



少女革命ウテナ

1

Twin Saplings

(蒼の双樹)

大河内 一楼
Ichirō Ōkouchi

Revolutionary Girl Utena : Twin Saplings

少女革命ウテナ〈1〉-蒼の双樹-

Written by Ichirō Ōkouchi (大河内 一楼)

Featuring Illustrations by Chiho Saito (さいとうちほ)

Translated by Dallbun

This "light novel" was published in Japan in January 1998 by Shogakukan under their female-targeted label "Palette Books." Light novels are a style of Japanese novel aimed primarily at middle and high school students, with a shorter length equivalent to what we'd call a novella. They are often serialized in magazines before being published as a complete novel. This is the first of two such novels, and while it features illustrations by Chiho Saito, and includes familiar scenes from the manga and series, it's considered a separate continuity.

Giovanna's Note: Decent scans of the novel covers have been elusive, so this cover is an rough emulation of the Japanese cover with translations added. The cast page is a two page spread. I split it so that the text and images could be full size. Dallbun's translation shows internal dialogue in parentheses, which you'll see here in italics instead. I made the change for aesthetic reasons apparent when the content is presented book format. Aside from the rare typo or grammar correction, this text is presented as Dallbun translated it. Because he's awesome.

▼ **Saionji Kyouichi**

The Student Council vice-president.
Misogynist leader of the Kendo Club.

► **Kiryuu Touga**

The president
of Ohtori
Academy's
Student Council.
An all-around
superb
athlete,
but said
to be a
playboy.

▲ **Kaoru Kozue**

Miki's younger twin sister.
She and Miki have always
been together since they
were small.

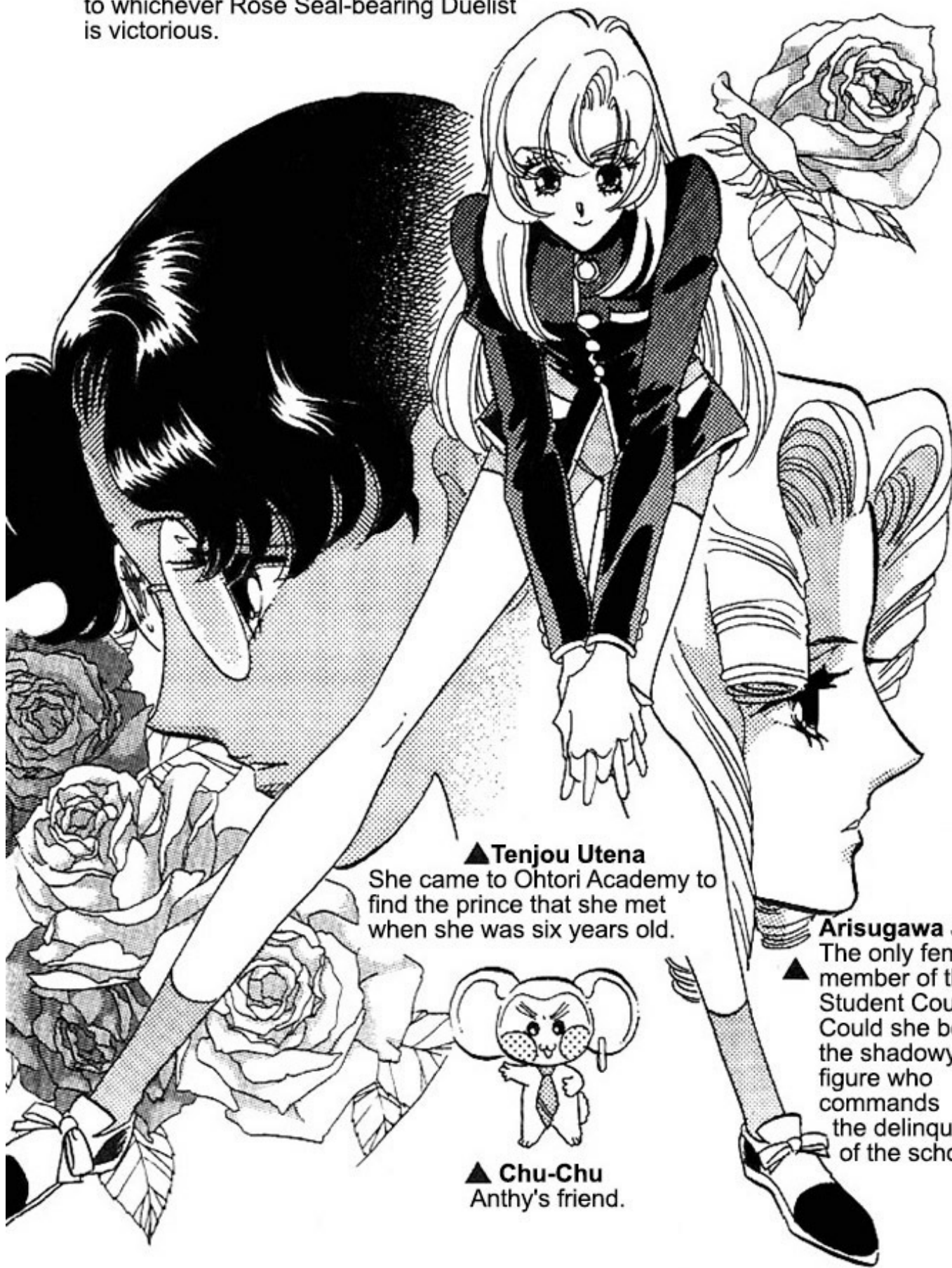
▲ **Kaoru Miki**

A member of the Student
Council. Cute, and a real
genius. His piano and
fencing skills are both
at the national level.

Important Characters

▼ Himemiya Anthy

The Rose Bride. She becomes engaged to whichever Rose Seal-bearing Duelist is victorious.



▲ Tenjou Utena

She came to Ohtori Academy to find the prince that she met when she was six years old.

▲ Arisugawa Juri

▲ The only female member of the Student Council. Could she be the shadowy figure who commands the delinquents of the school?

▲ Chu-Chu

Anthy's friend.

Table of Contents

Prologue	
Chapter 1: The Dueling Game	
Chapter 2: Ohtori Academy	
Chapter 3: Kaoru Miki	
Chapter 4: Kiryuu Touga	
Chapter 5: Duelist	
Chapter 6: The Dueling Arena	
Epilogue	
Afterword	

Translation Notes

"Twin Saplings" - (Gio's note: This translation note is based on the original translation Dallbun did of the title: A Pair of Young Trees.) The title is distinctly poetic, something I wasn't really able to bring across in English. The "young" here is actually "ao," the word for blue/green, which can also mean unripe or immature. (Just like calling a newbie "green" in English.) The kanji used is the older, less commonly-used version: 蒼 as opposed to 青. The "pair of trees" part isn't exactly common parlance, either.

Chapter 2

- Anthy's cooking - Nori is a kind of seaweed, used extensively in Japanese cooking or, in this toasted and flavored form, eaten as a snack. Taiyaki are fish-shaped cakes, often filled with red bean paste. The point is that none of the dishes Anthy prepares even remotely resemble an actual meal - she just makes massive quantities of snack food.

Chapter 3

Tsukamoto Shinya - Her name in kanji is 塚本信也. Not that that seems significant or anything.
The Blue Diamonds - Technically, their team name is "Blue Diamond," but that sounds bizarre in English, so I adjusted it slightly. Unlike Miki's team, which appears to be all male, the genders of the Blue Diamonds (besides Tsukamoto) are unspecified. I assumed it was a mixed team, and made one of their team members male in the one instance when I had to assign a gender.
Student Council Cottages - "Cottage" is the word they used here, but I probably should have changed it to "villa." "Cottage" has a slight implication of squalor in English that isn't intended here. I might change it if I ever do a second pass on this translation.

Chapter 4

"What, you're choosing a man-girl like this over your own sister?" – Yeah, "man-girl" is an extremely awkward-sounding insult. Forgive me.
Miki & Kozue's "fried egg" - Specifically, it's tamagoyaki, which is more like a rolled omelette. But I figured that calling it anything other than fried egg would have made it sound too exotic in English, when the point of the scene is that it's a very standard, everyday sort of dish.
"the thirty-square-meter room" - Originally 20 tatami mats, which is closer to 30.5 square meters. Of course, that unit of measurement is pretty meaningless to most English-speakers.

Afterword

"the Komuro of the anime world" - I have no idea who or what he's referring to, I'm afraid. Tetsuya Komuro...?

Twin Saplings

Prologue

"O, noble castle..."

As the words left Himemiya Anthy's lips, a small light flickered to life beneath her breast.

"Power of Dios that sleeps within me..."

The light within her chest grew brighter.

"Heed your master, and reveal..."

Slowly, it continued to grow. Before long, the light took the shape of some kind of rod. Saionji Kyouichi's hand closed around it.

"The power to revolutionize the world!"

His voice was full of confidence, as if he was jeering at his opponent. He drew the object from Himemiya Anthy's chest.

A sword. What Saionji drew forth was a sword, formed from the noble light. Among him and his colleagues, it was called the 'Sword of Dios.'

Across from him, the girl wearing a boy's school uniform - Tenjou Utena - drew back in surprise at the strange sight of a sword emerging from a girl's chest.

"What... is that...?" she murmured in disbelief.

An understandable reaction.

Right now, an upside-down castle was floating above her like a chandelier, and the girl from whom the sword had been drawn - Anthy - was apparently a prize awarded to the winner of the duel.

"You're a Duelist, but you don't even know about the Sword of Dios?"

"Duelist? Sword of Dios? What the heck are you talking about?" The words were unfamiliar to Utena. And that wasn't all. The Dueling Arena, the castle floating overhead, Himemiya Anthy... Utena didn't understand any of it.

"What's wrong, Tenjou Utena? If you won't come at me, I'll just have to come to you!"

Saionji lunged towards Utena with the Sword of Dios.

Utena quickly raised her shinai, as Saionji's sword closed in on her. Bringing it up in front of her, she blocked the blow! However, in the next instant, her shinai was sundered in half.

No way...

Utena stared at the cleanly-cut end of her shinai.

"You're kidding! That sword is real!?"

Saionji wasn't laughing. He merely adjusted his stance, his scornful eyes still locked on Utena.

Seriously...?

She shivered. She felt like she had goosebumps over her whole body.

He's not joking... How the heck did I get into this...?

Gripping her half-length shinai, Utena slowly backed away.

"What's wrong, prince? Weren't you going to take revenge for your friend?"

Wakaba!

Hearing his words, Utena stopped in her tracks.

It had all started with a love letter tacked to the bulletin board. Utena's friend, Shinohara Wakaba, had sent it to Saionji. He hadn't posted it on the board himself, but Wakaba's feelings were still deeply hurt. Utena had seen the tears pouring from her eyes herself.

Taking Wakaba's heartfelt feelings... and just tossing them in the trash!

That's what Utena found unpardonable. Saionji had trampled on her friend's heart.

So she'd challenged him to a duel.

That's right... for Wakaba's sake, I can't forgive Saionji. That's why I've ended up here. Why I'm standing here. So... I won't lose. I can't lose!

Utena raised her head.

"...It's not over yet."

"What?"

"You only lose if your rose gets knocked off your chest, right? So I'm not out yet."

"Oh? You intend to keep fighting with that shinai?"

"That's right!"

As she shouted out her answer, Utena sprang towards Saionji. Her target: his breast pocket.

"Let's see if you can!"

Saionji swept out with his sword. Utena avoided it by a hair's breadth. But she couldn't relax yet. Saionji slashed his sword back up, so fast he was almost cutting the air.

Like a leaf dancing on the wind, Utena deflected the strike, and braced herself against the storm of blows, aiming for the rose on his chest.

Cutting through the wind.

Dancing on the wind.

Holding steady against the wind.

The breathtaking swordplay continued.

Before long, Utena's shinai knocked the hilt of Saionji's sword from his hand.

"Dammit!"

The Sword of Dios was sent flying through the air. Saionji was still off balance - here was her chance.

Utena raced towards the spot where the sword would come down. Spinning, the sword arced through the air.

Utena stretched out her hand.

The sword fell.

Just a little more...

There!

The Sword of Dios fell into Utena's hand almost as if it had been drawn there.

This scent...

The moment she gripped the Sword of Dios, Utena was engulfed in the scent of roses.

It's just like... that time...

That time - when a prince had saved Utena, as a child. She had smelled roses then, too...

It's the same... the smell of my prince... the scent of roses... it's entering me.

Silently, Utena closed her eyes.

The scent of roses... is moving me.

From the floating castle descended the specter of a boy. A beautiful boy, with a dignified air. Somehow, he resembled Anthy... The boy descended straight towards Utena, and overlapped her body, as if melting into her.

Dios...!?

Anthy's countenance, thus-far expressionless, changed drastically. Her formerly downcast eyes now widened, and visibly brimmed with tears. But neither Utena and Saionji noticed the change in her.

"I won't let you win!"

With a cry, Saionji dashed towards Utena, gripping the shinai she had dropped. For her part, Utena was still standing in a daze.

The scent of roses is engulfing me... my body is filled with it....

Saionji's shinai drew near. Towards Utena's rose.

Five more meters.

Three meters... two... one.

Utena's eyes snapped open.

With inhuman speed, Utena leapt forward. The Sword of Dios was aimed straight for Saionji's rose.

The two met.

There was a moment of stillness.

Somewhere, bells began to peal deafeningly.

"This... can't be..."

"I won... that's great, Wakaba..."

Still smelling roses, Utena's consciousness slowly began to drift away.

I won... Wakaba...

I... won...

I...

...

Chapter 1

The Dueling Game

I want to be a "prince." Not a "princess" who needs to be protected, but a cool "prince."

Since *that time*, that's what Utena had thought. That's why, even though she was a girl, she always wore a boy's school uniform. Of course the teachers at the school made a big deal over it, but there was nothing in the school rules that said "a girl can't wear a boy's uniform," so she just kept shrugging them off.

Basketball, soccer, baseball - she was better than the boys at every sport, and she got love letters from girls almost every day. Her personality was also boyish - she had a straightforward demeanor, always stood up for the underdog, and referred to herself as "boku."

The "prince" who was even cooler than a boy - that was Tenjou Utena.

There was a reason she wanted to become a "prince."

It was when Utena was six years old. Her parents had both died, and Utena was wandering aimlessly through the rain. Sorrow ruled her heart, so overwhelming that she couldn't even think.

She was all alone. She was sopping wet, and cold. She walked ceaselessly, tiring herself. And the girl, almost like she was dropping off to sleep, fell into a river.

Utena didn't even try to swim, but surrendered her body to the water. Her mind became blank, and she stopped thinking.

The next thing she noticed was the scent of roses wrapping around her.

Lifting her heavy eyelids, she saw light, and the figure of a man. In the glare, she couldn't see his face. He was slim, with broad shoulders, and had long fingers, like a pianist. He wore clothes as white as snow, and he held the cold and miserable Utena tenderly in his arms.

He gently kissed the tears from Utena's cheeks, and gave her a ring with a rose-shaped seal.

"Perhaps this ring will lead you back to me. If you don't lose your strength and nobility..."

"Nobility" - young Utena didn't know that word. But mysteriously, she understood what he meant.

Eight years later, Utena was again wrapped in the scent of roses.

Where... am I...?

Her eyes were heavy. Her mind felt cloudy, and she couldn't really turn her head.

I'm... that's right, I was duelling Saionji...

From the mists of her memory, Utena dredged up her memory of the duel.

Right, he called it the Sword of Dios. It came out of Anthy's chest... And that castle was floating. It sparkled like a chandelier, and it was upside-down...

Slowly, Utena opened her heavy eyes. In front of her, she saw light, and the figure of a man.

He was slim, and had broad shoulders. In the glare of the light, she couldn't really see his face. To her surprise, she was in his arms, as if he was carrying her.

I've felt this once before... that's right, back then.

That time - when Utena had fallen into a river, and been saved by a prince. He had carried Utena like this.

Could it be... the prince...?

Forcing her heavy eyes open, Utena tried to get a good look at the man's face. But from this position, all she could see was his silhouette.

Who are you...? Could you be the prince...? Have you saved me again...?

She couldn't form her questions into words. Once again, she sank into unconsciousness...

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"Good morning, Utena-sama!"

When Utena opened her eyes, Himemiya Anthy was standing before her.

She was a girl with glasses and coffee-colored skin. She definitely didn't look quite Japanese, but had beautiful features. A hint of sadness was visible behind her large eyes.

"Why... are you...?"

Utena knew of her. In fact, they were in the same class this year... though they'd never spoken to each other before. Why was this girl here? Utena glanced around the room, trying to understand the situation.

Wait... where am I?

She was in an old-looking room. Or rather, the building itself looked old. That said, the room seemed to be well-maintained, and was surprisingly clean. There were two beds lined up under the windows, one of which Utena was lying on.

She'd never seen this room before - it didn't look like the nurse's office, but it certainly wasn't her own room, either. But -



"This is your room, Utena-sama," said Anthy.

"No way. My room is on the third floor of the South Dorm..."

"From today on, you'll live here, Utena-sama."

Anthy brought out a piece of paper. It was a notice from Ohtori Academy, and sure enough, it said that Utena was being moved to the East Dorm, Room 21.

"...so, what, this is the East Dorm? The one they haven't used in over ten years, that they say is haunted?"

Ohtori Academy was a boarding school, and all its students were housed in dorms scattered around the surrounding area. Utena, who had transferred in half a year ago, was no exception.

"Utena-sama, you've been sleeping ever since you passed out in the Dueling Arena."

The Dueling Arena!

As soon as she heard those words, it all came back to Utena.

"That's right! The Dueling Arena!"

She began to replay the strange duel in her head. The duel where Saionji Kyouichi had used a real sword. Where the castle had floated, and they'd said the prize was Himemiya Anthy...

Who even won? Was it Saionji? And what about... the prince?

Someone had carried Utena after the duels. She wanted to know who it was. Could it really have been her prince who had held her close...?

But Anthy continued on, about a different subject.

"You won the duel, Utena-sama. Therefore, you may now do with me as you wish."

Utena stared at Anthy in disbelief.

Is she kidding me...?

But Anthy didn't look like she was joking in the slightest. She just stared straight ahead at Utena.

"The Rose Bride is engaged to the victor of the duels."

"The Rose Bride... now that you mention it, Saionji called you that, too."

Saionji Kyouichi - the boy Utena had dueled. He was the vice-president of the Student Council, as well as captain of the Kendo Club.

"First off... I thought you were like Saionji's lover or something."

"Saionji-sempai is merely a Duelist."

"What, there are others? That's..."

"Other Duelists? Yes, all the members of the Student Council are Duelists."

"So these other Student Council guys are also trading you back and forth through duels?"

"It's all according to the rules of the Rose Seal. A flower to be passed between the bearers of the Rose Seal... that's who I am."

"And you're okay with that? You just let them use you as a prize?"

"Those are the rules."

Anthy answered calmly, in a flat voice. As if she understood something Utena didn't. But to Utena, it sounded like Anthy was just giving up on everything.

"That's wrong!"

Utena threw aside her sheets, and leapt to her feet.

"It's horrible for you to be treated like this!"

Utena was angry. At the Student Council, who used Anthy like a gambling chip in their Dueling Game.

"You think it's okay for them to do that kind of thing just because they're the Student Council? I don't care what big-shots they are... it's too cruel!"

But Anthy just continued to stare at Utena curiously, as if she couldn't understand why she was getting so upset.

"I'll be right back."

Utena strode away from the bed, towards the door.

"Utena-sama, where are you going?"

"To the Student Council!"

By the time the shout reached Anthy, Utena had already swept from the room. The door slammed shut behind her - a reflection of her feelings.

"Am I so pitiful?" Left alone in the room, Anthy murmured wonderingly to herself.

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The Student Council meeting room was located halfway up a large tower that stood in the center of Ohtori Academy. But the elevator that went there had a sign reading "Off-Limits to Non-Student Council Personnel."

Like I give a shit.

Utena ignored the sign and entered the elevator. She was so angry, she wasn't paying much

attention to her surroundings - it was a weakness of hers.

The elevator was strange. Usually, an elevator would have buttons for each floor, but she didn't see any. Utena hesitated, confused - but soon the doors closed on their own, and the elevator began to ascend.

It goes there directly? How extravagant.

Then she stopped thinking about it. The elevator was going up, at least, and it's not like she ever planned on using it again.

Soon, it stopped and the doors slid open. As it did so, a wind blew into the elevator, making Utena close her eyes for a moment. When it died down, Utena opened them and saw... a vast vista of blue and white!

She was on an enormous balcony jutting out from the tower. It had no roof, and looked out onto the pure blue sky. She saw a table and chairs placed in the middle of the vast white tiled floor.

This is... the Student Council room?

Utena tilted her head in surprise.

Man, Ohtori Academy really is weird. Utena thought, walking out under the open sky.

I guess nobody's here...?

She looked around. Blue sky, white tiles. And a fashionable little table that looked like it belonged in a cafe. Other than that, nothing but the sky stretching out all around...

No, wait. Over there, by the edge of the balcony, where the blue and white met, she saw the shape of a person. It was clear at a glance that this wasn't a normal student - their uniform was pure white.

They had long hair, broad shoulders, and a tall, well-proportioned body. There was no way that it could be a woman.

