

少女革命ウテナ

2



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Verdant Hopes
(翠の思い)

Revolutionary Girl Utena : Verdant Hopes

少女革命ウテナ〈2〉-翠の思い-

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Translated by Dallbun, because he rules

This "light novel" was published in Japan in March 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.

▼ Kiryuu Touga

President of the Student Council, and a star at both academics and athletics. Is Utena falling in love with him!?

Saionji ►
Kyouichi

Student Council vice president, and captain of the Kendo Club. Pining after Anthy.

Himemiya ►
Anthy

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

Chu-Chu ►
Anthy's friend.

▲ Tenjou Utena

To meet her beloved prince, she enrolled in Ohtori Academy. But she's ended up fighting the other Duelists...

Important Characters

▼ **Kaoru Miki**

A member of the Student Council. A boy genius.



▲ **Arisugawa Juri**

The sole female member of the Student Council. Captain of the Fencing Club.

▲ **Shinohara Wakaba**

Utena's best friend, in love with Saionji.

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Translator Notes

"*Verdant Hopes*" - Like the first novel, it's a very poetic title, and similarly uses an archaic form of a color kanji: in this case, 翠 for "midori," or green, rather than the standard 緑. "Midori" can also mean greenery or vegetation, as in the holiday [Greenery Day](#). I went with "Verdant" over "Viridian" because plants or flowers are a motif in the book (and in Utena in general), and also because using "green" as an adjective is pretty meaningless. As for "omoi," it can mean a lot of things, including thoughts, feelings, expectations, or wishes. "Hopes" is just one possible translation.

Chapter 3

"an evening of playing marbles with Chu-Chu" - The game is ohajiki, technically.

Chapter 5

Yamamura Keiko - Not Keiko of Aiko, Keiko, and Yuuko – that would be Sonada Keiko. It's not an uncommon given name.

Verdant Hopes

Prologue

It was a love letter written on pale pink stationary.

The contents were hand-written in a cute, girlish style, without much skill but with plenty of careful effort. A delicate floral scent wafted from the page.

This letter was currently posted in a hallway, in the Middle School building of Ohtori Academy.

"Hey, what's it say there? Something about dancing?"

"Hahaha, what a joke!"

The ones reading and laughing at it were exclusively boys. They didn't understand how sacred the letter had been to the person who wrote it. Or maybe they were just jerks.

Tenjou Utena and Shinohara Wakaba passed by behind the crowd of young idiots.

A girl, wearing a boys' uniform. A sports prodigy, with an enthusiastic fanbase among the girls in the lower grades, who boasted that she was "the prince who's cooler than any boy." That was Tenjou Utena.

The girl by her side, Shinohara Wakaba, was quite normal in comparison. Her school uniform, her appearance, her grades in school. The only thing about her that you could call unusual was that she called herself Utena's lover.

"What's with the crowd?" asked Wakaba, who tended to be a bit of a groupie. Utena just glanced over at the group, looking disinterested.

"Someone's love letter is posted on the board," a gossipy boy on the edge of the crowd answered.

"A love letter?"

"Yeah. Looks like it's for Vice President Saionji." At that, he turned and pushed back into the crowd.

"Saionji?" Utena repeated. She'd just transferred to this school, and wasn't familiar with the name. She still didn't know about Duelists, or Saionji, yet.

"Check it out! 'I danced with you in my dreams. I must be a fool...!' Well, they've got that right!"

The group gave another round of crude laughter. The other female students passing by just frowned and ignored them.

I can't believe these guys!

Utena roughly forced her way into the crowd and tore the posted love letter off the wall. She was a girl of few words, but she possessed more than enough force and moral authority to quiet the crowd of rubberneckers.

"What're you doing?"

"Hey, I was reading that!"

Complaints rose from the group of boys. But...

"Disgusting." With one word, Utena made them all fall silent.

"Well, c'mon... someone posted it, so of course we read it."

"Don't."

The boys glared sullenly at Utena. Then, as if trying to hide the embarrassment in their eyes, they each cast their gaze uncomfortably downwards. After all, they were just a bunch of chumps, only capable of acting as part of a group.

Casting her gaze over the chagrined group, Utena caught sight of Wakaba, standing behind them in a daze. Even from a distance, she could see the large tears welling up in her eyes.

Wakaba...?

Their eyes met. Suddenly, the tears started gushing forth.

"Wakaba!" Hearing Utena call out, Wakaba turned and fled.

Could that love letter have been... Wakaba's?

Without thinking, Utena dashed off after Wakaba. There was no way she could leave a crying friend alone.

Thinking back on it, that was when the Dueling Game began for Tenjou Utena...

Chapter 1

Shinohara Wakaba

Morning.

The students of Ohtori Academy stirred to life to greet the day. Students rushed through the halls to get to class, or chatted about common interests in groups with their friends. As dawn ended, some students were still wearing sportswear from early morning sports practices.

One student dashed down the hall. She wore an Ohtori Academy girls' uniform - her high-cut skirt fluttered as she ran. She dodged between loudly laughing girls and clumps of boys. Her target was the girl in a boys' uniform who was headed towards Middle School 2nd Year, Class C - Tenjou Utena.

"U~tena! <3"

She threw herself forcefully onto Utena's back. It would have been enough to knock most people over, but Utena kept on her feet. She made a slightly sour face while she gave Wakaba a piggy-back ride.

"Morning, Wakaba. You seem lively as ever."

"Yep! <3 Thanks, Utena!" the girl – Shinohara Wakaba – replied happily from Utena's back. This was their usual morning greeting.

"Hey, Utena, listen!" Still clinging to Utena's back, Wakaba began chattering at great speed. "Last night, my favorite compact broke, it was terrible! It was the one with the blue and gold eyeliner in it. It made me look so mature, I really liked it, it was such a shock! And to top it off, there was glass scattered all over my room, I cleaned it up but it seriously took all night... hey, are you listening, Utena?"

"Sure," Utena answered, half annoyed and half impressed by Wakaba's rapid-fire speech. "But before you keep going, do you mind getting off my back?"

"Aww, why? It's just a little 'skinship' between lovers. How about just a little longer?"

"Who are you calling lovers?"

"You and me, *duh*. <3"

Wakaba hugged Utena. Or, to be more accurate, she was latched on to her.

It had been about one month since that day - when Utena had taken Wakaba's love letter down from the hall, had her first duel, and become engaged to Anthy Himemiya. Wakaba had gone back to being her perfectly cheerful self, at least as far as Utena could tell. Maybe one month had been long enough to heal her broken heart.

For her part, Utena was finally recovering her balance from the disruption of her second duel. No

new challenger had appeared since Miki. The members of the Student Council seemed to be lying low, and she'd returned to a peaceful daily routine.

"Oh yeah, and speaking of my compact breaking, it's because I was watching this drama last night, and it was so crazy! The toootally beautiful but ordinary heroine got another new boyfriend, again! Talk about being fickle, geez!"

Wakaba hopped off Utena's back, but kept talking. She began to relate the entire plot of the drama in question.

"...but she didn't go to the meeting place at all! And in the window of the store... hey, Utena, didn't you see it? Everyone was watching it in my dorm."

"Nope. My dorm doesn't even have a TV."

Utena and Anthy lived in the East Dorm. People called it haunted, and it was indeed old, not the sort of place that would have a television.

"But aren't you bored in the evenings, without a TV?"

"Nah, not really. Anthy's there, too. We chat and drink tea and stuff. It's nice. Right, Anthy?"

"Yes, Utena-sama," Himemiya Anthy smiled back from Utena's side. It was the first time Wakaba had heard her speak today.

"You chat, huh...?" Wakaba eyed Anthy. They'd been in the same class since last year, but Wakaba had never seen her chat with anybody. Even recently, she only really talked to Utena - to anyone else, she would usually just smile and nod.

I still think it'd be pretty boring to hang out with her...

Anthy didn't respond to Wakaba's impolite stare. Ordinarily, someone getting eyeballed like this would show *some* reaction, but...

"Yes, Wakaba-san?"

"No, nothing." Wakaba ended up being the one forced to avert her gaze. And feeling Anthy's eyes on her, she hurried to change the subject.

"Anyway, Utena. Did you do today's math homework? What with my compact breaking yesterday, I totally didn't have time to do it."

"Yeah, right. You had the time, you just didn't do it."

"Aww, don't be that way! A good boyfriend would be more sympathetic."

"I told you, I'm not your boyfriend, okay?"

At Utena's heartless response, Wakaba clapped her hands to her face and began to pretend she was crying.

"You're so cruel! And to think, I've changed my hairstyle, my lipstick, my hobbies, and my clothes, all to please you! But you..."

"...You're quoting the heroine from last night's drama, right? I get it." Utena gave a wry smile at Wakaba's heartfelt performance.

Seeing Utena smile, Wakaba began grinning again, too. Making Utena laugh always made her happy.

Anthy just watched the two of them, her own smile unchanged. She'd been smiling like that ever since Wakaba had launched herself onto Utena's back. It was the sort of smile that made her look like she was wearing a mask.

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"So Utena, about my compact. You wanna meet up after school tomorrow? I want to go buy a new one."

It was lunch break. While she spoke, Wakaba was busily picking the green peas out of her pilaf. She already had a small mountain of green piled at the side of her tray. Utena watched it grow, both surprised and impressed.

"Hey, Wakaba, you should eat your peas. They're good for you."

"No way," Wakaba replied without hesitation. Apparently, eating green peas wasn't even an option to her.

"Maybe you shouldn't have ordered pilaf, then."

"But they didn't have any green peas in the pilaf until last week! This is... it's... it's a conspiracy! Tyranny! Thievery!"

"Uh, I don't think you can really call it thievery." Utena seemed untroubled by Wakaba's passionate speech.

Wakaba didn't mind, though. Her mood soon lightened... although she continued her project of de-pea-ing her food... and she changed the subject.

"Anyway, how about we meet up after school day after tomorrow? Today you have that tennis match, and tomorrow is the soccer game, but you're free the day after that, right? The basketball game is next Monday, and so is helping out the Archery team..." Wakaba rattled off Utena's schedule. She was kind of proud of knowing it by heart.

"Yeah, that's fine. Day after tomorrow, after school, right?"

"But Utena-sama... day after tomorrow is..." Anthy suddenly spoke up. Utena and Wakaba both turned toward her in surprise. It was rare for her to say something of her own volition. There were many days where she didn't say anything at all, besides responding to Utena.

"Huh? Is something happening then?"

"Yes. You promised to buy Chu-Chu a new necktie..."

"Oh, right."

Come to think of it, Utena had... embarrassingly enough... lost to Chu-Chu at cards last night, and as a result had promised to do just that.

"Sorry, Wakaba! Is another day okay?"

"Awww!" Wakaba complained, clearly disappointed.

"Sorry, but I promised."

"Hmph!"

"I'm sorry, Wakaba-san."

"What're *you* apologizing for?"

"Yeah, Anthy. You don't have anything to be sorry about."

Wakaba and Utena responded reproachfully and encouragingly, respectively.

"But Chu-Chu is my..."

"He's my friend too, Anthy."

"Yes, Utena-sama." Anthy raised her eyes at Utena's kind words.

To Wakaba, the two of them seemed almost like a pair of lovers. A gentle girlfriend and sympathetic boyfriend - that's the kind of strange atmosphere they gave off. It felt like there was no room for a third person to butt in.

"Hey, what about my shopping trip, Utena?" Wakaba sounded blatantly annoyed at the whole situation. She called herself Utena's best friend, but recently Utena had only been spending time with Anthy. It wasn't much fun.

"Oh, right. How about the next day... Thursday?"

"Okay, Thursday it is! It's settled, okay? We've gotta get matching compacts, see."

"Gah." Utena made a face at Wakaba's counter-proposal. "Uh, I think I'll pass. Compacts aren't exactly my style..."

"It's not a matter of style, it's a matter of basic female grooming! A middle school student must have at least one compact!"

"Is that right?"

"Yep. You've got to put on a bit of makeup before going out to meet a boy you like. That's just

fundamental. *Fun. da. men. tal.*"

"But there's not really anyone I like..." Utena said sullenly, shoveling potato into her mouth. However, the face of the Student Council President - Kiryuu Touga - leapt unwelcome to her mind.

Man, why am I thinking about him again...?

Although Touga had enthusiastically hit on her during the uproar surrounding her last duel, she hadn't seen him around lately. She hadn't heard anything about him being sick or injured... was he still coming to school...?

"What's up, Utena? You're quiet. Don't tell me you have a crush on someone after all!" Wakaba stopped separating her peas. She had a good intuition about this sort of thing. "That's no good! I'm already your lover! You're not allowed to start liking a boy!"

"C'mon now, Wakaba..."

"Nuh-uh, nuh-uh! You're my own personal prince! I don't like boys anymore either, so you're with me, okay? Okay?"

"What do you mean, don't like boys *either*? I like normal boys, you know." Utena could only smile wryly at Wakaba's words.

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Ohtori Academy's buildings were all designed in western styles.

School buildings with Gothic architecture. Greenhouses that looked like bird cages. An enormous arched front gate. The chairman's tower housed an observatory. Every structure could be mistaken for an art museum.

Only the kendo dojo, placed slightly apart from the main school buildings, gave an essentially Japanese impression. Of course, the wood used was of the highest quality, and it had been built by top-notch craftsmen. However, it didn't give off the same feeling of luxury as the other structures. On the contrary, it felt utilitarian. It stood as a calm monument to the good taste of its architects.

However, this serene dojo was currently filled with the excited shrieks of girls.

"Touga-sama, you're so dreamy!"

"Saionji-sama is so manly!"

"Eeeee, they're both so cool!"

"Look over here...!"

Female students were gathered outside the kendo dojo. Some were cheering, some were taking pictures, and some were simply waiting breathlessly. But all their eyes were locked on the figures of two boys, facing off in the center of the dojo.

Long hair. Tall. Finely-chiseled faces. There was no mistaking that both of these boys were gorgeous.

The refined-looking one with deep red hair was Kiryuu Touga. He was Ohtori Academy's Student Council President, as well as the Vice President of this Kendo Club.

The other boy, with the wavy green hair, was Saionji Kyouichi. He served as the Vice President of the Student Council, and President of the Kendo Club. Compared to Touga, he had a somewhat thicker figure. And unlike Touga, who was a well-known playboy, he had a reputation for being a stoic guy who didn't get close to girls.

"How many times does this make?" Touga asked, holding his practice sword, or 'shinai,' in a low stance.

"Who knows? I stopped counting after a hundred." Saionji didn't loosen his guard, either.

The two of them had had innumerable matches since they were young. Thus, to them, this was nothing special. To the girls outside, however, it was a huge event. Here were the pair of Touga and Saionji, the two princes who split the affections of the school's girls between them. Moreover, it was a kendo match between them. The excitement in the gallery rose to new heights as their wondered which of the boys would win.

In contrast, Touga and Saionji continued to speak casually.

"I hear you were hitting on Tenjou Utena."

"Are you jealous? I thought you were more interested in the Rose Bride than in princes."

"Don't mock me." Looking irritated, Saionji shifted, raising his weapon above his head. It was a powerful stance – just seeing the strength Saionji displayed was enough to overwhelm an opponent.

"Heh... well, don't *you* look in good shape? Are you planning on trying again?"

"Naturally. That last duel was a mistake. I'm the only one fit to be engaged to the Rose Bride." Saionji answered without hesitation. He showed not a hint of doubt in the truth of his words.

At that, the two of them began to circle each other. The shrill cheers of the assembled girls continued, surrounding the two contestants and urging the duel on.

Lovely, cheering voices.

A feeling of tension.

Their eyes on each other.



A connection between them.

Anticipation.

Longing.

Pride.

All these things swirled through the dojo, clashing with each other.

“Taaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

As if to cut through all that, Saionji let out a battle cry. He brought down his shinai with all his might, in one swift motion. Touga brought his own shinai up as well – a clever strike aimed at Saionji's throat. It looked as if their blows would land at the same time.

Like the cries of wounded birds, the girls' voices swelled, and...

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Utena and Anthy, as well as Wakaba, passed outside the kendo dojo. They were headed toward the tennis court beyond it.

"What's going on?" Utena asked in bewilderment, seeing the flock of girls gathered outside it.

"I wonder?" Anthy tilted her head.

"I'll bet the President and Vice President are having a match," Wakaba answered instead. On top of every new fad, Wakaba knew all kinds of things. That made her an important source of information for the clueless Utena.

"The President and Vice President?"

"You know..." Wakaba responded, faltering just slightly. "Of, uh, the Student Council."

"Oh, Touga and Saionji?"

Hearing Utena mention Saionji's name, Wakaba turned her head away slightly.

Man, I'm hopeless. Guess I still haven't gotten over him...

Wakaba wasn't strong or stoic enough to have completely forgotten the events of one month ago. Although she'd regained her energy, it remained a thorn nestled deep in her heart.

Utena didn't notice the change in Wakaba's demeanor.

"Oh yeah, those two are both in the Kendo Club. Who's better? Probably Saionji, since he's the club president, right?"

"I wonder?" Anthy looked impassive and disinterested as always. Utena, used to her behavior, continued casually staring towards the kendo dojo.

"Hey, Utena, let's get going. The tennis match is going to start."

"Oh, sure." At Wakaba's words, Utena started walking again, not looking particularly concerned. Of course, Anthy immediately followed her. However...

I'm hopeless...

Only Wakaba lingered, staring at the kenjo hall. The hall that, until a month ago, she'd passed countless times...

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"And what's this?" Arisugawa Juri smiled, taking the ticket handed to her by Kaoru Miki. Normally quite stern, only her club members and other intimates saw the softer side of her.

"There's a concert coming up. I thought you might like to come."

As she listened, Juri ran her eyes across the ticket. Indeed, 'Piano - Kaoru Miki' was clearly printed there.

"Well, thank you. What a feat - holding a concert at thirteen."

"It's not that big a deal. I'm not the only performer or anything." Miki blushed slightly and averted his eyes. "It's a concert for young pianists. I've been invited before, but..."

"But this time, you decided to accept," Juri finished his thought. "Why all of a sudden?"

"...I just changed my mind, is all. There's no particular reason."

"I see." Juri didn't ask any further. She wasn't one to pry into other peoples' business.

The two of them walked towards the school gates together.

Ordinarily, they'd still have been at fencing practice, but today Juri had cut practice short, and invited Miki out... to review the new order of equipment for the club. She was businesslike through and through.

"Actually, Juri-sempai, I have a favor to ask you," Miki spoke up, somewhat stiffly. In club and in the Student Council, Miki always called Juri "Juri-sempai." But when the two of them were alone, he usually called her "Juri-san."

When Miki had first entered the Fencing Club, Juri had been the one to teach him the basics. Back then, he'd liked to practice so hard it seemed like his body would break. He'd even asked Juri to coach him more strictly.

Juri, recognizing his natural talent, had obliged, and they'd begun training together both before school and after club practice. At some point during the course of that, Miki had begun calling her "san." The fact that he still called her "sempai" in front of others just showed what a proper young man he was.

Anyway, hearing him call her “sempai” now made Juri worry slightly.

“Would you begin practicing with me, starting tomorrow morning? Practicing without a partner is...”

Just as she'd feared. Juri's expression clouded over.

“Don't you think you've been training a little too hard lately? I don't think your body can take it. You'll hurt yourself if you keep it up.”

Miki was silent. But his face clearly showed his disappointment.

“What's your hurry? This isn't like you. There's no need to push yourself this much, in piano or in fencing.”

“I want to get stronger.”

“Stronger?”

“To obtain what I desire... and to protect what I love, I've realized that I have to be stronger.”

“...”

“I'm sorry, forget I said anything. It was rude of me.”

“Miki...”

Juri had an inkling of what Miki was talking about. She knew about his involvement with Touga, and with Utena. And she had her suspicions about what had happened in the Dueling Arena...

So she didn't inquire further. The hell with playing the role of the wise *sempai* or the gossipy girl. She knew that in the end, Miki would have to deal with his problems himself.

“I understand. Let's train together.”

“Really!?”

“Yeah. But you're going to have to follow a training regimen of my creation. Is that alright?”

“Yes. Thank you, Juri-san.” Miki was smiling at last. His androgynous, youthful face beamed beautifully. He had a smile fit for an angel.

Juri returned his smile. She was glad to practice with him until he could resolve his own issues.

But just then...

“Hello, you two. You look like you're enjoying yourselves.”

Miki's smile froze at Touga's sudden appearance.

“Isn't it a little early for practice to be over...?” As he spoke, Touga's gaze trapped Miki like clamping jaws. Miki immediately looked away, as if fearing that something terrible would happen if

their eyes met.

