

The Akantharhodon I: The Sleeping Beauty

Emperor Saihitei was dying.

At least, that was the latest rumor. In truth, Hotohori (as his friends had come to call him) was indeed very ill, although the doctors were reluctant to bring dying into the picture. Perhaps it was because none of them were able to identify the illness or its cause; in fact, they found it nearly impossible to keep the emperor awake. Or perhaps it was the tradition of killing the doctors who failed, should the emperor actually die, that kept the physicians close-lipped.

In any case, Emperor Hotohori was kept in his room and in bed, with limited visitors each day. Not that it did anyone much good to try to visit him; his high fever, near inability to speak, and tendency to doze off made him a rather dull patient. He did, however, allow his attendants to groom him regularly because he didn't like the thought of not being clean.

Nuriko, Chichiri, and Mitsukake were among the first at Hotohori's bedside once the news was out. There had been expectation that Mitsukake would be able to heal the ailing emperor--indeed, surprise when he was unsuccessful--and, barring that, hope that Chichiri's own magical gifts might come in handy. But that hadn't worked either.

Nuriko slumped in the chair that was next to the bed where Hotohori slept. "If we can't save him, who can?" he moaned.

"Taiitsukun would be the next rung on the ladder, you know?" Chichiri said off-handedly. He seemed strangely unperturbed.

"We can't move him," said Mitsukake flatly. "Someone will have to go to Taiitsukun and bring whatever knowledge she might have here."

Nuriko looked longingly at the bed. "I'd hate to leave him, but the two of you should stay. . . Just in case . . ." His shoulders slumped further in dejection.

"Not necessarily," Mitsukake observed. He found himself caught in the hopeful gaze of Nuriko's large, violet eyes. "What I mean is, not all of us are so . . . attached. . ." Nuriko's stare became uncomfortable, and Mitsukake turned away without finishing his thought.

But Nuriko straightened, visibly pleased with the half-formed suggestion. "Of course!" he cried a little too loudly for a sickroom. "Tama's been bored to tears lately; I'm sure he'd go!"

An aide looked in from the doorway, startled by Nuriko's high, sharp voice. "He really shouldn't have a consort in there," the aide said sagely. "He's not in condition."

Nuriko had the grace to blush, although he couldn't hide his smile as he, Chichiri and Mitsukake left the room.

"Of course I'll go," said Tamahome later that day. He, Nuriko and Chichiri stood on one of the palace's breezeways.

"You really would?" exclaimed Nuriko, who had actually been unsure of Tamahome's willingness to help. Tama and Hotohori had not exactly been the closest of friends, despite their shared interest in Miaka, Priestess of Suzaku, or more accurately, because of it.

Tamahome shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe when the emperor's well again, he'll give me a huge reward!" His eyes lit up with the idea, but were quickly dimmed by Nuriko's elbow coming down on his head. But Tama's eyes lit up again when he heard Miaka's familiar call as she rushed down the breezeway toward him . . . and didn't stop in time. As if being bashed on the head by Nuriko wasn't enough, Tamahome now found himself skidding along the floor on his stomach, Miaka holding tightly to his ankles. "Why is it," Tamahome asked, "that

whenever Miaka's around, I find myself on the ground?"

Miaka merely stood up, as if nothing wayward had occurred. "How's Hotohori?" she asked as she turned toward Nuriko and Chichiri. "Is it true he isn't eating?"

"Not everyone can eat like you," answered Nuriko.

"Poor Hotohori!" cried Miaka. "I should fix him something he simply can't resist!"

Nuriko raised his eyebrows and let his eyes pass over to Tamahome, who was dusting himself off. Tama looked up at Miaka's remark and scowled. He could only guess what Hotohori might not be able to resist. Nuriko, his mind traveling along a similar track, forced back a wry smile.

Oblivious, Chichiri stated, "I don't think the doctors would allow that, you know?" at which Tama's eyes got very wide and Nuriko nearly choked as he swallowed his laughter. Rolling right along, Chichiri went on, "They've been very strict. Maybe you should just bring him flowers . . . you know?" he added when he caught Miaka's crestfallen expression.

The priestess brightened at once. "Of course! I'll go collect some from the garden!" And she was off.

"I hope he likes roses!" Miaka was saying, and rather loudly at that. "Oh, I picked some other stuff too. . . But the roses were so pretty! It must be so stuffy in that room--"

"Miaka," Chichiri cautioned as he escorted her to the emperor's chambers, "you'll have to be quiet or they're liable to throw you out, you know?"

"Oh, of course," Miaka answered in a loud whisper as they approached the doors. But the minute they were inside, she rushed in screeching in a tone only slightly less than a shout, "Hotohori! Look, I brought you flowers!"

Miaka skidded to a stop before she even reached the bed, all joy seeping from her cheerful features. Hotohori lay in bed with his back to the door, his breathing heavy as he dozed. Trembling slightly, Miaka set the flowers that she'd lovingly wrapped in silks and string on the vanity and moved slowly toward the sleeping figure. "Hotohori?" It came out as nothing more than a squeak.

Chichiri came in behind Miaka and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps now is not the time," he suggested softly.

The priestess ignored him. "Hotohori, don't worry. Tamahome's going to--" She reached out to take hold of one of the emperor's pale hands.

"Miaka, no!" Chichiri exclaimed. "He doesn't like to be touched, you know?"

Even as she grasped the hand, Miaka turned. "What--?"

And then Hotohori began to scream.

It wasn't a scream of terror, Miaka reflected as she sat on the little bench near a bush of particularly fragrant roses. He wasn't afraid. It was pain. It was as if I'd hurt him somehow. But how could that be? He's never been that way before.

Miaka's thoughts broke free as footsteps approached. Nuriko stopped next to the bench and fingered a rose. "It's not your fault," he said after a moment. "Chichiri should have warned you earlier."

"But it was so horrible to hear him scream like that!" wailed Miaka. "The doctors said they'd never heard him do that before." She turned to Nuriko, tears beginning to fill her eyes. "Oh,

Nuriko, you don't actually think I hurt him, do you?"

"I doubt it. All you did was take his hand."

"But that sound!" Miaka insisted. "He acted like I burned him or bit him or something!"

"Maybe he was dreaming and you startled him," said Nuriko.

Miaka stared at her feet, considering. "No," she finally said, "he sounded more wounded than anything. And I don't think they're going to let me see him again, either."

There was dark magic at work here, Chichiri knew. The minute Miaka had been taken from the room, Hotohori had ceased to scream and had fallen asleep. Something or someone had gone to great lengths to separate the Emperor of Konan from the Priestess of Suzaku, the very person bound to protect the emperor and his country. The questions then became who, why and how?

Chichiri was tempted to visit Taiitsukun himself, knowing he could make the journey much more quickly than Tamahome and Tasuki, who'd gone with him. But Nuriko had been right when he'd said that both Chichiri and Mitsukake were needed nearer the emperor. Chichiri was even more convinced of it now and determined to stay near Hotohori as much as possible. He slumped now in a chair next to the bed and dozed.

Roses. Hotohori dreamed of roses, dozens upon dozens of them. He could smell them, could see the petals being tossed around him as if at a wedding . . . or a funeral.

I must be dead, he thought, even as he opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by rose bushes of every conceivable size and color. And someone dressed in white was bent over him, leaning closer now, talking to him. Hotohori squinted at the person, trying hard to give the words meaning in his mind.

"Maybe she hit her head," a female voice suggested. Hotohori couldn't see the speaker; all his world was roses and this one fellow who was now chuckling.

"This is no girl," the one in white said, and Hotohori's eyes widened as the features became clear. He'd never seen such hair, red as Suzaku's tail feathers, surely a good omen. Perhaps he wasn't dead. Perhaps this was a vision.

"It must be!" the girl's voice said. Over the shoulder of the red-head appeared a pink-haired girl, her large blue eyes focused critically on the emperor.

"A vision?" asked Hotohori in a whisper.

"Who are you?" demanded the young man in white who was kneeling beside him.

Hotohori hesitated, not entirely sure it was safe to reveal his true identity as Emperor of Konan. "Saihitei," he answered at length, slowly sitting up, only to be embarrassed to find himself dressed in nothing but a red and black robe. Even his feet were bare and dirty from the ground!

The pink girl gasped and looked quickly from Hotohori to the young man next to him and back again. But then another female voice piped up from behind them, asking in a frightened squeak, "Is he all right?"

"Yes," said the red-head. He eyed Hotohori for a long, uneasy moment. "I'm Kiryuu Touga," he finally announced. And waited. But if this Saihitei fellow was impressed, he kept it to himself.

"You really are a boy?" the pink girl demanded as another girl came to stand next to her, this one with hair to rival Nuriko's.

“I think the question is,” remarked Hotohori with some disbelief as he scanned the curious faces, “am I really awake?”

The Akantharhodon II: You Can Be Me When I'm Gone

"Did you hear that?" Utena asked Anthy.

Anthy regarded her doubtfully. "Hear what, Miss Utena?"

"I know I'm not imagining it!" Utena insisted. "Listen! Listen to them talk!"

"What are you doing here?" Touga was asking.

