

ABSOLUTE DESTINY



POST-APOCALYPSE

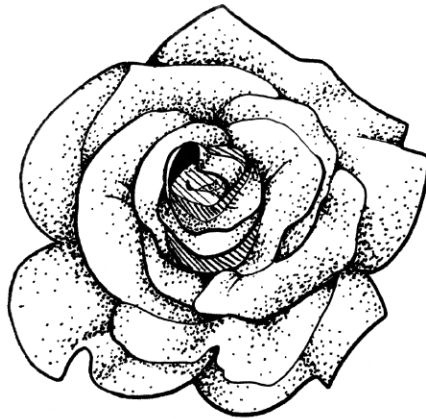
Requiem for my Prince

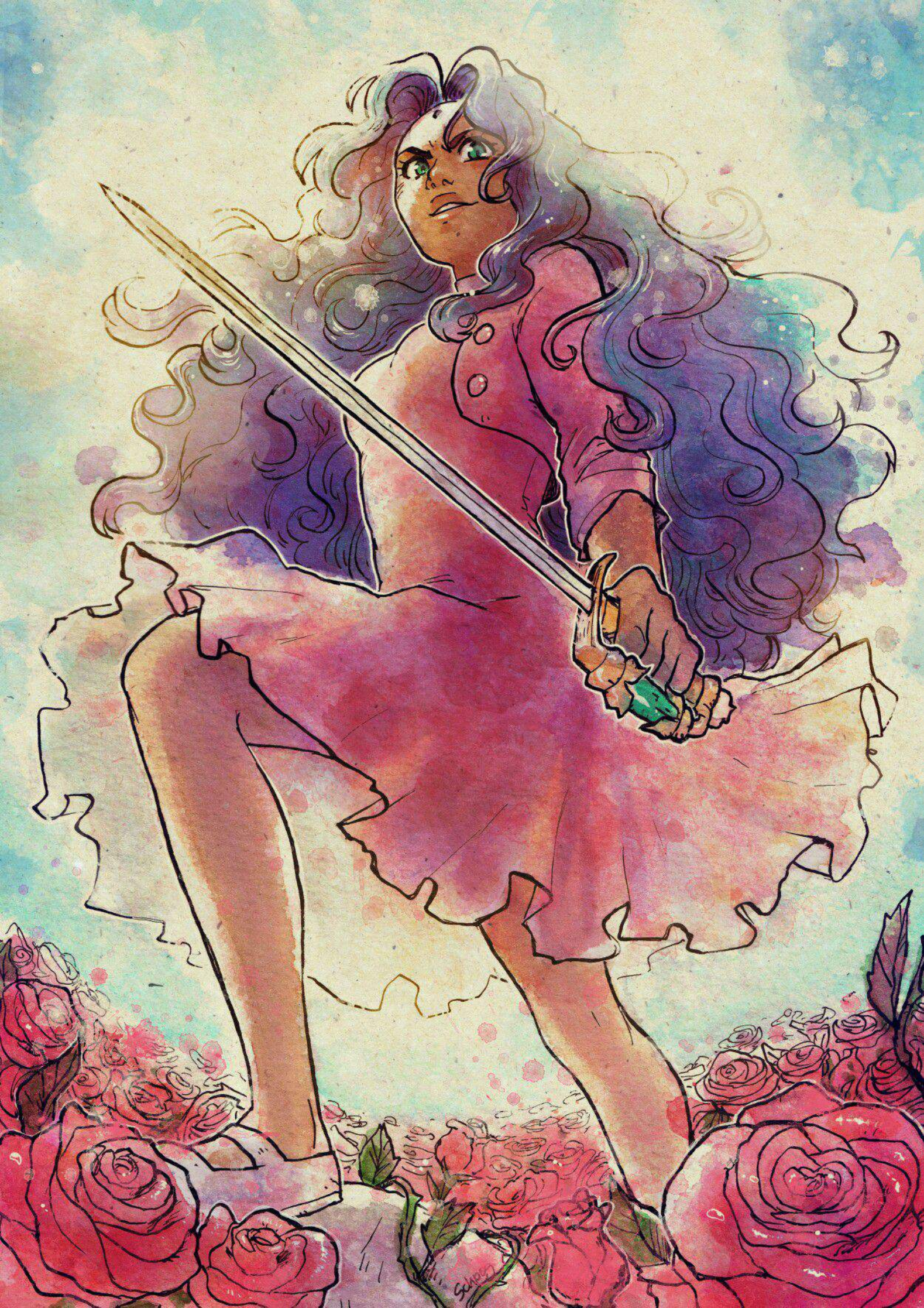
[Foxiea](#)

I lost her to the apocalypse
Forgotten to this world
But her bravery
Has set me free;
Her modest revolution

I go in search of the promised place
Where my prince does slumber
My love, I pray,
We'll reunite someday;
My hopeful revolution

I will find her on my future's edge
Her pure white rose in bloom
And with her hand in mine
Together we shine;
Our destined revolution











together

You always knew you'd eventually move as far away from your past mistakes as you possibly could, to move into a city that would accept you and try to live a new life away from your old problems, but you never would've expected the company you'd end up keeping along the way.



CW: misogyny, mentions of violence & scars & past-in-show trauma

together.

[@j_trsh](#)

i.

With your hand gripped tightly to the wrist of the woman in front of you, you shuffle deeper into the screaming crowd. You can barely tell where you are; you're much too short to look over, though given how many people here look way too menacing for your own good, maybe hiding below is for the best.

"Goddamn parties, of all the times..." She's muttering under her breath, pulling you through all the noise. "God, I wanna knock these people out."

"P-please don't." You're already panicking enough as it is. She grips a bit uncomfortably tight for a moment, but calms herself down.

An hour and a half ago, you had left the airport, a long, painful trip to your new home. You were both supposed to take a train to one station, and then take the bus to your new apartment. Then the train station you needed to stop at had technical difficulties. Okay, fine. You went to the station before, and you walked to where you would've stopped normally. Problem solved, no more issues.

"You have a hand free?" She takes her phone out and hands it off to you. "I know we're close, but I don't know which specific building we're in. Look it up for me?"

"Why can't you?"

"I need this hand." She showcases why, gently nudging a man aside so you can both pass. "Consider it our one means of protection. Shouldn't lose it."

The bus didn't come. And then the next bus didn't come, followed by the backup alternate bus, followed by checking the first bus stop again just to be sure, by which point you bothered to look it up and it turns out that there's a festival happening which shut down the entire street you live on. Which means you're walking home, in the dark, along these sidewalks you've never before crossed, surrounded by hundreds of screaming drunks, all of whom outsize you greatly.

Your name is Nanami Kiryuu, and you are absolutely fucking terrified.

"O-okay, three buildings down from here." You're trying not to sound as scared as you are. "The red one, there's a cafe right next to the entrance."

"Got it." She tries to quicken the pace.

There's a lot of men looking at you. They keep saying things. You're pretty sure none of what's coming out from them is good, but you're so far gone from all the overstimulation that you have no idea what most of them are saying. One of them keeps following you. You don't like this.

"Helloooo there, pretty lady."

His hand keeps getting closer to you. Your nails grip into your friend's wrist.

"What're you doing hanging out with that scrawny shit over there?"

Please go away.

"Hey." His tone's getting angrier. "Stop getting so clingy with your little guy-pal."

Please go away, please please please don't do this.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to hang out with a real m—"

She catches his hand before he can touch you.

"Lay one finger on her," she threatens, eyes glowing with hatred, "And I will fucking end you."

The man realizes what he got into, and skitters off.

"Asshole." She looks ready to kill someone, but calms herself down enough to remember where she was going. "Is is the place?"

Red building, cafe up front, entrance right next to it, just like the phone showed. You both hurry through the door, past the lobby, and quickly catch your breath on the stairs, standing between floors.

"Hey, um, Nanami." The girl with you begins to shake. "Did I... handle that well?"

"About as well as anyone could have."

"Are you sure?" She's starting to tear up. You quickly open up your arm in response, and she immediately clings to it.

"Yeah." You hold her tight, letting her sob into your shoulder. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Your name is Nanami Kiryuu, and you are terrified. Not just because of this, but because you're a complete mess of a human being, with no awareness of how to deal with the real world. You've been a terrible person for so much of your life, and quite frankly, you don't deserve anyone to ever get close to you.

"That's... that's good."

And this girl in front of you, of all the people to have stuck by your side for this long, despite everything you've done, is Utena Tenjou, the most honest, genuine, selfless woman you've ever met in your entire life, trapped in the kind of world to take advantage of that.

You don't really know what you two are, if you're real, genuine friends, if you're long-known acquaintances or just two bitter women seemingly stuck with each other until death, but even then, stuck with each other you both are. You need her—and as strange as it might sound, she might need you, too.

"It's okay. You did good, alright?"

ii.

When you ran away from Ohtori Academy, you didn't really know what you should do next; you had a plan for getting out with as many things to sell off as you could hold in a few bags, but there was a part of you that never actually expected to go through with it, much less successfully execute it without someone catching you. For the walk out of Ohtori, and the town surrounding it, you were ecstatic, for the walk into a different, real town, made out of real buildings instead of metaphors, it was setting in that you never prepared to get this far, and then, when you finally realized that most pawn shops wouldn't let a small girl sell off large swaths of expensive items for hundreds of thousands of dollars without suspicion, you were completely lost.

You'd only lived a life of luxury up until that point. Suddenly, you were lower than even the proles you'd spend so much time mocking as a child—but luckily for you, they made shelters for those kinds of people.

You had no idea how to do anything, and because you sounded crass and smug to all these strangers working at the shelter, nobody was willing to help you... but then, after all the teenagers started coming back after school, someone you knew waltzed right in.

"Uuuuugh." Utena just woke up, after you both immediately clonked out upon getting your keys and heading into your new home. "I wanna go outsiiiiide."

"Not for another hour." You've been up for a few hours, though you probably should have slept some more.

"C'mon, it can't be so bad." She's incredibly antsy from not being able to do a morning run.

"Do you want to spend the rest of the day with a migraine?" You tap your phone, showing a jet lag calculator timing down. "No light. We're waiting another hour."

"Bleeeehh."

When she walked in that day, though, you didn't even catch on that it was her until someone called her name. Gone was her ignorant smiles of innocence, all happy and positive,

and in its place was an aura of power potent enough to where most people were terrified of her. Cuts and bruises all over her from head to toe, like she had just fought a small gang within the past hour, and a grimace strong enough to the point that you were surprised her jaw didn't implode from all the pressure.

Of everyone in that shelter, of all the workers and volunteers and kids, you were the only one to have ever asked what even happened to her—and she seemed to have hundreds of stories on hand to explain to you with.

There's a pattern in them that goes a bit like this: she'd stumble upon someone being bullied, and she'd try to stop it. The bullies try to taunt her, and then at some point... something happens. It always seemed to be small and meaningless, but you know she exploded in response to it, because even trying to recall it to you would make her tense and angry. Things escalate from there, multiple people hold her back and calm her down, and by the time it's all done she's either suspended or expelled from the school.

Her triggers always seemed so unrelated to each other, at first. Why does someone poking you in the ribs cause the exact same reaction as them threatening to kill everyone you love? How are you stoic in the face of a man pulling a knife up to you, but he mentions one thing about playing hero and that's when you lose all sense of reason?

"Helloooooooo." Utena's waving her hand directly in front of your eyes. "You alive in there?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." You've probably been staring off into the distance remembering this stuff, haven't you. "Just kinda tired, is all."

"If we're gonna feel like this anyways, it shouldn't matter too much if we go out early." She's managed to sit herself down next to you, though she's still doing stretches to get herself moving. "I don't see the big deal."

"It'll be a lot worse than this, trust me." Honestly, you're kind of wishing for more than just an extra hour of no sunlight right about now. "We should just try to rest until then."

While she kept talking about all these fights she got into, you had absolutely no idea what to make of them—and God, if you weren't so terrified of where you were back then, you probably would have been the exact same condescending, smug piece of shit you always were in response—but terrified you were, so you just kept listening and listening, and by some point there became a mention of how they'd call her the Prince Charming who never saves the princess, and the tense anger she kept holding made into something more desperate, her fists weakly trying to tighten like she was holding onto something for dear life.

She was trying to save people, constantly, yet she didn't want to be reminded of the fact. She hated being seen as a hero. No, more specific than that—she hated the consequences of failing as a hero.

There was a reason for that, right?

Did Anthy do this to you?

You blurted it out by complete accident, in that completely awkward asshole way you'd always do. You were expecting a violent backlash, the same things she'd do to all those other people who made her remember Anthy, and instead of that, you were met with a hug, tightly wrapped around you. She'd quietly talk about her the same way a widow would talk about their dearly departed, trying to hide all the pain with happy memories, and every way Anthy would act in these stories felt... familiar.

She was the polar opposite of you, you thought, but as Utena kept talking, the more it just seemed like she was a vision of you in an alternate universe, where you never stumbled into learning how to resist the system designed to suck the life out of you, the one where you never got away. Every time she gave an anecdote about her, you seemed to have your own on hand that could almost repeat it word-for-word.

It wasn't until her older brother was mentioned that you caught onto why.

"Alright, you're definitely not just doing that because you're tired." She has her hand on your shoulder. "You doing okay?"

"Yes?" You're confused.

"I mean, like, maybe this room's just too humid or whatever, but I'm pretty sure people don't cry when they're doing fine."

"I'm crying?" Your fingers run over your face, now a mild damp of tears. "Oh. I am."

"Yeah, you need to stop doing that." She starts to pat her lap. "Wanna lay down?"

"I-I guess." God, who are you kidding, of course you do. You quickly lay your head onto her, and she starts stroking your hair to calm you down.

"Keep your eyes closed. I'll check the clock for us."

"O-okay." You're really bad at admitting that you need this, to yourself or anyone else, but she never seems to mind. That's something that'd always catch you off guard.

She's always been this nice, too. You thought she was just being a selfish hero-type whenever she did it at Ohtori, and like, you weren't exactly wrong in some sense, but even then it was misguided, not egotistical. She really did just want to help you, which meant that someone actually just wanted to help you. She didn't do it because you were pretty, or wanted

to spend your money or use you as some utility to hold power over and then throw away, she did it because she thought that's what good people are supposed to do and she wanted to be good.

You thought you were alone all that time, only in contact with an abusive brother and three friends who ended up always hating you, when a person who wanted to be a genuine, honest-to-god friend was there with you, and because that place screwed your entire perception of reality to shit, you ignored it—and because it screwed her perception, too, she never knew how to handle it. If it wasn't inadvertently hurting someone else, it was self-destructive, pushing her body's limits until it broke under all the weight.

It's not that she wanted to be flawed or selfish. It's that she wasn't taught how to be a truly good person. Nobody there was.

"Hey, what did I say?" She caught you with your eyes open, staring at her hand. "Eyes closed, c'mon."

"When did you get this mark?" You see it close to her wrist, small and kind of curved, but clearly deep. "It looks new."

"Oh, that." She seems so calm about it. "Think it came from last night. You held onto me pretty tight with your nails, after all."

"Oh." You really should just close your eyes, but you're too fixated on this. "It hurt, didn't it?"

"I guess? I dunno, it didn't really do all that much to me, I've had much worse—"

You instinctively hold her arm close to your chest.

"...Nanami."

"I did this."

"C'mon, it's not that bad. It'll heal in a few days at most."

"But I did this. "

"But you didn't mean to, right? And it helped you. I might've not noticed that creep otherwise."

"But—"

"No more buts." She manages to wriggle her arm free, and holds it away from you until you close your eyes again, which you comply with. "It's gonna take a lot more than a nail mark for me to stop helping you, y'know."

God, she's too nice. You always kept her away because you thought that nobody was that kind without an ulterior motive, but she just wanted to be that kind. Anyone could just be that kind because they think that's the right thing to do.

You were a lost child who didn't know how to do a single thing in the real world, and even after all of the things you've done, she was still wanting to help you the entire way, helping you learn how to cook and pay for things. The world tried to force her kindness away—and you were complicit in it!—and Jesus Christ, even after being harassed and vilified and stabbed through the goddamn back, somehow her selflessness still stood there, unwavering if not still damaged.

If she could still be that good, after all that's happened to her? Maybe you still have a chance in this world.

iii.

Against all odds, you actually got things accomplished today, being able to get some things for your new apartment. Nothing really fancy, since you should probably save all the really big furniture for a taxi run when you both have a lot of energy, but you were able to get some towels for the shower and a small lamp to light things up without it being too bright.

Mostly, though, you spent a lot of time in a lot of different cafes and restaurants, since Utena wanted to go out and explore the new city she's in, and you needed a constant supply of tea lest you pass out on the sidewalk, so this seemed like a really good compromise. You were a bit too out of it to really acknowledge much when you weren't in the comfort of an air-conditioned room with a nice cup of Earl Grey, having to just get Utena to lead you everywhere by hand, but even when she was stuck indoors, Utena seemed calmer than she'd ever been before in her entire life, probably because she isn't getting weird looks all the time for existing.

Whenever anyone around you in the shelter talked about safe places for anyone to go to, regardless of identity or sexuality, Vancouver was a name that would keep popping up. It seemed like a natural fit for you two, and, at least from the first glance you're getting here, it worked perfectly; there's even a cute lil' queer-centric street, adorned with rainbows all over, with lots of people who seem to be just like you! There's a cynical part of you that knows this is probably ruled by corporatism more than anything, but given how anywhere near where you used to live had nothing but ratchety old men screaming about mental illnesses the moment

anything even mildly disconnected from heterosexuality was even implied, this is basically heaven to you.

It's now later in the evening, the sun's just about to come down, and, while you lounge on the porch to your new apartment, you're trying to get Utena to help you order takeout.

"Is there a ramen place around here?"

"There's a lot, yeah." You're scrolling through a list of them now. A lot of the restaurants you passed mentioned a phone app that can do takeout for you, instead of awkwardly stuttering your order to some poor soul over a phone line. "Want me to go through them?"

"Actually, wait, maybe pho." Utena's lazing over the rails, and if you didn't already know how good her sense of balance is, you would think she was about to fall right over. "There's probably a few pho places around here."

"I'd assume thirteen counts as 'a few' to you?"

"Wait, really?" She almost trips over herself with how quickly she springs over your shoulder in response, glancing at the full list. "Holy shit, that's a lot of pho."

"We live in a city now, Utena." Admittedly, the sheer quantity of restaurants that exist near you at all is still rather overwhelming to you. "There's gonna be at least thirteen of basically anything."

"Is there thirteen Indian restaurants?"

"I thought we were getting pho."

"Yeah, but what if I wanted Indian?" She's right back to stretching over the rails again.

In the sentence "you're trying to get Utena to help you order takeout", trying would be the key word. She's not exactly someone who'd you say is well known for her acute decision-making, and now that she's tired, it's even worse.

"Alright, Indian it is, then."

"Okay wait, hang on, I didn't say I wanted—"

"I'm hungry and we need to order something." You really want to be stern about this sort of thing. "You need to actually decide on something."

"Okay okay, fine, can I at least have the phone for a sec?" She holds her hand up, and you give it off to her. "It'll be faster if I just go through all the options."

"Right." You still feel bad whenever you feel like you need to scold her, though. "You... can take your time if you need to."

"Wait, seriously?"

"I dunno! I feel like I was rude, is all."

“Eh, you’re justified.” She’s digging through the menu for each restaurant. “Didn’t I spend like ten minutes choosing between coffee sizes today? It’s fine.”

“I guess.” You kinda suck at pushing much of anything, don’t you. “God, I’d be really bad at raising kids.”

“Oh, probably.” She digs right to the bottom of a menu, but one item in particular seems to claw her eyes wide open on reaction to seeing. “Oh oh oh! This one!”

Woah, she actually definitely chose something that quickly. You check what she’s pointing towards.

“Utena, this is...”

“You’ve had it before, right?” She’s unreasonably excited over this. “I’m pretty sure you have, anyway. It’s really tasty, trust me.”

Shaved ice, strawberry flavored. The menu tries to make it sound a lot more complicated than that, but that’s all it really is. This is, apparently, the one thing in a restaurant that she can so definitively want that it took her thirty seconds for a decision that usually takes forever.

“You do know what shaved ice is, right?”

“Duh? It’s ice that’s shaved, Nanami. Explains itself.”

“It’s also not real food, Utena.” You have a sneaking suspicion why she wants this so much, but she hasn’t eaten all day, and flavored ice isn’t exactly going to count as a lunch substitute.

“We’re supposed to be getting a meal.”

“It’s good, though!” She quickly swipes back up to the other, not-dessert foods on the menu.

“See? There’s other stuff here, you can get other stuff.”

“We can get other stuff.” You try your second attempt at a stern enough voice to sound serious. “You need to get actual nutrients into you. You’re getting something else, got it?”

Oh no, she’s getting that sad puppy-pout on her face.

...

“You can get the shaved ice if you order something else from here.” God, you’re way too easy.

“Yesssss!” She picks the cheapest thing she’s willing to eat on the menu along with the ice, and hands the phone back. At least this place has some stuff you’d actually want; you quickly get some fish and chips and finish ordering.

Why is it so easy to make you change your mind, anyways? You guess there's some fear that you'll hurt someone because you had no awareness of their feelings, like all those times you'd do that so long ago, so you just give in before a decision you want to be stubborn about ever gets to that point.

Isn't that better, though? If you just be more tolerable to what other people want? Maybe it's not if it's something that you'd know would hurt you, but, like, you don't think giving into shaved ice or whatever is going to do much harm. Maybe you should try and be more aware of this sort of thing when a more serious problem comes up—

“Doing that thing that you did this morning?”

“Mhm.” You probably look like a zombie when this happens, but whatever. “I dunno, I'm just thinking about past stuff.”

“Ah.” Now that she has nothing to put off through stretching, she's leaning back on the porch door. “How do you do that stuff so easily, anyways? Thinking about back then is...”

“It sucks, yeah.” You slump back right beside her, tired as you are. “But, like, I sucked back then, too, right? I should try to learn from that.”

“I suppose.” She's staring off into the distance, and making what you'd presume to be the same reflecting-type face you were making. “Iunno. Any time I try to do that, everything just hurts.”

“Hey, you don't need to right now.” You put your arm around her. “This stuff's draining, you've already done way too much today as it is.”

“That's... fair, yeah.” She's still staring.

“Hey, c'mon, cut that out.” You wave your hand in front of her, and she shocks herself back into reality in response. “If I shouldn't be doing that, neither are you.”

“R-right.”

She's shaking again.

“Alright, that's enough overthinking for you today.” You hold onto her, and get her to stop looking out into the sky. “Anything that'd help you calm down?”

“I dunno?” She glances down behind you.

“Hmmm.” When she's like this, there's usually this one thing that always helps her out. “You want me to set up the sleeping bags?”

“No!” She blurts it out so obviously without thinking that she regrets it within seconds.

“Okay, I mean, not ‘no’, but...”

“So a maybe.”

“I—okay, not a ‘maybe’, either.” She’s getting embarrassed over it, the goofball. “I mean, it’d be nice! But you don’t have to do that if that’s not—”

“Okay, I’ll go set it up now.” You can comfortably say she’s confirmed wanting it, might as well skip the rest of her worries. “Just gimme a sec, alright?”

iv.

The set-up that Utena asked for is one you’re very well-acquainted with, and it doesn’t take you particularly long to make it all fit together, though this one doesn’t exactly come with the proper kind of bedding she’s probably more wanting it to be like.

Two bed-like areas, pointing in opposite directions, positioned in such a manner that there’s a spot in between them to hold hands, large open window on one side to see the night sky with. Even in the shelter, where you’re never supposed to move the beds, you’d always just quietly move the beds once all the workers were out, and then you’d wake up early to move them back into place when they came back.

Just to add the cherry on top, you fold up one of the new towels in the center, a pillow for your hands to hold on. With that, your sleeping arrangements—Utena’s sleeping arrangements, more importantly—are complete.

“Okay, but this really is kind of weird, though.” She’s unzipping her sleeping bag to lay on it, still kind of anxious about it. “Like, it’s only comfortable to me because, like...”

“Because it was how you slept during your most comfortable moments with the girl you were in love with but didn’t realize until it was too late?”

“Y-yeah?” She is now hiding her face in the bag out of embarrassment. “That’s weird, though! It’s weird that I ask you to do that!”

“We’re two weird people who’ve lived weird lives, Utena.” You’ve plopped yourself similarly onto your bag, and you hold your hand out. “Take the small comforts when you can.”

“Bleeeh.” She immediately clings right onto your hand. “Shouldn’t I be comfortable about all of this, though? Like, we’re in a city that accepts us, I already met new friends and everything.”

“Utena, trauma doesn’t just magically go away just because—wait, friends?”

“Yeah, just from when we were out today.” She lazily drags her messenger bag from behind her and scrounges inside. “Like, they gave me their numbers and stuff to text them with.”

“...Their numbers.”

“Yup.” She dumps out what seems like dozens of paper scraps onto the floor. “I dunno, a lot of them were really nice to me.”

She... she knows why they're doing that, right?

“You do realize that they're not doing that to be friends?”

“They aren't?” She glances down at them with a bit of worry. “Oh. Were they just messing with me?”

This absolutely useless lesbian.

“It's not a bad thing, trust me.” The old you would be teasing her to death over this, but as much as the new you feels similarly, you'd rather not make her even more worried.

“Remind me to explain tomorrow?”

“Alright, yeah.” Her eyes still stick to the papers for a moment, but eventually goes back to you. “Tunno, having friends just sounds nice, right now.”

“That makes sense.” You get her to move the bag back so she can lay back down in position. “We need new people to be around that isn't just each other, after all.”

“I-I guess.”

There's a long silence. You're pretty sure she's thinking about something, but it doesn't seem to be the kind you associate with bad traumatic memories; she's responding to any gesture immediately, no staring off into space or anything, just a comfortable reflection. You leave her be, opting to just stroke her hand every once in a while.

She seems to have calmed down, at least. She can keep her eyes closed without immediately cracking them back open out of fear, and when you gently smile at her, you're met with her old smile, the genuine, optimistic one that's as bright as you remembered it.

If nothing else, you're thankful you can help her like this. It's the least you can do.

“Hey, um, Nanami.” Utena breaks the silence for a moment, as her fingers clutch against yours. “Can I ask a kinda weird question?”

“Sure?”

“D-do w-we...” She's having trouble saying it, so you patiently wait for her to compose herself. “count... as friends?”

“Obviously? Of course we do.”

“No, I mean, like...” She seems really scared to clarify, but does so eventually. “Tunno, like friend-friends.”

...Friend-friends? What is she talking about?

She means if you're both more than acquaintances, right? She's not, like, asking about something bigger than that? She doesn't even know about the literally dozens of people who were trying to hit on her, there's no way she thinks enough about that stuff to ask. Actually, no, what are you saying, it's Utena, if she was in love with someone she would definitely say it as awkward as—

Wait. Wait wait wait wait wait, hang on one second.

Did Utena just confess to me?

Her face immediately turns into a bright red.

"No!" Oh whoops she definitely heard that. "I mean, yes! Maybe? I don't know!"

"W-why are you asking?" You're pretty sure you're about as red-faced, too.

"Because I thought you'd know if we were!"

Wait, do you actually even know?

"Maybe?" You absolutely do not know in the slightest, for Christ's sake. "I, okay, not *maybe*, but not-not-maybe? Like, uh... I've never really actually known either?"

"Wait, hang on, if you don't, that means—" This woman has transformed her entire face into a tomato with how red it is. "Wait, so what are we, then?"

"I mean, if I knew, I'd have a pretty good answer to—okay, hold on." You're the only one who can try to not overcomplicate things here, Nanami, Jesus Christ hold it together. "Just... let's go back a step here. You didn't just ask that because you didn't know, right?"

"I mean, I'm just pretty sure nobody who's 'just friends' do the stuff we do!" She's clearly trying really hard not to immediately hide herself. "They don't hold hands all the time, they don't lay on each other's laps and stuff, they definitely don't recreate a bed that one of them used to do with the person they were in love with!"

"I dunno! Like I'm not good at knowing any of this, but I'm pretty sure friends are supposed to comfort one another!"

"Not like this!"

Oh jeez, she's back to shaking.

"Utena—"

"This isn't..." She's starting to do the thing she always does where she just hides into the closest thing in front of her. "This isn't what friends are supposed to do!"

"Utena, we're fine, please don't worry—"

“But people are gonna keep staring at us!” Unfortunately, the thing closest in front of her is you, and it’s really strange that she’s afraid of being too touchy-feely considering how her face is getting *way too close to your neck*.

“Utena, i–it’s fine, it’s okay–”

“No it isn’t!

She’s breathing into it.

“This always happens to us, Nanami!” She is breathing *VERY HEAVILY INTO IT*, oh god Nanami do something already!

“O–okay but can you just stop for a sec–”

Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK–

“This always happens, they always do this when we–”

“Utena.”

...

Alright, you wanted to do something to stop that, and your spur-of-the-moment planning resulted in you kneeled over top of her, still faced in the opposite direction while looking down, with her eyes fixated directly up at you in shock.

A very, uh... submissive kind of shock in her eyes, actually. You have never felt something more devoid of a friend-like tension with her than right now.

Hm.

Well, you have her full attention now, at least, and you’re pretty sure you have a good idea of what you should be telling her? So you’re either you’re about to prove her worries wrong, or prove them very, very right.

Here goes nothing.

“Okay, lemme ask you my own question to try and help you.” Finally, a time where the stern voice holds a good use. “How many times did we get that weird look today?”

“I mean...” She’s definitely certain there was one, but she sure is straining to find an example. “Okay, I didn’t see anyone, but that doesn’t mean–”

“So you didn’t notice anyone wanting to judge us?”

“Actually, um, I don’t think you were paying much attention, but someone did try to compliment us while we were going downtown.”

“Utena, that doesn’t count here, and you know it.” You have a point here, time to reel it in.

“You remember the kind of people who used to give us those looks, right?”

“I dunno?” She clearly just wants to say ‘anybody’, but she’s at least humoring you by considering it. “I guess old people?”

“Gross old people?”

“I mean, okay, they all kind of fit that brand of old straight men, yeah?”

“And what do you think their opinions on homosexuality look like?”

It takes a second, but she almost immediately eases her tension down to normal. You’re pretty sure it clicked, thank some kind of lord.

“Those kinds of people live by awful rules of how people should be doing things, Utena.” You shift to a more seiza-like position, kneeling right behind her so this stops feeling so weird. “We’re here to get away from those people, right? Give us some safety to be in public and not fear for ourselves.”

“Yeah, that... that makes sense, okay.” She breathes a sigh of relief, and there’s a brief moment of comfortable silence. You pat your lap, and she shifts right onto it, letting you pet at her hair.

Your name is Nanami Kiryuu, and you’re always terrified, more often than not. Not for anything in particular, but for anything potentially harmful—the fear that anything you utilise, your words or otherwise, will be used to hurt others, like they used to be. There was once a time when doing this was scary to you, to have her trust you so much that she could just lay herself on top of you, eyes closed and mind resting, putting her entire comfort into your hands.