“Looks like an unusual day for you, too. How often do you wear that kendo uniform?” Juri stepped forward, as if to protect Miki from Touga's eyes.

“Well, as the club's Vice President, sometimes it's unavoidable.” Holding the skirt of his uniform like a ballerina, Touga jokingly showed it off. The bruise on his shoulder was clearly visible.

“You were up against Saionji?”

“Yes, indeed. Well-deduced.”

“Nobody else could leave you with a wound like that. He's certainly good at kendo... if nothing else.”

“How harsh. You shouldn't insult a man's best friend in front of him.”

Juri didn't react to Touga's latest jest. Nor did she seem likely to offer even an amiable smile. “And where has this best friend of yours gone? You were together, correct?”

“Well,” said Touga, shrugging off Juri's frigid gaze. “He wandered off somewhere, still in his uniform. I wonder where he's gotten to. He's always been a capricious one.”

As he spoke, Touga looked down the path, in the very direction that Juri and Miki were headed.

*** **

“Utena, you were so amazing, as always! Takasaki competed nationally last year, you know!”

Wakaba was almost dancing around Utena. She looked much happier than the girl who'd actually won the match.

“Hey, Utena! I bet if you practiced hard, you could win the nationals yourself! No, better, you could become a pro and go to Wimbledon!”

“I don't think I'm quite *that* good.” Utena's match against Takasaki Kenichi of the Tennis Club had gone into a tie-break, and she'd managed to squeak out a narrow victory. It could easily have gone either way.

“Well, anyway, you remember we're going shopping on Thursday, right? So no promising to help out any teams then, okay?”

“Remember yourself! You're the one who signed me up for this tennis match, you know.”

“I was? Well, that's a minor detail.” Wakaba was cheery as ever. And although she was smiling wryly, Utena was enjoying herself as well.

Anthy, as usual, followed Utena silently. She had a faint smile on her lips, but it probably had nothing to do with Utena and Wakaba's back-and-forth.

Suddenly, a large shadow loomed before the three of them. A man in a kendo uniform – Saionji Kyouichi. He glowered sourly at Utena, then shifted his gaze to Anthy, who was standing behind her. A variety of expressions that Wakaba had never seen on him... sorrow, pain... flickered across his face.

“Anthy, you're still by Tenjou's side?” Saionji spoke rudely, but his voice held a hint of gentleness as well. “That's not the place for you.”

“Stop it, Saionji.” Utena stepped in front of Anthy, to protect her from him. “Our duel is over, okay? If you want Anthy back, feel free to challenge me again.”

“I was simply careless then. You haven't seen my true strength.” Saionji didn't sound like he was bluffing; his voice was filled with confidence. “Now, Anthy, come to me. On the day we were engaged, you swore to me. That you...”

“Dammit, Saionji, the duel...”

“Shut up! This is between me and Anthy.”

“Can't you see she doesn't like you? Anthy, tell Saionji you don't want to go with him!”

“That's ridiculous. Isn't that right, Anthy?”

“I...” Anthy spoke up softly from behind Utena. Saionji and Utena stared intently at her, while she gave a strangely out-of-place smile. “I do not want to go with you, Saionji-sempai.”

Hearing this, Saionji suddenly exploded in anger.

“Tenjou Utena! What are you making Anthy say!?”

“You don't get it! This is how Anthy feels now!”

“Shut up! The Rose Bride belongs to me!” Saionji tried to shove Utena aside, but she didn't fall over. She stood fast against Saionji, stopping him from approaching Anthy.

“We were engaged! I am Anthy's true...”

However, even a sports prodigy like Utena couldn't match a boy in raw power. Moreover, Saionji was a head taller than Utena, and a high-school kendo rank holder. It was only a matter of time before she couldn't hold him off any longer.

Wakaba looked on in a daze, watching Utena and Saionji struggle against each other.

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Wakaba had fallen in love with Saionji when she went to watch a kendo practice. A fan of his didn't have the courage to go by herself, so she'd invited Wakaba along.

However, when they tried to enter the kendo hall, Saionji had kicked them out.

“The dojo is a sacred place,” was all he said.

Wakaba had completely fallen for that cool attitude.

From then on, she'd kept her eye on him, and gone to his matches without fail. She treasured the photos that she secretly took during his fights, and tried any number of love charms. When her spells were ineffective, she was forced into more direct action.

She wrote him a love letter.

But that had ended in tragedy. He threw the letter away, and it had been tacked up in the hall, an object of ridicule.

Wakaba had cried that entire night, and afterward put Saionji entirely out of her mind.

That's what she'd intended to do, at least. However, watching Utena and Saionji grapple in front of her, Wakaba could hardly stay calm.

Duel? The Rose Bride? Engaged? What are those two talking about? To Wakaba, who didn't know about the Dueling Game, their conversation was completely incomprehensible.

What are you saying, Saionji-sama? I don't get it. I...

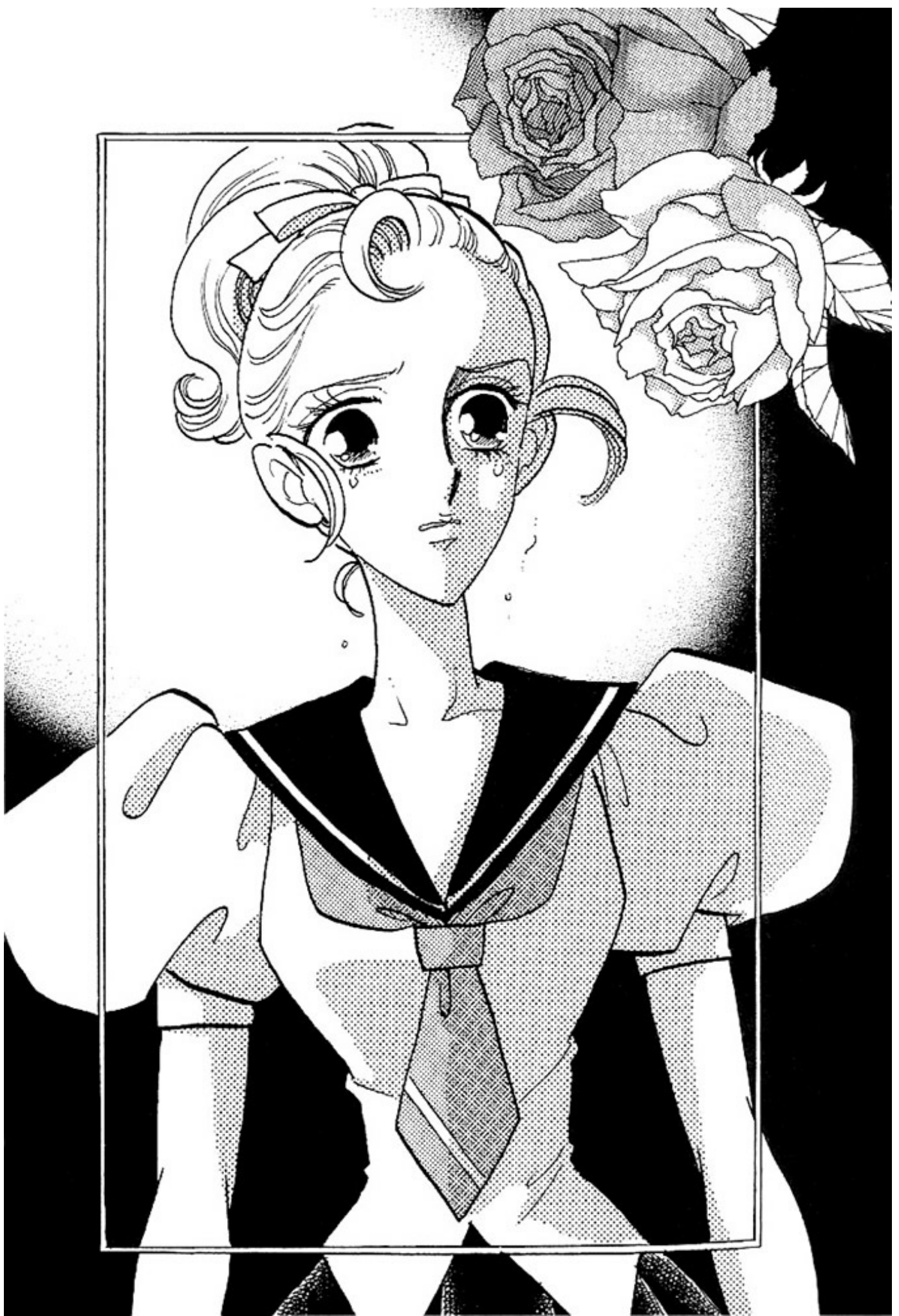
The same Saionji who had once tossed out her love letter was now fighting with Utena. And the reason for their conflict seemed to be Anthy.

The scene struck Wakaba as unbearably sad.

Stop it, Saionji-sama. Why are you acting like this over Anthy? You're always so tough, and cool, and stoic... You're so cold to the girls who come to watch you fight. You don't even let them inside. That coolness is what's so great about you. That's why I started liking you... So why are you acting like this? Why? Why!?

Pow!

The next thing she knew, Wakaba found herself slapping Saionji across the face.



Saionji, who had been focused entirely on Utena and Anthy, was stunned by this completely unexpected blow. He didn't recognize Wakaba at all. But this unknown girl had slapped his cheek, and her eyes were brimming over with tears. Obviously, he ceased his scuffle with Utena and stared at her.

“Stop it already!” Wakaba shouted. “Just stop it. Don't let me see you all miserable like this.”

“.....?”

“If the boy I fell in love with is this pathetic, doesn't that make me a pretty sorry person, too? So please, keep being cool!”

“Wakaba...” Utena spoke to her, comfortingly. But Wakaba didn't seem to hear her.

“If you rejected me, then okay, that can't be helped, but... at least don't destroy my memories! I want you to stay that strong, cold, cool Saionji-sama!”

Saionji had no idea what Wakaba was talking about. Still, he was overwhelmed by the force of her words.

“Right now, you're not even the tiniest bit cool! The Saionji I loved was more... more...”

“That's enough.” A strict, but also somehow kindly, voice stopped Wakaba's tirade.

“The Student Council...?”

Standing there were Juri and Miki. Of course, Juri had been the one to speak.

“Continuing is only going to hurt you more.” Juri's tone was kind, hiding only a trace of its usual leopard-like harshness.

“I... I...” Upset, Wakaba looked around. Utena was looking at her with concern. Anthy was gazing at her coolly.

And Saionji, his cheek swelling red, was starting at her, too, almost like she was some strange wild animal.

The whole situation suddenly struck Wakaba. Shame and regret came crashing down on her, and she could no longer stand still.

...I've got to get out of here.

That was the only thing going through her head at that moment. So she ran. Dropping her bag where she stood, she suddenly bolted.

“Wakaba!” Utena took off after her. She had no idea what to say to Wakaba... she just felt like first of all, she had to go find her.

Anthy didn't follow, or even react visibly. She simply silently picked up Wakaba and Utena's fallen bags. Neither Juri or Miki had any stake in the situation, or any reason to follow after a stranger.

Only Saionji hesitated. His red, burning cheek. The tear-filled eyes of the strange girl. Himself, who had been left behind. He couldn't grasp how they were all connected.

At last, even after Juri and the others had departed, Saionji stood, unable to either follow or leave.

Chapter 2

Saionji Kyouichi

The next morning -

Utena, having went to school a little early, waited there for Wakaba.

Yesterday, she'd lost sight of her friend, and went all around campus looking for her. Only after she'd tried calling Wakaba's dorm and found out that she'd returned safely did Utena return to the East Dorm herself.

Anthy hadn't said anything about Wakaba. She just played with Chu-Chu after dinner as usual. Perhaps she was acting that way out of obligation. Or maybe she didn't feel like Wakaba's problems had anything to do with her. Utena wasn't sure.

What she *did* know was that she herself was worried. So she waited in the hall. Perhaps Wakaba would come leaping onto her back as usual.

But Wakaba didn't show up. The bell rang and homeroom started, but Wakaba's seat stood empty.

At last, just as Utena was resolving to go to her dorm to check on her once classes were over, Wakaba arrived.

“Excuse me. Sorry I'm late,” she said in a dull voice, her head lowered as she opened the door in the middle of math class. It was a shocking change from her usual demeanor.

The math teacher, looking a little worried about the girl's state herself, decided not to say anything about her tardiness for now and waved her to her seat. Her other friends, who would ordinarily have teased her themselves, were also quiet.

“Morning, Wakaba,” Utena wanted to say to her friend, who sat right next to her. But she couldn't bring herself to.

As Wakaba passed, Utena caught a glimpse of her eyes, which were puffy and red. It looked like she'd been crying all through the night. When she saw that, Utena couldn't find her voice. Since no one else was saying anything, she, too, just let Wakaba take her seat in silence.

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“Expulsion, huh...?” Touga murmured, his body draped over an elegant white chair.

“That's right. We should expel Saionji Kyouichi from the Student Council,” Juri repeated firmly.

The Student Council room was currently holding the council's monthly special meeting. Present were Touga, Juri, and Miki. There was no sign of Saionji, which was just how Juri, who was currently proposing he be relieved of his duties as Vice President, preferred it.

“Expulsion? That's a severe punishment, don't you think?” Miki asked calmly as he jotted down the proceedings with his pen. He never met anyone's eyes during these meetings. He was a note-taking machine.

The one Juri was staring down, however, was Touga, sitting across from her. She watched every move on his face, trying to read what thoughts lay hidden underneath his mask.

“The Vice President attempted to break the rules of the Rose Seal. He made direct advances on the Rose Bride. We can't accept such shameless behavior from a fellow Student Council member.”

“He didn't actually break the rules, though, did he?”

“So you suggest we just ignore his behavior until he does, Touga?”

“That's not what I'm saying.” A small, perhaps bitter smile played about his lips. “I'm just saying that expulsion is, perhaps, overly harsh.”

“You seem rather set on defending him. Why?”

“Because he's my best friend.” Touga laughed, as if something was funny. “At any rate, I dismiss the motion for expulsion. I doubt Saionji would agree with it, after all. Which means that if I oppose it as well, it automatically fails.”

“.....”

“Oh, it does seem like Saionji has caused quite a scene, so there should be some sort of punishment. But without a reason the other students would find suitable, we can hardly just fire our Vice President. Juri, you understand, I'm sure.”

Juri didn't answer.

Miki's expression seemed to indicate agreement. “Then the motion to dismiss Saionji as Vice President fails with one in favor, two opposed, and one abstaining.”

He finished writing this last event in the minutes, and put down his pen. The Student Council's monthly special meeting was over.

*** **

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Bowing to the teacher as he gathered his things, the students took a deep breath, like fish that had been returned to the water. The next moment, voices rang out throughout their own personal fishbowl, the classroom.

But Wakaba, who normally would have sprung back to life now, just quietly gathered her things into her bag.

“Hey, Wakaba,” Utena broached, mustering up her courage. “About that shopping we were talking about yesterday. How about going after school today? I kind of hurt my shoulder yesterday evening, so I'm probably not going to be able to play today.” She was forcing herself to be cheerful, but ended up

sounding kind of awkward.

Despite the awkwardness, though, Wakaba was happy. She'd actually been wanting to talk to Utena all morning. But after the incident the day before, she wasn't sure how she should act. Should she laugh it off? Or cry? Or just act like she'd forgotten all about it?

“What do you think, is today okay? Look, the weather's good, too. Oh yeah, that store you were talking about before... uh, what was it...?” Utena continued, trying to break the uncomfortable silence. It was rare for her to talk so much like this.

Thanks, Utena. You lied about hurting your shoulder for me. You can't fool me, though.

Wakaba decided to laugh about the whole thing. She didn't want to worry Utena, or make her think about what had happened yesterday. With that resolution, she raised her head.

“Hey Anthy, you wanna come too?” Utena asked Anthy, who was standing beside her.

“Yes.” Obviously, Anthy would hardly decline.

Anthy, too...? Wakaba felt the feelings of friendship stirring in her heart quickly wither.

I wonder why? Do I just want to be alone with Utena? Or is it Anthy herself?

Wakaba wasn't great with Anthy, but it wasn't like she particularly hated her, either. She just thought she was kind of weird, and hard to talk with.

But for some reason, hearing Utena extend the invitation left Wakaba feeling strangely cold. Maybe she did just honestly dislike Anthy? Was she jealous of her for being so close to Utena?

“So how about it, Wakaba?”

“...no thanks.”

“Huh? But...”

“We can't go today. You want to play in your soccer game, right?” Wakaba did her best to smile. “It's okay. I kind of want to be by myself today, anyway.”

“Yeah?” The concern on Utena's face was painful.

“Sorry I can't come to cheer for you today, but do your best in the soccer game, okay?” At that, Wakaba stood and hurried out of the classroom. Not that there was anywhere in particular she wanted to go, of course.

*** **

The game was half over, and the score stood 0 to 0. Neither the High School 1st-Year team nor the Middle School 2nd-Years could get a leg up over the other, and no goals had been scored.

On the whole, it seemed like the high school team was overwhelmingly stronger. At times, Utena

would carry the ball up the field herself, but with no teammates available to pass to, she wasn't able to score.

We've got to break out of this in the second half. When they attack, they kind of open up on the right side, so that's where we should aim our counter... When she heard the half-time whistle, Utena headed back to the bench, already planning out her team's strategy.

Anthy was waiting at the bench... which was really just the front row of the bleachers... with a towel and a drink for her. That was usually Wakaba's role. When the game stopped, she would run right up to Utena and stick to her like glue.

However, she wasn't here today. Utena felt like something was lacking when she took the towel from Anthy.

"It seems like a tough fight."

The one who'd spoken was Touga. He suddenly came up from behind Anthy, smiling.

"You'll have to try to counterattack in the second half. Their right side opens up a bit when they're on the attack. If you aim for that, you might have a chance."

He casually echoed exactly what Utena was thinking. He must have been watching the game for a while. And he was clearly quite familiar with soccer, as well.

"Why are you here, Mr. President?" Utena's voice oozed with suspicion. For all that he'd been following her around before, she hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since the incident with Miki. She was angry at him, though even she couldn't quite say why. Perhaps she did just have a crush on him.

In any case, she was forced to deal with him now, and both her expression and tone of voice were naturally quite severe.

"What kind of a greeting is that?" Touga joked, seeing her reaction. He enjoyed seeing Utena upset, it seemed. "I came to cheer for you. I don't see the captain of your cheerleading team around today, after all."

"Captain of my cheerleading team?"

"You know, that girl. With the head that looks like an onion."

Despite herself, Utena almost burst out laughing at that description. It described Wakaba perfectly.

An onion...? Well-put. Her attitude was already beginning to soften.

"Oh, you mean Wakaba. But don't you think it's kind of mean to compare her to an onion?"

"Ah, but doesn't the fact that you understood mean that you agree she looks like one?"

"W, well, it's okay for *me* to! I'm her friend!"

"Hmm. Her friend, huh?" Touga gave a suggestive smile.

“Anyway, did you want something? You're not here to challenge me to a duel, are you?”



“Perish the thought. I just thought we could talk for a bit.” He smoothly brushed a lock of hair away from his eyes. For a moment, Utena could smell a scent like roses.

“Chat?”

“Can I have a moment of your time after the game?”

“What the hell do we have to talk...”

Utena was interrupted by the sound of the whistle, signaling the resumption of the game.

*** **

The main street of Houou City.

Wakaba walked alone in the crowd. She took little notice of the gorgeous store windows, showy displays inside, or the young lovers who seemed to be enjoying them. She just stared at her feet, wandering aimlessly. She looked a little like a child who had just been scolded by her parents.

It's not like I was that in love with him... Her thoughts kept returning to one topic.

He's just handsome and good at kendo and does well in school, and everyone always squeals over him, so I decided to, too.

Yeah. I was just being a fangirl. Like the crushes you get on hot idols, that's all... She repeated it over and over in her heart, like chanting a spell. But no matter how many times she said it, it just made her more sure that she was lying to herself.

Saionji Kyouichi – Wakaba's beloved, unreachable prince. Her love letter, which had ended up being exposed, had been meant to break through to him...

Wham!

An impact. Wakaba bounced off a soft but unyielding wall, and lost her balance, falling back on her butt. Only then did she take notice of her surroundings.

She was inside a department store. The sales assistants were dressed in fine clothes, the lighting was bright, the place was filled with unobtrusive classical music, and a bottle of salad oil lay at her feet.

Apparently she'd run into someone in her distraction. The salad oil had probably been dropped by that person.

“I, I'm sorry! I was kinda zoning out there, and...” she stammered, grabbing the bottle and standing up.

“Be more careful next time. You should watch where you're...” The person speaking was the one Wakaba had run into – Saionji.