Hotohori looked around uncertainly.

"Well, do you go to school here?" Touga pressed.

"Maybe he has amnesia," Anthy suggested quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Touga told her. He turned back to Hotohori, only to find him staring at Anthy. Utena saw it, too, and scowled.

"That's not very polite, you know!" She stepped slightly to one side as if to shield her friend.

"I'm sorry," Hotohori answered. "It's just, your clothing. . ."

Anthy's eyes widened as she realized what Utena had been talking about.

"Usually I'm the one getting stares," said Utena ruefully, seemingly having forgotten her own revelation.

Touga's eyes ran over Hotohori's own clothing, and he said, "You aren't exactly dressed well either."

"I--" Hotohori forced himself to swallow his indignation; he had no idea what kinds of powers these people might have. "I'm from out of town," he finished somewhat lamely.

"A long way out of town," Touga responded with a conspiratorial smile and Hotohori reddened slightly. Touga rose and offered his hand to help the emperor up. "What brings you to Ohtori Academy?"

Hotohori thought quickly as he tried to gather some dignity by arranging his robe. This was a school . . . He, of course, had been taught by tutors and learned men, but Miaka had often described the schools of her world. Hotohori's eyes strayed again to the girl with the purple hair, whose pleated skirt and bowtie was reminiscent of Miaka's. "I have a sister," Hotohori finally answered, "who is thinking of coming here to school. I wanted to see it first."

Touga arched his eyebrows, and Hotohori could not tell whether there was disbelief in the expression. "A considerate brother," Touga said at length. "My own sister goes here, and I am the student council president. I think I can convince you that Ohtori is good enough for your sister. But first we should find you some less conspicuous clothing."

Utena and Anthy watched the two boys leave the greenhouse. They hadn't even said goodbye. "Boys!" Utena hissed.

"I understand now what you meant," Anthy told her friend quietly. "They sound alike. Do you think they noticed?"

"No," Utena said with a shake of her head. "But isn't it amazing? They sound exactly alike when they speak!"

Anthy gazed for a moment at the glass door to the greenhouse. Then she said, "Nanami won't like it."

Utena turned to her in surprise. "What difference will it make to Nanami?"

But Anthy didn't answer.

When Chichiri woke up, he knew something was wrong. It was the room. It took everything he had just to pull himself out of his dreamless sleep--how long had he been asleep?--only to find the emperor was gone.

The roses Miaka had brought were on the bed, and the smell of them was strong. Too strong. Upon closer inspection, Chichiri found they had taken root in the bed and were beginning to grow, their brambles snaking out and clutching the sheets and bedposts. And Hotohori, who had not moved in almost a month, was nowhere to be found.

“Well, this is interesting,” said Taiitsukun as she consulted her mirror. “You say the Emperor of Konan is ill, but I don’t see him at all.”

“What?” snarled Tasuki.

“According to my mirror, he isn’t here. Or there. Or anywhere in this world,” Taiitsukun informed them.

Tasuki started on a string of curses while Tamahome asked, “So where is he?”

“You see these roses?” Taiitsukun pointed to the flowers that covered Hotohori’s abandoned bed. “They are anchored here, in the mouth of a vortex. Your emperor has been taken to another world.”

Tasuki paused in his tirade to ask, “So how do we get him back?”

“You must find out where the vortex originated and close it. It could threaten the empire as a whole if you do not.”

Tamahome frowned. “But what about Hotohori?”

“It could be that he is the vortex . . . although that seems unlikely. If he does not return on his own, the only way to save him would be to go in after him. However,” Taiitsukun stated with a pregnant pause, “that does not ensure that you will be able to find him or get him back to Konan. And should the vortex become unstable and collapse on its own, you might very well find yourself stuck.”

“The sooner the better then,” said Tasuki, turning to leave. In Konan, the emperor was like the boss, and you did whatever you could for him. “How do we get into the thing?”

“There is no certain way,” answered the wise woman, “and it depends on the nature of the vortex. Still, you must ask yourselves--”

“What Hotohori would want us to do,” finished Tamahome with a nod. “Whether he’d rather we save Konan by closing the vortex or go after him.”

Tasuki whirled back around to face Tama. “You really expect us to leave him?!”

And the curses began again.

“Well, where was the last place you saw him?” Nuriko demanded.

“Asleep in his bed. Where he has been for weeks, you know?” growled Chichiri. “I fell asleep too, and when I woke up--” He flung open the doors to Emperor Hotohori’s chambers and gestured for Nuriko to step inside.

“What’s with all the roses?” gasped Nuriko, putting a sleeve to his nose to block some of the overwhelming perfume.

“A vortex,” Chichiri told him. “I think someone is trying to separate Hotohori from Konan,

you know?”

“Because without a good leader, an empire is easy to conquer,” Nuriko deduced. “So what do we do now?”

“I couldn’t find a way in,” said Chichiri. “It was created through an outside magic, very hard to do, you know? It won’t take just anybody, and it’ll be hard to close too.”

“We have to find a way in,” said Nuriko. “We have to get him back. He’s not well and he could be in danger.”

Hotohori reflected that he had not felt so good in weeks. The sunshine and fresh air were doing wonders for him, and the grass under his bare feet felt unbelievable. Had he ever run barefoot through the grass? He didn’t think so.

Touga had been thoughtful enough to ask Hotohori to be his guest while visiting Ohtori. They’d also gone to get Hotohori some appropriate clothing, but the suit would not be ready until later that evening. Now Hotohori was seated on a garden bench behind Touga’s home, Touga’s kitten biting and pawing at Hotohori’s toes and he wriggled them under the hem of his robe. Touga himself was stretched out on the grass, periodically distracting his pet by drumming his fingers enticingly.

The two boys laughed as the kitten wavered, unsure of where to strike next. And then suddenly someone came bursting through the shrubbery. “Oniisamaaaaa!” it screeched.

Hotohori froze, his eyes wide in surprise. The kitten darted under his robe to hide. And Nanami skidded to a halt when she saw her brother was not alone.

“Ah, Nanami,” said Touga, sitting up properly, “this is our guest Saihitei. He’ll be staying with us for awhile.”

Nanami’s face became a hard mask of schooled civility. “Charmed,” she murmured.

“Nice to meet you,” Hotohori answered uncertainly.

Nanami’s eyes grew large and round. “What?” she breathed. “What did you say?”

Hotohori glanced in alarm at Touga, whose own gaze was focused heatedly on his sister. “Nanami!”

“Say something!” she demanded of Hotohori.

But Hotohori was at a loss for words as Touga snapped again, “Nanami!”

Nanami’s eyes flew now to her brother and began filling with tears. She turned and fled.

“I must apologize,” Touga said. “She was not the most becoming example of Ohtori’s schooling.” He rose. “We should go get your clothes now before dinner.”

Hotohori started to stand but stopped when he caught sight of the curious pink nose that protruded from the edge of his robe. “Oh!” he exclaimed as the kitten ran out from under him. And he and Touga laughed together once more, all tension released.

“We can’t tell anyone,” Nuriko instructed. “Not yet.”

“But they’ll see he’s gone, you know?” Chichiri pointed out.

“Not if you pretend to be him.”

“And lay around in a bed full of thorny roses?”

Nuriko grimaced, knowing that his plot was full of such snags. “You could pretend you’re

feeling better.”

“But how do I explain the roses?” asked Chichiri.

“You get another room. Tell everyone that something strange is going on in your room. That much is true.”

“It’s not really my room, you know?”

Nuriko huffed in exasperation. “I’ll tell everybody that you--I mean, Chichiri--went to search for answers about this vortex and that you--I mean, Hotohori--are feeling much better but have to change rooms because of the vortex. You see?” When Chichiri only frowned, Nuriko resorted to the feminine art of pleading. “Please? Think of the mess we’ll be in if everyone realizes the emperor is gone! That, on top of this vortex other-worldly magic thing . . . It would be too much!” And when Chichiri still looked unconvinced, Nuriko added off-handedly, “Of course I could just break your neck for having lost him in the first place.”

“Okay, okay! No need to get violent, you know?”

To say Tamahome and Tasuki were confused was to put it mildly.

“What the #@!* do you mean he’s fine? Taiitsukun said he wasn’t even here!” Tasuki shouted.

“So where’s Chichiri?” Tama asked, looking around. “Where did he go for the information?”

Nuriko glanced over at the “emperor” and said, “He thought there might be some scrolls . . .”

But Chichiri just shook his head. “It’s not like we can’t trust them. Let’s just tell them, you know?”

Tama understood. “Chichiri is masquerading as Hotohori! How do you do that?” He reached up and pulled at the look-alike’s face.

“Ouch, you know?”

“We wanted to keep the advisors and court from panicking,” Nuriko explained.

Tasuki was still confused. “So the emperor isn’t here?” When he saw the confirming nods, he went on, “Then how do we get into the vortex?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet,” Chichiri admitted. “Did Taiitsukun tell you anything?”

Tamahome became solemn. “She suggested maybe we shouldn’t risk it. The vortex might threaten all of Konan in some way. We might have to close it. Hotohori . . . he’d understand that we have to do what’s best for Konan.”

