they said. And I thought -- but couldn't say -- no, it's not, she's just another stupid, dead artist.

It *still* makes me so *angry* with her.

But now I think back on it and... Utena, I don't know how to save someone who doesn't want to be saved.

Part Thirteen: Prydwen

"What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine."

"Sounds like a guerrilla operation." [...]

"Guerrillas have something to hope for." Suddenly she switches on a jolly smile. "Think of us as opossums, Don. Did you know there are opossums living all over? Even in New York City."

-- from "The Women Men Don't See" by James Tiptree Jr.

The sun was just rising on our third day at Ohtori as Juri and I descended from the arena. How did an entire night pass? Did a night pass? Time was moving strangely, as it always did here, and I... I couldn't be sure whether I was awake or dreaming, or, perhaps, dreaming while I was awake. I felt oddly weightless coming down that immense, ridiculously long stair.

Anthy met us at the bottom. Kozue and Shiori were, of course, long gone, but Anthy was there. She and Juri just looked at each other for an eternity of a pause before Juri stormed ahead, sword in hand still, and Anthy fell into step next to me. Just behind Juri, we walked along the path lined with broken urns of roses. The roses were starting to impinge upon the path, reaching thorny arms toward us, plucking at our clothing and scratching my legs in those damned short pants. The path narrowed as we got closer to the entrance.

We passed through the gate, and at the top of the stairs, Juri hesitated, silent rage rolling off her in waves. She stared across one of the pools of water there, a pool that seemed as wide as the ocean at that moment. Suddenly, she cocked back her arm and flung the sword out into the pool, a fierce snarl on her face.

I could have sworn that Anthy was beside me, but there she was, ankle-deep in the center of the pool. She put out her hand and caught the sword neatly by the hilt before it ever touched the water. A ray of sunlight gleamed off the blade as she held it aloft, and her voice carried perfectly to our ears:

"That is not yours to throw away, Juri."

Anthy waded out of the water like a mere mortal, and Juri fumed for just a moment, watching her, before turning and running down the steps and up the path.

Miki and I made pancakes for breakfast. Juri made Saionji set the table, and found a jug of orange juice somewhere ("If he wants to poison us, let him.") Nanami hung around and made snide comments about the lack of bacon until Juri exploded and offered to fry /her/ instead. Everyone suddenly realized that Juri was, possibly with reason, short on

temper, and became very polite to one another.

Anthy and Chu-Chu greeted us all cheerfully at the table, and when we finally settled down, Anthy asked, "So, what did everyone dream about?"

"What, during our three-hour naps?" Nanami snapped.

"Yes," Anthy said, scraping butter over her pancakes.

"I dreamed about flying," Saionji said. "It was just a patrol mission, no exercises, so it was... very pleasant."

"Huh," said Juri. "I dreamed about riding a horse over the country we crossed to get here."

I shrugged. "I was swimming in the pool at school. The pool was empty, except for me and something I kept glimpsing underwater. It wasn't particularly scary, just sort of nerve-wracking."

Nanami sighed in exasperation. "Honestly. Don't you all know that all those dreams are about sex?"

Juri raised her eyebrow. "Then we're all subconsciously thinking along similar lines, though I'm certainly not aware of it."

"What did you dream about, Miki?" I asked hurriedly, trying to head off another Juri versus Nanami moment.

"I dreamed I died," he said in a faint voice, staring at his forkful of pancake.

We all stared at him. Not even Nanami had a comment for that.

The door to the observatory slammed open and a very pale Kozue stormed through, headed directly for the white couch where Akio reclined, holding a saucer and teacup. Touga was nowhere to be seen.

Kozue rounded the end of the sofa and stood directly in front of Akio, holding a crumpled piece of paper and an envelope with a familiar red seal in her hand.

"What the hell does this mean?" she shouted, shoving the letter toward his face.

He ignored the paper that trembled inches from him and sipped from the teacup. "Have you forgotten how to read now?" he asked genially.

She stepped back, the muscles in her jaw and throat showing like piano wires under her

nearly transparent skin. "I won that duel," she said, a little subdued, voice vibrating.

"Did you?" he inquired, inspecting the contents of his cup. "I seem to recall your rose falling."

Kozue started to reply, but stopped and clenched her fist. I could hear the paper crunch and the sealing wax snap. "I need help to do what you ask," she said after a very long moment of staring at him.

"You have your assignment," he said, taking another sip of tea.

"*This*," she said, shaking the paper, "isn't possible, and you know it." She stepped forward and leaned over him with great deliberation, setting her hands on the back of the sofa and bringing herself face-to-face with Akio. Very softly, she said, "The only way it will happen is with. Your. Help."

His gaze finally flicked up to meet hers. The tableau held for an electric minute.

"Very well," he said.

She pushed herself upright, brushed her white hair back, and opened her mouth to say something.

Akio, sitting like a statue carved from ice, cut her off. "Get out."

"But..."

Then he was on his feet, looming over her. I'd forgotten just how tall he was -- how tall he *could* be. "You'll find what you need in your room," he said, the usual silk in his voice turned smooth and featureless.

Kozue's cheeks flushed slightly, and she staggered back a couple of steps from him, one arm raised as if to ward off an expected blow. But Akio never moved, just fixed her in his frigid gaze until she retreated hurriedly to the door. She turned back once, then dashed out the door. Behind her, the door creaked slowly and stiffly shut, not quite latching.

When I looked back at Akio, he was sitting again, holding his teacup and saucer, watching the mirror-smooth surface of the tea.

"That was a... good breakfast," Saionji reluctantly admitted, sitting back from the table after his third helping.

"I could've made crepes," Nanami muttered.

"Then you can cook tomorrow morning," Juri said.

"Hopefully, we won't be here tomorrow," Miki said earnestly.

"Yes." Saionji leaned forward onto the table. "I don't think we're accomplishing anything here. I don't think we *can*. I think we should just... leave."

"Me too," Miki said, looking away toward the French doors. "I... don't want to be here any more."

I frowned and opened my mouth, only to surprise a similar expression on Nanami's face. I gestured with my chin for her to say her piece.

Nanami nodded shortly to me. "Don't tell me you've given up on the people you came here for?" she asked, looking from Saionji to Miki. "Because I haven't."

"Did you actually think you could convince *anyone* to leave this place?" Saionji asked bitterly. "We only left because of *her*." He gestured at me.

"That's not true," I protested. "You each left for your own reasons. The only thing I ever learned here was that each person has to rescue him- or herself."

"There!" Saionji said. "We can't do anything. They have to get themselves out of this."

"But they need our help to do it," Nanami said heatedly. "Even... even Anthy couldn't do it alone." She glanced at Anthy, who continued to look, like Miki, out into the bright sunshine.

"We didn't come here to get back our golden days," Juri snarled. Everyone, even Miki, looked at her. "We didn't come here to be given a miracle. Or a shining thing. Or eternity. We came here to give these things to other people, and that's a thankless, dirty, miserable job."

Miki looked chastened. Saionji looked stubborn. "Oh, really?" he said.

"Yes," she said, standing. "I know a lot about jobs like that. Being a police officer." She turned away and laid a hand on the glass of the door, then tossed over her shoulder, "A *female* police officer."

Saionji looked away and grunted acceptance.

Miki shrugged helplessly. "If we're not leaving, then what do we do?"

Anthy stood and leaned against the wall next to Juri. "We go do the thankless, dirty, miserable jobs." She smiled wanly. "It will be nice to have help, really."

"Well, maybe the girls ought to do it," Nanami said, examining her nails. "You boys are making a hash of things."

"Oh, really?" Saionji bristled. "I don't see you walking out of here with Touga on your

arm."

"You think you can do better?" she exclaimed.

"Of course," he replied with a smug smile. "You never did know how to talk to him."

"Well, you must've been just a wonderful husband," she replied sharply, "since Keiko has so completely thrown herself at you."

"*You* talk to her then," he snapped.

"I think I will!" Nanami sprang to her feet and marched out.

Saionji folded his arms and sat in a red-faced sulk for a moment, then leaped up and followed her.

Juri and Miki exchanged looks. Miki said, "Maybe that's a good idea. You want to swap?"

Juri gave a grim, lopsided smile. "Hell, yes." They left together.

I looked around, then at Anthy. "Where'd Chu-Chu go?"

Anthy waved airily. "Oh, he's taking care of a few things. Shall we?"

Hoshiko was standing alone in the ballet dressing room, facing away from the mirror. There was a towel around her neck, and she was staring fixedly at a piece of paper. In her other hand dangled, forgotten, her outdoor shoes.

Stirring herself from her perfect stillness, she carefully replaced the shoes in her cubicle. Then she pulled a plain black cell phone out of her gym bag and pressed a few buttons, crumpling the paper slightly in the process.

After a moment, she said into the phone, "This is Fujiwara Hoshiko. Did you get a letter today, Student Council President?"

In the background, I could hear a teacher's voice echoing in the ballet classroom. "First position."

Hoshiko said, in a carefully formal voice, "My letter contains instructions that are simply not possible."

In the background, the teacher's voice said, "Second position."

"I don't wish to discuss that. I want to know whether you think the letters are genuine."

The teacher's voice said something in a lower tone, clearly correcting someone.

"I don't care about your perception of 'my place.' I have considerable reason to doubt the letter. The instructions are... obscene."

In the background, the class went on. "Third position."

Hoshiko gave the phone a dubious look. A faint sound that may have been laughter came from it. She replaced the phone to her ear and said, "These directives are completely antithetical to our goal."

"Fourth position," echoed from the classroom.

"Of course I am capable," Hoshiko declared angrily. "But I don't wish to waste my time and energy on irrelevant distractions."

There was a brief silence, then, "Fifth position."

Hoshiko dropped her voice. "That's impossible." She stared at the cracks running through the tarnished silver backing of the mirror.

Distantly, the teacher said again, "First position."

"How can you believe that?" Hoshiko hissed.

The teacher said, imperturbably, "Second position."

Hoshiko said disbelievingly, "Do you really think the End of the World would instruct us to do.... this?"

"Third position," drifted dimly in from the classroom.

"This can't be the way to achieve revolution," Hoshiko insisted.

"Fourth position," announced the teacher.

"We have to focus on our own goals," Hoshiko went on.

"Fifth position."

Another silence. Hoshiko drew her breath in angrily, paused, then pulled the phone away from her ear and viciously snapped it shut.

In the background, the teacher said implacably, "Repeat."

"I can't believe I got stuck with *you*

," grumbled Saionji.

I wondered for a moment what he was talking about. He appeared to be alone.

Then: "It was only because she asked me, I'll have you know," he snarled, apparently in the direction of his shoe.

"Chu!" said Chu-Chu.

"Like the bloody thing even exists." Saionji drew his foot back a little as though to kick, but then seemed to think better of it, running a hand through his hair and striding through one of the archways. I-meant-to-do-that radiated off of him like it did off the kitten when she leapt for the arm of the chair and missed.

Chu-Chu, with a very large crowbar over his shoulder, trotted amiably after him.

Just beyond the archway was a parking lot. Black asphalt seemed to stretch for miles-- I had never seen anything like it, except perhaps at Disneyland. Chu-Chu pushed his way through the weeds at the corner of the archway like an explorer pushing his way through the jungle. Somewhere, he had acquired a pith helmet. Upon seeing the parking lot, however, he seemed to wilt a little.

The parking lot was full.

"Did this used to be so big?" asked Saionji uncertainly. He shoved back his own pith helmet and rubbed his forehead.

I was sitting on a stool in the dim backstage of the school theatre, holding my head in my hands. "Chu-Chu?" I muttered, bewildered by the moving pictures in my head.

Anthy, meanwhile, had her head and shoulders down in a large cardboard box clearly marked PROPS.

"I don't remember a parking lot," I said.

She came up from hunting, holding a bent black witch's hat. After a moment of trying to straighten the point, she tossed it to the side with a shrug and went back into the box. The hat hit the floor in a mighty cloud of dust and skidded into a corner.

"Anthy, what are you looking for?" I asked. I thought about going to look over her shoulder, but wasn't entirely certain of my feet. I was still woozy from whatever was going on.

A shiny golden crown popped onto the floor and rolled to my feet. As I picked it up, one of the paste rubies dropped out of its tinfoil setting and skittered under a low table.

Moments later, a broken sword pitched onto the floor, followed by an old sheepskin that had been combed through with gold glitter, the head of a horse costume that might have been white once upon a time, and a dusty bunch of artificial flowers. A basket followed, and when it toppled over, a rubber snake fell out. There was a dagger whose metal had peeled off, revealing dull grey plastic underneath.

"Huh," she said, somewhat muffled. "Haven't seen this in a while." And a brass-looking cup with glass gems all around it clanked out and rolled so I could see the label affixed to the underside of the base, though all I could make out was "GRA."

Anthy stood up from the box, and I could see it was empty (mostly -- I think there were still some bright yellow feathers in there). Then she bent and picked up the cup, turning it over in her hands thoughtfully.

"What's that?" I asked.

Anthy glanced at me, then back down at the cup. She flicked its rim delicately with a forefinger, and to my astonishment, it rang like crystal. Then she grinned and tipped it so I could see the interior.

"Empty," she said, still smiling to herself. She turned and tossed it lightly to the back of the stage where, among a welter of three-legged stools, pasteboard armor, and overstuffed chairs with stuffing hanging to the floor, there was a cardboard fireplace lined with orange tinfoil. It rattled into the fireplace with the sad chinking sound of pot metal. Then it exploded.

"Bloody hell!" I exclaimed, resorting to my favorite English phrase. "What was *that*?"

"Sorry," Anthy said unrepentantly.

Nanami was striding angrily down a hallway, fists clenched, pausing to peer out every window and in every door that was the least bit ajar.

"Aaaiiii, Nanami-samaaaa!" three girls squealed as they burst out one of those doors.

Nanami recoiled, spinning on her heel to put her back against the wall and raising one hand protectively.

"We're soooo happy you're here, Nanami-sama!" one girl exclaimed, clasping her hands at her bosom.

"Sooo happy!" the second girl emphasized. "We neeeded you!"

"Need you very much!" the third girl said.

"Need... me?" Nanami said.

"Oh, YES!" the first girl said. "We need your experienced eye!"

"Your traveled eye!" the second girl said.

"Your experienced and traveled eye for our SHOW!" the third girl said.

"Ah," Nanami said faintly.

"Say you'll do it?" the first one pleaded.

"Say you'll help us?" the second one said.

"Say you'll come?" the third one said, leaning in close.

"Of course," Nanami said hurriedly. "Of course! Now, if you'll excuse me..." She slid away down the wall a few steps before turning and running off.

"That was easier than I thought," the first girl said.

"Yeah!" the second girl said. "Thanks for the help," she added to the third girl.

"No problem," the third girl said, buffing her nails on her shirt.

Touga was crossing the main hall of the school, which was strangely empty. His footsteps echoed on the marble floor. Beyond him, I noticed a number of school notices pinned to a bulletin board. Someone had written over these in heavy black marker, but some of the notices had been taken down so I could only read a few of the characters: "Repent," "Rapture," "Revolution," and, "Ruin."

Hoshiko appeared from one of the side halls and came up short at the sight of him. Her gaze followed him for several moments, and her face was completely unreadable. Abruptly, she burst into motion, jogging after him. "Mr. Deputy Chairman," she said.

Touga paused, turned, and smiled at her. "Fujiwara-kun," he said warmly.

With a flick of her wrist, Hoshiko sent the envelope -- its red wax seal showing it to be the one she'd been regarding earlier -- flying into his face. He stepped back with a look of alarm.

The letter fluttered to the floor like a dying bird. There was a long silence as they both stared at it.

Finally, Touga looked up at her and said, "Hoshiko..."

She looked furious when she met his gaze. "Do it yourself, World's End." Then she spun and ran out the main doors.

He watched her go, standing very still. Eventually, he dabbed at a spot on his chin and laughed a little. "Paper cut," he said to himself, smiling wryly, before turning his back and walking on. The envelope remained where it fell.

I was surprised when Anthy took us back to the Birdcage. "Anthy," I said weakly, looking at the little greenhouse with revulsion, "are you sure...?"

She gave me an impatient look, then smiled. "I won't be but a moment," she said.

I sat on the bench outside and watched as she went in and came out carrying the familiar watering can. It made me feel dizzy, or maybe sick to my stomach. She flashed me a wide smile as she went to the tap, which was sufficiently unlike the old Anthy to make me unclench my fingers. But then I was looking at her back as she filled the watering can. She hummed a little tune -- slightly off-key -- and tapped one foot absently behind the other. For a moment, gone were her tattered leggings, the oversized t-shirt, the little skirt she was so fond of. For just a moment, I saw her back in the uniform.

Then she turned around, and the illusion was gone. She held up the watering can as though to show it to me, smiled directly into my eyes, and spat into the water.

I blinked.

Anthy's eyes narrowed with mirth. She went into the greenhouse, leaving the door open, and I could hear her singing as she watered the roses. "Aupres de ma blonde/qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon/Aupres de ma blonde/qu'il fait bon dormi'!"

Anthy exited the Birdcage wearing the look of suppressed, sly laughter that I have come to associate with the oddest things. She propped the door open with the watering can with great precision, as if arranging a vase of flowers on an elaborately set table. Then she came over and kissed the top of my head; I noticed, as she walked, a few fallen rose petals detach themselves from her shoes.

The confusion of seeing Anthy so very happy while watering the flowers -- she had smiled when we were in school, but I had never heard her sing, or laugh -- was enough to shock me out of the illusion of the past. I looked up at her with, I suspect, a goofy expression on my face.

She was wearing a sprig of frothy white Queen Anne's Lace behind her ear. In the very center of the blossom, there was a cluster of tiny red flowers, as if the bloom had been pricked with a needle. She must have gotten it in the greenhouse, but only roses grew in the Birdcage.

"You're very... happy," I said uncertainly.

She kissed the tip of my nose. "I had an amusing idea," she said. "Besides, I have you."

Tsuwabuki sat, cross-legged, on his bed, a dark grey stone in his hand, sword across his lap.

A familiar envelope was on the bed next to him, a folded piece of paper beside it.

He slid the whetstone carefully along the blade, following the curve of it precisely.

A breeze blew in through the open window, gently ruffling his forelock.

Another stroke of the whetstone along the blade.

The paper shifted slightly, caught by the breeze.

Another stroke.

A gust of wind picked up the paper in a twirling dance.

I didn't even see Tsuwabuki move. One second he was sharpening his sword, the next he was on his feet, sword slicing through the air.

The wind died. The letter fell to the floor in two pieces.

Tsuwabuki smiled.

Yukio was standing in an elevator -- no, *the* elevator -- leaning his forehead against the wall. His face was hidden by his hair. In one hand was the crumpled letter from the End of the World.

The elevator chime sounded and he straightened up immediately, assuming his usual expression of sardonic boredom at once. However, it took a few seconds for the doors of the elevator to open, and he stood there, staring at them. At last, they creaked apart, and he stepped out into the deputy chairman's office. He hesitated for a moment, scanning the vaulted room in a manner that almost seemed nervous.

"Ah, Fujiwara-kun." Touga's deep voice preceded him as he emerged from the far side of the planetarium projector. "You're the last person I would expect to come to my office."