You’re trying to be better than that, though. That’s the best you can do, given your circumstances.

“Okay, I can explain that reaction, though?” She seems somewhat worried to ask permission for it, so you silently nod for her sake. “It was just, um, the person I mentioned earlier definitely thought we were dating? It was just worrying me a lot since.”

“They definitely could’ve gotten that idea, sure, but that’s okay.” You’re scritchng behind her ears to keep her calmed down. For whatever reason, it seems to be really effective on her. “I don’t really know what we count as, either, but no matter what we end up being, this place is gonna be alright with it, okay?”

“O-okay.” She’s already rubbing back into your hand in response. God, she’s too cute.

This girl in front of you, the woman who’s managed to stay by your side this entire time, as you try and keep her calm as can be, is Utena Tenjou, the most honest, genuine, selfless

woman you've ever met in your entire life. Once, she was trapped in the kind of world to take advantage of that.

Maybe, in this new world you're in, it can be kinder to her in return.

"Wait, hold up, wasn't there supposed to be takeout coming by—"

Knock on the door, right on cue. You both laugh at the timing of that, and she sits up so you can get the food, paying for the meal and thanking the delivery man.

"Lucky you, they actually planned for someone to willingly get solidified flavored water delivered along with all this warm stuff and put it in another bag."

"Shush!" She sticks her tongue out at you, and you can't help but laugh. She still goes for the shaved ice first, naturally.

You don't really know what you two are, if you're just friends with an unbreakable bond, if you're so deeply in love that you come off as a happily decades-married couple bickering and holding hands, or if it's something strange and unique between those two things, something that can't ever be explained with mere words, only in emotions and acts of affection.

"Hey, Utena, can I have the hand back for a sec?"

"You still worried about the mark?"

"Not really. I just, er, kinda want it?"

"Oh. I mean, I can eat this with one hand, so if you want—"

You cling to it immediately.

"Thank you."

She looks perplexed. "For what?"

"I dunno." You keep it close to your cheek, holding one of the few genuine smiles you've ever had. "For everything, I guess."

"Pffft, you dork." Her giggle is as warm as it can be in response. "...Same goes to you, though."

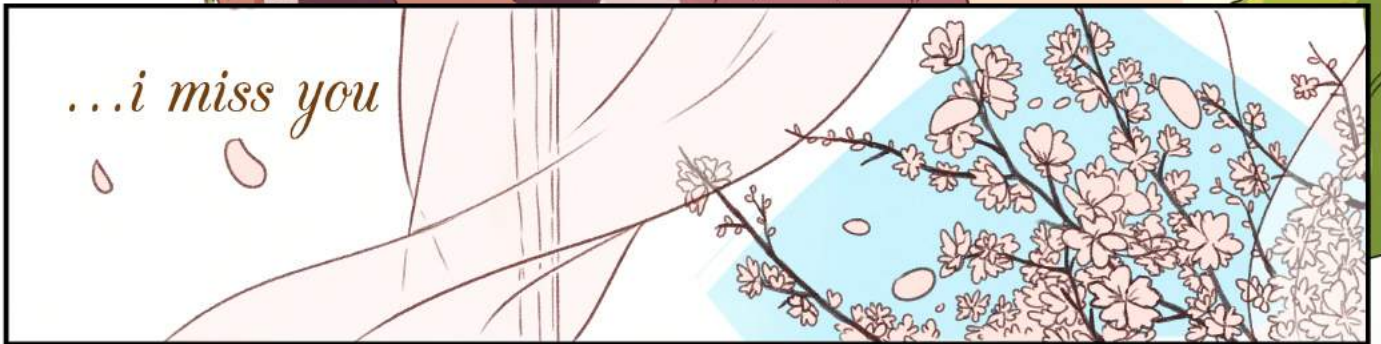
You care about her, more than you've cared about anyone before in your entire life. Maybe you have some equivalent to "love" for her, something as real and as powerful but different in how it acts, who knows, but what matters most is that it's there—and, as strange as it might sound to the anxiety in the back of your head, who still tries to push forward with confusion to why she'd ever want to even come near you, she has that same feeling for you, too.

You've both done well. More importantly, you've done it all together. What that "together" is now, whatever that together might end up being in the future, you'll never trade for the world.

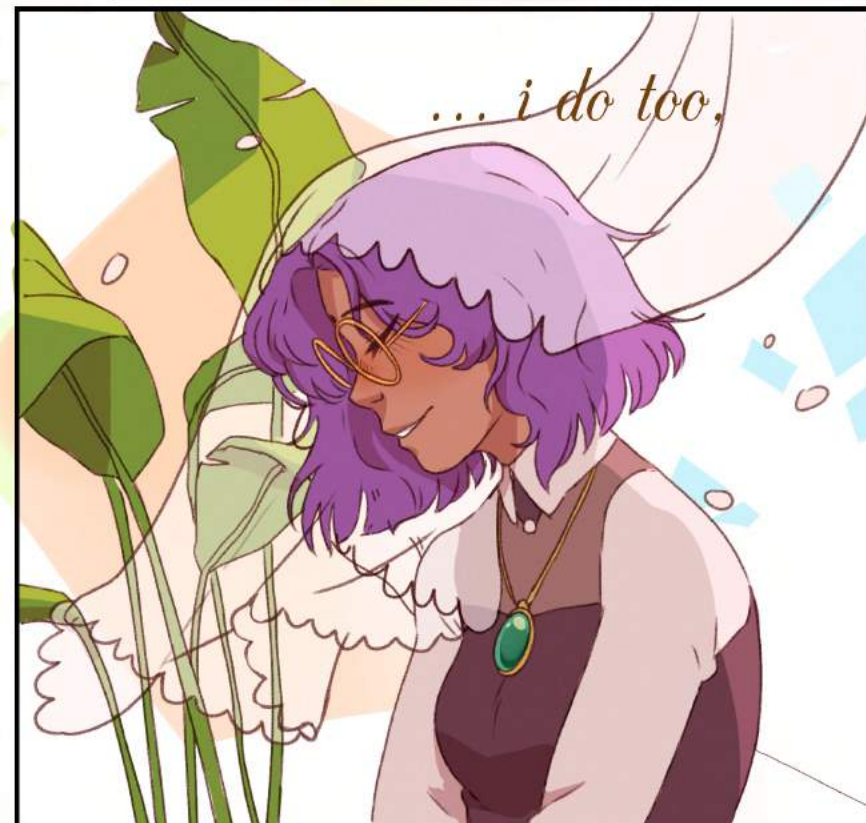
i guess things got messed up but...



...i miss you



... i do too,



*but we are here now,
together.*



thank you for the tea



you know,

*this reminds me of back then
you always made me tea*





ISN'T THIS ENOUGH?

Welcome to Juri and Shiori's vehicle repair shop – cash only. Lost girls come by and pass on through.



Isn't This Enough

[Iain Macnab-Stark](#)

Have you heard, have you heard? The hawk has lost its wings. But what the cuckoo lost was its 'intent'.

Juri was woken from an ungraceful nap against the wall by a spanner tossed in the vague direction of her head. "Huh?"

"Customer!" Shiori yelled from the front room. "Wait till you see who."

Juri dragged herself out of the corner and hurriedly patted down her crumpled overalls, picking her way through the cluttered storage-room into the brighter-lit front. A strangely small amount of sunlight made it in from outside but it was still worlds better than the darkness of the interior.

She stepped out to meet the customer, and...there, in a sleek but soul-crushingly functional family hatchback, was Anthony Himemiya.

Freed from Ohtori and her brother, she had bloomed; or 'exploded' might be more accurate. She'd struck out pretty far from traditional femininity, sporting ripped jeans and punk accessories, revealing when she lifted the rounded sunglasses eyes livelier than they ever remembered seeing back then.

"Oh my! If it isn't Arisugawa and Takatsuki. Well, how on Earth have you been?" Now *there* was something that hadn't changed: her damn inscrutability. She made the simple act of smoothly remembering her old classmates' surnames suggest that she knew *everything*. And there was absolutely no hope of gauging how sincere her friendliness was.

"We're...we're well," Juri said, not sure if she believed that. "Been a while..."

"It has! School was interesting, wasn't it?"

Juri froze. What was going through her mind wasn't, *That's an interesting way to put 'traumatic'*, or anything so altruistic. It was: *How did I act towards you, back then? Did I do anything that would make you vengeful?* She'd been so wrapped up in

self-pity and longing she'd barely spared a thought for anyone else. Had she ever dismissed Anthy? Bullied her? Attacked her?

She barely registered the small talk or what was wrong with the car, setting about the repair work on autopilot as she wracked her memory. So hard to recall anything that wasn't Shiori, Ruka, the occasional flash of Tenjou or...the glass prince.

When she tuned back in, Anthy sounded much more casual. "So, Shiori, still breaking hearts?"

"Ah...no, we're..." Juri could feel the eyes on her from the other end of the car. "We're together now, properly."

"Oh? How delightful! The wonders of healthy communication, I suppose!" Anthy said, so sickeningly sincere that she couldn't possibly be. *Her* eyes seemed to be fixed on the corner of the room; she'd spotted the sword, grease-stained and neglected, half-obscured by the toolboxes that kept it balanced against the wall.

"It's fixed. Wheel shouldn't give you any more trouble." Juri stood up, wiping her brow before shoving an elbow onto the window's edge and leaning towards Anthy, consciously smudging the door with grease. "Cash only, please, and no paper trail. We're not exactly official here. But hey...how is it on your end? Did things work out with you and Tenjou?"

"Ah, well..." Anthy's head bobbed from side to side. "Who can say what goes through her head? She's out there somewhere, but I haven't seen her since...well, I'm still searching."

"Good luck," Juri said, allowing a genuine smile as Anthy pulled back out into the sunlight.

"What do you think?" Shiori asked after the car had vanished, sneaking up and wrapping her arms around Juri from behind. "Should we be more open, or do I have to keep on guessing what's in your heart?"

Juri pulled Shiori around to in front of her by her overalls' collar, kissing her lips and her neck. "I want you. You want me. Isn't that enough?"

Shiori leaned into her, giving rapt attention to stroking her hair. “It’ll do, for now.”

Have you heard, have you heard? The peacock has lost its feathers. But they were painted on to begin with.

“Wake the hell up!”

“Ahh!” Today, Juri had cunningly arranged pillows around her head to shield from any tossed spanners, which was probably why the sharp impact had come to her knee. She stumbled forwards, blinking away her drowsiness. “Customer?”

“Customer.”

It was indeed a customer, and this time she didn’t blame Shiori for not recognising her. All the same, you’d think the car would have been more distinctive— it looked for all the world like *that* car. The car it had been too early for any of them to drive. It wasn’t quite the same car, but it was just similar enough to stir the pits of their stomachs. And Wakaba Shinohara, of all people, was at the wheel.

“Hey...” Juri said, making her way through the piles of clutter towards the car. “It’s been a while! To be honest, if this isn’t rude, I didn’t really expect to ever see you outside.”

“Outside?” Wakaba leaned out the window, head tilting. “I’m sorry, have we met? Maybe you have me mistaken for someone else.”

“Juri,” Shiori whispered, swaying back to lean towards Juri’s ear. “She’s...”

Juri nodded. She remembered those final days, after Tenjou and Himemiya’s escape but before their own. Those two had vanished from her memory within a week. And the familiar mist was over Wakaba’s eyes.

She hadn’t left Ohtori, not really. It was still in her.

Neither answered when she idly asked if they had a boss, the boyfriend of one of them perhaps? They did the repair job in silence and as quickly as they could

manage, just wanting to be rid of this joint reminder of it all—the driver, the way they used to be, and the car, a vivid symbol of the Prince.

A shiver passed over Shiori as she tried her hardest not to remember him, the ride, the duel, the truth, any of it. Juri didn't bother—she remembered it all, infallibly, every day.

They got the car fixed up quickly, improvised anything that would have required her to come back in for a check-up to the next best thing, and sent her on her way as fast as they could; Juri slammed the garage door the instant she pulled away and ran to wrap Shiori in her arms, feeling the shakes. "I know."

"We were like that—"

"I know."

"He—"

"You're safe now. You're with me." They hung there, clinging together in the darkness.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

Have you heard, have you heard? The chick has lost its way. But will finding it make it happy?

Today what was hurled was a dirty rag. "Coming, coming," Juri muttered, shaking herself awake and brushing hair out of her face. She followed Shiori into the front room, and...somehow she still wasn't getting used to these reunions. In fairness, this one was pretty spectacular.

Nanami Kiryuu sat with ridiculous platform heels resting haphazardly on the dash of some enormous pink monstrosity of a vehicle, cocking an eyebrow at the unkempt mechanics from behind oversized shutter shades.

“Is this hideous corner really where you’ve ended up?” she crowed. “Don’t worry, I’ve heard about this place. I’ve got cash, so check the engine *thoroughly*, will you. I just didn’t expect you of all people...”

“Well, you know,” Juri said, opening up the bonnet, “life takes you all over.” Nanami leapt out to stomp around the garage, peering into the back room. “Dingy, isn’t it... are you okay with this?”

“We get by.” Shiori came over with the toolbox, rubbing Juri’s back while she was bent over the car. “And we have each other, so it’s not too bad.”

“You have...?” Suddenly Nanami came to a halt, hiding her face with her hand. “You... ‘have’ Juri, as in...friends, or co-workers, or...” She coughed furiously.

“As in lovers. Is there a problem?”

“N-No! I’m just...uh...interested.”

“Interested?” Juri stood up, wiping her forehead. Hearing that from a man would’ve been instant alarm bells. But hearing it from Nanami Kiryuu... “What do you mean?”

“I just wondered if you could tell me what it’s, uh, like. You know, uh.” Nanami stared at her feet. “Girls, loving girls.”

Juri laughed. “Oh, I have plenty of experience with it! You know...” Slowly she made her way towards Nanami, lifting her chin to make their gazes meet and dropping her voice into a hypnotic tone. “You just start noticing the way her hair falls, the way she walks, her eyes... you think, wow, her voice is pretty... that sort of thing. Hey, are you okay?”

Nanami stumbled back, attempting to slap the red out of her face. “F-F-F-Fine! I’m...” She took a deep breath, snapping back into her composure with impressive speed. “...fine, thank you.”

“Nanami...” Juri turned serious. “Is there a girl you like?”

The resulting silence lasted almost a minute before Shiori broke in with: “Do you want to—”

“Do I want to what? Sit down and have a nice talk about it?” Nanami turned a withering look on her. “Do you know who you’re talking to?” She strode back past them, towards the light.

“Hurry up and fix my car, peons.”

They did, and once satisfied she pulled out in a stylish and highly unsafe swerve, giving a smirk over the half-opened window as the car radio faded in. “Be happy. You were useful.”

“I think...” Juri said, as they watched the atrocious mass of pink and chrome speed off, “...that means ‘thank you’.”

That one, least, was going to be alright.

Have you heard, have you heard? The hen has lost its egg. But all that was inside was that which couldn’t crack the world’s shell.

The next morning was the most pleasant; Juri had unconsciously tensed for some hurled object, but was woken by a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“Mmh...customer?”

“You got it.”

She pulled herself away from the wall, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and stepping through into the main room. And then stopped dead in her tracks, wide-eyed. Utena Tenjou astride a sleek black motorcycle, in full biker leathers, hair flowing free as she whipped off her helmet, was altogether too much for Juri’s brain to handle.

“The engine’s got a bit of a stutter,” she said. (Had her voice always been that deep?) “Could you give it a look over?”

“Y-Yes, of course,” Juri managed, breaking out of her trance aided by a playful smack to the head from Shiori. “Only, could you say all that again?”

“Wait...Juri?” Utena swung off the bike, face brightening instantly. “Juri, Shiori! It’s been too long. You guys, uh, got out?”

“Yeah, I...” Shiori shrank behind Juri. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s like that.” Utena’s eyes narrowed. She’d spotted the discarded sword too.

“Actually...didn't you have a whole fencing career ahead of you? Star of the school? What are you doing here ?”

“The last couple duels...” Juri headed over to the back of the room, kicking the junk off the floor and reaching for the sword. The instant she took it up, her hand started shaking furiously, until it fell loosely from her grip. “Like you said. It's like that.”

“And you're okay with that?”

“What I want doesn't matter. This is reality.”

Utena grimaced. “I don't know if you went through the same things I did, but I just...don't want you to let the marks left by that man define you.”

“As if it's that easy!” Juri laughed.

“No, you're right. It's not easy at all. But maybe I can help a little.” Utena's hand dipped into her jacket pocket, and produced a familiar ring.

Juri flinched back. “Why do you have—”

Utena held the rose crest up to her lips, whispering, “*Grant me the power.*” On contact it shattered, as though it was made of glass or she of something immeasurably stronger, producing a blinding flash. When the light faded, she held an ornate sword—that sword. “En garde.”

“I can't...” Juri backed towards the wall, Shiori still hiding behind her.

Utena advanced. “Yeah, I guess it'd take a miracle, right?” She made an experimental lunge—and was blocked by Shiori, clutching an old piece of metal piping in both hands.

“Please don't say that,” she said, forcing Utena back a step. “The ‘miracle’ Juri wished for, keeping locked in her heart for so long...” She fought back, moving with the muscle-memory of duels past. “It was just the childish hope that things would magically work out! She had to lose that to pursue me for real.”

“And that's good! But in rejecting your fake miracle, haven't you forgotten what the real thing is?” Utena began to fight in earnest, easily outmanoeuvring Shiori and pushing her towards the corner of the room. A quick feint left the mechanic open and Utena raised her blade with who knew what intent—

—only for it to clatter to the floor a moment later, Juri standing between them with sword in hand, her grip steady, her stance flawless. After a second she recovered her self-awareness and looked down at herself in shock.

“How did I...?”

Utena smiled, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Love...a love that’s already been hard-won and carved into your heart...is the only real miracle I’ve ever encountered. Sorry that I had to be harsh, but I couldn’t leave you like that.”

“I understand.” Juri glanced down—the sword of Dios had vanished. “You’re looking for Himemiya, aren’t you?” At the frantic look she received, she continued. “She was here recently. Headed west. She wants to see you.”

“Thank you,” Utena said, clearly holding back a lot more than that.

“Also! See if you can find Shinohara while you’re travelling. She needs waking up, too.”

The repairs didn’t take long, and as Utena pulled out into the road, she called back to them. “Shiori! You weren’t a bad duelist, either. Have Juri teach you some and you could make it, too.” Slamming down her visor she roared off into the horizon, leaving their poor gay hearts a-flutter all over again.

Have you heard, have you heard? The eagle has lost its cage. But first it had to stop making new cages for itself.

The next day, they spotted Kozue on a passing bus, eating a sandwich.

Hey, cars are expensive.









Let's have tea and laugh together
ten years from now, okay?



ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

Anthy lives and dies through a multitude of universes, from mundane coffee shops to weapon academies, to reunite with Utena once again.



Alternate Universe

[Whinyskeleton](#)

Anthony Himemiya stepped through the gates of Ohtori Academy and was met with a blinding flurry of stars. The world collapsed around her and her vision filled with an endless void, the universe dancing and colliding in orbit before her eyes before it was pulled, dizzyingly, back to her. The scene went black and before she knew it, she was opening her eyes in a place she had never seen before.

This was all she remembered about leaving the academy. Somehow, for some reason or another, her escape from that place had caused her to jump to an entirely new universe. Upon awakening in that foreign room, her brain had been flooded with information she didn't know she knew. Things like how she had a job, the directions to get there, her address, the dress code, her childhood- which was suddenly so much different than the childhood she remembered from the place she had come.

She stumbled out of bed and fell on the floor as two versions of herself competed to exist in her brain. If it hadn't been for her experience with multiple personas, she probably would've had a rougher time getting them to coincide together. She may have even forgotten Ohtori completely--- a kinder world would have let her.

It was as she sat on the floor, breathing heavily, coming to grips with her new age, new self, new life, that a sudden dread overcame her. *She was going to be late for work.* Perhaps it was because she had been in such a hurry to get ready and out the door that all reasonable thought had escaped her, but it wasn't until she was seated on the bus, headed safely for her destination that a few very important things came to her. The first was that she hadn't seen Chuchu all morning. She wondered if perhaps he had not followed her into this world. The other was the promise she made to herself to find Utena. She worried she wouldn't be able to find her here.

These doubts were assuaged slightly when she arrived at the cafe she worked at and was greeted by the opening shift. There on register was Miki, and at the espresso bar were Touga and Juri, pouring steamed milk and flirting with customers. Anthony

stood frozen for only a moment before heading into the back to put her things away and tie her apron. Of course her shock didn't appear on her face, she had too much experience hiding these things. If the student council was here then perhaps Utena could be as well? As she came back out behind the counter, Miki nodded at her and then to the small kitchen off to the side.

“You're bussing tables today. Nanami will be in later to help with the dishes.”

Anthony nodded, “Of course, Miki.” She noted out of the corner of her eye, the way his gaze lingered on her but she purposely ignored him. She no longer had any obligation to be nice to any of the members of the student council and that included him.

She spent the morning clearing and wiping down tables and, when she could, sneaking glances at her coworkers. It didn't appear to her that they were acting strangely. At least, they weren't acting suspicious in the way that she was. It didn't seem that they thought anything about this situation was out of the ordinary. When the flow of customers started slowing down, she went ahead and took her lunch. As she grabbed her bento out of the back, she felt someone approach her from behind. When she turned around she was confronted with Utena, standing before her. Her heart squeezed in her chest, their last moment together rushing through her mind. But the Utena before her just reached past her and grabbed her apron from behind Anthony's head. She looked down at Anthony and smiled cheerfully.

“You taking your lunch?”

Anthony searched Utena's face, looking into her eyes for any sign of recognition. It was then that she realized that... This wasn't her Utena. This person looked like Utena and sounded like Utena, but her eyes were more naive. She still had an arrogant confidence about her that her Utena had grown out of. Judging by the blush on her face, Anthony guessed that Utena had caught her staring, and she remembered that she was still waiting on an answer.

“Yes, I am.” she brushed past the Utena imposter and walked out of the cafe, to find someplace quiet to think about the predicament she was in.

Over the next couple of weeks, Anthy came to a few conclusions. First and foremost was that she was not going to find Utena here. There already was an Utena in this universe and as it was not hers, then the logical conclusion was that the Utena she was seeking was somewhere else. The other was that she needed to find a way out. When her weekend hit, she tried driving past the city limits, to perhaps leave the same way she had Ohtori, but every time she passed the “Leaving the City” sign, another sign would follow it only moments later reading she was entering the exact same city. It seemed she was stuck on a looped map.

And Chuchu still hadn’t shown up.

She enjoyed eating her lunches alone, feeding parts of her lunch to the squirrels that came up to her. These student council members– or her coworkers she guessed– crept her out in some unexplainable way. They were too... Nice. Almost as if they hadn’t endured centuries of repeated toying on their emotions at the hands of her and her brother. They smiled at her, and goofed off together, and made jokes. There had been more than one occasion that Anthy had watched Juri bicker playfully with Shiori, in this world, a customer that frequented the cafe, and had felt the need to vomit.

These people were happy... She didn't belong here.

It happened one evening while closing up and Anthy and Utena were alone together. They had stacked the chairs and finished sanitations, all that was left was to lock up. Neither of them had said a word to each other the entire time. As they walked out into the cool misty night, Utena turned to her.

“You know, you’ve been kind of different lately.” Anthy fished the keys out of her bag with a suddenly calculated precision.

“Have I?”

“Well I mean... I guess. It’s hard to really say. You don't sit with us anymore on your breaks and you don't talk to us any more– not that you said much in the first place, but now...”

"I apologize." Anthy locked the door and turned to cross the street but felt a hand on her wrist.

She looked back to see Utena's earnest gaze.

"If something's wrong, you can talk to us about it. Whatever it is--- we'll try to help!"

Anthy could have laughed. She ripped her hand away and stumbled into the street from her momentum. "Please don't presume."

As she went to turn around again, she was blinded by a white light and heard a screech followed by a loud thud before everything went dark.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in another unfamiliar bedroom, her brain yet again assaulted by new information.

It didn't take Anthy long to figure out she was jumping universes. It didn't take her long after to discover that the trigger for sending her to a new universe was her death. She didn't mind these fake deaths so much, not after the human pincushion treatment she endured at Ohtori, and grew accustomed quickly to offing herself and resetting if she found she didn't like the world or finding Utena in that universe was hopeless. It was like falling asleep on an airplane. Of course, there were worlds she enjoyed more than others. Some that she even chose to stay in, despite knowing the Utena was a knock off, simply because it was enjoyable to stay there.

And yet, despite herself, she found herself enjoying some of the Utenas as well. Sure, they weren't hers, but she missed Utena, and even if this one didn't know her the way her Utena knew her, they were still versions of her, and still had that certain something that charmed her to Utena in the first place.

However, as she passed from world to world, she picked up on a peculiar pattern. Even though she tried her hardest to find Utena as soon as possible, it was always Utena that found her first. She chalked it up to Utena's annoyingly chivalrous radar for damsels in distress but it was still a little unnerving.

When she reminisced about it, her favorite universe by far was the one where she owned a flower shop. All of her flowers came from her own garden at her home outside the city. She took care of honey bees and fed the wild animals that showed up on her back porch and in exchange, they took care of her garden and left her vegetables alone. It was one of the few worlds that allowed her to use her old nature magic.

And just like always, it was Utena that found her first. Even though Anthy had scoured the phonebook for her name, had forced herself to be sociable and ask her small business neighbors if they knew anyone with pink hair, she had been fruitless in her efforts. Only a few weeks later, Utena walked right into her shop, as if hand delivered. She was fresh from the light spring rain and had a cheery air about her. She walked right up to Anthy's counter with a sheepish smile.

"Do you have any roses here? I have a customer that wants a very realistic tattoo and she's not liking any of the pictures I'm showing her."

Anthy smiled lightly back. "I'm afraid I don't sell roses here. There's a grocery store a couple blocks down. I do apologize." A look of surprise fluttered across Utena's face but Anthy watched her push it down. She turned toward the shop and scratched her head, thinking for a bit before turning back to Anthy.

"Actually, if you have any camellias, I don't think she'd be able to tell the difference." Utena said conspiratorially. Anthy smiled genuinely for the first time in a long while.

They joked back and forth for a little bit but in the end, Utena was Utena and Anthy watched as she stepped back out into the rain to walk the extra blocks to get the roses her customer asked for. She didn't think she'd mind staying in this world for a bit longer.

And by "a bit longer" Anthy apparently meant, till death did she part. She hadn't even noticed the passage of time. Perhaps that world's Utena wasn't her Utena but it was still a good version and she enjoyed her company. In the end, they were married and Utena moved into her house outside town. They started selling honey together at

the farmers market and making big dinners out of Anthy's garden. Utena would give away whatever they couldn't eat and Anthy started getting gifts from the town neighbors in return. Knitted blankets and special coffee blends, the first cookies baked of the day and homemade soaps.

It was one of the few worlds where no other members of their school existed.

It was the first world where Anthy let herself die of old age.

On the other end of the spectrum was Anthy's most hated world. She tended to have a distaste for any universe that revolved around a high school theme, but this one was definitely the worst. In this world, there were people who could turn into weapons and fight monsters and it was the purpose of this school to teach those weapons and the people who wielded them how to fight. On her first day there, her classmates were all meant to pair up, weapon and weapon holder, and to form a relationship that would last the next three years.

Or for the next few hours, Anthy thought, depending how long it took her to find a moment alone and reset.

What made the whole thing even more deplorable was that Anthy was a part of the weapon group, and what else did she turn into but none other than an all-too-familiar sword. She'd spent enough time just being the sheath for this sword, she had absolutely no intention of sticking around for the honor of being the real deal. As soon as she was able, Anthy "excused herself from class" to "go to the bathroom".

She had to have been to what seemed like hundreds of different places, filling hundreds of different occupations, living different lives each time. A magical girl, a vampire, a spy, even a dragon. She had been a multitude of different ages- a teenager, an old woman, an ageless entity.

So why was it here? Why this place? Why this world?

"Anthy?"

She had only to hear her name and she had known. Of course she found her first. She always found her first. Even though Anthy was the one searching, even though she promised to find her, that stupid chivalrous disposition would always win out. Anthy slowly turned around. They looked into each other's eyes and a feeling of mutual recognition was felt between them. They stared in silence for what felt like ages. Even though they were the eyes of a teenager, Utena's eyes looked so weathered, worn out. She had a tiredness about her that Anthy wasn't accustomed to. She could still tell though. This Utena was hers. She smiled lightly.

"Miss Utena?"

A small smile graced Utena's lips, "I thought I told you not to call me that." People rushed around them, all hurrying to get to classes. Anthy vaguely thought she heard a bell ring. Utena spoke again, "So, how about that date you promised me?"

They sat in a booth in a near empty diner, facing each other, neither knowing who should go first. It was Utena who had more initiative.

"Man, I've missed you Anthy. I mean I just saw you, but it's so good to see you. "

Anthy let out a breath, "I understand what you mean."

Utena reached her arms up, reclining in her seat. Anthy felt a leg brush against her own.

"The places I've been, the things I've done... It's unbelievable. But I imagine you have similar stories of your own?"

Anthy smiled slightly. Indeed she did.

They sat like that for a few moments, appraising each other. A waitress brought them some tea.

"You seem different. I like it." Utena said.

"I could say the same for you." Anthy answered.

"Maybe we're picking up each others traits. You don't seem as mysterious as the girl I left at Ohtori."

Anthy inclined her head, "Nor you as easy to read."

Utena chuckled at that. "I imagine you had fun with my alternate selves?"

"Depending on the universe."

"Yeah, your alternates were... something."

"I imagine you tried to help and befriend every single one of them, though."

Utena made a face and Anthy got the feeling she was very much right. She sipped her tea.

"Well, anyway, I didn't see any one from our old school when I was looking for you. Did you?" Utena said, changing the subject in a not so subtle manner. Anthy shook her head in response, which only made Utena frown.

"Do you think they'll be able to make it over here? Now that we've found each other maybe some kind of, I don't know, portal or something has opened up."

"I would hope not. There's some people I'd rather never see again."

Utena's eyes widened. "Ah. I don't think... Well, I don't think we'll ever see him ever again. I mean, I don't know about your worlds, but I never saw Akio once in all my universes." Anthy looked down into her tea cup. She was right. Her brother hadn't made a single appearance. It made her feel like perhaps his existence at Ohtori was supernatural. An outlier.

After all, he was the one keeping that place, and it's rules together. Maybe the rule for having your own universe to play in was that he wasn't allowed anywhere else.

"No, you're right. I haven't seen him either," she paused to make an amendment, "But I still wouldn't mind never seeing the members of the student council again." She watched as Utena's face froze, probably weighing which was the right way to take this conversation. Anthy sighed.

"No, I understand. You're worried about Wakaba. I, also, have someone I'm worried about." If she hadn't seen Akio in any of the universes, then not seeing Chuchu either was probably a bad sign too. She felt Utena grab her hand from across the table.