Nuriko’s eyes widened slowly with the horror of what he was hearing. “Leave Hotohori in there?”

Tama swallowed and stared at his feet, but when he looked up again, determination was in his eyes. “I’ll go. Alone.”

“No way!” Tasuki shouted. “I’m going too!”

“We’ll see if the vortex will allow it,” Chichiri responded mildly. “It wouldn’t take me, you know?”

“We’ll get in!” Tasuki announced confidently.

Nuriko nodded his approval. “Find a way.”

Akantharhodon III: Mirror, Mirror

Light advanced over the horizon and would soon be followed by the sun, promising another perfectly blue day in Kutou. Nakago opened his eyes and out of habit turned to look at the bed, checking to be sure that the Lady Yui was still there and still breathing. Seeing that she had kicked off her covers during the night--a common enough occurrence; Nakago had noted that Yui dreamed fitfully--he went to blanket her again before leaving. As the sheet fell over her, Yui sighed. "Tamahome," she murmured, but her eyes never opened.

It had been one thing to get rid of the emperor, Nakago considered as he left Yui's chambers and headed down to the dungeons and his own private place, but perhaps being rid of all of them was not such a bad idea. It was the cost of the magic that had made Nakago wary of trying more than a little of it. Now that he was sure it would work . . .

The room was nothing more than four stone walls sunk far below the palace. It was damp, but that was unimportant. He kept his things there, but did not spend much time beyond his magicking; if he was missed, people would search and eventually find this little room, which Nakago preferred to keep secret.

The newest thing was the large mirror that leaned against the left wall. Nakago had not found a satisfactory way to hang it and didn't much care in any event. It worked just as well either way. Now he was able to see that the remaining Suzaku Seven were indeed going to attempt to find a way to save their emperor. They stood in the doorway of Hotohori's chambers, fighting off sleep.

"Nakago."

He turned at the sound of his name, furious with himself for not having heard whoever had followed him. But he relaxed when he realized it was not his fault; no one could have heard. "My Lord," he acknowledged with a small nod.

"Nakago, I have reports from the Eternal Castle that this vortex of yours is causing damage to its world. The stress on my realm alone is dangerous. You must finish this soon."

Nakago gave an apprehensive glance towards the mirror. "I haven't been able to close it; one of them is holding it open. If the sleep were stronger. . ."

His visitor's dark eyes considered the image in the mirror. "You have little to bargain with, Little Magicker. You wanted one of them dealt with and he has been. Others would be more costly."

"My life is not enough?" Nakago asked darkly.

"For a warrior, a life is nothing. He is required to give it and thinks nothing of it. Someone else's life, however. . ." From the folds of his black robe, the visitor produced a glowing globe. Inside was an image of Yui, still asleep. "She has difficulty sleeping," the visitor remarked thoughtfully.

"The Priestess?" Nakago's tone was flat.

"She will sleep until this is over. If it ends unsatisfactorily, she will continue to sleep indefinitely." The globe was returned to its place beneath the flowing robe, suggesting there was no room for argument.

In the mirror, the roses that now covered Hotohori's bed opened.

Hotohori sat in front of the vanity mirror in his guest room and plucked tentatively at the new clothing. The uniform looked exactly like Touga's except that it was black instead of white.

“More your color,” Touga had told him, and Hotohori could almost have sworn that Touga had winked. Hotohori did have to admit the red and gold trimmings were becoming, and the dark fabric was the same shade as his hair.

His hair. Hotohori sighed. He’d combed it to shining, but he was sick of having it loose and in the way. What he wouldn’t give for a servant!

As he clumsily began to pull it back and attempted to tie it with a ribbon, Touga stuck his head in. “Saihitei, the fairest of them all.”

Startled, Hotohori let his hair fall. “What?”

But Touga only frowned. “Why don’t you just braid it or something?”

Hotohori blushed slightly. “I don’t. . . I mean, someone usually does it for me.”

Touga’s frown deepened. “You’re from a village so poor and isolated that you don’t have bathrooms, but you have people to do your hair?” He referred to Hotohori’s earlier amazement at being shown the tiled room attached to his guest quarters. Water piped right into the house! “Who are you, really?”

“Saihitei . . . But my friends call me Hotohori.”

“Here,” Touga said, coming into the room. He stood behind Hotohori and grabbed fistfuls of hair, then swiftly began to braid the thick, dark locks. “They call you Hotohori?”

“Yes. . . How did you learn to braid so well?”

“I used to braid my own hair when I was younger. I wanted it to be wavy like my friend Saionji’s.” He gave a short, rueful laugh. “I would sleep on it and take it down in the morning, and it would be curly for about an hour, and then--” He shrugged as he tied the braid off with a red ribbon. “Now sometimes I do Nanami’s. As a sort of brotherly gesture. Don’t you do those sorts of things for your little sister?”

“I. . . I came here, didn’t I?”

“And I suppose she’s the one that does your hair for you.”

Hotohori stared at his own reflection, and his amber eyes met Touga’s blue ones in the mirror. Touga smiled briefly, almost wickedly, and turned to leave. “Sleep well. Tomorrow I’ll show you more of Ohtori . . . Hotohori.”

“Everything’s coming up roses,” Tasuki observed. He was strangely unaffected by the large pink blooms, but he was the only one.

“I’m so sleepy!” yawned Nuriko, leaning heavily against the doorframe.

“We must stay awake!” Chichiri insisted, but his own eyelids were falling.

“It’s these roses,” said Tasuki. He pulled out his fan.

“Are you insane?!” Nuriko shouted, forcing himself to be just ever-so-slightly more awake. “You want to set the entire palace on fire?”

“Well, what’s your idea?” Tasuki looked around. Mitsukake slept standing up, his chin against his chest. Tamahome was leaning against the healer’s shoulder, snoring softly. “Chichiri,” Tasuki said sharply, “you’re the one who knows about this stuff! What should we do?”

Chichiri stifled a yawn. “The vortex is slightly open, you know? We may be able to get inside and find the emperor.”

“How?” demanded Tasuki.

“The trick is to keep the thing open while the search party is inside, you know—else you’ll be stuck.”

Tasuki took hold of Chichiri and shook him. “HOW DO WE GET IN?”

As if in response, a great whirlwind began to form in the room. The scent of the roses was so strong, Tasuki gasped and dropped Chichiri, as a dimensional hole began to spin itself above the bed, rose petals of every possible color pouring out of it.

“My guess would be that’s it, you know.”

“I’m thinking of giving a party on Saturday night,” Touga said as he and Hotohori strolled through the halls of Ohtori Academy.

“Party?”

Touga’s eyes slid toward his companion. “You know. Music, food, guests, dancing. Ah, the Kendo room. Do you fence?”

“Naturally.” Hotohori’s gaze swept the large, dim, empty room.

“Care for a match then?” And without waiting for an answer, Touga went to the rack that held the practice swords and tossed one to his friend. Hotohori caught it deftly and squared off.

So intent were they on the duel that they never noticed the group slowly gathering to watch, which included Touga’s fellow Council members, his sister, and Utena and the Rose Bride.

“He’s good,” Utena remarked to Anthy.

“They seem to be evenly matched,” Anthy agreed.

“Who is he?” demanded Jury.

“Saihitei,” Nanami hissed.

Jury turned toward her. “Who?”

“My brother’s new best friend.” Nanami was unaware that Saionji stood right behind her. He laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and said, “Or his new whore.”

“He’s too flat-chested to be a girl!” protested Miki, but everyone ignored him.

“Supposedly he’s checking out Ohtori for his sister,” Nanami went on.

“Well, if she’s half as good-looking as her brother, she won’t have any problem making friends,” Saionji stated.

“And if she’s half as good with a sword, she’ll have no problem fighting them off, either,” Jury observed as the two exhausted duelists finally called it a draw and bowed to the admiring crowd.

“Evenly matched,” Utena mused.

“Perfectly,” Jury corrected. “Perfectly matched.”

The Akantharhodon IV: Snow White, Rose Red

The thorny vines of the roses began to snake their way across the floor of the emperor's bedchamber. They wrapped themselves around Mitsukake's and Tamahome's boots, then moved on to Tasuki.

"Hey, those hurt!" Tasuki growled, endeavoring to step free. But the vines had wound themselves tightly and were beginning to drag their captives toward the vortex. While Mitsukake and Tamahome continued to sleep, unfazed by this new development, Tasuki began to recite every expletive he knew--alphabetically.

"That's pretty impressive, you know," said Chichiri dreamily. He leaned against the wall near Nuriko, the two of them close enough to the door to be safe for the moment.

"You're not helping!" Tasuki shouted.

"I thought you wanted in the vortex," Nuriko put in.

"No one said anything about being attacked by thorny weeds!" the fiery bandit insisted as the vines tightened their hold. "Chichiri, wake up! You have to keep this thing open!"

"I can't even keep my eyes open, you know?"

"So what do you think of Ohtori?" asked Touga.

Hotohori turned his thoughts from the odd apparel he'd been given--"swim shorts"--and dipped his foot into the water experimentally. It felt good. "It's amazing. . ." he finally said in response to Touga's question, "all that knowledge. . ." He turned his submersed ankle in a thoughtful circle.