Could that be...?

He resembled the person who had carried Utena from the Dueling Arena.

The prince... is he here?

Eight years ago. Ever since she'd been saved by the prince, Utena had received a letter marked with a rose-shaped seal every year. The envelopes carried the faint scent of roses - and the seventh letter had said "I'll wait for you here." Inside were photos of Ohtori Academy.

So she had transferred here. To meet her prince.

I can meet him at last...

She slowly drew closer to her prince.

My prince.... finally...

She was so close that she could see the luster of his hair, and even smell him.

"Welcome, Tenjou Utena."

The prince turned around.

His hair was a deep red, and he had clear eyes. No - one could go so far as to say that they were cold. A slight smile played about his lips. He would definitely be called a handsome man. Even extremely handsome.

"How... do you know my name...?" Utena managed to ask. But he merely gave a small smile, and didn't answer her question.

"I've been waiting."

He put his hand on Utena's shoulder. It was so warm, it almost felt like a clothing iron.

"Waiting for you to come here."

Waiting...?

The memory of the letter welled up vividly in Utena's mind - "I'll wait for you here."

Could he be...?

Surprised, Utena found herself frozen, unable to react. The boy's face came closer. And in the blink of an eye, his lips met hers.

Kiss!

...!

For a few seconds, Utena couldn't move. She was being kissed. By a boy who might be the prince who had been waiting for her...

Several seconds passed while Utena became aware of this. It was such a sudden, unexpected kiss.

"What are you doing!?"

Utena pulled free of the boy. Sure, she thought he might be her prince, but she rejected his sneak attack with a certain girly squeamishness.

"We haven't even introduced ourselves."

The boy she had pushed away gave an audacious smile, and brushed stray bits of his long hair back over his shoulder.

"I'm Kiryuu Touga. I'm a member of the Student Council, and the one you've been looking for."

Kiryuu Touga!

Utena had only been at the school for about half a year, but she knew that name. He was the president of the Student Council. He had excellent academics, was an all-around good athlete, and an object of affection for all the female students. He was also a notorious playboy...

"Just like they say, you're quick with the girls," Utena said, wiping the lips he'd kissed on her sleeve.

"Oh, I don't kiss just anyone. Only girls as charming as you."

Yeah, right. Utena thought. There's no way this guy is my prince. My prince is more of a gentleman, more... more...

"What's wrong? Didn't you want to see me about something?"

That's right. I came to make them stop these duels where they use a girl as a prize.

Utena turned to face Touga, with dignity. He was about a head taller than her, but she stared him down defiantly.

"I came to put a stop to the Dueling Game."

She plunged right into the subject - she hated beating around the bush.

"Unfortunately, I'm not the one who set the game up," he answered with a small smile. Rather than soothing her, though, it only grated on Utena's nerves.

"Then who's in charge of this cruel game?"

"It's all the doing of 'The Ends of the World.'"

"'The Ends of the World'...?"

Is that supposed to be the name of a person? Or some kind of group?

"We don't know their true nature, either," replied Touga, as if reading her thoughts. "But one day, we suddenly started receiving letters from 'The Ends of the World,' marked with a rose seal. They contained the rules of the Dueling Game, as well as these."

Touga held up his left hand. On it glittered a rose signet ring, the same as Utena's.

"Hmph, that's a pretty lame excuse, Mr. President. 'You're just doing what the letters said.' Who on earth would duel because of that?"

"Of course we aren't just following their instructions for no reason. It's because we want the Power of Dios."

"Dios... that's right, the sword was called the Sword of Dios, too."

"The Power of Dios... its said that only the victor of the duels will receive it, and it has the power to revolutionize the world..."

"How dumb... do you Student Council members really believe such an outlandish story?"

Touga gave a smile that could be either agreement or disagreement. "A castle floating in the sky, the Dueling Arena, the Sword of Dios... quite a lot of effort for a mere joke, don't you think?"

That's true... no prankster would be able to pull off magic tricks like that.

"You felt it yourself, didn't you? The power when you held the Sword of Dios?"

Power... Utena remembered the power, and the rose scent that had flowed through her.

There really was some kind of power. Strong, and noble...

"If they continue to win duels, the one engaged to the Rose Bride will ascend to the castle glittering in the sky. There, they'll receive the power to revolutionize the world - Dios' power. I only half believed it myself, but I've finally been convinced. During your duel with Saionji."

"You were watching us?"

"You, a participant in this Dueling Game, drew out the power of the Sword of Dios... I was quite surprised. That's what made me certain that the Power of Dios exists."

'The Ends of the World,' the Dueling Game, the Rose Bride, the Power of Dios... it was all so unbelievable. But Utena had seen the sword be drawn out of Himemiya Anthy's chest. As well as the upside-down floating castle. And...

The Power of Dios... I felt it flow into me, along with the rose scent. I was filled with the same rose scent as the prince... The memory of that smell came back to her.

The prince... I followed him to this academy. A letter with a rose seal, saying "I'll wait for you here." If that's the same as the letters that the Student Council members got, that told them to do the dueling game... then if I participate in the duels, maybe I'll be able to meet my prince?

Utena sank deep in thought, forgetting that Touga was there. He quietly drew up behind her.

"I'd like to find out. What kind of power do you have?" he whispered in her ear. A sweet murmur, like a sigh...

Pow!

Over her shoulder, Utena struck Touga in the cheek. It made a lovely sound.

"Touch me like that again, and I won't hold back!"

His cheek swelling red, Touga stared at her in shock. But soon, the look in his eyes changed to something like intrigued interest.

The prince from her memories. And Touga, who she'd thought might be her prince. Utena was now

certain that the two were completely different people.

I can't believe I thought this guy might've been my prince. And to think, he was my first...

Utena tightly bit her lip.

"I'm leaving."

With just those words, Utena turned and ran from the room. Not even glancing back once, she left behind the place where blue and white met.

Watching her go, Touga touched his cheek. The place where she had struck felt hot.

"Now what got you so upset, Tenjou Utena?" The smile on his lips didn't reveal whether he was joking, or being serious.

He watched the doors of the elevator shut. A strong wind blew in Utena's wake, past the elevator and Touga.

*** **

The second floor of the East Dorm -

Utena's new room was number 21, deep inside the building. Immediately upon returning from the Student Council room, Utena flopped down on the bed.

I can't believe my first kiss was with that guy.

Lying on her back and staring at the ceiling, Utena wiped her lips on her sleeve.

What a disaster. He just kissed me so quickly...

She could still feel the warmth of Touga's lips. It annoyed her.

The rumors of him being a playboy were true after all. I'm sure he's involved in a bunch of other girls, too. Besides, anyone who'd try to win a girl in a duel has got to be kind of playboy-ish. He talked about letters from "The Ends of the World" and stuff, but I'll bet he actually just sent them himself...

But wait, that would mean that he sent the letters that brought me here, too...

No, that's ridiculous. My prince can't be a guy like that. Not an unscrupulous playboy like that...

While she was thinking, Utena rolled her body over. Lying on her stomach, all she could see were the white sheets and pillows.

Wha...?

Utena took another look at the bed she was lying on. Although she'd used it shortly before, someone had made it back up again.

"It must have been Anthy. Come to think of it, where is she? Did she go out?" Utena started to climb off the bed, when...

"Chu---!"

...she heard a strange sound by her feet.

"Huh?"

It was a monkey.

There was a monkey below her, pulling on her foot with all its strength.

"Why is there a monkey here?"

It had very long ears, a red tie hung from its neck, and its gestures seemed somehow human.

What a weird monkey...

It continued to tug at her foot.

"What is it? You want to take me somewhere?"

The monkey nodded its head at her... or at least that's what she thought it looked like.

Does it understand what I'm saying...?

As soon as Utena rose to her feet, the monkey dashed to the door and made a "chuu" sound, like it was calling to her.

Maybe it does understand me after all... well, guess I'll go check it out.

Utena hopped out of bed and ran down the stairs with the monkey. Ahead of them was the back door... no, the door to the central garden. It was hanging open. The sun was already starting to set, bathing the world in an orange glow.

"Woah..." Utena murmured, as she stepped into the garden.

The central garden was unexpectedly well-maintained. The paths were flanked by lines of short shrubs, behind which small flowerbeds were arranged. A few trees spotted here and there added to the view, and the wind carried their fresh green smell to Utena.

I'd heard that this building was haunted and hadn't been used for ten years, but this garden is surprisingly pretty...

Forgetting about the monkey, Utena paused for a moment to take in the garden. She didn't know much about flowers and stuff, but she could tell that this garden was very high-quality.

Does Anthy maintain it? Utena wondered, as she started to walk again. Just then, she heard -

"Why, Anthy?"

...a man's voice. It came from behind one of the trees. Without hesitation, Utena ran down the path so that she could see who was talking.

"Back then, didn't you say that you belonged completely to me?"



The boy was Saionji Kyouichi. Saionji Kyouichi - who served as the Student Council vice-president, and captain of the kendo club. Like the other members of the council, he was good at both academics and sports, and was quite attractive.

With his chiseled face, sharp gaze, and wavy long hair, the girls on campus were split between him and Kiryu Touga. But unlike Touga, who was a known playboy, Saionji didn't appear to have any interest in dating. They said he was a stoic guy who never made a sweet face towards a girl. And, of course, this was the boy who Utena had dueled in the arena - the one who Anthy had been engaged to before Utena.

Anthy stood before him.

"Was our engagement nothing but a lie, Anthy?" he asked, gesturing dramatically to her. He looked completely different than the arrogant guy he had been in the Dueling Arena - you could have mistaken him for an actor in a tragedy.

"No. But that's over now." Anthy replied flatly, staring steadily at Saionji.

Huh... Utena had thought that Anthy was a shy, retiring girl, so she was struck by the face she was making now.

Saionji stared at Anthy for a moment, and then...

"You're shameless!" Driven by some violent emotion, Saionji struck Anthy in the face.

Again with this guy! Saionji had also hit Anthy the first time Utena saw them together. That time, Anthy hadn't resisted, but simply accepted the blow. She didn't seem to have any intention of opposing him this time, either. Her cheek burned red, but she made no move to flee.

"Stop it!" Utena shouted, without thinking. With that, she leapt out from the shade of the tree and interposed herself between Saionji and Anthy.

"Tenjou Utena!?"

"Utena-sama!?"

They both exclaimed in surprise at Utena's sudden appearance.

"Stop it, Saionji. Anthy's just following the rules of the Rose Seal. You're the Student Council Vice-President, so if you've got a problem you should challenge me to a duel properly. I'll take you on anytime!" she said.

Whoops. Utena hadn't had any intention on participating in these duels to win a girl. But when she saw Anthy being hit, she made that defiant declaration without thinking.

"Tch..." Saionji looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end he bit back his words. He turned his back and strode away.

I guess that guy was pretty serious about Anthy... Utena thought, watching Saionji's back as he left. Of course she couldn't forgive him for hitting Anthy, but strangely, Utena was sure she had

seen some kind of love in Saionji's face, too.

"Thank you, Utena-sama."

Utena turned to see Anthy bowing deeply to her. It was a very proper, formal gesture, but somehow didn't feel tense or awkward.

"Nah, I didn't really..."

"Have you agreed to the duels?" Anthy asked, staring directly at Utena.

Utena hadn't wanted to participate in the Dueling Game. But if she didn't, did that mean that Anthy would become someone's plaything again?

Would Anthy just be the possession of whoever won the duels? She doesn't even fight back when someone hits her. She just carries out this Rose Bride thing... Utena's heart was shaken as she imagined how the next victor might look upon this poor girl.

"Yeah, sure. Jeez..." Utena mumbled. She turned away from Anthy - if she was looking at her, she felt like she might blush.

"Even though you'll need to continue to duel from now on?"

"I guess since I've already come this far... Besides, I can't just abandon you."

"Me...?"

"Yeah. You don't want Saionji to hit you again, do you?"

Anthy gave no answer. She simply lowered her eyes, as if bowing her head.

Maybe it's a difficult subject for her... Utena felt a little bit awkward about Anthy's manner. No doubt it was too much to talk to her about it so soon after Saionji had hit her.

"Chuu."

Utena felt something down at her feet. It was the monkey from before.

"Oh, yeah. This monkey..." Utena said, picking him up. This was the perfect way to change the subject. "He's the one who told me that you were here in the garden."

"My, Chu-Chu." A pleased glint suddenly sparkled in Anthy's eyes.

Hmm, so he can make Anthy look so happy... The Anthy that Utena knew was always quiet and expressionless. Seeing her smile now made Utena happy, too. She'd already forgotten the awkwardness of before.

"Is he your pet?"

"No. He's my friend." Anthy answered, completely straight-faced. It didn't look like she was joking.

I see. Maybe she's not good at communicating with people. So her only friend is... Utena felt like she understood Anthy a bit better.

"Will he be my friend, too?" She held out a finger to the red necktied-monkey.

Chu-Chu turned to look at Anthy. Then, seeing that she was smiling, he grasped Utena's finger with both hands - a handshake.

"Chuu."

"Thanks, Chu-Chu."

Chu-Chu grinned at her... or that's what it looked like to Utena, anyway.

Chapter 2

Ohtori Academy

Utena and her classmates attended Ohtori Academy, a private school that stood on a hill in the middle of Houou City. All the students lived in dorms in the surrounding area, and each morning you could see them come in from all directions, converging as they climbed the hilly path that led up to the school.

Tenjou Utena and Himemiya Anthy were among the crowd.

"C'mon, I told you to stop calling me 'Utena-sama'." They were walking to school from the East Dorm. Utena must have repeated these words ten times since yesterday.

"But I'm engaged to you, Utena-sama." Anthy replied. She, too, had delivered the same response over and over.

Yesterday evening, Utena and Anthy had started their strange life together. The old East Dorms had ten rooms, but the only ones living there were the two of them *and one monkey*. And even though there were plenty of rooms, they were sharing the same one.

"There are so many spare rooms, why don't we each use one?" Utena had suggested, but Anthy had refused to listen. The Rose Bride had to live with the victor of the duels, she said. This explanation didn't really satisfy Utena, but it would also have been against the rules for her to use whatever room she wanted, so eventually she stopped arguing. It's not like she really minded living with Anthy anyway.

"Look, Anthy. You and I are classmates, so you shouldn't call me 'sama.'"

"But I'm the Rose Bride."

Their back-and-forth exchange continued.

"Look, Anthy..."

"Yes?"

"We've stopped talking about the Dueling Game and the Rose Bride stuff, so cut it out with calling me 'sama.' I want to be your..."

Just as Utena was saying that, she heard shrill voices exclaiming "Aaah, Utena-sama....!" It wasn't Anthy. When she looked, she saw three female Ohtori Academy students running up to her.

"Utena-sama, how are you feeling?"

"That uniform looks great on you today too, Utena-sama!"

"Utena-sama, you're so cool!"

The three girls spoke all at once. Utena was enormously popular among the female students, both for defying the teachers with her uniform and for outdoing the male students in sports. Whenever she played a game, there was a group of girls cheering for her with high-pitched voices, and there was a mountain of love letters in her shoe locker every day. Among the female students, Utena was the undisputed "prince" of the campus.

"Thanks. I had a bit of cold before, but I'm feeling better now." Utena smiled back at the innocent underclassmen. *No way I can tell them about the duel...*

"Good morning, Utena-sama!"

"Good morning."

"Utena-sama, if it's all right, will you take this?"

"Thanks, I'll be sure to use it."

"Utena-sama, we heard that you were absent yesterday. We were worried!"

"Thanks, but I'm fine now."

One by one, Utena exchanged words with the crowd of girls surrounding her. Eventually, when her crowd of fans dispersed, Utena noticed Anthy looking at her.

"Uh, no, that was just..."

Why shouldn't Anthy call Utena 'sama,' if she was fine with all the other girls doing it? Utena felt like Anthy was accusing her of hypocrisy with her gaze.

"No, I mean, everyone calls me 'Utena-sama', but in your case..."

"Yes?" Anthy smiled, with no hint of accusation.

"Never mind... it's fine." Utena sighed, giving up on convincing her.

"By the way, was I absent from school yesterday?"

"Yes. You slept for the whole day."

"Man, and I didn't have permission or anything. Anthy, sorry, but would you show me your notes from yesterday later?"

"I don't have any notes."

"You didn't take any? You look so serious, I kind of thought..."

"I was absent yesterday as well."

"Huh? Why?"

"I'm engaged to you, Utena-sama."

"Ah..." Utena sighed again. As she had countless times since last night.

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"Utena, you're so mean!"

Someone threw herself onto Utena's back from behind. It was Utena's self-proclaimed lover - Shinohara Wakaba.

"I can't believe you changed dorms without even telling your Wakaba! Don't you think that was cold?"

"Wakaba...?" Carrying Wakaba on her back, Utena strained her neck around trying to look at her.

Come to think of it, Wakaba was the reason Utena had dueled Saionji in the first place. Her love letter to Saionji being put on display was what had angered Utena enough to challenge him. Not that she'd known anything about the Dueling Game - that part had just been an accident.

"The school just suddenly told me to move. What was I supposed to do...?"

"Hmmp..." Wakaba dropped off of Utena's back with a thud. "Well, whatever. But just because I'm not around, don't think you can get away with finding yourself another woman."

"Hey now..." As she laughed in embarrassment, Utena felt somewhat relieved. She'd been worried that Wakaba would still be down over the incident with the love letter.

"Anyway, Utena, take a look at this." Wakaba pulled out her wallet. Inside was a picture of a beautiful boy with pretty eyes, playing the piano.

"Who's this?"

"It's Mickey. You don't know him?"

"Mickey?" Is he half foreign or something?"

"Middle school first-year, Kaoru Miki-kun. Mickey is just his nickname." Wakaba nuzzled the photo to her cheek. "He's a total genius who's already taking college-level classes. Also, his piano-playing and fencing are at the national level, and he's cute, to boot. Not to mention that he has a really sweet personality, and he's single! From here on out, I'm definitely going for younger boys." Wakaba's lengthy praise of Miki came out in a single breath. She seemed to be quite the fan.

"Is that so?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Utena. You're only into old guys."

"I am not. Don't go around smearing my good name."

"Well, what about your prince that you met eight years ago? If you think about it, he's gotta be middle-aged by now."

Utena made a sour face. She didn't tell many other people about her prince. It was kind of an embarrassing story, and didn't really suit her. Also, she could never explain it clearly to her own satisfaction. So, since she'd come to Ohtori, she'd only told one person.

Maybe I shouldn't have... Utena thought with regret, as she looked at that one person.

"Yeah, definitely going with younger guys. They're cute, and earnest... Older guys are..." Wakaba's voice suddenly quieted. "...Older guys... I'm giving up on them..." she trailed off.

Looks like she hasn't forgotten about Saionji after all... Utena thought, looking concerned.

For a moment, it seemed like Wakaba was going to cry, but then she shook her head strongly and cheered up again. "So anyway, where's your new dorm? The West Dorm? Or are you in the Clock House? I want to come over and visit. We may be in different dorms, but I won't forgive you if you have an affair."

"Wakaba, people are going to hear you and get the wrong idea."

"It's fine, it's fine. You're much cooler than any of the boys around here, anyway."

"You were just saying a moment ago that you thought that younger boy was pretty good."

As they were talking, Utena started to smile. The two of them were already returning to how they normally were. In fact, Utena felt even happier than normal.

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"But still, the East Dorm?" Wakaba asked mournfully, as they were waiting in line to get at their shoe lockers.

"Yeah, but it's a lot nicer than you'd think. I mean, I know how it looks from the outside, but there's also an inner garden and stuff."

"No matter how nice it is, it's still haunted... darn, and I wanted to come visit you. Hey, isn't it scary at night? Being all alone in such a big empty dorm? If so, you can always come hide in my bed." Wakaba suggested, incorrigibly.

"I haven't seen any ghosts. Besides, there's one more person there. In the same room, actually."

"A roommate? Someone else is staying in that haunted house?"

"Yeah. Himemiya Anthy."

When she heard that name, Wakaba dropped her head low in a dramatic gesture of disbelief.

"What's with that reaction?"

"How unlucky!"

"What is?"

"Rooming with Himemiya Anthy, of course! We were in the same class last year, too, and I hardly ever heard her speak. She spends all her time tending the rose garden, even though nobody asked her to, and I don't think she has a single friend. She's so gloomy!"

"Hmm..." Utena glanced over at Anthy, standing in an adjacent line. While they waited their turns, everybody else was chatting with nearby classmates. Just like Utena was currently chatting with Wakaba. But Anthy was alone. She just stood patiently by herself.

"The dorm might seem haunted, but that's just how it looks on the outside. Anthy's the same way."

Come to think of it - before Utena had come, had Anthy lived by herself in the East Dorm? Utena suddenly remembered how Anthy had smiled when she'd said that Chu-Chu was her "friend."

She's been all alone at school and when she goes home, and Chu-Chu's been her only friend. That's why she hasn't been able to talk to anyone about doing this Rose Bride thing...

Utena took a second look at Anthy. Even surrounded by a mass of other students, she completely stood out among them. It was almost like she was standing in front of a blank wall.

Alright. I'm gonna be friends with Anthy. If she has one friend, I'm sure she'll start talking with more people and brighten up a little. And if she gains a little self-confidence, surely she'll be able to say herself that she doesn't like the Rose Bride thing. Yeah, that's the best way. From now on, we're going to live together, and become firends.