Yukio gazed at him past a shock of dark hair. "I like to be unpredictable."

"I see." Touga regarded the Student Council Vice President thoughtfully. "So, what brings you here, then?"

Wordlessly, Yukio held up the letter to display the seal. When Touga raised his eyebrows inquiringly, Yukio burst out, "Take me instead."

Touga blinked in apparent surprise. "What?"

"You said it yourself," Yukio replied, his normally cool voice warming quickly. "I should have caught it then, but I was too angry. I needed this--" he shook the paper "--to tell me what I already knew. Take me instead." He strode closer to Touga. "You need someone who knows at least some of what's going on. *I* know far more than *she* does. You need someone strong. I'm stronger than she is. You need someone who can take whatever happens, because you don't really *know* what will happen. I can do that. She can't." He stopped, almost but not quite touching Touga, and, after a pause, looked up at him through his hair. "You need someone willing," he said hoarsely. "*She'll* never be as willing as I can be."

Touga stared down at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing. "Aren't you the very *flower* of chivalry, then?"

Yukio seized Touga by the lapels. "Don't *laugh* at me!" he snarled, shaking him. "You certainly *seemed* to want me enough a few *months* ago!"

Touga did stop laughing, and gently removed Yukio's hands from his coat. "But, as you told me, you've moved on and up. There's no turning back down the familiar road, and your attempt to save her will win you no glory in her eyes." In an oddly tender gesture, Touga pushed Yukio's forelock back and looked down into his face. "You're so predictable, Yukio-kun," he said softly.

Yukio stared up at him, wide-eyed, and his lips trembled, just barely, before he bared his teeth in a wordless, feral snarl. He slapped Touga's hand away and turned his back, walking slowly, with immense self-control, back to the elevator.

Juri knocked on a door. The small plate beside the door read "Kaoru Kozue".

She waited. After a moment of waiting, she cocked her head toward the door and appeared to be listening. She looked thoughtful, then shrugged and turned to pass back down the hallway.

"Arisugawa-san!" two girls called after her.

Juri paused, brow knit in a perplexed look. This gave the two girls time to catch up to her.

"Arisugawa-san!" one said. "We really need your help!"

"My help?" Juri said, both eyebrows rising.

"Yes, with our play!" the second girl said.

"Your play." Juri's voice went a bit flat.

"It will be *such* a lovely play," the first one said, "but we can't decide about the costumes."

"Such a shame," Juri said, and I picked up the thread of sarcasm this time.

"Would you help us, Arisugawa-san?" the second girl asked.

"How?" Juri inquired.

"We need you to model some costumes!" the first girl said.

"I don't... do modeling these days," Juri said.

"It would just be a few!" the second girl said.

"So very quick!" the first girl assured.

"And we wouldn't tell anyone!" the second girl added.

Juri sighed. "Oh, all right. I suppose, if I must."

The two girls squealed with delight. "Thank you! Thank you! We'll let you know when we need you!"

Juri watched them run away, high-fiving and giggling, down the hall. She shook her head.

The sun beat down on the endless rows of parked cars.

"I don't understand it," said Saionji. "Even if every student owned a car-- even if they owned *two* cars-- how could there be so many?"

"Chu," said Chu-Chu, leaning against a convenient dandelion growing out of a crack in the asphalt. He sounded tired.

"We're never going to find it," Saionji muttered.

"Looking for something?" Touga locked the door of a silver Mercedes and walked around to the bumper, smiling.

Saionji eyed him unkindly. "You, maybe."

"I'm flattered. Care to go for a drive?"

"No," said Saionji. "We can talk here."

"In the blazing sun?" He started to stroll past them, glanced down at Chu-Chu. "Odd company you're keeping, Kyouichi. Surely there must be some shade on campus. Let's find a place to sit down."

Saionji, visibly seething, followed him.

"It will be magical!" the first girl said.

"It will be wondrous!" the second girl said.

Yukio glanced over at them as they giggled madly.

"She'll be so beautiful!" the first girl said rapturously.

"Just think of it! Fujiwara-san, auditioning for *our play!*" the second girl said.

Yukio gave them a second look, one that fixed on them. "What play would that be?" he inquired.

"Oh, the very best and most wonderful play of them all!" the first girl said.

"A play to end all plays!" the second girl said.

"*Everyone* is auditioning, Student Council Vice President," the first girl added, almost flirtatiously.

"Absolutely everyone," the second girl said, and this time I was sure it was flirtatious.

"Everyone, including my sister?" Yukio said.

"Of course!" the first girl said. "How could the Drama Club put on a production without the most lovely of us all?"

"We're writing in a swan role just for her," the second girl said. "Or something like that."

The room was very neat. It was so neat, in fact, that one might be forgiven for thinking

that no one lived there; that it was a display model, artificially perfect from the smooth, taut blanket on the bunk to the schoolbooks ranged on the shelf with military precision. Only two things spoiled this illusion: the stand on a low table that held matched daisho and the student himself, sitting in the desk chair in front of the supernaturally tidy desk.

Toshiro was sitting with his hands folded in his lap, staring at a white letter placed in the exact center of the desk. The letter was still in its envelope, the familiar envelope with the everlastingly familiar red seal. He sat there, gazing at it as if it were a piece of art.

A fly buzzed in the window. Outside, cicadas shrilled.

Cicadas were still shrilling. Miki shaded the sun from his eyes with his hand as he stared at the sculpture in the center of the fountain. It looked like a lump of rock to me, but clearly he could see some kind of shape in it. It was odd; I didn't recall paying much attention to the sculpture in the fountain, and yet I was absolutely certain it hadn't looked like that. Clearly, Miki shared my sentiments.

He walked slowly around the basin of the fountain. I saw drapery, something that might have been a hand, something that might have been the hilt of a sword.

"Miiickey!"

He flinched slightly, then turned a disbelieving stare over his shoulder. Two girls in the fluttery, ugly uniforms descended upon him in a flurry. "Kaoru Miki!"

"Yes?" he said blankly with his typical deer-in-headlights expression.

"You've kept up on your piano, haven't you?"

"Oh, of *course* he has, how could you ask him that?"

"You're right, of course! I'm sorry, Mickey-san!"

"Uhm," he said. "No, that's all right. I... do still play, yes."

"Ohhhhh!" they both exclaimed dreamily.

"Would you play for our play?" one asked, her hands clasped together pleadingly.

"Pleaaaase?" they chorused, bowing.

"Ah. Um." Miki rubbed the back of his head. I thought disgustedly that he was going to be too polite to refuse.

"Oh, *THANK* you!" they chorused, bowing like jacknives and dashing off in a scatter of

delighted giggles.

"I didn't even say yes," Miki said bemusedly to the empty air. He turned back to his contemplation of the sculpture with a distracted expression.

Kozue stood before a mirror in what I supposed was her room. She glowered at herself, muttering silently, moving her head angrily as if making a sharp remark to someone. She raised thin, skeletal hands and began to twist her long, pale hair together in hard, fast motions.

When her hair was wrung together tightly, she viciously stabbed a slender, very plain silver pin through the bun to hold it in place. She glared at her hair, bound and pinioned. It made her icy eyes look enormous.

She shed her student council uniform reluctantly, hovering over each piece to hang or fold it properly -- lovingly, for Kozue. In its place, she donned the hideous Ohtori girl's uniform, the one with ridiculous starched puffball sleeves bigger than her head. She pulled the blouse on with movements so savage I thought she would tear it.

Lip curled into an ugly sneer as she regarded her transformation in the glass, she lifted something from a nearby table. She hesitated, and then she slowly slid on a pair of glasses -- large, round, familiar.

The sneer vanished and the lines of her face smoothed and went blank. The corners of her mouth curled up briefly.

"Anthy?" I said weakly. "Anthy, I'm feeling a little sick again." I opened my eyes.

I did not immediately recognize where I was and Anthy was nowhere to be seen. The room was dark, filled with half understood shapes, and for one nightmare moment I wondered if I was asleep and dreaming. Then my eyes resolved the shapes of the hard backs of folding chairs scattered haphazardly across the half-dark floor of an unlit auditorium. I wasn't sure *which* auditorium. I stood up, gripping the back of a chair for support.

"Utena-sama!"

"Can that really be Utena-sama?"

"Ooooooh, *amaaaazing!*"

A pair of double doors not far from me flapped open and three girls stepped in, sunlight so dazzling behind them that I could only see their outlines. Their voices were not immediately familiar, although they sounded familiar enough or, at least, like the voices of girls I'd known in school though at the moment I couldn't remember any names.

"Fancy running into you here!"

"It *must* be fate!" That girl had a particularly shrill voice.

"Our play is *sure* to be a success if Utena-sama is in it!"

"Please say you'll come!" all three of them chorused.

"Come to what?" I said, still trying to make out features.

A slip of paper was thrust into my hand. "You *have* to come! Now that you're here, we can't *possibly* make it a success without you!"

"Oh, *thank* you, Utena-sama!" the shrill one gushed.

And with that, they skipped out, the double doors thumping shut behind them. I groped my way out after them, but they were long gone by the time I got outdoors. Once I managed to make my eyes adjust, I looked down at the paper. It read, "Gathering Shadows Kashira Theatre Auditions."

Chu-Chu sat in the shade of Saionji's pith helmet, which had been propped up with a stick as a makeshift tent, fanning himself with a small palm leaf. He had exchanged his own pith helmet for a small brown fedora for reasons I could not quite fathom. He looked exceedingly dusty and tired.

Eventually, he got to his feet, took a swig out of a tiny canteen, and trudged off among the tall weeds and the enormous rubber tires. It was quite a jungle down there.

A ladybug, preoccupied as beetles often are, trundled its way into his path. With a startled, "Chuuu!" Chu-Chu leapt back, manifesting a tiny whip out of nowhere. While the ladybug peacefully continued on its path, he attempted to disentangle the whip from his tail. By the time he had accomplished that, it had vanished out of sight in a clump of grass.

"Chu!" he said righteously, and strutted onward boldly, yet cautiously.

The next foe he met was a cicada, sitting quite still on the sunblasted asphalt. This time, Chu-Chu had the whip at ready. With a brave, "Chu! Chu-chuuu!" he lashed out at it.

Unfortunately, it was only the empty shell of a cicada, and the blow of the whip launched

it high into the air in a wild parabola that ended on Chu-Chu's head. He lost his dignity and entangled the whip again while wrestling it.

After winning that battle, he got to his feet, looking the worse for wear, righted his hat, and trudged on.

On and on he marched, sometimes peering upwards at the mysterious, sundrenched monoliths of the parked cars. Rounding a large tire, he was startled to come face to face with a small grass snake, no more than six inches in length. This was considerably longer than Chu-Chu was tall.

Chu-Chu stared at the snake. The snake gazed back at him and flicked out its tongue serenely.

Chu-Chu turned tail and basely fled, screaming.

The snake flicked its tiny tongue out again, looking as puzzled as it is possible for a reptile to do.

People seemed to be ignoring me. That was all right with me, I was ignoring most of them. At present, I was only interested in where Anthy was, considering what had happened the last time I lost track of her. I decided to go check the tree where we'd eaten lunch so often in school.

As if I had conjured her from my wishful thinking -- Anthy didn't work *quite* like that -- she was sitting comfortably under the tree. I hurried towards her and saw that she was sitting with someone else. A student, I supposed, recognizing the uniform. The girl's hair was pulled out into two peculiar pigtails, each banded neatly into three segments.

Neither of them was particularly clear as they were both sitting in shadow and Ohtori's cloudless, brilliant blue sky, hard as enamel, reflected behind them. But I would know Anthy anywhere, and I hastened over the lawn.

Anthy turned her head toward me and I thought she smiled. She plucked a dandelion from the lawn as I approached and blew it, tiny seeds traveling on fine white parachutes. The seeds rose up in a faint cloud and pirouetted on the wind.

Anthy's companion picked a dandelion as well and breathed on it with a puff of laughter. She needed two breaths before the little lion's head was bare.

Anthy picked another and blew one, two, three times. The seeds drifted in an ethereal scarf over the face of her companion and they both giggled. I broke into a run. I wanted to play with the dandelions too.

The other girl picked one and held it over her face, blowing on it with great theatrical

puffs. It must not have been fully ripe because it took her four tries. "How long?" she asked Anthy. "How long should we sit here?"

Anthy picked a dandelion and blew on it twice. Seeds rose up in great clouds. "Until the eleventh hour, of course." She blew three times more.

The other girl picked a dandelion and looked at it reflectively. "That won't be long now," she said.

I finally reached the tree and looked down at Anthy in confusion. "Dandelions?" I said.

Anthy smiled, reached up, and pulled me down to sit beside her on the grass. "I think they make a lawn look more decorative, don't you?"

There was no sign of her companion.

As Anthy and I walked into the quad, I felt her hesitate and stop before I saw anything. Robert was standing in the center of the quad, where several paths came together. In his hand was a letter, thicker than the ones I had seen before, but still bearing the familiar red seal. Students hurried past him; he ignored them, but I had a sense that he was very aware of his surroundings. There was just something about the set of his head.

He broke the seal on the letter and shook it out with an actor's grace. The movement around him started to slow. He looked at the letter, glanced up at the tower atop the building directly in front of him, and began to read.

As he read, the students around him drifted to a stop, listening.

"I will praise the sovereign, supreme king of the land,
Who hath extended his dominion over the shore of the world."

His voice rang from building to building without benefit of a microphone. Beside me, Anthy gave a tiny snort. We walked on.

Despite the large arched window that took up most of one wall, the bathroom was dark. Perhaps that was because this window, unlike the others, was made of stained glass. It looked like something that had been lifted from a cathedral. At the top of the arch, naturally, was the distinctive rose pattern.

Most of the bathroom was occupied by a large, white, claw-footed tub. A translucent shower curtain printed with lively black and orange koi was pulled around most of it. The

tub was seemingly occupied, but all I could see was a white, glimmering outline, like bones.

Toshiro entered, solemnly carrying a large bath sponge. He knelt on a little stool next to the bath, dipped the sponge in the water, and reached behind the shower curtain to wash the hidden figure. Water dripped.

Toshiro dipped the sponge in the water and reapplied it with the patient grace of a nurse or a geisha. He said nothing. His face was as closed and expressionless as it had been when he was doing sword exercises.

"That is enough. The robe now." Akio's voice was taut.

Toshiro wrung the sponge out and set it on the floor, got to his feet, and lifted a long white robe down from a hook on the door. He passed this behind the shower curtain as the indistinct figure rose to its feet with the noise of water.

On the floor, the abandoned sponge leaked red.

Still standing in the classic pose of an English actor (he lacked the vividness I associated with traditional Japanese theatre), Robert continued to declaim. There was something in the rise and fall of his voice -- something to do with church? with court? -- that suggested the measured cadence of ritual.

"Complete was the prison of Gweir in Caer Sidi,
Through the spite of Pwyll and Pryderi
No one before him went into it.
The heavy blue chain held the faithful youth,
And before the spoils of Annwn woefully he sings,
And till doom shall continue a bard of prayer.
Thrice enough to fill Prydwen, we went into it;
Except seven, none returned from Caer Sidi."

I didn't recognize any of these names. I didn't recognize any of the places. The hair on my arms still stood up.

Miki followed Shiori down the broad hallway that led toward the music rooms. He seemed to be hurrying as she paced solemnly around a turn. She kept ahead of him effortlessly.

At the door of a music room -- I had no way of knowing if it was The Music Room, but I

would've bet money on it -- she paused and looked over her shoulder until he had nearly rounded the corner before she opened the door and vanished inside. Miki saw the door closing and broke into a run to catch it. He flung the door wide and gasped.

Instead of the music room, he had just taken a few precipitous steps into a very business-like lobby. The door swung slowly shut behind him as he stared at the automated check-in desk with the touch screens in front of him. Above the touch screens was an elegantly printed notice, giving room rates for "rest" and "stay." Then he turned and glanced to his left, where one glass wall apparently portioned off an enormous aquarium. There were no fish, no plants, nothing in the dark water except one dimly-glimpsed red spike-heeled shoe, sitting sadly on the bottom.

When he spun and looked back at the exit door, there was a discreet advertisement poster, describing an "image club," with images of silhouetted figures in both female and male Ohtori school uniforms. Miki made a small choking noise, and turned wildly for the only other doorway.

He practically ran across the floor (which, I noticed in passing, was tiled alternately in mirror and black). He wrenched the door open and catapulted through it.

At first glance, I wondered if Miki had somehow managed to get into an eccentric teacher's sitting room. An elaborate paper figured in dull gold and rose covered the walls, along with a number of oil paintings in curlicued gilt frames. There were several heavy, patterned carpets on the floor that appeared to be very expensive. The overstuffed furniture was mostly in white velvet and the same dull gold as the walls, with silk cushions of many colors.

Miki looked startled and stood quite still, as if trying to figure out where he was.

On the elaborate marble mantelpiece, an immense vase of roses was reflected in an ornate mirror. It was a candy box of a room, precise, patterned, perfumed -- I imagined that I could even smell the roses.

Miki seemed at a loss for what to do. First, he went to a window and pulled aside a heavy silk curtain to look out. Apparently dissatisfied with the view, he strode over and peered at one of the vast, dark paintings. In my convenient position over his shoulder, I peered as well. The painting depicted a naked woman (as most classical European art seemed to do). She lay on a couch, gazing openly out at the viewer. One hand rested lightly between her legs, the other rested on the pile of white pillows she was propped on. Behind her, someone stood, offering her a bunch of flowers that she coolly ignored. At the foot of the couch, a little black cat arched.

Miki regarded this painting with a puzzled frown, and moved on to inspect the enormous painting above the scroll-backed loveseat. This depicted a curious marble indoor pavilion in blue and white, with two very pale-skinned naked women lounging on the steps in front of it, one swathed in white draperies, the other entirely bare. A figure heavily cloaked in black was offering them brass implements that might have been musical

instruments. In the background were numerous more naked and white-draped women.

If anything, this painting seemed to puzzle Miki even more. He moved to the painting to the right of it, slightly smaller but with an even more ornate frame. This painting depicted a woman in a red garment that curiously left her very white breasts bare. She wore gold hoop earrings, a necklace of gold coins, and a number of bangles; one hand was loosely propped on her waist in a pose of careless confidence. Her long dark hair trailed down her back, and she carried a golden platter supporting a sheathed knife tucked against her hip.

The title to this one was engraved on a small oval at the bottom of the frame: Salomé.

Miki turned from the painting with a shudder. As he turned, his sleeve caught something that had been half-hidden beneath the pillow on the loveseat, and it fell to the floor. He turned and looked. The thing was a small corset in dainty pink satin with little rosebuds along the top. He stared at it, his mouth open in an expression of horror. Then he turned, wrestled open the carved sliding door, and flung himself through. I noticed a fourth painting beside the door: a full-length portrait of a woman in red silk that looked as if it had been soaked with water, her elbows up as if she were stretching, staring thoughtfully and eerily past the viewer. I don't think Miki noticed it, though.