Touga kept his own legs crossed beneath him. Although he'd suggested a swim, he didn't appear to be interested in getting in the water. He only stared at it. "Where did you go to school?"

"School? I didn't go anywhere. I was tutored at home."

"Really? Why?"

"My mother, she was protective of me. She would never have let me go away."

"She let you come here," Touga observed.

"She's dead," Hotohori said flatly.

"Good for you then."

If Touga had slapped him, Hotohori could not have felt more struck. "I was lucky to have such an attentive mother! She invested a great deal of time and interest in me!"

Touga chuckled softly. "You sound like you've been told that so often you've begun to believe it."

"Well what about your parents?" Hotohori countered.

Touga frowned back at the water. "What about them?"

"Do you love them?"

Touga reached down and touched his reflection in the pool, causing it to shiver. Then he plunged his hand in, obliterating it completely. "This is a pointless discussion," he said. "We have much better things to talk about."

“Like what?”

“Like the party tomorrow night. But first try to beat me to the far end of the pool.” He jumped in, temporarily blinding Hotohori with the splash.

“Hey!” Hotohori shouted after him as he followed, “No fair!” He swam furiously to the end of the pool, only to find himself alone there. “What--”

“Rapunzel, I’ve let down your hair!” Touga cried triumphantly, and Hotohori felt his long, heavy braid come loose in the water. Turning, he saw Touga a few feet behind him, holding up the dripping red ribbon.

Who’s Rapunzel? Hotohori wondered fleetingly. And suddenly it struck him as funny, this whole other-worldly situation, and he began to laugh. How strange to feel this way, so at ease, the weight of Konan a distant memory, a dream.

This place was dark but solid. Tasuki felt the thorns fade and found his boots none the worse for wear. But his feet still hurt.

Mitsukake and Tamahome continued to snore somewhere off to Tasuki’s left. Squinting, he was finally able to make them out in the shadows. Leaning over, he punched Tama hard in the arm. “Wake up already!”

Startled, Tamahome jerked awake, and his sudden motion woke Mitsukake as well. “Where are we?” Tama asked.

“We were dragged into the vortex!” Tasuki explained in his characteristic shout.

“It’s dark,” Mitsukake put in rather obviously.

As if in answer, a sudden light blazed from somewhere ahead of them. Blinking and squinting, the three discerned a form seated on a huge throne made of stone and onyx. The man, already thin and pale, looked more so thanks to the enormous chair and dark decor. He held a glowing globe of light in his left hand.

Tasuki took a step forward. “Who’re you?”

The man let go of the globe and it floated like a bubble to hover somewhere above him in the cavernous room. “My name is Morpheus. I am the King of Dreams.”

Behind his throne, something fluttered slightly. Barely visible was a boy, dressed in long, black robes that—had any of the warriors of Suzaku been familiar with the development of ancient European civilizations—they might have called Grecian. The boy’s garment was cloaked and fastened at the shoulders in gold, his sandals were made of diamonds, and he held a sword that was almost as long as he was tall. But his most impressive feature, aside from the large, sullen eyes, were his wings: one white, like that of a bird or an angel, the other black and jagged, like that of a gigantic bat.

“My nephew,” Morpheus explained. “He is waiting to be born. Kamui, why don’t you . . . play or something?”

The somber expression on the boy’s face deepened into something nearing hatred as the eyes traveled from the three visitors to the man on the throne. But the boy did not speak. Instead he turned and, gripping the sword so tightly his pale knuckles turned blue, he left.

Morpheus shook his head slowly, sadly. “I fear that boy is destined for evil,” he mused, then sighed. “But it is none of my say. Now, what can I do for you?”

“They look just like Snow White and Rose Red! I had a picture in one of my books when I was

little,” Wakaba added, as if that made her an expert.

Utena looked up at the landing where Touga and his new friend stood, surrounded by admirers. “Saihitei looks uncomfortable,” she observed. “Maybe we should go speak with him. A friendly face might put him more at ease.”

Anthy hesitated, although Wakaba’s eyes were alit with stars. But just then Touga took hold of Saihitei’s arm, as if to keep from bolting. The sight of that sent Utena up the stairs, two at a time, with Wakaba and Anthy in her wake.

Tasuki, Tamahome and Mitsukake stared at one another. But before any one of them could speak, a large raven flew into the room, cawing loudly and listing badly in flight.

“That brat took a swipe at me with his sword!” Matthew complained. “He may be one of the family, and he may have wings, but I’ve already died once and that was enough!” The raven perched himself on the arm of the throne and turned to give Morpheus and his guests a good look at his bleeding wing.

Morpheus sighed heavily. “That child is a walking disaster. Excuse me for one moment. Matthew, entertain our guests until I return.” And the King of Dreams glided out of the room.

Matthew cocked a bright eye at the visitors. “Hiya!”

Tasuki, Tamahome and Mitsukake stared at one another.

“Saihitei, hi!” Utena exclaimed with a cheerful wave. Anthy and Wakaba crowded in behind her. “Do you remember us?”

“Of course,” replied Hotohori with courtly grace, “from the greenhouse. But I never learned your names.”

“I’m Tenjou Utena and this is Himemiya Anthy and Shinobara Wakaba.”

“How do you like Ohtori?” Wakaba asked. “Are you thinking of staying?”

Hotohori opened his mouth to answer but turned as Touga tugged at his sleeve. “I want you to meet the other council members,” Touga told him. “Arisagawa Jury, Kaoru Miki, and my especially good friend Kyoichi Saionji.”

So Hotohori opened his mouth to greet them, but Jury stepped into the gap by saying narrowly, “We saw you dueling the President yesterday; you’re very good.”

But as Hotohori began to respond to that compliment, Utena said, “Excuse me, but we were speaking with Saihitei.”

“Oh, please, call me--”

But then Miki gasped and Jury went white, while Saionji’s expression grew dark as he lowered his brows in a frown.

“He sounds just like--” Miki began.

Hotohori turned an alarmed look on Touga, who himself appeared angry. “What’s the matter with you?” he demanded of his council members.

“It’s just that you sound alike,” Utena put forth. “You haven’t noticed?”

If the statement perplexed Hotohori, it did nothing to faze Touga, who only shrugged. Saionji then took up the thread of conversation by stepping in menacingly close to Touga’s newest friend and saying, “Jury was saying what a good fencer you are.”

“Well, I--”

“I’d like to challenge you myself,” Saionji went on wickedly.

“Saionji, he’s not a duelist,” said Jury.

“Did I say he was? I only want a shot at the only person ever to match Touga in a duel.”

Touga chuckled. “Is Saionji jealous?”

The vice-president smirked. “The Rose Bride is one thing. You are another.”

Miki pulled out his stop-watch.

“Rose Bride?” Hotohori asked.

Touga ignored the question, instead saying, “Hotohori, give me your left hand.” Hotohori obediently held it out, and Touga slipped a silver ring onto his finger. “Tomorrow, at the dueling arena.”

Miki stopped his watch.

The Akantharhodon V: Hanging out with the Dream King

“Touga, you can’t have a duel at the arena if it’s not for the Bride,” said Jury. “And you can’t give him a ring if he’s not a Duelist for the Bride, either.”

But Miki was shaking his head, frowning at his stop-watch. “It shouldn’t be,” he murmured, “but--”

“Hotohori?” Utena was asking in confusion. “Saihitei, why did he call you--”

But Hotohori wasn’t listening. His eyes went from the smoldering hatred of Saionji to the smugness of Touga, the reproof of Jury, the plain astonishment of Miki, the concern of Utena and her friends . . . He glanced down over the loft railing at the first floor, where many students danced, talked, ate, and spotted Nanami and her friends staring back up at him. He looked back at Touga, now frowning, speaking, although Hotohori couldn’t hear him, his attention now on the double doors at the end of the loft, doors that led out to the balcony, out into fresh air. Propelling himself between Touga and Saionji, Hotohori fled.

“So, you guys all having the same dream or what?” asked Matthew in an attempt to be cordial.

“Dream?” Mitsukake asked.

“Well, this is the Dreaming. It’s what most people do around here. People who don’t just live here, anyway.”

Just then Morpheus returned, carrying the hefty sword that his nephew had earlier possessed. Even next to the Dream King’s tall, thin figure, the blade seemed long. Tamahome found himself wondering what kind of strength it took to lift it, much less use it. Morpheus took his seat, looking worn and grim, setting the sword next to his throne. “I am sorry,” he said wearily, “for my nephew’s behavior. Kamui is a . . . willful child.” The fact made him sigh before returning to more immediate business. “What brings you to my realm?”

“That bird said we were dreaming,” Tasuki said, jabbing an accusing finger at Matthew.

“Indeed? True enough that most people who come here are, in reality, asleep. But in this case, Matthew is mistaken. You have been caught in a spell.”

“But we are actually here?” Tamahome asked. “We’re not really asleep in the emperor’s room?”

“You are entirely here,” Morpheus conceded.

“What spell are we in? Who cast it?” Mitsukake queried in his practical, deliberate way.