Looking at the solitary Anthy, Utena resolved to invite her to lunch.

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The private Ohtori Academy, which offered courses ranging from primary school to college, was often described as "aristocratic." A large number of the students were the children of doctors, lawyers, company presidents, and other such affluent sorts, and the western-style architecture of the campus also greatly contributed to the effect. The halls were wide and open, the window frames covered with fine engravings. The elegant constructions on the campus, such as fountains, rose gardens, and arching corridors, would never be seen at a normal school. The partly open air cafeteria where the students ate lunch was merely one more such aristocratic location.

Utena and Anthy brought their lunches to a small round table in the middle of the cafeteria. Utena had invited her along. However, it didn't take long for the conversation to die out.

"Hey, Anthy. Do you have any hobbies?"

"No, I don't."

"You're not in any clubs?"

"No, I'm not."

"No boyfriend or anything?"

"No. Although I do have a fiancée."

"...Anthy, is it fun hanging out with me?"

"Yes."

And so on.

It's not as though Anthy never smiled, Utena had discovered. Sure, just as Wakaba had said, she'd never seen Anthy smile in class. But even since last night, Anthy had smiled countless times in response to things Utena had said. Still, those smiles seemed somehow empty of emotion. Many people would surely think of them as mocking.

If she's always like this, it would be stranger if she DID have friends...

Even Utena eventually gave up on having a cheery conversation. For now, they'd just have lunch together, but hopefully Anthy would open up to her little by little, and then -

"Sometime soon, a new Duelist will challenge you, Utena-sama." Anthy stated firmly, out of the blue. Having done so, she calmly took another sip of tea.

"A new Duelist... you mean another member of the Student Council?"

"Probably so."

Utena gave a small sigh. She felt like reality had suddenly come crashing back. This unbelievable Dueling Game was now a fact of life for her. The Dueling Game, and her prince - she probably should have asked for more information from the Student Council president, Kiryuu Touga, but...

Because of his stupid kiss...

Just remembering it made Utena irritated again.

"If the president challenges me, I'm going to beat him black and blue."

"You sound pretty confident."

It wasn't Anthy who responded. A girl wearing the distinctive white uniform of the Student Council stood behind Utena. She sized up Utena challengingly.

A leopardess - if Utena had to sum up her impression of the girl in one word, that would be it. She had a crisp attitude and way of speaking, and a harsh gaze, which together gave off the impression of masculinity. But her figure and appearance were undeniably female. She had slim, shapely legs, and even under the student council uniform, you could tell she had a well-developed chest. She had refined features, and an aristocratic air. Her hair was curled in rings, a style that looked good on her, but which probably only she could pull off.

"So you're Tenjou Utena."

"Who are you?"

Even as she asked, Utena realized who this must be. The only female member of the Student Council: Arisugawa Juri. She was a fencer of the highest grade. Her academics were also excellent, and it appeared she would be an honor student. But behind her back, people also said that she was the shadowy figure controlling the delinquent students of the school. There were even rumors that teachers who crossed her would get fired.

"High school first-year, Arisugawa Juri."

Like I thought.

Juri didn't give any further response.

Does she think that's enough of an answer? No matter how famous or recognizable you are, you should be a little more self-aware.

"So you must be a Duelist too, sempai," Utena said, spotting the Rose Seal on Juri's finger.

"That's right. I heard there was a girl who defeated Saionji... so I came to do some reconnaissance." A smile, far from friendly, quirked upward at the corner of her lips. "I can't believe Saionji was beaten by a girl like you. His swordsmanship was his only strong point."

Is she trying to pick a fight!? Utena now understood the look in Juri's eyes. *Am I going to have to duel her next?*

Utena returned Juri's icy gaze with a heated glare of her own.

She looks totally confident - she's not looking away.

Time seemed to stop for the two of them as they stared each other down. Neither the idle small-talk of the students around them, nor the shining sunlight, entered between them.

But then, a pretty, boy soprano voice cut in. "Arisugawa-sempai."



It was a beautiful young boy. His beauty was androgynous, not entirely feminine or masculine. His hair was light blue, like the sky, and his eyes were clear as crystals. He seemed a little smaller than Utena. He had a slender build, and on the whole, he gave the impression of being delicate. Like Juri, he too wore the special uniform of the Student Council. And on his finger, he wore a Rose Seal ring...

This boy is a Duelist, too?

"We've been summoned. President Touga has called a special Student Council meeting," he nodded to Juri.

"Where?"

"The Student Council room."

"I see."

After this minimal exchange, Juri turned on her heels. Without another word to Utena, she strode from the cafeteria.

"Please excuse me, as well," the boy continued, bowing his head.

"Wait!" Utena called out, as the boy was turning to leave. Judging by the atmosphere, if he hadn't intervened, she was pretty sure she would have been challenged to a duel. "Uh, thanks."

"I was just here on Student Council business. You don't have anything to thank me for, Tenjou-sempai."

"You know who I am?"

The boy gave a little smile. "You're rather extraordinarily famous, sempai. At least, among us."

"Oh yeah, you're on the Student Council, too," Utena said, bracing herself. The boy looked and acted so friendly that she'd forgotten he was a participant in the Dueling Game as well.

"Please, don't worry. I have no intention of fighting duels to possess a girl."

Huh...?

"I hate the idea. It's barbaric." He smiled warmly. The phrase "like the smile of an angel" was made to describe this boy. As if sucked into that smile, Utena found herself spontaneously hugging him.

"I'm so glad there's someone in the Student Council who thinks the same as me," she said, her arms still around him.

That's right. Just because everyone received a letter, doesn't mean that they all duel. That's great. I'm so glad there's someone on the Council who seems to be on my side.

"Uh, um... Tenjou-sempai..."

Flustered, the boy pulled away from Utena. It might have just been her imagination, but he looked

a little red.

"Oh, sorry. Did I hurt you? I was just so happy, I..."

"No, it's fine. But I have to go to that Student Council meeting, so..." Stumbling slightly, he started to leave. After a moment, however, he turned back.

"I'm Kaoru Miki. I'm one year younger than you, a middle school first-year. It's nice to meet you, Tenjou-sempai." Miki smiled at her. His face was angelic, enough to melt your heart.

He's so kind and friendly... He might not be a very good Student Council member, but it seems like he'd make a good friend. Come to think of it, Wakaba was just talking about him. Mickey, the idol of all the high school girls. So that's Mickey...

Watching Miki walk unsteadily away, Utena felt a little bit more cheerful.

Lately, all I've been dealing with is the duel, and kiss, and stuff... it's nice for something good to happen for once.

Utena was pretty dense when it came to relationships between boys and girls.

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"Tenjou Utena... what kind of person is she?" Touga murmured.

"Middle school second-year, Class C. Female. Not a member of any clubs. Transferred to Ohtori Academy half a year ago." Miki calmly stated.

"So there are Duelists other than us... I made a mistake." Saionji Kyouichi twisted his lip in frustration.

"A 'mistake'... is that really all it was?" Arisugawa Juri spoke softly, but still loud enough for Saionji to hear.

"What!?"

"You lost because you're so infatuated with our mysterious Rose Bride. It's made you rusty."

"Interesting. Why don't we test that theory?" Saionji said, bristling in response to Juri's criticism. Touga made no move to stop them. On the contrary, he looked amused at the situation, a smile playing about his lips.

The student body would never have imagined that this was what gatherings of the dazzling Student Council members were like. The widely-adored Student Council members didn't get along very well. In fact, they had a tense relationship, almost to the point of discord.

"A young maiden who dresses as a man... how charming."

"Shut up. I only lost due to carelessness. If I fight her again, she'll surely lose."

"Naturally. To lose twice against a Duelist like that would be..."

"Utena-san is strong."

Miki, who had been recording the other members' conversations, suddenly cut in between Saionji and Juri. He spoke firmly, with conviction. Normally, he didn't do things like that. Juri and Saionji, and even Touga, looked at him in surprise.

"Don't you all think this is strange?" Miki spoke quickly, as if unable to withstand the gazes of the three upperclassmen. "After learning about the upside-down castle, the Rose Bride, and the Sword of Dios, wouldn't one normally try to investigate those mysteries further?"

"'Normally'...? Well, that's normal for you, Mickey," Touga teased. "What's normal varies from person to person. For instance, why don't *you* try to unravel these mysteries, *best friend*?"

Saionji, the target of Touga's words, glared at him with undisguised distaste. But he still answered.

"I have no interest in such mysteries and secrets. You may as well worry about why there are men and women, or the process by which people grow older every year. Win, win, and win some more - that's all I need to understand."

"...And there you have it." Touga concluded, amused. Saionji scowled at him again.

"But..."

"This is unlike you. What are you so worked up about?" Juri protested to Miki. But her voice held none of the iciness she'd shown when speaking to Utena and Saionji.

"I wouldn't really say I'm worked up..." But as Miki spoke, he realized that he was indeed acting different than usual.

What is it, I wonder? It's true that I've been concerned about how casually the others accept the existence of the Rose Bride.. But asking them about it so directly... why did I do that? What am I so worked up about?

"What's bothering our cute, earnest Miki?" Miki blushed deeply. He stopped writing, and glared at Touga. "Ah, how frightening. Love certainly does change a person, doesn't it?"

Touga's joking words pierced Miki's heart.

Love...?

Memories rushed back in Miki's mind: of Utena's gallant face breaking into an innocent smile, and the way she had hugged him. Back then, her body had felt so warm and soft...

Don't be stupid... that didn't mean anything. Miki's pulse quickened. And the more he denied it in his heart, the more it quickened.

"Is our only point of business to hear about this new Duelist, Tenjou Utena? Or is it that you're

going to duel her next, and want to tell the rest of us not to cut in line?" Saionji asked Touga accusingly, as he suddenly stood up. The two of them had been childhood friends, but now they got along terribly. Or, more accurately, Saionji harbored a deep one-sided hatred of Touga.

"Not at all. My turn isn't for some time."

"Touga, you can wait for your turn for all eternity. I'll duel again, and take back Anthy. And this time, I won't lose to anyone." With that, Saionji turned his back on Touga and left. A strong wind blew through the space between them.

"Unfortunately, the next challenger has already been decided."

"What?" Saionji stopped in his tracks. "Who is it?" Saionji looked at Juri. But Juri was staring at the sky, as if all this had nothing to do with her. Miki always insisted that he didn't want to participate in the duels. And Touga had just said that it wasn't him.

"Is there another new Duelist, like Tenjou Utena? Someone besides us Student Council members? Answer me, Touga!" Saionji yelled.

But Touga just looked at his best friend with amusement, and didn't answer. Juri continued to look at the sky. Miki quietly stopped recording the proceedings. The special Student Council meeting was over.

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A white tablecloth was draped over the long table. It was big enough for twelve people to eat on at once. The East Dorm dining hall had three such tables. If it was a little bigger, you could have hosted a whole house party there.

However, there were only two people and one animal eating there now - Utena, Anthy, and Chu-Chu. Today was Anthy's turn to cook. Anthy seemed so mature that Utena had figured she was good at household tasks. So, Utena had looked forward to tonight's dinner with a little anticipation. What would she make?

However.

"Um, is this...?" Utena asked, pointing at one of the plates.

"It's shaved ice."

"And this one...?"

"It's taiyaki."

"So this one has gotta be..."

"Yes, it's seasoned nori."

Utena rubbed her head. *Could she be messing with me...?* For a moment, she was suspicious. But Anthy was smiling, waiting for Utena's response.

"Hey, Anthony."

"Yes?"

"Do you always make stuff like this for dinner?"

"Is that strange?" Anthony's smile suddenly vanished.

"No, it's not that... but it is a little unusual, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Utena-sama. Saionji-sempai never said anything about it, so I assumed it was alright."

"That's right, you cooked for Saionji, huh?"

"Yes. And he always ate it all, without comment."

Saionji... You're a pretty brave guy. Seeing the sickening combination of foods lined up on the table, Utena once again revised her opinion of Saionji.

"Hey, Anthony. Do you want to join any clubs?"

"If you tell me to, Utena-sama."

"But is there anything you're interested in, or that you'd like to try doing?"

"I understand. I'll join the same club as you, Utena-sama."

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I just think you... could use some friends."

"I have a friend right here."

"Chu!"

Chu-Chu, who had been grappling with a taiyaki on top of the table, proudly raised his hand.

"I mean *human* friends."

Unlike most people, Anthony seemed content in to carry out role as the Rose Bride. Utena figured that was due to Anthony's introverted tendencies. She lacked self-confidence, so she couldn't refuse to act as a prize in the Dueling Game.

She'll definitely change if she makes friends. She'd have someone to talk to about her problems. She'll become a little more cheerful, and gain more interests, and eventually find someone she likes...

She does whatever the Student Council says because she has such low self-esteem. If she makes friends, and finds her own place in life, she'll stop thinking of herself as a prize in this stupid game.

Anthony was cutting a taiyaki in half for Chu-Chu to eat. Looking at her, Utena's conviction grew.

Anthony definitely wants friends. Look how well she and Chu-Chu get along!

"Alright. To begin with, how about I be your friend?"

"You, Utena-sama...?"

"Yeah. Not as the person engaged to the Rose Bride, just as a friend."

"But..."

"It's not a big deal. I'll just be another friend like Chu-Chu. We can eat together, and talk to each other if we have problems."

"Of course. If you say so, Utena-sama." Anthy smiled.

Uh, that's not really what I was going for... Utena thought in despair. But seeing Anthy's smile, she decided not to fight it.

Well, I guess it's fine.

Utena took a breath, and returned her attention to the meal. Shaved ice, taiyaki, and seasoned nori, all lined up.

"From now on, I'll cook our meals." Utena sighed heavily.

Chapter 3

Kaoru Miki

There were a few places on campus that Utena particularly liked. One such place was a grassy field that extended beyond the sports grounds. She would lie down on its gentle slope, and spend time looking up at the sky. Sometimes she'd be lost in thought; other times she'd think about nothing at all.

"Utena-sama, what are you thinking about?"

Utena was lying flat on her back, but Anthy, to her side, was sitting politely, her knees together.

"Hmm, just the Student Council stuff... I guess."

Her duel against Kyouichi Saionji. Arisugawa Juri's provocations. Kaoru Miki, who was opposed to the duels. And...

Kiryuu Touga... how dare he steal my first kiss...

Utena unconsciously clenched her hand into a fist. He'd just taken her by surprise, but the idea that a playboy like him managed to kiss her so freely still rankled.

"Are you concerned about who your next opponent will be?"

"Yeah... I guess there's that, too."

She'd told Saionji he could challenge her any time, but she didn't actually want to duel. It would be so easy if she could directly tell this "The Ends of the World" person to stop the duels, but that was impossible since nobody knew who they were. That meant she'd need to convince the members of the Student Council to stop participating...

But I can't imagine those Student Council guys will listen to me. Saionji is out of the question, and if Arisugawa-sempai is anything like how she was last time, talking to her won't do any good either. Does that mean I'm gonna have to go to that playboy...?

"Hey, Utena!"

Utena was pulled out of her reverie by a girl calling to her from direction of the sports field. She turned to see her classmate, Tsukamoto Shinya, come running up.

"Utena, can you help us out?" she asked abruptly, stopping beside Utena.

"Help you out?"

"In our basketball game. We're having a pretty hard time."

Utena was a great all-around athlete, and was often asked to join in on games. Baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball... whatever the sport, she was better than average. She played with the boys, too, and was able to not only hold her own, but put them to shame. When she played, female

students would often cheer for her with shrill voices, then crowd around her and offer to let her use their towels after the game.

"Alright, who're you playing against? The Class B SpeedStars? Or is it the Class C Basketball Alliance?" Utena asked eagerly. Thanks to the Duels, she'd had all kinds of problems on her mind over the last few days, so a chance to just move her body sounded great.

"Well..."

Tsukamoto looked slightly embarrassed, and said falteringly, "Actually, it's a team of first-years."

*** **

Ohtori Academy had four basketball courts, which all the students could use freely. After school, teams of students from each grade would gather there to play games. There were all kinds of teams, from ones consisting of a group of classmates, to ones that had a mix of students, from middle school to college.

Tsukamoto Shinya had formed a team called the "Blue Diamonds" with some friends from her class, and they had a pretty good record. For her to be seeking outside help, their opponent must be pretty tough.

When Utena ran up to check it out, the game was just entering into its second half. The score was 34 to 38. The Blue Diamonds were losing.

"What the heck is going on?"

The opposing team's players were, on the whole, short, thin boys. They were only one year younger than Tsukamoto's team, but for boys of that age, one year made a big difference in their size.

And it doesn't look like any of them are particularly amazing players... Utena thought, watching the flow of the game with a cool head.

At the moment, the ball was in the hands of the second-years - the Blue Diamonds. Taking advantage of their height, they passed the ball around, gradually bringing it closer to the first-years' basket.

Two first-years stood in their way. The second-year carrying the ball cast his eye about for a teammate near the basket, and spotting one, immediately prepared to make a pass. He dribbled the ball once sharply...

Just then, an opposing player cut in with amazing speed. Coming from the blind spot of the player who was about to make the pass, he stole the ball before it even hit the ground.

That's...!

The blue-haired first year player now had the ball. With fast, tight, dribbling, he quickly brought the ball to the other team's side of the court.

He's that boy from yesterday... Utena watched the blue-haired first-year in fascination.

But the second-year players, no slouches either, quickly pulled back and shored up their defenses. Two second-years were coming up on him from behind, too. He was in a pinch.

But, just as he was on the verge of being boxed in, he threw the ball. As if laughing at the taller players, the ball gently flew through the air, into the waiting hands of a glasses-wearing first-year standing to the right of the goal. He caught the ball and stole a point, so easily that it almost looked like he was just practicing.

Wow...

It was obvious that their success was due to their tactics.

Deliberately leaving an enemy player open to give them a chance to steal the ball, then drawing out the opponents and making such an excellent pass... an amateur might not realize it, but this team had pretty high-level play. Coolly looking over the whole court and instantly choosing on a course of action... you needed quick-thinking and decisiveness to do that.

"These boys are really doing a number on us," Tsukamoto, standing by Utena, said with chagrin. Then she called out loudly, "We're changing players! Takematsu, switch out for Tenjou Utena."

Even though the players were quite fired up by now, for a moment they all fell silent. Everyone knew about Tenjou Utena - the sports star who got called in to help all kinds of sports clubs.

Someone affixed a blue badge - for the Blue Diamonds - to the front of Utena's school uniform, and she entered the court. There, as if waiting for her, stood the blue-haired boy from before.

"You're pretty good, Miki-kun," said Utena, holding out her hand.

"I'll do my best, even if I'm up against you, Tenjou-sempai," Miki said, smiling brightly as he shook her hand.

Like I thought, he's a good kid. Utena thought again, fondly. Miki and the rest of the Student Council were as different as night and day.

*** **

The game resumed.

If they could keep up the pressure on the first years' commander, Miki, the rest of their opponents wouldn't be much of a threat. The second-year team assigned that key role to Utena.

For their part, from the perspective of the currently-leading first-years, the only threat to their victory was the new player - Utena. If they could just contain her, they should be able to secure their victory. But Miki was the only one who had a chance of doing that.

Thus, the match became a one-on-one duel between Utena and Miki.

As fast as lightning, Utena launched an offensive, rapidly dribbled the ball straight into the

opponents' side. Using a feint, Miki slipped around the side of his opponent and brought the ball back up the court. Their play styles were completely different, but they seemed about evenly matched in skill.

For a while, this back-and-forth continued in the center of the court. But gradually, the first-years started to get worn down. By the second half of the game, their energy was clearly starting to wane. Even when Miki managed to bring the ball to the other team's side, no other players were following him.

When Miki noticed this, he immediately switched to defense. They were still ahead by two points. If they could just hold out for another couple minutes, the first-year team would win. Miki guarded the front of their hoop, while giving precise directions to the surrounding players. As Utena and her teammates struggled to break through, time slowly slipped away.

We're out of time... in that case, I'm gonna go for a direct attack!

Utena, in possession of the ball, darted straight ahead. With a burst of speed, she leapt towards the opponents' hoop. She was trying to make one last basket herself.

Catching wind of this, Miki leapt at the same time. The two came together in front of the basket.

Shoot!

As it left Utena's hand, the ball was drawn towards the basket...

And bounced off.

Utena and Miki didn't see it, because at that moment they were tangled together and falling towards the ground. The match was over. Nobody was looking at Utena and Miki, underneath the hoop.

Soon...

"Oww... you okay, Miki-kun?" asked Utena, lying on top, as she moved first.

"I'm... I'm fine." Miki raised his head. And there, so close he could have kissed her, was Utena's face.

...!

His heart wouldn't stop pounding. It felt like if he moved even a little, his heart would leap out of his mouth.

Utena and Miki each looked into each other's eyes.

His eyes are so pretty...

This close, Miki's eyes were as beautiful as crystals. She could see her own face faintly reflected in them.



The two froze like that for a moment, eyes locked on each other. They couldn't hear the surrounding noises. It was like time had stopped for them...

"...u."

"...jyou."

"Tenjou, can you hear me?" It was Tsukamoto's voice.