He ran down a hallway, along which I glimpsed murals in a style that looked very ancient, with content that was frankly pornographic. At the end of the hall was an archway, blocked only by filmy violet draperies. He shoved through these and was in --

It was a round room, arcaded around the edges with pointed arches, plastered in white and tiled with beautiful and intricate scrollwork in blue and green and red. Overhead, there was a dome, painted in similar elaborate designs. Hanging from the center was an enormous lamp made of pierced brass which threw, instead of light, a pattern of tiny stars everywhere. Low divans, huge silken pillows, and silver lamps on stands were scattered everywhere, interspersed with little carved tables which held chess sets, boxes of candy, and an apple cut into rabbits.

Miki, inelegantly, sneezed. I could see a faint haze of smoke in the air. I hoped it was incense.

A little eight-sided fountain, covered with colorful tiles, plashed gently in the center of the room. Looking bewildered, wary, and helplessly awkward, Miki began to pick his way through the litter of bargain-basement orientalist furniture. He tripped over a set of nesting brass tables and had to catch them before they toppled and made a clatter on the marble floor.

"Hello?" Miki said uncertainly. Only the fountain answered him.

He peered into a couple of alcoves. Finally, kicking a cushion out of his way, he folded back a carved wooden screen to find a low couch behind it.

On the couch, Shiori reclined, but not in the pose of a seductive courtesan. She lay stiffly

on her back with her hands folded on her chest. Her eyes, however, were open, her gaze fixed on Miki's face. He stood there and stared at her.

Finally, he said, "You can't... you can't *possibly*..."

She only stared at him.

Miki tried again. "You can't possibly be serious," he said.

She stared.

He said, "Takatsuki-san, you couldn't have imagined that this would work on *me*."

She stared.

He burst out, "It isn't like this, you know! It's *nothing* like this!"

Shiori moved without warning from a carved figure on the couch to a hissing, snarling creature inches from his face, like a cat whose tail has been stepped on. "You know *nothing* about it!" she shrieked. "*Nothing!*"

"Forgive me, Takatsuki-san," he said, his voice audibly bewildered and still polite, though he took an involuntary step back. "But I do know about it. I've grown up, you see."

She bristled, the skirts of the Rose Bride dress seeming to fluff out in her anger. "Grown *up*?" she screamed. "Grown *up*? You fool. You know nothing about this place, nothing about *him*, nothing about *me*, and nothing at *all* about your sister!"

Miki reeled back as if she'd slapped him, although her hands hadn't moved. Shiori ruthlessly pressed the advantage. "You think what *I'm* doing is shocking? You should go and see *her*."

Miki looked away. Shiori laughed unkindly.

"I can't see her doing..." he began, but was cut off by Shiori laughing again.

"Go and see," she mocked him. "She's in that house you two used to live in, just down the street. Go and see." She reached behind her onto the couch, produced a set of keys, and flung them at him contemptuously. Miki caught them by reflex.

Shiori's laughter cut off as though someone had thrown a switch. She turned and left the room, vanishing behind some of the blowing draperies. As if in a trance, Miki turned and went back the way he came.

Robert was still reading. A circle of students stood around him, a silent, puzzled audience.

"Am I not a candidate for fame, if a song is heard?
In Caer Pedryvan, four its revolutions;
In the first word from the cauldron when spoken,
From the breath of nine maidens it was gently warmed.
Is it not the cauldron of the chief of Annwn?"

Keiko leaned back in her chair with a groan, her belly stretching the material of her uniform. She arched her back and I heard it crackle. She sighed, staring at her desktop, which was strewn with papers. "These resumes are all *dreadful*," she said.

One of the matching pair, I guessed Yuuko, set a cup of tea in front of Keiko. "Kanae-san really didn't have a very impressive resume," she said.

The one I guessed was Aiko had her feet up on her relatively tiny desk, which also had a stack of papers. She gnawed expertly on her Pocky and regarded another sheet of paper. "What can you expect? She was the old Chairman's daughter. The way to get a good job is nepotism all the way." She tossed the paper over her shoulder, missing the dented and battered trashcan.

"It's amazing that all these girls imagine that they're qualified for the job," Keiko said, picking up a resume and peering at it as she sipped her tea.

Aiko picked up her stack and dumped them on top of Yuuko's. She collected the paper on Yuuko's desk, neatened the stack, and then placed it precisely in front of Keiko. "There you go," she said brightly.

"How many made the cut?" asked Yuuko.

"Almost ten," replied Aiko.

Yuuko collapsed into her chair and clenched a piece of Pocky between her teeth. "They say Kanae-san died of overwork."

"I expect that's so," Aiko said, crumpling up a stray resume and aiming for another trashcan. The ball of paper danced around the rim and popped out. "We should find someone with stamina."

"And a high tolerance," Keiko said, sweeping her desk clear with a grandiose swing of her arm and sitting back to take a sip of tea.

"Tolerance for what?" Aiko asked, her brow wrinkling.

Yuuko picked up her folder of rejections and dropped it into the trashcan next to her desk. "Everything," she intoned.

"What is its intention?" Robert read.
"A ridge about its edge and pearls.
It will not boil the food of a coward,
That has not been sworn,
Sword bright gleaming to him was raised,
And in the hand of Lleinawg it was left
And before the door of the gate of Uffern the lamp was burning.
And when we went with Arthur, a splendid labor,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Vedwyd."

Several of the greenhouse windows were broken. Thorny, muscular branches of roses reached out, groping for the sunlight. Rust streaked the upper levels of glass.

Juri, clearly on her way someplace else, glanced over at the Birdcage and paused in mid-stride, gaping. After a moment, she approached cautiously, as though the greenhouse might be haunted. With some effort, she pulled open the murky glass door, which shrieked in protest, and ducked inside among the verdant rose branches and the fading flowers.

Shiori was sitting on the bench in the center of the greenhouse. She held the watering can in both hands, staring down at it. She didn't look up when Juri came in. After a moment, she said, "I can't get the lid off."

Juri replied dryly, "I don't think they need watering."

Shiori's head snapped up, half alert, half flinching. Her eyes dilated behind the oversized glasses. "Juri-san," she whispered.

Juri huffed an impatient sigh and flicked a rose, sending shriveled petals scattering across the floor. "What you need are pruning shears," she said.

"All I have," faltered Shiori, "is this." Her eyes never left Juri's face.

"One hell of an inheritance," Juri said, not completely without sympathy.

"Juri-san," Shiori breathed again, and suddenly she was on her feet, reaching for Juri's face.

Juri caught Shiori's wrist and held it between two fingers. "No," she said, calmly.

Shiori flung her weight forward in a flurry of slender limbs and suddenly loosed brown curls. Juri side-stepped, without releasing her grip, and Shiori narrowly avoided an undignified rush out the door.

"The time for that is long past," said Juri, and her voice was very patient and only a little sad. She let go Shiori's wrist.

Shiori stood there, frozen, for a moment, and I saw her face contort with fury. She whipped around and spat venomously at Juri, "I don't want your *pity*."

"I'm sorry," said Juri. "It's too late for that too." And she stepped past Shiori and out of the greenhouse.

A breeze followed her, scattering withered petals. Shiori stood in the midst of the overblown blossoms, her face twisted with impotent rage. She spun away from Juri, the glasses suddenly rendering her expression blank.

Robert tilted his head back and addressed the tower directly.

"Am I not a candidate for fame with the listened song
In Caer Pedryvan, in the isle of the strong door?
The twilight and pitchy darkness were mixed together.
Bright wine their liquor before their retinue.
Thrice enough to fill Prydwen we went on the sea,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Rigor."

He got no answer, unless you counted the empty candy wrapper that a breeze tossed at his feet.

Saionji leaned over the edge of the Student Council balcony, peering out at the school, his jacket open at the collar. "It hasn't changed," he said tightly.

"No, it doesn't," said Touga from behind him. Touga's footsteps sounded crisply on the marble as he approached the railing. "It's a perfect garden. It never changes."

"Bullshit. I do some gardening, back home," Saionji said. "The point of a garden is that it grows."

"Is that really the point of a garden?" asked Touga. "Or is not that growth rather a

yearning after the perfect blossom?"

"I have a vegetable garden," Saionji said drily. "The blossom isn't the point."

Touga turned to lean his elbows on the rail and smiled into Saionji's eyes. His tie was loose and the neck of his shirt open. "How unutterably pragmatic you are. Presented with a garden of perfect moments, you think only of marketability."

"I'm not thinking of marketability," Saionji said. "But the product."

"And the consumption of the product?" Touga asked, tilting his head back to expose his throat to the sky.

Saionji turned away angrily, his jacket swinging open. With a sharp motion of his hand, he shoved a black checker onto a square at the edge of the board. "King me," he said.

Touga slowly placed one of his captured checkers on top of Saionji's king. He lounged across the nearest chair, leaning chin on fist. "Did we run out of metaphors?" he asked innocently.

Saionji turned his chair around and sat down, folding his arms along the back. "*You* never run out of anything, much less slick lines."

"Why, thank you, Kyouichi," said Touga, reaching out to move his bishop all the way across the board. The movement bared his chest completely as his shirt fluttered open. "Check," he said.

Saionji spared a glance for the board. "Huh," he said, shoving his king to hide behind a pawn. "What are you doing here anyway, Touga?"

Touga shrugged lightly, letting his shirt slide off his shoulders. "It's a job," he said.

"Do you actually *do* anything?" Saionji asked. "You have assistants, after all."

"I have many duties," said Touga, stretching back over his chair like a cat.

"Besides screwing the students?" asked Saionji. "And my wife?" He fiddled absently with the unbuttoned edge of his jacket.

"I'm a very busy man," said Touga, and I wondered how his trousers were staying up, since they weren't buttoned any more. "But I *always* have time for old friends."

Saionji surged to his feet, jacket quite gone, and slammed his hands on the table. Little black and white stones leapt off the board. "Thanks," he said harshly, "but no thanks." With a small, hard smile, he added, "But I'll remember where to go if I want to get screwed." He spun around and marched toward the doors.

Touga reached out indolently and clicked a black stone onto the board. "Atari," he noted.

I could not imagine why so many students had stopped to listen to Robert. English was confusing enough without all of these ridiculous and jaw-cracking names.

"I shall not deserve much from the ruler of words,
Beyond Caer Wydyr they saw not the prowess of Arthur.
Three score Canhwr stood on the wall,
Difficult was a conversation with its sentinel.
Thrice enough to fill Prydwen there went with Arthur,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Golud."

There was a knock on the door of the office where Keiko, Aiko, and Yuuko sat, an old-fashioned iron-caged fan blowing papers around the room. Aiko, or perhaps Yuuko, shouted, "Come in!"

The door opened, and Nanami stepped into the room, ducking a resume as it sailed over her head into the corridor. "Hello," she said, attempting to square her shoulders.

Three voices shrieked in unison, "INTERVIEWS ARE NOT UNTIL NEXT WEDNESDAY BETWEEN 2:30 AND 3:00!"

Nanami blinked. "I'm not applying for... whatever it is."

"Oh, of course you are," Keiko said wearily. "You *all* are."

One of the others -- Aiko? -- said, without looking at Nanami, "Put your resume in the basket."

Yuuko added, in a well-oiled tone, "Don't call us. We'll call you."

I admired Nanami -- I could *see* her gathering her wits about her, and the deep breath she took. "Why, Keiko-chan, I had *no* idea you were expecting!" Nanami squeaked in a practiced, breathless, feminine outburst, as she crossed the room in three long, quick strides. Her hands hovered around Keiko, as if they might descend, raptor-like, on the swollen belly.

Keiko's eyes grew large as she focused at last. "Nanami-sama!" she exclaimed, heaving to her feet. "I didn't know you had come!"

"Of course I've come," Nanami said soothingly. "But you mustn't get up! Here, sit back, put your feet up! How I've missed you all!"

"Really," Yuuko said in a flat sort of tone.

"Of course," Aiko said in the same sort of voice.

Keiko docilely allowed Nanami to fuss around her, leaning back in the vast wooden chair with her feet up on an inverted trashcan. "Nanami-sama," she said again. In a lower tone, she said, "You know, you're going to be an aunt."

If this surprised Nanami at all, she didn't show it. "I know," she said. "Have you picked out names yet?"

"I did, before," Keiko admitted. "But that was before I knew who the father was."

"Ah, I see," Nanami said, crouching beside Keiko and taking her hand. "And where will you live once the baby comes?"

"Why, here, of course," Keiko said, a little baffled.

"She can't leave," Yuuko said. "Touga-sama needs her."

"He needs *us*," Aiko said defiantly.

Nanami beamed at them. "Of course he does! He'd be lost without all of you! I quite see that."

Aiko and Yuuko looked startled behind their pink lenses. "You do?" Yuuko asked suspiciously.

Nanami nodded. "But what if he got a job somewhere else? Would you follow him?" she asked innocently.

"He won't," said Keiko, an expression of blank bafflement passing over her features.

"He can't," said Aiko.

"What an impossible idea," said Yuuko, severely, redlining a resume with large, irritated strokes.

Nanami drew her breath in to ask another question, leaning confidentially over the desk, but Keiko beat her to it. "I know everything's going to be perfect," she said with a kind of absolute diction that ought to be dreamy, but wasn't. "I think we're going to have a little stranger very soon."

"Soon?" echoed Nanami blankly.

"Oh, yes. He's stopped kicking." Keiko leaned back in her seat and sipped something from a mug that had a little family of black cats on it.

"That happened a while ago, didn't it?" put in Aiko while she riffled through a folder and

pulled every other application to toss into the trash.

"Yes," said Keiko serenely. "Right after I came here. That's a good sign, isn't it? Akio-san said it was a very good sign."

Nanami stared at her, her mouth open. She managed to shut it and say, "Er..."

Keiko leaned forward, making the desk chair creak, favoring Nanami with a brilliant smile. "Do you want to feel him not kick?"

Nanami scrambled backwards, stumbling over one of the many overflowing trashcans that littered the floor of the office. "Oh! Ah, not right now! Thank you! I, um, have something I need to do right now!"

The door of the office banged shut behind her and she fled down the corridor, breaking into a run as soon as it became clear that the hall was empty. She turned to a door, seemingly at random, and pulled it open, shutting herself inside.

Nanami walked into a small, dark auditorium and was brought up short by the sight of a reel of film playing: a series of screen kisses spliced together and looping over and over. There was no sound, just the flickering, burnt, blurry motion.

She looked like she recognized it, but couldn't remember from where, her mouth working silently as she tried to figure it out. A trace of realization crossed her face, and she said, aloud, "Tsuwabuki."

A hand from the darkness seized her. She had just enough time to get half a startled shriek out before she was pulled hard against Tsuwabuki's chest and he was kissing her.

Her eyes went wide. She struggled briefly, pushing him away. When he didn't let go, the struggle escalated. In the darkness, I couldn't see most of what was happening. I could hear them, though.

"I thought," Nanami said, breathing a little hard, "that you wanted to be my brother, Mitsuru."

Tsuwabuki grunted in pain and, tensely, said, "I was a child then. What else could I think?"

She exhaled between her teeth. "You think you're not a child now?" Then she exclaimed sharply. It looked like he had her by the hair.

"I'm not a man yet," he hissed, "and I'm not a child either. Make me a man if you dare, Nanami-sama."

"You're... mad," she said after a moment's more panting struggle.

"Does desire make one so?" he asked, pinning her against a wall with his body.

"No. I think you're just mad," she said, and then he made a pained "woof!" sound and crumpled to the floor. She stepped around him delicately and looked down at him, her face desperately sad in the flickering light from the screen. "Oh, Tsuwabuki," she breathed. "I liked you just as you were."

Robert was not getting hoarse yet.

"I shall not deserve much from those with long shields.
They know not what day, who the causer,
What hour in the serene day Cwy was born.
Who caused that he should not go to the dales of Devwy.
They know not the brindled ox, thick his headband.
Seven score knobs in his collar.
And when we went with Arthur of anxious memory,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Vandwy."

I woke slowly. Behind my back, the rough bark of the tree (with the uncomfortable lump that always appears between one's shoulders) reminded me of where I was. Something cool-- and damp?-- brushed across my forehead.

"Anthy?" I asked, then opened my eyes to the face of a stranger. "Augh!"

Toshiro-- I recognized him after a couple of seconds-- calmly placed the sponge back into the little basin of water. "He makes that mistake, too, sometimes," he said.

"Augh," I said again, and tried unsuccessfully to press myself through the wood of the tree. Where the *hell* was Anthy?

Toshiro was, inexplicably, not dressed in his Student Council uniform. Instead he wore full traditional court formal dress, as far as I (not in any way a student of history) could determine. He knelt in the grass in front of me as if I were royalty, making me uncomfortably aware that I was still wearing my dueling outfit. I noted in passing that the silk was double-patterned-- white roses woven into the black silk, and golden phoenixes embroidered over.

He placed his hands together and gave a deep obeisance when he saw that he had my full attention. "Tenjou-sama, it is the ambition of my heart to ask you to be my patron."

"What?" I managed to squeak.

He went on as though he hadn't heard, his eyes modestly fixed on his knees. "My name is

Akimoto Toshiro. I come of a good samurai family, and although my father cannot speak for me, Ohtori Akio-sama is willing to sponsor me in his place. I have been waiting and learning all my life for the opportunity to become your trainee."

I tried to speak, but all that came out was a strangled sound.

"I am well-trained in the sword arts, and I engage in a course of reading chosen for me by Akio-sama every day. I can play the ryuteki flute, both for performance and for dancing. I read three languages besides Japanese: Chinese, English, and French, all of them well enough to translate into Japanese. I speak English, French, and German. I paint in the traditional style with ink and can compose court poetry, although Akio-sama tells me that I do not have the delicate imagery to be considered proficient in this yet."

I tried to stop him several times during this dreadful litany, but I only managed a few weak "Ums" and he went serenely on.

"I am well-read in classical literature," he continued, and then, raising his gaze, "and also in samurai history. You will find me more than willing to perform all of the traditional duties of a samurai's companion."

There was a horrible significance to his gaze. I felt very strongly that there was something I was not quite understanding.

"Akio-sama has, in the absence of a family set of daisho, presented me with an ancient and honorable pair of swords. It would be an honor and a delight to carry them in your service."

I couldn't figure out whether I was being cast as a teacher or as a prince. I didn't want to be either. On the other hand, how could I refuse that burning, sincere gaze?

I glanced surreptitiously from side to side while Toshiro looked back down at his hands resting on his knees. No one else in sight. I hoped that Anthy had a really good excuse for leaving me to deal with this all on my own.

The silence stretched out uncomfortably.

Finally, I had to speak. "I, um, I'll certainly consider your, um, offer," I said.

He said nothing.

"It is, ah, really unexpected. An unexpected honor," I amended, trying to sound more formal. "I need time to consider your, uh, qualifications."

He looked up at that, a single searing glance I simply couldn't read. "Thank you. You honor me with your thought." He bowed again, his forehead touching the ground, then rose and walked away.

I shuddered, and waited until he was well out of sight before going in search of Anthy.

I walked onto the quad, only to discover that Robert was still there, still reading, still with his silent and attentive ring of students. I sat down on a cracked stone bench. I could hear him from where I sat, although I was on the far side of the courtyard.

"I shall not deserve much from those of loose thought," Robert read, a strange little smile playing around his mouth.