“You knew your brother’s machinations the best. Do you have any idea of what could be going on over there?” Utena implored, a familiar earnest expression on her face. Some things didn't change. Anthy pieced it over in her head.

“Well, if any of them have any chance of leaving, they would have to break their cycles of self sabotage first...” she distinctly remembered the pretentious talk of quote unquote coffins, “But then they'd also have to be willing to leave behind the people they care for in that world, unless they can help each other break out of their selfish habits,” she mulled it over a bit more before adding, “and this is assuming there's even a way they can cross over.”

Utena looked crestfallen. “So it's almost impossible then.”

“Well, not completely. Wakaba still has a good chance.”

Utena slumped forward. “No way, she’d never leave Saionji behind, and that guy’s as messed up as they come.”

Anthy thought about all the times Wakaba had proudly proclaimed Utena as her true love and all the times she’d almost thrown out Utena’s back giving running leaping hugs. She kept her comments to herself.

“Cheer up, Utena.”

They sat quietly for a moment longer.

“I’m grateful that we found each other but,” Anthy pauses before voicing her complaint, “I do wish it had been in another world.” Utena nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, something with more magic or where we’re already adults would have been fun but I can understand why it’d be here.”

Anthy wasn't convinced. “Yeah?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, in this world I have parents, and the high school we go to is completely normal. When I got ready and came downstairs this morning, my mom had breakfast ready and she hugged me goodbye. They aren't the parents that I know from, well, that place, but I have memories of them raising me and of this father teaching to ride a bike and them cheering for me at basketball tournaments. I think this world is just... Giving us a second chance. At a normal life.”

Anthy sat silently for a while. Now that she thought about it, she had parents in this world too, a concept she had never before experienced. She'd been zoning out this morning, not really planning on making attachments because her brain had filled her in that this was a high school world and she never intended to stay in those types of worlds very long... had she only known.

"You have a point. I guess that means we can't leave this world then."

Utena's mouth hardened and she shook her head. "There probably won't be any more resetting." She looked forcefully into Anthy's eyes. "We should make this world count." They both sat silently for a little while after that. Anthy could tell from her face that Utena was still worried. She offered one more reassurance.

"There's no way of knowing what's happening on the other side. Perhaps, now that we've found each other, miracles will happen for them as well."

It was hard to tell if this eased Utena's mind or not but she went back to sipping her tea and gazed out the window beside them, holding Anthy's hand the entire time.

As Anthy walked through the door of her new home that night, she was greeted by the comforting smell of curry. She made her way to the kitchen to get a second look at her "mother". There, at the stove, was a short woman with dark purple hair, who looked very much like herself except older and plumper. At her feet sat a small, fat, grey dog with big floppy ears, begging for scraps.

"How was your day, darling?"

Anthy sat on the floor of the kitchen and reached out for the animal, petting him behind his ears.

"It was alright."

She turned his collar and felt an unexpected tear spring to her eye upon reading the tag. The older woman chuckled and continued.

"That's good. Chuchu missed you."



You cut
your hair

You got
contacts

actually I just
stopped needing
them.

ah.

What happened
to your ring?

I uh, destroyed it. I
crushed it when I
was trying to save you

oh.

So... where's
Chu-chu?

Oh he's home, he
likes to catch up on
his soaps on Thursdays.
I said I'd be fine.



so how were
things at Ontori
after I uh..
left.

Well...

Some things
have changed.
Small things,
but real things

For the most
part though

Not a whole lot
has really changed.
Ontori is still Ontori.

Hey, if its
ok for me
to ask...
I wanna
know,

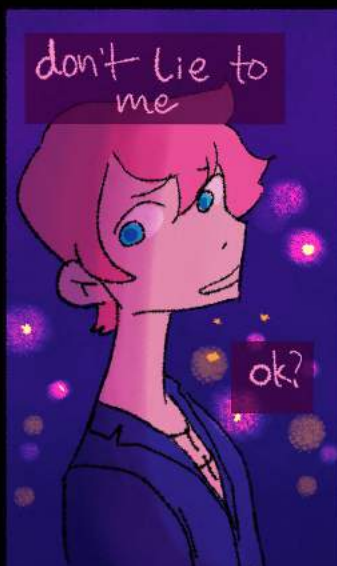
How's
Wakaba

oh she's
fine! I'm
sure she'll
be out of
Ontori in
no time
at all!

hm...



hey...
himemima



don't lie to
me

ok?



alright, sure
miss tenjou!

hey ok ok,
no need to
be so formal

i've told you,
just utena!

if that's the
case, then for
me, it's just antly.



oh! you live in
this building? I
live a block away!



i'm suprised I didn't
find you before today.



if i'm honest, there
were times I thought
that maybe i'd seen
you around. Or some-
one like you. Some-
one like your hair, or
your walk, but...

you never had
your ring so
I wasn't sure.



huh,

makes me wonder
if this world was
trying to keep us
apart or together.



Well, I'm not sure I really
believe this world cares at all.



there's no
princes, no
witches, no
magic sword



there's no
End of the
World



and that's ok,
I'm ok with
that because,



It means at the end
of the day, this is
a choice

We can choose to be
together.

WAKABA HOLMES

Ohtori Academy's beloved pink-haired tomboy has gone missing completely out of the blue, and Detective Wakaba Shinohara is on the case!



Wakaba Holmes

[Amuk](#)

It was a dark and stormy night.

No, wait, that was wrong. Wakaba was getting her tropes mixed up. She was a detective solving a case; in this case, a dame would appear at the door in tears. After a long, fruitless chase, the dame would betray her and break her heart. Though, could that still happen though if she were both the client and the detective?

No, probably not. A different tack was needed. There were other detectives. She could be Sherlock Holmes, with her assistant the Onion Prince. She'd solve the crime, and the onion prince would provide some comical relief. Case closed, open and shut.

No, wait again. The prince was useless and a bit annoying. Even if he fit the sidekick character, there was no way she could handle having him around for several episodes. Wakaba would just have to solve this case herself then.

What case? Why, the case of the missing Utena. Like there was any other case Wakaba would be interested in.

(Well, maybe the case of Saionji, but that's another tale.)

-x-

Witness #1: Juri

Juri stepped forward and with pinpoint accuracy stabbed her opponent. If anything, Wakaba was impressed anyone *still* wanted to fight her—she was certain that Miki's and Utena's challenges should have shown just how strong the fencing captain was.

Well, *former* fencing captain. It seemed she had a social ladder to climb at their new school before she was named captain once more. Even the rich elites had troubles.

Wakaba pulled out a notebook to note that down. That was a good quote.

There was a soft twip and Juri won her last point. A cheer rose up from crowd as she removed her helmet and gave a short bow. Somehow, her hair flawlessly curled

around her face. Another quirk of the rich? Before Wakaba could ponder it any further, Juri turned to her. "Wakaba, was it?"

She blinked, surprised. "You remember who I am?"

"Of course." Juri smiled softly and Wakaba could swear she saw roses. They framed Juri delicately, petals gently blowing in the breeze and she rubbed her eyes violently until her sight returned to normal. "You're Utena's friend."

Utena. Right. The reason she was here. Wakaba squared her shoulders, ready to grill her first witness. It was important to set precedent. "Do you know where she is?"

"I haven't seen her since school..." Absentmindedly, a gloved hand clasped her locket. Her finger tapped it lightly as she pondered the question. "Did she graduate?"

"Her grades weren't..." She couldn't even complete the lie. Despite her princely ways and athletic grace, Utena had never been one for studying. Still, she had graduated with the rest of her class. They had all gotten their diplomas and tossed their hats and Utena had mentioned that—

Wakaba froze. What had Utena said, if anything? Had she even been there? Anthy had left before graduation, before everyone else, and Utena...had Utena been with her? No, that wasn't quite right.

"I...I don't know," Wakaba admitted slowly, still unable to comprehend it. How could she have forgotten that? Any of that? "I don't think so."

"I see." Comforting her, Juri squeezed Wakaba's shoulder. There was something soft about her expression, something overbearingly kind. "I think she left ahead of all of us."

"Typical." Wakaba snorted. "She always liked to leave me behind."

"I'm sure that's not the case. You remember her, after all."

What did that have to do with anything? She didn't press the question, instead refocusing on the prize. "Either way, she's going to learn the hard way that you just can't shake me off." Wakaba pumped her fists, gathering her energy once more. "I'm a dog, my bite is worse than my bark!"

Juri chuckled, shaking her head. "That's not how it goes."

“That’s how it goes *now*,” she countered confidently.

“Of course. Anyways, Anthony might know, but I haven’t seen her since either.”

Juri pulled out her phone, scrolling through her contacts until she found the right one. “Miki might know.”

A lead. Her first witness and she already had a lead. Wakaba launched a hug on Juri, flying through the air until she wrapped herself around the fencing champion like a blanket. “Oh, thank you thank you thank you.”

Doubling over, Juri let out a sharp exhale as all her air left her before straightening up. Somehow, despite all of that, her hair still maintained perfection. “No problem.”

As quickly as she had attacked, Wakaba shimmied off. Pulling out her phone, she grabbed Miki’s information. “My second witness, huh.”

“Let me know if you find her.” When she looked up, Wakaba was almost drowning in rose petals. If she thought Juri had looked beautiful before, she looked downright ethereal now. Her former schoolmate reached out and caressed her cheek, a tender expression on her face. “Good luck.”

“Th–thank you.” She stumbled back a step or two but didn’t break contact.

“You know...my locket, it’s still missing a picture.”

A wind blew now, despite the fact that they were indoors. Wakaba wasn’t quite sure how to interpret Juri’s expression. Her fingers were soft on her cheek, her touch warm. She swallowed hard. This wasn’t expected, not in the least. Was this even in character for either of them? Electricity sparked at skin contact and she couldn’t break free from Juri’s magnetic gaze.

However, this wasn’t a romance story. This was a mystery, a thriller perhaps, but not a romance. Before she could get sucked in, Wakaba shook off the petals and pulled away from Juri’s tempting hand.

“Anyways, I have to go.” And with that, the detective fled to a safer haven.

Witness #2: Miki

A soft melody trickled into the meadow, the sound of a bird taking flight. An unknown voice sang along, the vocals a cry of freedom. It was amazing how poetic music could make Wakaba feel and by the time she had reached the piano room, she was ready to create a new epic.

Alas, now was definitely not the time for it. By the time she reached the classroom door, the hallway reverted back from grass to brick. Alone in a corner, Miki played the piano. A dozen feathers floated around him, the only sign of the change in scenery, and Wakaba could have sworn they had left this weirdness back in high school. Maybe this was a fever dream and they had never graduated. Or the rest of the world was just as strange and there was no escaping.

Before anymore shenanigans could occur, she tapped him on the back. A cacophonous sound escaped the instrument as his hands jumped in surprise. “Wakaba!” Peering behind him, he sighed with relief when he spotted her presence. “You should have called out.”

“I did,” she lied without a second’s thought. “But you didn’t hear me.”

“Ah, I guess so. I was a little zoned out.” Miki gave a sheepish smile, his finger steadily tapping his thigh. A nervous quirk? Wakaba remembered he used to have a stopwatch. Perhaps he had lost it or it was broken. “So what is it?”

“Do you know where Utena is?” Wakaba pressed her face close to his, searching for any sign of a lie. The moment he slipped up, she’d catch him. And arrest him. And then force him to cough up the dough. Only, this wasn’t that sort of case and she wasn’t ready to resort to extortion.

“Utena...” Miki’s expression grew troubled, his finger tapping even faster now. She could almost hear the ticking of a clock, the second hand spinning in wild circles. The piano played on its own, a serious theme highlighting the moment. “I haven’t. I tried calling Anthy, but she doesn’t pick up. She only sends me a few texts, here and there.”

He pulled out his phone and showed several pictures. Either Anthy had terrible photography skills or hated Miki as most of his pictures featured a confident monkey. There he was, relaxing in a fountain. There he went, scaling a wall. Only glimpses of Anthy could be found in those pictures and even then, there was no hint of pink, no sign of Wakaba's lost prince.

"Nothing huh..." Wakaba sighed, her shoulders hunched forward. Wallowing in pity for a moment, she hunched over slightly. The pictures didn't even give a hint of location, the backgrounds out of focus. Was this the end of the line for her? Even the piano played quietly now, troubled by this turn of events.

And yet, a crescendo appeared as Miki reached out to her. "I could give you her contact info. She might not respond, but it's better than nothing. Maybe the rest of the student council knows? You could ask everyone."

"Everyone?" Even more leads. Hope was not lost. The piano roared as it raced to the finish. Wakaba straightened and opened her phone. "Keep talking."

-X-

Anthy, where's the hostage?

Wakaba stared at the response to her very clear and concise message: a picture of a monkey talking a bath in a sink. Cute, she guessed, but a monkey? What did that have to do with anything? Maybe she didn't just hate Miki, but everyone else as well. Or maybe it was a very elaborate "Do Not Disturb". Either way, Wakaba would have to persist.

-X-

Witness #3: Nanami

"A farm?" Wakaba cocked her head, not quite sure she understood what she was seeing.

A farm, check.

Livestock, check.

Nanami, living on said farm. Even mentally, she couldn't check it off. A dozen questions floated through her head—why? How?

“Oh, didn’t you know? Farmers are all the rage now. I discarded the “shucks” and vocabulary, though. There’s no need to degrade myself that much.” In what were possibly the most fashionable overalls that existed, Nanami sneered down at her. It was impressive, really, how even the sight of a pitchfork and bucket of eggs didn’t ruin the effect of the sneer. “Though you are a friend of Utena’s, I suppose I can’t expect you to know *that* much.”

Several chickens, three elephants, and a cow followed her as she walked. A golden bell gleamed from the cow’s neck, worth more than Wakaba’s house. “Why all the animals?”

“They...” Nanami frowned, as though she had never really considered the idea before. Turning around she squinted at the flock of animals around her. After several moments, she found a solution and faced Wakaba once more, her expression just as haughty. “Every girl has these experiences.”

“Huh?” Wakaba raised an eyebrow. “What experiences?”

“Yes, that is how it is with girls.” Nanami smiled, nodding sagely. “Whether it is an egg or a cowbell, we cannot tell anyone about it. Of course, that means this too must remain hush hush.” If possible, she wilted at the thought of it. Quietly, so quietly Wakaba had to strain to hear it, she muttered under her breath. “Really, we can’t share anything.”

At that very moment, the clouds covered the sun, leaving only a sliver of light. It shone on Nanami like a spotlight and she fell to her knees. Her livestock encircled her, sitting down as they mournfully cried up. Sorrowfully, she covered her face. “Truly, we are all alone.”

Wakaba had signed up for many things but not the next Disney Princess. Or whatever this was. “So...Utena?”

Her question went unheard as Nanami sighed dramatically.

-x-

This time, the picture was a blurry picture of a monkey sunning itself near a window. At the very least, if Anthy wanted to harass her, she should do it in high quality. Or put a nice filter.

Put more effort! Wakaba texted back angrily.

-x-

Witness #4: Saionji

As usual, Saionji's glorious mane of green hair floated in the wind artistically. He could have been in a shampoo commercial or on the set of a romance. Instead, he was sitting on a bench in old greenhouse, long since abandoned by Anthy. Even the withering roses couldn't disrupt his image; he seemed more like a tragic hero waiting for his doomed heroine.

Wakaba gingerly stepped on the scattered petals, not sure if she should approach. His expression was serious as he wrote in a journal, his script gently flowing from the tip of his pen. What tormented tales could he be writing? "I had three eggs for breakfast," he muttered softly, his voice so low Wakaba had to strain to hear it. "I wonder if Touga will actually write back this time; Anthy was the only one who would exchange diaries with me."

Wakaba took a step back. She had been wrong; he was actually the mourning princess. If he had asked, she would have exchanged diaries with him. Diaries and eggs and whatever he wanted to. Even now, she had a corner of her room clean just in case. Before he could notice her, she fled. She was not quite brave enough to face him yet.

-x-

Wakaba tilted her head, trying to stare at the photo in a different angle. Maybe it'd make more sense upside down? She craned her neck even further, trying to change the angle. It had to be of the monkey, it was always about the monkey. She had seen a hundred photos by now and none of them were of Anthy or even more importantly, Utena.

Abstract art? she guessed.

-x-

Witness #5: Shadow Girls

“Have you heard?”

Wakaba stared as two shadows excitedly talked to each other, each girl posing dramatically against the brick wall. A quick glance around her indicated that no one else was in the hallway. “Heard what?”

“The tale of the lost prince, of the broken princess.” One of the girls suddenly wore an impressive dress, or at least, the shadow of an impressive dress. She twirled around slowly. “The princess is now looking for her prince, but will she ever find her?”

“Her?” Wakaba raised an eyebrow. There was still no one else in the hall, no matter how hard she looked. “Didn’t you just say prince?”

“I said car,” the other shadow girl replied, transforming into an impressive car. On her hood, there was a statue of a monkey eating bananas. Without a moment’s hesitation, she ran over the princess, leaving a set of tire marks in her wake.

With a cough, the princess gingerly sat up, dusting the dirt off her. After she cleaned, she reached up to touch her now frizzy hair. “Oh no! The prince will never find me now!”

“Okayyyy.” Wakaba turned heel and quickly jogged away from it all. Even she knew better than to listen to her imagination.

-x-

A monkey slowly loosening his tie. His cheeks were a bright red, his paw covering his cheek.

Wakaba almost dropped the phone. *EROTICA??? D:<*

-x-

Witness #6: Touga

“Utena?” Touga stretched languorously on the car, his shirt unbuttoning itself before Wakaba’s eyes. She couldn’t tear her eyes away.

Not that she wanted to. Sure, she was on an important case and still on the clock, but even detectives were allowed a few vices. And if Touga insisted on exposing his chest like that, well, even Wakaba was human.

“Yes, do you know where she is?” Wakaba wiped the drool from her mouth as his shirt flew off in the wind. “Or Anthy, Miki said they might be together.”

“Hmm...” Arching his back, he gazed up at the sky before turning over. The view was great either way. Behind her, Wakaba could hear several cars crashing. “No idea.”

“No idea?” Wakaba frowned. He was her last lead. “Not even one? Didn’t you hang out with her brother all the time?”

“I did, back in there.” He gave her a look, running his hand through his hair. “But I’m not there anymore, and he’s still trapped. What a fool.”

Where they exes? His expression was scornful as he stood up. The button his pants flew open and Wakaba contemplated the merits of questioning him further. “So no one knows.”

“Anthy does if anyone does. But she’ll be in the last place you expect,” he cryptically responded, his zipper slowly going down. His pants were next, she knew.

A one-night stand. Other detectives had those, right? Her mouth dry, Wakaba shook her head quickly. She had to keep her head in the game. “Got it, got it, need to go.”

As she turned, she heard the sound of fabric falling and it took all of her willpower not to turn around.

-X-

Wakaba stared at the monkey, standing next to a fancy vase. He was posing, a model at work, but the vase caught her eye more. She knew that particular mix of blue and green, with pink veins running through it. She even knew the painting in the background, a golden backdrop of a sunflower fields.

Well, it seemed like Touga was right. Anthy was in the last place Wakaba had expected. Somehow, she was inside Wakaba’s home.

Witness #7: Anthy

It had been over a week since Wakaba had returned home. As she pulled into the driveway, she spotted an Indian woman in floppy sunhat standing outside her door on her porch. Running along the rails was a familiar monkey. The woman, noticing her, gave a small wave.

Anthy.

“How did you get into my house?” Wakaba asked, the words just spilling out of her, the second she was within earshot. Rapidly, she examined the front windows and door; nothing looked broken here, at least. Maybe the back?

“You left your key in the door,” Anthy replied, holding up a key that should not exist. Wakaba had her key in her purse. Her mom had her spare. There was just no way—her keys were missing. She could have sworn she saw them this morning but the keys were missing.

“How?”

Anthy snapped a picture of her monkey as he tumbled off the rail. Another picture for Miki? “Maybe you were in a hurry to leave.”

Playing oblivious, eh? Two could play at that game. Wakaba was not a seasoned detective for nothing. She leaned against the door as though she had all the time in the world. The wind blew, the leaves rustled, and Wakaba puffed an imaginary cigar. Even her words were slow and drawn out. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re looking for Utena, right?”

“Utena?!” Perking up, she leaped at the other girl and clasped her hands. Maybe she couldn’t play the game, but that no longer mattered. “Where is she?”

Freezing up momentarily, Anthy stared at their joined hands. “I thought only Utena was like this, but I guess even her friends would be too.” Before Wakaba could question her, she pointed her head at the door. “She’s in there.”

Utena was that close? Immediately, she dropped Anthy's hands and dashed to the door. Yanking it open, she ran down the hall and into the living room, looking for a flash of pink. For those ridiculous shorts and those long pink locks and—

“Sorry I'm late.” Wakaba stopped when she spotted a girl sitting on the couch. She took off her black cap, revealing shortly cropped pink hair. “I missed you, Wakaba.”

“Utena?” Wakaba stared for a second before launching herself at her friend. There was no music or spotlights or even petals scattering in the wind, just Utena's warmth under her own.

“Wakaba! You're going to kill me one day.” Utena leaned back with the weight, her head knocking against the couch. Wakaba just gripped her even tighter. Gently, Utena patted her back. “I'm sorry.”

“You said that already.” Wakaba leaned back till she could see Utena's face. She looked healthy. Good. Good. Without a second's hesitation, she banged their heads together. “Now you're forgiven.”

“Thank you,” Utena groaned, her arms still wrapped around her. “Did you have to do that?”

“Yes.” Seeing stars, she rested her forehead on Utena's shoulder. She had a dozen questions to ask, a dozen things she wanted to say, but her stomach growled and so she stuck to the basics. Everything else could wait till after.

She had her teeth on Utena and this time, just like a dog, she wouldn't let go.





I'M ONE

DARE TO IMAGINE THE FUTURE



GETTIN' READY
😊



キッス



Waka's first pride



LOVE

YOU HAVE TO BE NICE TO YOUR WIFE EVERY DAY



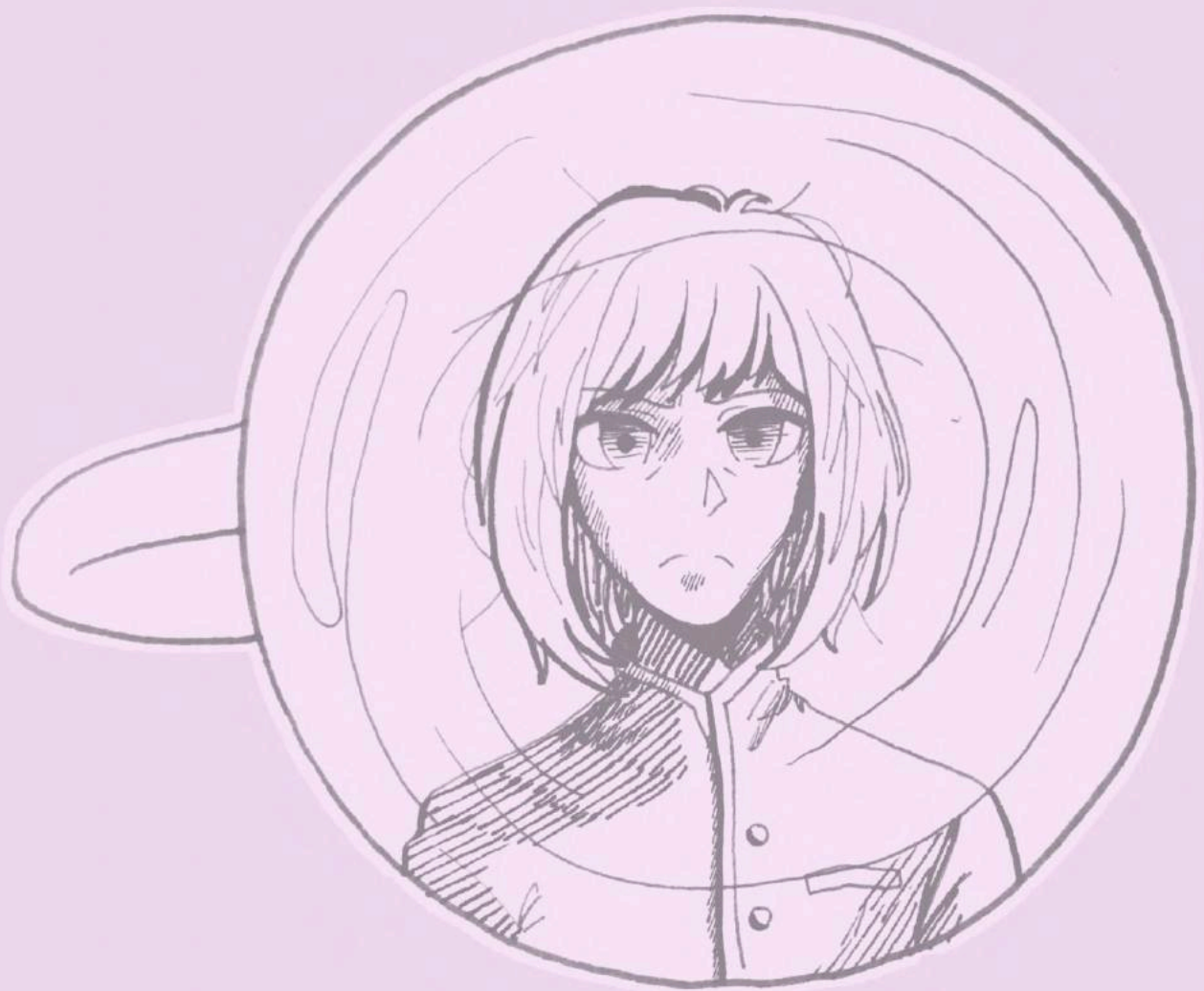
YOU HAVE TO BE NICE TO YOUR WIFE EVERY DAY



Jules
@hyakunthios

THOSE WHO CAN, DO

It's difficult to adapt to reality when you've been floating in timeless space, and harder so when you're thrown into it with nothing but your knowledge of theoretical sciences and the clothes on your back.



Those Who Can, Do

[Ayu Ohseki](#)

Horns honked, lights changed, crowds surged, and Mikage was invisible. That was how it was when you sat on a city sidewalk with a sign explaining you were down on your luck and could anyone spare some change for you to buy something to eat: suddenly everyone within a two-block radius was studiously blind to anything on street level, fixed solely on some distant point straight ahead. Your education, eloquence, experience, and everything meant nothing. The outside world was that kind of place. It was so much faster and colder and more uncaring than he could have ever imagined.

Truly, graduation was a punishment for the unready—an exile from Eden.

He didn't bother to sigh, though he'd spent many breaths in lament in the early days, as yet another clutch of wealthy-looking adults walked past his sign and donations cup without a second glance. On rare occasion, those who hated the fact that poor people would exist in public yelled at him to get a job. Mikage had not seen fit to explain that it was difficult at best to obtain employment, even if you were educated on a master's level with excellent extracurriculars, if you had no home, no references, and a dubious history at best. He'd seen other beggars perform for their donations—dancing, singing, playing the guitar—but he wasn't an artist, he was a mathematician. What was he supposed to do? Explain the Planck constant for the public's amusement? Solve calculus problems with imaginary numbers like they were circus tricks? And anyway, it mattered little. Even if he proved the existence of eternity itself, as long as he remained in an undesirable shell, he could never prepare the way before himself.

So instead he clutched his hair, greasy and scraggly from lack of wash—when you were homeless and dirty, he had found, people begrudged even your use of public facilities—and stared across the sea of concrete and asphalt that spread around him in all directions. What city was he in now...? He'd forgotten. His memory had grown even spottier since he'd left Ohtori Academy. Been forced out of Ohtori Academy. If it

weren't for the occasional clinks of yen and brief but pitying looks, he would wonder if perhaps he were dead, if now he were only a ghost haunting the outside world.

But that would be too easy, too merciful. Ghosts didn't feel light-headed from hunger. Ghosts didn't feel humiliated by their tattered, unwashed garments. Ghosts didn't think longingly of the school life where they had been respected and feared... well, no, perhaps they did that one. But they wouldn't huddle under park benches at night for warmth and a few snatches of slumber, praying that neither rain nor policemen found them, knowing as autumn grew increasingly chilly that winter inevitably would.

Slumber. Nemuro, Nemuro... To sleep, perchance to dream... No, that too would be the easy way out. Mikage had long since concluded that if he ended his own life, only oblivion would await him. No Mamiya, no Tokiko, no one would greet him, just as no one had greeted him on his way out of his time-plated Paradise Lost. He would simply cease to exist.

Sort of like he functionally had now. That realization prickled his mind and skin. If it made no difference, then...?

...No. That was the hunger talking. He rubbed his forehead, glanced at the meager contents of his donations pan; then he folded his arms on his knees and rested his head upon them.

Horns honked, lights changed, crowds surged, and Anthy strode forward. Her pink dress and purple hair fluttered around her thighs as she walked, head held high. There was a time when she would have preferred to die than inflict herself upon a sea of strangers. Then she found there was something— someone—for whom it was worth braving the most chilling of terrors. Each time she challenged the outside world, it actually left her feeling a little better about herself. I made it through, I didn't collapse, I didn't fall back into a shell of myself, she could tell herself. And then: Utena, I've come a little closer to you. It won't be long now!

On her shoulder, Chu-Chu rode, eyes bright and ears open for all the sounds of the city. Her brother had told her many times, long ago, that the outside world was just as cold and uncaring as the world within her coffin, so at least she could stay with the devil she knew. That line had worked on her for so very, very long... The crowds might be vast and uncaring even in the outside world, but it was easier with even a single companion. She smiled warmly at the little monkey, and Chu-Chu squeaked affectionately back.

Then he turned his head, and he yelped, he yelped and leapt into the air in bound after bound, pointing desperately at something. She turned her gazes towards where he indicated and—

She sucked in a sharp intake of air—

There, ahead of them, past the busy streets and throngs of human bodies, was a patch of pink hair.

Anthy thrust herself forward like a saber strike, and Chu-Chu tumbled in mid-air and grabbed hold for dear life onto the strap of her white purse. Though she stumbled from time to time, though she crashed into strangers who yelled at her to watch where she was going, she didn't stop moving forward, couldn't keep her gaze off that figure, slumped, defeated and in despair. Tears stung her eyes, and with one final push, she burst through the crowd and staggered to a halt before the one she sought.

“Utena?!” she called, heated and hopeful and so, so yearning.

An achingly familiar voice called an achingly familiar name. Half-asleep as he was, memories mixing with reality, Mikage lifted his head and saw a blur of an achingly familiar form. “Mamiya...?”

he whispered in a voice cracked from disuse.

Then his vision cleared.

Mikage stared at the former Rose Bride.

Anthony stared back at the once Professor Nemuro.

“Ah,” they uttered in unison.

~*~

The spoon’s clinking on ceramic jangled Mikage’s nerves as much as the rich scent of black coffee soothed them. In the end, it was a zero sum balance, and he took a shallow sip of his roast as Anthony mixed hers with cream.