“Lord Nakago purchased my services for a sleeping spell that draws the sleeper into a vortex. Unfortunately, this spell will have to end soon; the vortex that passes through these worlds is damaging them. So if there’s somewhere you need to be, I suggest you get there swiftly.”

“We must find Hotohori, our emperor,” Tamahome said. “Do you know where he is?”

“He did not pass here.”

“That’s not what we asked you!” Tasuki put in with a growl. “Where is he?”

But Tamahome placed a staying hand on Tasuki’s shoulder. “If you know where he is, can you send us there? You said yourself we should get there swiftly, if we can.”

“Then you must sleep.”

“But I’m not tired!” Tasuki insisted. “I wasn’t asleep when I came through the vortex, and I’m not gonna sleep now!”

Morpheus drew back on his throne. “You were . . . not asleep?” He folded his hands and considered the orange-haired bandit for a moment. “You are different.”

“Yeah, he’s a real freak,” Tamahome agreed, “but that’s not really important right now, is it?”

“It might be,” the Dream King mused. “His passing through the vortex awake may have done something to alter it.”

“Your Highness, you should come out of there!” one guard was shouting as he tugged on Chichiri’s sleeve. “That thing is dangerous!”

Chichiri yawned. “But I’m so tired, you know!” He glanced over at the vortex and howled, waking Nuriko.

“What--?” Nuriko began sleepily, rubbing at his eyes. Once his vision was clear, he saw. “Oh, it’s . . . opening?!”

Indeed, the vortex had swallowed the bed and most of the roses that had once been there. It took up an entire wall of the room, leaving a few vines of roses trailing from the large, hungry mouth. “Getting wider,” Chichiri said. “Pretty soon it’ll take up the entire room, you know!”

“Highness!” the guards were shouting.

“Will closing off this room contain it?” Nuriko asked.

“I don’t know. But if it widens and then suddenly falls in on itself . . . I have to stay in here with it. But one of us should be out there, just in case . . . you know?”

Nuriko took the hint and fled the room.

“This shouldn’t be,” Miki was saying, staring at his watch. “But--”

No one was listening. Touga, frozen in surprise by Hotohori’s hasty exit, finally gathered himself and took off after his friend, silently cursing himself for allowing such a scene to occur as he felt all eyes in the room turned his way.

“You can’t duel in the arena,” Jury was telling Saionji. “He shouldn’t have given Saihitei a ring; this isn’t a duel for the Bride.”

“Something’s very wrong,” Miki said under his breath. He looked over at Utena, Anthy, and Wakaba. “Touga’s become the Bride.” He held up the watch, as if to show them.

Utena only shook her head to indicate she didn’t understand. “No, Anthy’s the Rose Bride.”

“Not now, not anymore. Something’s changed.”

“This has changed everything,” said Morpheus as he gazed into the globe he’d pulled from his robe. “The vortex is growing instead of weakening, and the terms of this world--” He indicated the globe, which had a blue-haired boy inside it, “have altered dramatically.”

“Look, we don’t care,” Tamahome said. “We just want Hotohori back.”

“You should care,” Morpheus told him gravely. “The vortex may very well swallow your world entirely.” He returned the globe to his robe. “Very well, I will send you on to the world in which your emperor has taken up residence. Look up.”

Mitsukake, Tamahome, and Tasuki exchanged wary glances, but silently deciding that the act of looking up could do them little harm, did as they were told. The ceiling of the room was distant, and many globes of light like the one that hovered above the Dream King’s throne

hung suspended high above them, forming the familiar patterns of constellations. It made Tamahome dizzy, looking up and up like that, and he felt himself fall backwards, with no floor to stop him . . . falling.

“Hotohori,” Touga panted, having caught up with him in the garden, where Hotohori sat on the grass, knees drawn up, head down, “what was that about?”

“I should ask you that!” Hotohori huffed. His head shot up to glare at Touga. “Why does your friend want to fight me? What’s this talk of a Bride? Why did you give me this ring?”

Touga took a seat beside his newest friend. “Saionji is jealous. He fancies himself my best friend.” He smiled at Hotohori. “Would you feel better if we practiced?”

“You haven’t answered my other questions,” Hotohori responded sulkily.

“Later. You’ll feel better if we expend some energy now.” He rose. “I’ll go get the swords.”

“Highness, no!” the guards were shouting as Chichiri began to push the doors of the chamber shut.

“I must stay in here!” Chichiri grunted, for it was hard work pushing against the doors while the guards were pushing the other way.

“He’s not well!” the captain of the guard told his men. “We must get him out of there and into the care of the doctors! So push!”

“No, no, I have to stay in here!” Chichiri insisted with a groan. “Oh, they’ll never listen as long as they think I’m the emperor, you know!” With a sigh, he returned to his natural form and allowed the guards to swing open the doors. “He’s not in here, you know?” he told the befuddled men.

“But--we just heard him! I could have sworn . . .” The captain scratched his head. “Where did he go?”

Chichiri shrugged. “He told me to stay here and try to hold that back, you know? He probably went for a bath,” the magician added. “If I were you, I’d get out of here, though. This magic is tricky, you know?”

The captain and his men glanced uneasily at the vortex. “Right,” the captain said. “We’d better find the emperor and make sure he’s all right. You,” he told Chichiri, “stay here and, uh . . . whatever it is you do.” He waved his men outside. “Think I’ll close these doors,” the captain added over his shoulder as he retreated. “So you can, uh, concentrate. Magic,” he muttered as the doors shut behind him. “Nasty stuff, that.”

“More roses,” Tasuki groaned, blinking to focus. They’d each of them landed on their backs, hard. “What is it with these #@%ing things?” He stood up swiftly, just in case any of these thorny little plants had plans for his boots.

Tamahome sat up slowly. “Where are we?”

“The Dream King said this would be the realm Hotohori has been contained in,” Mitsukake said.

“It’s a garden,” Tasuki said dryly. He looked up and around. “Enclosed in glass,” he added. “We can break our way out.”

“Let’s try the door first,” Tama suggested. He strode confidently to the portal in question and opened it neatly. “See?”

Tasuki grimaced. "You always do things the easy way."

Hotohori held nothing back, pushing Touga into a completely defensive combat and finally knocking him successfully to the ground. Even then, Touga wasn't completely sure Hotohori would cease his attack, but slowly the madness in the amber eyes was replaced by sheer fatigue. Touga sighed in relief. "What are you so angry for?" he asked, peeling off his jacket, which was damp with sweat and uncomfortable.

Hotohori collapsed onto the grass next to his so-called friend and unzipped his own jacket. "Answer my questions," he said dully as he tossed his sword aside.

"It's not as easy as all that," Touga insisted. He reached suddenly as if to touch Hotohori, who ducked away.

"Don't," he growled.

Surprisingly, Touga laughed. "You're beautiful when you're angry!"

Hotohori scowled. "I'm beautiful all the time," he said stubbornly.

"True!" Touga agreed with a chuckle, then sighed and rested back on the lawn. "It feels good to be away from that stuffy crowd."

Hotohori blinked over at him in astonishment. "But you were so excited about throwing a party!"

Touga shrugged. "I think I'd rather have you to myself."

Hotohori rose. "I'm going back."

"With your jacket unzipped and wrinkled? Well at least let me fix your hair; it's come loose." Hotohori hesitated, and Touga added, "You don't want to go in looking like that. Come here." He patted the grass next to him.

"Don't try anything," Hotohori said tightly as he sat down.

"Like what?" Touga said in his ear, causing him to flinch.

"Cut it out."

"Are you afraid?" It was a whisper, and it gave Hotohori chills.

He caught his breath. "Of what?"

"Anything," said Touga, sitting back a little and sounding suddenly reasonable. "Of dueling with Saionji? He's our Kendo captain, you know."

"Is he good?"

"We're about even."

Hotohori shrugged. "Then I guess I don't really need to worry. Aren't you done?"

Touga leaned in close again, and out of the corner of his eye Hotohori saw red hair fall over his own bare shoulder. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Should I be?"

Touga released him. "There," he said, "done."

Akantharhodon VI: *La Vie, ce n'est pas pour la Bataille . . .*

"There's nobody here," Tamahome said.

"Unless they're waiting to ambush us," Tasuki suggested.

"It seems unlikely," said Mitsukake.

"Maybe to you," Tasuki returned grimly as he glanced around at the little courtyard and the building that surrounded it. "What kind of place is this?"

"I think it's a school," said Tamahome. "Miaka talks about hers, and she's described it as being similar to this." He looked up at one of the towers that rose above them, but quickly brought his gaze back down for fear of another fall through space. "These hallways must eventually lead out of here," he said, heading for a breezeway.

Shrugging at one another, Mitsukake and Tasuki followed.

"But that's not possible!" Jury was telling Miki, as if somehow this simple cliché would change the fact that Touga was, indeed, the Rose Bride. Saionji only stood there, laughing.

"Anthy," Utena said slowly, "I guess this means you're free now."