Hearing her, Utena suddenly snapped back to reality, and pulled herself away from Miki. Miki, blushing, also came to his senses. His heart was still racing.

"W, what's up, Tsukamoto?" For some reason her voice felt inside out. Perhaps she was kind of embarrassed, and impatient.

"The game's over. Time's up."

Hearing that, Utena took another look around her. The court was full of sweating athletes, and spectators chatting with them. The ball was abandoned, rolling around slowly off to the side...

"Did I make the shot?"

"Sorry. You were really close, though."

"Oh..."

Utena absently looked up at the hoop directly above her. When she did, a wave of childish competitiveness came over her.

Maybe if I'd tried another feint, he would've flinched a bit to the right...

She stared sadly at the goal. At that moment, her expression really did look like a child's. Miki stared up at her as if she was radiant, and not just because of the light shining from behind her.

Utena-san... His mind blank, Miki was frozen in place. But...

"Nngh..." Miki groaned, painfully. Apparently, when he'd collapsed with Utena, he'd hurt his foot.

"You okay, Miki-kun?"

"Yeah. Umm, it seems like I twisted something, but I don't think it's serious."

"It's a little red." Suddenly appearing at his side, Anthy examined Miki's foot.

"Let's go to the nurse's office. Can you stand up, Miki-kun?"

"There's no need for that." Miki smiled reassuringly at Utena. But compared to his usual smile, it looked a little weak. "I often get little injuries like this in Fencing Club, and... ah!"

Miki tried to stand in one quick movement, but when he put weight on his foot, involuntarily cried out in pain. His classmates, gathered around him in concern, helped support him as he stumbled.

"Looks like we should go to the nurse after all." Utena took Miki's arm. "C'mon, lean on my shoulder."

"Tenjou-sempai, you don't have to..."

"Don't worry about it."

"Ah...!"

Utena forcefully pulled up Miki, and started walking with him through the crowd of worried teammates and spectators.

"Try not to push yourself," Utena said, as she dragged Miki along. Anthy followed along behind them, carrying Utena's bag.

Miki's pulse quickened further. So much so that he was afraid Utena, beside him, would hear.

*** **

"So having that kid with glasses run to the left was nothing but a decoy."

Utena, still lending Miki her shoulder, didn't even try to conceal her surprise.

"Yes. Well, if nobody had followed him, the plan was for me to cut to the left and pass to him, or shoot. But never mind that - what about the shot where you got up to 44 points? Were you planning that all along?"

"Um... the time when I made a feint to the right and scored that three-pointer? No, I was just desperate."

"I can't believe you made that shot, from that position... it was amazing." There was no resentment in Miki's words. He was saying what he really felt.

Actually, Utena had thought about talking to Miki about Student Council-related stuff this time too, but somehow they'd ended up talking about the basketball game instead. Well, after all, geeking out about sports was a lot more her speed than trying to plumb the depths of mysteries.

Anthy was still walking behind them, but she hadn't said a single word. She just trailed Utena like a shadow. At first Utena had been self-conscious about it, but she'd already gotten used to it.

From ahead of them, the three heard a chorus of shrill voices. Kiryuu Touga was there, and flocking around him were a bunch of female groupies. They were the source of the shrieking.

Man, that playboy. How does he attract all these girls? Utena turned away in disgust. She wanted to just ignore him as they passed by. But it seemed that Touga noticed her.

"Yo, Tenjou." Breaking off from the ring of girls, he ran up to them.

"Don't come any closer," Utena said sharply. Touga took no notice, and smoothly moved in to walk alongside them.

"How cold, Tenjou Utena-kun," he teased. Apparently this was meant to lighten the mood, but Utena only found him extremely irritating.

Ignoring Touga, Utena spoke to Miki instead. "Miki-kun, let's go to my dorm. It's closer to here than the Nurse's Office."

Utena took Miki's hand and forcefully pulled him to the side, changing their direction. Since it happened so suddenly, Miki ended up leaning heavily on Utena. Anthy smoothly followed behind them, almost as if she had predicted it.

"Wasn't there more that you wanted to ask me about? Perhaps you'll remember if we pick up where we left off."

Where we left off...!?

Utena had intended to ignore Touga, but hearing those words, she sharply turned to glare at him.

"Yeah, I wanted to tell you that you'll pay for that."

"How frightening! I got it, I got it - I'll take my leave here. Please look after Mickey." He winked, then returned to his flock of female students.

Hmph, I'll be damned if I play into that guy's playboyish whims. I'll bet he didn't think any further than "a boyish girl would be nice." I can't believe I thought that guy was my prince, even for a second... And no way am I going to ask him anything. I'll deal with the Dueling Game without his help.

Wait, I wonder if he's really "The Ends of the World." Only a playboy like that could think of a game based around something as horrible as trading a girl around...

"Tenjou Utena-sempai!"

"Eh?"

Miki raised his voice a little, and Utena finally noticed him.

"Ah, sorry. I was kinda thinking about something... what's up?"

"Well... is it really alright to go to your dorm, Tenjou-sempai?"

"Yeah, sure. It's no problem, right, Anthy?"

"Yes. As you like, Utena-sama."

A very Anthy-like answer. Usually, Utena would have responded with something like 'You shouldn't talk like that!' but at the moment her attention was elsewhere.

Why did I invite Miki to my place? I mean, I do want to talk to him about the Dueling Game, but even so... It wasn't until much later that Utena realized that the reason she'd invited Miki over lay with Kiryuu Touga.

"There. All done." Anthy finished binding a compress to Miki's left foot. She spoke like a preschool teacher to one of her students.

"Thank you, Himemiya-sempai. And you too, Tenjou-sempai."

"I didn't really do anything. And, could you stop calling me 'Tenjou-sempai'? Just 'Utena' is okay." Utena, who had been standing to the side observing while Anthy treated Miki, looked a little embarrassed.

"But..."

"It's fine. Calling me 'sempai' feels too stiff and formal."

Miki thought it would be bad form to refuse, and anyway, he wasn't particularly set on calling her 'sempai.' So...

"Okay, then... Utena-san," he said hesitantly, as if testing the waters. Of course he couldn't abandon honorifics entirely.

"Eh, good enough. Even if I ask, I guess going without honorifics is tough for Miki-kun too, huh?" Utena asked Anthy, to see if she agreed.

"Yes. As you say, Utena-sama."

"Man. I really wish you'd stop calling me 'Utena-sama.'"

"But, I am..."

"...the Rose Bride?"

"Yes." Anthy smiled. But once again, the smile was empty of emotion.

"Oh, brother." Utena didn't say anything more. Instead, she turned her attention back to Miki.

"By the way, Miki, there was something I wanted to ask you."

"About the Dueling Game?" Miki asked, anticipating her question. He was called a 'genius', after all. His insight had also been well-displayed in the basketball game earlier.

"Yeah. I heard that the Student Council got letters from 'The Ends of the World' telling them to do the Dueling Game. Is that true?" Utena asked, looking straight into his eyes.

"It's true," Miki answered simply. "I got a letter from 'The Ends of the World' too. This ring was enclosed, as well."

"I see. So you don't know who 'The Ends of the World' is, either?" Utena asked, a little discouraged.

"No... but I think Kiryuu-sempai might."

"President Kiryuu?"

"Yes. The rest of us only receive one-way letters, but it seems that Kiryuu-sempai is in communication with him. Just the other day, he apparently knew who the next person to duel would be..."

"Is that right, Anthy?"

"It seems that Kiryuu-sempai also came to the Dueling Arena during Utena-sama and Saionji-sempai's duel."

"Now that you mention it, he did say he was watching us."

"How did he know about your duel against Saionji-sempai?"

Utena thought hard. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chu-Chu eagerly trying to peel a banana.

I guess I'm gonna have to ask him... The memory of the kiss burned in Utena's head like a refrain.

But if that happens again...

"Just once, I heard Kiryuu-sempai talking on the phone about the Dueling Game. I don't think it was to Juri-sempai or Saionji-sempai. Perhaps it was..."

"The Ends of the World?"

"That's what I suspect."

Utena looked into Miki's beautiful, crystal-like eyes. They were clear and serene.

Miki-kun... I can definitely trust him... Utena decided.

Utena looked seriously at Miki, as if trying not to lose herself in his gaze.

"Miki-kun, I don't want to duel. If you agree with me, why don't we work together?"

Sometimes, eyes can speak more clearly than words. Especially when they're speaking from the heart. Miki received the message from Utena's heart, loud and clear.

"Like I said before, I may be a member of the Student Council, but I'm opposed to the duels."

"So..."

"Yes. I'd like for us to work together as well, Utena-san."

When she heard Miki's response, Utena immediately looked relieved.

"Oh, good."

The beautiful thing about Utena was the way she wore her heart on her sleeve. For his part, Miki tensed slightly, thinking that she was going to hug him again. Apparently not this time, though.

"It's really reassuring to have you on my side, Miki-kun. Hey, Anthy, you should thank him too. If we get rid of the Dueling Game, you won't have to be the Rose Bride anymore."

"Oh, but I don't particularly mind being the Rose Bride..."

"Why not? Even though you're a trophy in the duels?"

"I'm not a trophy. I'm engaged to the victor of the duels..."

"Ah, geez, stop it with the "engaged" thing! Stop stop, that word's not allowed, it's history!"

Shaking her head so violently it made her hair frazzled, Utena made a troubled face. She looked completely different than her relieved expression from a moment before.

"If you say so, Utena-sama." As usual, no unpleasantness could be read in Anthy's face. Up on her knees, Chu-Chu finally got his banana open and started stuffing his face with it.

"...Man, he's really crazy about it." Seeing that peaceful scene, Utena amazingly broke into a happy smile. Her face really did reflect her emotions at any given moment. If you looked away for even a moment, she could have moved on to another expression already.

Miki watched her out of the corner of his eye, though Utena didn't notice.

Utena-san's face is so changeable... I can't keep my eyes off her. Whether she's harsh, or serious, or troubled, she's amazing... But that unguarded smile that she gave me when she was relieved... that was the most magnificent. I want to see it again. If I stop the duels...

"What's wrong, Miki-kun?" Utena asked, finally noticing Miki staring at her. "Oh, I'm sorry. I cut you off while we were talking, didn't I?"

"No, it's fine. I was just..."

"Just?"

Just looking at your face in profile. Miki kept that to himself.

"Nevermind, it's nothing. Anyway, we should think about what to do next. How should we investigate Kiryuu-sempai? We should decide on a division of labor."

She wouldn't have put it in such fine words, but Utena could hardly complain. After all, she was starting to get very interested in the idea of investigating Kiryuu Touga.

Anthy remained silent, and appeared to pay no attention to the other two as she peeled a banana for Chu-Chu.

*** ***

In the south-west corner of the Ohtori Academy grounds, there were special cottages reserved for the Student Council's use. For the most part, the students of the school lived in dorms, but the members of the Council were allowed to live here by themselves. Caught up in his conversation with

Utena, it was already past 10:00 by the time Miki returned to his cottage.

The light by his front door was on. Within its orange light, Miki took hold of the doorknob and opened the door. It wasn't locked.

As he entered the entrance area, the light inside turned on before Miki even flipped the switch.

"Welcome back."

There to greet him was a young girl in pajamas. They were pale blue, and a little childish-looking. The swelling of her chest wasn't very visible yet. And surprisingly, her face was the spitting image of Miki's. If not for her slightly-different hairstyle, you could have sworn they were the same.

"Did you eat?" she asked, taking his bag. You could tell at a glance that she always did that - it was a perfectly natural movement.

"No, not yet."

When she heard his response, the girl broke into a smile almost like a flower blooming. Her smile, too, was just like Miki's.

"Okay. Let's eat together, then. I waited for you," she said, taking Miki's arm and leading him inside. Her footsteps were almost like dancing, and Miki, allured, smiled too.

*** **

"Chuu!"

Hearing Chu-Chu's voice, Utena opened her eyes. However, the room was still pitch-black. She couldn't even see where he was.

"Chu, Chuu!"

"Let me sleep, Chu-Chu. We've got school tomorrow." Utena pulled her blankets back over her head. But...

"Chuchuuchu!"

Chu-Chu didn't stop squeaking. It almost seemed like he was calling for Utena.

"Give me a break. Are you hungry or something?"

In the bed next to her, Anthy gave no sign of waking up. There was nothing for it but for Utena to pull herself out of bed.

"Chuu!"

Suddenly, a bit of light slipped into the pitch-black room.

Is that moonlight? Is Chu-Chu moving the curtains?

Feeling around the room with her hands, Utena walked to the window. Like she'd expected, Chu-Chu was there, looking down out the window.

"Is there something down there, Chu-Chu?"

Without hesitation, Utena pulled the curtains open. The pale moon shone down on her, a much gentler light than a fluorescent bulb.

The moon... it's shining pretty brightly.

Utena's eyes were drawn to the large, striking moon floating in the night sky. She understood now how some people could prefer it to the light of the sun.

"Tenjou Utena!"

Suddenly, Utena heard a voice from below. She turned her eyes downward.

A long-haired boy was looking up at her. His white clothes shone in the moonlight - it was a Student Council uniform.

"Kiryuu Touga!" The words slipped out of Utena without thinking.

Why is he here!?

Touga smiled up at her. It was the same tantalizing smile he'd shown when they first met. Utena pointedly looked away from him.

"Won't you come down, Tenjou?"

"Don't be stupid. You think I'm going to trust the invitation of a playboy who kisses someone the first time they meet?"

"Oh, that wasn't the first time we met. Though it seems you don't remember it."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're pretty light - I was surprised. Lifting you was like holding a bundle of feathers."

Lifting me...?

Touga smiled suggestively in the moonlight.

"And you said before that you saw the duel... are you saying...!?"

Touga nodded, still smiling.

"So you're the one who carried me out...?"

Was it really him? Those gentle arms, and that rose scent... so is he also the one who saved me, and kissed the tears from my cheeks...? Utena looked at Touga again with new eyes. Is he my prince!?

"Come down," Touga repeated.

This time, the words took hold of Utena like a spell.

Chapter 4

Kiryuu Touga

A dense forest spread out behind Ohtori Academy. Looming deep inside was a heavy stone gate. It was covered with tangled ivy, and looked abandoned by everyone. But when a person wearing a Rose Seal grasped the handle, the door opened easily. So easily that it almost seemed like it was moving by itself.

Beyond the gate there was fog, wild roses, and an enormous spiral staircase. The Dueling Arena lay at the very top of them.

Utena walked with Touga up the spiral stairs.

Here we are... There are lots of things I want to ask him, but...

Walking from the East Dorm to the Dueling Arena - that was the exact opposite of the route Touga had carried the unconscious Utena. When she thought of that, Utena felt strangely embarrassed.

I can't ask... somehow, my heart is pounding.... and the words won't come out.

She cast a brief glance to the side, at Touga. She couldn't even bring herself to face towards him.

For his part, Touga was ascending the staircase in silence. He just walked straight ahead, with none of his usual banter.

Thus, they ascended towards the Dueling Arena without speaking or looking at each other.

Why is he so quiet? I'd be fine with him chattering away a little like usual.

Moodily, Utena climbed the last stretch of stairs, and entered the Dueling Arena.

Woah...

Her eyes, accustomed to the darkness, were now dazzled by a shining light. The upside-down castle was shimmering overhead.

How pretty...

The luminescence and luster of the castle was changing from moment to moment. It looked almost like a chandelier, brilliant and beautiful.

Utena forgot the oppressive atmosphere of a moment before. She stared up at the beautiful sight with a look of childish wonder.

Happily, Utena ran to the center of the Dueling Arena and turned around in the middle of the light. The lights flowed around her as she spun.

This is great!

Utena continued spinning underneath the chandelier castle. She was like a dancing fairy.

After dancing for a while, Utena noticed Touga's eyes on her. He seemed strangely pleased at the sight of Utena's frolicking - almost like a young boy who just pulled off some prank.

"I thought you'd like it."

Utena flushed at Touga's words. She felt like she'd fallen into a trap somehow. As if Touga had remained silent for the sake of staging a performance.

Why do you look so happy...?

Her heart began to thump again. It was embarrassing for him to have seen her at her most unguarded.

But...

Heart still thumping, she took another look at Touga's face.

So he can look childish like this, too...

She'd never seen him with such a boyish expression before.

"This is what I wanted to show you. The Dueling Arena, at night."

Touga gazed at Utena intently. His eyes looked very earnest. So much so that she could almost believe that the rumors about him being a playboy weren't true.

What's with this stare...?

Utena glanced away, trying to escape his gaze. The beat of her heart grew so loud, it felt like it was coming from somewhere outside of her.

Even if you make those eyes at me, I won't be fooled, she thought silently to herself. Her pulse, however, wouldn't let up.

"Only those who possess a Rose Seal... that is to say, those chosen by "The Ends of the World"... can enter here. In other words, only a few people in the school can see that castle. Truly, an extravagant work of art."

As if responding to Touga's words, the castle twinkled again.

"And only one person will eventually reach it. Someone who continues to be engaged to the Rose Bride, winning duel after duel."

Touga's eyes, still fixed on Utena, seemed filled with a strong determination.

"Rather than being a knight who defends the bride, being a princess would suit you better. "

"Y... yeah? Well, unfortunately, I don't plan on being either a knight or a princess. What I want to be is a prince."

“Oh?” Touga looked Utena up and down. “Is that also why you wear a boy’s uniform?”

“Kind of.”

“Would you mind telling me more? Why do you want to become a prince?”

“You’ll laugh. The story doesn’t suit me at all.”

“I won’t,” he responded, simply. Short, concise, words. He showed no sign of saying more.

Utena stole a glance at him from the side. Touga was facing her straight on, waiting for her to speak.

Reluctantly, Utena began.

“When I was six, my mom and dad died. It was a big shock, and I ran away. I was out in the rain, cold and tired, and eventually everything started to become a blur. That’s when I fell in the river. But there was someone who saved me.”

With the scent of roses... I can remember it vividly, even now. Not to mention that I smelled it again just two days ago...

Utena looked at Touga. But his expression remained unchanged – he continued watching her, inviting her to continue the story.

“He seemed almost like a prince to me. And after he pulled me out, he gave me this ring and said, ‘If you...’”

“...If you don't lose your strength and nobility...”

.....!

Touga finished the phrase that Utena was going to say.

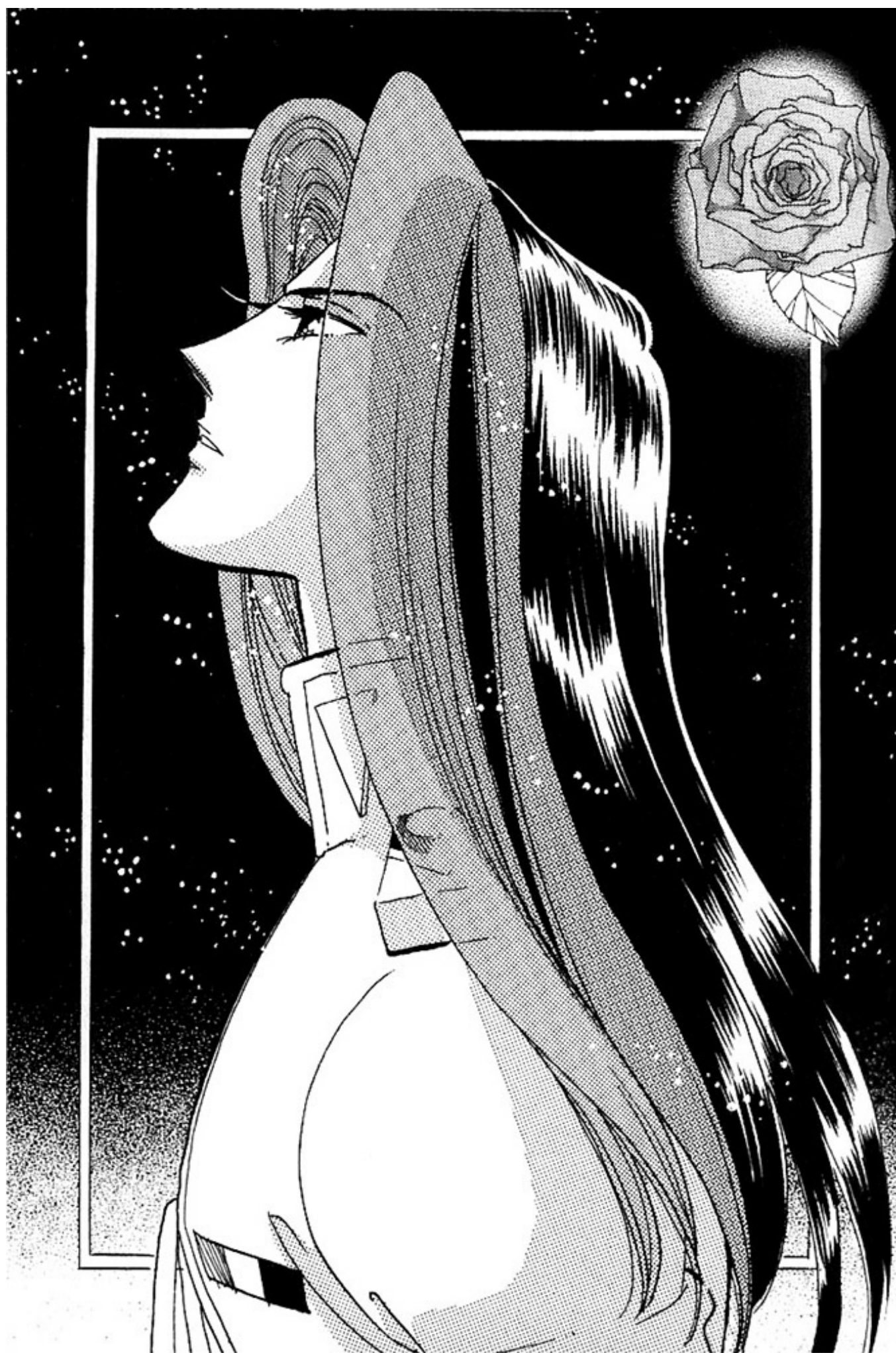
Why...? Only my prince should know that...