“I’ve never understood people who cut their coffee with cream or sugar,” he remarked, cradling his mug and letting its heat thaw his fingers. “If one doesn’t want a bitter drink, one shouldn’t be drinking coffee.”

“I used to think the same way,” Anthony replied, setting her spoon to one side and picking up her own mug with long, delicate fingers. She took a longer sip, then set it down. “Then I realized the value of sweet to go along with the bitter.”

Mikage had no response for that, so instead, he glanced around the coffee shop to which Anthony had brought him. It wasn’t a large place, and based on the fact that the single barista was also the single server, he suspected that it was a pet project that made little if any money, but it was absolutely stuffed with memories. The walls and furniture were polished ash wood, and antique lamps decorated tables and green plush booths along with knit doilies. The walls were hung with framed portraits of decades long gone by, and a phonograph played a pleasant, nostalgic tune. The lighting was low and intimate, a combination of the lamps and small windows high up on the walls; the most light came from the door in at the top of a stairwell leading in from ground level. It was the type of place he might have brought Mamiya, once upon a time. Mamiya had always preferred the darkness of underground places.

A Mamiya had, anyway. Mikage still wasn’t sure when the Mamiya who had been his co-conspirator had traded places with the Mamiya with the freckled face, though hindsight armed him with some suspicions. How astounding, what yearning for a beautiful memory could make one overlook.

He took another sip of coffee. Somehow, it was even more scalding than the first.

“Why did you bring me here?” he asked then, because it was a question that could no longer be delayed. It asked many things at once, and here was the least important of them.

Anthy drank deep of her coffee. She had never been one for coffee before, but she liked the way that the liquid turned the same shade of brown as her skin when she mixed it with just enough pale cream. It felt then like she was imbibing herself, taking the thing that everyone around her had always carelessly consumed and becoming one with it once more. When she was feeling particularly vicious, she could imagine it as her brother’s skin instead, now the one consumed instead of the one doing the consuming. Those thoughts did pass her mind fleetingly in the present moment, but she swept them aside. Right now, she drank of herself.

“Why did you bring me here?” her companion asked then.

“You seemed cold,” she replied. On the table, Chuchu gnawed through artificial sweetener packets.

“That’s all?” he said, ringing with skepticism.

“Do you need another reason?”

“It’s not a kindness I would have expected, considering what I kept trying to do to you.”

“You were hardly the only one who did ill by me, and of everyone who did, you were hardly the worst,” Anthy said calmly. On the table, Chuchu gnawed through cane sugar packets.

“Trying to kill you was ‘hardly the worst’?”

“In many ways, if you’d succeeded, it would have been a kindness.”

Chuchu began to gnaw into a salt packet, paused when he reached its contents, burst into tears, and flung it away. The one who called himself Mikage flinched back as white granules flew everywhere, but Anthy only took another sip.

Presently, he settled and followed suit.

“You look in good spirits,” Mikage observed then. He had never seen the Rose Bride in such bright clothes, with her hair unbound, without any glasses. “Does that have something to do with why you’re so far from Ohtori Academy?”

Neither had he ever seen her smile so warmly. “Yes.”

“...I note that Tenjou Utena isn’t with you,” he observed again.

“She will be,” Anthy replied, undaunted.

Mikage was not one for hunches. He preferred cold, concrete facts, ones that lined up dutifully when you counted them, and not emotion-based guesswork that spilled everywhere if you slipped in the slightest way. Still, seeing her now, knowing what he did, he had to surmise, “Did she revolutionize the world?”

“She revolutionized a world,” Anthy corrected him. “As it turns out, that was enough.”

“...I see.” He lowered his gaze to his drink; his haggard face stared back at him palely. “So she succeeded where I failed... I hope you reunite with her soon.”

That seemed to surprise her, if her blink was any indication. “Thank you.” She paused. “But why do you say that?”

“I have no grudge against you. If she’s the reason you look so happy, then good for you. May you have a happy future together.” He could have left it at that—certainly it would have made the conversation more pleasant—but he continued, “Perhaps that sounds odd, coming from me. While I sought your death, it was never personal. It was simply what needed to be done.” He shut his eyes. One could almost believe him noble, with words like that. Thoughts of Tokiko striking him across the face made him add, “...Since to my eyes, you were nothing more than an object to be replaced.”

It wasn’t the first time someone had said such a thing about Anthy. It wasn’t the first time someone had said such a thing to her face, or at least in her presence. It was

unusual, however, for someone under her power and in her debt to be so plain about it.

“Oh?” she prompted.

“That’s all,” he said. “I simply never thought of you as a person until now. It was easy and convenient for me. If you weren’t a person, then killing you was a matter of no consequence.” His thumb traced down the side of his mug. “...And Mamiya would be able to gain eternity.”

“It takes a certain passion to be willing to kill for someone you love,” Anthony observed.

Mikage said nothing. He brooded into his mug for a moment; then he drained it and leaned back in his booth seat. While he sagged there, Anthony caught the barista’s eye and gave them a nod. They came by a moment later and refilled his cup.

“I was a fool,” he murmured as the barista walked away. “I never noticed that he had already died. Everything I did was meaningless.”

Anthony sipped her coffee. Chuchu sulked, feet dangling off the edge of the table.

“...but I suppose you have no reason to care,” he added, wearily sitting upright. He blinked at the sight of his mug, and turned in time to see the barista return to their spot behind the bar. Then he sighed and cradled his cup between his hands. “Thank you for the coffee. I should have said earlier.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “It’s not much, I know.”

“It’s more than I deserve.”

Anthony set her now-empty mug down, thumb tracing the curve of the handle. Chuchu hung his head.

“You should go,” he prompted her, curled over his refill. “You have someone out there for you.”

“...And nothing for me here?” she guessed.

Mikage gave her a thin smile and nothing more.

“Does my presence bother you that much?”

“Yes,” he said truthfully, though he didn’t think she’d take kindly to it. The fact that she didn’t outwardly react meant little. “When I look at you, somehow, I start to see Mamiya again.”

Her gaze was steady and implacable. “I see.”

“It sounds nonsensical, I know,” he added. “But in the end, I’m a ghost of the past that could never let go of his few precious memories.” He glanced away in shame. “It’s no wonder I began to lay Tokiko’s image over Tenjou Utena’s... though I didn’t realize that until after I ‘graduated.’”

“Not once you lost the duel?”

He laughed like a faint sigh. “I was in a bit of shock at the time. I suppose that sounds pathetic.” Anthy didn’t respond, so he continued, “In any case, it’s not good for me or you for us to stay together. I can’t repay you with money or favors, so you’re best off returning to your search.”

Anthy threaded her long fingers together and tilted her head at him. “Why do you think you need to repay me?”

“Illusions are powerful indeed when you want to believe the fairy tale they show you. But I’ve already been stripped of all that. I know the weight of my sins.”

She considered this for a moment. Then she tilted her head the other way. “If you really think that’s what’s the best for me, why don’t you leave first?”

Mikage paused. To leave first would mean to surrender the warmth and comfort and refills of the coffee shop, to return to the cold streets where he was invisible and miserable. Then he half-sighed, half-chuckled. Yes, he understood what she meant. “You’re right. I’ll do that.”

Half-rising from his seat, he reached for his mug to drain it before he went, but before he could pick it up, Anthy rested her hand over his. Startled, he looked up, and wine red eyes met leaf green.

“You really are like Utena,” she said, smile rueful. “And I know the weight of my sins, too.”

His confusion was palpable in the way it furrowed his brow, parted his lips, and made him blink. Anthony's smile deepened at the sight.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Have you ever wondered who the false Mamiya was?"

He stared at her like that was a question he'd never realized he needed to consider. He sat back down. "Why are you asking that?"

She let her hand and eyes linger on his until his hand tensed and his eyes widened.

"...You?" he whispered.

Anthony shut her eyes and pulled her hand away. "Yes."

Silence rung between the scratchy beats of the phonograph. Then she heard a low heh, followed by an almost noiseless, heartbroken laugh.

"I see... I see. So you and Ends of the World used me from beginning to end," he murmured. "It all seems so obvious in retrospect, but at the time, I didn't notice at all. It was all a lie, and I drank it up without even pausing to notice the flavor of deceit..."

Anthony opened her eyes. Mikage's gaze was on the ceiling as he slumped again on the back of his booth seat. He sighed like a coffin lid pulled open for the first time in decades, then took his coffee and cradled it like it was his sole remaining support.

"After I took up the Rose Signet, Mamiya came to me," he told the air. "I thought Tokiko lost to me, but I wasn't completely convinced, either. He brought me roses and said, all of a sudden, that he wanted eternity. That... was you, was it?"

Anthony said nothing.

"When... I set that building ablaze... was he still inside?"

"I couldn't say. But whether he was or not," she murmured, "Chida Mamiya still died a long, long time ago."

"I see... I see." He drank deep of his brew. "How fitting. I fancied myself a puppet-master, never noticing the strings on my own limbs." His sorrowful smile settled like dust on an abandoned house.

"You seem less upset than I thought you would be," Anthony noted.

“Were you expecting me to be angry with you? I suppose I am, at that. But even if the two of you manipulated me, the hand on the candelabra was my own. At this point, all I can do is apologize to Mamiya and Tokiko for what I’ve done... and what I’ve failed to do.”

His words floated in the air like dust motes in dying sunlight between them. She studied him, then looked down at Chuchu. He looked up at her, and the two of them shared a nod.

“What are you doing?” Mikage wondered as Anthy pulled her purse into her lap. Next to her, her tiny monkey companion stood up from the edge of the table and used an unbroken packet to begin to sweep up the salt he’d spilled.

“You said you couldn’t repay me with either money or favors,” she said as she rummaged through her belongings. “But there is something you could do for me, if you’re willing.”

He frowned. “What is it?” he asked, then took a drink.

“When I left Ohtori, there was someone I never saw on my way out, even though the world should have changed,” she said, pulling out a pair of envelopes. A pre-folded, blank sheet of stationery followed, and she wrote upon it as she spoke. “And he stated he intended to restart the duels. However, the duels won’t run without a Rose Bride. With me gone, he would have to find a replacement... and I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone, no matter how much I hated her.”

“Who are you talking about? The one you never saw, I mean,” he clarified. From the way she spoke, he couldn’t imagine she meant Utena.

“Someone connected to you, too,” she replied. “I don’t want to see her again, and even if I did, I wouldn’t be able to save her anyway. You can only save yourself... with, perhaps, a helping hand.”

Mikage glanced at the letter, setting his mug down. The top curled up, hiding the addressee, but the message itself was simple to decipher, even upside-down: *I forgive you. Please, forgive yourself. Love, Anthy.*

Reading it, his whole body seemed to squeeze in on itself. He mustered one word: “Why?”

“Because you’re convenient. Because you’ve wronged me. Because I’ve wronged you. Because we both wronged her. Because I have faith again in both second chances and moving on. Because you now recognize the price of your illusions—something you now have over him.” Anthy paused, setting her pen down in consideration.

“Because... no one else is left to give her a hand. And because both you and I have reason to spit in the eye of the Ends of the World.”

That stirred his interest and something long-frozen, deep in his chest. “What would you have me do?”

Eyes alight with lively mischief, she smiled. She slipped the letter into one envelope and addressed it, then pulled open the other envelope and filled it with yen bills. As Chuchu finished sweeping the salt into a neat little pile, she set both face-down on the space between herself and Mikage.

“Deliver this letter for me,” she said. “The money will be enough for what you need to do so. If you refuse, I understand. I leave them for you still.”

His gaze was troubled as he stared down at the envelopes. Anthy mused that he had remarkable self-control to not simply take them. Then again, he’d always been like that. Akio had had to give him an extra push before he accepted the Signet.

“Is it good for me to return to the Academy?” he asked, perhaps of her, perhaps of himself. “I have no place there any longer.”

“It may not be,” Anthy admitted all the same. “It isn’t for me. That’s why I ask this of you to do in my place.”

He looked up at her. “Can I return? I already ‘graduated’ once.”

“Those who have graduated from Ohtori Academy cannot return to what they once were,” she replied, tracing a finger along the lip of her mug. “But it’s not entirely barred to those who are older and wiser, either.”

His gaze clouded. “Wiser... I’m not sure about that. But...” He paused, first to peer into his mug, then to take a deep drink. He frowned at her when he was done.

“Himemiya Anthy. What is the outside world to you?”

“Freedom.”

“Freedom?” He made a bitter noise that wasn’t quite a snort and wasn’t quite a chuckle. “This dismal, disconnected world is ‘freedom’?”

“Freedom is sometimes terrifying. But it’s because of that that you’re free to choose.”

“...I have no place in the Academy any longer. But I have no place in this world, either.” He stared into space for a moment; then his focus returned. “All things being equal, then, I suppose it makes no difference if I return long enough to deliver a letter. I’m only concerned that once I’m back, I won’t want to leave again.”

“It might be better if you didn’t.”

He startled. “What? Why?”

“Every school needs its teachers, and Ohtori Academy has a dearth of ones who know their illusions. Wouldn’t you say so, Professor Nemuro?”

His eyes widened.

“...But,” she added, standing up, “all I ask of you is to deliver a letter. You must prepare the way before you on your own.” She leaned over, hands on the table, to bump her forehead to his; then she scooted out of the booth, stretching out a hand for Chuchu to jump onto and race up her arm onto her shoulder, and walked away.

Mikage watched her go, first to pay the barista, then as she left the shop, leaving the clarion call of bells in her wake. Then he lowered his gaze to the envelopes, picked them up, and turned them over to reveal the addressee in Anthy’s neat, flowing script:

To Ms. Ohtori Kanae.

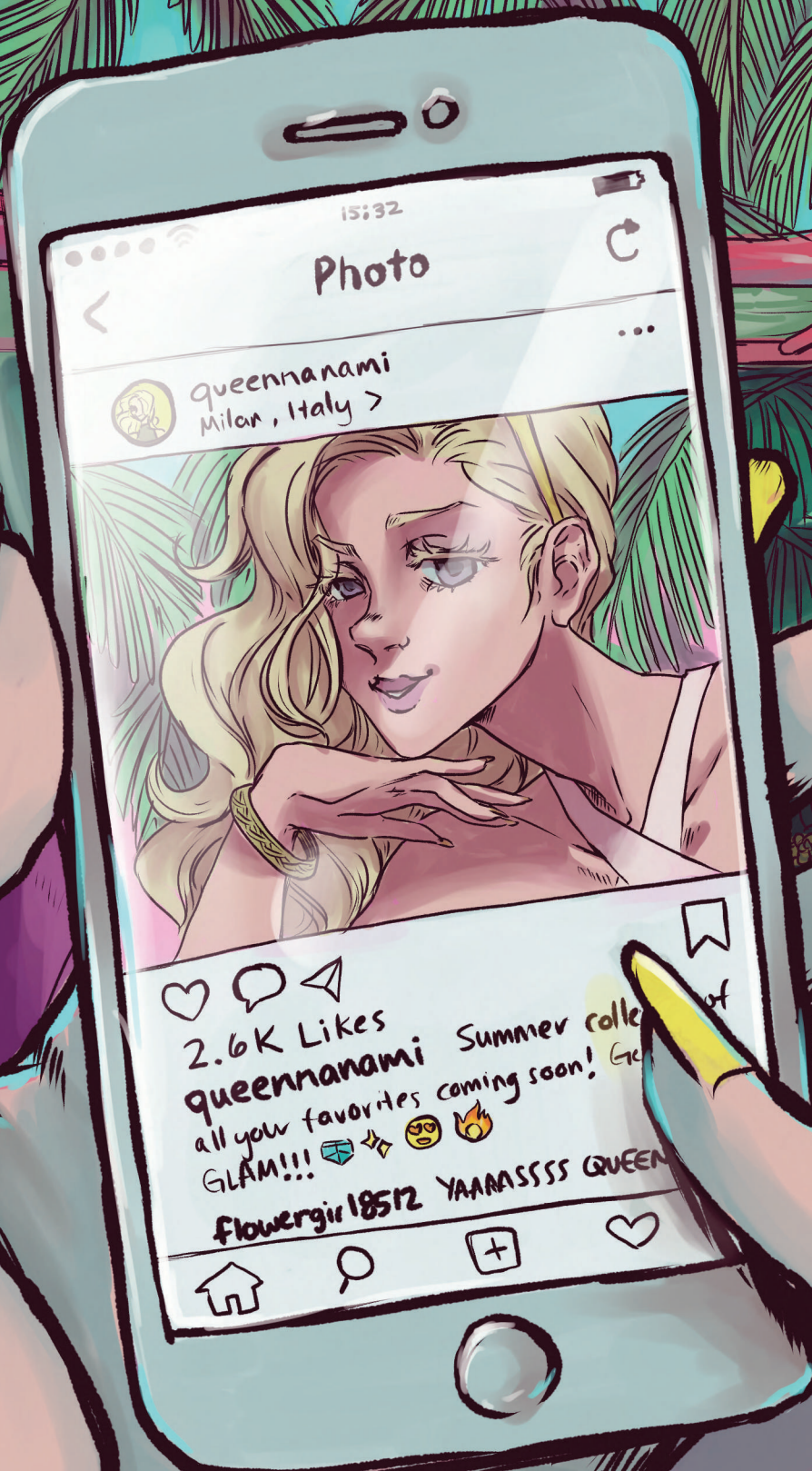
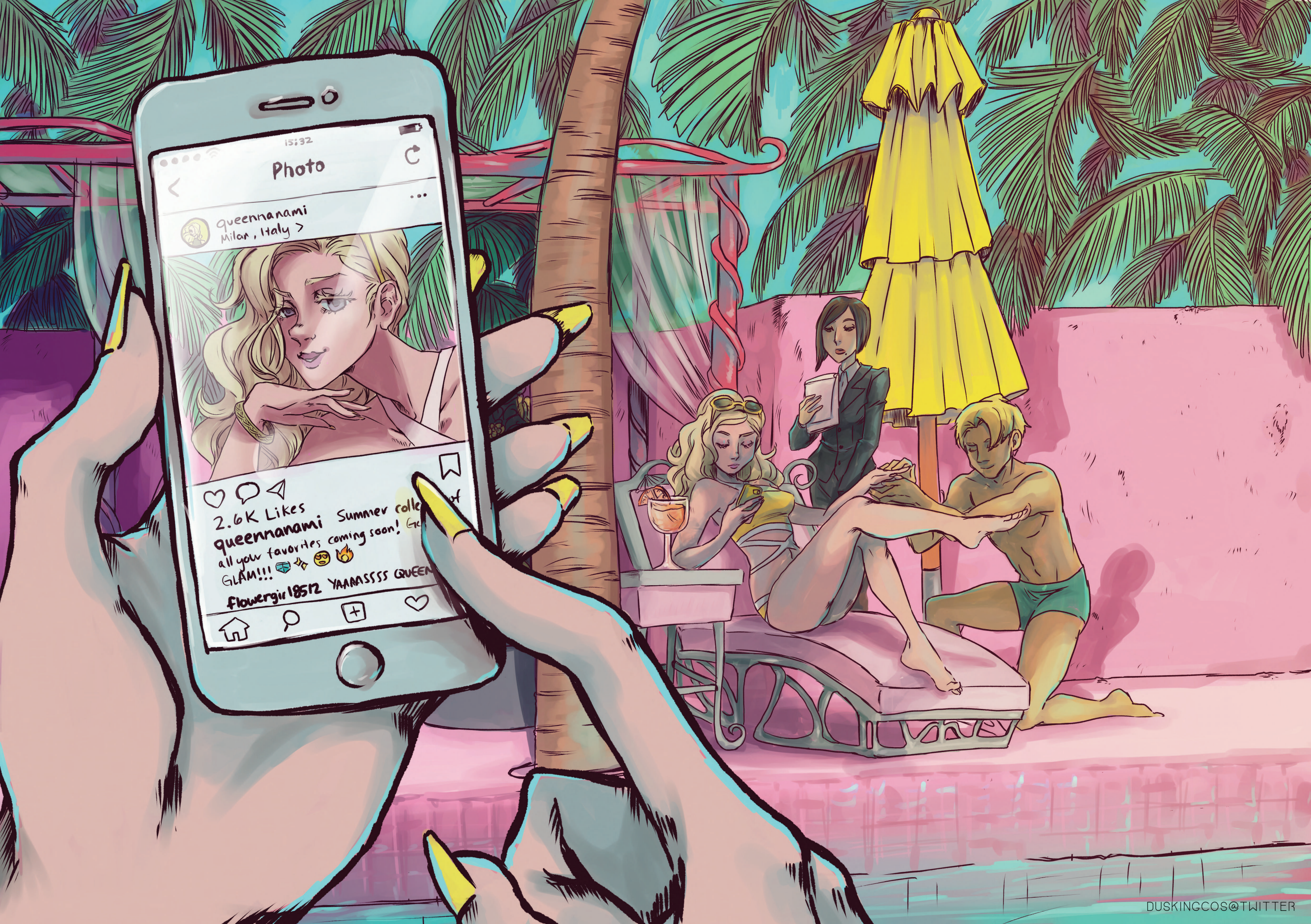
Someone still trapped in the garden of eternity. Someone who couldn’t escape, even when the world changed... Someone who needed to be saved, to save herself, but

needed a hand to guide her to the way out first. Someone no doubt wrapped tight in the Ends of the World's web.

The first of his Black Roses. The last of those he had agonized for nothing.

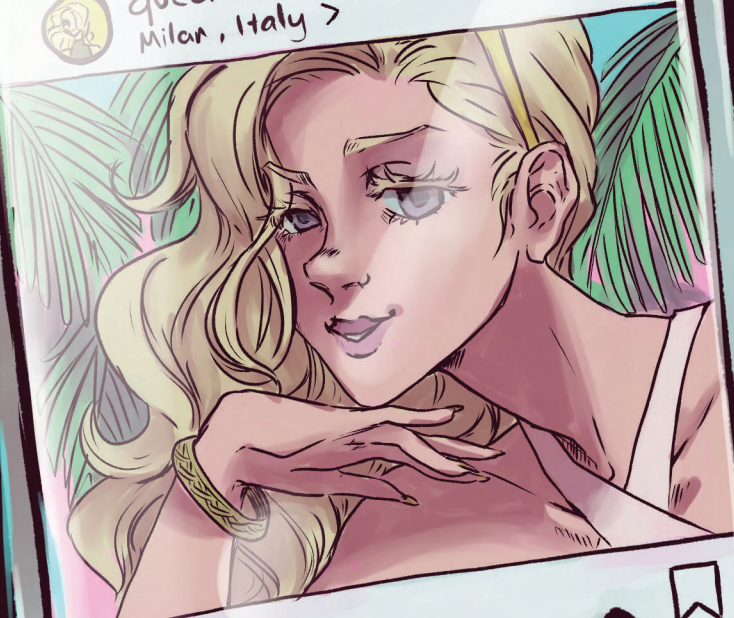
Perhaps nothing would change. Perhaps everything would. Either way, it wasn't like him to leave an equation unsolved, and he'd found none of the solutions he needed in this world.

Tucking the envelopes into his pocket, the Professor took one more refill to go.



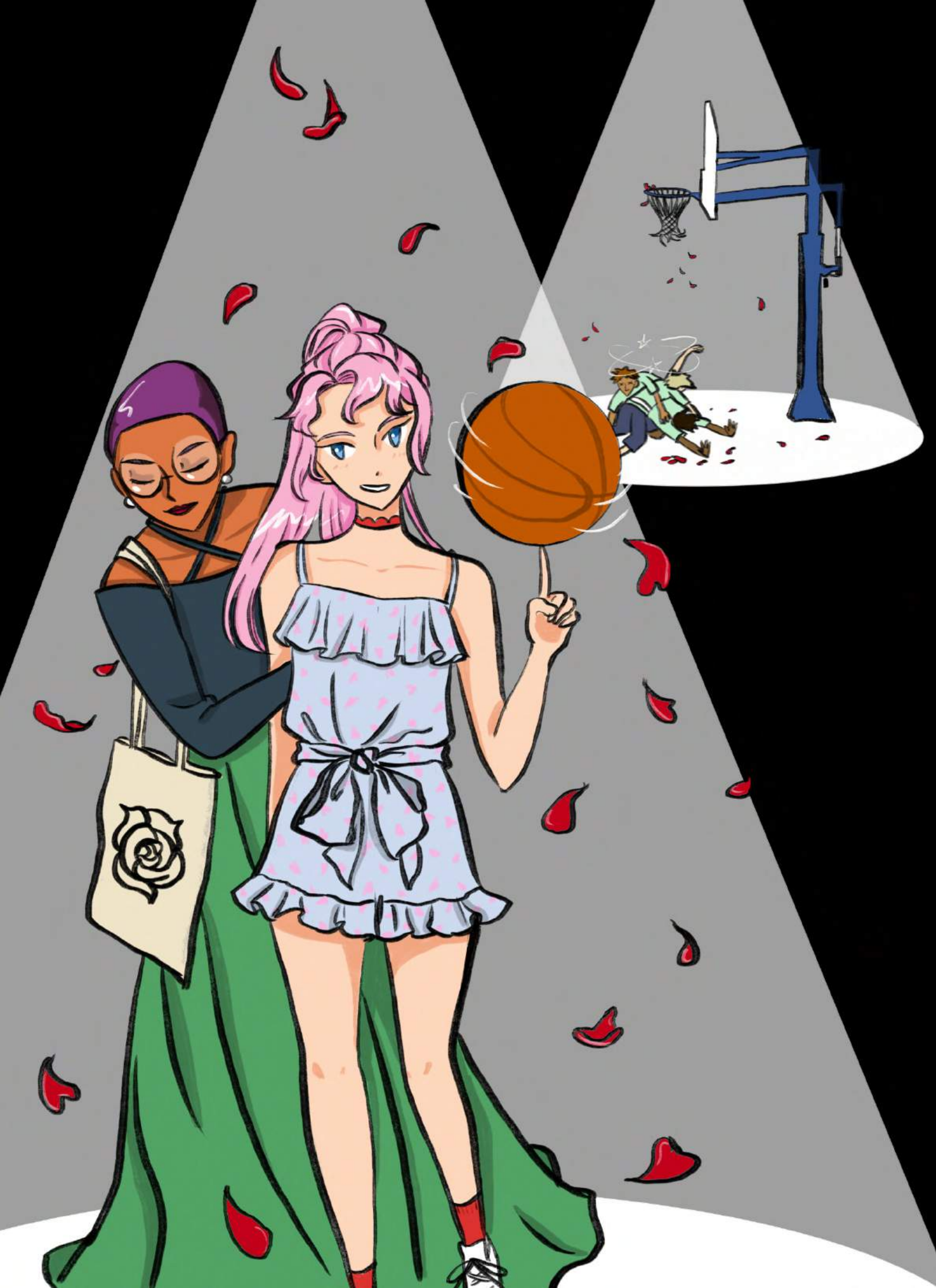
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all your favorites coming soon! Get
GLAM!!!
flowergirl18512 YAAASSSS QUEEN









YOU
KNOW
ANTHY,

I NEVER
MISS THE DAYS
WHERE WE
HAD TO FIGHT
TO HOLD OUR
HANDS

MOMENT OF TANGENCY

The outside world has left Nanami an embittered woman, down on her luck with little hope. A chance encounter with an old classmate helps her back to her feet.



Moment of Tangency

[Rose](#)

'I don't want to get up, I don't want to get up, I don't...'

But the music on the radio got louder and louder and she knew the moment the annoying voice of the conductor came in she would be unable to go back to sleep, what time was it anyway? Without removing the covers her hand fished for her cellphone.
7:05 am.

She had an interview at 9:00 am.

'Uugh... I will count until ten, and then I'll wake up...'

One, two, three, four...

"Damn it!" Nanami kicked the bed covers and got up, feeling her messy hair falling around her shoulders, she had to blink a few times and scroll down her phone to finally wake up and start for the day.

There, perched on the bathroom room were the clothes she prepared for today, somehow... they looked better last night, she didn't like how the dark blue looked a little too ...dark, as if she was going to a funeral rather than (hopefully) to work.

She didn't have time to go through her clothes again.

That was what she kept telling herself as she opened her closet, pulling out shirts and pants... or maybe a skirt would do? Nanami shook her head, skirts made you look juvenile and they were not professional; but none of the combinations made her feel satisfied.

But then a pale yellow shirt from way below all her stuff peeked at her, in her mind she already knew the color would be perfect; even though it was obvious the shirt was old for her not to remember when she bought it, it didn't look worn off, the color wasn't too vibrant that it stung your eye, in fact it was the perfect shade to compliment her hair...

Of course the universe loved to bait her, because when she lifted it to her eyes there it was: the garish logo of a restaurant, the one where she had first worked as a waitress for almost a year.

‘Why do I even still have this?’ She wondered and for a full minute she could only remember the embarrassment of it, all the shifts, the rude and lechery customers and the miserable pay... when she opened her eyes the shirt was crumpled in her hands with such force that it felt like she could have teared it apart piece by piece...

She couldn’t afford to throw away a perfectly good shirt though.

And with the perfect accessories, vest and jacket, nobody would be able to look at the logo in the shirt (Why did it have to be printed? if it only was sewn in...).

Nanami resigned herself and went to make herself a quick breakfast, a quick makeover, a quick hairdo and quickly started to gather everything she would need; train ticket? Check, money? Check, keys? Check, phone? Check!

‘Best of luck to myself!’

□

“Watch where you’re going!” She got up to her feet before anyone noticed she had fallen, wincing when she felt a pang in her knee.

Fortunately her pants had not sustained any damage or stain, but she still looked around, ready to yell at the guilty person who crashed into her–

“Oh god! I’m so sorry! Are you alright?” The woman in question didn’t seem to notice how angry Nanami was, there was nothing remarkable about her: medium height, brown hair and average complexion, the most noteworthy thing about her was her shrilling voice that made her want to get away as soon as possible.

Nanami was not in the mood for this. She tried to walk past her, but the woman quickly stood on her way.

“Move! I’m gonna lose my train, or do you want me to be late too?” She practically growled.

“Oh, sorry you’re right! Let me pay you for a cab then!” The woman said again and when Nanami saw her reach for her purse she lost it.

“Who the hell do you think I am!? I don’t *need* your charity!” Once she said this, Nanami stormed out without even waiting for an answer, she didn’t need to arrive in a cab, she didn’t want to, and she most definitely didn’t want to owe some random woman in the street a favor so she just kept walking to her station.

Dread filled her every time she saw the train cart full of people almost squished against the windows, when some people came out of she realized that she needed to be quick, otherwise she would have to take the next train, she was quick to walk past all the people next to her and secure her place.

Commuting using the train was a living nightmare.

Unfortunately it was also the cheapest and faster, so it wasn’t like she had lots of options, meaning that here she was, squished between dozens upon dozens of employees, both men and women, she looked with envy to the ones that wore their casual clothes and comfortable shoes, no, not because they have super nice clothes – they were all cheap common clothes anyway – but because it meant that they already had a job and their office uniform waiting for them.