"What's going on?" demanded Nanami as she came up the stairs to where the Council stood. She pegged Saionji with a glare. "What's so funny?" Saionji could only shake his head, laughing so hard now that tears were running down his cheeks. "I fail to see the humor in my brother's hasty exit," Nanami growled at him, "chasing after--" She sneered, as if she found the very name distasteful. Then, biting her lip, she let her gaze wander down to the double doors that led to the balcony. "I wonder what . . ." She started off for the doors.

"Where's my sword?" Kamui demanded.

Morpheus didn't bother to look at his nephew as he concentrated on the globe in front of him. "I put it away," he said absently.

"It's mine."

"It's your father's, and you were being destructive." The Dream King frowned deeply at something he saw in the glass. "I am busy, Kamui. Go."

"I want to see the book, Lucien."

The exceedingly tall librarian had to look a long way down to find the imperious face that matched the imperious tone. All eyes, that face. Never even a smile. "What book would that be, Master Kamui?" Lucien asked politely, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"The Teuchos."

Lucien sighed. "You know you cannot see it; it's been forbidden."

"By who?"

Lucien lifted his hands and held them wide open to indicate. "Everyone, as far as I can tell. Everyone who has any influence, anyway. Why do you want to see it so badly?" he added. In some small way, he felt sorry for the boy, although he wasn't exactly sure why.

Kamui turned away. "I'll find it," he promised, starting down one of the library's great aisles.

Lucien could only shake his head, wondering if the boy might not make good on his vow and how he might stop Kamui should he need to. “Perhaps,” he called after the Dream King’s nephew, “perhaps if you spoke with your Uncle Destiny?”

Kamui whirled. “Destiny?”

“He wouldn’t show you the Teuchos,” Lucien told him, “but he might be able to tell you . . . something . . .”

“Like when I’m to be born? Or about my father and grandfather?”

Lucien shrugged. “Perhaps,” he emphasized weakly, wanting to make sure the boy didn’t get his hopes up too high. “But you’ll have to ask Lord Morpheus for permission first.”

Kamui sent the librarian a withering look. “I know where the gallery is,” he said and started for the exit. He paused in the doorway. “And Lucien, if you dare go to Uncle Morpheus about this, you’ll have me to deal with.” And he was gone.

Lucien drew himself up slightly. “Why, the little--” he began, wondering how he could ever have felt pity for such a creature.

“Leave it to Nakago to bargain with a . . . What was he?” Tasuki asked.

“The Dream King,” Mitsukake answered.

“There’s a light up there,” Tamahome said, turning left. They’d been wandering the halls and breezeways of the seemingly endless building for at least half an hour.

“There’s no light anywhere,” Tasuki countered. “It’s dark out, and there’s nobody here. I think we’ve been tricked.”

“No, it is lighter down this way; I think it leads outside.” There was a moment of silence as they walked, before Tamahome asked, “What if . . . the vortex . . . ?”

“The sooner we get back the better,” Mitsukake responded. “Then Chichiri can close it.”

“We hope,” said Tasuki.

Tamahome glanced back at him as they emerged from the building into a courtyard lit dimly with tall streetlamps that were decorated with roses. The lamps stretched off into the distance, and far away an odd, circular forest rose above all the buildings that ran between the building they’d just escaped and the strange arena beyond. “You always make things difficult,” he said.

“I’m practical,” Tasuki insisted. “For example, where the hell are we now?”

Hotohori came bursting back through the exact doors he’d used to make his hasty exit an hour earlier, startling Nanami. Touga followed much more calmly, neglecting to notice his sister as he traced Hotohori’s steps toward the Council. Nanami reached for her brother’s sleeve as he passed, and irritation crossed his features briefly. “What is it, Nanami?”

“Why are you following him around like this?” she hissed. “You look ridiculous!”

Touga frowned slightly and did not answer, instead turning to watch Hotohori approach Saionji. The vice-president looked supremely amused. Hotohori had no expression whatsoever.

“Now,” Hotohori said to his challenger.

Saionji was visibly surprised. “During a party?”

Hotohori only stared at him dully, so Saionji shrugged to show he didn’t care, either. Then he turned to Jury and Miki. “Does Touga know?”

“Does Touga know what?” Hotohori demanded.

“Wait. If Touga’s the Bride, then doesn’t that mean he belongs to Tenjou?” Jury looked at Miki for confirmation, but he only shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “This has never happened before.”

“Well I don’t want him,” said Utena. “Let them fight over him.”

Hotohori gave up trying to understand. “Where is this arena?”

Saionji smiled wickedly. “Follow me.”

Akantharhodon VII: *La Bataille, c'est pour la Vie*

Touga and his sister had watched the Council's discussion from afar and were mildly surprised when the group began moving towards them and the balcony doors. Without thinking, Touga turned to trail after Hotohori as he walked past, but Nanami caught his arm again. "See?" she said. "You're just following him around like a dog!"

Touga hesitated, looking from his sister to Hotohori's retreating figure. He didn't understand it either, really, but he had to go. He pulled away from Nanami's grasp and hurried to catch up with Jury, who had hung back a little and now smiled at Touga somewhat maliciously. "So," she said off-handedly, "which one of them is your prince?"

Touga frowned. "What?"

Jury laughed. "You really don't know!"

Touga ignored her humor, his eyes involuntarily searching out the dark figure of Hotohori, who walked ahead, his expression set and sober. "They've decided to duel tonight?"

"Why wait?" Jury asked. "Might as well get it over with."

"We don't usually have spectators."

"This is a special occasion." And she began to laugh again.

Miki frowned back at them from over his shoulder. "Did you tell him?"

"Tell me what?" Touga inquired, although the tone was not as demanding as one might have expected.

"So meek!" Jury exclaimed with delight. "Not our usual, feisty president. Must come with the territory."

Miki turned to watch Anthy, who was animatedly chatting and laughing with Utena and Wakaba. "Must," he murmured to himself, then turned back to Touga. "So which one is the champion?"

"Saihitei," Jury answered for him.

"What's she talking about?" Touga asked Miki.

"Well, you're the Rose Bride--"

Touga stopped walking, so Miki and Jury did as well, Jury howling with laughter because she could see that Touga knew it was true. And that he was afraid.

"In Hell," Mitsukake said gravely.

Tasuki and Tamahome swiveled their heads in his direction. "Huh?" Tasuki grunted.

"It would be better to say, 'in Hell' than 'the hell.' It makes more sense, grammatically, since Hell is technically a place that you would be inside of."

Tasuki glanced over at Tamahome to make sure he'd really heard correctly, but Tama only shrugged and turned away, stopping when he saw movement down near the strange forest that stood at the far end of the street. "There are people down there," he said, as if somehow he hadn't believed people actually existed in this world.

"Then let's go," Tasuki said, striding forward.

"What if they're not friendly?" Tamahome asked.

“Then we’ll kill them. Come on.”

“You’ve come without permission and having stolen your father’s sword.”

Kamui rolled his eyes as he walked alongside his uncle, whose garden wound around them. “You always tell people what they already know.”

Destiny might have smiled slightly, but from under his cowl it was impossible to tell. “What would you have me tell you?”

“I have a feeling you know.”

“And I have a feeling you know what I’m going to say.”

Kamui darted a sharp look at his uncle. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have to ask.”

“You cannot see the Teuchos, Kamui, it is forbidden.”

“By who?”

“I do not know, I only know that it is. I also cannot tell you your destiny, since you do not have one.”

Kamui’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Destiny patted the book chained to his arm. “Everyone has one of these, a Book of Destiny that details everything they will do and have done, every choice they make, every choice they might have made, every path their lives might have taken and will take. But you, Kamui, do not.”

“You have one?”

“Naturally.”

“The Endless?”

“Of course.”

“My father?”

“Yes.”

“But not Tithendion! Surely not!” exclaimed Kamui, who could not believe that the supreme God would allow his life to be dictated in such a way.

“Even Tithendion,” answered Destiny. “What is the Teuchos, but a record of what He has accomplished and what He will bring to pass?”

“I’m in there, aren’t I?” asked Kamui.

“In the Teuchos, yes, although you are not named specifically. Kamui, when your father created you, he carved you from the very last piece of silver in Argyros. And he placed a piece of each of The Endless inside of you, a piece of everyone but himself. And he swore that your path would not be marked out for you, that you would choose your own way. He did not want you to become what the Teuchos said you would become. . .”

“How can I avoid a danger I’m not aware of? I must see that book!”

“Kamui, by giving you no destiny, your father has given you every destiny. Use that power.”

“To do what?”

They walked along in silence for awhile, Destiny seeming to forget that Kamui had asked him a question. But then, finally, the shrouded figure said, “You should leave these realms, Kamui. You have ceased to grow here.” He reached out and plucked a rose from a nearby bush. “You

may never be born, if your father does not return for you. You will not bloom. You should go.” Kamui gingerly took the flower from his uncle’s fingers. “Is it possible for me to . . .? I mean, without my father?”

“Only he can give you life. But it does not mean you cannot pass among the living. You should go,” Destiny said again. He was thoughtful for a minute, before saying, “Do you know, you are very much like Despair? Not our Despair now, no, but very much like the one . . . before . . . I wonder if he put more of Despair in you than any other of us?” It was said more to himself than to his nephew.

“I-I don’t . . .”