Giving no sign whether he’d noticed Utena’s reaction or not, Touga slowly walked toward the center of the Dueling Arena – to Utena’s side.

“If you don’t lose your strength and nobility, you’ll reach the castle.”

The light shining down on him, he stared up at the castle.

“And inside... is everything.”



Simply standing there, staring upwards, Touga looked somehow sublime. It was difficult to approach him.

It feels like he doesn't let anyone get too close to him... what is he seeking up there...? Is he my prince? I want to ask him... but...

Touga continued to stare up at the castle, unmoving.

What was he thinking about, as he gazed at it? It was impossible to tell. But it certainly wasn't about girls or school.

Utena felt like she was witnessing some holy ceremony, and couldn't bring herself to speak any further.

*** **

"Utenaaa!" Wakaba exclaimed, launching herself onto Utena's back. That was Wakaba's style of physical affection.

"Morning, Wakaba. You seem lively as ever." Utena replied over her shoulder, as she absently gave Wakaba a piggyback ride.

"Thanks!" That got a cute smile from Wakaba. "What about you? You seem kind of tired. Didn't get enough sleep?"

"Uh... yeah, basically," Utena replied evasively. It was true, thanks to being dragged out to the Dueling Arena by Touga last night, she hadn't gotten enough sleep. But her current mood had to do with more than that - she was dwelling on something Touga had said.

"If you don't lose your strength and nobility..." Those were words that only her prince should know. Which meant...

"By the way, I heard the news about your basketball game against Mickey. The sports prodigy, Utena-sama, was taken down by the boy genius, Mickey! That's what everyone's saying, anyway."

Oh, right. That game against Miki-kun was just yesterday. For some reason it feels like it was a lot longer ago...

"Man, I was so surprised when I heard about it from Tsukamoto! Why didn't you call your Wakaba over, too? I wish I could've seen it...!"

And last night was the Dueling Arena. It felt like we were there for a very long time... Even though we hardly talked at all.

"Hey, hey, you guys should totally have a rematch! I can't let my Utena-sama stay beaten like that! Well, of course Mickey is cute too, but I'll make super sure to cheer only for you, Utena!"

I never ended up asking him about the Dueling Game. Even though I'd decided to free Anthy from it... I'm sorry, Anthy. I just...

"See, I even wrote up a challenge letter for you! Just take this, walk up to Mickey, and WHAM! Slam it down right in front of him!"

Miki...

"That's right!"

Utena suddenly stood up straight, causing Wakaba to fall off her back.

"Ow!"

"Yeah - I should go see Miki-kun." *We promised to work together, didn't we? It's way to early to give up on things.*

Turning, Utena saw Anthy, looking in her direction with a blank expression.

If I free her from being the Rose Bride, Anthy can be... a little more...

"Wakaba, do you know what class Miki-kun is in?"

"Umm, First Year Class A...?" Wakaba responded from the ground, rubbing her butt.

"Thanks, Wakaba. I owe you one," Utena said, dashing off. She heard Wakaba calling out from behind her.

"H, hang on, where are you going? Don't you want to take your challenge letter? Hey!"

*** **

There were close to thirty music rooms at Ohtori Academy. That was enough to let the students practice privately, either individually or in small groups. There weren't quite as many music teachers as music rooms, but still far more than any ordinary school. And, deep in the academy, there was even a music room set aside specifically for the use of the Student Council.

The sounds of a gentle piano solo drifted softly from that room.

Is it Miki-kun playing...?

Utena paused in front of the door.

She'd gone to First Year Class A just like Wakaba had said, but Miki-kun wasn't there. Luckily, one of his teammates from yesterday's basketball game told her that he was in the music room.

What a lovely sound... come to think of it, Wakaba said his skill is on the national level.

Enraptured, Utena listened outside the door.

Anyone who can play the piano like this... Of course, a pianist like this must be a good, trustworthy person. Not that she needed more evidence to support her feelings.

Slowly, so as not to interrupt the piano solo, Utena opened the door. As she did, the music

swelled around her. It sounded much richer and more beautiful than it had from the outside. Inside, she saw Miki sitting at a grand piano.

Man, he seems really into it. It's like the whole piano was made out of candy or something. Or like how you'd treat your lover, maybe.

As she watched Miki's performance, Utena took a step forward. As soon as she did...

BLAM!

The door slammed shut behind her, much more loudly than she'd expected. Obviously, Miki noticed, and stopped playing.

"Utena-san. What brings you here?"

"Uh, hey." Embarrassed, Utena raised her hand in greeting. "You sounded great. What song were you playing?"

"The Sunlit Garden."

Utena had never heard that title. But she felt as if she'd heard the song before.

"Sorry, don't know it. I don't know much about music and stuff like that. Can't play anything, either..." she laughed awkwardly.

"It's not as difficult as all that. You just need to get the hang of it."

Miki offered her the space on the bench to his left. It was long enough for two people to sit side by side.

At Miki's urging, Utena thumped down on the seat. The cold black-and-white piano looming in front of them made her feel slightly uncomfortable.

Miki, on the other hand, was more conscious of how close Utena was sitting to him.

Is the piano bench really this small...? I've never noticed before. It's always seemed bigger... Or is it just because it's Utena-san that it feels like this?

Ping!

Utena tapped a key the piano. The sounds jolted Miki out of his reverie.

"Utena-san, curl your fingers like this."

"Like this?"

"Right. Like you were holding an egg or something in your hand. Now, try playing. I'll do it slowly, then you repeat after me."

"Uh, okay."

Slowly, Miki played a short bar. Utena watched, then tried to move her fingers the same way.

Miki played. Utena imitated him. It still couldn't quite be called a song, but the notes started to build together.

"Hey, Miki-kun." Utena asked, while following Miki's movements. She was still looking at the piano. "You were saying that the President is in contact with 'The Ends of the World,' right?"

"Yes."

"Why's he the only one? Because he's the President?"

Or because he's the Prince...?

"I have no idea. I've just heard him on the phone, is all. I could be mistaken."

"By the way, where did you hear him talking on the phone?"

"Um... at his house."

"The White House?"

"Yeah."

By school custom, the Student Council President lived in his own special house, which everyone called the 'White House.' It was just one of their many privileges.

"What, did you sneak in?"

"Of course not. I just... had Student Council business." Miki didn't meet Utena's eyes, as if he was guilty about something.

"Hmm." Utena didn't pry any further. She wasn't particularly interested in why Miki had been at the White House - just in who Touga had been talking to about the Dueling Game.

"If you don't lose your strength and nobility." How did he know those words? Could he really be my prince...?

Forgetting that she'd come to talk to Miki about the Rose Bride situation, Utena became lost in her own thoughts. Eventually she even forgot to follow Miki's lead on the piano, instead just absentmindedly repeating the section she'd learned up until now.

Noticing this, Miki began to play a lower part of the song than Utena's. He built on her mistake, and suddenly, something like a song began to take shape.

"Huh? I..." Utena suddenly noticed that she was playing the piano. Surprised, she glanced at Miki. He met her eyes with a gentle nod, urging her continue.

"Hey, it's sounding pretty good now." Utena looked happy. Even though she was just playing the same short bit over and over again, she listened intently and concentrated on it so that Miki would be able to cover her well.

"Just like that, Utena-san."

“I didn’t know piano could be so fun,” Utena said, an open smile on her face. Before she knew it, all thoughts of the Dueling Game and of Touga had fled from her mind.

Miki watched her from her side.

I really...

His gaze was hot.

I really... like her.

But Utena, caught up in the piano, didn’t notice him.

I like Utena-san. Utena-san...

“Utena-san.” The words slipped from his mouth.

“Uh?”

“Utena-san... I...” Miki continued. He couldn’t stop himself. “I really...”

“Move it!”

As he heard those words, Utena suddenly disappeared from Miki’s sight. The performance was cut short, and the music room, which had previously been filled with music, suddenly fell still.

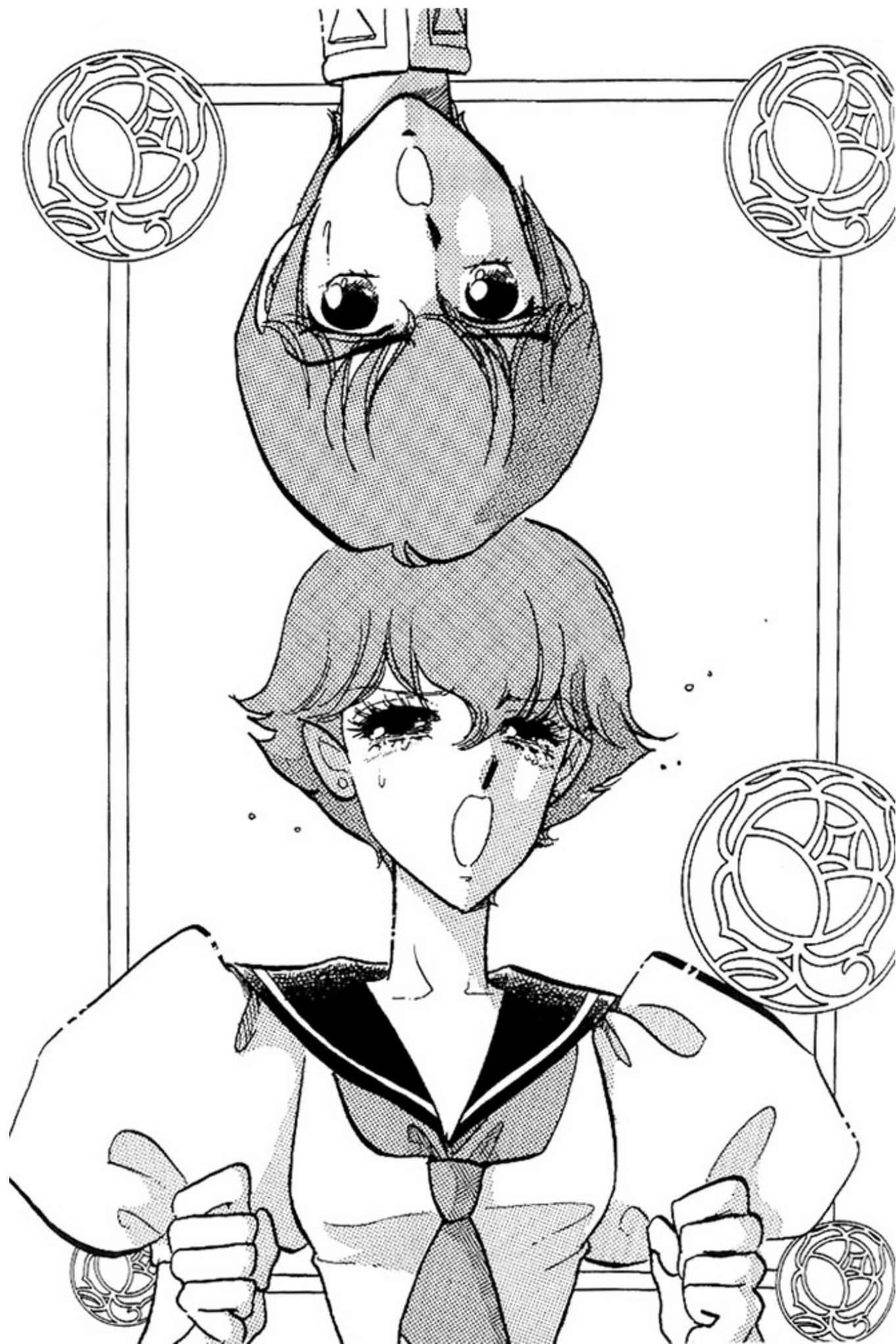
The girl who had shoved Utena off of her seat was the spitting image of Miki. Just like him, she had beautiful, striking eyes. Her hair was short, and the ends of it curled more than Miki’s, creating a more feminine silhouette. She wasn’t wearing a Student Council outfit, but simply a standard sailor uniform. There wasn’t a Rose Seal on her finger, either.

“Ouch!” Utena stood from where she’d been knocked off the bench, rubbing her hip. She still didn’t quite grasp what had happened.

“Move. The seat next to Miki’s is mine,” the girl returned, challengingly.

“Stop it, Kozue!” Miki cut in. “Utena-san wasn’t sitting next to me. I was sitting next to her.”

The tone of Miki’s voice was uncharacteristically strong. Kozue’s expression suddenly changed.



“What, you’re choosing a man-girl like this over your own sister?”

“Utena-san’s not a ‘man-girl.’”

Miki and Kozue glared at each other. Utena, stuck in the middle of this, eyed them both uncomfortably.

“Hey, you.” Suddenly, Kozue turned to Utena. “Miki and I have been together since we were born. We’re one person. So don’t think you can seduce him. Miki is mine.”

*** **

“Oh yeah, that’s his twin sister,” Wakaba explained over lunch, while cutting her hamburger steak into bite-sized pieces.

“Twin sister? Yeah, I guess she did look just like him.”

“Kozue’s famous for sticking to Mickey like glue. Thanks to her, even though Mickey’s as popular as you, he doesn’t have a girlfriend. Though I guess she’s decided to turn a blind eye to his fan club of older girls.”

“Huh... being siblings sounds tough.”

Not having any brothers herself, Utena still couldn’t quite grasp what it was like. There had been times when she had really wanted one, but of course with her parents gone, that had been impossible.

“It’s very nice to have an older brother, though,” Anthy suddenly spoke up.

Utena and Wakaba both turned toward her in surprise. Anthy rarely spoke on her own. Of course, if you asked her a question she’d respond, so it wasn’t as if she was against speaking to people at all.

“Anthy... do you have an older brother?”

“Yes.” Anthy smiled. Unlike her usual smiles, she appeared genuinely happy. “We’re rarely able to meet, however.”

Her smile seemed to well up from the bottom of her heart. It made Utena happy to know that Anthy could smile like that.

*** **

Elsewhere, Miki and Kozue were also having lunch. But unlike Utena’s group, they weren’t eating in the cafeteria. Their chosen venue was a blue bench in the middle of a garden.

They sat on either side of it, a plate of sliced sandwiches between them. Usually, they would talk endlessly about classes or friends, but today they ate their sandwiches in silence, not meeting each other’s eyes.

At last, Kozue took a breath and spoke, still not looking at Miki.

“Hey, Miki. Are you still angry about earlier?”

That is to say, when Kozue had pushed Utena off the bench.

“I’m not angry.”

“Liar. I know you. You always get quiet when you’re angry.”

Right on the mark. Miki looked a little bitter.

“Fine. I’m angry.”

It was unusual for Miki to sound this sulky. But it made Kozue happy to see him like this. Outside, her brother might be praised as a cute young genius honor student, but right now he was acting like a stubborn child. This was his vulnerable side, which only family... only she... could see. Kozue didn’t articulate it so clearly, but deep down, that’s how she felt.

“So what do you like about that man-girl?”

“Utena-san isn’t a ‘man-girl.’”

“That girl, then.”

...that girl!

At Kozue’s words, memories of Utena’s femininity sprang unbidden into Miki’s mind. Her soft body. The wind fluttering through her long hair. Her sweet fragrance...

“Don’t talk about her that way.”

“*That way?* You’re the one who’s thinking about her *that way*. Disgusting.”

Miki blushed. It was true, he was the one who had responded so basely to the phrase “girl.”

But Kozue didn’t try to provoke him further. He was already feeling bad. Pushing Utena off the bench had been an act of passion, but fundamentally, she didn’t want to hurt Miki. It was just that she felt her private sanctuary, the Student Council music room, had been defiled, and had taken action without thinking.

Up until now, only Miki and Kozue had been using that room. Neither Touga, Juri, nor Saionji ever came to play music. It was possible they knew how, but they weren’t in the habit of coming to the music room to do so. So the two of them had it to themselves. They would sit together and play 'The Sunlit Garden.' For Kozue, that was the most important expression of their relationship, like a ritual. That’s why she had gotten so upset. She wasn’t normally such a mean girl.

The two stopped talking again. A bird chirped loudly somewhere nearby. Occasionally the sound of the wind through the trees broke the silence.

“This egg is pretty good,” Kozue commented, the sound like a drop of water falling into a still lake.

“Yeah.” Miki took some of the fried egg from the lunchbox Kozue had prepared. They didn’t bother to divide the food. Ever since they were young, they’d shared everything, even clothes. It was natural to them.

“Let’s have the croquette.” Miki used his fork to cut the last croquette in half.

They finished their meal in that manner, then poured some tea. Kozue, without needing to ask Miki, took two cups and added a generous amount of milk and sugar.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

They drank the sweet tea. This, too, was a long-standing tradition of theirs.

Then they continued to stare ahead in silence. The bird chirped loudly again.

At last, Kozue opened her mouth.

“I’m sorry, Miki,” she said quietly. After a moment, Miki responded. “It’s okay.”

At last, all traces of anger were gone from his voice.

*** **

Thunk.

The white ball slammed into the carefully-arranged other nine, scattering them across the green cloth. The orange ball – number 5 – fell into a pocket.

“Hmm... quite a dangerous position,” Touga said, his voice droll as he twirled the pool cue in his hand. Touga was the sort of guy who could make actions like that look good.

"Don't get cocky, Touga," Juri said grumpily, from across the table. She wasn't usually one for frivolity.

"Indeed, the game's only just begun."

Touga's cue once again met the ball straight-on. His target was across the table to the left - the one-ball.

"Tenjou Utena has been investigating you. She's checked the student registry, Student Council minutes, club activity records... she's even looked into where you're from."

Thunk.

The white ball struck the one ball, which then knocked the seven ball into a pocket. The white ball continued on to hit the nine ball, too, but that one stopped just short of a pocket.

"As expected from Arisugawa Juri, the shadow mastermind of the school. It seems like nothing happens on campus without your knowledge."

"That's not true at all. For instance, I don't know who's going to duel next." She shot a piercing look at Touga. "Isn't it about time you told me who it is? It's not you, or Saionji. Could it be that I'm going to get a chance?"

"Perish the thought! I'd hate to see you engaged to the Rose Bride. It would make it too difficult for me to take her myself later."

Thunk. The one ball and four ball were pocketed.

"Touga, you're full of bullshit. I doubt you've said a sincere word in your whole life."

"My, such harsh words." Far from sounding hurt, Touga seemed like he was enjoying himself. He walked up beside Juri and readied his cue.

"So do you plan to ignore Tenjou Utena?"

Thunk. The two ball disappeared into a pocket.

"Did you think I hadn't heard about your little nighttime visit to the Dueling Arena?"

"How unlike you, Juri. What do you care what happens to a little girl yearning after her prince? She doesn't have anything to do with you, does she?"

"Hmph. She's just one of my cute underclassmen."

"I see."

Thunk. Numbers 3 and 6 dropped into pockets. Only 8 and 9 left to go.

"But, you know, for him this is a trial to reach adulthood."

"And who put that idea into his head, I wonder?"

Thunk. The 8 and 9 balls were swallowed up into the pockets. The white ball bounced off the cushioned sides a few times, then slowly began rolling towards a pocket, itself. The two watched it raptly. Finally, with a loud rattle, it fell.

"Divine retribution."

Touga's only response to Juri's barb was a small smile.

*** **

"Does well at school, is a sports prodigy. If you just look at his grades, he seems pretty average. No car accidents or criminal record. Not that I think Touga-sempai would let himself be caught if he did do anything wrong." Miki murmured to nobody in particular as he looked over the materials they'd assembled over the past few days.

He and Utena had gathered as much information about Kiryuu Touga as they could. They'd hoped they'd be able to discover how Touga was connected to "The Ends of the World."

Utena, sitting back to back with Miki, was going over materials, too. Right now she was looking at Touga's address from eight years ago. If he'd lived close to her, then maybe...

"Amsterdam!?"

Utena exclaimed, involuntarily. Apparently, on that day eight years ago, Touga had been living in the Netherlands.

"Is something the matter, Utena-sama?"

"What about Amsterdam?"

Miki, as well as Anthy, who was sitting to the side playing with Chu-Chu, turned to her in surprise.

"No, uh... apparently the president used to live there."

"Yes, it's Houou City's sister city. I heard that connection is one reason Kiryuu-sempai came to Ohtori Academy. What about it?"

"Nothing, it's just that my aunt is gonna visit there, so..."

Miki looked at her curiously, but other than that gave no response, and returned to his work. Anthy, likewise, said nothing.

I thought that if that guy was my prince, he'd had to have been living somewhere nearby...

Utena was feeling slightly discouraged, although she hadn't quite realized that fact herself.