She teared her eyes away from the sight, her station was the last one in the route anyway so by the time she made it, and the train would most likely be empty anyway.

□

It was packed.

The place where they would all be waiting for their interviews was packed, and she hated herself for admitting this – only in her thoughts, never out loud – but they all resembled her: wearing their best clothes, their hair done modestly but still professional...

She didn’t want to think about it anymore and just walked to the receptionist, gave her name and her papers and sat, far away from the other girls chatting away in purpose.

It was a long time, or at least it felt like a really long time, even the games and apps she had in her phone didn’t do much to distract her, her shoes tapped fast onto

the floors and looked around the place looking for something, anything to focus on that wasn't the clock on the wall, but there was nothing.

"Kiryuu Nanami?" She perked up immediately when she heard her name and entered the office the lady at the desk signaled for.

Inside there was an old man, his wrinkles and glasses made Nanami think vaguely of a grandpa, but she already knew companies put their best 'face' for these things, so she had to be careful with what she said.

"Miss Kiryuu? Please take a seat?" Ugh, even his voice sounded gentle and soft, no doubt this guy was a professional.

"Pleased to meet you." Nanami put on her best smile and used her perfect posture – one that allowed her to make use of her best assets without looking unprofessional – and answered his questions, most of them were the usual: her age, experience, career, how did she find out about the position, etc.

"Excellent, Miss, now, everything seems to be in order, but may I ask when can we expect your family registry? It's not an optional requisite."

And just like that Nanami knew it was a lost cause.

□

It was just another day; tomorrow would be another.

Nanami put these words on repeat while she waited for the train back home, but the fact that she had lost not just the morning but the entire day in that office and that she was starting to see a lot of people who were coming back from work didn't really help her mood, so she got ready to squish herself once more for the sake of arriving to her apartment and forget this entire day had happened.

Once inside the train, trapped between a woman who had her case in front of her which dug painfully into her shoulder and a guy whose breaths were hitting her right in the face, the world decided once more play her for a fool.

Because she felt a hand – a grown man's hand – going from her back then to her butt.

For a full minute her mind went blank because she couldn't believe on top of everything this had happened to her now, the moment it finally dawned on her what was happened she tried to squirm to get away from the groping but it only resulted on the people throwing dirty looks at her, and her arms were now twisted in weird angle that would probably result in more pain later on.

She was trapped.

During the entire trip until the next station she tried to think of the things she needed to buy for the week, tried to make the budget too, tried to remember the lyrics of that one song in the radio she really liked it, anything to not think about the hand on her.

'Only a bit more Nanami, only a little more, hang in there, then you can unleash all your fury onto them and...'

"ARRIVING TO THE STATION, PLEASE CLEAR UP THE ENTRANCE."

What?!

The thought got stuck on her head when she was almost barreled by a group of people all hurrying past here, she was sure she might have given a few turns in between people and maybe earned a couple of bruises from the things people were carrying and scraping against her in the meantime.

After she was able to focus again she realized the car was almost empty again except for a couple of old ladies.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Her heels stomped on the floor and she stormed out of the cart, maybe if she hurried she would be able to-

Nothing, there were too many people on the platform and most of them were dressed the same.

"You pervert!!!" The yelling doesn't come from her but from behind her where a security guard is standing in front of a woman and another man who looks like wants to get away, especially because the yelling starts to attract attention from everyone else.

He can't, of course, because as looks the woman has an iron grip on his wrist, when she tries to get close, she can see the guard is not taking seriously anything the woman says, if anything he looks bored and other people are doing nothing but whisper around them.

"I know what I saw!!" The woman suddenly looks around her and fixes her eyes on Nanami and she just froze in place. "Nanami you tell them! He groped you! I saw him!!"

It's in that moment that she realizes it's the same woman from this morning, the one who made her trip and apparently decided she looked pitiful enough to offer her a ride! Nanami had half her mind to disagree with her – she still felt her teeth grind at the thought – and embarrass her, but then she looked at the guy who was doing his best to look as if he was completely innocent.

She had no way of knowing if he had been the pervert who grabbed her butt, it had been impossible for her to see anything about the man, but the shifty way he looked when Nanami tried to look into his eyes made her realize that even if he didn't grab her, he had definitely done that to someone else.

Or maybe not, in truth, Nanami was just tired of being a cosmic plaything for the day, and wanted to let someone else take the brunt for her.

So, she summoned her best laugh and pointed at the man with all her might.

"You pervert!" She yelled. "You took advantage of me! I could see your dirty face when you grabbed me! On. My. Ass. And now you're trying to get away with it!! Like hell I will let you do it!" She grabbed her phone and snapped a shot from the guy, who was now so scared that he looked blue in the face. "And you!" She pointed to the guard now who flinched when she pointed at him. "Isn't your job to attend to all security matters on the platform? Aren't you supposed to make people feel safe? Well, I can tell I didn't feel safe, I'm disgusted by this man, but I'm more disgusted by you! Who doesn't even bother to take their job seriously, allowing scum like him to get away with things?"

She snapped another shot of him, making sure his plaque and name were visible on her picture – she knew the camera with 10 mega-pixels had been worth it –

and she showed it to him. “Just so you know, if you don’t process this complaint, I’m not gonna bother with your bosses, I’m going to post these on the internet and you will be ruined along with these man’s reputation!”

“Well, you heard her? Is that what you want?” The woman who had been looking shocked while she was yelling was now standing next to her looking proud. “You know nowadays, news fly right?”

Both men shared a dismayed look, especially when other people were pulling out their phones too, some of them taking pictures others were probably tweeting about it and the guard finally escorted Nanami to his office.

After filling out some papers and giving out her information, and also gotten the information from the man, who had to be detained until actual police arrive from the looks of it, she excused herself, she didn’t want to make more of a deal than it already was, and at the very least she still had the pictures in case she found the same idiot again.

Nanami doubted anything would come out of the whole thing, and her threats had been pure intimidation, but at the very least it had improved her mood a lot.

“That was so cool, Nanami!” She almost screeched when the chirpy voice of the same woman caught her off guard. “I can’t believe what you actually threatened that guy!”

Wait... how did this broad even knew her name, even before when she called it, Nanami had been a little too swept into getting some well-deserved retribution to think about it too hard, but she had no idea who this woman was, she knew her name and this was the second time in a row that she conveniently found her...

Oh dear, was she dealing with a stalker?

“I can’t believe I found you here! It’s been so long since we were both in Ohtori Academy, right?”

Or maybe not... was she a classmate? She looked around the same age as her, although it was hard to tell, she couldn’t have been one of her friends or popular

people because she was sure she would remember that, but she was talking to her so casually, there was no other alternative.

“Y-yes! I suppose it has!” And she didn’t feel like making a fool out of herself for a second time in a single day.

“We have so much to catch up on! Oh, I know!” How could a grown woman look this excited and skip like that and not break her heel? It was a mystery for her. “Let’s have dinner together!”

Any other time, Nanami would have been freaked out about having someone’s face so close to hers, but this time she took the chance to get a good look at her, to see if any feature struck a chord with her.

...Nothing, just like this morning, her appearance was completely normal and that meant completely unremarkable and forgettable too. She did have a very large forehead though, still, she had her hair styled in a way that it complemented her features rather than call attention to it, Nanami would give her that much.

“Dinner? Uh...” She was actually very hungry, because she had spent the entire day at the office waiting for her interview, Nanami had not gotten any lunch, breakfast had been her only meal... but it’s already the second half of the month and she can’t afford to eat out, she has a bunch of cup ramen waiting for her at the apartment. “I don’t know, it’s pretty late and...”

“Oh come on!” The woman took her hand this time and got the most ridiculous face on her, teary eyes and pouting almost resembling a puppy. “I’m inviting you, so dinner is on me!”

From all the things that could bait her, those were the ones she couldn’t refute. And her belly decided to answer in her place.

She didn’t have bad taste in restaurants, Nanami decided.

Even if it wasn’t anything too fancy – and really those types of restaurants were for romantic dates, not for friendly outings – the place had a warm and welcoming atmosphere and the added bonus of having booths so they could have

some privacy even if they were only two people, and the food smelled delicious. She hadn't had lots of filling meals in a while now.

It was funny really, years ago she wouldn't have even thought about putting a foot inside one of these... family restaurants.

Once they were seated and the waitress gave them a couple of menus, the woman kept chatting about their days back at school, and despite herself Nanami tried not to let the guilt gnaw at her gut, because she really couldn't be making up stuff on the spot, plus the fact that the other woman was buying her a meal... people did not do that for strangers they'd met for five minutes during middle school.

"...Anyway, that was quite a graduation ceremony! Some of my college buddies still tell the story whenever we get together and I think from that moment on, the rules on formal clothing were much more specific!" She laughed when she finished saying this and Nanami tried not to make herself sound too fake, lost in her musing she had not heard a word of what she said.

The waitress bringing them their drinks bought her some time.

"That sounds like quite a story, mmmh, how about in middle school though? We had some pretty weird stories right?" That's right maybe if she shared a story she might remember! Or at least pretend until the food came and the bill was paid.

The woman looked like she was thinking for a long moment, she looked straight at her, not a hard stare or judging in anyway, but Nanami still felt as if she was being examined.

"Say..." She paused to take a sip of her drink. "...you don't really know who I am right?"

Time stopped and it was hard to breath because she was busy sputtering the water, her nose burned because she had asked it to be ice cold and goddammit, this woman did it on purpose because this was the most ridiculous thing that could happen to her. She also felt someone patting her back and putting a napkin close to her mouth.

"Wakaba, what happened?" It was probably the waitress.

"Sorry, sorry, that was my fault."

Wakaba...

‘Utena, aren’t you going to give a present to your best friend in the entire world?’

Who was the person who kept saying that? In her mind Nanami saw a girl, she couldn’t see her face clearly, the only thing she remembered was that she was a tomboy, countless of memories of this girl playing rowdy sports, wearing boys’ clothes, talking like a boy and with overall unladylike manners, the girl annoys her to no end, of that she is sure because she feels a vein in her head throb at the mere sight of her. There is also another girl, this one doesn’t annoy her, she wishes she would only annoy her, but no, the knot on her stomach and the chills running down her back whenever that girl was concerned were real and always made her feel like she entered a lion’s den.

Next to her, the tomboy girl’s oddness was welcome.

And of course she thinks she remembers another girl, she’s always there too, always following the other two around as if she was a puppy, she’s not annoying or scary like the them, she doesn’t remember anything about her, only her trailing behind the other two girls.

“Nanami? Are you alright? Can you see me? How many fingers am I holding?”

“I’m fine!!!” She yelled to whoever was holding three fingers right into her face, of course that attracted the attention of the other customers and Nanami wished she could sink into her seat.

“Sorry, you weren’t reacting and I was afraid you had choked or something.” She sounded genuinely sorry and that alone made her back down, also because she still felt her throat sore.

“I’m sorry, Miss, was the water too cold? I can bring you more.” The waitress, while well-intentioned, looked less concerned for Nanami and more for being written up by her manager.

She couldn’t say she blamed her.

“Another glass is fine, thank you.”

“Right away, Miss. Oh, Wakaba are you on shift tonight?” The waitress was talking to Wakaba now.

“No, I asked the day off,” said Wakaba, shaking her head.

They fell into an awkward silence after that, how could they not? How was she supposed to talk to her now that she outed herself as not really knowing her? They didn’t have any shared interest or hobbies and didn’t even seem to frequent the same circles as to ask about that either.

Then again it wasn’t like Nanami had kept in touch with her old classmates.

“So... you work here?” She has no trouble picturing Wakaba in the role of a waitress, she was tact, patient and give off was friendly enough to make small talk to customers, all things she herself absolutely failed at. “You don’t look like one to work on night shift though.”

She realized too soon that she had spoke the last thing out loud, Wakaba seemed to realize too and giggled a little.

“All my shifts are at night Nanami, I’m a bartender.” She pointed to the bar where right now there was another older guy mixing and serving drinks. “Mr. Kobayashi is going to retire soon, and he’s teaching me all he knows before that, so I guess you could say I’m like an apprentice.”

Nanami didn’t even knew women were permitted to become bartenders and she stopped herself right in time, that would have probably been rude and she had already called her a goody-two-shoes before, but what did she even knew about Wakaba to know if this was expected from her? She didn’t even remember her 5 minutes ago and what she remembered was so small that she could laugh at herself.

“So, Nanami what have you been up to? I noticed this morning that you were going to the corporate district.” Wakaba’s enthusiasm and self-contented smile was contagious and she found herself smiling too, wishing to have something exciting to share, something worth of her attention.

‘Not much, I was going to an interview, after finishing college, a gig as an intern I have been between jobs for the past year.’ Hmph, didn’t that sound pathetic?

While she thought about this, the waitress had finally brought their food, but Nanami had lost her appetite.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it,” Wakaba apologized, even though she was only making small talk, she was definitely nicer than herself. “I can only imagine how it has been for you and your brother.”

If a bull had entered the restaurant, trashed everything around just to take Nanami on its back to a faraway island, she would feel less shocked than she felt now and of course the shock gave way to embarrassment, the way Wakaba used her hand to cover half of her face was enough confirmation that she knew and that she was aware that she wasn’t supposed to know.

Ugh, her day couldn’t possibly suck anymore so she may as well get on with it.

“What else there is to say? That as it turned out neither me or Touga were our parents’ real children?” Back in school Nanami had thought that was the worst thing that had happened her, now she wished that was the only secret. “And not only that, we weren’t actually adopted, we were *bought* off, kept and groomed only to fulfill their wishes and ambitions, and that when Touga and I refused to do what they demanded from us – I was *eighteen* when they wanted me married off to a business partner who was old enough to be my *grandfather* – we were thrown out from the house and disowned?” Disown was such a proper word because they had been nothing but property to these people. “So go ahead and pity me, laugh in my face like I did to you and your friends so long ago.”

Nanami doesn’t want to look up to see Wakaba’s eyes, filling with disdain or pity.

“I... don’t want to do that.” Is the only thing Wakaba said, “I just thought I could cheer you up because you look so... tired.”

Tired? Yes, that was the perfect word to describe how she had been feeling for quite a while now, not physically tired, but mentally and emotionally tired and done with everything around her.

“Do you ever wish things would have gone different? To just... give in to what people wanted from you?” It was a good question one that she herself had asked herself many times.

“There are... many things that I regret, sometimes I like telling to myself that if I could go back, knowing what I know now, I would do things different, better...” What she kept to herself though, was that another part of her knew she wouldn't do anything to change. “... And I do wish someone would have told me how hard it was to simply live by, how expensive it is, how many basic skills you need and I never learned until I had no one to lean onto than my equally incompetent brother.” There had been many times when she had become tempted to run back and beg for forgiveness and promise to be a good girl this time but... “No, I still wouldn't do it.”

How could she? After a particularly nasty fight with Touga about it which had led to a very unceremonious reveal of what exactly their so-called parents had ‘requested’ from him, what they had taken from him right under her nose.

“How do you know?” Nanami asked, she knew that it couldn't be Touga, he had nothing to gain from a girl like Wakaba.

“I don't know if I should tell you, you would probably go hunt him down.” Wakaba laughed a little but it was obvious she wasn't entirely kidding on the last sentence.

And there was only another person close enough to either of them to know the full story, and yes, Nanami could feel her fists balling at her sides and her mind was relishing into some payback fantasies.

“Idiot, as if I have time to waste on doing any of that.” After all, she knew he and Touga were still in contact, if she had wanted she would have no troubles contacting him, he had been the first one to reach out to them and had acted so sickly concerned that it was disgusting, her bruised pride had not let her think anything else back then.

“You know? At first I thought that you had not changed at all, but that was silly of me to think right? Everyone changes, you, your brother, even Saionji.” The blush that crept to Nanami's face was not unwelcomed, it made her feel giddy even.

“I guess...” She picked the fork and started to play a little with her food, not knowing what to say in exchange, she had no frame of reference to know if Wakaba had changed... she did remember one thing though. “Well, feel proud of yourself, without his annoying fanclub around, you can finally have Saionji for yourself right?”

After all, if he had confided Wakaba with such sensitive information, that had to mean they were on more than just speaking terms.

She didn’t expect the laughter that came from Wakaba.

“Oh, I hardly doubt it, I’m not his type, and he’s no longer mine either.” Had that been because they both changed or because now adulthood gave them new perspectives, more options? “You know?” She doubted for a second and her voice got quitter. “Back then, he practically begged me to talk to the manager about getting you a job.”

That was when Nanami *finally* noticed the name of the place on the cups and the napkins: it was the same name as the place she started her life as a working girl, the same name printed on the shirt she had so carefully hidden.

“Is not the same, I doubt your memory is that bad.” She laughed again. “the owner has a couple places all over the city and the prefecture....”

The only reason Nanami is not banging her head against the table is because she wants to think she still has a minimum of manners, she just started eating her meal, which had already gotten cold, but beggars can’t be choosers, they both ate in silence for quite a while, the only sounds coming from them were the cutlery scraping against the plates.

“Hey Nanami...” Wakaba started. “You think we could hang out again? It’s nice to have someone from school to talk to.” She was smiling again, and Nanami could now see why people – even people like Saionji – wanted to keep talking to her: it was easy, she didn’t have any grandiose expectations of people or even herself and life, it was... normal, comfortable.

“I... guess I can make a place on my schedule.” She exchanged phones with her without many words, and when she checked it, she couldn’t help notice there was another number she added.

“I don’t want to meddle, but maybe you too could call Saionji every once in a while?” Wakaba didn’t say that he too worried about her, but the sentiment was there nonetheless.

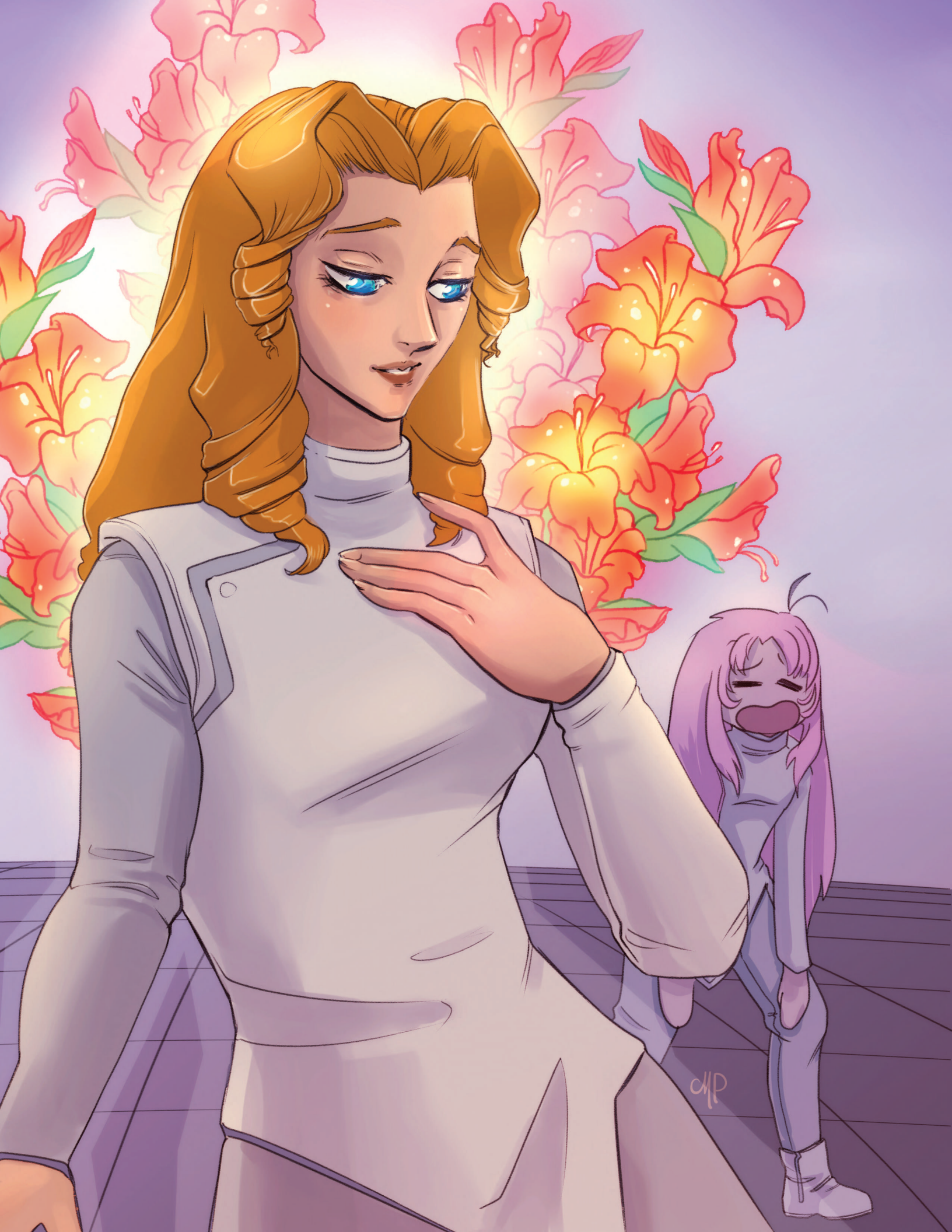
Nanami didn’t know what to say, all this new information didn’t let her think clearly and now she felt like she really had to re-acquaintance herself with the guy, only to see if he really was not an idiot anymore.

“Maybe.” She immediately took another bite. She had a lot of things to think about.

A couple notes:

- Even if Nanami was disowned, I think she and Touga would be likely to keep the Kiryuu name’s pronunciation and just change the kanjis conforming it.
- Being adopted in Japan carries a lot of baggage from what I’ve heard, and people being found out having adopted or being adopted is apparently source of shame.
- The family registry in Japan (or koseki) is a public document where people can track down their ancestors, is actually standard practice for job interview to request this document precisely for the reason above among other things.
- As for the title, the dictionary of obscure sorrows defines it as “glimpse of what could have been.”







I'm so sorry Juri..



For everything, everything .



For my cruelty ,



For asking you to forgive me even though I have your blood in my hands because I crushed your heart too many times.



I-I...

We'll heal, together.

THE BRIDES and THE BLADES

Akio copes with Anthy's departure like the rational, mature, and totally not monstrous adult that we all know that he is.



GW: Akio being Akio, sexual allusions

The Brides and the Blades

[Giovanna](#)

It wasn't what Anthy had said. A departing salvo was hardly worth fixing to memory if it explained nothing and afforded him no response. Something else lingered in his thoughts, gnawing at his peace of mind: the eerie way Anthy shed, word by word, the voice her face belonged to. It was a change so drastic as to render her unrecognizable, so that an apparition in the shape of Anthy was what the elevator door closed on. Some stranger that he didn't know had left him.

Light bounced off countless swords flying in violently elliptical arcs around the arena. They were the rocks and dust that create rings around a planet, too far away to distinguish themselves, instead appearing a single entity that dominated the night sky. A starless night sky: the projector was occupied with them, so there was nothing else to see. "It's quite telling, and I shouldn't have been surprised. Without the Rose Bride to draw them, the swords could have done anything. They had no rules to follow. Gravity, dispersion, entropy... no principle of the natural world would have meant anything to them. They could have scattered in confusion. They could have torn apart everything I've built here. They could have come down on me, deciding at last that I'm the source of their woes."

A woman stood nearby, dark blue hair resting around her face. She was in the calm eye of a storm that was shrinking around her, but it was not the swords she watched. She stared instead at the projector, the spheres making up its hulking mass turning with a low mechanical hum. It was a familiar thing made now a menace, and a bitter laugh escaped her when she realized how blind she had been, all these years. The projector, the school, the world...none of it had ever belonged to her, and it was not into her family that Akio had been adopted. It was the other way around.

"Perhaps I've given the world too much credit. The swords didn't feed according to their needs, or their tastes, or by any other higher motivation. Without a scapegoat, they hated everything equally, and destroyed whatever stayed in reach long enough

for them to find.” Akio’s gaze slid down from the subject of his ponderings to the woman nearby. Sweat drew shimmering lines down her neck, and there was a stubborn set to her jaw that pleased him to see. “But they still have preferences. Creatures they most eagerly love to hate.”

Resentment had dripped from Himemiya’s lips with every word she spoke. It had been the purposeful sting of antiseptic, curative and deliberate, rather than the needless hurt of an animal’s venom. Akio had learned to trust the potency of that resentment. Her voice made a weapon was proof of her hatred, and as long as she hated him, she loved him also. For as long as he could remember, neither of them were particularly inclined to distinguish between the two. As long as her heart was locked in the same passionate hatred his was, he knew Himemiya would never leave. More than everything they’d shared in their lives, their joys and hurts, more even than the blood that bound them, it was this that Akio had relied on.

“The Swords of Hate are the world’s retribution for a crime so unforgivable that they believe this violence is justified. Though that debt was paid long ago, the possibility that history might repeat itself is enough to draw the world’s wrath. Or that’s their excuse. The truth is, the Swords have a kinship with the Rose Bride. A connection built of a shared need: neither would know themselves except through the hatred felt by the other. It’s a gruesome intimacy, like staring into an unwanted mirror. A relationship that’s deep, destructive...and most of all familiar.”

Akio slid his fingers through tousled blond hair, and the woman’s bright blue eyes widened as his gaze pressed on her. She was drawn to him as an escape from the blades closing in around them, the cruel curiosity in his eyes still easier to bear than the imminent destruction looming behind him. Her resolve wavered, pinned as she was by the unreality of her predicament. She tried to step away, but Akio’s fingers tightened in her hair, and the nails denting her scalp seemed to her a prelude to an inevitability.

“I thought once that the swords would come down on me, given the chance.” His lips curled down as the maelstrom above closed in. “I wondered then whether I

would survive them. But I needn't have worried. The swords would no more destroy me than they would destroy the wind that carries them. They need me. It's my pointing finger that they follow...to the one Princess in the multitude that might, for a moment, be my Bride."

It was the sound of hatred, fading gradually from her voice, that made his sister into such an unfamiliar creature. Who was she without it? Could either of them really say before that moment? The constant misery they shared was realer to them than the possibility of either having a soul, and it had shocked him to see it so easily cast aside. She'd taken the risk of ending her entire existence, and truly...that's exactly what happened. Whoever it was that left, there was no doubt in Akio's mind that his sister was gone. She'd died right there before him, and he needed no mangled body on the floor to tell him that.

"Perhaps, if no individual among you was ever elevated above the others into clear view, the swords wouldn't come at all." The backs of his fingers drifted smoothly down the woman's face, brushing aside scattered auburn curls. Her lips quivered, but her dark eyes were glazed over, unfocused, as if Akio wasn't really there. "The Princesses of this world could agree to remain a safe, homogenous, indistinct thing...but you don't want that, do you? You clamour for the chance to rise above the others. You fight over it. You don't care what the fate of the Rose Bride is, only that for a moment, you would be her. A single soul apart from all the others..."

Akio's lips descended on the single soul he spoke to, smiling against her shy, pliant answer. The swords watched this kiss, and it sent them into an ecstatic, howling rage. Their sweeping orbits closed in until they were no longer a blur of light and sound, but mob of angry faces made of cold steel.

There was a time when this had scared him. The blades screeching against one another had made his teeth clench. The gathering wind had made him unsure of his footing. The light had burned his eyes as they danced, vague in the distance. Then finally, the fear that coiled in his stomach as they slowly turned to a very real, very

sharp, very close reality. Ages had passed that way, before the fear turned to anger. At the swords. At his Bride. At the ridiculous necessity of it.

But ages more had given Akio perspective. He'd learned to love most dearly the sound of their hatred, and the screaming cacophony of their wrath was now to him the soft sighs of a familiar lover. He welcomed them now, and even invited them. The kinship became theirs, so long as the hatred came down on someone else. Anyone else. Especially...

She shed the role of the Rose Bride with each word, her crown, her earrings, her dress...guilt given form as it laid discarded at her feet. It was as easy that. As easy as undressing. All that pain, all that cruelty, and everything that had grown, rotten and ugly, from that miserable soil...she walked away from all of it. She walked away from him. Her last words rang bright in the open space of his office, melodic and sweet, the sound of a creature who inexplicably bore him no ill will.

With that, she disappeared from his world, and the machine of Akio's memory whirled to life. Once a name, she became a title, then only a relative, before being reduced to merely a someone. And then, finally, a no one; an absence made linear across the passage of untold ages, so that there was, comfortingly, nothing there for Akio to forget.

"There was a time, ages ago, when the Princesses of the world wanted most of all to be saved. At that time, I was a Prince to them." Ebony hair clung to cool sweat on the woman's neck, and Akio traced his fingers along the vein-like strands as they led down to her chest. Her clothing fell away ahead of his touch, until his hand paused over a bared breast. The air pressed against his palm as it hovered there, the space below condensing from nothingness to solid matter, and in a flash of brilliant light, a sword appeared and was drawn. Akio didn't bother to look at the blackened, garish mockery of a Prince's weapon. He smiled instead at the dress that had grown from the woman's skin as the sword materialized outside it. A silky bodice of royal purple, accented in golds against her emerald eyes. A flowing skirt, a thick bustle, and a glittering crown decorated with iridescent pearls. An amalgamation of all the dresses a

woman would endeavor to wear in her lifetime, a distillation of the ambitions driven by her sex. A princess, a bride, a queen...

"I'm still your Prince. Even now. But you don't want to be saved anymore, do you?"

"No." Her expression darkened, and her voice was laced with anger. She gazed at him, at the sword he held, and at the blades closing in, all with the same boiling resentment. This didn't bother Akio, and in fact, he appeared pleased by it. He pulled her into a gentle embrace, his breath drifting through her hair.

"Back then, it was the sole ambition of a Princess to draw the attention of the Prince. They looked for dragons. They wandered into dark forests. They put themselves in harm's way, hoping they might make themselves a Bride when their Prince came to save them."

His fingers tightened around the back of her neck and she let out a soft murmur, neither pleasure nor pain. A ghost of a kiss pressed against her forehead, and she was suddenly ripped from his arms, turned so that she stumbled, falling to the floor on her hands and knees. She tried to get up, but felt the sharp point of a blade at her back, and turning her head, she saw Akio looming over her.

"It makes no difference to you that the dark forest you wander into now belongs to me. You don't care that the Prince you find here will not save you. All that ever mattered was that I notice you." His lips were curved in a soft smile, but his eyes glittered with a miserable satisfaction. "And you, sweet Princess...I have noticed you."

The woman looked up at the howling swords, individual blades wandering closer in their decaying orbits, the mob testing its willingness to attack. She smiled an unhappy smile. Then, in a slow breath, she drew her knees under her and pushed herself up, driving the cold, ugly steel of her own sword into her back. The woman screamed with an otherworldly passion, her fingers curling around the tip of the sword as it burst from her stomach, tearing her dress and spilling hot blood onto the floor. The maelstrom of blades, the mob of Princesses that stood watch, suddenly

turned on their axis, caught by the scent, and then they descended on her. Akio stepped delicately away, knowing the swords would be no threat to him.