Saionji-sama! Wakaba couldn't believe her eyes.

Why is he in a place like this!?

In an instant, everything she'd said to him the previous day came rushing back.

“If I liked someone like you, doesn't that make me a pretty sad person, too!?”

It was basically a confession of love. Of course, she'd already gotten his response...

Her entire body flushed, burning with heat. She was so dizzy, she felt like she was about to fall over.

“You...?” A moment after Wakaba, Saionji also realized who he'd run into. “You're that girl from yesterday, who was with Anthy and Tenjou Utena...”

Wakaba wanted to flee. Just like yesterday, she couldn't think at all. But her feet wouldn't move.

“...I'm Shinohara... Wakaba.” With no way out, she answered Saionji, looking away.

“Ah... I'm Saionji Kyouichi.” Saionji automatically introduced himself back.

After that, they settled into an awkward silence.

Why is Saionji-sama somewhere like this...?

“Hey. Give that here.” Saionji spoke quickly, apparently uncomfortable. It took Wakaba a moment to realize that he was referring to the bottle of salad oil in her hand.

Huh, so Saionji-sama cooks...? Still in shock over this unexpected meeting, Wakaba timidly handed over the bottle.

“Are you all right, sir?” An older female saleswoman hurried up. It was impossible to read from her experienced business smile whether she was concerned about their well-being, or whether she simply didn't want them blocking traffic.

“Yeah.” Saionji handed her the salad oil he'd taken from Wakaba. “Please wrap this up as a present. It's for a girl, so use a pretty ribbon.”

“Whaaaat!?” Wakaba burst out without thinking.

“What?”

“Um... it's just, giving a girl salad oil as a present...”

“What's wrong with that?”

Wakaba looked back at Saionji's clearly irritated face. She flinched a little under his gaze, but unlike yesterday, that somehow just made her more resolved.

Whatever. At this point it's all the same no matter what I say.

“Well, it's just, that's, like, an end-of-the-year gift. You should give her something cuter, like flowers or jewelry or something...”

“What!?” Saionji had chosen his gift with complete confidence. He felt it perfectly encapsulated his heartfelt wish for a domestic woman. Wakaba's comment came as a complete shock.

“Well, then, what kind of present do *you* suggest?” he replied testily. His tone suggested he was demanding an answer.

He's asking me what kind of present... what should I do? Wakaba withered under his glare.

Flowers or jewelry... those are too cliché. Gift certificates are too impersonal, and with clothes, getting the right size is a problem...

What should I say? What would I want? What kind of present would make me happy?

“What's wrong? Can't think of anything better than salad oil after all?”

“...Toothpaste!”

“Tooth... paste?”

Confusion flashed across Saionji's face, soon replaced with a look of triumph.

“Hmph. You clearly have no taste. What woman would be happy to receive toothpaste?”

“N, no, think about it! Toothpaste is a dream gift!”

“A dream gift?”

“Sure! Like, she uses the floral-scented toothpaste you gave to her, and while the scent still lingers, the two of you exchange your first kiss! Don't you think that's romantic?” That was a scene from an old shoujo manga that Wakaba liked.

“That's ridiculous. You read too many comics.”

He'd hit the nail right on the head. Wakaba reddened.

“Well, it's better than salad oil!”

“Toothpaste is a far more unnatural gift.”

“No, salad oil is!”

“Toothpaste!”

“Ah, excuse me, sir. Would you still like me to wrap this for you?” The saleswoman from before held the salad oil, her business smile slightly strained.

Chapter 3

Friends

"Alright, how about this?"

"A sewing kit? No way! Get this instead! I think it's cute."

"I don't want cute, I want fancy. Have you no taste at all?"

"Enough to know not to get her salad oil!"

"Says the girl whose first choice was toothpaste."

Saionji and Wakaba were at the gift corner on the sixth floor. They were searching for a good gift that was neither salad oil nor toothpaste.

"Fine, then. How about this? Surely you have no complaints here."

"Ummmmm, I don't know, I think it's a little too low-key. I'd give it 65 out of 100."

Before she knew it, Wakaba had started talking to Saionji comfortably. Quarreling about gifts had done the trick, it seemed. Now she was back to her usual self - a cheerful 14 year-old girl.

"What do you think of this one?" Wakaba's next choice was a cute, leaf-shaped hair ornament.

To Saionji, a hair clip was an acceptable accessory, unlike earrings or necklaces. And the use of colors on this one was quite tasteful. He thought it would make a good present for a female middle-school student.

"Alright. Let's go with this. You over there!" he haughtily addressed a young saleswoman. "Please wrap this gift. Use a pretty ribbon."

"Yes, of course. And how will you be paying?"

"By credit card." With a practiced motion, Saionji pulled out his card. Wakaba found herself staring.

A credit card... how mature. A card wouldn't suit the image of an ordinary high school student, but with Saionji, it didn't seem out of place. Perhaps due to his appearance and self-important attitude.

He really is cool after all... Suddenly, Wakaba remembered all the things that she'd loved about Saionji. She stared at Saionji again like she used to back then. That profile, that wavy hair, the way those hands moved... they all belonged to Wakaba's love, the boy she'd seen in her dreams so many times.

Except now, he was close enough to touch. And it was just the two of them.

"Now, please sign here."

"Sure."

Wakaba watched as Saionji took out a silver fountain pen. It was decorated with the rose crest of Ohtori Academy, and looked of extremely high-quality.

"Wow, that pen..."

"Oh, this?"

As he looked at the pen, nostalgia and melancholy... emotions that he rarely showed... stirred in Saionji's eyes.

*** **

"Oh, I was given this when I graduated middle school. They were awarded to the two students who most excelled in sports and academics." Touga answered, holding his silver fountain pen. He twirled it around in his hand, showing it off to Utena.

"Huh... pretty impressive, Mr. President. Guess you've always been a real ace."

"Please, stop calling me Mr. President. I'd like you to call me 'Touga.'"

"Yeah, right." Utena didn't trust Touga in the slightest. In the middle of an otherwise casual conversation, he would start hitting on her out of the blue. She didn't understand the feelings of someone who could say romantic things so lightly.

"You seem down, Tenjou. Aren't you satisfied with your victory?" Touga whispered in Utena's ear, while she was staring off to the side.

Utena's plan had been pulled off perfectly, resulting in a brilliant victory. Of course she was happy about that, and when they heard the end-of-match whistle, she and her teammates giddily hugged each other.

But when she returned to the bench, that feeling had faded. Wakaba would normally be the first to run up and hug Utena, but she wasn't there. She hadn't thought it was so important to her, but now that Wakaba was missing, Utena realized how lonely it was without her.

"Are you that bothered by your cheerleader being gone?"

"Well..."

"Hey, Tenjou. Has anyone ever told you that friendship is nothing more than a misunderstanding?"

"A misunderstanding?"

"That's right. You have friends, don't you?"

Anthy and Wakaba's faces sprang to Utena's mind.

"Of course."

"How nice. But do you think they consider you a friend, as well?"

For a moment, Utena didn't understand what Touga meant. Your friends were your friends - she'd never doubted that for a moment.

"For example, Anthy. You call her your friend, but does she feel the same way?"

"What are you talking about? Anthy and I *are* friends."

"So you're saying that she thinks of you... as a friend?"

Utena wasn't sure how to answer that. It was true that if you asked Anthy, she'd probably answer that Utena was "the one Engaged to her."

"Well, what about you, then?"

"Me?"

"What about your public nuisance of a friend?"

At first, Touga didn't seem to understand who she was referring to. A moment passed before he answered.

"Oh, you mean Saionji?"

"You're best friends, aren't you?"

"Yes, we're best friends," Touga answered without hesitation. "But the question remains whether that's a one-sided friendship as well."

*** **

The mechanical mole stuck its face slightly out of its hole. It was struck by a red hammer with so much force that it seemed like the machine might break.

"Saionji-san, that's too hard! Hit it a little more lightly!"

"What!? You want me to hold back?"

"If you don't, you're going to break it!"

"But I'm already going easy on it!" Saionji hit another mole with the hammer. It made such a loud sound that even the worker standing nearby looked worried.

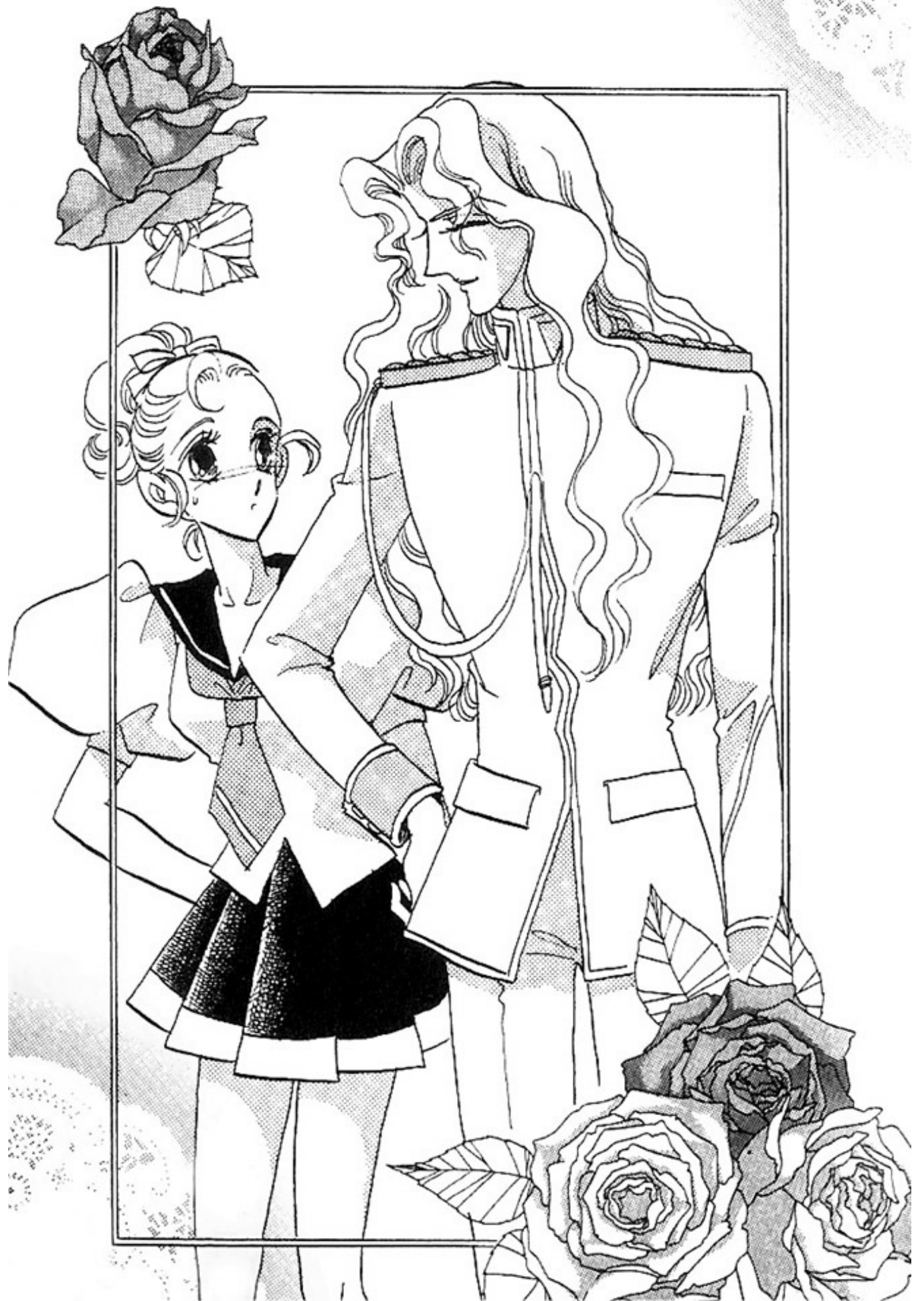
Suddenly, a fanfare played. A noisy, electronic one.

"W, what now!?"

"The game is over. You got the top score! Awesome!"

The readout on the cute mole-adorned game machine flashed "HIGH SCORE."

"Hah! I sure showed *them*!" Saionji declared triumphantly, putting down the hammer that was attached to the machine. "Heh. That was more fun than I expected. I suppose it's not bad to come visit the amusement center once in a while."



"Geez. 'Amusement Center?' You're so old-fashioned, Saionji-san!"

"R, really...?"

Saionji looked around in embarrassment. Wakaba thought it was the cutest thing she'd ever seen.

I can hardly believe it... I'm really at the arcade with Saionji-sama...

Wakaba had brought him to the arcade because he'd said that he'd never been to one before. "But that's like a standard date spot!" she'd urged him as she dragged him along.

I didn't think I had it in me... Wakaba was surprised that she'd been able to ask Saionji to come here at all. Until now, she'd just been one in the crowd, gazing longingly at 'Saionji-sama.' But now, they were out having fun, and chatting together, just the two of them. She'd dreamed of that so many times... though this was *slightly* different from the dreams she'd written about in her love letter.

"Well, it's about time for me to go. It's already getting late," Saionji spoke, though it was only a little after five.

"Oh... really...?"

"What's wrong?"

Wakaba looked at the package Saionji had bought from the department store. The one with the leaf ornament that they'd chosen together inside.

He said he's giving it to a girl... but who? Could it be for Anthy? But...

"What is it?"

"Um... I was just wondering who you're going to give the hair clip to," Wakaba managed to get out. If she didn't ask now, she'd never have the chance again.

"Oh, this?" Saionji answered casually, as if it was a boring question. "It's for my little sister."

That wasn't true, of course. Saionji didn't have a little sister, or any siblings at all, for that matter. It was just a little white lie, since he was reluctant to say that he'd gotten it for Anthy. Wakaba, however, believed him completely.

Oh, his sister... Wakaba sighed in relief that it was such a minor thing.

So it's just a present for his sister... not for a lover...

That's right. They say Saionji's a real woman-hater. There's no way he'd get a present for a girl. Wakaba didn't doubt for a moment whether Saionji actually had a sister. Probably because she wanted to believe it was true.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I just thought it was strange, since I heard that you don't really like girls..."

"Who told you that!?"

"Um, who...? Well, like, they say you just throw out all the love letters you get." Saying that out loud stung Wakaba's heart.

"A feminine presence is a disruption to the dedicated pursuit of swordsmanship. Besides..."

"Besides...?"

"If I read them, then I would have to write responses. It would be rude not to."

Rude? Wakaba's jaw dropped at Saonji's amazing indifference to romance. Apparently he didn't consider it rude to throw away a love letter without reading it.

"What's so funny?"

"No, nothing!" But Wakaba wasn't able to hold back the tide of laughter that overwhelmed her.

All Saionji could do was frown at her in puzzlement.

*** **

That night -

In her room in the East Dorm, Utena rolled around restlessly in her bed, thinking about what Touga had said earlier.

'Friendship is nothing more than a product of misunderstanding' - she'd never considered that before. But she felt like she couldn't just dismiss it out of hand. People had one-sided loves, so why couldn't there be one-sided friendships?

"Hey, Anthy." She turned to face Anthy, who was resting after an evening of playing marbles with Chu-Chu.

"What is it, Utena-sama?"

"What do you think friendship is?" Utena just said exactly what was on her mind.

"Friendship...?"

"Yeah. Some guy recently told me friendship is just a misunderstanding."

"Oh? Well, perhaps that's true." It was unusual for Anthy to take an opposing stance like that. "There are those who say that all feelings are one-sided. That's why everyone is always looking for returns on their emotional investments."

"Returns?"

"Yes. Like a wedding ring, or matching accessories... If there's no physical sign that your feelings are reciprocated, you feel insecure."

"Hmm..." Utena kind of understood, and kind of didn't. "Anthy, what do you think?"

“Me?”

“Yeah. You and I are friends, right?”

“We're... friends?”

“Sure. I've said that before, haven't I?”

“Yes. But...” Anthy looked down.

Is this one of those one-way friendships, too?

Anthy's shadowed expression made Utena feel uneasy. Were the two of them really friends? Utena and Anthy? Utena and Wakaba?

Eventually, Utena fell asleep, her questions still unanswered.

*** **

Woosh. “Four hundred ninety-six.”

Woosh. “Four hundred ninety-seven.”

Woosh. “Four hundred ninety-eight.”

The sound of a shinai cutting through the air broke the silence of the night.

Woosh. “Four hundred ninety-nine.”

Woosh. “Five hundred... hah.”

His practice swings completed, Saionji wiped the sweat from his brow.

Five hundred swings before bed. That was what Saionji had done the night he'd lost to Utena, and what he continued to do every night without fail.

“Don't burn yourself out, my friend,” a voice came from the darkness. Apparently the person had waited until Saionji's practice was over.

“Touga.” Saionji recognized him by voice alone. He wasn't particularly surprised that Touga was here. But although Touga had called him 'friend,' Saionji's response wasn't particularly warm. “What?”

“Isn't that a little much?”

“...”

“The number of practice swings. After all, you were already strong enough to defeat those moles this afternoon.”

“Hmph. I suppose it makes sense that spying on people would be another one of your

unwholesome interests." Saionji turned his back on Touga. "What do you want?"

"Don't be so cold. Actually, I came to invite you on a date."

There was a slight pause before Saionji's tentative response.

"Me?"

"Now, now, don't misunderstand. I don't swing that way." Saionji didn't know about Touga and Miki, since Touga had never seen fit to mention it. "I came to invite you on a *doubledate*. Me and you, with Tenjou Utena and her friend."

"Tenjou Utena's... friend?" Saionji looked back.

In the darkness, Touga's lips curled upwards in a small smile.

*** **

"U-- tena--! <3" Wakaba leapt onto Utena's back. Taken by surprise, Utena came close to falling out the window she'd been looking out of.

"Wa, Wakaba?"

"Good morning, Utena!"

"Uh... good morning..."

Wakaba's mood was such a reversal from the day before that Utena wasn't sure how to respond. Naturally, she looked and sounded somewhat confused.

"You seem kind of down, Utena!"

So were you, yesterday! Utena thought, smiling awkwardly back at her. "You... think so?"

"Yeah, but I have just the thing to cheer you up! A present from your beloved Wakaba!" Wakaba got off of Utena's back with a little hop. It was clear that she was feeling perky today.

"Here you go!"

Wakaba held out a small box, just about big enough to sit on the palm of her hand. It was tied with a cute ribbon - obviously a present.

"What is it?"

"It's a compact! It matches mine. <3"

"Gah."

"What, you don't want it?"

"No, no, of course I appreciate it..."

"Ahh...! You don't *seem* very appreciative. How about this, Utena!?" Wakaba started playfully strangling Utena.

"Okay, okay! I get it, Wakaba!" Utena laughed even as she was being strangled.

For whatever reason, it seemed like Wakaba had gone back to her usual self. Utena didn't get the impression that she was faking it.

Did something good happen to her?

"Hey, Utena! Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah! I told you I am." Utena could only smile wryly, as Wakaba seemed ready to launch into an account of what she did yesterday.

It's good that she's cheerful again... but it'd be okay if she's wasn't this cheerful. Wakaba was in such a good mood that Utena was taken aback. Nevermind 'cheerful' - Wakaba was almost floating on air.

Wakaba's chatter was interrupted by one of their classmates, Tsukamoto.

"Hey, Utena. You got a minute?"

"What's up, Tsukamoto? Is it another basketball match? If so, you should discuss it directly with her manager, me!" Wakaba answered for Utena. "Manager" was, of course, a self-appointed title.

"It's not that, Shinohara. Tenjou, you've got a visitor."

"A visitor?"

Who...?

Utena's question was immediately answered, as shrieking voices arose from the entrance to the classroom.

"Touga-sama!?"

"Why are you here in the Middle School?"

"I saw your kendo match! It was soooo close!"

"Welcome to the Middle School, Kiryuu-sama!"

Utena's brow furrowed.

"Yo, Tenjou," Touga called out loudly to her, heedless of her feelings. The reactions from her classmates were immediate.

"Huh? Tenjou!?"

"Touga-sama and... Utena?"

"Tenjou and the President...? I'd never have suspected!"

All eyes were instantly locked on her.

"What's going on, Utena?" Even Wakaba was kind of glaring at her.

"I'll explain later."

"Oh, okay..."

Utena smiled vaguely, but inside, she was grumbling.

Dammit, Touga! Just you wait...

If he'd noticed her reaction, Touga showed no sign of it as he stood waving from the entrance to the classroom.

*** **

"Don't come and call me out in public like that," Utena said, as soon as the two of them were alone. "Isn't the Dueling Game supposed to be a secret?"