"They know not what day the chief was caused.
What animal they keep, silver its head.
What hour in the serene day the owner was born.
When we went with Arthur of anxious contention,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Ochren."

Miki was standing in the darkened room I took to be his old bedroom at the Kaoru mansion. There were two small beds, side by side, one with a large M on the footboard, the other with a large K in the same place. He stood between them, at the feet, staring with unseeing eyes at the nightstand.

Kozue stepped into the doorway. She was smiling that terrifying, long-toothed smile of hers, but she stood there silently waiting to be acknowledged.

After a long time, Miki noticed that he was being watched. Unexpectedly, he smiled, a soft, sad sort of smile. "Hello," he said.

The expression on Kozue's face changed, annihilating that self-satisfied grin and leaving her looking... wistful? "Hi," she said, the simple greeting as unexpected as Miki's response to her.

"I was just thinking," he said, watching her. "Thinking about the sunlit garden, and my 'shining thing,' and the duels, and everything else. It seemed like the right sort of place to think."

"It's hard to think here sometimes," she said, looking a little surprised at herself for saying it. "At the school, I mean."

"Yes." He nodded. "Everything there is always so... intense. Brooding, swarming around you, clinging and baying at one's heels. I know this isn't really away from it but..." He shrugged and looked around the room. "But it is."

Kozue stepped into the room, slowly walking around her own bed, running one hand absently over the footboard. "It's designed to be that way. To keep you off-balance all the

time. To keep you from thinking too much."

"I always did," he said. "Think too much. That was what the stopwatch was all about." He grinned at her. "I think."

She smiled back at him. One hand reached out, hesitantly, and rested on his arm. "It's a hard place to come back to, isn't it?"

He looked around the room again, then nodded. "So many memories. So much of a feeling of... of being caught in a spiral, or a loop, or something. Feelings kept /happening/, you know? And, in my memory, it seems like the same sort of feelings, all the time. Some kind of emotional monkeytrap." He sighed, laid a hand over hers. "It can't be easy for you either."

"Me?" she said, a little startled. Then, thoughtfully, "No, I suppose it isn't."

She looked up at him again, and the madness, for once, was not in her eyes. There was, instead, something intense and magnetic. His gaze met hers, and they stared at each other for a long, long moment.

A single tear coursed down her cheek. He caught it at her chin with one of his fingers, and tilted her chin up, leaning closer.

No. I desperately tried to wrench myself out of the vision. I couldn't believe this was happening.

"Anthy," he breathed.

I jolted upright. I had been leaning against a wall, eyes too full of the latest vision for me to keep walking, but now I had to move. I pointed myself at the quad, in the right direction, and ran for all I was worth.

"Miki," she said into his mouth.

No. No. No. Oh, god, no. I was across the lawn, onto the sidewalk, I could see the gate. I dodged around someone, clipping them with my elbow. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them spin and catch themselves on a tree. I cast a breathless apology over my shoulder.

Hands at fastenings, the slithering of clothing.

I felt my knee, the one I had nearly destroyed in basketball, beginning to balk at this pace. I was on the road to the mansions, to Miki's house, it wasn't that far...

"No," I panted. The creak of a bed. "No!" I said again, turning a corner. The fever vision darkened my eyes, and I knew I would never make it in time. "No!" I sobbed. "Don't make me see. I don't *want* to see!"

Somehow, I was on my knees and someone's arms were around me, and I was just repeating over and over, "I don't want to see!" to blot out the sounds my ears weren't hearing.

Just before I would have had to see it, the vision was gone, like blood that someone had dabbed away with a handkerchief. Anthy was whispering, "Utena! Utena, come back!" in my ear and holding me tightly. I could only nod and cling to her.

"No more," she said. "You won't see any more. I'm sorry I left it so long, but I'm here now."

"But Miki..." I said into her shoulder.

"It's done," she said simply, "and there's no helping it. Something else I should have stopped, but I was finishing something important and couldn't leave that. I would have had to start over."

"Do you think she'll... tell him?" I asked.

Anthy turned her head to look toward the mansion. "Yes," she said.

"Monks congregate like dogs in a kennel," Robert read, his voice dropping from his previous theatrical declamation. His hands shook.

"From contact with their superiors they acquire knowledge.
Is one the course of the wind, is one the water of the sea?
Is one the spark of the fire, of unrestrainable tumult?
Monks congregate like wolves,
From contact with their superiors they acquire knowledge.
They know not when the deep night and dawn divide.
Nor what is the course of the wind, or who agitates it,
In what place it dies away, on what land it roars.
The grave of the saint is vanishing from the altar-tomb.
I will pray to the Lord, the great supreme,
That I be not wretched.
Christ be my portion."

Robert's voice had sunk to a whisper. Slowly, he opened his hand, balancing the letter on his palm. The wind picked up the many sheets and scattered them, whipping them high over his head and carrying them away over the roofs.

He stood for a long moment, alone on the overgrown grass of the quad, then turned and walked slowly into the main building.

The table was laid with a damask tablecloth, brilliantly white and ironed so crisp that the corners folded like paper. Each place setting had five plates stacked, white on white, the edges of the porcelain thin as flower petals. The silver, polished until it was pale as moonlight, was folded neatly into the silken napkins, and the crystal glasses -- dry of water or wine -- reflected back the candlelight in brilliant flecks, without rainbows. The inevitable rose centerpiece, centrally placed on an embroidered lace table runner, was of white roses stripped of their leaves, ghostly as pearls.

There was no one sitting at the head of the table. Beside the heavy, carved chair, Shiori stood, her red dress like a shout beside the pale table.

Hoshiko sniffed disparagingly, unfolding her napkin with a wrist-snapping neatness and taking her seat with all the disdainful primness of a cat. "What's the use of having a Student Council Meeting without the Student Council President, *I'd* like to know. Or perhaps she simply likes being late to her own party?"

Toshiro stood behind the chair opposite her. "If it pleases the Student Council President to be late to her own party, then that is her prerogative."

Yukio prowled around the table, choosing a seat near the foot where he would not be looking directly at Hoshiko. "At any rate, it is characteristic of her to do so." He stared moodily at his plate. "It seems to me that we have all been behaving... uncharacteristically of late."

Tsuwabuki snorted, pulling out the chair next to Hoshiko and sitting down carelessly. "I think we have all only been acting according to our own natures. How else are we supposed to act?"

This appeared to sting Hoshiko, though it was not directed at her. She fanned herself energetically with a carved ivory fan, the dependent silk tassels trembling with her rage. "Indeed!" she said. "I refuse to act out of my nature. I certainly decline to take the... *instructions* the End of the World was so *impudent* as to send me. I have never read anything so *unnatural* and *obscene* as that letter!"

"Obscene, madam?" asked Toshiro, seating himself after a final glance at Shiori, who still stood like a statue next to the empty chair at the head of the table. "Strong words." He sat down carefully, using one hand to move his dress sword out of the way of the chair. The ribbon of some foreign order gleamed palely in the light of the candles on the table.

"There is, at any rate, nothing *inappropriate* in how I am expressing myself," said Hoshiko, fixing Toshiro with a stern glance over the edge of her fan. "The letter was obscene and I see no shame whatsoever in both declaring this and refusing to follow those... instructions." She snapped the fan shut and tapped it significantly on her plate.

Tsuwabuki yawned and glanced meaningfully down the table at the empty chair. "We must make allowances for your sex, madam," he said, with a touch less politeness than Toshiro. "For myself, I found nothing obscene or difficult of performance in *my* instructions from the End of the World."

"That can hardly concern me," replied Hoshiko loftily, running her fingers along the string of pearls which encircled her dainty throat and dipped into the low neckline of her dinner gown.

"But why not?" asked Tsuwabuki. He did not look down at the figure at the foot of the table, who was looking away and fidgeting with his cuffs, ostentatiously ignoring the conversation. "But why not, indeed? Do you not feel a small curiosity -- the charming weakness of your sex, madam! -- to know what was in the letters sent to others?"

Hoshiko stopped the gentle movement of her fan, looked at Tsuwabuki directly, and said, "Why, pray tell, would I wish to know the contents of someone else's letter? It cannot affect *me*."

"You feel no curiosity on that point whatsoever?" pursued Tsuwabuki, aimably adjusting his monocle. "About *anyone's* letters?"

Hoshiko closed her fan with a little snap. "I do not indulge in vulgar curiosity about other people's affairs. Why do you persist in pressing the point?"

"No reason," said Tsuwabuki, glancing toward the foot of the table. Yukio, his chin sunk into his deep blue silk cravat, was still looking out the French doors at the view off the balcony. "No reason at all."

Anthy and I walked toward the auditorium. There was a sign taped to the door that read, "Gathering Shadows Kashira Theatre Auditions and Rehearsal for the Spring Play."

"Anthy," I said. "Isn't it summer already?"

"Hush," she replied, as we groped for our seats in the darkened room. "It's impolite to talk during auditions."

Most of the chairs were empty, but the auditorium still felt crowded, perhaps because of all the fuss around the stage. Two girls were standing on either side of Miki, who was sitting at the piano below the stage with a bewildered look on his face. Another was standing, script in hand, gesturing wildly as she tried to herd actors into place. The stage floor was black and polished, and the curtains were red. There was an old backdrop pulled across the back of the stage -- a faded scene showing a garden and a castle.

Suddenly, Kozue strode onto the stage, dressed in a brown Victorian men's suit. She

looked extremely elegant, from her polished leather shoes to her gold watch-chain. In one hand she held a small book, but she didn't bother to look at it.

Miki, who had been hustled from his piano and given a top hat which looked ridiculous on him, was pushed onto the stage. He held a photocopy of the script helplessly and looked anywhere but at his sister.

Shiori, wearing a dirty skirt and apron and a battered flat straw hat, entered the stage from the other side, carrying a basket of roses. She stared at the floor.

"We'll just start," announced the girl who had been waving people to their places. She reached up and tugged wildly at her pigtails. "We'll read some of the lines, just to get you started." She was standing in front of some of the footlights, which were aimed awkwardly; other students were working on the wiring and the angling of the stagelights. "All right. Scene!" she said, pointing to the three "actors" on stage.

Another girl, a mere shadow from the wings, said authoritatively to Miki, "Don't just stand there, Freddy. Go and find a cab!"

Miki stared at her, consulted his script, and read out mechanically, "All right, I'll go. I'll go." Then he stood there until the director impatiently strode over to him, seized him by the arm and flung him at Shiori.

"Sorry!" he blurted quite naturally, as they collided.

"Look where you're goin', dear," shouted the girl in the wings.

Shiori looked down and said nothing. Miki carefully steadied her with both hands, letting the white sheets of his script scatter over the black stage. "Are you all right? I didn't mean to..."

"Line!" shouted the director.

Shiori said nothing.

"Let's try the next Eliza," said Kozue cuttingly. "It's clear that this one won't do."

While they were taking Shiori offstage, I turned to look at Anthy, whose eyes were fixed on the stage as if it were a proper performance. "Anthy," I said. "Why are we wasting our time here?"

"Shh," she replied.

I knew this room. I knew this room and I did not want to be seeing it, but I looked anyway.

The chairman's office was huge, so large that the planetarium projector took up surprisingly little space. So large that the enormous arched windows that lined the walls seemed barely enough to lighten the shadows at the center, where the rug and the two white couches were placed.

One of the couches was occupied by a sprawling red figure. It took me a moment to focus enough through the shadows of the room to see that the figure was an empty dress. An empty red dress, sleeveless, with a green underskirt. A dress with peculiar gold epaulets. A dress, some cuffs, and a little tiara, tossed onto the couch and lying there like a broken doll.

Wakaba was standing behind the other couch, staring.

She was wearing her usual uniform, and her hair was bound up into her usual ponytail. She was standing, her hands resting lightly on the back of the couch, staring at the dress. I couldn't hear her breathe.

She didn't move, or speak, or even clench her fingers on the cushion. She only stood and stared, her face as frozen as an image painted on china.

Now Hoshiko, dressed in the flat straw hat and carrying the basket of flowers, was ushered onto the stage. Miki had the script thrust into his hands again, and Robert, dressed in full evening dress with a white waistcoat and top hat, in contrast to Kozue's elegant brown tweeds and trilby hat, came on stage. Miki was still miserably out of costume, wearing only the awkward opera hat.

"Cheer up, Captain," said Hoshiko. Her script was nearly hidden among the roses in her basket. "Would you consider buying a flower from a poor girl?"

Robert, clearly enjoying himself, said, "I'm sorry. I haven't any change."

"I wouldn't have any trouble changing half a crown," said Hoshiko politely.

I couldn't help thinking that it was unkind to leave Miki on stage with both Kozue *and* Robert, and I tried whispering to Anthony, "Don't you think--" but she put her fingers on my lips.

"I haven't done anything wrong by speaking to the gentleman!" declared Hoshiko. "I have a right to sell flowers as long as I stay off the curb. I am a respectable girl, so help me!"

The director said, audibly enough for us to hear her five rows back, "*Too* respectable." She conferred with the prompt-girl with much waving of hands and scripts. Meanwhile, Hoshiko demanded to know of Kozue why "the gentleman" was taking down her words if not to "take away her character and force her onto the streets."

Robert informed Kozue, with a wealth of meaning in his tone, that she needn't begin protecting him against molestation from young women until he asked her to. The director gestured angrily at Hoshiko, who gave her a lofty look.

Meanwhile, Miki was attempting to make an exit stage right, but the prompt-girl with the giant bow on her head kept shoving him back onto the stage.

Hoshiko, who had clearly been getting more and more fed up with the commentary and instructions from the director, cast her basket down and announced that she didn't have time for anything as juvenile as play-acting. "I have better things to do with my time!" she announced in a ringing voice into a sudden silence on the stage.

Into that silence, Kozue stepped into the center of the stage and said, "A woman who utters such disgusting and depressing noise,

she has no right to be anywhere,
no right to live."

Hoshiko spun on her heel and marched off the stage. She held her head high, but I think she was crying.

Chu-chu, who was currently dressed in overalls with a little red-spotted handkerchief tied about the lower part of his face, crept into the darkness.

It was a large, unnaturally clean garage. There was, of course, only one car in it. A red convertible.

"Chu!" exclaimed Chu-chu, delighted, and produced a wrench out of nowhere. This exclamation, however, seemed to be his undoing. As he hurried toward the car, an enormous hand came down out of the shadows and seized him by the head.

"What," said Touga's voice, "did you think you were doing?"

"Chu?"

While the prompt-girl was offstage looking for another Eliza, Kozue continued with her first song, delivering it with emphasis and verve, and apparently not needing to refer to a script. She sang, "Why can't the English learn to set a good example," directly at Robert, who could only shrug his shoulders and smile at the implication.

Wakaba looked waiflike and charming in the straw hat, and although she had to look at her script for the words, she sang a song about "lovely" things with a great deal of liveliness to the audience: "Someone's head resting on my knee/Warm and tender as he can be/Who takes good care of me

Oh, wouldn't it

Be lovely!"

She got a round of scattered applause from the director and the people in the seats. As I was clapping, I whispered to Anthy, "What's going on?"

"I've found a lever," she said serenely. "Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion; his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable." And she laughed, perfectly soundlessly, with that mischief in her eyes which was always deeper than mischief, a trickster depth that seemed to open endless mazes. "Godlike," she repeated, and laughed again, this time a somewhat more-than-soundless giggle which made me laugh helplessly, and made some students in the front seats turn around and stare.

On stage, Kozue and Robert were having a conversation over Wakaba.

"She's so deliciously low," crooned Kozue, slinking around Wakaba. "So horribly dirty!"

"I ain't dirty!" said Wakaba, stamping her foot. "I washed my face and hands before I come, I did!"

Robert said, "Ohhh!" as though he had only just now divined Kozue's real intent.

"We'll start today. Now. This moment. Take her away," said Kozue, flapping a hand at... at Juri, who hadn't bothered to put on a costume. "Mrs. Pearce, and clean her. Sandpaper... if it won't come off any other way."

I didn't care for the look she gave Wakaba at that point.

"Is there a good fire in the kitchen?" Kozue asked, spinning back to Juri, who raised an eyebrow and glared at her coldly.

"Yes, but I--"

"Take all her clothes off and burn them. We will have some new ones made." One corner of Kozue's mouth curled up cruelly. "Just wrap her in brown paper until the dress is ready."

"You're no gentleman, you're not!" burst in Wakaba breathlessly, "to talk of such things! I'm a good girl, I am!"

Robert and Juri protested this proposed action, and Kozue overrode them grandly.

"You can't take a girl up like that, as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach!" Juri snapped at Kozue, and I thought that she probably had reason to know, doing the work she did.

"Why not?" asked Kozue, and turned to Wakaba.

Kozue smiled into Wakaba's eyes in a way that was unpleasantly familiar. That was not Kozue's smile. "The streets will be strewn with the bodies of men... shooting themselves for your sake before I'm done with you."

I gripped Anthy's hand as Robert drawled, with an ironical note which gave the lie to his words, "Does it occur to you, Higgins, the girl has some... feelings?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so," crooned Kozue. "No feelings we need worry about."

"Anthy," I hissed between my teeth. "They're going to--"

She squeezed my hand reassuringly.

Juri stepped forward, script in hand. She looked angry but restrained. "I must know on what terms the girl is to be here. What's to become of her when you've finished your teaching? You must look ahead a little. Sir."

Kozue smiled tolerantly, throwing her head back as though against a comfortable couch. "What's to become of her if we leave her in the gutter?"

Juri said sharply, "That's her own business, not yours."

Kozue's smile grew sharper, more like her own. "Well, when I'm done with her, we'll throw her back in the gutter and then it'll be her own business again."

Robert protested this, and after a prolonged wrangle, Kozue agreed that Wakaba had to know under what terms and conditions she was to stay.

Kozue walked around Wakaba, not quite touching her. Wakaba stood very still, her arms wrapped around herself. "At the end of six months," said Kozue in a soft, insinuating voice, "you shall be taken to a fantastic castle, in a gondola, beautifully dressed."

"If the Prince finds out that you are not a lady," said Kozue, dropping her words like coins into a well, "the police will take you to the Tower where you will be executed by the sword..."

She stopped, glanced once out over the audience, and smiled, slowly. "...as a warning to other presumptuous flower girls."

I reached out for Anthy's hand again. The seat next to me was empty.

Yukio looked over the busy courtyard, leaning his forehead against his arm on the raised window sash and peering under it. The mass of students below parted like butter before a swordblade, and he focused on the cause. Tsuwabuki strode among them, face stern. Conversations faltered and people shrank back from him.

Hoshiko was standing with a group of admirers of the feminine persuasion, and she spared a single glance toward the cause of the myriad little silences. As she did, another group of girls hurriedly shifted themselves between Tsuwabuki's line of sight and a slim dark girl with a pixie haircut, closing ranks like wildebeest around a calf.

Tsuwabuki turned so quickly that his braid snapped in mid-air. His gaze seemed to drive a line straight into the heart of the group of girls, even though they turned their faces away. He began to prowl in that direction, slowly and carefully.

Hoshiko called, "Tsuwabuki-san!"

Tsuwabuki looked her way and came to polite attention. "Yes, Fujiwara-san?"

Hoshiko walked toward him, a grim little smile taking possession of her face. "I need your stopwatch for a moment, Tsuwabuki-san."