“The problem, my unfortunate Bride...is that if I notice you, so does everyone else. And they hate you more than I do.”

A simple statement of the obvious can be said with the devastating power of an incantation, rendering from mere thought a truth that defined itself in the speaking.

“Women are all Rose Brides, in the end.” The Prince in his castle, deep in the dark forest, had heard someone say that once, and it had been true ever since.







VIA
EL
A

LA NO
DE
ROSA

HILU MARTÍNEZ



TAKE YOUR TIME

Juri is unsatisfied with her glamorous life of high society and feels the older years wear on her friendship with Miki, who walks a similarly unhappy path. Every good friendship needs a fight to test its strength.



Take Your Time

[Ronia](#)

The night was deep enough that windows were just starting to turn gray. As they had parted ways, as they had each walked their own paths out of the tower, Miki had felt it all slowly begin to slip from him. He still knew it was there, everything that had happened from the moment Tenjou Utena had appeared with her own rose crest ring. But the details were melting from his mind. It was a disconcerting sensation, and he knew, somehow, that if he returned to his dormitory, if he let himself close his eyes, he would open them later and recall none of it. He had walked along the dark campus, the empty buildings so silent and still, and their hollowness frightened him.

Miki stopped at the music building, stepped up into the doorway and put his hand on the doorknob. He'd figure it would be locked at this hour, but he had just wanted to rattle the door, to try to show himself it was all really there, not a dream, or a plywood set. To his surprise, the door opened, into the main hall, pitch black at this time of night. It confirmed the building was real, but this somehow unsettled him further.

Yet he followed the familiar path up to the familiar room. It was empty, of course, except for the grand piano. Miki took a seat at the bench, but put his hands in his lap, and set his gaze up, over the piano. He couldn't make out the far side of the room in the dark, just the gray windows. Images played behind his eyes, shadows rising up from the dark, the outlines of Himemiya in the garden, his sister fumbling over the keys –

"It's a little late, isn't it, Miki?"

He gasped at the voice, pulling himself out of his stupor. At first he imagined he could see who was at the door. Another silhouette, he pictured the pointed edges of her bobbed haircut, the wide hem of her uniform skirt. But he recognized the voice. It wasn't hers.

"Juri-san?" he asked, startled. "You knew I was here?"

He heard Juri's footsteps as she crossed the room, her edges becoming distinct, the soft orange tint of her hair just barely brushing the darkness. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

Miki caught himself nodding, despite the dark. "Of course not, Juri-san," he answered. And then, with a touch of weariness in it, "The music classroom isn't just for playing the piano."

Juri moved around him, and took a seat on the far end of the piano bench, facing away from the keys. They sat in silence, together, at first. Though he still couldn't really see her, sitting that way had a pleasant familiarity to it. They had spent plenty of time together in the Student Council hall, waiting to hear from their president, or just using it as a retreat from the outside world. It had been one of his favorite spots on campus – after this room, in any case. Though strangely, it too seemed to be fading from his mind. Now, he couldn't quite picture the view from the hall's wide balcony any more, or the high, arched ceilings.

He wondered if Juri expected him to play the piano. But her thoughts seemed to follow his, instead.

"Do you remember when you first joined the Student Council?"

Miki blinked, suppressing a strange urge to laugh. "I was terrified of you then."

"You're not terrified of me anymore?"

He turned his head to look at her, even though he could barely make out her face in the dark. Miki briefly imagined the small, knowing smile she often had, and he thought it must be there now. He didn't answer her, and after a few seconds, he heard a brief, fluttering laugh.

"That's all right Miki. I remember you seemed younger then, like this little baby bird that was going to get caught between Touga and Saionji's antics."

"Smash the world's shell."

"Mmm," came her response. He thought he could feel her moving beside him, though he still couldn't see what, if anything, she was doing in the dark.

"I asked you to have a cup of tea with me. I'd never heard your voice before, even in fencing club."

"I think I talked to you a few times before in fencing club, Juri-san."

"Mmm," she answered again. "Maybe I just forgot."

There was a soft clink on the bench next to him. "Let's have another drink, Miki." Miki reached out to the space between them, expecting to find that she had set a thermos down on the bench, and stunned to find a flask there instead.

"Juri-san, I – I'm too –"

"Young?" There was another, now a clap of laughter. "I think I know this, Miki. Even when we do grow up, we'll still always be too young."

"I can't imagine Ohtori without you, Juri-san."

Juri smiled at Miki. He probably meant it. And she was also sure he would barely feel her absence in a week or so. She reached out, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Just try to keep up the fencing club, all right?" She glanced up, over him. Miki was the only one to come to see her off, helping her carry her bags and pile them into the waiting taxi. It was no surprise to her – she had only ever allowed her popularity at a distance, after all, and she was sure that like Miki, all those admirers she was dimly aware of would soon be just as dimly aware of her. She could spot, with a glance back to the gates, a small collection of schoolgirls gathered just on the other side, bunched into a small crowd, mostly talking among themselves. But one, silhouetted in the sunlight, was clearly facing them.

Apparently there would be no last goodbye. That was probably for the best. She turned her eyes back to Miki. "I put a lot of work into that club. I'd like to know it doesn't fade too quickly."

Miki nodded. "Of course I will. I'll report on my progress if you –"

"That won't be necessary, Miki." She clapped his shoulder. "Have a good year. I know we'll see you soon."

And not to linger on sentimentality, Juri stepped away, shoving the last bag in her hand across the backseat of the taxi and taking a seat alongside it. Miki stayed standing where he was as she closed the door, and though the windows were tinted so he couldn't see her, Juri watched him, as he still didn't step away, at least not until the taxi had turned a corner and he had slipped out of sight.

Somehow, Juri had never imagined it would be so different from Ohtori. She had already had private living quarters on campus – she really lived in an apartment, not a dorm room. She had already been working regularly, maintaining her own schedule of appointments with designers and photographers and paying her own expenses. Her teachers had held no real authority, and she had rarely attended classes.

The last part seemed strange to her, in retrospect. How could she have so rarely attended classes? She'd had top marks, and under everything, Ohtori was a school, wasn't it?

Maybe the difference was the power she had carried around campus. She still had some of that power – she was beautiful, poised, and wickedly intelligent. She appeared in posters that lined the trains she rode, or were displayed in the shops she visited. But anonymity was a force to be reckoned with now. She had never thought of herself as someone who valued popularity and recognition, they were just byproducts of her ambitions. If she wanted to be captain of the fencing team, to achieve outstanding academic success, to maintain the identity she had constructed to keep herself from slipping into yearning or regret, attention was going to come along with it. But she never strove for attention itself.

Now that she didn't have it, now if she wanted that attention, she'd have to fight for it – Juri had to decide whether it was something she wanted, after all. And what either answer would mean for that identity she'd so carefully curated.

At first, Juri continued modeling simply because it was easy. She already knew photographers and designers, already has a reputation. There was very little that she has to build up from scratch. But when she wasn't returning to Ohtori at the end of it, the work felt so much emptier than it had before. When in front of a camera, she

barely spoke. Those men who lavished her with gifts and praise never wanted to hear her own thoughts or opinions. They wanted her to keep working, to keep being the object they could market to others – anything she felt, any word she spoke, would detract from her long red hair, her tall frame, her easy elegance that could be used to inspire fantasies of beauty and success in others. Even with her face in posters or shop windows, the illusion only worked if no one really knew her. While still at Ohtori, she'd had the school to return, the attention of those who knew her as Arisugawa Juri, fencing club captain, top student, Student Council member –

Once, she had stopped when she saw her face in a display case above an array of perfume bottles. In the photo she had a soft smile, her eyes shyly averted, her bright hair floating in some unseen breeze, and collected around her red rose petals were falling like raindrops.

It nagged at Juri for days, the uneasy familiarity, reminding her of another face she couldn't quite place.

So she turned to other options. With the contacts she had, it wasn't hard to find jobs in advertising and marketing, in buying for stores and designers. She had top grades and the prestige of her school and glowing recommendations on her side. It might have been enough to get her anything she wanted.

"What do you want to do?" It was a question asked over and over. Before she had easily set herself goals. They were, after all, a good alternative to desires. Yet she was stunned to find that now, she wasn't sure how to answer that question. The first words that came to her were satisfaction, excitement. She didn't know how she would find that in an office, looking at clothing or marketing perfume.

But it couldn't only be about what she wanted. So she took those jobs. She worked in office, had drinks with her colleagues. When she had saved up the money, she tried her hand at other options, something that might give her that spark she was looking for – reading scripts, looking at cameras. She would watch courtroom dramas on television and then read law books in the library, and then return to her job the next

day. Work into the evening, and return alone to her apartment to cook a meal and read a book and hear nothing but the distant traffic in the street below.

It was monotonous, and anonymous, and with every option in the world she felt she couldn't break out of it.

And then, one Saturday, she broke it the only way she knew how. She put on a long coat, sunglasses, and a kerchief to cover her hair. She caught a train, and then a taxi, finally arriving late in the afternoon. Somehow, she thought, someone might stop her at the gate. That under her glasses and kerchief, someone might recognize her, shout her name as she passed. But no one even looked at her. The girls in their uniform skirts and blouses looked so young, younger than she ever remembered being when she was at Ohtori. A group of boys kicked around a football, knocking it toward her. She stopped it with her foot, and they shyly retrieved it from her, apologizing profusely, hesitant to come near her.

Juri found the fencing hall, hearing the snarl of foils as she approached it. So that was still the same, it seemed. There was a back door, one that led to a storage space from which, with the door open, she could watch the proceedings. The participants were lined against the far wall, jumping one after another to take up a foil and challenge the current leader. He never removed his mask, but she knew Miki's voice, calling out as she had before –

"Next! Next – "

It continued for another ten minutes, before he announced that they were done for the day. The other students, boys and girls, removed their masks, shook out their hair, retired to put away their equipment. Miki stayed behind, as she knew he would, answering questions from lingering students, collecting up the sabers left on the floor and setting them down along the wall closer to her. Juri waited, and waited, keeping just out of sight behind the door, until the last of the students left. He turned away, glancing down, a familiar click ringing through the empty hall –

She set aside her kerchief and glasses, and stepped out, her footsteps echoing over the walls. Miki turned, but went still the moment he locked eyes with her.

"Juri-san?" She wondered if she looked any different. He did sound uncertain.
"What are you doing here?"

A few answers sprung to mind. But instead, she knelt down, and lifted one of the foils from the floor.

"It's not such a big deal, Miki." Kozue barely looked up from the suitcase she was packing, her belongings slowly disappearing from their shared room. "I can always call you. I'll write you every week, okay?"

"I – it's not about that –" Miki's protest felt caught up in his throat. He couldn't understand his sister's cheerfulness, the way she carelessly tossed clothes from her dresser into the open suitcase. "You're dropping out – what are you going to do if you haven't finished your education? How are you going to find a job? Mom and Dad –"

"Oh, Miki –" She stopped what she was doing now, tossing away a last pair of socks and turning to look back at him. He felt a sudden urge to recoil, her eyes were so focused as she approached, and when she lifted her hand for a moment he thought she might hit him. But she raised it to slowly press her palm to his cheek, the tips of her fingers brushing the ends of his hair, her eyes looking straight into his. She stood like this long enough that Miki wondered, dithered – should he move? Say something? Looking back into her eyes, his mind went blank.

"I know you need more time," she said. "But don't take too long. I'll be waiting for you out there."

Her mouth quirked into a smile, and she lowered her hand, sweeping back toward her packing. Miki couldn't think of anything else to say. He stumbled back toward the door.

The next time he saw Kozue, an upperclassman was helping her carry her bags toward the school gates. She stopped when she spotted him among the porticos, and ran over to him, throwing her arms around him in a hug he barely had time to return before she released him, and shoved a folded up piece of paper into his hands. "See you later, brother."

On the paper, she'd written a phone number, and street address.

She was right, really. It didn't take him much longer. As predicted, Miki finished his studies at Ohtori early. He received several invitations from other institutions, including ones overseas, but decided on a mathematics program in a major university in the capital. He had never wanted to go too far – now he would be a train ride away from both of his parents, in the same city as Kozue again.

He'd thought she'd be happy to hear that, but when he called her to share his decision, she sighed, and Miki couldn't help but hear a note of disappointment in it.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," came the answer. "I just thought you might finally be a little more interesting."

Yet she was at his new dormitory before he arrived. He was never entirely sure how she had done that. She helped him unpack, ran out to buy snacks they could share while they worked. When most of his clothing had been put away, his books stacked on shelves and new notebooks and pens and calculator arranged neatly under the lamp on his desk, Kozue pulled out his old music book, and idly flipped through it.

"Do you think you'll still practice the piano here, Miki?"

He turned back to her, surprised by the question. "Of course. There's a music hall on campus. Why wouldn't I?"

She shrugged, rising from where she was sitting on his bed and closing the book between her hands. "I don't know, I thought you might be a little too busy for that kind of thing now."

Kozue dropped the book on the desk in front of him. "Anyway," she smiled up at him, then retrieved her bag and coat from his chair, and shrugged them on. "I've got to go to work."

Miki nodded, and she walked around him, out the door of his room. It wasn't until she was a ways down the hall that it hit him to ask –

"Wait – where do you work?!"

But again, Kozue had turned out to be right. There was a music hall on campus, with multiple piano rooms that Miki could have visited if he were inclined. There was a fencing team that practiced in the gymnasium twice a week – not highly ranked, but enough of a challenge for him. And yet, he visited neither place. He went to class, studied in his room, studied in the library. He was quickly tutoring other students, most of them older than he was. He was asked by several professors to assist them in their classes. He found a concentration quickly, and just as quickly found that it was all he seemed to want to do.

He made a point to write his parents, to call Kozue. He had planned on visiting his parents on weekends, and yet instead he was in the library, or the faculty lounge, pouring over books, composing lesson plans, drafting papers. And every so often, he thought about calling Juri. He had thought she would call him, but she never did. He wondered if she still visited Ohtori's fencing club, since he left – he doubted it, but still. Now that he had left Ohtori, it was hard for him to imagine what had made her want to come back. There was so much he needed to focus on here, so much he could do now. He had to think she felt the same.

And time passed so quickly. Much like at Ohtori, he gained a reputation around campus for his studiousness, for his kindness as a tutor, for his "genius eccentricities." But he heard none of it. It was a year later and he had exams to think of. Two years later and his thesis kept him at the library late into the night. Three years and he had to be thinking of the future again, of which program he would pursue, of where he would want to work. 'Professor Kaoru' was so inevitable that the other students already used it. He imagined his old friends at Ohtori would have thought that was funny – after all, he had always been the young one when he was there.

Time at Ohtori had moved slowly, he thought now. Sometimes it had felt like it was never moving at all. Even as he grew older, he was still young among his classmates. There had always been more than enough time for everything he could do, classes and music practice and fencing club. Now every moment he had was so easily

consumed, and months seem to pass while he was reviewing his notes. And he was old, Kaoru-sensei, even when he actually was younger.

It hit him full in the face one spring evening, late in his third year, as he walked back to his room after another long session in the library. He passed the music hall he had never stepped into, but someone inside had opened a window. From within, the melody, struck gently along the piano keys, wafted like a warm breeze and made him stop in his tracks. Even when the player within hit a false note, there was a sweetness to it. Something that couldn't have been achieved in rote perfection.

He listened under the window for nearly twenty minutes, somehow unable to move. When he heard the piano lid close, he finally took a step forward.

And the moment he reached his room, he tore through it, searching for his old music book. It wasn't like him to lose track of anything, yet he hadn't looked at it in years. Eventually he found it slipped along the bottom row of his bookshelf. He pulled it out, flipping through the pages, ruffling them between his fingers, unsure what he expected to find. But as the pages fluttered, something slipped out, and fell to the floor.

He knelt down to pick it up, and turned it over between his hands. It was a single napkin, printed with a stylized butterfly, and the name and address of restaurant in a distant neighborhood.

Miki went the next day. It was a small place, with bright lights and plastic booths, and glass doors and wide windows that meant he could easily watch what occurred from the outside without ever stepping in. He caught sight of Kozue at once, wearing a navy blue dress uniform and carrying a pitcher. She was smiling as she stepped among the booths and tables. She stopped at one where a man was seated alone, turned away so that Miki couldn't see his face. Kozue refilled his glass. He looked up at her, and must have spoken, because she laughed.

And for the briefest moment, perhaps, her eyes fluttered up, to the window. Or he'd imagined it, but it hit him like a clap of thunder.

Miki turned on his heel and left.

As soon as he reached his room that night, he picked up the phone.

"Yes?" Juri's voice. It had taken so little time, really.

"Juri-san, it's me, Miki – Kaoru Mik–"

"I know who you are, Miki," she replied.

"Right. I – I know it's been some time –"

The restaurant Juri recommended was beautiful. And, Miki imagined, expensive. The entire room was made up of varying tones of off-white and soft gold, from the ceiling lamps to the table cloths. Juri arrived, it seemed, to match, wearing a sleek white suit and a gold necklace of slender bars that lengthened as they reached further down her neck. She smiled when she saw him, and he felt rather conscious of his slightly frayed suit jacket and his thin tie – he never found the time to buy new clothes. The thought struck him with a pang of nostalgia for Ohtori, for the ever-present school uniforms.

Juri knew their host and waiter by name, and they were led from the main room, to a table set for two in a more private space. They were handed black leather menus, and the waiter poured two glasses of ice water. Juri ordered white wine after a glance at the list, but Miki chose to stay with water.

And then there were a few moments of silence, strained all the more in the quiet space, the talk from the restaurant barely audible to them. Juri lifted her glass, taking a small sip of her water.

"So, how have you been, Miki?"

That did make things easier. He had plenty to talk about when it came to his studies, his work as a tutor and teaching assistant, his exams, his plans for the future. Juri listened patiently through all of it, and the only brief pause came as they ordered their meals, and then again when their plates were brought out. As he found himself drawing to a close, Miki felt as though he looked up, and to see her wine glass nearly drained, her meal half eaten. His own plate was barely touched. For the first time he noticed the strangely sweet scent coming from the dishes – both looked beautiful and so elegantly presented, but something about that scent made him queasy.

"But –" he said, trying ignore the scent, diligently pressing himself to eat, "I'm sorry, I've talked too much. What are you doing now?"

Juri folded her hands, and shrugged. "This and that. There are a couple projects coming up, and ..."

And she seemed to drift off, like she couldn't muster up anything else too important. Miki waited for her to continue, but when the silence lingered –

"Your necklace is very beautiful," he noted. The restaurant's soft lights gave it a constant shimmer. "Was it another gift from a designer?"

"Oh –" She idly reached up toward it with one hand, her fingertips just brushing the slender gold pieces, but her eyes flickered away as her other hand reached for her wine glass. "Yes, it was – a couple years ago..."

Again, she seemed to lose interest in the story before it had begun. Miki waited again, looking down to his meal, not wanting to seem too keen to fill the silence.

"Have you been back to the fencing club, Juri-san?"

He hadn't thought much of asking it, but at once, he knew it was a mistake. Juri's eyes widened, snapping back to him.

"No, Miki, I haven't. Not since you left."

Miki nodded. "I – I was wondering. I thought maybe you –"

"What?"

His eyes fell back to his plate. "N-nothing, it's nothing."

"Why don't you say what you're thinking, Miki?"

She was watching him intently now. Miki wanted to back out fully from this thread of conversation, knowing from her tone that nothing good would come from it. But he wasn't sure how else to pull away. Without thinking, he slipped into an even more formal tone. "I'm sorry, Arisugawa-san, I didn't mean to upset you."

Again, the moment he said it, he knew it at once it was the wrong thing to say. Juri's eyes flicked away, and she lifted her wine glass, draining it now.

"So you've been busy. Do you do much outside your class work these days?"

Miki blinked. It wasn't what he was expecting she would ask. "I – I've been working with the faculty, I'm hoping to –"

"Anything else, Kaoru-san. Do you still play the piano? Any sports at your university?"

"I – I've had to focus on –"

"Have you got a girlfriend?"

That stopped him cold, and now he could feel a few spurts of anger bubbling up in his stomach.

"That's really personal, Juri-san."

She shrugged. "You look like you haven't been out in a while. Do you even have any friends there?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Juri held up a hand. "I didn't mean to upset you."

He stayed quiet for a moment, stung by this. He had meant well, hadn't he?

"Juri-san, I was –" He took a breath. "I was asking because I was worried about you. I didn't understand why you'd go back there."

She shook her head, that small, knowing, aggravating smile flickering over her face. The kind of smile she'd so often had when they were students, when she was making some note of his youthful naiveté. "And maybe you should worry more about yourself. At least Ohtori made you show some nerve once in a while. You were always so lonely, and you still don't seem to understand why."

"Because I don't need to throw around a sword so I won't feel bored with my life now?"

Her smile was gone. The silence stretched on now, and it only took a few seconds for Miki to, again, regret his words.

"Juri-san –"

But she was leaning to the side, reaching for her purse.

"Maybe this was a bad idea. I'll go pay the check."

"I didn't mean –"

Juri looked back to him. "I know you didn't, Miki." But nonetheless, she rose from her seat. Her eyes were still on him, and they could both hear the footsteps of the host rushing to approach them.

"I hope things keep going well for you."

Her apartment was dark when she stepped into it, the rainstorm outside tapping against the windows. Juri flipped on the lights without looking around, walking straight across the room to the dining table where she set down her purse and a few pieces of mail. She ran a hand through her hair, shaking herself a little as she shrugged off her coat, and turned to hang it up.

Which is when she saw him. He was leaned against the wall next to the door, his foil lowered in his hand, the stance she had seen him so often before. Juri stopped, her coat still half-hanging from her shoulders.

"Miki – what are you –"

"Showing some nerve?" He raised the foil toward her. She shook her head, a few raindrops slipping loose from her hair.

"I don't even have mine here."

Miki took a step toward her. "I don't believe that."

She glanced down at the foil, and then back up to his face. Slowly, Juri swung the coat from her shoulders, and over her arm. "Look, let me put this away, and I'll show you."

With careful steps, Juri moved across the front room, to the closet by her front door. Miki followed her, foil raised, though still a good distance from her. She turned her back to him as she moved toward the closet, and called, "This is you working up some nerve? I really just thought you might ask out a girl."

"And where is your boyfriend, Arisugawa-san?"

That, she had to admit, was showing some nerve.

Juri opened the closet door, and stepped in, taking down a hanger to neatly set her coat over it and replace it inside. And then it took her barely a moment to close her hand around her own foil, set against the wall next to her shoes.

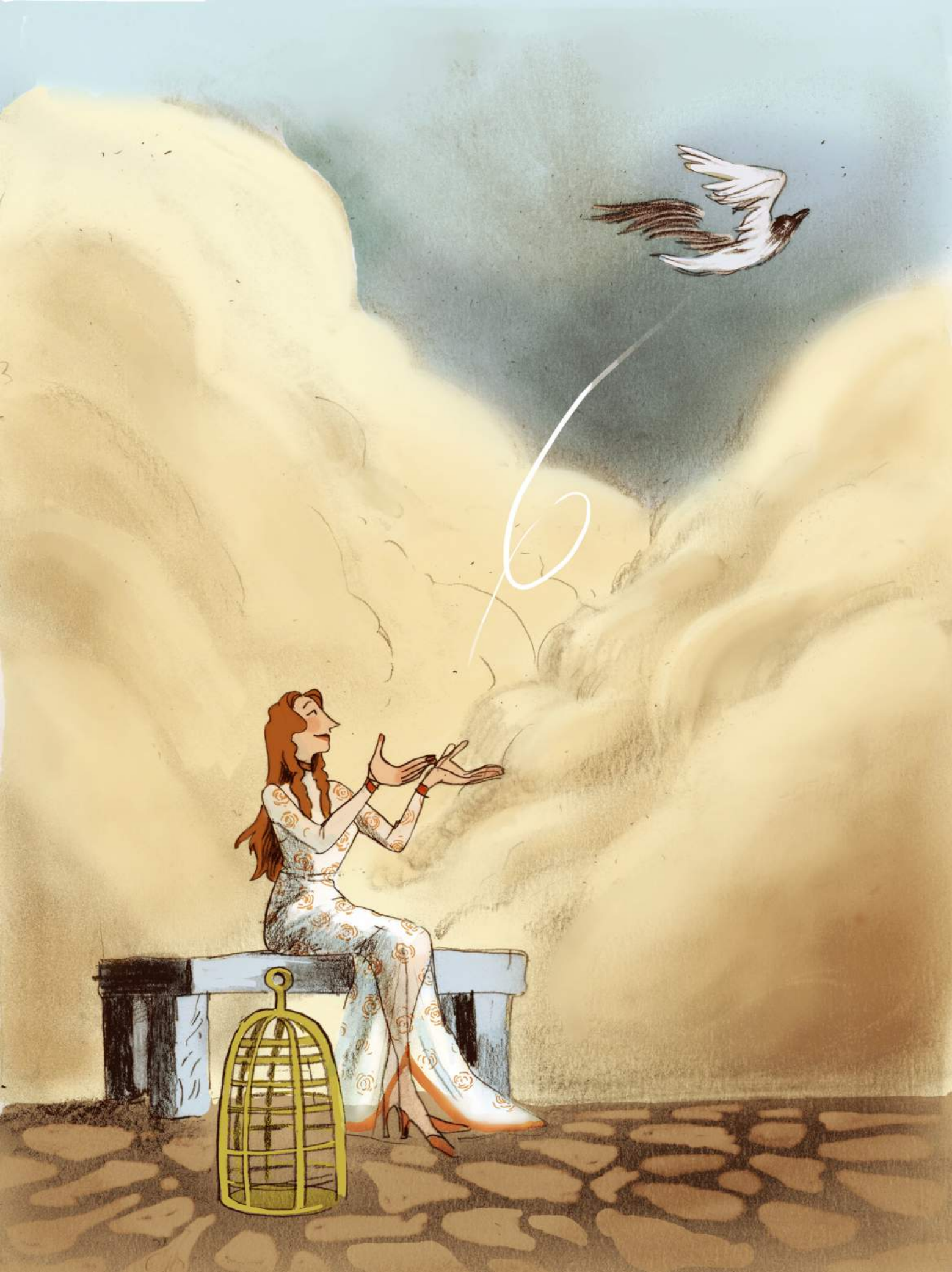
She spun, arm out, all strict sporting rules forgotten. This wasn't the fencing hall, this was the arena. There was no such thing as fair play.

As she expected, Miki was caught off guard. Her blade slammed against his, knocking his entirely out of his hand. The foil clattered to the floor, and skittered away from them, sliding to a rest next to her front door. Miki's eyes were wide in shock, and Juri took the moment to rush him, her saber raised so that its point came right up to his throat. She stopped so close to him that Miki stumbled, hitting her table and falling back slightly against it. Juri kept him there for a moment, but then lowered her foil, and also tossed it aside. It hit the floor, and rolled along, next to his.

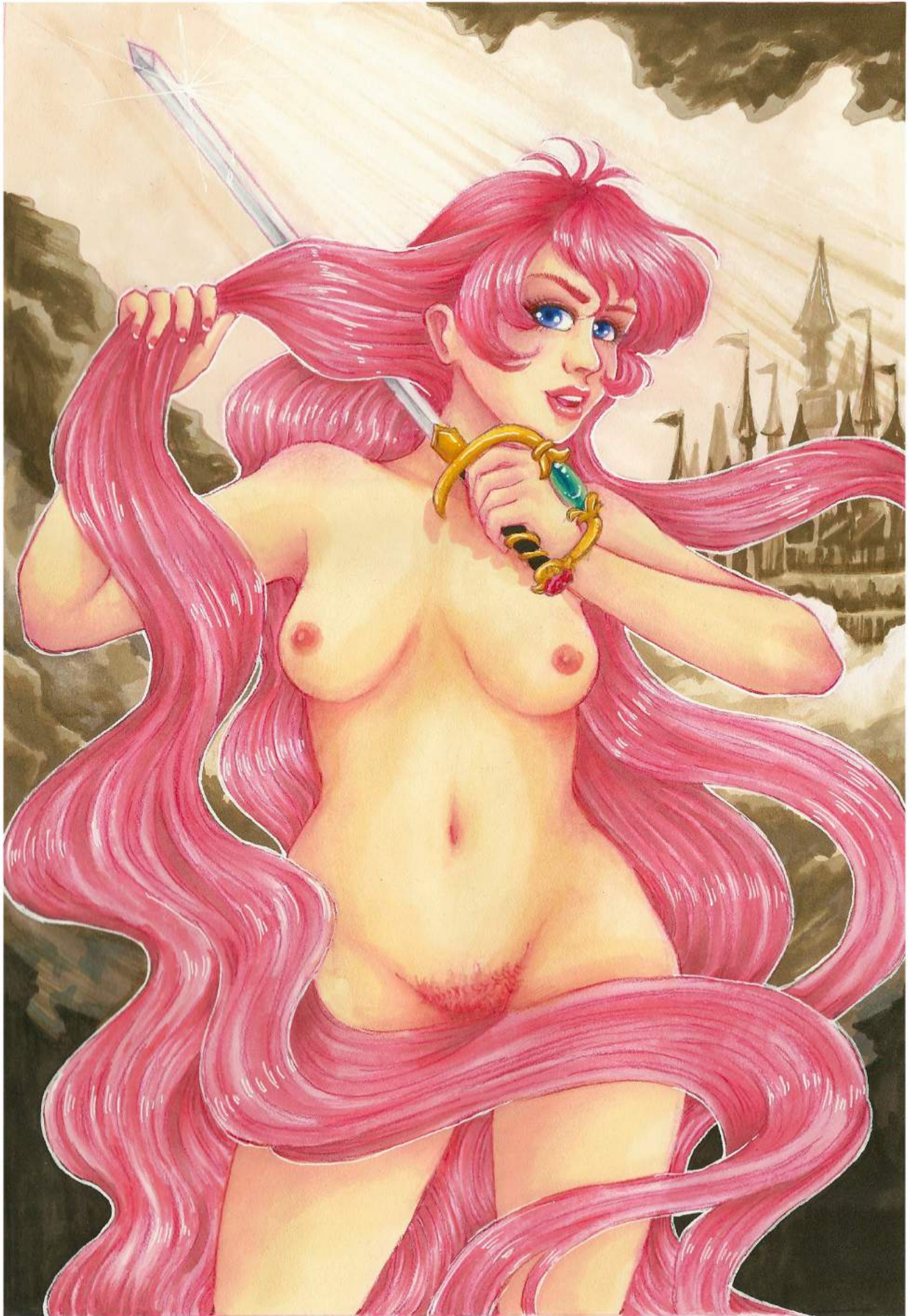
"Thank you, for that," she said. She only now realized her breath was a little shaky. Her nerves lit with a spurt of adrenaline. Juri clenched her now free hand, and opened it again. "But we have time now."