Obviously, the fact that special duels were held for the members of the Student Council was kept under wraps from the general student body. Utena had made no promises, but she kept it a secret like the Student Council members did anyway. It wasn't for their sake, though - it was for Anthy's. If the Dueling Game was public knowledge, then Anthy who served as the 'Rose Bride' prize, would surely be the object of great scrutiny. Utena just didn't want to subject her to that.

That's why she was so upset with Touga for thoughtlessly approaching her in front of everyone.

"Hey, now. There's no need to glare. Obviously I wouldn't deliver a challenge in a place like that."

"Of course not. But how am I supposed to explain why you came to visit me?"

"Simple. Say I came to ask you out on a date," Touga whispered. His voice was so sweet, it might have melted the heart of any other girl.

Utena, however, curtly rejected him. "I don't like lies."

"Lies?"

"Yeah. This seems like a good time to tell you - I hate liars and playboys."

"Oh, but it's not a lie. I really did come to ask you out, you see."

"I just said, I hate playboys, too."

Utena didn't believe him.

This guy asks out girls like most people say 'hello,' she thought.

"If you don't have anything else to say, I'm gonna head back."

"But you haven't given me an answer about our date." Touga sounded completely relaxed, like he was sure Utena would say 'yes.' That only irritated Utena more.

"Sorry, I don't want a repeat of that other time."

"That other time?"

Utena flushed. She remembered how, the first time she'd met Touga, he'd caught her off-guard by kissing her out of the blue.

Not that again...

His lips were so warm, it was like being kissed by a flame...

"Anyway, I'm not interested in an invitation from a dangerous guy like you. If we went on a date, who knows what you'd try to pull?"

"Well then, how about a double date?"

A double date - just like it sounded, two couples going on a date together. But what about the other couple...?

Utena turned back towards Touga, looking dubious.

"I'll bring a friend, and you bring a friend too, alright?"

"A friend?"

"That's right, a friend."

A friend... Back to that topic again. The word pulled at Utena's heart.

A friend of mine... Anthy and Wakaba's faces floated before her eyes.

"Well, I'll just be off, then."

"Hey, hold it! I haven't said anything about agreeing to..."

"We'll be waiting for you at the entrance to the Dueling Arena forest after class," Touga said as he left.

"...go on a double date," she finished, even though Touga couldn't hear her.

"No way I'm going on a double date. If he thinks he can just decide that by himself, then I hope he enjoys waiting." She couldn't stand how he'd decided everything by himself. "That playboy can just wait at the forest forever. Maybe he'll learn something from it."

Touga had sounded completely sure that Utena would come. Maybe he just thought that no girl would turn him down.

"Yeah, it's not like I agreed to anything, so I have no reason to go... not really..."

Frustrated, Utena kicked a small rock by her feet. The stone struck the side of the school building with a 'clink.'

Chapter 4

Prince

After school.

In the end, Utena wound up standing in front of the entrance to the Dueling Arena forest.

It's not that I particularly want to go on a date. But it would've sucked for whatever friend Touga brought along if I just left them waiting, so here I am.

Utena grumbled silently to herself while she waited impatiently for Touga to appear.

If it was just Touga being left waiting, that'd be fine. But I don't want to leave some poor friend waiting.

Yeah, once his friend comes, I can explain the situation and head back. No way am I actually going to go through with the date.

Utena continued to frown, like she'd been doing ever since her chat with Touga. Wakaba, smiling next to her, stood in sharp contrast. She was busy admiring herself in the compact she'd bought yesterday - a cute one that looked like a white seashell.

Anthy, however, wasn't with Utena for once. Utena had told her to go on ahead of them. It wouldn't do to show up at a double date with three people.

Utena turned to Wakaba, who still seemed oddly happy.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking they're late, that's all."

"Hey, what's going on, anyway? Does it have something to do with the President coming to see you earlier?"

"...I'll let him explain himself once he arrives."

Utena hadn't told Wakaba about the double date thing. She'd just asked her to come with her after school. Even so, Wakaba had gladly agreed. Utena was grateful for that, but she was still wondering why Wakaba looked so happy.

Did she get the wrong idea about something...? Utena thought, concerned.

Utena's concerns were unfounded, however. Wakaba had no idea why Utena had invited her here - she was just happy that Anthy hadn't been invited along, too.

"By the way, whoever asked to meet you here must be pretty weird. This forest is totally off-limits, you know."

"Oh, it is?"

"Yeah. I guess you hadn't heard, but it's written in our student handbooks and everything. Ordinary students aren't allowed in."

"Ordinary students, huh? So *non-ordinary* students *can* go in?"

"Exactly," another voice answered, instead of Wakaba.

Utena spun around in surprise. What she saw was...

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting, Tenjou Utena-kun."

...Kiryuu Touga. Riding a white horse.

"Touga..."

The horse was pure white, and so beautiful that it looked like it had stepped out of a fairy tale.

A prince on a white horse...

Yes, those were the words that came to mind, seeing Touga sit astride his mount like a knight from the Middle Ages. The sun was at his back, making him look all the more dazzling.

"What's wrong? A sports prodigy like you has never ridden a horse before?"

"So this date is supposed to be... horse riding?"

"That's right. The two of us will fly like the wind on my beloved steed."

Touga rubbed his horse's neck with a practiced hand. It let out a long, calm snort. Even with her untrained eye, Utena could tell it was pleased.

"...It seems happy."

"Oh, I think she's just happy that a lady like you will be riding her."

"Not this again," Utena complained, in response to Touga's flirtatious remarks.

"How much longer do you intend to hit on her, Touga?" an arrogant voice cut in. Utena knew it well.

No way... that guy?

Coming up from behind Touga was, indeed, Saionji. Like Touga, he was also riding a horse.

Just great. Utena cursed her own thoughtlessness. Touga had said he was bringing a 'friend.' Of course she should have expected this.

The guy who threw away Wakaba's love letter, which had been tacked up in the hall.

The guy Wakaba had been trying so hard to forget.

The guy who Wakaba had slapped, her eyes filled with tears.

Those memories flashed relentlessly through Utena's mind.

I can't believe I invited Wakaba on a double date with Saionji...

"He's the friend you were going to bring!?"

"Sure. He is my only friend, after all," Touga replied, winking at Saionji. Saionji turned his head, deliberately refusing to look at him.

"Sorry, Wakaba! C'mon, let's go. I really didn't know..." Utena turned back to Wakaba. But Wakaba's attention was elsewhere.

"Saionji-san..."

"So when he said 'Tenjou Utena's friend,' he meant you...?"

Saionji and Wakaba's eyes met. They stared at each other in silence.

To Utena, watching, it felt like time had frozen around them.

*** **

In the central garden of Ohtori Academy, there was an elegant greenhouse shaped like a bird cage. The only things grown there were roses. Red roses, black tea roses, Julia roses, and older strains... it was like a rose exhibition. There was even a rare breed of white rose that was only cultivated here. It was clear that roses had an important place in the academy - the school crest was even shaped like one.

Unfortunately, however, the ordinary students weren't allowed into this museum of roses. It was for the exclusive pleasure of the Student Council.

One of them, Kaoru Miki, came here occasionally to admire the flowers. He didn't water them or anything, he just enjoyed spending time amidst their beautiful fragrances.

"It's been a month since we came here last."

"You're right. You've been working a little too hard lately, Miki."

Sitting alongside Miki was his twin sister, Kozue. She wasn't a member of the Student Council, but other students could enter with a council-member's permission.

"You think so?"

"Yes."

That's all they said. For them, that was enough.

Unselfconsciously, Kozue took Miki's hand. He didn't refuse.

"Don't overdo it, Miki."

"I know. I won't."

The twins' conversation was short. It was almost like their clasped hands were conveying their thoughts between them.

"Kozue, I..."

"What?"

As Kozue stared straight at him, Miki hesitated.

We're becoming adults. At some point, we'll have to walk our own paths.

...was what he wanted to say.

Miki had lost his duel against Utena. He'd wanted to protect her, but instead, he'd been defeated by her. And although Kozue had been saved in the end, he hadn't been the one to save her.

That's why Miki wanted to become stronger. So he could at least protect the people important to him. To that end, he'd recently been throwing himself into both piano and fencing. He felt uneasy when he wasn't driving himself to greater heights. Pushing himself like mad, he felt like he was getting a little stronger, a little closer to being an adult. Even if that was nothing more than a delusion, it made Miki feel a little better.

However, Miki still couldn't keep himself away from Kozue. Even while dedicating himself to piano and fencing, he always made sure to set aside time for her.

After all, Miki...

"Chuu!"

...cried a strange voice. Not a person's voice, of course. It belonged to Chu-Chu.

He now noticed that Anthy was in the middle of the rose garden, watering the plants. Chu-Chu was by her feet, grappling with a frog.

"Himemiya-sempai...?"

"Oh." Anthy turned. She looked startled, like she hadn't noticed the two of them until now.

"How long have *you* been here?" Kozue's tone was venomous: as if to say, 'you're interrupting our private time.'

For whatever reason, Kozue disliked Himemiya Anthy. She felt like she had a reason for it, though nothing in particular came to mind.

"Oh, just for a moment," Anthy responded, neutral as always. Either she hadn't noticed Kozue's hostility, or she was choosing not to respond to it.

"It's unusual to see you by yourself," Miki cut in, sharply squeezing Kozue's hand. "You're not with

Tenjou-sempai today?"

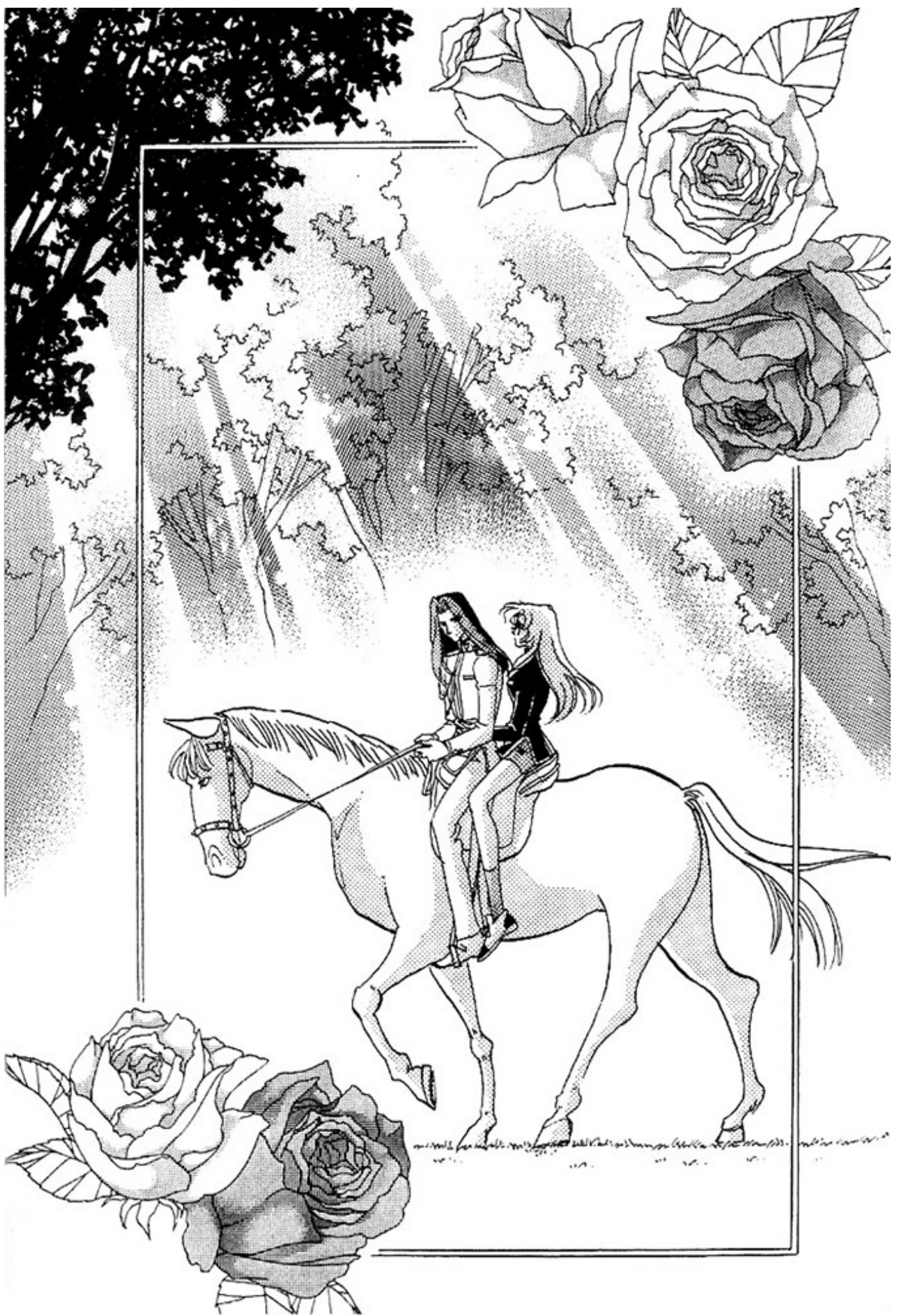
"No." Anthy smiled slightly at some private joke. "Today is pest control day."

*** **

"Come on, Tenjou Utena," Touga said, taking her hand. He pulled her up, with surprising strength.

"D... don't be ridiculous, Mr. President," Utena protested, even as she was settling in to the saddle behind him. Anyone other than Utena might have lost their balance and fallen off the horse. Touga didn't seem particularly concerned, though.

"Right, like that. Not bad."



"Wasn't that dangerous? I hadn't said anything about wanting to ride."

It was her first time on a horse, and she was higher than she'd expected. The leaves on the ground looked tiny from here, and so did Wakaba.

"Oh, should I have treated you like a lady?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Geez, you're always so..."

"Yes?" Touga's face was surprisingly close to hers. Involuntarily, Utena remembered their first kiss.

You always come at me out of the blue... you're so high-handed.

"Hang on tight, Tenjou." Touga said, suddenly shaking the reigns. That was the signal to "run." The white horse faithfully obeyed its master.

"Hey, wait a second! I'm gonna fall!"

"It's fine. You can hold on to me!"

"Who would want do that?" Utena's response was drowned out by the sound of the horse's hooves.

The white horse's pace gradually increased, and so did the jolting of its movements.

Are horses supposed to be this rough!? Flustered, Utena grabbed Touga's back. When she did, she noticed Touga grin silently, though he still wasn't looking at her. No doubt he was pleased that she'd girlishly clung to him like he'd planned.

The white horse carried the two of them deeper into the Dueling Arena forest.

*** **

Meanwhile, Wakaba had been left behind.

Well, it isn't a white horse, but...

She stared at Saionji. Sitting astride a healthy-looking black horse, he looked princely enough to her.

My prince is here... My own stubborn, cold, love-letter-dumping prince.

Saionji held her gaze like a magnet. Everything was still, like a scene out of a picture book.

However...

"Well? Get on." Saionji's words broke the spell. "Behind me. Let's catch up to those two." He eyed the saddle behind him.

"But..." Wakaba looked down at her school uniform... specifically, her miniskirt.

If I ride a horse in a skirt like this, I'm gonna be exposed.

"If it's too high, I'll help you up."

"Thanks. But..."

"What? Do you hate horses?"

"No, it's not that... it's just, this skirt..."

"...?"

Apparently Saionji didn't understand why Wakaba was hesitating. With no other choice, she decided to spell it out for him.

"Well, um... everyone would be able to see, wouldn't they?"

"Don't worry. There's nobody around but me."

You're the one I don't want to see!

At a loss, Saionji stared at Wakaba, who was looking down in embarrassment. His eyes showed both annoyance and surprise.

At last, he reached out for Wakaba's arm, and...

"Eek!"

...yanked her up to join him. He held her there, supported in his arm.

"S, Saionji-san..."

His face was right beside hers. She was so close, she could even hear his breath.

"You can ride like this, right?"

Saionji deposited Wakaba beside him. Both her legs hanging off one side - what was called 'riding sidesaddle.'

Oh, man... we're so close... Is my hair okay? I thought it looked pretty weird the last time he saw me... And I ate curry for lunch, will he be able to smell it? I don't want him to think of me as 'that girl who smells like curry.' But if I turn my face away, that'd be rude, right? What should I do...?

She kept staring at Saionji, frozen.

Saionji, meanwhile, looked like he was about to say something, but decided it was too much trouble. Instead, he shook the reins with his left arm - his right arm still wrapped around Wakaba.

"Giddyup!"

"Ah! Eeek!"

The black horse ran like the wind... or at least, that's how it seemed to Wakaba. In fact, it had only started a slow trot. Still, Wakaba clung fiercely to Saionji. She felt like she'd fall if she loosened her grip at all.

At least she wasn't worried about her hair or whether she smelled like curry anymore.

*** **

On the north side of Ohtori Academy stood a wide forest. It was so large, it could even be seen from the town below. Ordinary students, who weren't allowed in, just called it 'The Forest.' It was only known as The Dueling Arena Forest to a very restricted few.

Utena and Touga raced through it on their white horse.

"Touga, can you slow this thing down!?"

"What was that? I can't hear you!" He gave no sign of slowing down.

They raced down a path that was so narrow, it could have been mistaken for an deer trail. The wind from their passing sirred up leaves behind them.

"So why did you invite that girl?" Touga shouted back at her.

"What do you mean?" Utena shouted back. It was the only way they could hear each other.

"I told you to bring a friend along. Why did you bring her, and not Himemiya Anthy?"

"Wakaba's a friend, too!"

"Was that all? Or was it that you *couldn't* ask Anthy?"

"...!"

Bullseye.

When Utena had tried to invite Anthy, Touga's words had sprung back into her mind: 'Are you sure that your friend thinks of you as a friend, too?'

I'm Anthy's friend. Or, at least, I think I am. But... what about Anthy? Does she feel the same way? Maybe I didn't ask her because I wasn't sure...

Unexpectedly, the white horse came to a stop. As the silence of the forest returned, a feeling of loneliness swept over Utena. She felt like she had to say something, just to break the silence.

"Touga... we left Wakaba behind," she said, changing the subject. She didn't want to talk about Anthy.

"Maybe she didn't want to spoil the mood."

"Don't be stupid." Even Utena's blustery voice was quieter than usual.

"Hey, Tenjou. Can't you reciprocate my feelings a little? Surely you've noticed how I feel about you."

"I..."

Utena tried to push herself away from Touga's back, but it was hard to make much of a gap between them on the horse.

"I just don't..."

"I understand. It's your prince, isn't it?"

"..."

"The prince who saved you when you were young, and wiped away your tears. Who sent you a letter each year on your birthday, and told you you could meet him at this academy..."

Utena's prince - the person who had saved her after her parents' deaths. She had no idea who or where he was. But she'd always yearned after him. She'd even started wearing boys' clothes, to become more like him.

"He said he'd meet you here. Don't you think the author of those letters could be a student here at Ohtori?"

Touga's words sounded like an invitation. He was leading her thoughts towards a particular conclusion.

Is my prince... him...?

Utena locked eyes with Touga.

"Couldn't your prince be a guy like me...?"

"Stop it." Utena dismounted, hopping down from the side of the horse.