As Tsuwabuki reached into his pocket for Miki's stopwatch, the herd of girls spirited their calf away into the nearest building. Yukio scowled at Hoshiko and mumbled, "You proud little liar."

I could have told him that caring about the other members of the Student Council was one thing, but this was another entirely. But he wouldn't have understood.

I couldn't watch most of the next scenes. Kozue seemed to take a spiteful pleasure in sneering and snapping at Wakaba's words, putting an empty tray (which was supposed to contain strawberry tarts) out of her reach, and brutally stuffing her mouth with marbles. Robert seemed disposed to interfere in the last, but didn't. Wakaba seemed too frightened to protest.

Finally, she managed to pronounce something about the rain in Spain correctly (although I thought the script took an awfully long time getting around to it) and Kozue and Robert preened themselves on their success and danced together while Wakaba, forgotten, stood alone on a corner of the stage.

Wakaba sang about dancing all night, which struck me as very sad, since she hadn't danced at all. She was whisked off the stage to dress for the next part.

Miki reappeared. They had managed to get him into an elegant gray morning suit and a

matching top hat, in which he ought to have looked quite nice. Unfortunately, he was so unhappy that he reminded me of a small child at a wedding. The script-girl appeared beside him, and then Kozue strolled across the stage and engaged the script-girl in light banter.

Then Wakaba appeared on Robert's arm. She was wearing the most preposterous dress I have ever seen, and was completely eclipsed in an enormous cartwheel of a hat that was stuck sideways onto her head and enveloped her in clouds of veiling. Robert squired her across the stage and introduced her to Miki and the script-girl.

I blinked. It was hard to tell, when she was only saying, "How do you do?" in the lowest and most well-bred tones possible, but she didn't sound like Wakaba.

"My sister-in-law died of influenza, so they said," remarked the vision in the enormous hat, "but it's my belief they done the old woman in."

That was *not* Wakaba's voice. I blinked in shock as the other characters on stage registered mild surprise at the words.

"They all thought she was dead," said the woman playing Eliza, "but my brother, he kept ladling poison down her throat. Then she come to so sudden, she bit the bowl off the spoon. Now what call would a woman with that strength in her have to die of influenza?"

I couldn't understand why the people on stage hadn't noticed.

"But you surely don't believe your sister-in-law was killed!"

"Do I not! Them as she lived with would have killed her for a dress pin, let alone a dress," said the person behind the veiling.

"But it can't have been right for your brother to pour poison down her throat like that."

"It might have killed her!"

"Not her," said Anthy serenely. "Poison was mother's milk to her. Besides, he poured so much down his own throat, he knew the good of it."

Chu-chu stood outside on what looked like new, black asphalt. In front of him was an equally new, white-painted, expensive-looking wooden garage door. He looked up at it, with determination in his eyes and a hairpin clutched in one tiny paw.

There was one problem, though.

The padlock that secured the door (also shiny and new and bearing, I couldn't help noticing, a discreet red Ohtori rose seal) was a good four feet off the ground.

Chu-chu looked up at it, and his little ears drooped.

There was a ball, after which Anthy was declared to be "Hungarian!" I wondered whether she thought this was amusing.

Kozue, after indulging in what I thought was an unseemly amount of soliloquy, began to sing in a saccharine, ironic tone, about being "accustomed to her voice." I sat on my hands.

"What an infantile idea," Kozue snapped at the audience. "What a heartless, wicked, brainless thing to do. But she'll regret it. She'll regret it! It's doomed before they even take the vow." She looked over the dark theatre and stared into my eyes. Her own were wide and mad.

"In a year or so when she's prematurely gray/ And the blossom in her cheek has turned to chalk. She'll come home and, lo you'll have upped and run away..." sang Kozue to me and I very nearly leapt out of my seat and went for her throat. She smiled at the expression on my face.

"Poor Eliza! How simply frightful!" sang Kozue, playing to her audience. "How humiliating!" she sang with false sympathy to a girl in the front row. "How *delightful*," she purred to a young man hanging on her words.

It was only at this point that I saw that she was no longer dressed in the neat brown Victorian tweeds. She was dressed in an all-white Ohtori uniform. The Prince's uniform. Akio's uniform.

"How poignant it'll be on that inevitable night, When she hammers on my door in tears and rags," sang Kozue, walking back and forth, "Miserable and lonely, Repentant and contrite." She flashed an anticipatory smile to the audience.

"Will I take her in or hurl her to the wolves?" she asked, examining the nails of her left hand. "Give her kindness or the treatment she deserves? Will I take her back or throw the baggage out?" She made a wide, throwing-away gesture as she asked this, smiling an ironic smile that turned her face into a skull.

"Well, I'm a most forgiving man. The sort who never could, Ever would/ Take a position and staunchly never budge," she murmured confidentially to a pair of fluttering first-years who clutched each other and giggled in the front seats. "A most forgiving man."

"But I shall never take her back," Kozue sang with a grand gesture, "If she were crawling on her knees! Let her promise to atone! Let her shiver, let her moan!"

She knelt down, stared out into the audience, and whispered, gently, "I'll slam the door

and let the hellcat freeze."

After that line, the rest of the song was something of an anticlimax, for in it her double-sided assertions that she had grown "accustomed to her face," were delivered in the same deadly gentle voice.

"Eliza," she said finally, turning her back on Anthy, who had just entered the stage, "Where the devil are my slippers?"

Anthy said, "You want me back only to pick up your slippers and put up with your tempers and fetch and carry for you."

Kozue whirled around, looking -- for a split second -- helpless and startled. Then she said, irritated, "I haven't said I wanted you back at all."

Anthy replied serenely, "Oh, indeed. Then what are we talking about?"

Kozue visibly groped for her line. "You never asked yourself, I suppose, whether *I* could do without *you*."

Anthy replied, with a startlingly accurate accent, "Oh, you *are* a devil. You can twist the heart in a girl as easy as some could twist her arms to hurt her. I can't talk to you: you turn everything against me: I'm always in the wrong. But you know very well all the time that you're nothing but a bully."

Kozue blinked and shook her head. The prompt-girl and the director exchanged their scripts and the prompt-girl frantically leafed through the second script before hissing, "Independence!"

Kozue picked up the cue smoothly, stalking towards Anthy and growling "Independence? That's modern blasphemy. We are completely dependent on one another, you and I."

Anthy replied, looking sideways up at Kozue, "I'll let you see whether I'm dependent on you. If you can preach, I can teach."

Kozue snorted. "What'll you teach, in heaven's name?"

Anthy smiled, away from Kozue, into the audience. "Certainly nothing that you have taught me."

Kozue was caught up for a moment, but before the prompt-girl could give her a line again, she snarled, "You take one step towards teaching and I'll wring your neck." She made a motion as though to seize Anthy, but stopped short for some reason. "Do you hear?"

Anthy flung her head back. "Wring away. What do I care? I knew you'd strike me one day. Now I know how to deal with you. You cannot take away the knowledge you have given me; and we always knew I had a finer ear than you. And I know how to love,

which is more than you. Your duchess is only a flower girl after all, and I can teach anyone to be a duchess -- or a witch, which is the same in the end." Her words took on a deeper resonance. "Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself."

"You damned impudent slut, you!" said Kozue, raising her hand to slap Anthy across the face. But she thought better of it, and lowered her hand. "But it's better than snivelling, better than fetching roses and wearing spectacles. I said I'd make a woman of you, and I have."

Anthy replied coolly, "Yes: you turn around and make up to me now that I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you. And it is not from you my womanhood comes."

Kozue flexed her skeletal fingers, and replied, grudgingly, "Of course I do, you little fool. Five minutes ago you were like a millstone around my neck. Now you are a tower of strength, a knight, a prince."

The script-girl, awkward for the first time, called from the wings, "The carriage is waiting, Eliza. Are you ready?"

Anthy said, "Quite. I shall not see you again, Professor. Good-bye." She started to exit, stage left.

Kozue's hands flexed again, as though to grab her and bring her back. "Oh, by the way, order in some rose petal jam and a cake, will you? And buy me a pair of white gloves, to match this suit of mine."

Anthy said, without turning around, "Buy them yourself." And walked offstage.

Kozue stood there staring after her, then snatched the script from the prompt-girl, hurled it to the stage, and walked off in the opposite direction.

There was scattered, uncertain applause from the audience, and Robert said, entering from the wings, "Was that... the way the play was *supposed* to end?"

Miki, who was sitting on the piano bench, replied without looking at him. "Well... that was the way it *originally* ended."

"Oh," said Robert.

We went to the cafeteria for lunch. It should have been dinner, I suppose, or breakfast, or something other than lunchtime after lunchtime in the eternal golden afternoon of Ohtori. I looked down at my tray, contemplating that eternity and feeling ill.

"Oh, come *on*, Utena," snapped Nanami. "The cafeteria food here isn't *that* bad."

"It's loads better than what I'm used to," said Saionji, popping open a can of tea. "And I can't believe you've gotten fussy on Himemiya's cooking."

Anthy reached over and put a cold can of soda on my tray.

"Where's Kaoru?" asked Juri, and although I knew she was diverting the conversation, I flinched from the ambiguity.

Nanami looked startled. "I haven't seen him for hours. He won't know to look for us here."

Saionji swallowed a mouthful of food and said, "We'll run into him back at the dorm, then. Or you could try calling his cellphone."

"Idiot!" Nanami flared up. "I don't have coverage in Japan; why don't *you* try calling him?"

"Don't know his number," said Saionji sulkily.

Juri rolled her eyes and looked around the cafeteria. "I could swear I recognize about half the people here. I hope it's just similar faces."

Nanami said, "I'd think it was similar faces if half the people here didn't seem to recognize *you*."

Juri stood up, ignoring this remark, and waved her arm to someone on the far side of the room. Behind her, three young men in glasses turned to look to see who she was waving to.

Nanami looked in that direction, then stood up to see better. "Miki!" she shouted, when Juri's wave seemed to not be effective. The three young men in glasses all stood up to see better and shaded their eyes with their hands.

Juri and Nanami sat down and Miki made his way over to the table. He was carrying a tray, but there wasn't anything on it but a prepackaged energy drink.

"Miki!" scolded Nanami, "That *can't* be all you're having for lunch!"

"They were out of milkshakes," said Miki, and sat down, eyes on his tray.

Behind Nanami, the three young men in glasses all carefully stirred ice-cream into their coffee, and drank the resulting mixture through straws, staring all the while at Miki.

Kozue had her sword in her hand. Her coat was draped over a chair in the dormitory lounge; she wore a tight-fitting black tank top and her white trousers. She took a fencing stance and saluted the piece of wood she'd hung on the lounge wall. Then she lunged, striking the point into the wood. She withdrew it and struck again. And again. And again.

Students peered into the lounge from the doorway. Some hurried away. Some paused, admiring; others lingered, hungry looks consuming their faces.

Toshiro drifted into the lounge with books in his arms. He didn't spare a glance for Kozue, who had built to a regular percussion of destruction on her side of the room, but settled into a deep leather armchair. He set his books on the table beside him, glanced out the window at the fine afternoon, then took up the first volume and started reading.

Chips and splinters were flying from the wood now. Kozue's face was fixed in a feral snarl. Her sword point drove deeper and deeper into the wood.

Toshiro paged sedately through his book.

Students gawped through the doorway.

Hoshiko shoved through the crowd and stood just inside the door, her gaze moving from Kozue to Toshiro and back to Kozue.

The sword broke through the back of the wood and thrust into the plaster wall. Kozue let go the hilt and stood back. Her sweat-soaked shirt clung to the sawtoothed ridge of her spine.

"Pardon me, Kaoru-sempai, but what are you doing?" Hoshiko said, her words polite but her tone sarcastic.

A girl elbowed past Hoshiko in a violent rush, followed by two or three more. Hoshiko staggered, catching herself gracefully on the back of Toshiro's chair. She spun like a cat to glower at the girls, who were offering Kozue towels and glasses of water.

Kozue smiled at her admirers, taking a glass of water from one girl and a towel from another. Then she dashed the water in the girl's face and lashed out with the towel at the rest. They shrieked and stampeded back toward the doorway. The glass shattered against the lintel of the arch, and the last of the students fled basely.

Toshiro turned another page without lifting his gaze from the book.

Hoshiko turned an appalled gaze on Kozue. Kozue smiled demurely and said, "Why, surely, Hoshiko-kun, it is *obvious* what I'm doing." She caught up her coat and jerked the sword from the wall. She gave Hoshiko a mocking sketch of a bow and strode out.

A piece of plaster fell out of the wall. Toshiro turned a page. Hoshiko stared at the pierced wooden board, which still had the remains of the Ohtori symbol on it.

Technically, I was looking for Chu-chu, but actually I was tactfully leaving Miki and Anthy alone together. I'm not the most perceptive person in the world, I know, but I can tell when someone has a burning need to confess and beg for forgiveness when all they do is hover around the person they want to talk to, while staring anywhere *but* at that person's face. Miki was painful to watch, and my unfortunate peeping-tom ability did *not* make things any easier for me. So I told Anthy I was going to go and look for Chu-chu and she said that was a great idea.

I had no idea where he was, of course. In a garage, last I saw. I did not remember a garage anywhere around campus.

I walked around the edge of campus, running my fingers along the cold iron rails and peering down staircases, hoping for a burst of inspiration for where I should look for this garage. I didn't get one. What I got was a brief warning of running feet and then someone tackling me from behind.

"Hi, Wakaba," I said, as best I could with my face wedged in between two iron railings.

"Utena! U-ten-A! I'm so glad to see you!"

"I'm glad to see you, too," I said, extricating myself from the railing and turning my head to see her profile. "You're very cheerful today."

"Why wouldn't I be cheerful when you've come to visit? Hey, I just got a great idea! Let's go for a ride!"

"A ride?" I asked. "Where?"

"Oh, out in town. It'll be fun, Utena, c'mon!" She slid off my back and grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

I couldn't help grinning back at her, she was so happily, innocently pleased to see me. "Okay," I said, more to her smile than to her words.

"Great!" She started towing me off, talking all the while. "...and there's this great little shop, you can get the most amazing sweets there, all in the *cutest* little shapes, flowers and animals and little tiny teacups..."

"Really?" I said, letting her tow me along and thinking unhappily about her uniform with its cute, fluttering skirt. The year she ought to have graduated...

"This way!" She pulled me down a staircase and we were in a little courtyard. I frowned, trying to remember. Had I been here before?

"And we could stop and get some tea, and maybe buy some cute pencils or barrettes, you

know I always lose my hairgrips for my ponytails," said Wakaba, leading me towards the iron gate at the other side of the courtyard, which was standing slightly ajar. "It won't take us long to get there!"

I stopped, Wakaba tugging on my unresisting hand, but my feet were rooted to the concrete. Just beyond the gate, in the shadow of the wall, was a red convertible.

"Come on!" said Wakaba. "It's so much fun to ride in!"

I opened my mouth to say something, to ask her something, but I didn't say a word. Akio strolled around from the other side of the car and smiled at us. "Wakaba-chan," he said. "How thoughtful of you to bring your friend."

Wakaba beamed.

Akio leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "But Utena and I have so much to catch up on, Wakaba-chan. Would you forgive us if we went out just the two of us this afternoon? We'll come back and have dinner together."

Wakaba smiled up at him. "That's all right. I'm sure that we'll have lots of time to catch up, won't we, Utena?"

"Oh, yes," said Akio. "Plenty of time. All the time in the world, in fact."

Aiko and Yuuko were sitting at two desks in the office. The shades were pulled. Behind them, Keiko's desk stood neat and empty.

Aiko -- or possibly Yuuko -- was staring down at a stack of papers on her desk. She picked up a pen and put it down. Her fingers trembled.

Yuuko -- or Aiko? -- was staring at the keyboard of a computer. On the screen was some sort of form. None of it had been filled out and the cursor blinked impatiently in the "date" field.

Suddenly the one who was sitting in front of the papers said, "What do you want to do with your career?"

The other replied, in bright, brittle tones, "Oh, we have the best career in the world right now!"

"Of course, of course." She picked up the pen, held it poised, then put it down. "But if you *were* to do something else..."

"But I wouldn't!" The other pushed the computer mouse away from her in a sudden spasm of terror. It hit a teacup, which rocked in its saucer and fell over. The teacup was

empty and clean inside, white as an eggshell.

"Hypothetically," said the first, taking a pair of sunglasses from a drawer in her desk and sliding them onto her face.

"Oh. Well. Hypothetically, of course," said the other, twisting her hands together. "Hypothetically speaking, I thought I might go into journalism."

"That's a good career," said the first, taking a deep breath and picking up her pen again. She started to write on the top paper of her stack.

"Of course, there's a lot of competition," the other replied, untangling her fingers with difficulty. She picked up a lipstick, then put it down without using it. Instead, she pulled a green eyeshade out of the file drawer and put it on. "What would you, hypothetically speaking, like to do, if we didn't already have a career?"

The first paused and regarded her handiwork. "I thought I might go into politics. Or diplomacy."

"That's boring."

"Not as a secret agent."

The one in front of the computer thought about this, touching a few of the computer keys thoughtfully, her eyeshade tilted down over her face. "You're right, that sounds quite exciting."

"And elegant," she said complacently. "It's very important to have an elegant career."

"Maybe journalism isn't for me," said the other. "Perhaps I should do something more... *exotic*."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she mused, leaning back in her chair and hooking her thumbs under her collar. "But I think it would involve UFOs."

The town unfurled beyond the car windows like a banner. I stared straight ahead, somehow still aware of the way Akio leaned back casually, only one hand on the wheel, a look of sleepy pleasure on his face.

We drove in silence while I wondered in frozen panic whether I had ever seen this intersection, that convenience store, a particular wayside shrine. Why didn't anything look familiar?

The car swung to the right and bus stops and bicyclists began to grow fewer. "I thought we'd drive along the highway for a while," said Akio. "It's nice to relive old memories, isn't it?"

My face felt numb, as though I had been to the dentist. I looked directly ahead, noticing that the windshield was perfectly clean. There weren't even any fingerprints on it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Akio look in my direction. "What, no smile for old memories? Don't you remember your school days fondly, Utena?"

My mouth felt stiff and heavy, as though it were cast in bronze. I hated the way he said my name.

He looked back at the road. "I certainly remember your school days fondly," he said, with a smile in his voice -- the sort of smile that made me long to wipe it off his face, except it was in his voice and I couldn't reach it, if you see what I mean.

There had to be something I could say, the right thing to say, the key. I remembered searching for it before, desperately, trying to talk away the bodily heaviness and the terrifying flesh. But my metal jaw would not move, and I could not think of what it was anyway.

"If we drive far enough along this road," said Akio as the highway rolled away under us, "we'll come to the carnival site. But I am afraid it has shut down for the season."

My desperate gaze found myself in the car's side mirror. I sat bolt upright, not touching the seat back. My face looked as frozen as I felt. But in my hair, caught just above my right ear, was a tiny pinch of Queen Anne's lace.

I turned my head slowly toward the passenger window.

Anthy was walking up the steps of Nemuro Memorial Hall. It was as solid as though I had never seen it in ruins -- had I seen it in ruins? She opened the door and went in.