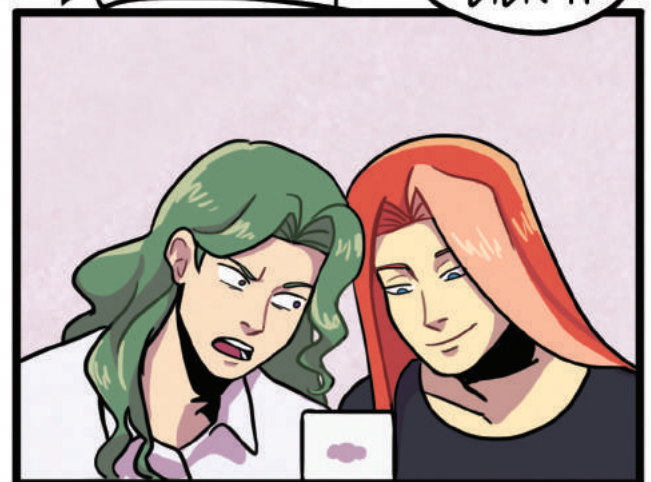
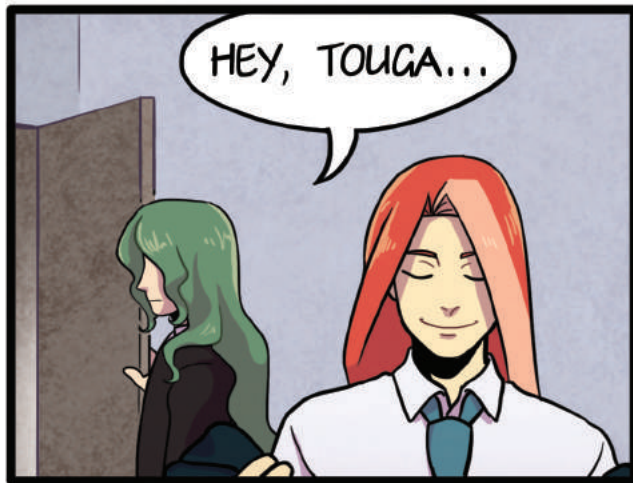
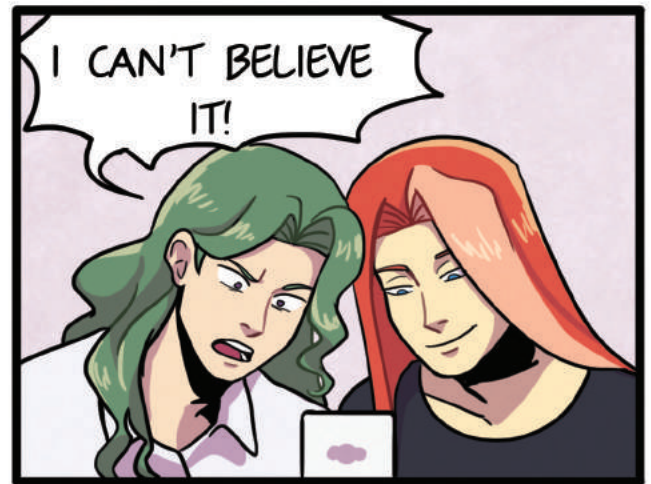
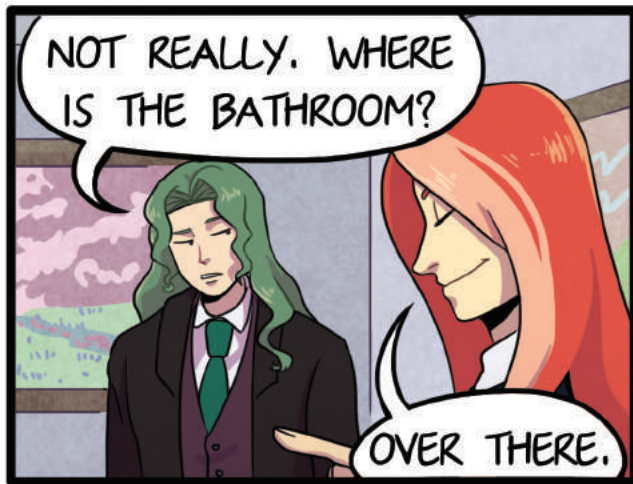
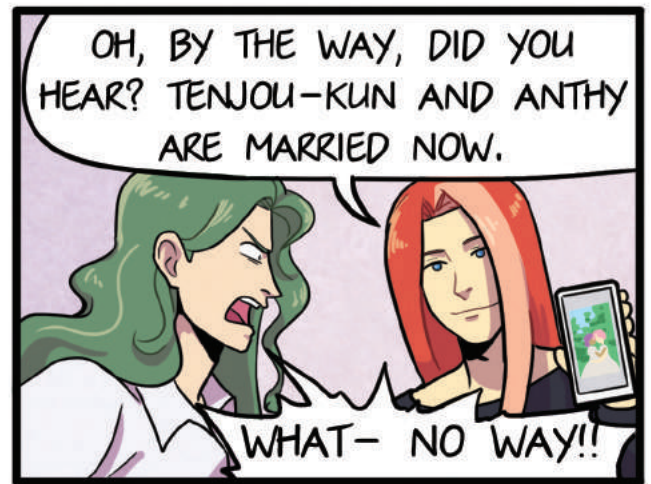
She took a step back, and nodded her head toward the flat's small kitchen. "Come on," she said. "I'll make tea."

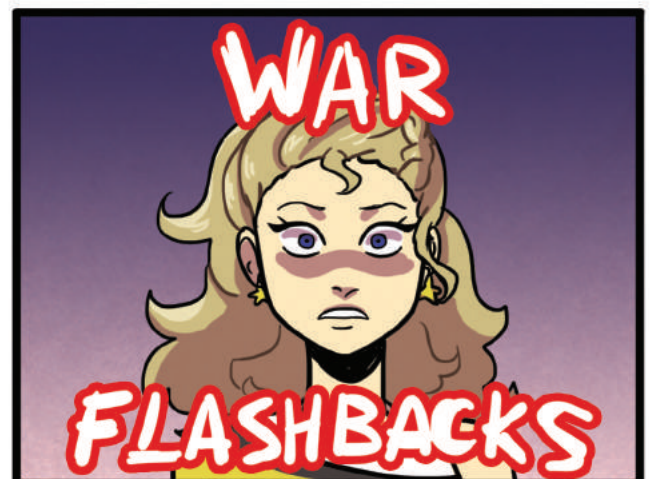
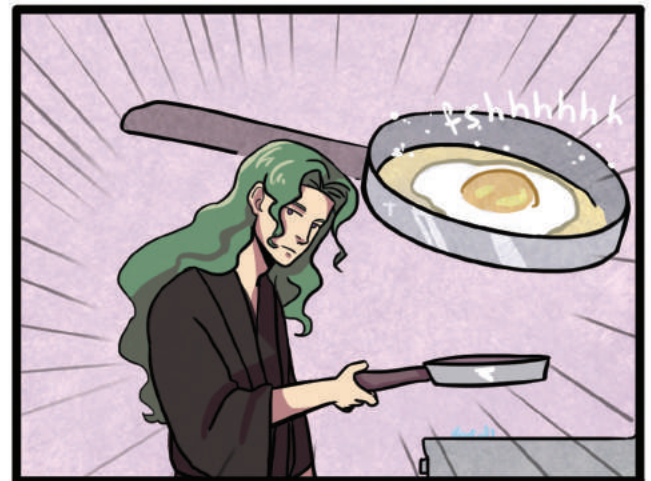
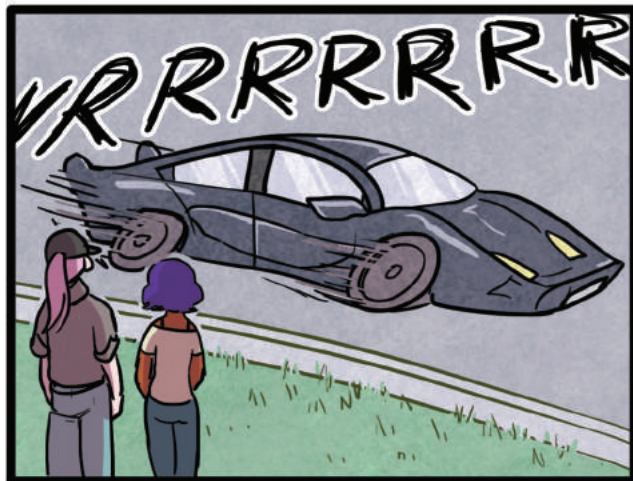
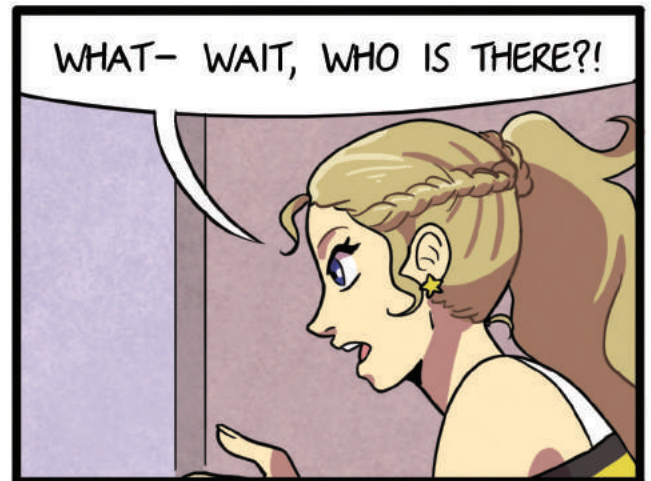
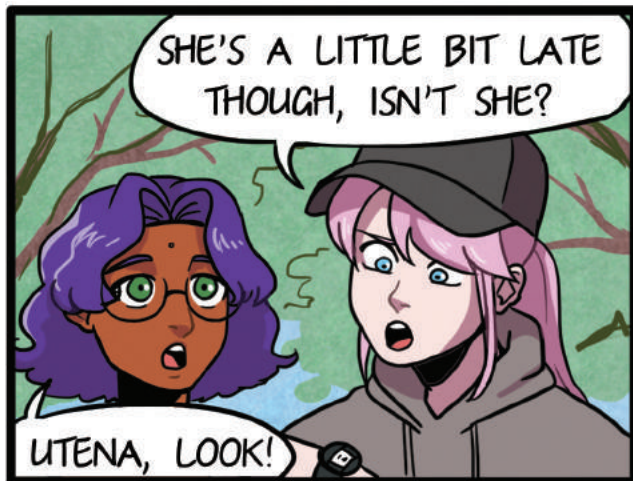
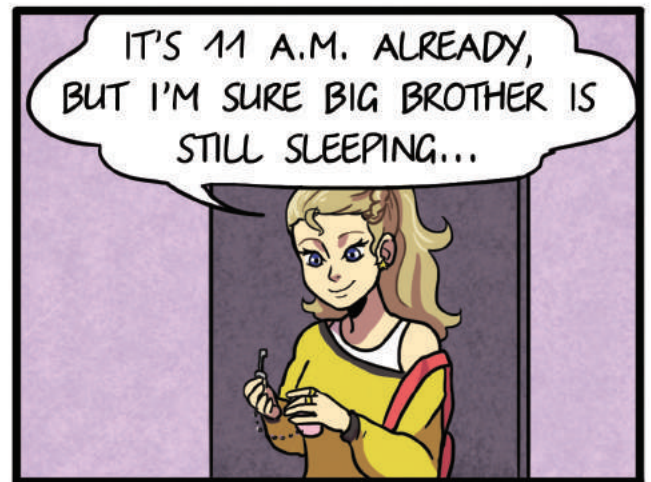
Miki followed her movements, his eyes still wide. But then, he nodded, and straightened from the table.







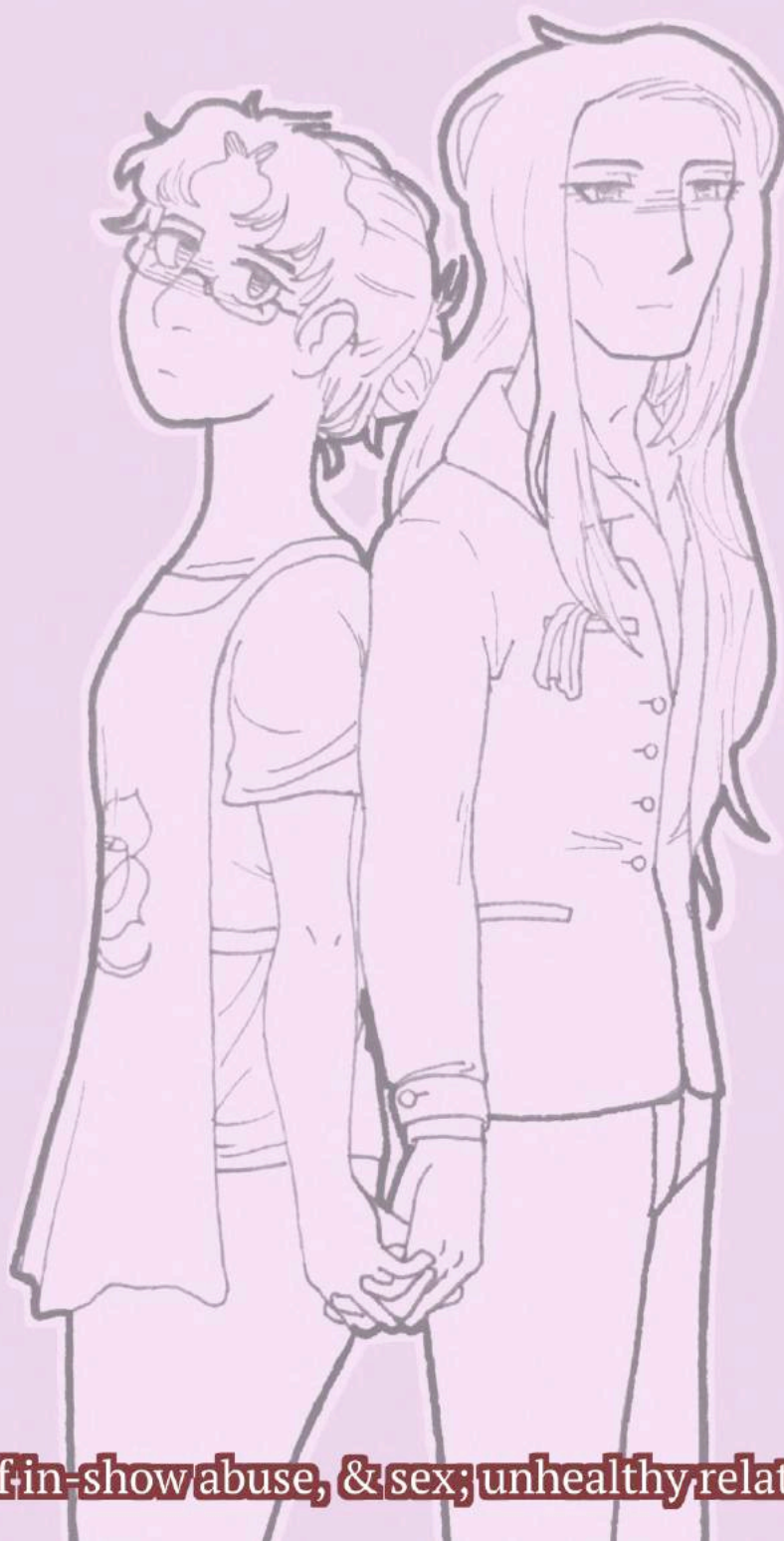






THE HOLLOW ONES

Someday, together... the promise goes unfulfilled.
In the absence of other options, Anthy settles for
something a little askew of pink.



CW: mentions of in-show abuse, & sex; unhealthy relationship dynamic

The Hollow Ones

[Yasha](#)

My ears hear what others cannot hear. Small, faraway things people cannot normally see are visible to me. These senses are the fruits of a lifetime of longing. Longing to be rescued. To be completed. -- India Stoker



Slim, deft fingers. It was those he noticed first as he stood there waiting for her to be finished wrapping his bouquet. Elegant brown hands, unpainted nails, with no sign of calluses or work-roughened skin. The regular woman had calluses, just faint ones, one on the side of the first joint of her right middle finger and the other on the heel of her left palm. This woman's hands were soft all over, as if she spent a lot of time or money making sure her hands looked as if she'd never worked a day in her life. Touga looked up, mildly curious.

An unexpected wave of *deja vu* rolled over him, making him catch his breath. Deep purple hair was gathered into a knot at the back of her head. Sea-green eyes, long-lashed and heavy-lidded, not watching him. A faint smile on her beautifully curved lips... one that, despite knowing nothing about her, he could have sworn was fake.

But why would it be? He had no reason to believe it wasn't genuine. The conviction remained with him, however, unshakable. The feeling of *deja vu* grew stronger.

He had an account at the quiet little florist in the bottom of the office building. It made things easier-- he was always buying flowers for someone, for some reason. Often they were for himself. The flowers he took home were always the ones she was wrapping up now, the silvery, red-lipped *Osiria* roses. He had them ordered in specifically for him. No need to waste them on someone who wouldn't appreciate them. But this girl was new... wasn't she? Certainly his order would have been written down, but she hadn't consulted the proprietor or any list, just immediately gone to wrap up his roses as soon as he entered. He hadn't even spoken to her yet.

May as well make sure those really *were* his roses. "Excuse me," he began, walking over to her. Her hands stilled completely and her eyes shot up to his face as if startled. Almost immediately, her hands started up again and she gave him a bland, polite smile. "Can I help you?" she asked, as neutrally she would to any stranger.

No. Something was off. Something wasn't right here. Intrigued, Touga gave her his most sincerely charming smile. "I believe those are my roses, but... I could swear we've met. Haven't we?"



Always just a little too perceptive, a little smarter than anyone had given him credit for. Anthony saw Touga notice her surprise and felt faintly irritated. Not much smarter, but enough to make him annoying. They'd worked together well once, long, long ago, but she didn't want to see him now. He shouldn't have remembered her. "No, I don't believe so, sir," she said, smiling her blandest, most boring smile. "Are you Mr. Kiryuu?"

She'd half-hoped that he'd recall his father and be put off. He must have been too used to it for that. "I am. Are you certain we've never met?" His slate blue eyes were probing, too interested. She didn't want him to be interested in her. He laughed, a little chuckle that was meant to sound endearingly embarrassed. She knew he felt nothing of the sort. "I'm sorry if I'm too insistent. I just have the strangest feeling that I know you... or maybe I did, once."

"I don't think so, sir," Anthony said, still smiling, and taped the bouquet shut. That was what she got for not paying attention.

Before she could punch anything in on the cash register, he stopped her. "I have an account," he said, and he'd grown up enough that he didn't say it with any particular inflection. Years ago, it would have been bragging.

"Thank you so much for your patronage," Anthony said, smiling exactly as brightly as a grateful proprietor would to a valued customer. Touga left, but that curious look never left his eyes.



The next week when he came in for his roses, that strange woman wasn't there. Nor the week afterward. He had the oddest feeling that she was avoiding him; there was no reason on earth for her to do so, nothing that he could possibly have done that would put her off... but he'd seen her eyes narrow slightly when he'd asked if he knew her. She hadn't liked that. It wasn't a reaction he was used to receiving. Oh, maybe it had happened once or twice when he was younger, but he never needed to make up for a bad first impression now. He could hardly imagine how to begin.

Normally he would have ignored her and gone on with the rest of his life. She was unimportant, barely on the periphery of his awareness. He should have forgotten about her the moment he'd left the store.

That he hadn't was proof enough for him that he should pursue her further. Whimsy rarely played a part in his decisions. Impulse was something he'd carefully controlled all his life. This... was different, somehow. Was it because of that strange feeling of familiarity, or was it because she had been indifferent to him?

Either way, he found himself sweetly rejecting his current paramour, making sincere-sounding apologies and assuring her that it wasn't her fault and that perhaps someday in the future he would be open to something more, and no he didn't want her waiting for him, and it was all so ridiculously tedious that he had to keep himself from becoming short with her display of emotions. He would definitely stay in touch, definitely not lose her phone number and forget her name the moment she was out of sight.

It was no more than any of them deserved. Their eyes lingered on his expensive suits and his antique car, his impeccable looks and perfect body. He knew very well that he was a status symbol to them, a set of price tags and the expectation of gifts, a promise of sweet words and pleasurable evenings showing off to their friends that yes, they were desired by him. He lived up to it. It was simpler than finding something real.

Breaking up gave him a reason to go to the quiet little florist when he normally wouldn't, and of course, that woman was there. His skin was suddenly at attention, as if her mere presence had him awaiting her touch.

Was that what this uncertainty was, some strange sort of foreplay? Was that how those others felt about him? It was impossible to tell. And he couldn't let it sway him; despite the twinge of attraction, what he most wanted was to know more. She was a mystery.



Again, he was here. Anthy damped down her internal frustration. Yes, at Ohtori they had colluded on certain things, worked together for certain ends-- Saionji came to mind, the outburst that she and Touga had driven him to with the illusions, the bloody slash across Touga's back. Touga had orchestrated that... but he couldn't have done it without Anthy's willingness to play her part. Masking her irritation, Anthy again gave him her blandest smile, standing behind the counter as if the barrier would protect her from him. "Is there something I can help you with, sir?" she asked. Hopefully he would think she had forgotten his name.

He shouldn't have remembered anything. None of the others had. The only one she hadn't spoken to was Saionji; his attachment to her had been too strong, and she had worried that it would break his forgetfulness if she approached him at the kendo tournament she'd seen his name listed in. She'd watched him fight from the sidelines, his movements more controlled now, his mastery of the sword evident. Without her to push and sway him, his temper was no doubt easier to master.

Touga hadn't been there. Perhaps that was another reason Saionji had seemed more at peace. Perhaps that was why he'd won the tournament, grinning widely as a brown haired girl had rushed into his arms at the end. Touga's absence had made these things possible.

But here he stood, giving her a charmingly embarrassed smile, the tips of his fingers delicately stroking the lip of one of the roses in the vase near him. They were red as blood next to his pale skin. He still kept his fingernails long and perfectly manicured. "I'm afraid I need some cheering up today," he said, his smile turning a little regretful. "Is there anything you can suggest?"

Anthony had to try very hard not to press her lips together in irritation. That was no more sincere than anything else he did. She knew it because she had been that hollow, once. His question demanded a question in return, an inquiry about the reason for his feelings or an investigation of his preferences. She decided to go with the latter. "Which of the roses makes you happiest?" she asked, not moving from her spot.

A mistake. She'd gone with roses without thinking, and she saw that curiosity flare in his dark blue eyes. There was no reason for him to be curious! He only ever bought roses! "Usually it's the Osirias, but I know you have to order them in. You don't happen to have any now, do you?"

"I'm sorry, no," Anthony said mildly. She knew very well that he always ordered the Osirias. And... to tell the truth, she couldn't blame him for his admiration. They were uniquely beautiful, the petals luminously white on the outside, red as sin on the inside. "Those are difficult to get without a few days' notice."

He shrugged, his smile quirking in a careful construction of understanding. "I suppose I'll have to be satisfied with something else. Could you possibly tell me a little about the other roses? I'm curious." There was no way she could remain behind the counter then, not and keep her façade of welcoming customer service intact. "Of course," she said, coming out from behind the counter, walking the few steps across the room. "Is there any specific color you prefer?" she asked as she came to stand near him-- but not too near-- her spine straight, her posture as remote and perfect as it had been when she had been the Rose Bride. "Orange, perhaps? It is comparatively rare." She gestured toward an arrangement of orange roses, one that had maroon chrysanthemums scattered among them for contrast.

She had to admit she'd been thinking of Juri when she'd made it. Their brief encounter at a fashion show a few years ago had left Anthony thoughtful; Juri was as elegant and detached as ever, and there had been no recognition in her eyes when Anthony had complimented her on her wardrobe choices, a closely fitted, dark pinstriped suit with a maroon ruffle spilling out at the throat. Her hair was looser than it had been, falling over her shoulders in graceful ringlets. She'd accepted the compliment graciously and turned to look for someone in the gathering crowd waiting to be let in to take their seats. A smile suddenly lit Juri's face, and Anthony thought she'd caught a glimpse of maroon hair before Juri strode off, following that glimpse.

"I'm not one for orange," Touga said, his voice shattering her remembrance. His eyes were on her rather than the flower arrangement, his gaze probing. "I do enjoy rarities, though. I'm glad you noticed. Are there any other uncommon roses you can show me?"

If only he'd stop watching her... but Anthony knew his mind was working, teasing at the edges of the forgetfulness, trying to figure out who she was, what she was. The intense attention was a little unnerving; she had cultivated an air of unimportance and used it well back then. It had obviously lingered, in spite of her efforts to be the person Utena had imagined she could be.

Even thinking the name hurt. She'd looked so long and found... nothing.

She swallowed, knowing he would notice that she was unsettled but unable to keep it entirely to herself. Her voice was calm and unwavering, however, and her smile as vapid as always when she answered. "If you'll come over here, we have some blue roses you might like. They were once said to be impossible."

He somehow ended up standing beside her at the next arrangement, his Italian-cut grey silk suit almost brushing the arm of her dress. His proximity made her even more aware of him, a little shiver wanting to run up her spine. He'd always had that effect, though it had never worked on her before--possibly becoming less hollow made her more susceptible to physicality. Anthony gestured at the arrangement, blue roses and white lilies spilling from the tilted vase in a cascade of petals. "Something like this, perhaps?"

He reached out to fondle one of the roses, languidly glancing at it as his fingers made contact with the velvety surface, then looking back at her, his eyes intent as his fingers stroked the petal. "Did you make this?" he asked, and while he only sounded curious, there was an undertone in his voice that brought memories rushing to the surface.

Miki. They'd played with him, batted him back and forth between them like two cats toying with the same mouse. Anthony's hints of sexuality, and Touga's brazen use of it. It had spontaneously appeared, that game between them. They'd never spoken of that secret game, not even to each other. Miki was none the worse for it, thankfully. Anthony had been to one of his concerts, had the chance to speak to him after his performance. The auditorium had been packed. As Anthony had walked up to the passage backstage at the end, she'd caught sight of a blue haired woman in the front row. Miki himself had been as bashful as ever under the heaping praise, but there was a new strength to him now. Perhaps he'd found his shining thing after all. He'd smiled at her, shook her hand, and accepted her compliments with no recognition at all. Once his attention turned elsewhere, she'd left.

The remembrances rushed through her mind in an instant, but she hesitated too long before she spoke and she saw Touga's blue eyes flicker as he noted it. "I did, yes," Anthony said, her voice as mild and placid as always.

"You have a wonderful touch with beautiful things," Touga said, that undertone in his voice like the purr of some giant, self-satisfied cat. His fingers stroked the petal, his nail lightly scraping the skin of it. "It's very beautiful... but I think I'd prefer something more genuine."

Of course he knew that blue roses were dyed. Of course he would know that. And of course he could somehow make it about her rather than the roses. Anthony knew what he was doing... but that didn't entirely stop it from working. She nodded her head, acknowledging his point, and said, "I may have something in the display cooler."

Once in the cooler, of course he stood close enough that she could feel the warmth of him contrasting with the frigid air, like standing in the chill air a moment before stepping into a warm bath. There was a bank of yellow roses overflowing the cooler buckets on the left, an order that was about to be made into centerpieces for a wedding. He chuckled fondly when he saw them, and Anthony knew he was remembering his sister. Nanami had done well for herself, making it to the top of a successful finance company. Anthony had seen her once, coming out of her building into the busy street, surrounded by a cloud of followers that she was barking orders to. Pretending clumsiness, Anthony had bumped into her hard, as if she'd stumbled. Where the old Nanami would have thrown a fit, this one asked, if a bit impatiently, "Are you all right?" Her lackeys fluttered around them, steadying them and offering assistance. Anthony had answered her and they'd both continued on their way.

Behind the exuberant burst of yellow roses, near the back, there was one lone rose that might suit Touga's overly discriminating taste. Anthy lifted it gently from the cooler bucket, bringing it up for his inspection, the unfurling flower so dark a red that it might have been black.

It was a mistake. She realized it as soon as she'd done it-- she'd lifted the rose up to him, and his eyes had widened, as if with some realization. His hands came up, clasping the stem of the rose, careful not to touch hers. "I'm sorry to bring it up again, but there's something so familiar about you. Are you sure we've never met?"

"Never," Anthy said, feigning surprise. Of course lifting up a rose to him would tease loose another thread of remembrance. She should have known. Why hadn't she known? Was that something that came with being human, did losing that hollowness mean she also lost some of her clarity of thought?

"I could swear..." he said, trailing off. His fingers did not touch hers as he lifted the rose from her hands. He hadn't touched her back then, either. Once she'd been his bride, he'd dropped all pretense of seduction. He'd known he hadn't needed it, not with her. She was the Rose Bride. But... he'd never used her that way. He hadn't even touched her unless it was necessary for their deceptions. That felt almost kind.

But then, he knew very well what it was like to be objectified. Against her will, Anthy felt a little swell of kinship with him.

"Lovely," he murmured, glancing at the rose and then back to her.

Mustering her professional demeanor, Anthy asked, "Would you like me to make an arrangement for it?"

A lazy grin curved his lips. Anthy could tell it was so practiced that he barely knew he was doing it anymore. "Sometimes I prefer beauty unadorned," he said.

"At least let me wrap it for you," Anthy said. As he acquiesced and followed her from the cooler, she couldn't help but wish that they were on the same level, whether that meant that she was hollow again or whether that meant he had chosen to be human. They might have been able to coexist somehow, in some nebulous way her mind couldn't define. Maybe it was just that she wanted someone to talk to after all this time.



She'd been wavering, Touga knew it. Those sea-green eyes had changed from blank and impenetrable serenity to alertness, watching him carefully, weighing his actions. It was perhaps the first time she'd really looked at him. But the wavering had come to nothing; when he'd asked about the possibility of knowing her outside of her workplace, perhaps at a little café he enjoyed, she'd gracefully declined. Wishing her a good evening, Touga started for the door, his mind flicking through potential options for changing her answer.

Another customer bustled through the door before he was halfway there, an older woman in a designer dress, a scowl marring her smooth brow. In her arms she held a potted rose bush. It was covered in deep purple blooms, the barest hint of white deep in their hearts. She almost ran into him, ignoring him completely, and she was speaking before she even reached the counter where the intriguing woman stood. "This is *not* what I wanted. I told you I wanted Midnight Blue *longstems*. This is a *shrub*."

The woman with the sea-green eyes responded mildly, "Midnight Blues aren't a longstemmed variety. We told you that when you placed your order, and you said you would take them however you could get them. I'm sorry if we misunderstood you, but there is no way to get Midnight Blue longstems. They don't exist."

Revulsion prevented Touga from leaving. Carrying his single dark rose, he stepped back, drifting around to the side of the counter and listening to the exchange while pretending to browse the flower arrangements.

"If you like, we can refund you the cost of the rose bush," the green-eyed woman said calmly.