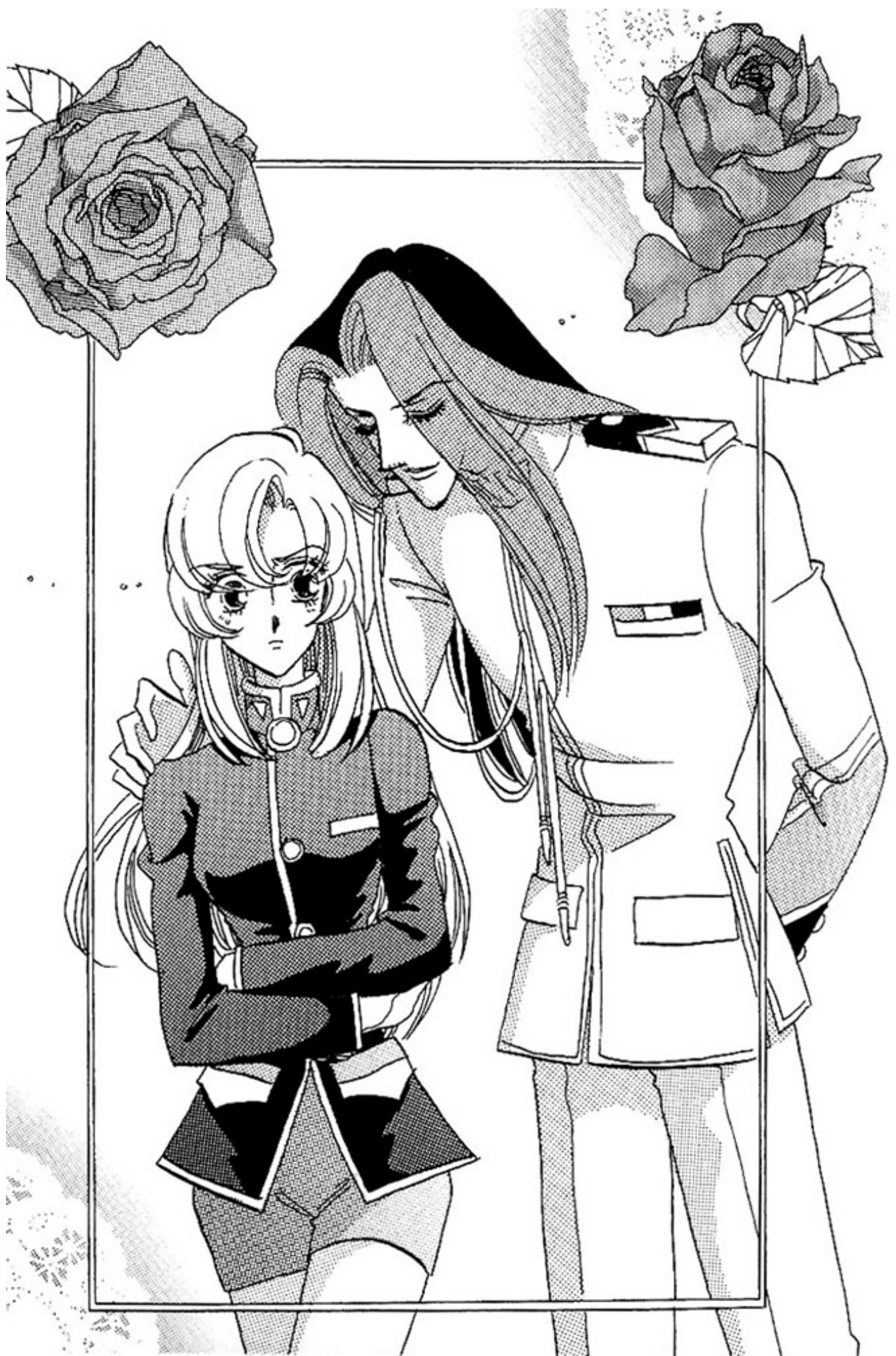
"Don't run away, Tenjou."

Utena's body froze, like she'd been struck by lightning.

That's right. This is a good chance. To find out whether he's really my prince. I've been meaning to ask him directly for a long time. Not to mention asking more questions about the Dueling Game and Ends of the World...

But... I'm afraid. I'm not sure I want to learn the real answers. Whether they're what I expect or not... I'm not sure how I should respond, or what I should do afterwards. I'm not confident.

But still...



Utena tentatively turned back around, only to find that Touga had already dismounted himself, and walked up behind her. He was not respecting her personal space. Indeed, he was close enough to kiss...

"Are you really..." she began to blurt out, her voice cracking. Her throat was dry, and her heart was pounding. It felt like her blood was boiling within her body, and her mind started to feel dizzy.

But,

Say it.

Utena took a deep breath, and looked at Touga. Seeing the resolution in her eyes, even he looked serious for once. He put aside his playboyish demeanor, and faced her head-on.

"Are you..." Her voice seemed to echo across the silent forest.

"Are you really my prince?"

"And if I am?"

"...!"

In the silence that followed, Utena became aware of the quiet, rustling sounds of the forest all around them.

*** **

Saionji and Wakaba's black horse walked quietly through the forest.

Saionji was being unexpectedly gentle with the horse. Whether that was because Wakaba was riding, or whether it was just his usual riding style, she had no idea.

"Saionji-san, do you do a lot of riding?"

"I haven't for a long time," he answered, eyes fixed straight ahead. "But this was our usual course back in middle school."

"Touga's and yours?"

"Yeah," he nodded.

He looked a little grim, so Wakaba tried to lighten the mood.

"You and Touga are best friends, huh?"

"Best friends? Who told you that?"

"Who...? Um, well, you run your club and the Student Council together, and they say you used to room together back in middle school, so..."

"Yeah, maybe we were, back then."

Wakaba didn't fail to notice the hint of a smile on Saionji's lips. It looked somehow childish, and seeing it made Wakaba happy, for some reason. It felt like this side of Saionji was hers alone to see.

"What?"

Apparently Wakaba had started grinning at Saionji as she stared. He looked back at her questioningly.

"Oh... uh, it's nothing." Wakaba hurriedly turned away again from Saionji's face, which was far too close.

This is unreal. I'm actually riding on a horse with Saionji-san? There's no way anyone will believe me if I tell them. I can hardly believe it myself...

"Now, where did that jerk Touga get off to?" Saionji muttered, looking around. There was no sign of him or Utena. They couldn't even hear any hoofbeats.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have dragged my feet so much."

"Don't worry about it. It's Touga's fault for racing off ahead of a novice rider like you."

"I knew it!" Wakaba exclaimed, in her usual voice.

"Knew what?"

"You've been slowing down for me because it's my first time, haven't you?"

"Not really." Saionji turned back away unhappily, and fell silent.

So he was taking it easy for my sake after all...

Wakaba stared at Saionji out of the corner of her eye again. His sullen expression struck her as very childish.

Pretentious and unfriendly, but a kind person underneath - Wakaba had always imagined Saionji like that, but now it seemed that he really was like that in reality, too. Come to think of it, that shoujo comic she liked, with the toothpaste gift, also featured that kind of cool, standoffish boy.

Of course, "cool but kind" was merely Wakaba's impression of him. But, after all, love is blind. Wakaba's view of Saionji was what was real to her.

"Saionji-san, I..." The words rose unbidden from her lips.

"What?"

"Um, I... That is..."

Wakaba just needed to follow the usual script of a love confession. But she still didn't have the courage to go further.

"What's wrong?"

"I..."

"Hmm?"

"...Forget it. It's nothing."

"Don't worry. Please, proceed."

"But..."

"Go ahead."

Saionji was being stubborn. Wakaba had to say something now.

"Well..." But there was no way she could say she loved him now, either. Just like the first time, her confession had again ended in failure.

"Actually... what's the 'Rose Bride?'" With no other choice, Wakaba asked the first thing that sprang to mind. Not that she hadn't been wondering about it anyway; but she hadn't been planning on asking him.

"You mentioned something about it the other day. And I heard Utena and Anthy talking about it, too, and..."

Wakaba's voice wilted, then died. Saionji's expression hardened, transforming completely from what it had been a moment ago.

"I'm so sorry. It was rude of me to ask..."

"No."

Saionji suddenly grasped Wakaba's shoulders.

Huh!?

Silently, Saionji began to lean his head down towards hers. Wakaba's heart began to pound as his handsome countenance drew near. It felt so loud, she worried that he might be able to hear it.

Oh man... he really is super dreamy...

His face was almost touching hers now.

Is he going to... kiss me?

Wakaba wondered whether she should close her eyes. She sort of felt like she should, but she couldn't bring herself to shut out this sight. It was straight out of her dreams.

His lips drew nearer.

And nearer.

And nearer.

And then...

...he spoke.

"Don't get involved with the Rose Bride," he growled.

He made it sound like a matter of life and death. And yet, Wakaba detected a note of kindness in his voice, as well.

"With the Rose Bride...?"

"That's right. You shouldn't become mixed up in it." Saionji's gaze was fixed on her. She couldn't remember ever seeing anyone look so serious.

"I'll say it once more. Don't get involved with the Rose Bride. That's my advice to you."

The "Rose Bride." The term reverberated in Wakaba's mind. It felt dark and ominous. Like a curse.

*** **

"And if I am?" Touga answered, watching Utena closely.

If he was the prince, that is.

My prince...? The guy who saved me when I was young...?

Utena's left ring finger felt hot. That was where she wore the prince's Rose Seal. Eight years ago, while in despair, she'd fallen into a river but been saved by a prince. Since then, she'd received a letter stamped with the Rose Seal every year.

This year, the letter had pointed her to Ohtori Academy. There had been a photo, and the words "I'll be waiting for you here."

That's why she'd come. To meet her prince once more...

"Well, ARE you my prince?" she repeated. She was suspicious of Touga. She and Miki had researched his background, and even snuck into his room to investigate. "But you were in Amsterdam at the time..."

Amsterdam was the location of Ohtori Academy's sister campus. Where Touga was supposed to have been living when Utena had fallen into the river.

Touga just smiled at her questions, baiting her with his lack of response.

"Answer me, Touga. Are you... are you really my prince?"

"Here's your answer."

Touga moved closer to Utena. Utena pulled back, trying to maintain their distance.

So Touga moved closer. And Utena moved away... until her back bumped up against a large tree. Nowhere to run.

"Since I first saw you, I knew this day would come."

Utena saw her reflection in his eyes. For some reason, she thought she looked young again... like she'd been when the prince had saved her.

"I am your..."

"Touga!"

It was neither Utena nor Touga's voice.

Utena took the opportunity to slip away from Touga. He didn't try to stop her, but simply gave a half-annoyed, half-amused smile.

"He never did have any sense of timing."

He turned back to look at Saionji and Wakaba, sitting aside their black horse.

The only sound was the rustling of the wind through the trees.

Chapter 5

Painful Love

The bells rang, signaling the end of school. After the requisite bow to the teacher, the classroom suddenly exploded into a flurry of activity. Some students swiftly gathered up their bags, some met up to coordinate their after-school plans, and some simply started chatting.

Only Utena continued to sit just as she had during class, staring out the window. She'd been in that kind of mood that all day.

It was all because of the double date the day before. After Saionji and Wakaba had met up with her and Touga, they'd all ridden back out the forest without any more conversation. There, Touga had suggested parting ways, and the date had ended there.

I wasn't able to get a straight answer out of him...

She'd been brooding over that since yesterday.

Was Kiryuu Touga her prince, or not? Yet another chance to ask him directly had slipped through her fingers.

Of course, at the time, she hadn't wanted to ask. But now that she hadn't, she wanted to after all. Which didn't change the fact that she couldn't bring herself to do it when they were face-to-face.

I just can't do it...

When it came to her prince, Utena immediately became just like anyone else. She lost her courage, and became another timid, nervous girl.

"What's wrong, Utena?"

Wakaba's voice pulled Utena back to reality.

"Oh, class is over?"

"Well, duh! It's been done for a while!" Wakaba responded, looking amazed.

Now that she looked around, Utena saw that there were only a few students left in the classroom. Everyone else must have already left.

"Geez, Utena... you're acting really weird today!"

"I am?"

"Uh-huh."

Just hearing that didn't return Utena to her usual energetic self, though. And though she normally welcomed hearing Wakaba's lively voice, today it seemed less fun and more just plain loud.

"I've just got something on my mind. It's nothing major."

"Yeah?" Wakaba asked. But she didn't press the matter further.

Honestly, she wanted to grill Utena about what had happened yesterday with the Student Council President. However, with the mood Utena was in today, it seemed like any such efforts would be futile.

"Well, if you have any problems, come to your super best bud Wakaba for advice, okay? See you later!"

Wakaba clapped Utena on the back, then left the classroom in a flash. Utena stared after her for a moment, absentmindedly.



"Wakaba seems kind of happy today, don't you think?"

"Yes. She's been like that all day," replied Anthy, who had been standing silently near Utena for some time. "Something good must've happened to her."

"Hmmm..." Utena looked back to Anthy. It was unusual for her to pay much attention to Wakaba. Maybe Wakaba was just in such a good mood, it was hard not to notice.

Geez, and I couldn't even tell... I'm so out of it today. Nothing, it seemed, could lift Utena out of her funk.

*** **

Wakaba ran, clutching her bag with both hands. Inside was a boxed lunch that she'd stayed up until almost midnight making. Of course, it was for Saionji.

She'd made light foods, suitable for eating right after practice: a sandwich and a few small side dishes. Wakaba didn't usually cook much, and even those were a bit of a stretch for her.

I wonder if Saionji will eat them...

Her sandwiches didn't taste bad, but nobody would call them pretty. Still, she thought the wieners cut into the shapes of little octopi were pretty well-done.

It'll be fine. They taste good, anyway. And I poured my feelings into them! ...oh, what am I saying? <3

That's what was going through her mind as she split away from the main school buildings and drew near the kendo hall. Any number of girls with eyes for Saionji were already camped around the windows, peering in. Every Saionji fan knew that he'd get upset if you actually entered the building. All you could do was peer in and hope you caught a glimpse of him.

I used to just be one of the crowd, too...

Seeing the other girls, Wakaba briefly indulged a warm feeling of superiority. Today, she was different. She didn't have to peek any more.

Not slackening her pace, Wakaba entered the kendo hall.

The girls gathered around the windows were split between two reactions. Some felt pity for this foolish, idiotic girl. Others were filled with schadenfreude, gleefully anticipating Saionji-sama's rage.

But a moment later, they all fell into shock and despair.

"Saionji-san."

"Oh, it's you. What is it?"

Saionji appeared suspicious at Wakaba's sudden appearance, certainly. But to the surprise of all

the onlookers, he didn't immediately throw her out.

"It's about time for your break." Holding her bag, Wakaba smiled broadly.

*** **

Out on the hill that stretched across the school grounds -

Utena leaned back against a gently sloping patch of grass, and stared up at the sky. She did this sometimes when she wanted to think... and sometimes when she wanted to zone out and not think about anything at all.

"My prince..." Utena murmured, still skygazing.

Anthy, who was usually glued to her side, wasn't around. Utena, feeling that she wanted to be alone for a while, had told her to go on ahead.

"He told me to come here, so it makes sense that he's a student..."

Utena rolled over onto her side. As she did so, she noticed something pressing into the side of her leg. Reaching down, she pulled the offending item out of her pocket. It was a white, shell-shaped compact... the matching one that Wakaba had bought for her.

A compact, huh...?

Skillfully, Utena popped it open with one hand. As it opened, the light from the sun reflected off the mirror inside, bathing Utena's face. Utena tilted it away to avoid the glare.

It was her first compact. The mirror reflected Utena's face sharply and clearly, so much so that Utena felt a little embarrassed.

What am I doing...? Utena sighed, staring at herself in the mirror. She didn't think she was especially ugly. But the role of a princess pining for a prince didn't feel right to her.

Going on dates with a boyfriend or whatever isn't my thing, I guess.

As Utena was lost in self-reflection, she heard a voice from above.

"How unusual – seeing you with a compact."

It was a familiar voice. Straining her neck to see, Utena saw Juri standing over her.

"Are you switching over from dressing as a prince to being a princess?"

Hearing Juri's words, Utena pulled herself up to a sitting position, looking discouraged.

"It doesn't suit me, right?"

"I didn't say that. On the contrary, I think it suits you surprisingly well."

"...?"

"Could it be that this side of you is more real?" Juri's tone was unusually kind. It reassured Utena, who would ordinarily have objected violently to those words.

"Are you in love with Touga?" Juri suddenly asked, bluntly. There was no ambiguity to the question – Utena had no choice but to face it.

"I..."

Was she? That was the question that Utena had been struggling with since yesterday... no, since the day she first met Touga.

The playboy who had stolen her first kiss.

The young man who had stared up at the castle in the sky.

The one who'd told her not to lose her strength and nobility – words that only Utena and her prince should know.

The one who might be her prince... Touga Kiryuu.

"I don't know," was Utena's answer to Juri's question. "I don't know. I'm not even sure what that means..." Maybe that was the question that had been bothering her all day, if she was being honest with herself.

"It's okay to fall in love with someone." Juri wasn't looking at Utena. She was staring at the sky – no, staring into space. "But if you fall in love too deeply, it will hurt you. That's just how it is."

Utena looked up at Juri, surprised at her words.

Juri, still staring off into the distance, looked completely different than the girl Utena knew: the one they called 'the Leopardess.'

If you fall in love too deeply... it will hurt...

Utena didn't know whether that was true. But it sounded right. So, turning it over in her heart, she didn't ask any more questions, and just stared up at the sky alongside Juri. Juri didn't say anything more, either.

If you fall in love too deeply, it will hurt...

They stayed like that, for a while.

*** **

"What are you doing, Wakaba?"

It was night. Wakaba was in the kitchen, and the one who spoke was her dormmate, Yamamura Keiko. It was rare to see Wakaba here – working with ingredients was not one of her strengths.

"Oh, uh... nothing much."

"Weren't you rummaging around in here last night, too? What's up?"

"Well, I thought I'd, like, make a bento lunch."

"*You?* Did something happen!?" Keiko asked, with exaggerated surprise. "You must have a fever or something. Or you got such a bad score on a test, it scrambled your brain."

"Hey, it's nothing like that!" Wakaba protested, pouting. "I'm just kinda in a tough spot financially this month. I thought I'd cook some more to, like, save on expenses."

"Oh, that makes sense." Hearing Wakaba's explanation, Keiko abruptly lost interest. "But you're such a terrible cook, you're going to mess up and waste a lot of ingredients. It'll probably cost you even more in the end."

"Keiko. Remember that I'm holding a kitchen knife." Wakaba brandished the object in question.

"Just kidding, just kidding! Wakaba, you have what it takes to create the ultimate lunch. Give it your all."

Keiko fled the room. She knew Wakaba had been joking herself, of course – she was grinning as she left.

"Jeez, that was rude. I guess I have a reputation."

Wakaba looked down at her completed octopus-shaped wieners. Saionji had looked kind of embarrassed, but he'd told her that they tasted good. And he'd eaten the sandwich and drank all the tea, too. Of course, after he'd eaten, he'd gone straight back to practicing kendo, but it still made Wakaba unbelievably happy.

And to think that she'd once given up on him!

Her prince - cold and kind of misogynistic, but kind, deep inside.

Wakaba was conscious that she was falling for Saionji even more deeply than before. And at the same time, he felt more within reach than ever.

Before, I thought it was just a hopeless crush...

She thought back to the days when she'd watched Saionji from afar, alongside the rest of the girls.

She remembered the tears she'd shed, the day he'd posted her love letter in the hall.

And the moment she'd unthinkingly slapped his face.

She saw herself in her various reminiscences, floating up and then fading away again. It was like a montage of flashbacks in a movie. Indeed, Wakaba felt like she'd become a movie protagonist, herself.

A perfectly ordinary girl, one of countless others. Lacking any particular worth, she lives a barely-noticeable existence. But by complete accident, she meets the most popular person on campus, and they fall in love.

It was the sort of situation she used to read about a lot in girls' comics. When she was young, she'd believed that something like that would happen to her some day. But as she'd gotten a little older, she'd realized that that sort of thing wasn't real – it was nothing more than a fantasy. That's why it was in fiction. Comics and TV dramas presented a slanted view of the world.

And yet...

Maybe dreams really do come true sometimes. Maybe princes really do appear before ordinary girls. Maybe... maybe it's happening to me...

Were her dreams really becoming reality, or was this nothing more than a very realistic dream? Her heart trembled.

*** **

In the middle of the night -

The moonlight bathed the inside of the kendo hall faintly.

Two men holding *shinai* faced off against each other.

"It's quite an honor for you to have invited me here, my dearest friend," Touga smiled.

But the response he got from his good friend Saionji was cold.

"Don't misunderstand me. It's just that you're the only one who can give me a good fight."

Saionji's skill was unmatched in the prefecture. Even students in college sports clubs couldn't stand up to him. Since they were young, Touga had been his only equal in swordsmanship.

"It makes me remember our middle school days."

"Yes... we used to fight every day, back then."

"Because I was the only one who could give you a good fight?"

"Yes. But that wasn't the only reason."

Saionji dropped his sword to *gedan*, the stance where the sword was in its lowest position. That was unusual for him – his specialty was *jodan*, a stance where the sword was raised above the head.

"You changed," Saionji spat out, like it was a surprise attack. "Ever since you received the letter with the rose seal, you were different."

"I am who I am. I didn't particularly *plan* to change."

"Hmph. Well, I don't intend to engage in a debate with you."

Saionji's eyes narrowed slightly, and he inched his left foot forward just a touch. He was preparing to strike, Touga knew. The signs were almost imperceptible, and he only recognized them

because he had had matches with Saionji countless times before.

Touga lowered his own *shinai* to match Saionji's. In such an exchange, he had the slight edge.

Measuring the distance between himself and his opponent, he waited for Saionji's attack.

"Let's go!" Saionji bellowed, with ridiculous earnestness. As he did so, he lunged forward to attack.

Touga let a small smile play about his lips, as he raised his *shinai* to block Saionji's. Saionji's weapon, in turn, was aimed for Touga's throat.

Touga deftly deflected his attack, simultaneously striking Saionji's gauntlet... or so he had intended. However...

Somehow Saionji's *shinai* slipped past his. No, it was just that Saionji had moved more quickly than him.

Dammit!