It must be someone else after all. If he was in Amsterdam, there's no way he could have saved me when I fell in that river.

But, wait a minute... isn't it possible that he and his family were on a visit back to Japan then?

Utena cast her eye back over the list of Touga's former addresses. But of course it only listed where he'd lived, and didn't say anything about shorter trips.

"No good, it seems. There's nothing that seems connected to 'The Ends of the World' in any of this." Miki tossed the materials he'd been reading back onto the pile, with a dry thud.

"Utena-sama, perhaps you should stop investigating 'The Ends of the World,' after all."

It was very unusual for Anthy to offer an opinion. Even though she was intimately involved in this situation, she only spoke about it in passive terms. But that attitude only made Utena more eager to change things.

Anthy must be scared of this weird "The Ends of the World" entity. But I'll find out who or what they are, and expose the sneaky bastard. Even if it turns out it's Kiryuu Touga.

"We're about out of options... I think we'll have to go for it," Utena said, licking her lips

impishly.

“Try what, Utena-san?”

“Check out the White House. Maybe we’ll find out something there.”

*** **

Unlike other schools, Ohtori Academy’s Student Council held special powers. They wore a different uniform than the other students, were given priority in using the school facilities, had the right to dismiss students from other posts within the school, and so on.

In particular, the Student Council President had massive authority, greater even than a teacher’s. So of course, he also got special housing – the White House, a special residence that only he lived in. Just one of the special rights afforded to the President.

Miki and Utena stopped before the White House’s front door. Miki had called ahead, and apparently Touga was currently out in the town.

“He should be gone. But it’ll be locked.”

The large double doors were indeed locked. They didn’t even budge when Utena tried tugging them.

“Well, if we can’t use the door, how ‘bout the windows?”

She saw a balcony on the second floor. Utena was pretty sure she could jump to it from a nearby tree.

“Alright, I’m gonna give it a shot.”

After checking a couple of trees to find one she was sure could support her weight, Utena climbed on to the lowest branch and began to climb. She circled upwards, stepping from branch to branch. Just a few more steps and she would be on about the same level as the balcony.

She tightened her grip, preparing to climb further, when,

"Utena-san, what are you doing?"

Miki had easily opened the door.

"How'd you do that?" Utena asked, still hanging miserably from a branch.

"I used a spare key."

"Huh, good job, Miki-kun. You really came prepared, huh?"

"No, I just happened to have it."

He just happened to have a spare key...?

"Anyway, let's hurry, Utena-san. We don't want to be here when Touga-sempai gets back."

At Miki's urging, and Utena soon got herself back down the tree, and they slipped through the door. The matter of the duplicate key soon slipped from Utena's mind.

Following Miki's lead, they soon reached Touga's room. The walls of the thirty-square-meter room were almost completely hidden behind tall bookcases. They held old-fashioned thick, leather-bound books and a globe, but placed around the room, there were also modern devices like a computer and a fax machine. They were spread around carefully so as not to disturb the ambiance the room, in a way that surely reflected Touga's sensibilities.

They say you can learn a lot about a person by looking at their room...

Even a carefully arranged room always shows signs of residency. But here, there was no trace of Touga as a person. Normally, there might be a favorite genre of book, a poster, equipment for one's hobbies... some indication of how the person occupies themselves. But Utena didn't see anything of the sort.

"This is the room where Touga-sempai was talking about the Dueling Game."

Miki had already turned on the computer, apparently intending to search its database.

"On this phone here?"

Utena picked up an antique-looking white phone with gold trimming, which had been sitting on a small desk.

"Probably."

"Probably?"

"I was in the next room over at the time."

"The next room...?"

Taking a second look, Utena saw that there was indeed a door on the right-hand wall.

What's in there?

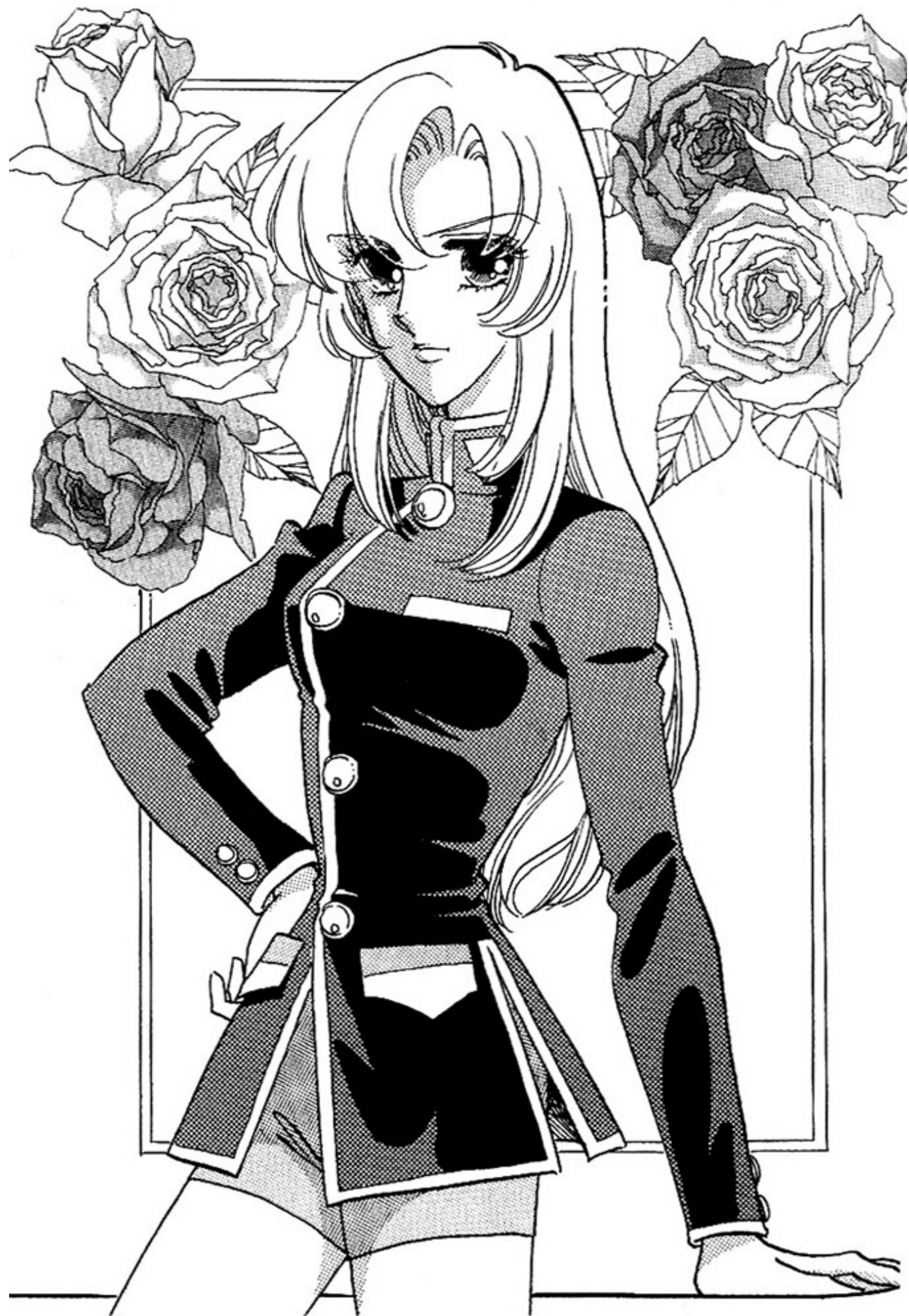
"In any case, Utena-san, could you please search the bookcases and desks? If there are any clues, they'll probably be in this room."

"Sure," Utena agreed, though she had no idea where to start looking.

If he's my Prince, he should have envelopes stamped with the Rose Seal. Now, where would he write letters...?

In addition to the computer desk, there was another large desk made of mahogany.

Alright, let's start here.



Utena immediately pulled open the desk and started rummaging around inside. She even checked the trash can, but saw no sign of an envelope. Miki was still working at the computer.

I guess he's not my prince after all. I mean, there's also that whole thing about him being in Amsterdam at the time...

Turning the antique globe on the desk, Utena checked the distance between Japan and Amsterdam.

Pretty far...

If she turned the globe to face Amsterdam, she couldn't even see Japan. It seemed pretty unlikely that he would have travelled that far just by chance.

Yeah, it can't be him.

Utena absently spun the globe around. It made three complete rotations... then split apart, right across the Prime Meridian!

"Miki-kun, over here!"

Hearing Utena, Miki raced over from the computer desk.

"There's another phone... inside!?"

A rose-red receiver was hidden inside the globe. But it didn't appear to have a dial or anything. Apparently it was a direct line.

"I wonder who it calls?"

"Presumably 'The Ends of the World.'"

"The Ends of the World"...

Utena took a quiet breath.

I could talk to them right now. The Dueling Game, the Rose Bride, and my Prince... the answers to all those mysteries are through this phone.

"Utena-san."

"I know."

With grim determination, Utena picked up the receiver.

I wonder who's on the other line... though I wouldn't be surprised if it was just Kiryuu Touga.

She decisively pulled the phone to her ear. But she didn't hear the dialing noise that normally came when making a phone call.

One second passed. Then two.

Still no sound.

Is it not enough to just pick up the receiver?

Utena searched inside the globe for a button. But other than the cord that was attached to the receiver, she didn't see anything.

Gachank.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of the phone being picked up on the other end. There was a moment of silence. Then...

"Yes?" came a woman's voice. Then, nothing.

I feel like I've heard that voice before... soft, but also sort of cold... kind of monotone and expressionless... Like...

Anthy!?

"Anthy, is that you!?" Utena exclaimed.

The other end of the line fell silent.

"Anthy, it's you, isn't it? C'mon, say something," Utena desperately called out. But there was no answer. Then again, the line didn't seem to have gone dead, either.

"Anthy. Is "The Ends of the World" there? Are *you* "The Ends of the World"? Is my prince..."

Beeeeep - she heard the irritating noise that showed the phone had been hung up.

"Himemiya-san was there? So it calls the East Dorm?"

"No, we don't even have a phone at the East Dorm." Either because it was such an old building, or because nobody had lived there for so long.

Maybe it wasn't Anthy? But...

"Sorry, Miki-kun!" Utena put down the receiver and dashed from the room.

Anthy, there's no way you're actually "The Ends of the World," right? You couldn't have made Saionji and me duel... There's no way that could be true...

*** **

Utena ran like the wind from the White House to the East Dorm. She had already forgotten all about Miki. Her head was filled with Anthy, and "The Ends of the World."

Barreling through the front door, she raced up the stairs. She went down the hall, and to the innermost room - number 21, where she and Anthy lived. She threw open the door.

"Anthy!" she cried out.

"Yes?" Anthony replied.

She was staring at Utena in puzzlement. At her knees, Chu-Chu was rolling around, tangled up in a ball of yarn. Apparently she was playing with him.

"Anthony...?"

"What's the matter, Utena-sama?" Anthony answered, apparently the same as always. She certainly didn't feel like a shadowy mastermind.

"Anthony, were you on the phone earlier?"

"The... phone?"

"Yeah, the phone. I made a call."

Anthony tilted her head slightly. "Utena-sama, there's no phone in the East Dorm."

"Yeah, but you didn't leave the room to take a call or anything?"

"No." Judging from her expression, she didn't seem to be lying.

So it wasn't Anthony...?

The energy that had propelled Utena back here left her, all in a rush.

Now that I think about it, if Anthony was "The Ends of the World," why on earth would she make herself the Rose Bride? And after all, I only heard the woman on the phone say one word...

"Chuu." Chu-Chu rolled around with his string at Utena's feet. He looked peaceful, and hadn't been at all disturbed by Utena's entrance.

Man, what am I doing, suspecting Anthony? She's just the poor girl who's being forced to be the Rose Bride. And I promised to be her friend... I can't believe myself.

"Did something happen, Utena-sama?"

"No, it's nothing. Sorry."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"It doesn't involve you... well, I mean, it does involve you, but... anyway. Sorry. Don't worry about it."

"My, you're acting strange, Utena-sama."

Anthony met Chu-Chu's eyes, and smiled. That smile was enough to clear up Utena's doubts.

*** **

When Miki got back, the words that met him weren't 'Welcome home.'

"You're late." Kozue sounded put off.

Special cottages were one of the rights of the Student Council. Miki shared this one with Kozue.

"Yeah, I was looking something up at the library," Miki answered, not meeting Kozue's eyes.

Kozue knew Miki was lying. She'd been worried about him, so she'd went to check both the library and the fencing hall.

He's lying to me. We've never had anything to hide from each other before...

Not thinking, Kozue stared at Miki. When he noticed her suspicious look, she quickly spoke again.

"It seems like you're coming home late every day recently. Dinner?"

"I already ate."

"I see." Kozue dropped her gaze.

"I'm going to bed. We have morning practice in the Fencing Club tomorrow."

Miki passed by Kozue and went up the half-spiral staircase. Their bedroom was on the second floor.

Miki... you jerk.

Kozue watched him go, then slowly went into the kitchen. She started at the table, where the cold dinner she'd prepared for the two of them was still sitting. Then she dumped it all into the trash.

...jerk.

Chapter 5

Duelist

The sounds of sharp steps and metal clanging against metal resounded around the gym. The Fencing Club was having an after-school practice.

One member stood out from the rest. She was wearing a striking white mask, and had already beaten seven other members.

“Next!” she called out.

Her seventh opponent moved aside, and a new one stepped forward from among the players lined up by the side of the wall. The white-masked player didn’t relax her stance.

“Excuse me,” her opponent bowed, before bringing up his saber. But...

“Touche!”

In an instant, the white-masked player closed the distance, and scored a hit on the left side of her opponent’s chest.

“Next!”

Her opponent left, and a new challenger stepped forward. This process repeated itself another ten-odd times, until finally there were no players left waiting along the wall.

“Next!”

“Captain, it’s over.”

Hearing that, the white-masked player finally let down her guard.

“Amazing as always, Captain. This time only took you eight minutes.”

The younger player, who was holding a towel, came up to her. Handing the captain a towel after she'd beaten twenty opponents was quite an honor. The boy's face was flush.

The captain took off her mask. As she did, long ringlets of hair spilled out - it was Arisugawa Juri.

"I don't see Kaoru Miki here today," she commented, taking the towel and wiping the light sweat from her face. In the whole club, the only one who could even begin to stand up to her any more was Miki. Without him, even taking on twenty opponents in a row wasn't much of a challenge.

"We received notice that he's absent."

"Absent?"

"Yes. According to the members in his class, it doesn't seem like he's sick... Should I bring you the report of absence? It should have a line for 'reason.'"

"No, that's fine," said Juri, her expression cloudy.

Absent...? So has he been investigating Touga all day, since after morning practice? Then perhaps he's looking into something quite unusual...

The entire gym had suddenly fallen silent. The club members had all stopped practicing and were staring at Juri. She didn't seem like her usual firm and frank self.

Although deep in thought, Juri noticed the eyes of the fencing club members on her.

"What? Keep practicing!" She whipped her saber once through the air with a sharp *swish*, a signal to resume practice.

Passing through the training club members, Juri walked to the window. From there, you could see Touga's residence - the White House.

It's too soon for you to go up against Touga. Your power is still...

As if reflecting Juri's uneasy mood, black clouds were gathering in the sky above Ohtori Academy.

*** **

"A fitting sky for the climax of this little game."

Touga raised his glass to the wide, darkening sky above. A pale purple liquid splashed inside it.

He was in his house - the same room that Utena and Miki had broken into the day before. The phone had been properly put back in its globe, and the rifled bookcases straightened. But the right-hand door that had been locked before was now wide open. Inside was a single king-sized bed. No trace of other desks or furniture could be seen.

He's a little... late.

Touga's gaze wandered around the room, eventually stopping over the bed. Just then, the door opened.

"Hey. You're late," he said, not looking towards the door. He sounded completely certain of who had arrived. On the table beside him, another glass just like the one Touga was raising was set out for the visitor.

"We need to talk." The visitor's voice was firm. He did not seem inclined to join Touga in a drink.

"I've been waiting for you, Miki-kun," Touga responded, still not looking at the boy standing stiffly by the door.

Miki's blue eyes seemed cloudy, just like the troubled sky.

Utena strolled absently through the school. For once, her constant companion, Anthy, wasn't by her side.

Since the phone call incident yesterday, Utena had felt uncomfortable around Anthy. Anthy herself had hardly seemed to notice, but Utena was angry at herself for having suspected her, even briefly.

Speaking of things she was upset at herself over, Touga was another. If she'd just asked him directly, she could have easily cleared up the question of whether he was her prince, but somehow she hadn't been able to bring herself to.

Man, I really haven't been myself lately. Doubting my friends, not saying what's on my mind...

It had been half a year since Utena had transferred to the academy to find her prince. And until just recently, she hadn't found any clues at all.

But now, she was sure she was getting close. Of course, it might or might not be Touga. But she had a hunch that the Dueling Game and Himemiya Anthy would lead her to him. She was quite certain of it. Even if he wasn't nearby in person, she had the strange feeling that she was working towards him. Call it a sixth sense.

Maybe that feeling that she was getting close to her prince was why she'd been so off recently. And perhaps that was also the thing that was actually getting under her skin.

That's what was going through Utena's head when the sound of distant piano music slipped into her consciousness.

Hey, that song... She remembered it. That's the one I was playing with Miki... Yeah, "The Sunlit Garden."

Perking up her ears, Utena determined that the sound was coming from the west side of the school – from the Student Council music room.

Come to think of it, she hadn't seen Miki since they'd parted in Touga's room – or more accurately, since Utena had dashed out of it.

As if beckoned by the music, Utena headed towards the music room.

The room had no lights, and no windows. Inside, there was nothing but a large bed – that's just how Kiryuu Touga's bedroom was.

The only noises were small, sighing breaths.

“Sempai? Are you serious about Utena-san?” someone asked with a sigh. A boy soprano’s voice. Miki’s. “If you just trying to play with her like you do with me, then...”

“Then, what? You’re saying you wouldn’t forgive me?”

“Ah!”

Miki’s breathing became rougher. It seemed that he wasn’t able to talk any more.

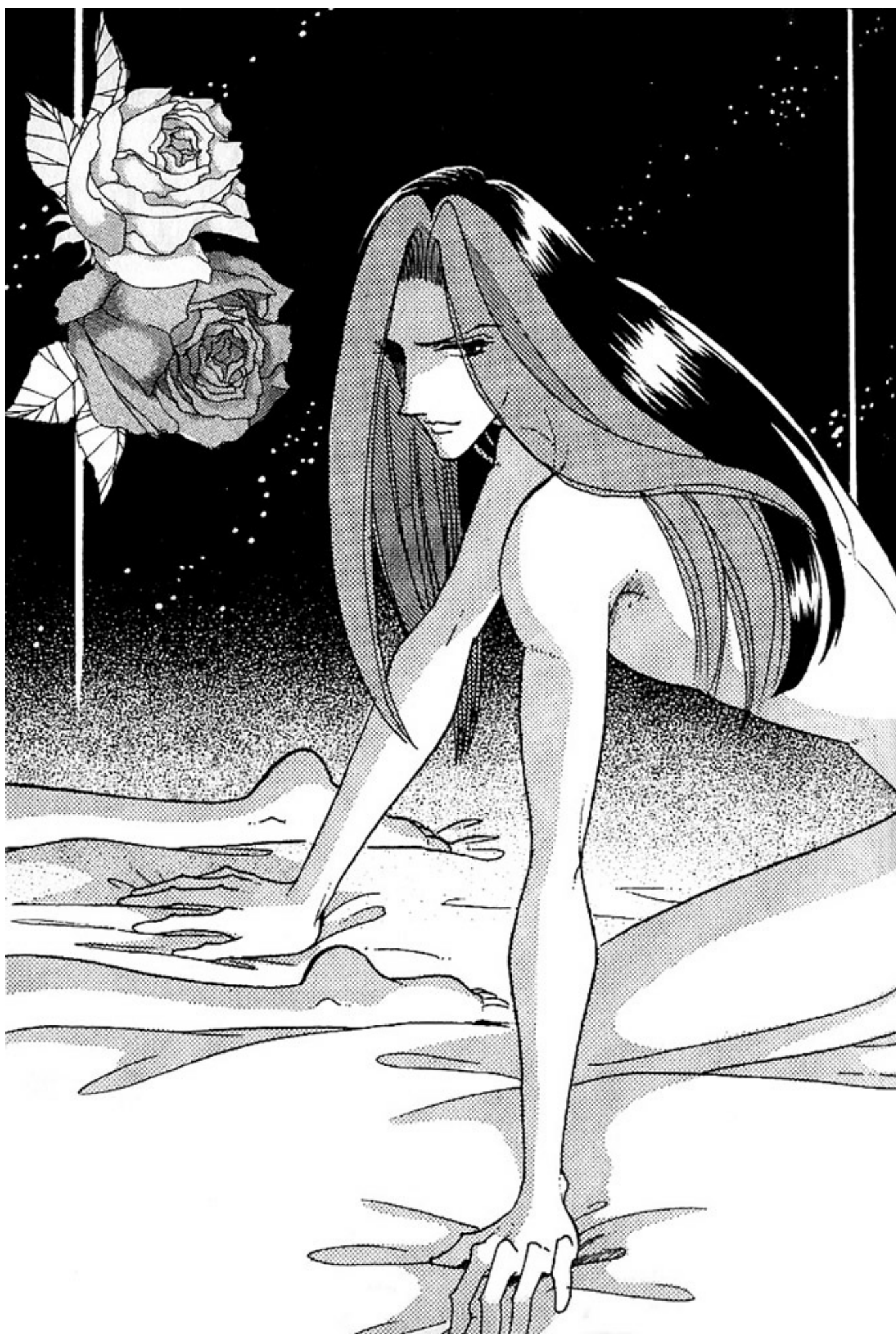
Sweat.