She passed through the dim lobby with its red velvet chairs and walked past the elevator doors. Down one corridor, then another, and here the hallways were white linoleum, which still somehow looked dingy and funereal.

She put her hand on the lock of a black office door and went in without bothering to knock.

Mikage sat behind the desk. Behind him stood a chalkboard, covered with what looked like strange zeros, large and small -- carelessly written and open at the top. His desk was entirely empty except for a single teacup and saucer set in the center of the blotter. He sat leaning forward, elbows on the desk, hands folded under his chin, staring at the door as

though expecting someone to come in.

Anthy walked up to the desk and stood before it.

"I thought it must be you," he said. "I have not forgotten."

Anthy merely bowed her head.

"I would say that I am surprised to see you here," he said, "had I not passed beyond all surprise a long time ago. At least, I suppose it is long."

Anthy bowed her head again, without removing her gaze from his. They stared at one another in the dim and dusty room.

Finally he said, "My teacup. It is empty."

Now she replied, "So it is."

He answered, pressing his folded hands to the bridge of his eyeglasses, "In some ways, you know, you have not changed."

She replied calmly, "Change takes time to get used to."

He said, more sharply than I could account for, "Time?"

Anthy smiled at him.

Mikage looked away, passing a hand over his face as though to hide his reaction. "I'm thirsty," he said finally, as if it were an admission wrung from him by great pain.

Anthy said, "I need your keys."

His head snapped back to look at her, his eyes widening with shock, and then narrowing again with something that looked like calculation. "My keys," he said slowly. Now the look between them was the gaze of coding and decoding. "Pour the tea," he said.

Anthy walked to one side of the room and returned with a white teapot. She poured tea into the single cup on the desk and it steamed there, hot and fragrant. Mikage stared at it as though it were a miracle, while she stepped aside into the shadows again and, presumably, put the teapot back where she had found it.

He raised the teacup and sipped from it. Anthy stood and watched him. She did this neither with her old, folded-hands pose nor with any sign of impatience; instead, she leaned casually against the side of the desk and watched him as familiarly as an old friend.

Finally, he put the cup down. Then he opened a drawer of the desk and produced a ring of keys. They jingled faintly in his hand as he stood up. "Where?" he asked.

Anthy walked a few strides away from the desk and paused, half turned, smiling enigmatically. She pointed downward with one hand.

I turned my head away from the car window. Akio said, "Wakaba is very fond of car rides."

Somehow I knew -- from his demeanor, if nothing else -- that he had not seen what I had just seen. Anthy had told me, but he didn't know. The knowledge loosened my muscles and warmed me.

I found my gaze fastening on the car keys dangling just beyond Akio's right hand, as I wondered what Mikage's keys opened. If only someone had taken these car keys away from Akio -- then this damn car wouldn't go anywhere. I pictured it sitting in a garage, gathering dust. No, better, sitting outside, rusting and filling with rainwater, the fancy upholstery rotting in the sun, covered in pigeon poop. I smiled.

Akio's voice broke in on my thoughts. "Pleasant memories?" he asked, insinuatingly.

"No," I said. I said it a little more assertively than I meant to, I think because I was making such an effort to get the words out.

He smiled anyway. You know how it is when you're not looking at someone, but you're still paying more attention to them than you are to what's right in front of you? That's how I knew he was smiling.

"My memories are *always* pleasant," he said, as though I had just confessed to unpleasant ones. Of course, unpleasant ones immediately crowded my mind.

Anthy would know what to say to that, I thought miserably, staring at the endlessly unrolling double line of the highway. "I was sorry to hear about Kanae-san," I said, surprising myself. I imagined Anthy patting my shoulder, as a reward for a job well done.

He reached down and shifted gears. "Yes," he said solemnly. "That was a tragedy. I don't think we were very well suited, though, do you?"

I looked down at my hands and the familiar/unfamiliar glint of the rose seal ring on the left. The side closest to him, I noticed. I couldn't think of a good answer to the question so I didn't give one.

"Kanae was always so formal and restrained," he said, leaning back in his seat again, resting one hand lightly on the wheel. "I greatly preferred the time I spent with you."

I folded my fingers together and tried to think of an answer to *that*. I mean, you might think that someone is lying to your face, but you can't just say so. And he might not have been lying, but that wasn't really important, was it? Inspired by that thought, I said, "Is

that really important?"

He glanced sideways at me. "Of course you are important to me," he said smoothly. Which hadn't been what I was referring to at all.

Irritated, I looked out the window again.

Into the silence, he said, "I don't believe I ever showed you the Ends of the World." There was an appalling silence after that statement, and then the hum as he pressed down the accelerator.

I said, my head turned away to look out the side window and my hair whipping into my mouth, "I saw it in any case. I didn't care for it."

He laughed, and the car hummed a little louder. "Brave words. It is what you came for."

I reached up and pushed my hair out of my eyes. "I -- no, it's not!"

"Anthy brought you here to claim it," he said. "But you cannot claim it without me."

I shook my head. "We had this conversation before," I said. "I don't want your eternity." I swallowed an unwise urge to spit after saying that word.

He laughed. It sounded exactly the same as it did before, but for some reason it raised the hair on the back of my neck. "But of course you do. Is it not what everyone is searching for? The miracle that lies beyond the Rose Gate. You saw it."

I remembered what I'd seen. I also remembered what had happened, and the scar in my side throbbed with my pulse.

"Anthy cannot claim it without me. When you flee it, you only flee the truth." He was looking at me, and I turned my head away from him again, again in irritation. I did not want to have this conversation again, and I was awfully cold.

I saw, in the side-view mirror, that someone was following us. Not a car. Motorcycles. A cavalcade of them, streamlined and sleek and black, perhaps half a mile back on the highway which had been completely empty a moment before.

After I saw them I heard them, a distant asthmatic aggressive roar.

Akio glanced in the rearview mirror, and I saw -- turning to look, this time -- a tiny frown contract his brow. He glanced aside at me and threw off another empty smile, a rictus in his stiff, pale, face. "There are so many who pursue the dream," he said.

They gained on the car with suicidal speed, identical low black machines occupied by figures in black leather body armor and faceless, featureless black helmets. I had thought there were half a dozen, then a dozen, then fifty, then at least a hundred of them, trailing off behind the red convertible like an honor guard.

Akio placed both hands on the wheel and pressed the accelerator pedal down. The car leaped forward, the engine whining with excitement; but the roar of the motorcycles drowned it out, shrieking their challenge. Now they were mere feet from the rear bumper, riding easily, spreading out in a black peacock's tail.

I raised my voice to shout, "Are they going to the Ends of the World, too?" Akio shot me a murderous glance, then turned his head as though to check his side mirror and froze.

I did too. One of the riders had pulled up next to the driver's side of the car, and pulled off her helmet. Blonde hair and a red scarf streamed back, and Ohtori Kanae stared expressionlessly at her husband, all the while handling the motorcycle as if it were a part of her.

Behind Kanae, two more of the riders pulled their helmets off, but because of the angle of the sun, I could only see them in silhouette. They seemed to be wearing the Ohtori uniform under their armored jackets, and one of them had her hair in a single large ponytail.

With a scream of tires, one of the riders pulled in front of the convertible. Even before he removed his helmet, I guessed who he was: pale red hair fluttered in the wind around his collar. Instead of tucking his helmet under his arm, though, he tossed it in the air, and it landed in the back seat of the car in a move any cinematographer would have envied. He was riding double, and the rider behind him wasn't wearing a helmet -- a boy with pale brown hair and freckles. Mikage swerved right and left as though anticipating Akio's moves as he attempted to maneuver around; but neither he nor Akio slowed down.

I sneaked a look at the speedometer: the needle was hovering at 180 kilometers per hour. I wasn't sure I believed it.

Akio snarled and pressed the accelerator all the way down. I looked behind us and saw Ruka, riding almost on the bumper. Next to him, riding so close that their knees were almost touching, was a woman I didn't know, with a beauty spot beside her mouth, wearing a silk aviator scarf. Behind them, more riders and their bikes snaked down the highway, revving their engines and following in a massive high-speed convoy.

"Utena!"

I looked out my window just in time to see Anthy take off her helmet. Her hair, freed of its constraint, whipped behind her like a banner. She, too, tossed her helmet into the air; I didn't worry that it would hit another rider.

"Utena, take my hand!"

I stood up, reached out, and took her hand. She pulled her motorcycle in close to the car and, steering it impossibly with her knees as if it were a horse, she reached out with both hands to guide my leap to the seat behind her.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and laughed into her hair. She laughed back, her

wild voice whipped past me by the wind, and we peeled off from the convoy. As she slowed the motorcycle along the shoulder of the road, we watched the rest of them go past -- intent, focused, herding the convertible down the two-lane highway like a pack of hunting dogs after prey. On the backs of their black armored jackets were black roses, outlined in white, on their helmets were the Ohtori seal, also white on black.

After the last of them went by, she swung the bike around and we started back the way we'd come. I pressed my face into the back of her neck and held on tight to her hips, as tight as when we made love, until the highway ended, and we were back on real streets again.

Miki stood outside the three staggered windows of the music rooms, holding a folder of music in his hands. He looked down at the book and seemed as surprised as I was to see "Camelot" embossed across the cover instead of "My Fair Lady." He sighed and started walking around to the door.

I wanted to yell and warn him not to go in there -- again! -- but of course it wouldn't have done any good. I wasn't there.

He pushed the doors open and entered the familiar corridor, neat and polished and exactly like all the other school corridors. He walked down the hall with a quick, purposeful tread, apparently intent on returning the music to... wherever music lived when it wasn't in use.

A door swung open just ahead of him and his steps slowed.

No! I yelled at him. *Don't! This isn't a videogame! Leave it alone, get out of there!*

But he couldn't hear me and he paused and looked into the room.

In the room was a grand piano with a three-branched candelabra sitting on a fringe-y shawl draped over it. The window was open and the breeze lightly fluttered the pages of the music left on the piano. It looked perfectly peaceful.

Miki stepped into the room.

NO, I bellowed at him, more in frustration than in hope that he'd hear me.

He strolled over to the piano and brushed his fingers over the keys. Then he sat down, put the music on the bench next to him, and with an oddly guilty air, reached out for the keyboard.

I felt a great urge to reach out and shake him by the shoulders, if only there weren't kilometers... or something... between us.

He gently played the first phrases of "The Sunlit Garden."

I wanted to bash his face -- or maybe mine -- into the keys. Hadn't he learned *anything* about how Ohtori worked?

"Still playing the same old song, aren't you?" asked Kozue, lounging in the doorway.

Miki startled back from the keys, nearly toppling off the bench.

Kozue strolled into the room. She was still wearing the white uniform -- not hers, but Akio's -- and it hung on her like old clothes on a scarecrow. She gave him a rictus of a smile which seemed to show far too much in the way of teeth and drew her sugar-brittle fingers over the silk shawl on the piano. I saw that there were red roses embroidered on it.

"Even though you... left, brother," she said, leaning against the piano as though on a crutch, "You still can't seem to get beyond those first few chords. Those first few baby steps."

Miki stared at her in horror and said, "At least I left."

"Didn't we have this conversation before?" asked Kozue. "It seems to me that you never really left at all." She smiled at him again, this time without showing her teeth, a narrow knifegash of a smile.

"That's not why I--"

"Ah, but why did you?" She strolled around the piano bench, leaned down to pick up the music in her corpse-white fingers. "Was it to find your shining thing? And did you? And was it as *shiny* as you thought it would be?"

"No," he replied, although I doubted any of us knew which of the questions it was in reply to.

"Perhaps I will be able to give you something else," she said, idly flipping through the book.

"I don't want *anything* from you," he said with unexpected vehemence.

She looked up then, staring at him over the edge of the music with a narrow, lidless, reptilian glare. Then she leaned over in a stilted, puppet-like parody of seduction (her flat bosom was, in any case, well buttoned up), and said:

"Even your son, O Prince?"

Kozue had both hands braced on the piano bench, peering gleefully down at Miki. She looked like a vampire stooping over its prey. "You can hardly run away from us now, my brother," she said. "Not now that you have such a tie to us. I know that you wouldn't want to *abandon your responsibilities.*"

Anthy walked across the room and picked up the candelabra. As she did so, the black shawl slid to the floor at her feet and lay there like a puddle of shadow.

Kozue seemed to notice us for the first time, and shot an irritated glance at me. Then she saw Anthy and stood up, lifting her knifelike chin. "You can't change the past," she told Anthy.

"And you cannot change at all," said Anthy.

"Your brother is stronger than you," said Kozue. "He's your oniisan, after all. And I'm with him."

"You are too weak even to bleed," said Anthy, and blew out one of the candle flames. It seemed to me that the sunlight was more golden, more slanted, and it came in through the windows in a sharply defined angle now.

"I'm too strong to bleed," retorted Kozue. "I have remade myself of steel and ivory, and others bleed for *me*. I *never* lose *anything* of myself."

"To bleed is not always to lose," said Anthy.

Kozue snarled. "He said it would work. Just like the story."

"He lied," said Anthy, and blew out the second flame.

Now the light pouring in the windows was ruby and amber. It seemed to me that Kozue gave it a terrified look -- as though, in a bizarre reversal, she was afraid of the coming of dark -- before rounding on Anthy again. "You lie!" she said, her voice rising to a shriek. "You lie! What can you know about such things?" She reeled back away from the piano, from Anthy. "It happens... like with Keiko..."

Anthy shook her head. "The dead cannot make children. They can only... take credit for other people's work."

Near Kozue, I saw Miki get to his feet, his face pale as milk but his gaze steady and fixed on Anthy. He whispered something -- I couldn't hear it but Anthy could.

She said to him, "This place is outside of life. Life cannot start here," and then blew out the last flame.

Dusk fell with frightening suddenness. The shape of the piano became nothing more than a looming shadow; the chair in the corner faded. Anthy was standing suddenly not on a scarf but on a patch of ground strewn with red roses, wilting at her feet.

In the quickly spreading darkness, Kozue cried out, but whether in anger or in fear it was hard to tell. The door banged, and she was gone.

"It would seem that we have," Yukio said to his sister across the tea table at the center of the hedge maze, "new invitations from the End of the World."

I hadn't even known Ohtori *had* a hedge maze. The hedges were decorated with colored paper lanterns, and fireflies were beginning to rise under the dark arches of the bushes.

Hoshiko glanced at the red-sealed envelope on her plate and sniffed. "I shan't bother to open it then." The plate had a design of tiny, sleeping mice painted around the edges.

"You might be interested to know, though," Tsuwabuki said, checking his stopwatch, "that it merely invites us to witness a duel."

"In the arena." Toshiro dangled a hand down from the branch he was reclining on and grinned unpleasantly at Hoshiko. "While the duel is happening!"

"How unprecedented," Hoshiko said, tearing her envelope in two and holding the edge of one piece to the lantern on the table. It began to burn. "Will you be participating, Kiryuu-san?"

Touga smiled at her, then carefully knocked his croquet ball through the wicket. "I have other things to do."

There was a crashing in the vegetation, and a machete slashed open the hedge nearest the table. Kozue staggered through, panting and perspiring heavily, a battered fedora cocked back on her head. "It's time," she said. "Come on, all of you." She looked up at Touga. "Except you. And *you* know what to do."

"Better than anyone, Student Council President," Touga said. "Don't keep the End of the World waiting."

It was a disorienting several moments. There I was, in the darkness of the music room. Miki was nearby -- I could hear his harsh breathing as he was trying not to cry. Anthy was holding my hand. And yet. And yet...

There was Anthy, saying to Juri, "It's time to end this."

Juri, standing in the salle with a foil in her hands, said, "About time," and put the foil neatly back in place. The two of them left together.

And there was Anthy, saying to Saionji, who was lingering in a hallway, "Come on, Saionji-san. What we've all been waiting for is ready."

Saionji cast a last look at the door that led to the office of Aiko, Yuuko, and Keiko, shook his head, and followed her from the building.

Anthy was there, too, with Nanami, saying, "Come, Nanami-san. Your brother is waiting."

Nanami tossed her head, turned her back on the campus green, and followed Anthy.

The Anthy holding my hand said, "Miki, Utena, it's time for the duel."

Miki stood up straighter in the dimness. "Will there be a duel then?" he said.

Anthy laughed gently. "*He* thinks so, anyway."

She squeezed my hand, and Miki and I followed her out of the building into the twilight.

In a brief flash, I saw what seemed to be a brightly-lit garage, shiny and clean as something in an advertisement. In the middle of the impossibly large space was a red convertible.

It was up on blocks, tires missing. The hood was up.

In front of it, dangling the keys from one limp hand, stood Touga. He scratched his head in puzzlement, and looked around the garage vaguely, but there were no tires to be seen.

As Anthy ascended the steps to the gate ahead of us, I had to stop to rub my eyes. I suddenly saw her as if through a heat shimmer, or a hall of mirrors, with a dozen Anthys converging on her, a dozen pairs of arms raised or poised or moving. She looked over her shoulder at me -- well, one of her did, because I saw another face looking the other way -- and the shimmer resolved, and all the arms came together into her two arms.

She put her hands on the gate and the mechanisms began to flow and shift with rushing water. The enormous flower of the gate bloomed open. Unlike times past, though, a curtain of water poured over that opening. The veil of water broke the hard, polished sunlight streaming in behind it into a shimmering, flowing glow, like a special effect in a movie. It was made all the more eerie by the fact that we were all standing in a purple dusk, the black outlines of campus buildings looming behind us.

When Saionji balked at walking through the water, Anthy smiled and said, "Did not the samurai pour water over their swords to purify them?"

Saionji looked at her and opened his mouth, then closed it. He plunged through the curtain. Miki followed him. Nanami covered her hair with her hands and threw herself into the water.

Anthy took my hand and we passed through the gate together, as we'd never done before. We emerged on the other side, streaming with water. Juri followed, striding through the water in a single step.

Anthy stepped close to Juri and slid her hand along Juri's waist to the small of her back. Juri's head snapped up and she turned a shocked look down upon Anthy. Anthy just smiled and stepped away. Juri shook her head and led the way to the stairs.

Miki and I made a cursory hunt for the gondola, and couldn't find it. Anthy watched us tolerantly, then passed on by. We gave up and began to scale the stairs for what felt like the thousandth time, walking behind Anthy in her old and ragged shirt, skirt, and leggings.

Of course, Akio was already there in his white Prince's uniform. Shiori stood at his left hand, still in the Rose Bride dress. Touga lounged against the wall, one hand resting on Keiko's shoulder. The Student Council stood in a small cluster around Kozue, with Yukio standing just a little apart. Wakaba stood alone, hands clasped behind her.

"This is an interesting reversal, little sister," Akio said. "It's been a long time since anyone challenged me to a duel."

Anthy regarded him with, I thought, something like pity. "You know it's over now," she said.

"I will have a duel," Akio said. "That's the way we play, little sister."

He gestured sharply to Shiori, and she stepped forward, opening her hands in a way that was deeply familiar.

Shiori said, "O Roses of the noble castle..."

Anthy seized my wrist. "Utena," she said.

I found that I felt oddly numb, even paralyzed, by the sound of Shiori's voice.

Shiori said, "Roses of noble memory..."

Anthy said, "Utena, pull the sword from me."