Saionji's weapon impacted against his body. Touga fell backwards, turning it into a somersault. The blow had missed any vital points, but struck his collar hard. A dull, throbbing pain remained in his shoulder.

"Tomorrow night, I will challenge Tenjou Utena," Saionji bluntly declared, the moonlight at his back. "Touga, I'll never hand over the Power to Revolutionize the World to you." His tone was firm.

Watching him, Touga's expression hardened.

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"Is love painful?" Utena suddenly murmured.

She'd been turning Juri's words over and over in her heart, until suddenly they spilled out. That's why they had been so soft – only Wakaba, who was right next to her, heard them at all.

"What did you say, Utena?"

However, she still hadn't been able to pick out the contents. Relieved, Utena decided to dodge the question.

"No, I didn't say anything."

"You didn't?"

"Yeah, you must be hearing things."

It was the next day. Utena was still feeling out of sorts after her meeting with Touga.

She'd been acting absentminded, making mistakes not just on homework but in her specialty, sports. Even her homeroom teacher had noticed, and suggested that she go to the nurse's office.

Does love... hurt?

Now, on top of wondering whether Touga was her prince, she had what Juri had said to grapple with. "Love hurts." She wasn't sure she completely understood it, but the words remained with her.

I guess I'm still working out my feelings since yesterday. Am I feeling love? Is it just hard to tell because of the pain that comes with it?

Thinking of Touga does make my heart race. Is that love? Or is it just because I think he might be my prince...?

I'm just not sure. No matter how much I think about it...

"Hey, Utena. Are you okay?"

Utena's contemplation was interrupted. She realized that Wakaba was looking at her with concern.

"Oh, sorry. Just thinking about something."

"You've been acting weird since yesterday, Utena."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely." Wakaba replied firmly.

Yeah... I guess this is pretty unlike me, huh?

"Hey, Wakaba. You have any plans later?"

"Huh?"

"Wanna go see a movie or something? Whatever you want to see is cool with me."

It was unusual for Utena to invite her out like that. Ordinarily, Wakaba would have agreed in a heartbeat.

But today...

"...what about Anthony?" Wakaba asked, uncharacteristically.

"She's not around. She has some errand or something that she does on Fridays."

"Oh..." Wakaba was not usually known for her concern about Anthony.

"I mean, if you don't have any other plans..."

"Um... I'm sorry, Utena. I kind of promised to meet up with Keiko." She meant Yamamura Keiko, another student in the South Dorm.

"Keiko, huh...? You know, I haven't hung out with her lately either. Ever since I got moved to the East Dorm, I hardly see the South Dorm folks." It felt like a long time ago, but until just a month ago, Utena had lived in the same dorm as Wakaba. "Hey, Wakaba, you mind if I tag along with..."

"I'm sorry, Utena! I've gotta go." Wakaba ran off, almost fleeing.

Utena cocked her head quizzically, but decided not to think too deeply about it. She looked around the room for something to distract herself other than a movie.

Utena was so caught up in herself, she still hadn't noticed the changes in Wakaba...

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I'm sorry, Utena... Wakaba inwardly apologized to Utena, as she headed towards the kendo hall.

Her appointment with Keiko was, of course, a lie. Actually, like the day before, she was going to bring Saionji a boxed meal.

Usually, she would have been happy to go to a movie with Utena, but today she'd had to pass. Saionji was more important to her than Utena right now.

Female friendship is fickle, I guess... she thought to herself as she ran, smiling and clutching the bag that contained the bento box.

Today, it again included a sandwich and an arrangement of side dishes. She'd even prepared slices of apple cut to look like rabbits for desert.

I wonder if Saionji-san will like it...

She imagined his pleased reaction at seeing the apple slices.

"Oh ho. Last time was octopi, and now rabbits. You're quite good with your hands."

"Oh, it was nothing! Any girl could do something like that."

"Not at all. Your culinary abilities are exceptional. You're going to make your husband very happy some day."

"Oh, Saionji-sama, stop it!"

That was the conversation that leapt into her mind.

Soon, she drew near the kendo hall, and went straight into the dojo. The girls assembled outside the window broke out in unfriendly whispers, but Wakaba paid them no heed.

"Hello! Is Saionji-san here?" she asked cheerfully as she entered.

The uniformed club members looked up, confused.

"The captain isn't here yet." one offered, looking uncomfortable.

"Oh... he's not?" Indeed, she didn't spy him anywhere. "Does he have the day off?"

"No, it's nothing like that..."

"I'll bet he's in the rose garden, like always," suggested one boy, who was wearing glasses. He stood out from the rest of the crowd, since he wasn't wearing a kendo uniform. He was probably the manager.

"Hey now..."

"Oh, it's okay to tell her, don't you think?"

"I don't know..."

"Um, what are you talking about?" Wakaba cut in without thinking. The conversation was feeling kind of awkward.

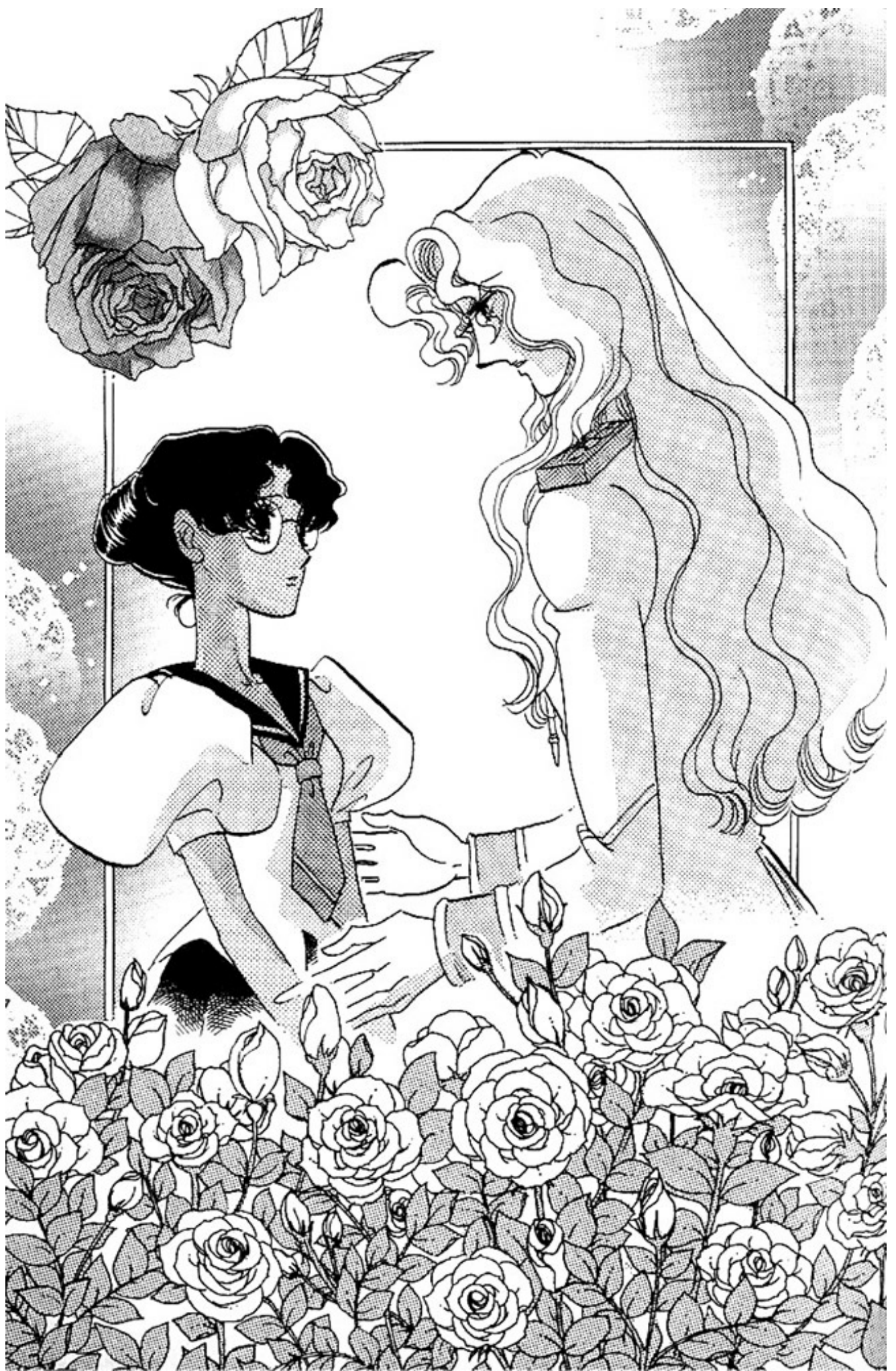
"The club president always goes to the rose garden around this time on Friday."

"The rose garden...?"

"Yeah. If you want to catch up with him, you should head over there."

Saionji-san in the rose garden...? The word "rose" made Wakaba feel strangely uneasy.

The rose garden... Saionji-san?



"Anthy, I know how much you must have suffered until now. But it ends today." Saionji passionately declared.

In contrast, Anthy listened passively. It wasn't even clear she'd heard him.

"Tonight, I will challenge Tenjou Utena to a duel. I am sure to be the victor. Our engagement will be restored, and you will become mine again." His voice was full of confidence. Apparently, as far as he was concerned, the result was a foregone conclusion.

"In order to regain you, I have undergone intense special training for the last month. Tenjou is no match for me anymore."

Since Saionji had lost his duel to Utena, he'd been coming to see Anthy in the rose garden every week: a fleeting reunion between two star-crossed lovers.

Anthy didn't react to Saionji's obvious passion. She kept coming to the rose garden on Fridays as usual, and one couldn't be sure whether she looked forward to seeing him, or whether she was just there to water the flowers.

There was no doubt in Saionji's mind, of course.

"Anthy, you are my Rose Bride. A flower that belongs to no-one else."

At those words, the door of the rose garden, where only Student Council members were supposed to be, shook softly.

*** **

"You are my flower, my Rose Bride."

When she heard those words, Wakaba had accidentally shaken the door. She'd been holding it half open so she could hear Saionji, eavesdropping on the two out of curiosity.

His Rose Bride... That phrase rang alarm bells in Wakaba's head.

Rose Bride... Anthy is the Rose Bride...

She dredged up her memories of the day she'd slapped Saionji...

"On the day we were engaged, you swore to me..."

"Shut up! The Rose Bride belongs to me!"

"We were engaged! I am Anthy's true..."

Anthy.

The Rose Bride.

Engaged.

To Saionji.

She felt like she was starting to put together the scattered pieces of the puzzle.

Anthy is the Rose Bride...? That's what she is...?

"She has some errand or something that she does on Fridays."

"The club president always goes to the rose garden around this time on Friday."

Utena's and the kendo boy's words matched up.

On Fridays, Saionji meets with Anthy. The two of them are surrounded by the scent of flowers. "Don't get involved with the Rose Bride" – that's what he told me. He meant Anthy?

Why? Why Anthy? What kind of relationship do the two of them have!?

I don't get it. That girl... and Saionji-san...?

That Anthy girl... Anthy...

Her mind a blur, Wakaba fled the scene.

*** **

Himemiya Anthy.

A second-year middle-school student at Ohtori Academy.

A girl.

Enrolled in C Class.

Staying in the East Dorm, same as Utena.

She was Utena's friend – she didn't seem to have any others.

And she was the Rose Bride...

Even though they'd been in the same class since they were first-years, Wakaba knew surprisingly little about her. Where she was from, what her family was like, her hobbies, her club activities... nothing.

What kind of a person is she...?

While Wakaba was turning this around in her head, she ended up at the reference library. This was where materials relating to the school, including student registries, were stored. Information about students' families and hometowns should be included in the registers as well.

However...

She's not here...?

Her name wasn't listed with the rest of second-year, Class C. Wakaba's name was, as was Utena's; Anthy's was the only name missing.

What does that mean? Who is she? Is her name really even Himemiya Anthy?

Wakaba looked over the other class lists, just to be sure. But she didn't see Anthy's name on any of them.

Himemiya Anthy... that girl is seriously weird.

Glancing around the room, Wakaba spied a door across from the desks and bookshelves, labeled "For Student Council Use."

Maybe in there...

Standing, Wakaba slowly drew closer to the door.

A gloomy girl who only talks about roses... before she got involved with Utena, that's all I thought of her as.

But now that I think about it, that rose garden is also only supposed to be for the Student Council. Why is Anthy allowed inside, I wonder...? Is she also a council member? But...

You know, how are the Student Council members chosen, anyway? I never thought to question it before, but I don't remember hearing about elections or nominations or anything.

"For Student Council Use." I'll bet that in there...

Wakaba reached out and took the doorknob...

And turned.

Kerchunk.

It turned without difficulty. It was unlocked!

There's gotta be something in here. About Anthy, and the Student Council, and the Rose Bride...

It'll be okay. Nobody ever comes to the reference library. If I'm fast, nobody will ever know I was here...

Anthy, this is all your fault. Utena, and Saionji, and me... you mess things up for everyone.

But just as Wakaba was about to open the door...

"And what are you doing?"

A voice rang out from behind Wakaba, freezing her in place.

I've been caught!?

"That room is prohibited to everyone but members of the Student Council. It would be a problem if you just entered freely."

What should I do... I'm in real trouble. Should I run? I don't think they've seen my face yet...

But it sounds like this is a guy. If I ran, he'd probably be able to catch up to me, and then there's no way I could make an excuse...

As she was hesitating, the boy behind her put his hand on her shoulder.

"That's a middle-school uniform, isn't it? Here, look at me."

Well... I guess I have to.

Resignedly, Wakaba turned around.

"Oh? Aren't you Tenjou Utena's...?"

Standing before her was Kiryuu Touga.

At least it was somebody who knew her. Wakaba managed to regain a small measure of her composure.

"I'm sorry... I didn't see what was written there." Wakaba looked down hurriedly. Touga's gaze felt like it was piercing through her, down to her soul.

"Looking for something? Can I lend a hand?"

"Uh, no, it's okay. I already found it." Lowering her gaze again, Wakaba scurried off to one side of Touga. She was too distracted to notice that she had left the student directory that she'd been looking through open on the table...

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"Tenjou's friend... her name was Wakaba, I believe." Touga said to himself, gazing after Wakaba.

Obviously, she hadn't overlooked the sign. The question was, why was she trying to go in there?

"Well, well."

Touga spied the open student register. There was no doubt that Wakaba had used it.

It was turned to middle school, second-year, Class C. The class that Tenjou Utena and Himemiya Anthy were in.

"Ah, of course. What a little trouble-maker."

Looking at the section where Anthy should have been, Touga smiled a thin, vicious smile.

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Utena's gotta know more about Anthy...

After fleeing the reference library, that had been Wakaba's next thought.

As far as Wakaba could tell, Anthy was close to Utena. They lived together in the East Hall, and they were always together on campus.

Sure, she'd never seen them talk that much, but still, Utena had to know *something* about Anthy. If she didn't, Wakaba was completely out of ideas. Nobody else voluntarily talked to her.

But even more than that, Utena was the friend Wakaba could most depend on. Whenever she was sad or troubled, she could always talk to Utena.

So, Wakaba ran straight for the East Hall. To Wakaba's knowledge, Utena wasn't helping out any teams or anything today. She had probably headed straight back to her dorm room.

But...

Wakaba remembered an incident from a few days ago. There had been something on Utena's schedule that she hadn't known about, but that Anthy had.

Could she have anything else going on today...?

Wait, no way. Just earlier, she invited me to go to see a movie. Yeah, and I'm the one she asked. Not Anthy, me. I'm her best friend.

She'll totally be there for me. And she'll listen to what I have to say...

The East Dorm drew into sight. It hadn't been used for more than ten years, and people said it was haunted – but that's where Utena and Anthy were currently living.

Only a month ago, Utena had been Wakaba's roommate. But when she became engaged to the Rose Bride, Anthy, she'd moved to the East Dorm.

Wakaba, of course, didn't know the reason. She just thought it was coincidence that the two had been roomed together.

This is the East Hall...?

Wakaba finally came to a stop before the front door.

Seeing it up close, it looks like it's in pretty good condition. It looks so old and creaky from far away...

People stayed away because of the rumors about ghosts, but like the other buildings at Ohtori Academy, it had originally been both stylish and elegant. It was hard to tell because the outside was so covered with ivy, but the pillars and window-frames were decorated in a way you didn't often see with more subdued, modern architecture.

I should have come to visit sooner, Wakaba thought, as she took the beautifully-engraved doorknob.

Is the inside going to actually be pretty too?

Wakaba slowly opened the door. There didn't seem to be anything like a doorbell near the entrance.

"Utena, are you here?" she called in, with the door still only half-open.

She heard no response. The East Dorm was silent.

"Utena, where are you?"

No way around it – this time, she raised her voice.

"It's Wakaba! I'm coming in, okay!?"

But just as she was about to step inside...

"Oh, Wakaba-san." The nearest door opened, and Anthy stepped out.

Anthy! She's back already!?

"Utena-sama hasn't returned yet."

"Oh, um... do you know where she is?"

"I'm afraid I didn't ask."

Wakaba felt a little relieved by her answer. Anthy didn't know where Utena was, same as herself.

"Well, I guess I'll just wait for her here...?"

"Of course. Utena-sama's room is on the second floor." Anthy turned and pointed up the stairs to show the direction. As she did so, Wakaba got a look at the back of her head.

That's...!

Anthy was wearing the leaf-shaped hair clip – the one that Wakaba and Saionji had picked out together. The one that Saionji had said was a present for his little sister.

Why!? Why do you have that? That was... that was the present that we chose together. He sent it to his sister...

The memory of that fun afternoon with Saionji now racked Wakaba with pain. The laughs they had shared together felt like they were mocking her. The meal she had spent all night preparing made her go numb, like it was poison.

And I thought my dreams were coming true... that I was becoming a princess for real... that things were changing...

This girl!

"The room number, 21, is written on the door... hmm?" When Anthy turned back around, Wakaba

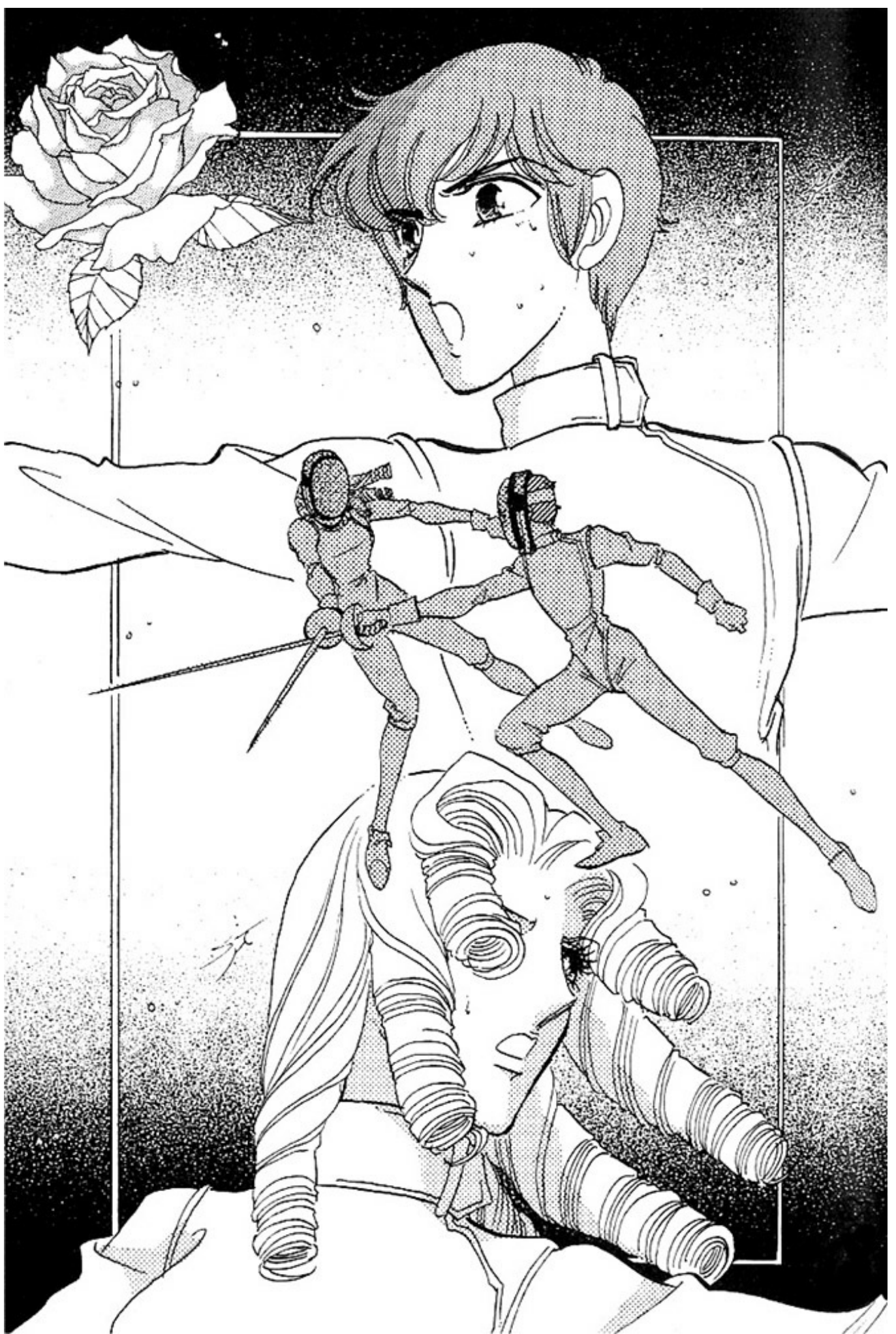
was gone.