“No, no,” Destiny said swiftly, “I didn’t mean for you to answer. It was just a consideration. Tell me, Kamui, is there anywhere you’d like to go?”

“Someplace where people like me,” Kamui responded quickly, surprising both himself and his uncle.

“It is true,” Destiny admitted, “that the family is not fond of you . . . Your very nature, Kamui, makes it difficult for anyone to—Ah, and now you are getting that stubborn, stony expression on your face, I know it!” (For Destiny could not see it, he was blind.) “You got that from Morpheus, I’m sure. But, Kamui, remember that you are an orphan, without parents and begrudgingly attended to by your extended family; you cannot go through any world expecting people to love or even like you.”

“So I am to go without ever being loved?” The idea gave him a small, sudden, unwanted pain in his chest. It made his breath catch for a moment, and he wondered at it. He squeezed the stem of the rose in his hand, puncturing himself, and feeling better somehow for having relieved the pressure inside himself, for having bled it out.

“I didn’t say that,” Destiny told him. “I said you cannot expect it. And then, should you be so lucky, it will surprise and delight you.”

“Delight,” Kamui murmured, thinking suddenly of Aunt Del, who’d finally tumbled down the rabbit hole. Well, with a family like this— “I want to go,” he told his uncle. “I don’t even care where, so long as it’s away from all of you.”

“Indeed,” Destiny said dryly. “Well, first you must leave the Sword of Heaven here; you can have it again when you need it,” he assured his nephew, who he sensed was wary of being without his weapon. “And,” Destiny added, “you’ll have to lose the wings.”

The group entered the dueling arena by benefit of Hotohori’s newly awarded ring; Utena had shown him how, everyone pleased with the obvious amazement of the new duelist as he beheld the elaborate Rose Gate. “Technically,” Utena told Hotohori, “you’d already be here with Touga, and the challenger would come up to meet you, but this is a strange situation.” Hotohori had only sent her a glance laced with disbelief; how could this situation be anything but strange?

Saionji led the way up the long and circling staircase, with Hotohori behind him and Touga after that. Touga might have held back—he’d wanted to, in fact—but Utena, Jury, and the others had made it a point to push him forward so that he could meekly follow his champion. He climbed the stairs with his head down and his eyes focused on Hotohori’s shiny black shoes. Somewhere behind him, Nanami had joined the party; Touga could hear her speaking sharply to Miki and Jury, and his heart sank a little farther. It will not be so bad, he thought, but it wasn’t the duel that really worried him. Something in the core of him was dying, fighting not to be subsumed by this new thing that was the Rose Bride, but losing. He feared his natural self might be mortally wounded, that he might never be himself again. He felt the compla-

gency, the complete lack of personality, tightening around what once had been, well, Touga. Now Touga was only a minor creature, because he was the Rose Bride first and Touga a distant second. Anthy, he thought. He wondered if she'd ever been somebody before becoming the Bride, and as he walked slowly up the steps he listened for her voice behind him and heard it tinkling in response to something Wakaba had said. Had she regained herself, now that she was no longer the Bride? The worst part, he thought, the worst part is that part of me is starting not to care. Something inside him was only too happy to be the Bride, relieved that he held no responsibility for himself. And then that fierceness pushed it back again, refusing to be washed under by this wave of apathy. And then there was that other little part of him that wanted desperately for Hotohori to turn around and smile at him. And that frightened him even more.

"It's farther than it looks," panted Tasuki.

"We're about halfway there," Tamahome observed.

"But where did they go?"

"Into the forest, it would seem," Mitsukake said. "Can you hunt?"

"Of course!" Tasuki replied. "I was the best hunter in our gang."

"I don't think that's an ordinary forest," Tamahome said. "I don't trust it."

"Has anything anywhere we've been been ordinary?" Tasuki asked. "What do you think they were up to, out here in the middle of the night?"

Tamahome shrugged.

"Well it can't be any good," the bandit insisted. "I mean, when our gang was out in the middle of the night--"

"They could be bandits, I guess," Tama said dully, not very interested in making conversation.

Tasuki's eyes lit up at the thought of it. "Come on," he said, dashing ahead, "let's catch up."

"Um. . ." Utena began, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah," Anthy agreed, "I know what you mean."

"So does he just know, or will you have to show him?"

Anthy gave a little shrug and stepped forward in case Touga should need her help. But the Bride, who stood now between the duelists as they faced each other, seemed to know exactly what he was doing--and he wasn't enjoying it.

It was Utena who had to come forward to show Hotohori how to catch Touga and take the sword from his chest. Saionji stood ready with Touga's sword, which he'd taken from where it had been tossed on the lawn earlier.

Now, with the duel in full force, it was easy to see that Hotohori was no amateur. Saionji, who was growing increasingly irritated at the fact that he was being handily bested in front of all his friends and comrades, was also becoming increasingly haphazard in his moves, which only succeeded in making things worse. One might have placed a hefty bet that the new duelist would remain the champion--

Except that Nanami could not stand the way Touga was looking at Hotohori.

"You want me to walk all the way up there?" Tasuki asked.

“You practically ran all the way here,” Mitsukake said.

“Exactly! I’m out of steam!”

The three of them stood at the base of the staircase, their necks craned to see where or if it ended. “There’s light up there,” Tamahome said, “and movement.”

“What if they don’t know where Hotohori is?” asked Tasuki. “Then we’ll have walked all the way up there for nothing!” The very idea of it made him bare his fangs.

“Then you stay here,” Tamahome said, starting up the stairs. Mitsukake gave Tasuki a small wave as he followed.

“Hey!” Tasuki shouted. “What if they kill you?! Where does that leave me?” They didn’t even turn around. “Fine,” he muttered under his breath as he hurried up after them, “since you’ll obviously need me to save your--”

Touga could not keep himself from being delighted at Hotohori’s clean dueling technique; it was clearly going to be a victory, and Touga was glad. He could not have withstood belonging to Saionji. And even as Hotohori moved to knock the rose from the vice-president’s chest, Touga was unable to detect disaster. It was when someone gasped, “Nanami!” that he turned to see that she had maneuvered to be behind Saionji, had taken his sword arm, and even as he had moved to block Hotohori’s blade, she pushed him forward, sending the sword into Hotohori’s chest.

Hotohori looked down in surprise at the blade that had impaled him, then up at Saionji, who quickly dropped the weapon, his own horror evident. He turned to see Nanami behind him, hand over her mouth as if aghast, but blue eyes alight with glee.

Everyone else was frozen.

“I didn’t--I wasn’t--” Saionji stammered.

“No, we know, we saw,” Jury told him mechanically.

Touga had Hotohori in his lap. Everyone watched the blood stain his uniform and flow onto the arena, marring the red outline of the rose.

“Touga,” Hotohori said, and a curtain of red hair spilled around him as his friend leaned in to hear, “I’m not afraid of you.”

Touga swallowed hard, not sure what to say. “Do you want me to fix your hair?” he asked as tears sprang to his eyes. “It’s--it’s messed up again, you know.”

“Take it down,” Hotohori murmured and felt Touga’s hand pull the ribbon free. He hissed as pain stabbed through him. “I’m going to. . .” But he didn’t finish the thought.

Mitsukake, Tamahome, and Tasuki could not see past the knot of people standing just inside the gate. “They don’t look much like bandits,” Tasuki said in disappointment.

“They might still be helpful,” Tamahome responded dryly and stepped forward. “Excuse me,” he said. The group turned around, the same glazed expression on each face. Tama recognized it immediately as Tragedy. “What--?” he began and then saw over the short, blue-haired one’s shoulder and burst through the line of them for a better look. “Highness!” he exclaimed.

This stirred the group from their shock, and they looked from one to another with questions in their glances. Tasuki and Mitsukake moved forward to look. “Mitsukake, come quick!” Tamahome shouted, and the healer strode to where Tama knelt on the ground. A red-haired boy held the emperor in his arms. “He’s--” Tamahome was saying.

“He’s dead,” the boy who held the body announced flatly. He showed no sign of letting Hotohori go.

“You killed the emperor?” Tasuki asked in astonishment.

“Emperor?” Touga responded, although his voice held no emotion, not even interest.

Mitsukake was shaking his head at Tamahome’s questioning expression. “There’s nothing I can do now.”

“He wanted his hair down,” Touga told them blankly. He looked up, suddenly, at the castle that hung suspended above them. “I think--” A wind began to stir, and the light became unbearable. Everyone turned their faces up to it, blinded by it, but unable to turn away. It could have lasted for hours, but when it was finally gone, so was Hotohori.

Touga clutched the red ribbon and silently cried.

Akantharhodon VIII: Deep As You Go

For one long, stretched moment, everyone stood there, watching Touga thread the ribbon again and again around and through his fingers. And then, finally, Nanami broke free of the tight knot that were her schoolmates, strode past the strangers to her brother, and slapped him.

Touga's head came up in one swift, smooth movement, red hair falling out of his face and blue eyes flashing as the thing inside that had made him the Bride began to crack. "This I will not forgive," he said lowly, and Nanami took one faltering step backward before turning and running out of the arena.