I couldn't move. I noticed that Shiori's voice was shaking.

Shiori said, "O Power of Dios that slumbers within me..."

Anthy turned to me and grabbed the sleeves of my uniform. "*Now*," she said through clenched teeth.

I saw that Shiori's face was wet. It took every ounce of will I had to drag my gaze from Shiori down to Anthy.

Shiori said, "I beseech thee, harken unto thy master..."

Anthy said, hissing, "She'll *die*, Utena."

I looked down at Anthy's furious face, and the paralysis lifted.

Shiori said, and so did Anthy, "Appear before me..."

Shiori, Anthy, Akio, and I all simultaneously said, "Grant me the power to Revolutionize the World!"

Anthy went back over my arm with the ease of long practice. I saw the bright, sharp light between her breasts and reached...

I remember those other times. I remember how the hilt was warm and fit my hand perfectly. How the sword slid out of her chest silently and easily. How it came free and I swung it aloft as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

This was not like those times.

My hand closed around the hilt, as before, but then I began to struggle to pull the sword. I gritted my teeth, braced my legs, and pulled for all I was worth.

Later, Nanami gave me a curiously vivid picture of what she saw -- me dragging the sword out of Anthy, Akio struggling to hold onto the sword in Shiori's chest, and the motions of a tug-of-war going on for several eternal seconds.

I won, the resistance vanishing and the sword surging up into the air and catching the sunlight in the unnatural midday of the arena.

When I looked up, Shiori was flung backward over Akio's arm. Her face was white and wet and blank. Akio glowered at me from under his brows. He dropped Shiori carelessly.

Shiori hit the arena floor with a sickening thud and lay still.

I set Anthy carefully on her feet. Anthy, jaw tight, straightened the front of the red Rose Bride jacket with a determined tug at the hem.

Anthy said, coolly, "It's all the same as always. *C'est toujours perdrix, mon cher frÈre.*" She gestured and the Rose Bride dress exploded into a fountain of roses. A wind whipped around her and spiraled them up away from her dark and naked form. The flowers

vanished over the side of the arena, and she was left clothed only in her wildly blown hair.

Akio snarled at her, then stretched out his hand to Wakaba. "Wakaba-chan, I need your help."

Wakaba went to him obediently and gazed up into his face. "What can I do, Akio-san?"

"I need your heart," he said, stroking her cheek lightly.

I started to step forward, raising the Sword of Dios, but Anthy gripped and held my wrist.

"You have it, of course, Akio-san," Wakaba said, a little confused.

"Good," he said, and set his hand over her breastbone.

Wakaba made a tiny hurt animal noise and fell backward. Akio seized the hilt of her heartsword and raised it so that the blade sang. He let Wakaba fall, as he'd done with Shiori. This time, though, Yukio darted forward to catch her before she struck the ground. I gave the Student Council Vice President a grateful glance.

Akio launched himself toward us, striking as quick as a snake, the sword scything lethally toward me.

Before I could throw myself back or try to block with the Sword of Dios, I heard and saw the blade -- Wakaba's heart -- snap into three pieces.

Akio managed to club me brutally in the jaw with the hilt before retreating.

I staggered back. I felt dazed and thoroughly out of shape, but raised the Sword of Dios and set my stance again as best I could.

Akio dropped the hilt with a dull clang and pointed at the Student Council President, saying, "You now."

I saw Kozue flinch, but she stepped forward with chin raised. She made no noise when the sword leapt toward his hand, but clutched once at the air and fell slowly to her knees. She gave a long, hoarse exhalation as the blade slid out, and tumbled limply to her side.

Akio brandished the heartsword.

Before I could react, Miki lunged past me, drawing a sword -- I did wonder briefly, *from where?* and then dismissed the thought as trivial -- and meeting Akio in a clash of sparks and sound.

Miki was a superb swordsman, there was no question of that. Their exchange was brief, savage, and so fast my eyes could barely follow their motions. For a few moments, Miki looked as if he had the advantage. Akio lost ground, backpedaling a few steps. But then

he lunged forward again, catching Miki by surprise, and a final strike cast Miki's blade wide. Instantly, the point of Kozue's heartsword drove for Miki's heart.

I was deafened by an explosion next to me, and Kozue's heartsword went flying away. Akio's hand bloomed with a trail of red rose petals, and he clutched it to himself, looking past me.

I followed his gaze and found Juri lowering her police pistol. She looked down at it, gave a sideways glance to Anthy, then tucked it into the waistband of her uniform at the small of her back. "That's enough of that nonsense," she said.

Miki had fallen to his knees and retrieved Kozue's heartsword. He stared at it, with its intricate hilt and slender blade, and didn't seem to know what to do with it. And then it broke in two in his hands.

Akio turned to Touga, who backed against the wall, looking pale and appalled. "Please," Akio demanded, extending the injured hand.

The tableau held for several seconds, their gazes locked, and then Nanami interposed herself.

She turned her back to Akio and faced her brother, fists on hips. "You know, oniisan," she said, "he lied to you, just like he lied to all of us. He lies to everyone. He couldn't possibly be our father, your father, whatever it was, exactly, that he said. Look at him." We all, including Touga, obediently looked at Akio.

The planes and curves of Akio's skull shone clearly under his skin, which had taken on a ghastly grey hue. His eyes, which I remembered as so brilliant and clear and compelling, were dull, possibly with pain, and strangely cloudy. He seemed to be shrivelled into a husk, a cicada's shell, left behind in the summer. The prince's uniform and his hair and his skin all seemed to share the same bleached, colorless quality. The only color in the image of Akio was the steady dripping of red from his hand, drops that struck and splattered into rose petals on the arena floor.

"Does that look human?" Nanami said to Touga. "Does that look alive? Do you think he's capable of having children?"

"A dead god," Juri said.

"A dying god," Anthy corrected, "who refused to die. He was dead from the moment he refused."

The grey statue that was Akio had continued to stretch out his hand to Touga, and now he roused himself to gesture again with the bleeding hand. "Who will you believe?" he rasped.

Touga shrank back as far as he could go without flinging himself off the arena. Akio dropped his hand and looked emotionlessly at the remaining clutch of Student Council

members. He took a step toward Hoshiko.

Akio paused and shifted his gaze from Hoshiko to Yukio. "You," he said hoarsely, "or her. Decide."

Yukio looked away from Akio, at Hoshiko, who, for once in her life, looked confused and worried. The siblings gazed at each other a long time, and then Yukio very deliberately stepped toward Akio.

Tsuwabuki erupted into motion, twin swords singing from their sheaths. "I'm the chosen one now!" he roared. "Not *you!*"

Yukio flung himself aside from the first wild slash. Tsuwabuki turned and started to charge Yukio again.

Hoshiko kicked out as he passed her. One snap-kick sent the nearest blade flying, and a heavier kick drove accurately into Tsuwabuki's solar plexus. He let out a "whoof!" and dropped his other sword, clutching at his belly and making siren-like attempts to inhale. Hoshiko stood and watched him for a moment, then her leg flashed out again, high and true, and struck him hard in the side of the head. Tsuwabuki dropped as if poleaxed.

She strode over to Yukio and slapped his face nearly as hard as she'd kicked Tsuwabuki. "That was *stupid!*" she snarled.

Toshiro -- little Toshiro, so strange and so easy to ignore -- dashed to Akio's side and fell to one knee at his feet. "Oh, my lord of the World's End!" he said in his highest and most polite language. "I will not -- nay, cannot desert you. Take my sword or my life, my dear lord, for they were ever yours!"

Akio lowered his stony gaze to the boy. Without a word, he reached down and set his bleeding hand on Toshiro's chest. The sword came free, shining and golden in the odd light of the arena, and Toshiro cast himself backward on the floor, arms outstretched messianically.

I raised the Sword of Dios once more as Akio turned stiffly to confront me with Toshiro's sword.

Akio fought, in our first flurry of blows, without his customary grace. He moved like a marionette: he gangled, he lurched, he flopped. It was more effective than you might think, even so, and I found myself losing ground to this inhuman monstrosity. It was all I could do to defend myself from the madly keening heart of Toshiro.

Anthy stepped between Akio and me, and caught the descending blade of Toshiro's sword between her palms. With a sideways wrench, she tore it from Akio's hand and cast it away. Toshiro's heart blew apart in screaming slivers as it left Akio's hand. One grazed my cheek, stinging like a wasp.

Anthy reached back, her hand closing over mine.

I let her take the Sword of Dios from me.

"You have no right to that sword," said Akio. "It won't serve you."

"It won't serve you either," said Anthy. She glanced down casually at the sword, and then, with surprising force, drove it into the floor of the Dueling Arena. It stood there, quivering, and a tiny crack opened in the white marble where it was driven in. "Not anymore. Not ever again."

"It's mine."

"I made it for you." I looked at Anthy, startled, as she said it. There was nothing in her cool, even tone to suggest that what she was saying cost her anything. But I knew that it did, and exchanged a look with Juri that made me think she knew it too. Anthy rested her hand gently on the hilt of the sword in a gesture that was not a caress but a sign of ownership.

Akio's skin was drawn tight around his mouth and eyes. "The Sword of Dios," he said in a low voice, not quite a whisper.

"Yes," said Anthy, looking down at it. She placed her other hand on the hilt of the sword as well. "Dios' heartsword. You couldn't use mine."

"You don't... you can't..." Akio drew himself up to his full height and seemed to will life into himself. Despite the sickly color of his face, he managed to regain his aura of strength. "Anthy." His voice was caressing, but there was a note of something else behind it. "Anthy, think about what you are doing. After so long, you can't throw it all away. Think, Anthy, think of me. Think of yourself."

Anthy stood perfectly still, although the wind picked up again and teased at the long loose coils of her hair. "That," she said, almost in a whisper, "I have already done."

She didn't move, just stood there with her hands crossed on the hilt of the sword. For a moment, all was still.

Then I heard a strange singing noise. I flinched -- it was too like the sound of millions of swords slicing the air with their speed. But this was a singular, edged, metallic noise. Anthy did not move. Yet the noise increased and rose in pitch until the very air rang with it, as though we were all enclosed in an enormous, transparent bell. And just as it seemed the note could climb no higher, it stopped.

In the utter silence that followed, the Sword of Dios cracked soundlessly along its blade, and exploded into bright nothingness under Anthy's motionless hands.

We all stared.

Akio fell to his knees.

Anthy, motionless as a statue, naked as the sword had been, regarded him. Then she raised something in her fingertips and examined it at eye level.

It was a rose hip. Wrapped around it was a single silver hair.

She untangled the hair from the rose hip carefully. It caught on the floral sepals on one end; it twined around itself in intricate knots; it clung to the rose hip like a lover. But she unwound it and held it up between her fingertips as a fine, almost invisible line, defining tautness between her hands.

Then she snapped her hands apart and the thread broke. Although it was impossible, I could have sworn that I heard the sound of it breaking, like a pin dropping onto a glass floor a thousand miles away. Akio flinched and his lip lifted in a snarl, showing impossibly long teeth, the fleshless grin of something embalmed. "I didn't need that anyway," he said, but his voice was curiously drained, like a recording from long ago.

Then she examined the rosehip itself, turning it this way and that, rolling it sensuously along her fingers. She lifted it to her lips.

"NO!" bellowed Akio, and lunged forward.

She closed her eyes and bit into it. She chewed briefly, then swallowed.

Almost immediately, she wrapped her arms across her abdomen and sank to her knees. I stepped forward, reaching for her.

A circle of scarlet began to spread out from her, staining the white floor of the arena.

Akio saw the edge of the circle and his eyes widened. He threw himself backwards and scrambled away crabwise from the advancing tide. "Anthy..." he said, gasping. "Anthy, no!"

Anthy raised her head and smiled at him in a pained way. "Tempus fugit," she said. The red hit the curved lines of the rose pattern and raced along it, too fast to follow, swooping and encircling everyone standing in the arena.

I heard a scream, and turned to see Keiko clutching her belly. She reached up and out blindly. "Touga-sama!" she cried.

Touga, if possible, looked more horrified than he had when Akio was confronting him.

Saionji dropped his sword and ran to her side. She struck at him and called, "Touga-sama!" again, but Saionji scooped her up into his arms.

"Are we done here?" Saionji asked, gritting his teeth as one of her flailing hands struck him across the face.

"Yes," Juri said. She looked briefly at the prone figure in the Rose Bride dress, then

turned her back.

The entire arena floor was patterned in red, and Akio was cowering against the far wall, arms across his face. Blood ran freely from his hand, and the sleeve of his jacket was dyed crimson with it.

I went to Anthy. She smiled up at me and rose to her feet. "Sorry," she said. "You probably think I'm such a wimp. But, you know, I'm not used to it the way you are." She looked down at her blood-streaked legs. "I suppose I *will* get used to it, though."

I put my jacket around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "Let's go," I said.

We found the gondola, with Anthy's help, and squeezed aboard. Saionji held Keiko, who screamed without ceasing for Touga. Juri held Keiko's feet to keep her from kicking anyone. Nanami watched Keiko with morbid fascination. Yukio and Hoshiko kept to their own side, trying not to bother the rest of us.

Wakaba, having woken up as we found the gondola, shakily ran toward us. "Utena! Wait!"

I went to meet her, and helped her the rest of the way in. She leaned against me and sniffled. My gaze met Anthy's over her head, and Anthy smiled almost maternally.

Miki hesitated and looked back at his sister's huddled form.

Anthy put a hand on his shoulder. "She has to rescue herself, in the end. Like these two did." She nodded at the siblings from the present Student Council, and they stared back at her, uncomprehending. "If she can, she'll come down from the tower on her own two feet. Or she'll stay, and there's really nothing you can do about it. He'll cast them all out himself."

"Even my brother?" Nanami said.

Anthy shrugged. "Eventually."

Miki shook himself like a dog, stepped aboard, and hauled the gate shut. The gondola shuddered into descent.

We were all silent, except Keiko, until we had passed through the gate that no longer roared with water.

Hoshiko paused then and said, looking distastefully at the shrieking pregnant woman, "I can call for an ambulance, if you like."

Saionji nodded. "Please," he added, after Keiko wound up and punched him hard in the face. Juri took hold of her wrists, leaving her feet to kick.

Hoshiko produced a cell phone and placed the call while we walked through the campus.

I noticed that Anthy's skirt and ragged shirt had appeared again, sometime between the end of the gondola ride and when we stepped back onto campus.

Students were wandering around the quad dazedly, some of them weeping, some of them laughing, some of them just holding their heads. One was sitting on the ground, turning the pages of a textbook. All the pages were blank. It was afternoon again, yet the quality of the light was different. This no longer seemed like an afternoon that would go on forever.

We passed Aiko and Yuuko. Or possibly Yuuko and Aiko. They sat on a bench, side-by-side, solemnly watching us through their rose-colored glasses and sipping tea from china cups. They looked far older than they ought to, like little old ladies at the park.

As we neared the front gate, we saw an elderly man and woman getting out of a car, calling out to a young female teacher who stared at them, appalled, whispering, "Mother? Father? How did you get so... old?"

When the ambulance and a couple of police cars arrived, the attendants had to put Keiko in restraints (with the assistance of one of the police officers) to get her aboard. She continued to call for Touga. They tried to stop Saionji from joining her in the ambulance, and he angrily informed them that he was her husband. He put his hand to his pocket, in search of his ID, and looked helplessly at Anthy.

She, of course, produced his wallet from a pocket of my jacket. "I think you dropped this, Saionji-san."

"Thank you," he said, earnestly gripping her hand as he took the wallet. "For everything."

He swung aboard and the ambulance drove away, lights flashing, sirens sounding.

"Will she ever," Nanami said, looking after the flashing lights, "you know, wake up?"

Anthy was silent for a moment, then said, "It's up to her."

"I doubt it, then," Juri said. "Shall we go? I think we've done enough damage here."

We all looked at Anthy. She smiled her best mysterious Mona Lisa smile at us.

Just at that moment, someone called, "Miki! Miki, wait!" and we heard running footsteps behind us. We, of course, all turned.

Robert jogged up to us, looking haggard and bedraggled. He stopped a few feet from Miki, and fixed Miki with what I guessed to be the most charming smile he could conjure at that moment. "Miki, old boy," he said almost jovially in English, "I'm in a spot of trouble, I think."

Miki looked at him without reaction.

"Really," Robert said, his brow wrinkling with consternation. "I've got no passport, you see. And I've, uh, I've been given to understand that, um..."

"You've been dismissed from service?" Miki said, sweetly poisonous enough to do his sister proud.

"Yes," Robert said, deflating. "So you see, I'm really in quite a fix."

"Indeed," Miki said.

There were a few beats of silence.

Nanami said, suspiciously, "How did you get to Japan without a passport?"

Robert blinked. "He, ah, sent the car for me." We all stared at him. "Well, you know, it doesn't *do* to think too hard about these things. What do you say, Miki, can you help me out? For old times' sake?"

Miki raised his eyebrow. "Which old times are you referring to? The old times where you were seducing me at the behest of Ohtori Akio? Or the old times where you were sleeping with my sister?"

"Oh, I say," Robert said, sounding hurt. "I *say*."

Miki sighed and turned a look at me, then Anthy, then finally settled on Juri. Miki raised an eyebrow. Juri smiled.

She stepped forward. Robert shrank away from her. She grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around, cuffing him expertly. "Oh, come now," she said, "We'll get you home safely, you illegal alien you. I'm sure a little time in the reality of the Japanese judicial system and being deported will be a welcome change from Ohtori, don't you think?" She smiled and nodded to us, then shoved him into motion toward the gates.

"Juri," I said, "this may be a bad question to ask, but where did you get those handcuffs?"

"Funny," said Juri, "I just reached into my pocket and there they were." She glanced back and held a hand out to Wakaba. "Shinohara-san, I can take you home."

Wakaba looked longingly at the proffered hand, then up at me. I smiled and nodded in what I hoped was an appropriately cinematic manner, and she gave me a squeeze and went with Juri.

We watched as Juri shoved Robert into the back of one police car and slammed the door on him, then took Wakaba to the other car. After a moment, the police cars pulled away and drove down the hill toward the town.

We all looked at each other.

Yukio and Hoshiko took polite leave of us then, not inquiring how *we* would be departing.

Anthy ran her fingers through her hair and sighed, sounding tired. She looked around at the students crying, laughing, sitting in poses of mute despair. Then she said, murmuring the words, almost whispering,

"And every scream tore through my throat.
No hurt I did not feel, no death
That was not mine; mine each last breath
That, crying, met an answering cry
From the compassion that was I.
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;
Mine, pity like the pity of God.
Ah, awful weight! Infinity
Pressed down upon the finite Me!
My anguished spirit, like a bird,
Beating against my lips I heard;
Yet lay the weight so close about
There was no room for it without.
And so beneath the weight lay I
And suffered death, but could not die."

Nearby, a young female student -- perhaps thirteen years old -- was crying "No, it's impossible! It's impossible!" over and over again into her cell phone. Next to her a young man, perhaps sixteen, was staring at the front gates of the school as though at a miracle. As I watched, he stood up, threw his bookbag to the ground, and ran out the gates without looking back.