"What's wrong, Wakaba-san? Did you prefer to wait in the kitchen?"

*** **

The sounds of steel ringing on steel, and of quick footsteps, reverberated throughout the gym. If your eyes had been closed, you probably would have thought that ten or more combatants were having matches.

In fact, there were only two people moving – Juri and Miki. Their swords were just meeting many times as quickly as in your average fencing match.



The other club members, who were nominally supposed to be practicing, were instead just staring wide-eyed at their fierce battle.

"Those two are amazing."

"Seriously. The captain's always been that good, but Mickey's really changed recently."

"Yeah... like, he's fighting more aggressively, or rougher, or something?"

The hubbub around them didn't penetrate the duelists' ears. Their nerves were sharp, but focused solely on the opponent in front of them.

However, though the fight may have been a work of art, it was time for it to conclude.

"Ah!"

Caught by a feint and another quick thrust, Miki was disarmed. His sabre went clattering to the ground.

"Again!" Miki picked up his sabre and stood again. But Juri had already lowered her own blade. "Juri-san?"

"Let's take a short break. You too, Miki."

"No, I can keep going."

"No."

Juri's tone was strict. There was nothing more Miki could say. But he looked rather displeased.

"Be patient," Juri admonished. She'd told him the same thing during their morning practice.

Since the day before yesterday, Juri and Miki had been practicing on their own in the mornings. However, Juri refused to go beyond the training schedule that she'd devised. Anything more would be too much of a strain.

After their morning session, Miki had said that he still intended to practice normally that evening. That's when Juri had first told him to be patient. It was no good to overwork your body.

On the other hand, she understood that there was no point in doing training that didn't inflict some measure of strain. Miki had wanted harsh training; he reminded her of herself when she was younger.

Back then, I swung my sword day after day, until it seemed like my body would break. If some well-meaning person had told me to slow down, I probably would have made a face just like his... I wasn't satisfied unless I was pushing myself to my very limit.

"Juri-sempai, I..."

Unless pushing to my very limit...

"Take a break, Miki. If you don't, we won't be able to keep going this evening."

"Well, alright..."

In response, Juri just gave a *sorry, no way around it* smile.

Unless pushing to the very limit... Juri thought again, looking at Miki's pleased face. And...

"You can't forget some things unless you cry until your tears run out," she spoke quietly, inside her fencing mask. Miki didn't hear her.

*** **

"You can't forget some things unless you cry until your tears run out." Perhaps Wakaba somehow heard Juri's words instead. After all, she was huddled in the corner of her room, clutching her legs to her body, crying her heart out.

The classroom. The gym. The library. The field off to the side of the school building. The cafeteria. The courtyard. And even the rose garden...

Wakaba had looked everywhere for Utena but couldn't find her anywhere. Maybe she had gone into town. Anyway, Wakaba didn't know where Utena was. She wasn't there for her.

Himemiya Anthy... it's all her fault. Wakaba said that over and over to herself, like a curse.

Since Utena started living with her, she's changed... she's started saying things about duels and Rose Brides and weird stuff like that.

And hanging out with Student Council members. Last month, she didn't even know Saionji-san or Mickey's names! What's up with that?

Anthy... she's so weird. All she does is care for the rose garden.

But that's not all. She's also the Rose Bride.

And Saionji-san's... lover...?

She felt another sharp stab of pain in her chest. In a way, she was punishing herself by thinking about this. As if attacking her own shame and regret, she kept repeating those painful words to herself.

As if washing her emotions clean, Wakaba's tears flowed ceaselessly.

How long this continued, she wasn't sure. The sun sank and moonlight began to creep into the room.

It's night...

Finally out of tears, she looked out the window at the moon...

"Wakaba, you have a package!" one of her dorm friends called from outside her door. "Can I come in?"

She opened the door. The lights weren't on, and when she saw Wakaba squatting in the corner, she was speechless.

"Oh... Wakaba...?" she asked, then faltered.

"Um... I'll just leave the package over here, okay?" she asked, and after doing so, hurried out of the room and shut the door.

Her friend's attitude made Wakaba feel neither lonely nor grateful. She just stared after her, at the small dimly-lit package by the side of the door.

A package...?

Wakaba sluggishly crawled over to it, and picked it up. It was rather large, but for its size, surprisingly light. The name of the sender wasn't written on it.

There's a letter.

An envelope was stuck to the side of the box. It had a rose in the style of the Ohtori emblem on it. Wakaba didn't know it, but it looked the same as the letters that contained a Rose Signet.

Inside was a single page of rose-scented stationary. Wakaba held the letter up to the moonlight to read it. Immediately, the words 'the Rose Bride' jumped out at her.

"IF YOU WISH TO LEARN ABOUT THE ROSE BRIDE, COME TO THE FOUNTAIN IN THE FOREST DRESSED AS TENJOU UTENA."

That's what was written on it.

Dressed as Utena...?

There was a little more written in the letter after that, but before reading on, Wakaba looked in the box. Inside was Utena's school uniform and a wig.

As well as a sword.

From the hilt to the blade, an exact replica of the Sword of Dios...

Chapter 6

The Dueling Arena Forest

At the same moment, Utena was looking at a rather unusual object sitting on her desk. It was a cute barrette, in the shape of a leaf. Obviously, it wasn't hers.

"Hey, Anthy. Is this yours?"

Anthy looked over from where she was playing with Chu-Chu by the side of the bed.

"Look. This hairclip on the desk. Anthy, did you bring it?"

"Oh, that? Yes, Saionji-sempai gave it to me two days ago."

This is from... Saionji...?

Utena tried to imagine the expression he had while buying something this cute. The thought of it made her laugh.

"Man, that guy just won't give up. I guess he's really into you, huh?" she asked, with a gentle smile.

Originally, Utena had hated Saionji's efforts to woo Anthy, but she was starting to come around. Maybe he also didn't just see her as the Rose Bride – maybe he thought of her as an actual girl, after all.

When you think about it, you've gotta feel sorry for him. For the girl he likes to be the Rose Bride, of all things...

She glanced over at Anthy. But Anthy wasn't showing any strong emotion – she was just playing with Chu-Chu as usual.

"So, this hair clip. Have you tried it on?"

"Yes, this evening. But..."

"But?"

"I'll stop if you tell me to, of course."

"No, I wouldn't tell you to do that," Utena said, flustered. "I don't wanna give you orders. And I mean, this was a present from Saionji, right?"

As she spoke, she opened their western-style dresser. It was already close to midnight, but Utena had just gotten back home. She was still in her school uniform.

After Wakaba had turned her down in the classroom, Utena had gone into town alone. She didn't really have anywhere in particular to be. She'd just wanted to walk while thinking some stuff over.

She didn't even think about where she was going. She'd ended up losing track of time, and it was almost 11 o'clock by the time she returned.

"Huh?" Utena asked in confusion, as she was putting away her clothes. "Isn't one of my uniforms missing?"

Utena had her uniforms specially ordered. Since she moved around a lot, and her uniforms often tore or got dirty, she kept three sets on hand. But now...

I'm sure there were two of them were here this morning...

There was only one uniform left in the dresser. Counting the one she was still wearing, that made two, total.

"Hey, Anthy. Do you know what happened to my..." Utena began to ask. She was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

"Geez, who's here at this hour?" Utena turned to Anthy, but she simply tilted her head slightly. "Well, if they're ringing the doorbell, I guess it's not a thief or anything."

Refastening the uniform that she'd been about to take off, Utena left the room. Anthy followed after her, Chu-Chu riding on her shoulder.

The front door was at the bottom of the main staircase, a little ways from Utena's room.

At times like this, it's pretty annoying that we're the only ones living in this building... Back in the South Dorm, they'd taken turns being on call to meet visitors at the door.

Then again, the East Hall received very few visitors. Even during the day it was hard even to spot the doorbell under all the ivy. At night, forget about it.

So Utena had no idea who could be at the front door. Hardly anybody came there in the first place. Not including herself and Anthy, she could count the number of people she'd seen there on one hand.

Who is it? Could it be that Touga guy...? Utena sort of jogged down the stairs to the front door, and opened it.

But the visitor wasn't Touga.

"Miki-kun... and Arisugawa-sempai!" Miki and Juri stood there. Perhaps they had ran; they seemed to be breathing heavily.

"Why are you here at this time of night? Has there been an accident or..."

"Utena-san, we're the ones who should be asking you. What are *you* doing here right now?" Miki shot back.

"Uh, I live here...?"

"That's not we mean," Juri said, flatly. "Miki and I just caught sight of you in the Dueling Arena Forest."

"The Dueling Arena Forest? What are you talking about? I've been here at the East Hall for a while now. Right, Anthy?"

"Yes. Utena-sama has been here with me," Anthy responded, as Utena looked to her for support.

"See? What do you say to that?"

"But I thought you were the only one who wears that uniform."

"Uniform...?"

The uniform that had disappeared from her dresser.

Someone wearing that same uniform.

Suddenly it clicked it Utena's mind.

"Miki-kun. Can you show me exactly where you caught sight of this person?"

*** **

A little earlier.

Wakaba stood before the fountain in the Dueling Arena Forest. As the message had instructed, she was dressed in Utena's uniform, and wearing a wig modeled after her hair.

Utena must know something about all this after all... Wakaba thought.

She felt uncomfortable; Utena's clothes were a little big on her.

Is wearing these clothes going to let me learn some secret? Like, there's something that someone would only tell to Utena, or something...?

Whatever it is, Utena is already caught up in it. With this Rose Bride stuff... with Anthy...

Ohtori Academy, the Student Council, and Himemiya Anthy... I don't know much about them, but I do know they're super suspicious.

Why did Saionji-sama tell me not to get involved with the Rose Bride? What is she... what is Anthy...?

The wind was cold. Utena's uniform covered more skin than her usual school clothes, but even so, it was getting towards midnight, and Wakaba was chilled.

I didn't know there was a place like this in the middle of the forest. Wakaba looked up at the fountain, which was bathed in moonlight. The water wasn't running right now, so it looked more like a large, ornate water basin.

I feel like I caught a glimpse of something here when I rode on that horse with Saionji-san. So it's a fountain, huh?

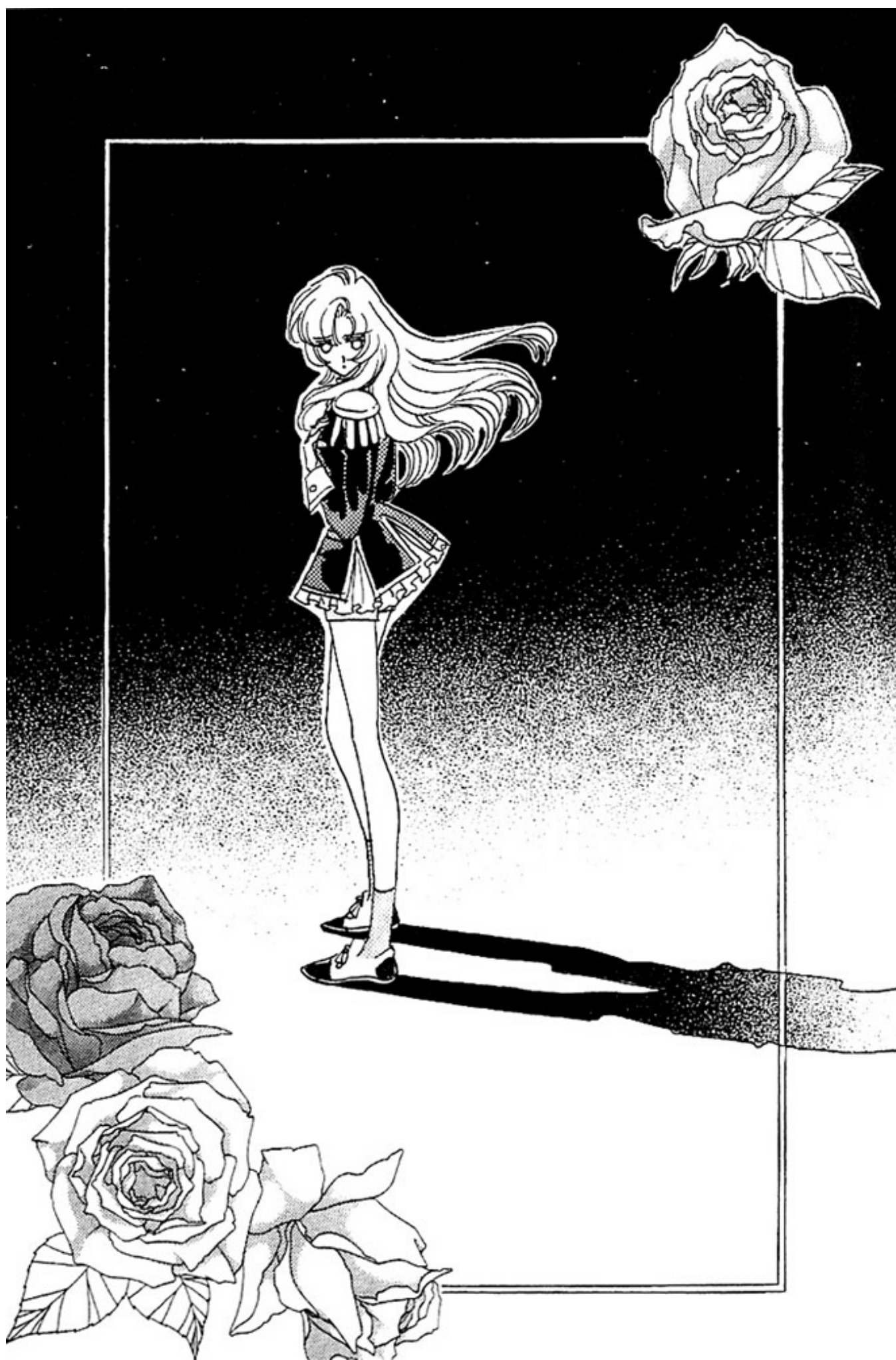
Unbeknownst to Wakaba, the fountain was the entrance to the Dueling Arena – a large gate would open at the hand of anyone wearing a Rose Signet. To Duelists, then, the fountain's function was to mark the entrance to the Arena. It could be that it also served to purify their bodies as they entered.

Wakaba didn't know any of that. To her, it was just an old, neglected-looking fountain.

So... now what?

Wakaba was starting to regret not bringing a watch. It seemed like she'd been waiting there for a long time. But maybe it just *felt* long, because of the cold and loneliness of waiting in the forest at night, alone.

Was this some kind of prank...? Wakaba thought, starting to doubt the contents of the letter.



"Tenjou Utena?" a voice came, out of the darkness.

It was a voice that Wakaba knew well.

She'd heard it many times in her dreams.

One that had warned her away from the Rose Bride, and praised her homemade lunch.

The shadowy figure slowly drew closer, from within the forest.

No way. It can't be... him?

The figure emerged from the forest, and stepped into the moonlight. In their hand was some kind of long object. They stepped into sight, emerging as if in answer to Wakaba's prayers.

"Just so you know, I was going to challenge you to a duel myself."

The moonlight figure was Wakaba's prince – Saionji Kyouichi.

Just as he'd told Touga, he had intended to challenge Utena to a duel tonight. However, he'd been beaten to the punch – he had received a card from Utena, first. It had read "Wait at the Dueling Arena, tonight." Rather brief for a letter of challenge, honestly.

Thus, he'd come here, to the Dueling Arena Forest, to duel with Tenjou Utena.

In order to vindicate himself, he'd practiced heavily for the last month. He'd only met Anthy once per week, and almost all of his time had been spent in intense, ascetic training.

And so...

There's no way I'll lose... he thought. He'd won against Touga. Therefore, there was no reason to think he'd lost to Tenjou Utena. His original loss to her had been an accident; his month of training had been to completely remove any chance of another.

I will surely win this time. And Anthy will return to me...

Saionji was confident in his triumph. Typical for him, he hadn't considered the possibility that Utena had become stronger, as well.

I will obtain the Power to Revolutionize the World. Touga... you can't beat me as you are now. You've changed since you received the Rose Signet.

Calling me his "dearest friend..." Back then, you would never have called me that. It would have simply been understood, without us saying anything. What need is there to put such things into words?

And that's why I'm not your "dearest friend" any longer.

So, Touga. I'll open your eyes for you.

Saionji gripped the katana in his hand more tightly.

His opponent, Tenjou Utena, stood before him, silhouetted in the moonlight. She looked somehow smaller than usual.

A true master will always appear imposing in the sight of others... I suppose this is the reverse? Saionji mused, attributing it to his own confidence. He didn't doubt Wakaba's disguise in the slightest.

Strange... Anthy isn't here. The moonlight revealed only one figure: Tenjou Utena. The Rose Bride was supposed to be present as a witness to the duel, but he didn't see her anywhere.

Perhaps she's gone ahead to the arena? He thought, but really, what reason would Utena have to wait here by herself? And if that was so, where had she gotten the Sword of Dios that she was holding...?

It was foolish to attempt to infer such things, so Saionji asked Utena directly.

"Hey, Tenjou. What's with Anthy?"

*** **

"Hey, Tenjou. What's with Anthy?" Saionji asked, having emerged from the forest.

Anthy – that's why Wakaba was here, herself. She thought back to the words on the card she'd received.

Oh no. I can't let him find out I'm actually Wakaba...!

Desperately setting aside her painful memories, Wakaba adjusted her posture. She tried to stand a little bit more like Utena.

The secret of the Rose Bride... of Himemiya Anthy... maybe I'll learn it now.

Wakaba silently drew her sword. That's what the letter had told her to do – and that if she did, she would learn the secrets she sought...

*** **

Utena didn't speak, but drew her sword.

What? Surely she doesn't intend to have the duel here...?

Anthy wasn't present, and the place wasn't appointed Dueling Arena... it was very suspicious. Nevertheless, Saionji drew his sword as well. Tossing the scabbard to the side, he took the kendo *gedan*, low position.

There are no roses to aim for on each others' chests. How on earth are we supposed to duel?

There was only one rule in the duels. Whoever lost their rose first, lost. They were wearing no

such things.

Which meant...

So... we need to force the other to surrender, then.

With no rules in place, they would have no option but to attack each other directly. Such a duel could only end when one of them conceded... or fell. It might get gruesome.

Hmmph... interesting. Perhaps this is why Anthy isn't present. Saionji didn't even flinch. On the contrary, he grinned with glee as he realized what Utena intended.

I had intended to make her grovel before Anthy's eyes... but oh, well. I don't want her to see this kind of bloody duel.

He gripped his katana in his hand, and slowly, began to close the gap between them. He kept his stance firm – whenever Tenjou Utena wanted to come at him was fine with him.

*** **

What should I do? Wakaba wondered, bewildered.

She'd followed the letter's instructions faithfully so far, but the situation didn't really seem to have improved. According to the letter, if she stayed quiet and drew her sword, she'd learn the secret of the Rose Bride.

So... do I keep going? Nothing has really happened yet. And Saionji-san hasn't told me anything, either.

What should I do? At this rate...

Saionji loomed closer in her field of vision.

Stop!

The sight of Saionji suddenly made Wakaba feel very uneasy.

I should just ask him directly. Not keep quiet and try to fool him, but just ask him, straightforwardly, in person.

If I do that, I'm sure he'll...

Wakaba lowered the sword she was holding. She was trying to show that she didn't intend to fight.

*** **

Tenjou Utena's sword dropped into *gedan* position. The sudden movement looked amazingly smooth and natural.

Here she comes! Saionji thought, misinterpreting it as the start of an attack.

This was his chance.

Saionji lunged forward, thrusting upward with his sword.

*** **

Lowering her sword, Wakaba was about to say something to Saionji. Instead, she gasped. Saionji lunged at her with savage speed. There was no time for words – neither for her to speak, or for him to hear.