"Oh, you'll do more than that. You're going to pay for my gas getting here, the half hour I spent talking to you then, and the time I'm spending talking to you now," the other woman sneered. "Lawyer's rates. I round up to an hour for consultations. And I'm going to lodge a complaint with whatever governing bodies are concerned with this business, starting with the rental owner here."

Disgust had been building in Touga's mind through her entire speech, and it peaked at her last declaration. This was ridiculous. Before the purple-haired woman could answer, he spoke up, striding over to the counter. "I'd also like to file a complaint. Do you mind if I get your name so I can make the process smoother?" he asked, pulling out his phone to take notes.

The customer smirked triumphantly at the woman behind the counter before looking to Touga and giving him her name. "It's so good to know I'm not the only one this business has taken advantage of," she added.

"I'm sure it would be," Touga said, "but I'm asking you to leave the premises, ma'am. I'm the owner of this building, and if you don't remove yourself immediately, I will file a complaint. With the police, for trespassing."

The only expression on the woman's face was shock. Excellent-- he'd caught her completely off-guard. "You can't do that," she finally said, visibly starting to gear herself up for another tirade.

"I absolutely can. And I promise you, I can hire an entire team of better lawyers than you." Replacing his phone in his pocket, he withdrew his wallet and pulled out a couple of bills, handing them to her without looking at them. Hopefully they were ones. "For your trouble," he said. "Now leave."

Flabbergasted, the woman reflexively took the bills, then collected herself and left with a huff, the quick taps of her high heels cut off as the door closed behind her. Once she was gone, Touga turned to the woman behind the counter. "It appears that lovely rosebush is back in your inventory. I'd like to buy it from you." Not that he thought he could keep it alive, but at least he'd be able to enjoy the sweet clove-like scent for a little while, before it died.

When he looked at the green-eyed woman, however, he caught a glimpse of an almost stricken look. Blinking rapidly, she cleared it away as best she could, but Touga could tell her composure was hanging by a thread. "Take it, if you like," she said. "As thanks."

He shook his head, opening his wallet again and pulling out one of the large-ish bills. "Don't be ridiculous. A business needs money to run." Laying it down on the counter, he picked up the potted rosebush and started for the door.

Just as he touched the handle, he heard her voice, a note of urgency in it that had never been there before. "Wait," she said. "Please."

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that stricken look again, as if something had pierced her to the core. And again, she blinked it away, although this time she couldn't seem to recover the placidity she had worn like armor. Touga turned toward her, waiting for her to speak.

"My name is Anthy," she said as she came out from behind the counter, walking toward him as if choosing her steps on precarious new ground.

Touga smiled, meeting her halfway. When she looked up at him, that blankness was nowhere to be seen; she was curious, uncertain, and something about her wide eyes and the set of her lips suggested a barely-hidden ache that he couldn't define. Instead of trying, he said, "The goddess Antheia."

She smiled, a puff of air that was almost a laugh escaping her, as if the reason for her amusement were a secret she couldn't voice. "Yes. Possibly. I do love flowers."

"I don't know how to take care of this," Touga said, nodding to the small shrub he was carrying.

"If you like, I'll teach you," Anthy said, her smile fading. "But... it's been a long time."

Touga nodded. He knew she wasn't talking about the plant.

And that was how, a few days later, this fascinating, mysterious woman that felt so familiar lay in his bed, draped across him, both of them still breathing hard and utterly satisfied. Even in bed, she had felt so familiar; a gesture or a look would suddenly strike him as something he'd seen before, somewhere he didn't remember. It was a little dizzying. Outside of the bedroom there had been talk, of course... but there had also been silences, and that was something he'd never had. Those silences were a chance to set aside his endless performance, and something about Anthy made it possible to do so. It was as if she knew him from the inside, knew what lay beneath his performances. Sometimes it seemed she would react to his inner thoughts rather than what he'd done.

It was... comfortable. He should have been incensed that anyone could presume to know him that well... but something in him wanted it. After all these years of playing his role, there was something attractive about being able to set it aside.

Not that he would ever speak to her about it. That was too personal, even for a lover. He was under no illusion that this would last... but for now, the enigmatic silence she brought with her soothed him like cool darkness after an eternity under the glare of a desert sun.

He slid his hand up her back and she shifted gently so that her head was pillowed on his shoulder. She smelled like roses and sex. Familiar. "I still feel like we know each other," he said. It took a long time before she answered. "We never will," she sighed.

Weighing the answer in his mind, he decided it was sound. He had no intention of laying his soul bare for someone else to carve up. There wasn't enough of it left for that sort of nonsense. "Good," he said, and continue to stroke her back, his fingers tangling in those glorious purple curls.



It had been so long, so very long since Anthy had left Ohtori. So long to fight for herself with no one there to help her or protect her... was she backsliding? She couldn't tell. But there was more humanity left in Touga than she had thought, or he wouldn't have stepped in to get rid of that awful customer. Such a small thing. She dealt with angry people from time to time. Their threats never came to anything. But to have someone look at her situation, decide it was wrong, and immediately attempt to change it without asking for anything in return... it really was such a small thing, but it felt like water for the parched land of her soul.

It wasn't something she could give up. If it had been someone else, yes, she would have let them go, deciding they were a good person and admiring that. But Touga wasn't a good person. She knew that. He'd protected her in spite of what he was... and she couldn't help remembering the way they had treated each other in Ohtori, the delicate dance around their respective territories and the brief moments of concord between them, cut short as if they had subconsciously known that getting too close would be disastrous.

They could never hurt each other now. Their walls were too thick. And eventually they would tire of each other and drift away, but for now it was good to be held by him and know that something in him thought she was worth protecting even in defiance of his selfish, cold nature. And it was good just to be held by him, although she sometimes recognized a gesture or a look that could only have come from Ohtori.

His hand slid up her back, nails dragging lightly on her skin, and she felt goosebumps follow it. It had been a long time since she'd slept with anyone, and the break in her celibacy was welcome. She shifted so that more of her body was pressed against him, her head resting on his shoulder. "I still feel like we know each other," he murmured, his voice a purringly satisfied sound that failed to disguise his questions.

Should she answer those questions? Should she let him know? If any of them could handle it, it would be him. He was already unhappy, she knew, though he didn't feel it because of his hollowness. It wouldn't destroy him to find that years of his life were lies the world had told him; he'd had his reality shattered long ago, first by his parents, then by his adoptive parents, then by Akio, then by Utena... one more shattering could hardly do that much damage at this point.

But then she would have to explain herself. If she did that, she would make herself vulnerable to him. That was not an option.

“We never will,” she sighed, a little sad that it could never happen, but mostly relieved. Keeping her silence meant he could never hurt her.

His hand slowed to a halt on her back while he thought, then he said just one word. “Good.” He began to stroke her back again, sweet silence resuming its dominion over the room.

Perhaps this was all she deserved. Perhaps this was all *they* deserved, this hollowness. But at least if this was hollow, they weren’t alone in it.



Just as a flower does not choose its color, we are not responsible for what we have come to be. Only once you realize this do you become free. And to become adult is to become free. -- India Stoker





SHADOWS

ON THE WALL

SEIZE THE
subsea

SHADOWS
ON THE WALL

rosé tv



root + regenerate

Life is callous and different and unforgiving, but Anthy, with newfound determination, feels a heart beating undeterred in every small joy. Blooming with love, the revolutionary girls hold onto each other.



CW: discussion of trauma & wounds

root + regenerate

[Alder Knight](#)

On the third floor of a walk-up community health center, there is a small cozy office with two chairs and a desk. Behind the desk is a young woman in a cardigan with cream-painted nails and short dark hair. She is a graduate student at the city university, studying to become a therapist, and she works in this clinic to get hours for her degree.

Across from her sits a pale 20-something with spiky pink hair, skinned knuckles, and a half-dozen mismatched necklaces. There is a ball-link chain around her neck, and she fiddles with the three charms on it while she struggles with her words: the hilt of a broken cocktail sword, hot pink; a silver ring with a rose imprinted in its flat top; the chipped-off handle from a broken porcelain teacup, sanded so the edges are soothingly smooth.

"Bad sleep again," she says, running her thumb over the cup fragment. "More nightmares."

The upholstery of the chair is plush against her back, and she sinks into it a little, rigid posture melting with the ritual exhuming of her nightmares. The room smells faintly of the therapist's hand cream, a light floral that Utena is relieved to be unable to place. She studies the ridged floorboards.

"Similar to last week's?" the therapist asks, clicking her pen, "or new ones?"

"The same. The thorns and the choking and the swords and then falling, same as usual. They're getting more vivid, though. More frequent."

"How's your sleep been otherwise?"

"Not so good."

The therapist makes a note on her clipboard and Utena presses the broken cocktail sword into her thumb.



Anthy is riding in coach. She could have whatever train ticket she wanted, really, but coach is where the ragged travelers and the students and the parents with children ride, so she is also riding in coach. The countryside passes steadily outside the window while her pet carrier rocks in her lap. At her feet is a small white suitcase. Her pink dress is crisp and clean in spite of her weeks in transit. Laundry is not one of the things she's ever had to worry about. She has other ways of keeping clean.

Mortal feet are soft, though, and she is on this train in part because of the blisters that have started impeding her progress. She unbuckles her shoes and removes her socks to apply an ointment to her heels. Before the revolution, she muses, pain meant nothing. She would have walked on even if her feet were bloody and raw to the ankle. Now pain is intimate and close. It is not a thing apart from her, observable at distance. So she sits, she rides the train, she bandages her heels. Chu-Chu dozes in his carrier on her lap.

Feet tended to, Anthy leans against the window and lets herself doze as well.



In a warehouse in the riverport district, Utena receives a paper-wrapped parcel and a stack of stuffed envelopes. She loads up her messenger bag and slings it over her shoulder, making her way through the chattering throng to the side exit. A few acquaintances hail her, and she wishes them a good morning and safe travels. Once outside, she takes a moment to breathe. The sun is rising behind the windmills. She buckles her helmet, unlocks her bicycle, and starts work.

The bike lane along the riverfront takes her as far as the trolley depot, where she turns off into the streets to weave between streetcars and jaywalkers. Cycling all day is cathartic: she earns a decent living as a courier, she explores the city that's become home to her in the aftermath of the revolution, and she stays active. She's sure she must have been an athlete, before they found her, because exercise and movement come naturally to her. Staying seated and stationary leaves her stranded with her thoughts, but activity lets her breathe. It helps that staying active makes her hungry. When she first left the hospital, she kept forgetting to eat.

The first delivery is to a High Street townhouse painted turquoise and covered in suncatchers and wind chimes. The elderly gentleman who emerges to accept his mail smiles and tips her generously. Utena pockets the extra cash and whistles as she bikes away. It's a tune she remembers hearing played on piano. She isn't sure where she knows the melody from, and she decides not to think too hard about it.



Anthy looks at the front page of the newspaper handed to her as she exits the train and discovers that she has been traveling for five years.

It comes as a surprise. She has never been entirely comfortable with the concept of linear time, as, for so long, it simply hadn't applied to her. Five years was a meaningless duration before the revolution. Time passed for peasants, and later for students. It did not pass for her, not in the way it did for them. It had not passed for her brother.

She looks down at her shoes. They are immaculately clean and white, but the soles are worn very thin. No wonder, she thinks, they have been causing her discomfort. They are intended for use by mortals. She must adapt her expectations.

Rather than continuing to another destination on another train, gently feeling her way forward, Anthy steps gingerly down from the train platform and into the pedestrian flow. Chu-Chu chirrup from within his carrier, so Anthy frees him to climb up on her shoulder and enjoy the sun. Feeling the cobbles through her beaten leather soles, she sets off towards the shopping district.



The brass key creaks a complaint as it turns in the lock, but the big wood and glass door swings open and Utena enters the foyer of her boarding house.

One of her many fellow tenants is washing dishes in the kitchen. "Tenjou!" she says brightly, looking over her shoulder. "You missed dinner! There's leftovers if you want them, though."

Utena smiles as she sets her bag on the countertop and pulls up a stool. "I stopped for noodles," she says as she cracks open a takeout container. "Thanks for thinking of me."

"You must've had a good day," her roommate remarks, and Utena hums assent around a mouthful of noodles.

The kitchen smells of drying herbs and lemon soap and coffee. Into that mix wafts the rich steam of her dinner. Utena tries to slow her bites and savor this treat: fat white noodles dyed golden in thick curry sauce, fragrant and spicy, with chunks of meat and fresh vegetables. Breakfast and dinner are included in her weekly room and board payments, so it is a bit of an extravagance to go out for restaurant food. Curry udon reminds her of something she cannot place, perhaps something from her life before the revolution. It is a comfort food, and she brings it home when she can. Perhaps she should learn to make it herself.

The thought makes her snort. Utena hasn't cooked much since the accident, and any skill she might have had for it before is decidedly absent now. She holds up chopsticks loaded with silky noodles, contemplating their color against the vase of sunflowers in the middle of the table, and then slurps them up, crunching sesame seeds and scallions. Her roommate dries her hands and heads upstairs, leaving Utena alone in the kitchen with her dinner.



The city is charming enough that Anthy decides to stay for a while. Something about it feels right – some remaining fragment of her magic resonates with something about this place. She decides to listen to that intuition and takes out a small apartment in a converted packing plant with large windows overlooking the river.

The place comes furnished, dark woods and floral upholstery. Anthy starts filling teacups and jars with cuttings of plants she passes on her walks. In a matter of weeks, the small space is verdant and fragrant, bursting with life and death. The small balcony terrace becomes a seedling nursery as she fills pots with earth and wild seeds.

One bright day, when she and Chu-Chu encounter a sign on their walk advertising a local farmer's market, they follow it. In a tree-lined cobblestone square, dozens of tables and carts overflow with vegetables, cheeses, hot loaves of bread, bundles of fragrant herbs. Anthy breathes deeply. She pays a few coins for a packet of cheese curds for Chu-Chu, and then approaches a wagon with cut flowers.

Their roses come in half a dozen vibrant hues. Her breath catches, heart quickening. unselfconscious, Anthy buries her face in the blooms. For a perfect moment, she inhales and exhales and feels a tightness in her chest begin to unlock, as some hurting part of her tries to slide out.

Someone laughs. Startled, Anthy straightens up. Her heart snaps closed. Beside the cart is a young woman, perhaps in her late 50s or so, brown skin a shade lighter than Anthy's with silver in her very black hair. "An enthusiast of roses, Miss?" She is smiling warmly. Anthy's moment of panic dissipates.

"Yes," she says simply. Chu-Chu squeaks and wriggles out from behind a cart wheel, still gnawing his cheese. She scoops him up and sets him on her shoulder before meeting the flower seller's eyes.

The woman effervesces a kind of bubbly friendliness that helps Anthy regain her calm. Her anxiety around crowds has vastly diminished since the revolution, but it still cuts into her when a stranger laughs. She and the gardener chat a while about rose cultivation.

"I have been looking for a new girl to help in the greenhouses, actually, if you're looking for a job."

"A job?" Being the Rose Bride was a full-time vocation, but it wasn't a job. Jobs pay compensation. There is a different word for a full-time job that isn't paid, and that you can't leave.

"Certainly! I can tell you're competent. Do you have a resume, dear?"

Anthy isn't sure what that means. "I'm sorry," she says, "I'm not from around here. Chu-Chu and I have been traveling for a long time."

The gardener gives an understanding nod. "Recently resettled, then? You're not the only new migrant to our city. Don't worry, we're happy to have you."

Anthy isn't sure what the gardener means when she starts talking about the Department of Immigrant Integration, but she and Chu-Chu leave the market that afternoon with a trio of lilac-colored roses and a business card with the address for the greenhouses.



Before dawn on one late summer morning, Utena startles herself awake, heart thundering in her throat. She tries to slow her breathing, remember her therapist's advice to take note of her surroundings, figure out what is real and what is dream. The room is cool but her skin is sweaty, so she kicks her sheets to the foot of the bed and flops back under the ceiling fan to pull herself together.

Repetitive nightmares have been a part of her life since the accident. She doesn't remember much of what came before. She suspects that Before comes in patches, sometimes, when her unconscious mind feels safe enough to slip her clues. It all comes out looking like fairy tales, though, and she wonders if maybe what she is remembering comes not from her own past but from favorite childhood stories. At this point she supposes she may never know.

Pushing her damp hair out of her face, she breathes deliberately and concentrates on the feel of her mattress supporting her, the fan's breeze drying her face, the faintly illuminated tangle of necklaces on her dresser, the smell of rain on the grass outside. This is real, she tells herself, I am in my room and there is nothing in here that is going to hurt me.

She knows that the way to avert disorientation and panic is to focus on being grounded and safe in the present. She wants to dig into her dreams, though. She doesn't know if there's information in them but trying to find out is irresistible. She breathes deep and slow again, and closes her eyes.

She is used to seeing choking vines covered in thorns, digging into her fingers, her limbs, her throat. Sometimes they burst with violent red roses, budding and

blooming and dying, petals dripping off like blood – the smell of roses still gives her vertigo. Sometimes her back is pierced with a sword, right near her incision marks; sometimes it is pierced with hundreds of swords. Sometimes they fall out of the sky like arrows and drive into her unrelentingly until the cliff she's draped over gives way and she and they plummet together, hurled to the ground where she screams herself awake and curls up crying and shaking in her bed until the sun comes back up. In these dreams, she is always alone.

Tonight's dream started like the formula, she's sure of it: a mass of thorned vines gathering around her, tearing her clothes and skin, slowly and inexorably binding her to the rock ledge. Even after all this time, she fights them, in every single dream. She never gets away. Tonight, she thrashed her skin raw under their tearing teeth, prolonging the inevitable, and then at once the vines stopped curling. The thorns retracted. The brilliant white light of the clifftop dimmed, like a spotlight gradually turning off, and the cutting vines, though still holding her immobile, somehow staunched the pain and bleeding of her wounds. Panting and dazed, Utena looked up, and got a glimpse of a silhouette before the darkness became absolute.

Eyes still closed, she shakes her head. She wants to place the shadowy figure, but no distinguishing characteristics remain as her waking mind washes out the dream. There is one phrase bouncing around her mind: "I came all this way to find you."

Utena realizes there are tears leaking from her eyes, and she blinks. The first lights of an overcast dawn are threading through the rooftop gardens and spires. Her breaths come in shudders now, and she fights to keep them from becoming sobs.

She can't quite place the heartbroken, hopeful feeling, but she knows its genesis: in this dream, she wasn't alone.



Two months into working in the greenhouses, the gardener starts assigning Anthy some shifts at the farmer's market. At first she works with another, more experienced flower girl, learning the finer points of floral sales and display to

supplement her existing green thumb. Later she starts taking one day a week all by herself. Chu-Chu keeps her company.

It is one such morning that she wakes before dawn, soft raindrops spattering her bedside window, and rises for a hot cup of tea with lemon in the window seat. She sips it quietly, humming to Chu-Chu, a song she used to play on the piano. She has seen an upright piano in the city plaza, available for any passerby who might wish to sit and play a while. Perhaps this week she will be brave enough to try it.

Tea finished, she braids her hair so it hangs long down her back, out of her face. She dresses in overalls and rubber boots and a rain slicker, says, "I'll be back later," to the houseplants, and heads out into the light rain with Chu-Chu peeking out of her pocket.



The morning rain is picking up as Utena parks her bike at the warehouse. Her sleeveless shirt is soaked through by the time she pushes her way to the pickup counter, shaking out the moisture that has made its way to her hair through her helmet.

"Tenjou! You're on a pickup today."

Utena takes an itinerary from the coordinator and steps back towards the wall to read it. Special order for a catering company, it says, with a location and contact person. She scans the map quickly, memorizes the address, and tucks the card into her safety vest. After a round of damp but cheerful good-mornings, she remounts her bicycle and pushes off to dodge the puddles.



The wooden flower display cart at the farmer's market is not just for aesthetics, Anthy learns early on. It is also the sole means of transporting flowers to and from the city center. The four wheels roll smoothly, though, and the handle fits comfortably in her hand. This rainy morning, she arrives early, working alone in the peaceful greenhouse. She loads squat barrels filled with water from the rainwater collection

tanks, packs them with fresh flower stems, and rolls the wagon out and down the unpaved wheel tracks to the pedestrian road.

The wheel ruts are muddy, but once she reaches the road the cart moves smoothly. It is a flat path with few twists or turns to get from the greenhouse to the market. Anthy takes it at a comfortable walking pace, unbothered by the weather. She has become more aware of heat and cold, ever since the revolution, and body sensations in general. The rain is pleasant as it hits her face, with no glasses to streak up, and the jacket keeps her dry and warm. Chu-Chu stays cozy in her pocket.

The rain comes down heavier as she turns into the cobbled square, where other vendors are setting up their own booths. Some purveyors of more delicate specialties may not peddle their wares today, lest the wet should ruin their goods. Anthy opens a large umbrella that stands up in the middle of the cart. It will keep the shower off of shoppers browsing the blooms, and flowers don't mind the rain.

Steady rainfall does not prevent more adventurous souls from seeking their produce and bread, and as the clock tolls the eighth hour Anthy welcomes her first customers of the day.



The streets of the city are streamlined for streetcar and pedestrian usage, with room for bicycles to weave through them like maypole ribbons. The couriers are earning their tips today, pedaling hard through rains that have intensified into a true summer storm. After her jumbled morning, Utena is improperly dressed for the rain, and feeling foolish.

The caterers have requested a pickup from a local goat farmstand, meat and cheese, as well as a variety of vegetables. The rainproof saddlebags on her bicycle will keep the cargo dry, if not their driver. She takes a shortcut through a garment district alleyway and across one of the city parks, and makes it to the farmer's market just as the clock tower strikes eight o'clock. The goat farm stall is still setting out their products, evidently having had a harder journey than usual in this weather. She thanks the vegetable farmers and loads her panniers with onions and chard and fennel, then

seeks out a hot drink. She's soaked through from helmet to cleats and doesn't want to catch a chill. She nurses a demitasse of spiced black tea from a vendor of herbal preparations, crowding under their awning with her bicycle while she waits for the goat stall to raise its own rain canopy. Then she hands back her empty cup, drops a tip in the tip jar, and wheels over to pick up the rest of her cargo.

She leaves the market by a different route than she came in, for ease of egress. It means passing by stalls she hasn't seen yet today, which is pleasant even if she is not in the best condition to enjoy herself. The patissier waves to her from behind a basket of croissants, and Utena grins and nods back as rain runs down her nose. She sniffs and wipes it. Tonight might call for a hot bath, she muses. The flour and grain cart isn't here today, but the flower cart is, right at the end of the row. Utena squints through wet lashes to see if her friend the gardener is working, but someone else seems to be selling the flowers today. She tries to get a better look at the new girl, but getting close to the cart means that the cloying fragrance of wet roses swamps her. She coughs and shakes her head as her stomach turns the lovely tea she just drank to acid.

The girl at the booth looks up in concern, but Utena waves her away with a sheepish grimace, brings her bicycle to the curb and climbs on as quickly as she can. The damp air makes the scent carry, but she'll be out of range before long. She pushes off, shaking a little now. It's only a few blocks to get out of the city center tangle, and then she'll be back on the riverside path and can bike hard enough to warm back up and shake off the nausea. She enters traffic without looking.



Anthony drops an armful of lilies into a mud puddle.

"Utena," she whispers, staring after the drenched bike punk. "Utena."

The cyclist looks as if she is going to be ill. She acknowledges Anthony's presence without recognition and then prepares to take off.

"Utena," Anthony says again, finding her voice. "Utena!"

A bewildered customer is protesting, picking her ruined flowers out of the puddle, but her words sound like they are coming from underwater. Anthony's entire

attention is focused on Utena, Utena, she's here but she's leaving again, how did she get so close without Anthy feeling her near?

Anthy realizes in the next moment that the home feeling she got from the city, the feeling that made her decide to stay, it's the feeling she felt with Utena, when the two of them were together, the feeling she thought she could never keep. Utena is home. Home is in the city. Utena is in the city, and she is about to bicycle away.

"Utena!" Anthy cries out, at the top of her voice, just as Utena rides out in front of an oncoming streetcar.



Do you know, do you know? Do you think you know?

All revolutions are about sacrifice. All sacrifice is about love.

Love is the strongest force in the universe. When it opens up, when it willingly surrenders to the hundred thousand cutting blades of hatred, it is the only force in the universe that can transmute hate's poison. The ferocity of love is the neutralizer of hate.

Extra, extra!

Once upon a time, there was an accident. The girl was all over the newspapers for days after it. They found her far away. She was alone, badly injured. The wound in her back was horrific. Doctors worried the spinal cord might be severed. She might have nerve damage, she might die, she might never walk again.

She healed. She walked. She recovered. She settled in the city. She remembered nothing from before. How can you remember what was never real? It felt like holding onto a dream after waking: the tighter you grip it, the faster it falls away.

The world healed. The world recovered. It had been revolutionized. One very old girl-shaped creature finally became a girl again. She had her own name and her own body and her own autonomy, which was very novel indeed.

Do you really know?

Can a witch ever really become a princess? It's a trick question. Better to be neither.

Better to focus more on love and less on fairy tales, don't you think?

Do you know, do you know? Do you think you know?



Anthy is not prepared to watch Utena shatter again before her eyes, so she throws a Hail Mary.

With a few words of incantation, she pulls forth the final remaining threads of her waning power and hurls them between Utena and the speeding streetcar. There is a burst of light, and Utena and her bicycle are knocked back, but the streetcar halts completely without collision. From the looks of the cable above, its electricity has been cut, which explains the car turning off but not its immediate loss of momentum, or lack of jostling inside. The conductor will later cite it as a demonstration of the automatic safety braking system and be awarded a promotion.

Anthy, chest aching and hollow, dashes out in her clomping rubber boots to the middle of the street. She skids to a halt, overall knees grinding into the mud, and grabs Utena's hand. Her heart is racing in a way she has never felt before.

"Utena," she says, "Utena." Now that she's really here Anthy can't stop repeating it.

Utena groans softly. Is she awake or asleep? Anthy isn't sure. Neither is Utena.

Something has cushioned her blow somewhat, Utena thinks, but her bike is probably wrecked and she's going to be behind schedule and the delivery pickup is

definitely spoiled. She tries to shift, assess her road rash, but she feels heavy. Maybe she really is sleeping. Maybe today never happened.

Someone is holding her hand. She squints up, but her head is pounding and the rain is in her eyes and the edge of her helmet is blocking her view. She might also be crying. It's hard to tell. Perhaps she is in shock.

"Who's there?" she asks.

"I came to find you," says Anthy.

"But who are you?"

"I came all this way to be with you," Anthy says, leaning over Utena's face to block the rain from her eyes, "so don't be afraid."

Utena blinks up again and her eyes finally focus. Something in her solar plexus unlocks. She recognizes it as the ache she woke up with this morning. Suddenly she is definitely crying, cold and shaky, hurting with a pain that she's sealed off for years. She fumbles to unclip her helmet.

"You..." she chokes out, "it's you, it's you isn't it? It's really you?"

Anthy carefully puts an arm under Utena's scraped and bruised shoulders and pulls her head into her lap. It's the middle of a busy street in the middle of a downpour and the two of them are sitting together, hearts breaking open, crying, stopping the world for just a moment.

Anthy has just sacrificed her last shreds of magic and immortality and could not have wished for a better way to do it. "Utena..." she says again, softly, stroking back the wet pink hair.

Utena reaches up and touches Anthy's face, and then her sobs turn into pained laughter, and she pulls her battered arms around Anthy's waist to hug her tightly. Chu-Chu and the lily customer stand together by the curb, watching with emotion as the two girls embrace in the street.

After revolution comes rebuilding. After pruning comes regrowth. A cut stem needs time to put out new roots, and those roots need time to take hold. Anthy has

spent five years searching for her lost champion, and Utena has spent five years healing from trying to live up to a fairy tale.

The revolution is past. The soil is wet. The city is their home. Perhaps now, together, finally, they can grow and bloom and shine.

The End.

Roses, Post-Apocalypse

[Taylor Ramage](#)

I.

Deep breaths now.

These steps pave a new path and

I will not traverse another round of
duels and “salvation.”

I once searched for a certain color
in every sunset.

Bright yet soft, it always
lingered

as the darkness descended.

I’m determined to

behold it again,

this time without the poisonous metal
infused in my blood.

No more thousand-year swords
in my flesh.

No more fake smiles and pleasantries
masking my tattered self.

The source of that sunset color—
she planted in me a seed that, at first, sprouted thorns,
but now this rose
will grow toward its light.

II.

She is here outside this

“hallowed” institution
and whether I see her before me
or feel her essence in each breath,
I cannot say.
I scan the faces of strangers,
looking for a princess who wanted to be a prince.
Though I walk along a new, open road,
I bring with me debris from
a crumbling castle that was never ours.
Sharp-edged rocks
nest deep beneath my skin.
Scrubbing them out only makes the bleeding worse, but
since starting this search I’ve watched a few of them
 skip
 back down
 the road,
losing themselves in the mist behind me.
Yet I might always
carry some pieces forward.

III.

This journey warrants a
break
in a quaint teahouse I’ve stumbled upon
with eloquent decor and few customers.
The steam meanders across my face and
in the quiet, I let a few things
settle.

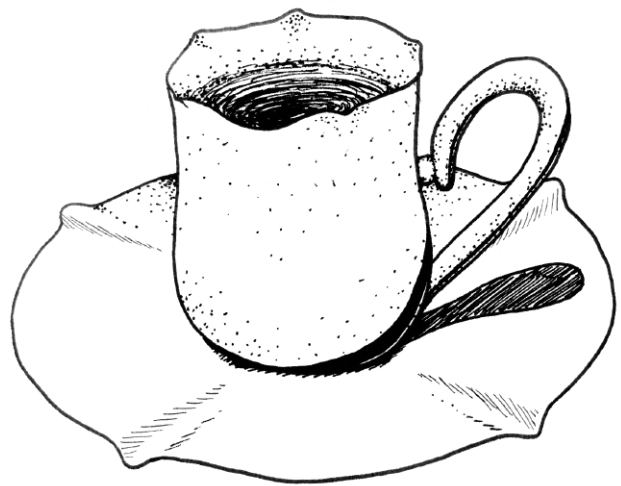
I know the road continues on,
but I glance absently to my side and
there's the color pink
with an extra teacup and a sheepish grin.

Of course she can sit with me.

The cadence of her voice
stirs memories of
dances and stargazing and sunlit gardens.
A part of me cringes but actually,
since she's the one
coaxing these images into my consciousness again,
I'm...
opening.

"Another cup of tea?" I ask her
after a while and that smile
breaks me in the best way.
This sunset color—
also lives in sunrises now that I think
of it
and I sense that this day is
that promised "someday,"
where together we grow from
the ashes of that crumbled world.
The dust stains our clothes yet

we'll wash them in our own time.





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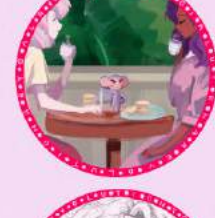
ENZOUKE



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SOMEDAY, TOGETHER...