Naked flesh.

Sheets.

Hand in hand.

Darkness.



Darkness. Sheets. Hands and feet.

Pain.

Hands and feet.

Sighs.

The two slowly shifted their positions.

“Mickey, have you heard this before? When they're just born, babies have no distinction between themselves and others.”

Miki didn't answer. He just kept letting out long breaths.

“As they start to explore things around them with their hands and feet, they gradually come to understand that there are things other than themselves. But to begin with, they think that they and their mothers are the same thing.”

“What... are you trying to say?” Miki's voice wasn't strong. He was still breathing heavily.

“In other words, the process of growth, of becoming an adult, is understanding the difference between yourself and others – breaking yourself free from the world, you might say. Starting to be interested in the opposite sex, starting to hate your parents... it's all to separate yourself from the world of your family. That's the most important step to becoming an adult.”

“I don't understand why you're telling me this.”

“You just don't *want* to understand. You're bright enough to figure it out.”

In the darkness, Touga's lips curled upward.

*** **

Utena opened the door slowly, not wanting to disturb the piano performance. As she did, the sound enveloped her. But the timbre of the music seemed somehow lonelier than last time.

Huh?

The one at the grand piano wasn't Miki. Their face was similar, but...

“Kozue-chan...?”

Kozue finally noticed her visitor. But seeing that it was Utena and not Miki, her expression darkened.

“Oh. Looking for Miki, I suppose? Too bad.” Her voice had suddenly become cold. Normally she was a brighter, more carefree girl, but when it came to Miki she became very emotional.

“Wow. So both of you can play the piano? Triangles and cymbals are about my limit, so I'm totally impressed,” Utena put out, attempting to lighten the atmosphere. But Kozue's curt attitude remained

unchanged.

“Miki's the one who's good at it. I can only play this song.”

“...The Sunlit Garden?”

“Yeah. Miki wrote it when he was six.”

“Six!? Woah, Miki-kun really is a genius.”

Utena was clearly impressed. But for some reason, that struck a strange nerve with Kozue. It was alright for *her* to praise Miki, but she didn't like Utena doing it.

“Tenjou Utena. Do you like Miki?” she asked suddenly, cutting to the point like a katana.

“Huh? Miki-kun and I aren't like that...”

“Hmph. I'm not convinced. You may dress like that, but you're still a girl. There must be someone you're in love with.”

Someone I'm in love with...?

With those words to herself, the image of a certain long-haired playboy sprang to Utena's mind.

Kiryuu Touga!? Why did I think of him!?

“Who do you love, Tenjou Utena?” Kozue asked again. Her eyes, just like Miki's, stared Utena down. Utena found herself unable to tear herself away from them.

“I'm in love with...”

“Yes...?”

“...my Prince,” Utena said. It had suddenly come to her.

“Prince?” Kozue still looked hostile. She suspected she was being put on.

“A prince saved me eight years ago. I want to meet him. That's why I came to this school.”

“Seriously...?” Kozue asked dubiously. But Utena didn't look like she was lying.

“Huh. How stupid.” Kozue turned away from Utena. The unexpectedly childish response had made her lose control of herself for a moment.

Is she serious? Talking about a prince as a second-year middle school student? How stupid. There's no way someone like that exists...

She looked out the window, many thoughts flitting through her mind.

What could Miki possibly see in her? Or is there really nothing between them after all? Yeah. It'd be weird if Miki liked someone I didn't. Miki and I are like one person. There's no way he'd be serious about this man-girl.

Kozue turned back to face Utena. Her expression had softened a bit.

“By the way, what did you want with Miki?”

“Oh, I just wanted to apologize to him about yesterday.”

Yesterday!?

Kozue looked hostile once again at Utena's guileless words.

Miki was with her yesterday? And he lied to me to hide it...? Why would he do that? What the heck did those two do yesterday...?

“T, that's right... you two were together yesterday.” Even Kozue herself could hear the quivering in her voice. “What did you want to apologize to him about? I'll tell him for you.”

“Uh, no, it's...” Utena replied, hesitating. She couldn't exactly say they'd broken into the White House. But she wasn't the sort who was good at thinking up convenient lies.

Staring at the silent Utena, Kozue clenched her hands into fists. Her nails dug harshly into her palms.

Miki and this girl... they've both been keeping me in the cold.

We've always been together... Always just the two of us...

Miki's leaving me. He's going off by himself.

Miki, you idiot!

Daaaaaaaaaaaaan!

Kozue slammed her hand down on the keys in front of her. The despairing sound echoed across the music room.

“Get out, get out! This room is for Miki and me!”

Daaan

Daaan

Daaandaaan

Daaan

Daaan

Daaan

Daaan

Daaan

DaaanDaaan

Daaan

Daaan

Daaan

Daaandaaan

Daaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaan

Daaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaan

Daaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaan

Daaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaandaaan

Kozue madly pounded the keys. She wasn't looking at Utena anymore. She kept playing, her head shaking violently.

“Kozue-chan...”

“Get out, get out, get out, get out!” Kozue sobbed, her hair shaken loose, not waiting to hear what Utena had to say.

*** **

The dark clouds that had been gathering in the sky above Ohtori Academy now covered it completely. With no light reaching it, the campus was robbed of color, and it seemed as if a chill air rose up from the ground.

“What bad weather.”

Behind the rose garden, Saionji stopped practising with his shinai to look up in the sky. It looked to him like the dark clouds seemed to be centered above the Dueling Arena. He could feel barely any wind, and they gave no indication of moving soon.

Is a duel going to start...?

The thought drifted through Saionji's mind. But he spoke to himself, dismissing the idea.

“Absurd. The next challenger will be me. I won't let a travesty of a victor like Tenjou Utena defile her position any longer.”

Saionji began swinging his shinai again. *Wait for me, Anthy. I'll free you from Tenjou Utena soon.* Sweat flew each time he swung his sword.

He didn't notice Utena pass along behind him.

*** **

There were several possible routes back to the East Dorm from the building with the music room. One of the more roundabout ways led past the White House. After fleeing from the music room, Utena unconsciously found herself heading that way.

“Who do you love, Tenjou Utena?” Kozue's earlier words still rung in her ears.

What did it mean to be in love with someone? She still wasn't clear on that.

Her first love had been “the Prince.” Besides that, she had never fallen in love. Not that there hadn't been anyone she was fond of, but she didn't think you could call any of it “love.”

Someone I love...

When Kozue had asked, Touga's face had risen to her mind.

Do I like Kiryuu Touga? Because I think he might be my Prince? Her thoughts started swirling around in her head. *Then, what if he isn't? I love my Prince, but that's...*

What does it mean to love a boy, anyway? It's gotta be different than feelings towards a friend. Or family...

Wakaba said once that when you have a crush on someone, your heart starts to pound when you're near them, and all you can think of is them...

"Let it go a little further, and before you know it, you find yourself doing stuff like standing outside of their house."

"In other words, you turn into a stalker?"

We laughed about it at the time, but... Utena stood for a moment, thinking about her silly conversation with Wakaba.

"Hey, welcome," a voice came suddenly, from above. Utena snapped out of her reverie and looked up. "Looks like our positions are reversed from last time." Touga winked down at her from a balcony. Utena had found herself standing in front of the White House.

No way... I don't like him or anything. I just happened to be heading home...

"What's up? Did you come to ask me on a date, by chance?" Touga asked, lightly. He was his usual breezy playboy self. But Utena had seen a different face of his, that night when he stood staring up staring at the castle in the sky. The image was still burned into her memory.

"Wait for a moment. I'll come down." Touga vanished from the balcony. Utena didn't have a chance to stop him.

*** **

Kozue was still slumped over the piano, crying.

Miki and Kozue - they'd been together since they were born. Playing, eating, taking baths - they always did everything together. Even when they'd split apart from their parents, they themselves had stayed together.

"I thought we'd be together forever..."

Between sobs, words poured out from her heart.

Eventually, her tears ran dry. At that time, Kozue felt the presence of someone behind her. She turned.

"Who's there!?"

"Poor, poor Kozue..."

A thin hand stroked Kozue's cheek. It resembled that of the prince who had saved Utena eight

years ago.

*** **

"Welcome in."

Touga opened the front door. His Student Council uniform was open in the front, and he wasn't wearing anything underneath, exposing his bare chest.

"You're looking a little disheveled there, Mr. President." Utena turned her head away. Seeing Touga's skin right now made her feel extremely embarrassed.

"How rude of me. And in front of a lady, no less." He spoke jokingly as usual. Utena watched from the side as he slowly buttoned up his jacket.

"Won't you come in?"

"No way. I still haven't forgiven you for what you did in the Student Council room."

"Oh? But you came in yesterday."

---!?

Touga grinned. It felt to Utena like he was seeing straight through her.

...well, looks like I've been caught.

"A word of apology might be in order, don't you think? Illegal entry, invasion of privacy, perjury..."

"Yeah, about yesterday, uh... Sorry. I shouldn't have done that. But you..."

Don!

Touga's hand hit the wall behind Utena. He leaned over her, backing her up against the wall.

"Unforgivable." In sharp contrast to usual, Touga looked completely serious.

"Move."

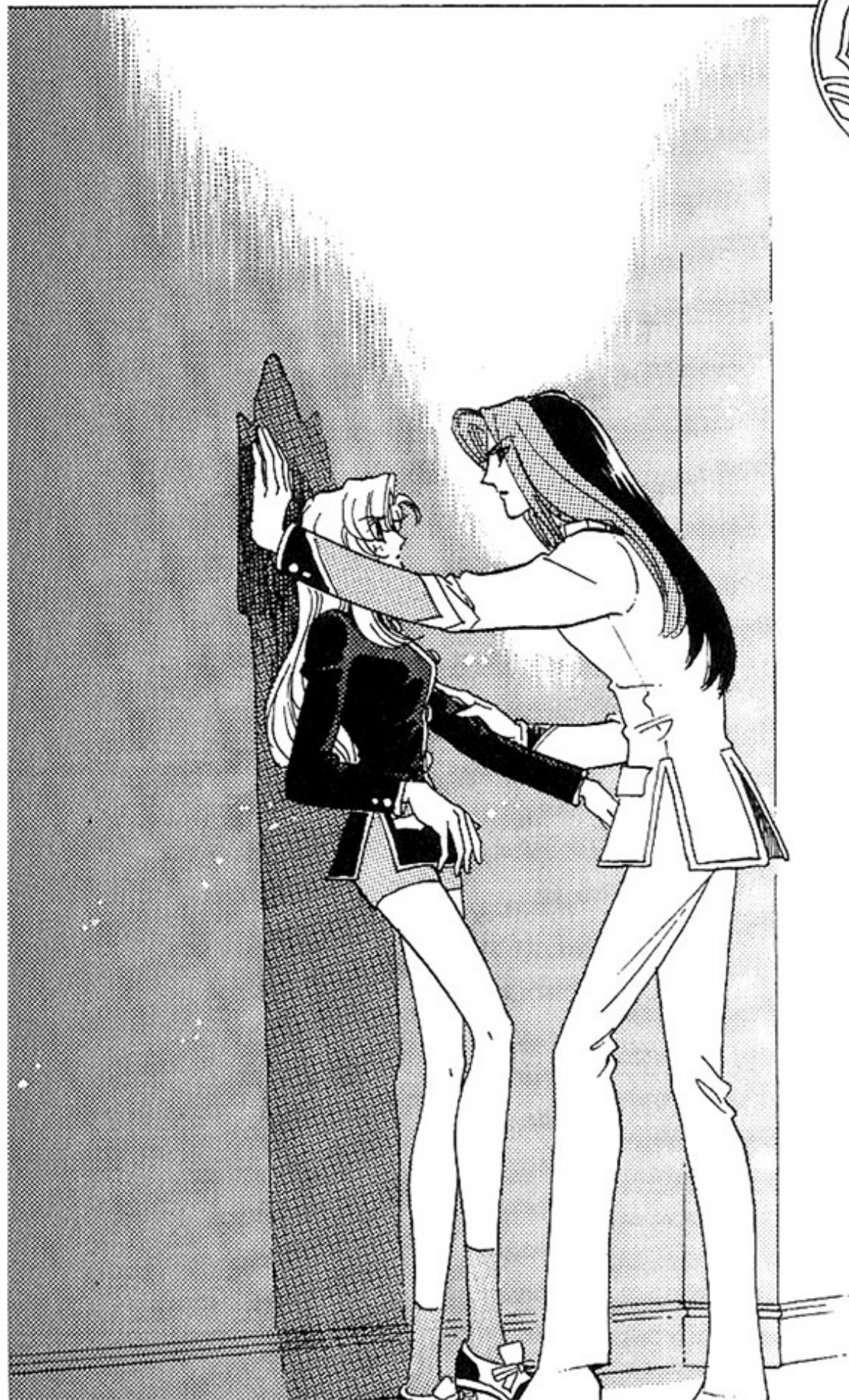
"No. I demand compensation."

Touga moved his body in closer. He stared at Utena with piercing, intelligent eyes.

"So, what should I ask for, I wonder...?"

His face slowly leaned closer to Utena's. They could feel each others' breath.

This is just like that other time...



Touga's lips drew closer.

He's going to kiss me... Utena found herself closing her eyes.

"Kiryuu-sempai!" a boy soprano cried out.

Utena opened her eyes in surprise, and saw Miki standing in front of the stairs. Unusual for someone as precise as him, but his sleeves and collar were open. And only one of his front buttons was fastened.

"Well, well," Touga smiled, still poised as if to kiss Utena. "You're a little late, Mickey."

"Kiryuu-sempai, what are you doing!?"

"Just what it looks like. I was going to steal a kiss from this maiden," he answered, undisturbed. Then he turned back to Utena as if nothing had happened. Apparently he intended to resume.

"Stop it, sempai!" Miki almost shouted. At this, the atmosphere suddenly changed. A goosebump-raising tension spread out between the three of them.

Utena was in complete confusion over the sudden appearance of Miki - just when Touga had been trying to kiss her, no less. As usual, it was impossible to tell what Touga was thinking. He had a slight smile, though, like he was enjoying the situation.

And Miki...

"What are your intentions towards Utena-san, sempai?" he asked suddenly. He glared straight at Touga, challengingly.

His intentions...? Utena also turned to look at Touga. She had been wondering that herself.

"Nobody would want anyone they're fond of to participate in something as dangerous as a duel. That's how I feel, at the very least. I would never make Utena-san duel. I want to protect those I love."

Miki-kun, are you saying...?

Miki turned his clear, crystal-like eyes to Utena. She could see her own confused expression reflected back in them.

Miki-kun, you... His words had been as good as a confession. *Man, what should I do... I like Miki too, but not like that... like a friend. I had no idea Miki was thinking of me like that. I had no idea...*

Utena looked toward Touga for some reason, looking for help.

"How sweet, Mickey," Touga said, catching Utena's eyes. "But Tenjou Utena isn't a woman who needs to be protected."

"That's no reason to make her duel."

"Why, it's up to her whether or not she duels. In other words, nobody else can stop her from

dueling."

"That's..." That was correct. Miki found himself faltering. "Sempai. Do what you want with me. But stop dragging Utena-san into all this. She shouldn't have to duel..."

"Really? But perhaps she's more qualified to duel than I am."

"No!"

"She beat Saionji. And drew down the Power of Dios. Undoubtedly, Tenjou Utena is the one closest to attaining the power to revolutionize the world."

"Does that power truly exist? Nobody's seen it. Nobody's confirmed its reality. It's..."

"No," a girl's voice answered, full of confidence. "The power to revolutionize the world is real."

Anthy stood there, wearing her white dress.

"Anthy, what are you doing here? And why are you wearing that!?"

It was the dress Anthy had worn when serving as the Rose Bride during the duel. The top part slightly resembled the special Student Council uniforms. Tassels hung from epaulettes on the shoulders, and there was gold lace on the chest. But in place of pants below, she wore a wide skirt. She had earrings, and a gold circlet atop her head. As the Rose Bride, she looked almost like a princess.

She didn't respond to Utena's question, but instead handed Utena and Miki each an envelope.

"Here are letters, marked with the Rose Seal..."

"Letters from 'The Ends of the World?'" "No way!" the two spoke over each other.

Anthy's white dress.

Letters from 'The Ends of the World.'

It could only mean one thing.

Utena opened the letter in confusion. Inside was a single message card - and written on it was exactly what Utena had expected.

**"TO THE ONE ENGAGED
AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT, YOU MUST DUEL IN THE ARENA."**

That was all. 'The Ends of the World' was telling Utena to duel again.

To her side, Miki's card fell out of his hands. It read:

**"YOUNG KOZUE IS LIKE A LEAF ABOUT TO BE CAUGHT UP IN A FIERCE WIND
IF YOU CHERISH HER, THEN AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT, YOU MUST DUEL IN THE ARENA."**

"What? But I just saw her in the music room.."

"Kozue... why...?" Miki turned to Anthy demandingly. But as usual, her face revealed nothing. "Kozue doesn't have anything to do with this. She isn't on the Student Council, and she doesn't have a Rose Seal. So why..."

"What will you do, Mickey? Will you duel Tenjou Utena? Or...?"

The sound of Touga's voice made Miki jittery.

"Touga-sempai! Did you... is this one if your plots!?"

"I don't know anything about it. It's 'The Ends of the World's doing."

"You liar. You've known about this from the start. That Utena and I were to duel, that Kozue would be snatched away... you're 'The Ends of the World,' aren't you!?"

Touga fell silent. But Miki stared straight at him, demanding an answer.

Is he really 'The Ends of the World?' And also my prince...?

"Unfortunately..." Touga slowly brushed his hair aside. "I'm not 'The Ends of the World.'" He spoke clearly and definitively.

"Honestly." Seeing Miki's unconvinced look, Touga gave a slightly bitter smile. "It *is* true that I know a little more about 'The Ends of the World' than the rest of you. So I can assure you that those letters are the real thing. If you don't have a duel, 'The Ends of the World' really will..."

He left the last part unsaid. But it was still enough to leave Miki in shock.

"Kozue..."

Miki dropped to his knees and looked at the fallen card again. "*At midnight tonight... you must duel...*" he read again, as if confirming the message.

"What will you do, Mickey?"

"Miki-kun, we're seriously going to duel...?"

Miki didn't move. Time seemed to stop as he stared at the message card. Utena couldn't bring herself to say anything to him. Touga looked on, awaiting Miki's decision. And Anthy was the same as always, standing expressionless. She wasn't even looking towards Miki.

At last, Miki stood.

"Utena-san."

Utena looked into Miki's crystalline eyes. But they weren't the same as they usually were.

"I challenge you to a duel."

They were the sharp eyes of a Duelist.

Chapter 6

The Dueling Arena

Night at the Dueling Arena.

Whether because of the dark clouds that had been gathering since evening, or because of some unnatural quality of the Dueling Arena itself, not a single star could be seen.

But something else glowing in the darkness more than made up for the lack of stars - the chandelier-like upside-down castle. It shone down on the arena, bathing it in light.

And in between the arena and the castle, another object glittered, too. A glass box - about long enough for a person...

"What's that?" Utena, the first one to climb to the arena, exclaimed when she saw it. "Is someone in there...?"

She could see a human-like shadow inside the glass.

"A coffin...?"

A long box that held a human body - that sounded like a coffin.

Utena strained her eyes, trying to confirm the contents, but at this distance she had no hope of telling who might be inside.

But...

"Kozue!" Miki cried out from behind Utena.

Kozue-chan? Utena still wasn't sure. To begin with, she could barely tell that there was a human-like shadow there at all.

But Miki seemed certain that it was Kozue in the coffin. He ran towards it past Utena. However, trying to reach a box floating in the air was quite a hopeless proposition. Miki slowed, then stopped when he was directly under it.

"Kozue..."

Just as Miki said, the one in the glass coffin was indeed Kozue. She wasn't moving. Or perhaps more likely, she couldn't move.

"Kozue, answer me! Kozue! Can you hear me?" he called up to her. There was no sign that she heard him.

"If you cherish her, you must duel." The words fell from his lips like a spell. "You must duel."

Miki drew his sword and slowly turned to Utena, who was approaching him from behind.

"Miki-kun, I don't want to duel you..." Utena was still reluctant. She'd decided to participate in the Dueling Game and protect Anthy... but she hadn't thought that she'd have to fight Miki.

While she hesitated, Anthy came up to her and pinned a white rose to her lapel.

"A small rose from within me... for you."

The white rose matched Utena's school uniform well. They almost seemed deliberately coordinated.

"A rose that flew here from the Ends of the World... for you."

As Anthy continued to recite, Utena's school uniform suddenly changed. Tassels appeared on her shoulders, and gold lace ran down her chest. The bottom of her coat gained white frills. It still looked essentially like Utena's uniform, but now gave a more gaudy impression, more in line with the Student Council's uniforms.