...!

In an instant, Wakaba was pierced by Saionji's sword.

Why...?

Strangely, she didn't feel any pain.

Why...?

Looking down, she saw the sword emerging from her stomach. A red liquid was slowly dripping down it. She admired the color for an instant, before it hit home that it was her own blood.

Why...?

The strength left her legs. She slowly slumped down to her knees, leaning forward on to Saionji's chest.

Why...?

Why...?

Why...?

The word filled her thoughts. But in the end, she wasn't able to speak it aloud.

*** **

Why on earth...

Tenjou Utena had made no move to evade his sword.

Due to his long training with the sword, he had reacted almost automatically. But he'd never even imagined that he would win the battle with one strike.

What the hell did she think she was doing...?

Blood slowly dripped down his sword. For a moment Saionji imagined that it was staged; some sort of trick.

The strength slowly left Utena's knees. She dropped to them, leaning forward onto Saionji's chest.

At that moment, her hair *fell off*.

...!

First it tilted, then slowly slipped and dropped down to the ground.

Under the wig, the girl dressed as Tenjou Utena wasn't Utena at all...

*** **

When Utena reached the fountain below the Dueling Arena, she was met with an almost unbelievable sight.

Saionji was there.

His sword was covered with thick, red blood. Utena's gut instinct was that it was human blood.

In his arms, he was holding a girl dressed as her. The moonlight revealed her face to be...

"Wakaba!"

Utena immediately broke into a sprint.

"Wakaba!!" Utena cried out her best friend's name as she ran. But Wakaba made no reply. Her eyes were closed – she was limp and unmoving.

Dead!?

The horrible thought sprang into Utena's mind; she tried desperately to dismiss it.

"Saionji, what the hell did you do!?" she screamed, accusingly.

Saionji didn't respond to the question. Surely it was because he was the one who'd wounded her.

"Answer me, Saionji! Did you do something to Wakaba!?" Utena's voice was hoarse, as tears began to fill her eyes.

Recently, she hadn't been paying much attention to Wakaba. She hadn't even noticed that something was going on in her life.

Now, those regrets slammed into Utena like a wave of emotion.

This is all my fault... I was too caught up in Touga's words. I was only thinking of myself, not of Wakaba...

How... how could this happen?

Utena's mind was in turmoil. Her dearest friend, Wakaba, was on the ground. Wearing Utena's own school uniform. A uniform which was covered in red, sticky blood. Blood which stained the sword of the boy who stood in front of her.

Anger.

Despair.

Regret.

Shock.

Suspicion.

As all these emotions tore through Utena's heart, she was focused on only one question.

"Answer me, Saionji!" she shouted again.

Slowly, Saionji nodded his head.

...! For a moment, Utena was speechless. Then she burst out, in rage,

"Duel! Duel me, Saionji!"

Strangely, they were the same words she'd said the first time she'd challenged him.

"I'll never forgive you. Never!"

Utena's heart was overflowing. She was gripped by the urge to smash everything.

*** **

"O, noble castle... Power of Dios that sleeps within me..."

In response to the power of Anthy's words, the hilt of a sword sprang from her breast.

"Heed your master, and reveal..."

Utena took the hilt that emerged, and drew it forth.

The Sword of Dios. A miraculous sword, said to contain the Power of Dios.

"The power to revolutionize the world!" Utena cried, as she brandished the sword, and ferociously dashed towards Saionji.

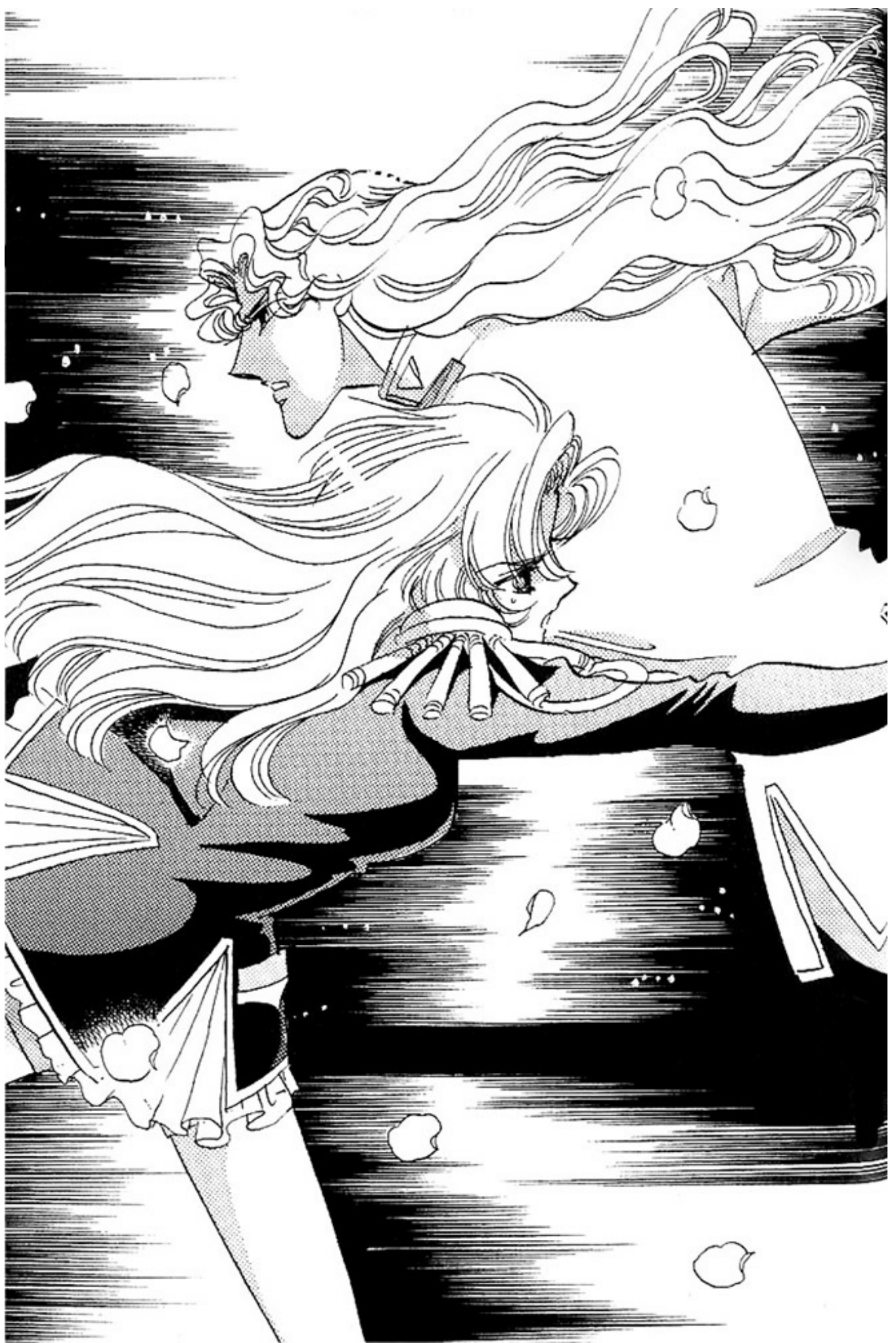
While climbing the stairs to the arena, and while the dueling rose was being placed on her chest, Utena had been nursing the same feeling.

This is vengeance for Wakaba...!

Although that thought filled her heart, she'd managed to be patient.

Wakaba had been rushed off to the hospital by Juri and Miki. There was nothing more Utena could do to help, except pray. All she could do for Wakaba was to duel, here, now, in the arena – at least, that's what Utena was thinking, just then.

Like a wild tiger let loose from its cage, Utena charged at Saionji. With all her might, she struck out with the Sword of Dios.



However, her attack was too direct. Saionji easily parried it.

“You're too easy, Tenjou Utena.”

“Shut up! You... Wakaba...” Utena came at him again.

However, Saionji deflected, or evaded, all of her blows. Carried away with emotion, her attacks were too monotonous.

But she didn't stop. Like a crying child in a fight, she put all her strength into her blade.

This is for Wakaba...!

For Wakaba...!

For Wakaba...!

That one thought filled Utena's head.

But her body couldn't keep up for long. At the rate she'd been swinging her sword, fatigue set in quickly. All too soon, the strength began to leave her sword.

And Saionji was not an opponent who would miss that fact.

Saionji began to batter Utena's sword, returning the offensive. The heavy blows came down at her, one after another. Utena couldn't parry them; she had to fall back.

The tide had completely turned.

“What's wrong, Tenjou Utena? Looks like you're cornered.”

Utena, retreating, was quickly drawing near the edge of the arena. It was fenced with a small wall, but it only came up to about Utena's knees. Furthermore, here and there, it had crumbled away. One false step beyond the edge, and in an instant, one would plummet down to the foot of the arena.

There was no way of knowing exactly how high the Dueling Arena was, but judging from how long it took to walk up the stairs, a fall would mean certain death.

Utena took a fleeting glance behind her.

Saionji didn't let the opportunity go to waste.

A diagonal downward slash, turning into a thrust. Anybody would find it difficult to respond to effectively. At the moment, Tenjou Utena certainly couldn't.

Saionji's sword flashed towards Utena's rose, like it was being sucked in.

Somehow, Utena attempted to throw herself out of the way of the blow. However...

At her left breast...

Saionji's katana pierced the side of her chest *without* a rose pinned to it – the location of the

human heart.

No...!

In shock, Utena collapsed backwards, onto the ground.

I've won! Saionji thought, seeing Utena fall. He clenched his fist.

At last, he'd had his revenge. He had kept his pride, and the Rose Bride – Himemiya Anthy – would return to him.

And yet, he didn't feel the sense of exaltation that he'd expected. He felt only shame.

Why...?

He'd been training a month for this victory. It had been all he'd been able to think about. And yet, his heart still felt clouded.

Why...? Saionji asked himself, as he stared at the fallen Utena.

I won. I won against Tenjou Utena. He repeated it to himself, but it failed to lift his spirits. On the contrary – the sight of her uniform called to mind the silhouette of another girl dressed that way...

Don't be foolish. That wasn't my fault. If that girl hadn't put on that charade...

But as if to refute his words, his thoughts kept going back to Wakaba.

When she'd slapped him across the face.

The two of them at the arcade.

Her octopus-shaped wieners.

The present they'd bought, bickering all the while.

Wanting me to buy toothpaste... what a strange girl. Saionji smiled slightly. A kind smile, which didn't suit the environs of the Dueling Arena...

As if responding to that smile, the fallen Utena moved.

What...? Saionji doubted his own eyes. But Utena was certainly moving. Right in his view, she was slowly, but surely, lifting herself up.

It should be over... surely...

I won...

There's no way she should be able to stand up. Impossible...

But despite his protests, somewhere in his heart, he was relieved to see it.

I'm alive...?

That was Utena's first, simple thought as she opened her eyes, after having been stabbed in the left side of her chest.

Saionji stood before her. They were in the Dueling Arena. Across from them stood Anthy, in her red dress.

Well, it doesn't seem like a dream...

She slid her gaze down to her chest, where Saionji was supposed to have stabbed here. Sure enough, her shirt was cut there. But underneath was a shining white object.

This is...!

It was the white, shell-shaped compact: the one that Wakaba had bought her, to match hers.

Wakaba... Utena's heart blazed.

Thank you, Wakaba. You helped me out again.

It's alright. Everything's going to be alright.

Utena took the Sword of Dios in hand, and stood. Her eyes were calm again.

"Hmph. To survive that, you have the luck of fools."

Even Saionji's scorn didn't break Utena's calm. She just coldly lifted her sword.

"Let's go," was all she said.

As she did, the castle hanging overhead began to shine. The light was coming from a person – it looked like a young man, descending directly down towards Utena. The boy, who somewhat resembled Anthy, seemed to melt into her.

This power... again. And this scent...

As Utena was enveloped by the scent of roses, she felt filled with power...

She sprang forward. Her movements were so sharp, they defied description. In an instant, she had closed the considerable distance between her and Saionji, her sword going for the rose on his chest. She seemed like a completely different person than she'd been just a short time before.

This attack...!

This was how it had gone the first time Saionji had lost, as well. After the castle had begun to shine, a single attack – this sharp thrust, which seemed to come from an entirely different person - had scattered his rose.

This was what he'd feared in this repeat match – this explosive, instantaneous force of Tenjou Utena's will.

However...

Obviously, he had prepared for this. His special training over the last month had been so that he could match Utena's thrust, at this exact moment.

He responded superbly.

As Utena's sword stretched out towards him from across the short distance, his own sword leapt up to protect his rose. This was why he'd switched from [i]jodan[/i] to *gedan*.

The Sword of Dios met Saionji's katana with a clash of metal.

Yes – I parried it!

So far, so good. This was proceeding exactly as he'd envisioned it during training.

But he hadn't parried it at all.

Saionji's katana went rebounding back, torn from his hands by the force of Utena's blow.

Impossible...!?

The power was shocking. To think that Utena's attack had enough force and weight behind it to deflect his own *tachi* katana...!

Staggered by the attack, Saionji lost his balance and fell backwards onto his rear.

Utena's next attack cut straight down from an overhead, *jodan* stance.

There was no way for him to evade it.

And he wasn't holding his sword.

Quickly, Saionji drew out the item he kept in his front jacket pocket:

The silver fountain pen. The one that he and Touga had been awarded upon their graduation from middle school.

It should be easy to block a direct downward stroke...

Saionji held up the pen to intercept the plummeting Sword of Dios.

Perhaps the same miracle could happen twice.

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As he fell, despite losing control of his body, Saionji managed to draw out something that sparkled like silver.

Still, Utena didn't hesitate. She brought her sword down.

It was a light attack. But it was enough to cleanly bisect the fountain pen, raised to ward off the attack, and to scatter Saionji's rose.

I won...! I won, Wakaba.

From somewhere, loud bells began to clamor. They seemed to be celebrating Utena and Anthy... and to be lamenting for Saionji.

Wakaba's compact had saved Utena. But Saionji's fountain pen, the twin of Touga's, hadn't been able to help him.

That's just how it was.

Utena was the victor of the duel.

The Rose Bride was still Tenjou Utena's, and Saionji remained a loser.

But for a loser, Saionji's expression seemed strangely happy.

Epilogue

The nurses' rubber-bottomed shoes made squeaking sounds as they walked on the white linoleum floor. Everyone sitting in the waiting room was quiet, listening to the occasional announcements over the loudspeaker calling for various patients.

Utena glanced over those people as she headed up the stairs.

After Juri and Miki had brought her to the hospital, Wakaba had somehow managed to pull through. She'd need to rest for about a month, but the doctors said she should make a complete recovery.

Utena went straight to room 301 and opened the door on which Shinohara Wakaba's name was written.

The room was so white might appear sterile. The only splash of color was the get-well flowers on the desk. Utena had brought them yesterday.

Wakaba lay on a bed in the middle of the room.

"Good morning, Utena," she greeted her, sleepily.

"It's not morning, Wakaba. I just got out of class."

"Gah, seriously? Man, being hospitalized sure is boring. I just doze all day." Wakaba laughed. But her smile was a little forced.

"By the way, they served pilaf in the cafeteria today, and it didn't have any green peas. I'll bet a lot of people thought the same as you," Utena said, lightly. She just wanted to make Wakaba smile a little.

Both Wakaba and Utena knew what was happening. They were each putting on a performance, because they were worried about the other. And by doing so, they were just hurting the other...

Still, neither of them could stop. Even if it was just a front, to stop smiling would have been unbearable.

"I've got some fruit on that someone gave me as a gift. Want to eat some together?" Wakaba pointed to the small desk where the flowers were. There was a small pile of other gifts as well, such as fruit and books.

"Oh, sure. Which one do you want?"

"Hmmm... I guess I'll have a pear? I think there should be a knife around here somewhere, too."

"Okay. I'll take a look." Utena looked through the basket and under the books, but she didn't turn up a knife.

She did find something strange instead:

A tube of toothpaste.

Obviously, that wasn't an uncommon item by itself. But this tube of toothpaste was wrapped in a cute pink bow.

“Hey, Wakaba. What's with this toothpaste?”

“Toothpaste?”

“Yeah, this one.” Utena held it up so Wakaba could see it.

“...!” Wakaba's eyes widened. “He remembered...”

“What is it, Wakaba?” Utena asked anxiously, as Wakaba's surprised face slowly filled with tears.

“No, it's nothing.”

“But...”

“It's okay. It's really... okay...”

Utena fell silent, as Wakaba burst into sobs.

*** **

“So Saionji has dropped out of school...” Juri murmured. It was after her morning practice with Miki.

“Well, there's no helping it. He stabbed a female student with a real sword,” Miki said, as Juri sipped from a sports drink. “If things had gone worse, it would have been a matter for the police. He was only allowed to leave voluntarily because Touga-sempai pulled strings for him.”

“Touga...” Juri's voice trailed off.

Certainly, she had put forth a motion that Saionji be expelled. In that sense, her wish had been fulfilled... but she found it hard to feel satisfied.

Maybe I'm over-thinking it...



Juri felt that there were some parts of this incident that didn't make sense. And although she had no particular reason to think so, some instinct inside her told her that she needed to take it as a warning...

“Still, it's strange,” Miki continued, unaware of Juri's misgivings. “I mean, who was she going to go meet in the forest that's off-limits to everyone but Student Council members? And in the dead of night, too.”

*** **

“It's been settled – Saionji Kyouichi will be allowed to ‘withdraw’ from school. Is that acceptable?”

A voice spoke from the phone - a deep, sweet voice that sent shivers down the spine.

“Yes – thank you very much.”

“By the way, what about that girl who's close to the One Engaged?”

“It was just a flesh wound. She'll be fine.” Touga responded. He didn't sound the slightest bit ashamed. “That Saionji... who knew he was so timid? At the last moment, he missed the vital organs.”

“And now what? If you're trying to drive her away from the One Engaged...”

“No. That girl was merely bait to drive Saionji out of school. I did consider separating them, but there's no harm in letting her stay.”

Touga twirled his silver fountain pen in his hand. The one with the school emblem on it.

“I see. And what will become of our vice-president?”

“I don't know. He's free to do whatever he likes.”

“What a cruel man. Isn't the vice-president your dearest friend?”

“Don't be ridiculous.” Touga laughed softly, took aim, and flung the silver fountain pen across the room. It twirled through the air, and landed squarely in the trash. “Anyone who believes in friendship is a fool.”

Afterword

Thank you for buying “Revolutionary Girl Utena 2: Verdant Hopes.”

As predicted in the previous volume, this volume tells the story of Saionji. What did you think?

What? This was Wakaba's story, you say?

No, no. That's not right.

This was Saionji's story. Definitely.

Probably.

...Maybe.

...

...hmm.

Afterword...Take 2

Thank you for buying 'Revolutionary Girl Utena 2: Verdant Hopes.'

Just like the last volume was about Miki and Kozue, this one is Saionji *and* Wakaba's story. What did you think?

No, originally I intended it to be just about Saionji, but as I started writing it, Wakaba gradually got cuter and cuter (although I still gave her quite a hard time), until she became this active in the story.

Wakaba doesn't do all that much in either the manga in the anime, so I thought it would be good to at least spotlight her in the novel. In the strange world of Ohtori Academy, she's probably the most ordinary person, so she's easy to write about.

Incidentally, in the last novel, Kozue was more popular among readers than Utena. Maybe the supporting actors are growing in strength...

Speaking of reader response, as I suspected, a certain scene in the last book drew a lot of attention. From reading fan letters, hearing comments from friends and acquaintances, and searching on the internet... it seems the thing that really left an impression was page 147 (laugh) (*translator's note: this is a reference to the image of [Touga on a bed with who we learn in the text is ah...Miki](#)*). It was almost like I could hear the readers' gasps and anguished cries... it was a lot of fun.

The reviews of the billiards scenes were also unexpectedly good. Everyone said they liked them, but that they also seemed kind of mysterious. It's good to see Juri and Touga together, since they don't generally interact much.

By the way, Utena never fulfilled her promise to buy Chu-Chu a new necktie. In all the commotion around the duel, she completely forgot. Poor Chu-Chu.

Of course, since in the novels, Chu-Chu is just an ordinary (or not?) monkey, he probably didn't even notice, but just kept on playing with Anthy.

But if that's the case, how on earth did Utena lose to him in cards...? (laugh)

Finally, I'd like to once again thank my wonderful illustrator, Chiho Saito-san. And my apologies to the project director, Kotou-san, for making him work so close to New Year's.

Thank you to everyone who sent letters in response to the first volume. I even got letters sealed with the Rose Signet, and letters with pictures inside. I enjoyed reading all of them. By all means, please send more.

The End

[Return to the Beginning](#)