We stared at Anthy. I know I must have looked appalled. She said, "Edna St. Vincent Millay. It's a very long poem, in English. It ends like this:

"The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,—
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That can not keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat—the sky
Will cave in on him by and by."

I doubted that most of the students understood what she was saying. I wasn't sure that *I*

understood, and I at least spoke the language.

Then she turned, raising her chin, and looked at me. "Let's go home," she said. "It's time to go home."

Epilogue

Mornings and eggshells crack, the eggshells scatter to the wind. You carry them within you, in the wind, and lift your feet toward construction sites and know that construction men eye women from the corners of their eyes. Silence sniffs at you like a cat and still you walk toward work, toward skyscrapers, imagine the shattering of old plateglass. You forget the Ko-Rec-Type, the carbon copies, the Xerox machines. The timeclock ticks, a medallion on the wall. You dream of grinding coffee beans, relaxing in the hot sun of Egypt, forget that pyramids are a wonder of the world. Is it another vacation you need, apple trees to sit under, the longings of a girl searching for arms, hands to link to her tiny fingers?

--from "Toward a 44th Birthday," by Nellie Wong

"Your daughter is adorable," I said to Saionji after I escaped the line where Anthy was playing her role as the bereaved. The tiny, dark-haired child was scaling her father, who stood carefully still like a particularly upright and well-dressed mountain.

"Thank you," he said, wincing slightly as a small black shoe scraped past one of his ears.

"How are things?" I asked, smiling up at the girl, who had braced her feet on either of her father's shoulders and was peering around the high-ceilinged room from her advantageous perch.

He gestured a shrug, since he daren't move his shoulders. "Keiko-san has been in the hospital all this time. She won't see me, and she won't accept that she bore a daughter."

"I'm sorry, Saionji-san," I said, laying a hand on his arm.

He glanced at me, surprised, I think, that I would touch him voluntarily. Then he smiled. "It's all right. I received a hardship discharge -- they were very kind, really. My mother came to stay with us for a while, but she wouldn't teach me how to take care of her. I finally begged one of my cousins to come teach me. She was baffled, but did it."

"How are you making a living now?"

"Oh, I teach kendo at a couple of schools in our area," he said, reaching up to steady his daughter as she rotated on his shoulders. "I'm starting to do some government consulting work. My family's well-off. Most importantly, I'm around for her."

"Your family dedication does you credit," I said, a touch formally. I nodded as Anthy arrived, striking in her neat white skirt and jacket, the white pillbox hat cocked jauntily to the side. "What kind of discipline do you use for your daughter?"

Saionji's eyes narrowed a little. "I know what you're getting at. Juri-san spoke very sharply to me on the subject. And, um, continues to do so."

I smiled a little hesitantly, and decided to shift the subject. "So, I don't think I asked what your daughter's name is."

The girl shrieked, "NEECHAN!" at that moment and began to hurriedly clamber down her father. Saionji couldn't answer without getting a patent leather mary-jane in the mouth.

Juri came into sight through the crowd, smiling. She was wearing a long black coat, a high-collared shirt, and black slacks. The small girl launched out of Saionji's arms into Juri's. "NEECHAN!" she shrieked again.

"Shhh," Juri said. "Other people need to talk too, Hime-chan."

Saionji gave me a sheepish look. "Um. Himemiya."

I looked a little stunned, I think. "You... named her Himemiya?"

Even Anthy seemed startled. "Oh, my."

Juri directed the child's attention toward us. "This is the woman for whom you were named, Hime-chan."

The child became very grave as she contemplated Anthy. Anthy returned a similar look. Finally, the girl said, "May I call you 'oncee-san'?"

Anthy appeared to consider a moment, then said, "Certainly."

The girl looked at me. "Who are you?"

Saionji hurriedly said, "This is Himemiya-san's friend --"

"Wife," Anthy interjected serenely.

Saionji winced. "Wife. Tenjou Utena-san."

Hime-chan examined me for a moment, then said, with great care and precision, "I am honored to meet both of you."

"She is a very formal girl," Anthy said after acknowledging the child's pronouncement.

"My family is very formal," Saionji said, sounding a little aggrieved.

I gave Hime-chan a little bow and a thank you. "So, Juri, you're an auntie now?" I teased.

Juri raised an eyebrow. "A big sister, thank you. Always a big sister."

"Ha," I said. "What are you doing these days, other than babysitting and leaning on Saionji to behave?"

"Working," Juri said with a shrug. "Alas, my girlfriend could not come with me today. She is allergic to funerals -- I mean, she is working very hard at the office."

"Are you still with the police?" I asked.

Juri shook her head. "I... well... Hisa didn't like me doing dangerous things. She watches too many horror movies. So I left and went into partnership in a detective agency."

"That's safer?" I said.

Juri shrugged. "Mostly."

"Have you *seen* my brother?" Nanami said by way of announcing her arrival. "He's got a pretty boy in a white uniform pushing around his wheelchair. I haven't seen his wife yet, though." Nanami was wearing a grey sundress with a smart black jacket over it, and matching heels. There was no ring on her hand, which surprised me, but she was wearing a very striking, antique-looking garnet sunburst necklace.

"She looks just like you," Saionji said, retrieving his daughter from Juri.

Juri gave Nanami a once-over. "More conservatively dressed."

Nanami shuddered theatrically. "Just like him."

I said, "Nanami, I'm sorry to tell you this, but your brother is a very sick man."

Nanami looked at me like I was stupid. "Of course he's sick. He's in a wheelchair."

"I didn't mean *that*."

Nanami sniffed. "You Americans. You are so rude."

I blinked. "Since when did I become an American?"

"Have you *seen* Kiryuu-san?" Miki said, by way of greeting. He wasn't looking at us, but was staring back the way he'd come. "Ohtori-san's mother-in-law is weeping on his shoulder and he's just talking to one of the other guests as if she weren't there."

"Oh, was *that* who that old hag was?" Nanami said.

"That's unkind," Juri said. "She's grieving."

"I didn't know that Japanese mothers-in-law," Nanami said scornfully, "usually did their grieving wearing black Parisian dresses, diamonds, and acres of veiling. She's acting more like a widow than a mother-in-law."

"I didn't think anyone wore veils any more," Miki said, finally looking at us. He was, I think, a little taller, and had lost some of the youthful curves in his face. He was growing out of "pretty" and into "handsome." His suit was grey, and his tie was dark blue. The tie tack appeared to have a company logo with beakers and flasks on it. "You all look good," he said.

Nanami kissed him on the cheek, as if rewarding a small child for good behavior. "Of course," she said.

"Where are you these days?" Saionji asked, hoisting his daughter back to his shoulders.

"England still," Miki said. "I'm working for a company that does chemistry research."

"Hear much from your sister?" Juri said.

He nodded. "She's at a conservatory in Germany. I can't remember which one -- she's changed schools at least three times."

"She must be good," Juri said. "I hear conservatories are notoriously picky."

Miki shrugged and said carefully, "They are. And I understand that artists are supposed to be... capricious. However, I'm growing afraid that she's making herself a reputation."

"How surprising," Nanami said, unsurprised.

We all turned at the sound of wheels approaching across the hardwood floor. Touga's red hair was cropped quite short yet stylishly, and was showing grey at the temples. His face was drawn and more angular than ever, and he was wearing a perfectly tailored dark gray pinstriped suit. Over his legs, he wore a laprobe, quilted from silk covered with a pattern of plum blossoms.

A slender, beautiful young man pushed the chair, and it took me a few moments to recognize Toshiro. His uniform was white and cut not unlike the Student Council uniforms. He stared through all of us without a sign of recognition.

"Well, isn't this just like old times?" Touga said, smiling wanly.

"No," said Juri.

Touga's smile turned tolerant. "Ah, Juri. Heard from Shiori lately?"

"No," said Juri again. "But I noticed her hiding in a dark corner over there, if you wanted to say something to her."

He turned his gaze abruptly from Juri to Miki. "And how is Robert doing?"

Miki shrugged. "I don't know. He dropped out as soon as he got back to Oxford."

"And you, Utena," Touga said smoothly, "what are *you* doing these days? Teaching athletics to small children?"

"I'm working on my Master's degree," I said. "In social work."

His gaze flicked to Saionji. "And how is your wife, Kyouichi?"

Saionji gave him a cold glare, but didn't respond.

"Ah, Nanami-chan," Touga said, his spirits restored by one victory, "and have you heard what has happened to your protégé?"

"My what?" Nanami said.

"Tsuwabuki-kun," Touga said, "the one you took such a... sisterly interest in."

"Of course I haven't heard," Nanami snapped. "Spit it out and go away. Your games tire me."

"He was incarcerated not long ago," Touga said, clearly enjoying himself. "It was a terribly tragic story..."

Juri broke in. "He stalked and killed his ex-girlfriend," she said bluntly.

Nanami's face froze for just a second, and she glanced at Juri, then looked back to Touga. Touga looked put out by Juri stepping on his... story.

Nanami finally said, "He was a very disturbed young man when last we met."

Touga gave a little shrug. "Even disturbed young men can be helped with strong guidance." He made a small gesture over his shoulder at Toshiro, who didn't react.

"Only if they want help," Juri said, giving Toshiro an odd look.

"Such a cynic, Juri," Touga said. "But then, you always were. How fitting you've ended up in a cynical profession."

Juri studied him a moment through narrowed eyes. "All professions are cynical. You'd know that if you ever had one."

Touga scowled and made a sharp gesture that started Toshiro into motion, pushing the wheelchair. Then Touga gestured again and they stopped. He looked directly at Anthy. "He missed you, you know."

Anthy didn't smile, just raised one eyebrow. "Do you really think I didn't know?"

Touga's lips pressed together tightly for a moment, then he said, "Was he really your brother?"

I could see Anthy considering how to answer. She studied his lean face, and so did I. He was perspiring lightly now, a little grey in the bright lighting of the familiar Ohtori reception hall. For a moment, he reminded me of Akio at the end of the final duel: knowing, yet refusing to know, the loss.

Anthy apparently took pity on him. "Yes. And both less and more. But," she added, with a quirk at the corner of her mouth, "it had been a very long time since he last called me 'onee-sama'."

She let the silence linger for a moment, then deliberately turned her back on Touga and Toshiro. The rest of us followed her example, cutting him out of the circle, and after a few more seconds, I heard the wheels on the floor.

Hime-chan looked down at Anthy from her great height and said, "I didn't like that man."

Anthy nodded solemnly. I found that I was nodding, and Juri was nodding, and Miki was nodding, and even Nanami was nodding. Saionji didn't nod, possibly because of Hime-chan's precarious positioning.

Hime-chan beamed at Anthy. "You can come to *my* house," she pronounced.

Anthy gave her a deep bow, which tickled the little girl so much she laughed and drummed her heels against Saionji's chest. He gave us a pained smile and said, "Hime-chan, we're supposed to be quiet. This is a sad time."

"Oh, okay," she said. Then she seized a handful of his hair and pointed across the hall with her other hand. "*That* man isn't sad."

Anthy and I turned to look where she was pointing, and saw Mikage -- it was unmistakably Mikage, not looking a day older -- standing by the photograph table and smiling as though the party were in his honor. He saw us looking in his direction and gave us a jaunty little wave.

"No," said Anthy. "I don't think he's sad at all."

"Himemiya-san," said a young man in a dark suit, bowing. When he straightened up, I recognized Yukio. He stared at her for a long moment, then said, "Am I supposed to condole with you on your loss?"

"I believe we can take it as read," she replied coolly. "What are you doing these days?"

"I am studying at Waseda University," he replied, turning to look at each of us in the little group. His eyes flicked last towards the distant wheelchair and the young man pushing it, flinching away like fingers from a hot surface. "I am working in Media, Culture, and Society."

"That sounds interesting," I said. "What do you--"

"Journalism, perhaps," he said, turning his gaze to Anthony again. "There are possibilities. It's very nice to see you all again," he added, focusing on the rest of us.

I think it was at this point that I noticed that Mikage was no longer standing by the photograph table. I never saw him again.

Juri said, "It is pleasing to see that you are doing so well, Fujiwara-san."

He gave her the ghost of a smile. "The University is a different world."

"Is your sister here?" asked Nanami, looking around the room.

Yukio adjusted his gaze to the back wall. "No. She could not get away from work."

"What does she do?" asked Nanami.

"She is a first-year Takarazuka graduate," he said.

I said, "I thought she wanted to do ballet," and then Juri, who had not been standing next to me, somehow stepped hard on my foot.

Yukio said, "Yes, but apparently she was not good enough to get into a first-class company, and she did not want to settle for second class."

"I'm sure she'll do well," said Juri kindly. "She has wonderful presence. I can imagine her singing Elisabeth."

Yukio's mouth twisted wryly. "If she's lucky, she'll be singing Lord Death instead. She was slotted into the otokoyaku program." He looked at the expressions on our faces and smiled a little wider. "Apparently, it was because she's tall and has a resonant voice."

"I imagine that's quite a change for her," said Anthony.

Yukio nodded.

"Don't worry," said Anthony. "Change is the one thing you can depend on. Now."

"I see *those women* showed up," Nanami said, jerking her head, indicating a pair of women standing at a little distance from the main group gathered at the graveside.

I looked over. The women were hard to tell apart, wearing large dark glasses and black suits, their hair gathered back severely. "Who are they?" I said.

"Aiko and Yuuko," Nanami said in a low voice.

"Ah, yes," Saionji said, glancing their way. "I've seen them a few times. They visit Keiko at the hospital."

Horrified, I said without thinking, "*That* can't be good for her!"

Saionji didn't look at me. "It's not. But I'm not in charge of her. Her family is."

Juri looked at him sideways. "Did her petition go through?"

He shook his head. "She clearly wasn't in a mental state to make a decision about a divorce. But I don't... feel right about making decisions about her care, and her family agrees."

Anthy, who was wearing a severe white kimono, approached the grave marker. Piled around the raw hole in the earth were white roses, what seemed like thousands of them.

White roses, the roses of the prince.

Everything seemed so surreal. I could see the school and the ocean from the hillside where the single grave was placed. "Where are we?"

"This is Ohtori," said Touga from behind my right-hand shoulder. "He asked to be buried here, rather than being cremated. Don't you recognize the spot?"

I looked around. "No."

"You should," he said, leaning back in his chair. "You won many duels here."

There was no trace of a forest, only a smooth grassy hill. I turned my back on Touga as Anthy beckoned us closer to the grave. She started handing each person a rose.

Touga was the first person to drop his rose into the dark hole gaping in the green turf. Tearless, he flipped one hand in an impatient gesture and Toshiro wheeled him away from the graveside. One by one, others each dropped a rose in. Mrs. Ohtori waited for a dramatic moment, then stepped to the graveside, wept tears upon her rose, and cast it in. I expected her to faint, but at least she spared us that.

The crowd dispersed until, finally, only Anthy and I were left.

As the scent of incense surrounded us, the two of us gathered armfuls of the remaining roses and tossed them into the grave. Petals flew around us as the grave mounded up with the curiously thornless Ohtori roses, until the grave was full.

Anthy stood looking at it for a moment, then took my hand and we went down the hillside.

I followed Anthy reluctantly up the stairs -- I hadn't known there *were* stairs, previously we had always used the elevator -- to our old room in the tower.

I don't know what I expected. I was braced, but I couldn't tell whether I was braced to find it changed or to find it exactly the same.

It was the same. The beds weren't made up, and although it was clean it had an air of being deserted. It didn't even feel like a dorm room over the break -- it felt more like a room in a museum, when you know that the furniture will never be used again, arranged only to be looked at.

I walked over to the huge arched window and looked out at the campus. It no longer looked the way it had when we lived here: over to the left, there was construction on a new gym, and the roof of the music building was being repaired, blue tarps fluttering in the wind. I could hear Anthy opening and closing cupboards behind me and I wondered momentarily what she was looking for, then turned my attention back to the campus. Some students were having an impromptu dance contest on the lawn. I couldn't see the source of their music because players had gotten so small since I was in school, but as I watched them I could almost hear it, loud and lively and cheerful.

"Tea, Utena?"

I turned around to see Anthy holding our old teapot. I stared for a moment, then managed to squeak out, "Yes, please."

She moved to the banquette and poured the tea into two white china cups, each five-petaled like a rose. Beside the teapot was a plate of cookies.

I didn't ask, simply lifted my teacup and looked at Anthy.

She said, "Do you remember the last time we had tea like this?"

"Yes," I replied, and took a sip. "We said we would have tea and cookies..." I stopped, counting.

"Ten years from then," she said. She sipped from her cup and then smiled at me.

I didn't need her to tell me. We drank our tea in silence.

I looked down into my almost-empty cup. "I remember that you said the tea was poisoned."

"It was," said Anthy, looking into her own cup as if to tell my fortune, or perhaps the fortunes of the whole world.

I looked up at her, startled, and after a moment she raised her gaze to mine and smiled. "Not with cantarella, of course."

"What with?" I asked, clutching my cup and saucer as if for protection.

Anthy thought for a while, and then said, "Doxa."

"I don't know what that is," I confessed.

"It's French," she said. "Or perhaps Greek." One corner of her mouth dimpled in a private joke. "This tea isn't poisoned, though."

"I knew that," I said, and reached for her hand.

She squeezed my hand, then dropped it to point to the plate. "Try the cookies."

I bit into a cookie obediently. It tasted of hazelnuts and apricots and chocolate and probably other things I couldn't identify. "I've never had these kind of cookies before."

She smiled. "Neither have I."

"They're so good!"

"I'm glad." She took one herself and we stood together eating cookies and looking at the new construction through the enormous window.

Then she spoke again.

"Utena, I'm pregnant."

I did not drop my teacup and saucer, but I did juggle with them in a very undignified way and splash the last drops of tea on my pants. After I set them down on the banquette, I turned to her and took both her hands. She smiled at me. "Um, did this happen...."

She nodded. "Yes. When he died."

I squeezed her hands hard. "Anthy, I... we..."

She studied my face carefully. "Are you glad? You look..."

"Glad!" I threw my arms around her. "Anthy, I love you! I am the happiest person in the world right now. I think."

Anthy laughed and kissed the side of my neck.

"I need to finish my degree right away!" I said. "And we can move into the larger apartment next-door, the landlady said that it would be going empty, remember, and she asked us to look out for anyone who wanted it? And--"

Anthy put her hand over my mouth. "Everything will be fine, Utena. It will be fine."

I seized her shoulders. "Will it? Really?"

"Yes," she said. "Or as fine as anything can be in the mortal world."

I touched the corner of her mouth. I noticed for the first time that there was the finest hint of a line starting there, a delicate trace upon her skin. I said, "Anthy, you..."

She said, "I am dying, too, you know."

I said, "WHAT?" and gripped her shoulders, restraining myself from shaking her.

She looked into my eyes. "Don't panic, Utena. I'm not dying any faster than you are." She smiled thoughtfully at something over my left shoulder. "Age is interesting. I think I'll enjoy it."

I slid my hands around her then, touching her strong scapulae, her masses of dark hair, like the precious and temporary things that they were. She rested her chin on my shoulder.

"I think I will have a daughter this time," she said.

Then, because the picture-making mechanism was crushed, the disturbing visions flashed into black, and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things.

-- Willa Cather, "Paul's Case"

THE END... and also the beginning.