"Anthy... what is this?"

"The duel is a hallowed ceremony. You need to dress appropriately." The answer came from Touga.

Utena looked at Touga's special uniform.

"That's right," he continued. "The Student Council uniform is intended as dueling attire."

"What...?" Miki exclaimed. Although he'd been against the duels, he'd been walking around the school every day in an outfit designed for them. It was a bit of a shock.

"Mickey, you may have believed otherwise, but the Student Council are not representatives of Ohtori's student body. The organization was not created to plan events. We are nothing more than a gathering of Duelists."

"That's absurd. I'm..."

"...a Duelist. Isn't that right, Mickey?" Touga looked significantly at the saber in Miki's hand. Indeed, Miki *was* standing in the Dueling Arena, holding a sword. In front of Utena, no less. If he wasn't a Duelist, what was he?

"Let's start the duel, Miki-kun."

"Utena-san?"

"Yeah, just having a duel should be enough to satisfy Mr. 'Ends of the World,' right? So let's get it over with."

"Utena-san, I..."

"We have no choice. If we don't duel, they won't return Kozue-chan, right?"

"...right."

"Nothing says we have to go all out, like some life-or-death thing. Whoever gets their rose knocked off loses, that's all. So..."

"Hold it, Tenjou Utena," someone cut in sharply. It was Touga. "If you don't fight with all your power, the girl won't be saved. The duel is a hallowed ceremony. If you don't take it seriously, 'The Ends of the World' won't consider it a proper duel."

"What? How are you so sure?"

"Did you arrange this after all, sempai?"

"No, I didn't."

"So how do you know?"

"...the duel is a hallowed ceremony," Anthy stated, as if delivering a prophecy. "It's as Kiryuu-sempai says. The duel will not accept deceit."

This time, nobody protested. Anthy sounded quite certain, and everyone, including Utena and Miki, understood that she was speaking the truth.

"Tenjou Utena, you want to meet your prince, don't you?" Touga whispered into her ear. "If you don't keep winning the duels, he'll never appear before you."

"What!?" Utena's countenance hardened.

"Your strength and nobility - to lose a duel is to lose those, too."

The prince's words echoed in Utena's memory: "If you don't lose your strength and nobility..."

Will I really be able to meet him if I keep winning the duels? And Kiryuu Touga - why does he know those words, too? Is it because he's my prince? Or...

For his part, Miki looked once again at Kozue in the glass coffin. Of course, she couldn't say anything. But staring at her, Miki almost felt like they could communicate telepathically. They said that twins occasionally felt like they could sense each others' feelings. Perhaps that's what Miki was feeling now.

Silence fell over the Dueling Arena.

Finally reaching a decision, Miki spoke.

"Utena-san, let's start."

"Miki-kun?"

"You don't need to go easy on me. I'm tougher than I look."

"But..."

"Utena-san, you're the one who should be careful. I'm going to give it my all."

Miki raised his saber.

The time for words had passed.

*** **

"O, noble castle..."

As the words left Himemiya Anthy's lips, a small light flickered to life beneath her breast.

"Power of Dios that sleeps within me..."

The light within her chest grew brighter.

"Heed your master, and reveal..."

Slowly, it continued to grow. Before long, the light took the shape of some kind of rod.

This is just like before, with Saionji. The Sword of Dios...

The rod - the hilt of the sword - glittered beckoningly at Utena. The blade of the sword was too dazzlingly bright to see, but it certainly looked as if it was growing from Anthy's breast.

I don't get how this works at all, but...

Utena took the hilt.

I'm pretty sure this was how it went...

Utena drew the sword out of Anthy's body.

"The power to revolutionize the world!"

As if in response to Utena's words, the light from the castle above sparkled on the Sword of Dios. The light gave off a feeling of overwhelming nobility, that somehow reminded Utena of her prince.

Holding the sword, Utena turned to face the young blue-haired boy standing before her - Kaoru Miki. His Rose Signet was on his finger, and his saber in his hand.

"Miki-kun, I didn't expect to have to duel you."

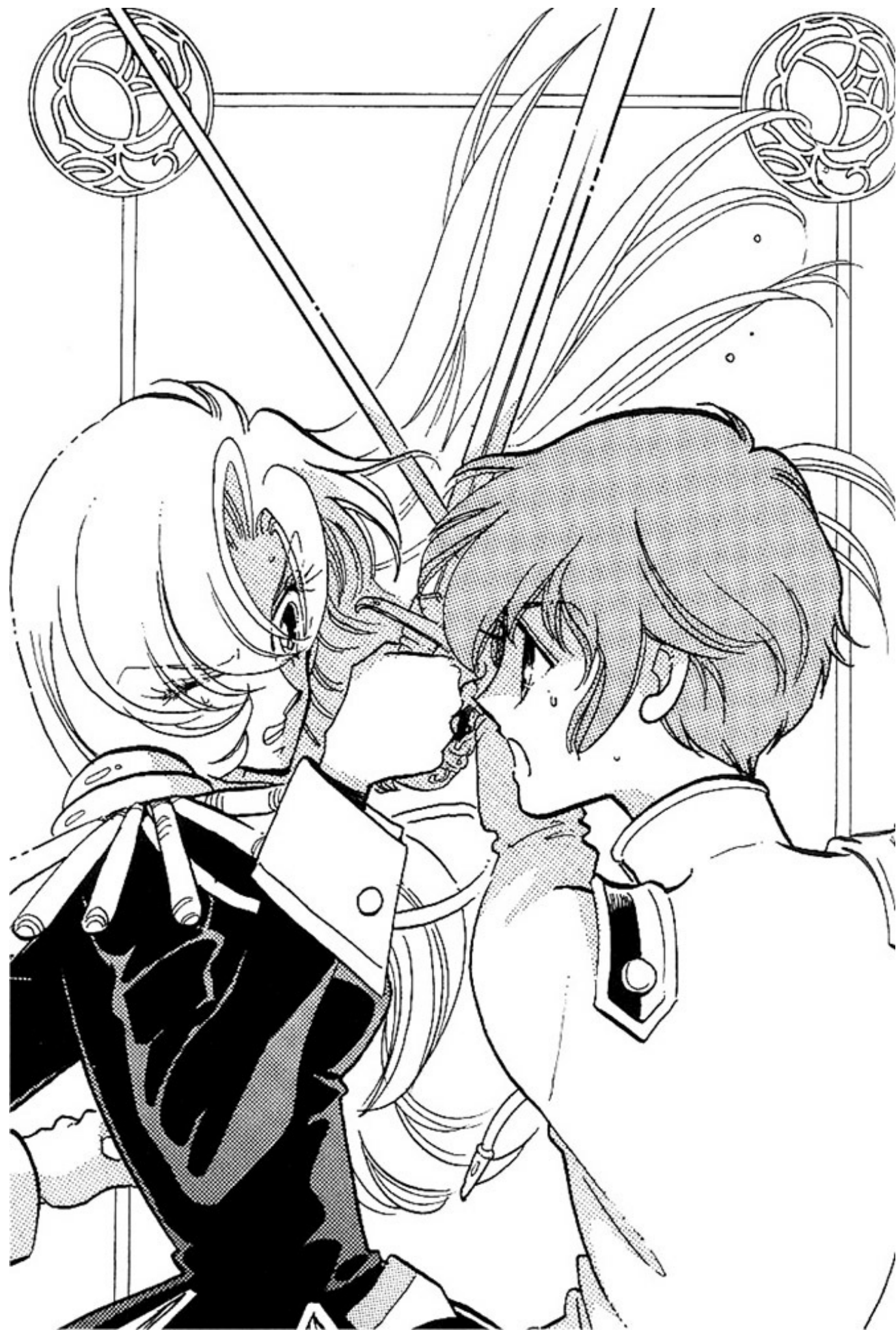
"Neither did I. But..." Miki's crystalline eyes were cloudy.

"Yeah, I get it. Here we are, standing in the Dueling Arena. We... don't have a lot of choice." Utena pointed her sword at Miki, as if inviting him to attack. "But this time won't be like the basketball game. I have my own reasons to win, you know."

"I understand. Now, here I come."

From his basic fencing stance, Miki suddenly lunged forward.

He's fast!



In the nick of time, Utena managed fend off the attack. Seeing this, Miki gave a satisfied smile. Both at the fact that he wouldn't need to go easy on her, and because he had managed to surprise her.

He continued to launch attacks, in rapid succession. He aimed for her left foot, forcing Utena to lower her sword. But the attack never came - it was a feint. The sword's direction changed in mid-strike, towards Utena's chest.

Twisting her upper body, Utena escaped Miki's sword by the skin of her teeth. That left her off-balance, and she fell back heavily.

"You're pretty good, Miki-kun." Now that she'd secured a little distance, Utena finally had time to speak. As it happened, they were the same words she'd said during the basketball game.

"Well, I have my own reasons to win," Miki said, looking resolute. It was the face of a man fighting for something important to him.

Above him, the glass coffin quietly watched over the fight.

The duel had only just begun...

*** **

When Miki and Kozue were little, their parents bought them a piano. It was a white grand piano - a little big for a child. The young siblings sat down to play together on the tall, wide bench. They had to claw their way up onto it to sit down.

"Okay, let's go!" Kozue said.

"Mmmhmm!" Miki nodded.

Ponnnnnnn!

They played the first note - a high "re." Before the day was over, Miki had learned two songs, and they enjoyed playing piano together.

The first time they'd went in a pool, they'd done it together. Just like their first phone call, their first time in an art room, and their first chess game.

But fencing was different. Miki had started that by himself. Everyone was surprised when they heard that the quiet, docile Miki had taken up a so-called combative sport like that. But as long as he didn't give up the piano, and always wore protective equipment, the adults in his life allowed it.

Kozue hadn't said anything about it. She'd had a fight with Miki for about two days, but afterwards started dropping in on Miki's practices and cheering for him in his matches, as if nothing had happened.

Maybe Miki had been trying to establish an identity as his own man by taking up fencing. Maybe that's why he'd chosen such a "barbaric," sword-wielding sport.

The fencing sword was surprisingly hard. Seeing how it bent when swung through the air, he'd sort of expected it to be softer, like a flag. But the steel saber was as solid and piercing as wood or ice.

Thus, as soon as he started fencing, Miki started coming home with bruises, making Kozue worry. Maybe they were the result of Juri's strict style of instruction. More and more, she had started taking over his training personally, to an unprecedented degree. She probably saw a natural genius in him.

Nor was she wrong. Even counting the club members in high school, only Miki had skill approaching Juri's.

And now, his sword was aimed at Utena.

There was no chink in Miki's Juri-trained defenses. Blocking off any opportunities for Utena to attack with calculated movements, Miki slowly forced her towards the edge of the arena.

Kozue... I'll save you, right now.

He brought up his sword, aiming to the upper right. Utena leapt back to avoid it.

But that was what Miki had been counting on. His goal had never been the rose on Utena's chest - he'd just wanted to force her back.

Hang on, Kozue. I just need to go after Utena-san a little more...

Utena, I liked you. When we were together, I felt drawn to you.

I didn't... I didn't want to duel you. But I'll make sure I win.

Brandishing his sword, Miki gradually pressured Utena. Just a few more steps until she was at the edge of the arena.

Victory was in sight.

*** **

A duel.

This was only Utena's second one, and Miki's first.

The Rose Bride, Himemiya Anthy, quietly watched their fight. Whoever won would have the right to do with her as they wished, but to look at her, she considered that to be someone else's problem. The tears she'd displayed during the last duel were a distant memory.

"Anthy, who do you want to win?" Touga asked her, not taking his eyes off the duel.

"I am the Rose Bride," Anthy calmly answered. She didn't look at him, either. "By the rules of the Rose Signet, I obey the victor."

She was as expressionless as always. Touga smiled slightly in response.

Utena was forced on the defensive against Miki's sword. It was sharp indeed. He may have lacked Saionji's raw strength, but he still pushed Utena back with his precise movements.

It's just like that basketball game. He's treating this like a chess problem, trying to find the best path to victory...

She understood that she was being pushed up against the edge of the arena. But if she tried to slip away to the left or the right, Miki was there to stop her.

Man, he's tough. He's a totally different type than Saionji...

Barely avoiding Miki's blade, Utena kept looking for an opening to escape to the side. She caught a fleeting glimpse of Touga, out of the corner of her eye.

He said that if I don't keep dueling, I won't be able to meet my Prince. I wonder how much he knows...?

In the moment that Utena glanced at Touga, Miki's sword slipped past Utena's, honing in on her rose.

"Shi...!"

Utena desperately dodged backwards to avoid the blade. But although she might have saved her rose, she found herself tumbling backwards.

Dammit!

Miki descended upon the fallen Utena.

Utena barely brought up the Sword of Dios to meet Miki's saber. But, unable to bring his weight to bear, Miki began pushing it back.

Past the locked blades, Utena could see Miki's face. His forehead was damp with sweat, and his eyes locked on the rose on Utena's chest. Perhaps it was the only thing on his mind... or perhaps he was just trying to avoid meeting Utena's eyes.

Beyond his shoulders floated the upside-down castle.

Touga said that the one engaged to the Rose Bride, who continues to win the duels, will ascend to the castle. And that if I lose, I won't be able to meet my prince.

Miki's sword and the Sword of Dios scraped against each other, creating an unpleasant noise.

Does that mean that my prince is in the upside-down castle? Or...

If I don't win, I won't be able to meet him.

I won't be able to meet my prince.

I won't meet him.

I won't meet him.

I won't meet him.

No!

I will meet him. One more time... so...

"...won't lose." Utena choked out. "I won't lose!"

In that instant, the mysterious figure of a young man descended from the castle in the sky. He was a beautiful youth with an untarnished air about him. Somehow, he resembled Anthy...

The youth descended directly towards Utena, seeming to melt into her body.

This smell... it's just like back then. The smell of my prince...

It was the scent of roses. The same scent that had enveloped her during her first duel, with Saionji. The scent of the prince who had saved Utena as a child.

"I won't lose!"

Utena raised her right foot to press against Miki's waist.

"There's no way I'll lose!"

With a kick, Utena knocked Miki back. He went tumbling towards the center of the Dueling Arena. He scrambled back to his feet, bringing his saber in a fighting stance.

But Utena had righted herself faster, and was already bearing down on him.

She's fast!

The Sword of Dios struck out.

Miki's chest was defenseless.

A cut.

And his rose scattered.

Somewhere, bells began to ring. There were a lot of them, judging by the volume.

Utena had won.

Crestfallen, Miki dropped to his knees.

At the same time, the image of the young man left Utena, and rose back towards the castle. The light of the chandelier-like castle winked on and off, as if welcoming their master home. Utena raised her head to see.

"Miki-kun, look!"

Miki looked up in response to Utena's call. The glass coffin floating in the middle of the air was slowly descending.

"Kozue!"

His arms flung wide open, Miki ran to meet her. Inside the coffin, Kozue still seemed to be unconscious.

When the glass coffin was a few meters above the ground, it suddenly vanished. Gravity took hold of Kozue, and she hurtled downwards.

"Kozue-chan!"

"Kozue!"

Miki threw his whole body into trying to catch Kozue. But he wasn't able to stop her entirely, and they went crashing to the ground together.

"Huh...? Miki...?"

Above Miki, Kozue opened her eyes. For a moment, she felt like she'd just woken from a dream. She took in her surroundings, and was surprised to notice Utena and Touga.

"Wh, where am I? What just..."

"Kozue, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"I was crying in the music room... and..." Kozue hesitated. "No... I don't remember anything..."

"Nothing...?"

"I don't understand what's happening. Somebody tell me!"

"Kozue..."

"I know I don't know anything! I don't understand anything..." Kozue began to cry in Miki's arms.

"It's okay now. It's okay, Kozue." Miki tenderly held her head.

Utena watched them, relieved. Her smile held a touch of jealousy for their close sibling relationship.

However, Touga and Anthy just looked down at them, expressionless.

Epilogue

After the duel, Utena and Anthy returned to the East Dorm and went straight to bed. But Utena couldn't sleep. The events of the duel earlier were still on her mind.

"Anthy, are you asleep?" she called quietly to the bed next to her.

"No, Utena-sama," Anthy responded, clearly. Utena felt a small feeling of solidarity that she wasn't able to sleep, either.

"Why does 'The Ends of the World' want us to duel, anyway?"

Anthy did not respond to Utena's murmured question. So Utena just keep talking.

"And why does everyone duel at all? Because they want the Power to Revolutionize the World? Or because they want you, the Rose Bride?"

Utena stole a glance at the neighboring bed. But in the dim moonlight, she couldn't read anything on Anthy's face.

"Everyone fights for something important to them."

"Something important to them?"

"Yes."

Something important to them. The words echoed once more in Utena's heart. But in her case, she wasn't quite sure what that thing was.

"What's my important thing...?"

"If it's for something important to them, a person can do anything. So I think that if you could do anything for it, then that's what's most important to you."

"For instance, if I was willing to duel for it...?"

She remembered the look of concern for Kozue on Miki's face. And Saionji's face when he'd tried to reconcile with Anthy.

"Something important, huh...?" she mumbled. But her words didn't carry much weight.

*** **

Thunk.

The cue struck the white ball, which scattered the carefully-placed other nine. The three-ball and seven-ball fell into pockets.

"Not bad... Tenjou Utena, that is. First she beat Saionji, and now Miki." Juri sounded somehow

amused. Although she'd presumably have to face Tenjou Utena herself sooner or later, she showed no trace of nervousness. She would win. She had no doubt about that.

"Mickey lost that duel before he even began," Touga said from across the billiard table, taking aim at the one-ball.

Thunk.

One and five were both pocketed. Touga slowly shifted his position to aim for the two-ball. Juri didn't watch him, but just leaned against a wall.

"What do you mean?"



Thunk.

Number two and number eight. Smoothly and precisely, Touga was removing all the balls from the table.

"Mickey said he wouldn't duel someone he loved. But he dueled Tenjou Utena in the end. Why was that?"

"Because his sister was important to him," Juri replied, sounding bored.

"Exactly. Mickey chose his sister over the girl he loved."

"So...?"

Thunk.

Four and six fell in pockets. All that were left were the white ball, and number nine.

"In other words, Mickey is still a child."

Thunk.

Finally, the nine-ball fell. And this time, the white ball didn't follow it into a pocket.

*** **

In the south-west corner of the Ohtori Academy grounds, there were special cottages reserved for the Student Council's use. They were two-story affairs, with small gardens and weathervanes. Kaoru Miki and Kaoru Kozue lived in one of these.

Going up a half-spiral staircase, you would find a room directly in front of you. This was their bedroom. In the middle of the room were two beds, lined up right next to each other.

Their pajamas differed only in color. And both their bodies were curled up... like the fetal position, you might say... sleeping.

Their faces, their clothes, and their way of sleeping - they were almost as alike as reflections in a mirror. Looking at them made you feel like the phrase "two hearts beating as one" was more than just a figure of speech.

If you said that being an adult meant recognizing the difference between yourself and others, then maybe Miki and Kozue were still children. They still hadn't abandoned the fantasy that they were as one.

A strong wind blew against the window, rattling it menacingly.

At the same time, they both reached out their hands towards the other.

And clasped them together.

Afterword

This novel is called "Revolutionary Girl Utena." That makes it about the third "Revolutionary Girl Utena" to exist.

The first "Utena" was the manga drawn by Saito Chiho-san, who also did the illustrations for this book. The second "Utena" was the TV anime: the smart, stylish creation of "the Komuro of the anime world," director Kunihiko Ikuhara, as well as all the others on the staff. Those two started production at about the same time, so even though the manga entered the world first, you might say that they're "twins."

So, the third "Revolutionary Girl Utena" - this novel - is like a younger brother. Although it uses the world and characters of "Utena," it's a different story than either the anime or the manga.

Exactly how is it different...? ...Well, it would be boring for me to talk about the content of the story itself, so I'll try to talk more about the setup.

One difference that's easy to see are the "vectors" of the romances. For example, in the anime, Miki likes Anthy, but in the novel he likes Utena. Manga Juri is in love with Touga, but Novel Juri doesn't even like him. Actually, it would be more accurate to say she detests him. Finally, Touga and Miki's relationship is original. If you're wondering what that relationship is... go read the novel.

There are also a few characters whose roles were lessened in the novel: Chu-Chu and Nanami.

Chu-Chu is popular in both the manga and the anime, but he didn't do much in the novel. The problem is that you can't see his cute body or movements.

As for Nanami, she doesn't really appear in the manga - she's an original anime character. Her power is such that if I let her appear in the novel, she'd probably have wrecked the whole world, so I kept her off to the side. Sorry, Nanami fans.

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to profusely thank the planner of "Revolutionary Girl Utena," Oguchi-san. Not just for this job - Oguchi-san is always helping me in all kinds of ways. Thank you.

I'd also like to thank the artist behind our wonderful illustrations, Saito Chiho-san. I'm especially happy that you illustrated that one scene for me...

Also, thank you to Kotou-san and Hayashi-san, from Shogakukan. Please help me out next time, too.

The plan is for the second book to be about Saionji. He has a pretty miserable role in the manga and anime... will the novel end up the same way, too? Please look forward to it!

The End

[Return to the Beginning](#)