Touga's eyes slid over to Saionji, who stood a little apart from the rest of the group. "And you?" he asked.

"I-I didn't--" Saionji looked to the others for support.

Touga rose. "Leave us."

"Wai just a minutet," Tamahome said, mustering authority, "what happened here?"

"A duel," Touga said flatly. "Hotohori lost." He looked again at the Council. "Leave. Now."

They blinked at him, like a aggregation of forest creatures gathered in a glade to watch as the hunter raised his gun. Then, shrugging, Jury turned to go. "You know where to find us," she said, and the others watched in disbelief as she went to the stairgate. They looked again at Touga, whose expression was grim and unpleasant, and decided that Jury was, perhaps, the lesser of the two evils. Turning as one, they left.

Nuriko walked the gardens. For four days he'd walked them, not knowing what he expected to find. But being in the palace was too confining, and there was nothing he could do to help Chichiri. It was the waiting, with nothing to do, that hurt the most.

Roses and roses. They were in full bloom now, threatening to take over the gardens just as they'd taken the emperor's chambers hostage. There were roses of every possible color, some of them having been specially cultured on the whim of this or that ruler. Nuriko wondered if Hotohori had ever demanded roses of any particular color. It didn't seem likely.

Up ahead on the walk, Nuriko spotted something black and inky. Had one of the scribes spilled a jar of ink? An awful lot of ink there, though, for just one pot. Catching his breath in his throat, Nuriko broke into a run. "Hotohorisama!!" Without much effort, Nuriko scooped up the unconscious emperor and hurried indoors, managing to elude the guards until he got as far as his room, when two soldiers stopped him in the hall.

"What--?" one of them began. Then, "Hey, it's the emperor!" None of the palace guards had seen Emperor Saihitei the past few days; it seemed that every time they were told he was in one place, they'd go to check on him, only to be told they'd just missed him. They'd begun to believe he was avoiding his entire staff, perhaps on some boyish whim.

"Is he hurt?" the second guard asked, suspiciously eyeing the torn--and rather strange, at that--clothing.

Nuriko smiled and gave his most girlish giggle. "We, uh. . . got a little rough. I think I wore him out. I was just going to--" He gestured to the door to his room.

The guards grimaced and blushed at the courtesan. "Yeah," one grunted, "go ahead."

Nuriko batted his eyes and escaped into his private chambers.

“He was your emperor,” Touga said. That numbness was invading again, that foreign thing that made the Rose Bride what she--or he--was. Tamahome, Mitsukake, and Tasuki just stared. “It’s my fault he’s dead,” Touga went on. “I’m sorry.”

The three strangers looked to one another, as if for ideas. “If he’s responsible--” Tasuki began. “He should be taken back to Konan,” Tamahome said slowly as he thought it over. “He should be held accountable.”

“They’ll execute him,” said Mitsukake. “Is it really worth it, the loss of another life?”

“I want to go,” Touga told them softly. They stood there for a moment. Tamahome leaned back to look up at the castle again. “What is that thing? Where did he--the body go?”

“More importantly,” put in Tasuki, “how in Hell--” and he sent a pointed glance in Mitsukake’s direction--“do we get out of here?”

Miki stopped on the bottom step and sat down as the rest of his comrades went on ahead of him. Fishing his watch from his jacket, he checked the time and sighed, then was startled by a shadow that fell over him. Jury.

“Miki?”

The concern on her face frightened him most.

“Miki, aren’t you coming?”

He stared down at his watch. “No. I need to stay here.” Jury seemed suddenly to realize that her mask had slipped; schooling her features into something hard and uncaring, she turned away. “Suit yourself.”

Miki stopped his watch and put his face in his hands.

“What are you wearing?” Nuriko asked under his breath, having carefully laid Hotohori on the bed. He tugged the torn and bloody jacket off the limp body, but after a moment’s debate decided to err on the side of caution and leave the pants on. A quick scan told Nuriko that the emperor was uninjured--from the waist up, at least--and he sighed with relief. Taking a brush from his vanity, he began to comb out the tangled hair, humming to himself all the while. Then he took some scented water to wash Hotohori’s face and hands. He paused when he saw the strange ring. “What--?”

Hotohori pulled his hand away. “Stop,” he whispered, so Nuriko did, although it had sounded more like he’d been finishing a sentence, perhaps from a dream.

“Nuriko?” he murmured drowsily. “But I--”

“I found you in the garden,” said Nuriko. “Where have you been?”

“A school,” Hotohori answered. “But I could have sworn--” He furrowed his brow and shook his head, unable to complete the thought.

“Must have been some lesson you were learning; your clothes were all ripped up and bloody when you got here.” Hotohori didn’t answer, so Nuriko rose from where he’d been kneeling next to the bed and turned to go. “I’ll get you something fresh to wear.”

“He didn’t mean to hurt me,” Hotohori said softly. “We were friends. Just. . . friends.”

Nuriko frowned from over his shoulder. “Sounds like you regret it.”

Hotohori's eyes flew to Nuriko's face, startled. "I don't know what you mean."

"I know exactly how you feel," Nuriko answered, as he pushed open the door to leave.

"Chichiri!"

"You're ruining my concentration, you know?" Chichiri snapped as Nuriko burst into the room. The magician looked like himself again; he'd been unable to keep up the spell that disguised him as the emperor while working to hold back the vortex and simultaneously holding it open. It hadn't mattered, though, since the guards had kept away.

"Hotohori's back!" Nuriko hesitated in the doorway, where Chichiri sat opposite the vortex. It had ceased to vacuum up everything in front of it--good news for Chichiri, who would have long since been gone--but it was still growing. This part of the palace no longer had a ceiling.

"He didn't come through here," Chichiri said.

"No, I found him in the garden. I came to get him some clothes."

"Then, even if this vortex closes, there's a way back to Konan," Chichiri deduced with a sigh of relief. "In that case, I can go ahead and seal this one."

Nuriko's eyes widened with apprehension. "Are you certain? Maybe you should have a look at the one in the garden first, to be sure. . ." But Chichiri shook his head. "I can't leave this room as long as this vortex continues to threaten the palace, you know. It would have eaten up everything by now, if I hadn't been working so hard to keep it under control."

Nuriko giggled. "Maybe we should call it Miaka."

"I'm going to close it," Chichiri said, standing. He said a few words that Nuriko didn't recognize, and with a loud bang the mouth of the vortex slammed shut. Rose petals drifted from the ceiling, which appeared none the worse for wear for having been swallowed by a vortex. "Illusory magic," Chichiri murmured.

"What does that mean?"

"It means the vortex was built on another dimension made to look exactly like this one. The second dimension sustains all the damage in place of the real world, and when that dimension is removed, the real world remains intact."

"Nice of them," said Nuriko.

"Clever of them," Chichiri corrected. "There are only a handful of people able to perform such a trick, you know."

"Can you?"

"On occasion." Chichiri turned for the door. "Let's go see about the garden."

"Things must be put back where they belong," Morpheus decided as he stared into his globe. "This is simply too far out of hand."

"What about Lord Nakago?" asked the Corinthian, who leaned over the back of the Dream King's throne for a look.

"He has nothing I really want or need; our contract was for my amusement only."

The nightmare looked at Morpheus in small surprise. "Amusement?"

"I do, sometimes, amuse myself, Corinthian." But he didn't sound all that amused. "This, however, has ceased to entertain me. And the vortices are beginning to do real damage, despite

their having been built on a separate plane.” A sudden bang from somewhere above them caused the castle to shudder slightly. “One of them has collapsed,” Morpheus breathed. He looked back into the globe. “Now for these.”

“I guess that answers my question,” Tasuki said as the bright light blazed forth from the suspended castle once again. He took hold of Touga’s arm and turned his face to the illumination. Tamahome followed suit, taking hold of Touga’s other arm as they were collectively swept into the vortex.

“That one wasn’t one of them, I don’t think,” the Corinthian said, pointing to the image imprisoned in the globe.

“Which?”

“The red one.”

Morpheus peered at it and shook his head. “They all look alike to me.”

“He’s dressed differently,” the Corinthian went on. “That’s why I think--”

“The emperor was also dressed differently.”

“Yes, but--”

“Well, it makes no difference now. I’m closing the vortices.” He moved to put the globe aside, then paused, his hand trembling.

“Sire?” the Corinthian asked uneasily.

“Kamui!” Morpheus hissed as the globe slipped from his fingers and shattered.

Slowly, Miki climbed the steps back up to the dueling arena and waited. It was not long before the figure appeared from somewhere beyond, a place Miki was unable to discern—a boy dressed in a white shirt and faded jeans.

“You’re early,” Miki told him. “And you’re barefoot.”

Kamui just stared.

“I thought you would be taller.”

Kamui scowled. “I’m as tall as you. Besides, it’s not size, it’s skill.”

Miki nodded and checked his watch. “The meek will inherit,” he said absently.

“Miki.”

The boys turned toward the sound. “Miss Jury!” Miki whispered in evident horror as she approached them.

Jury slipped an arm around the underclassman’s shoulders. “Who’s your friend?”

“He--”

“I’m Kamui.” He sounded offended.

Jury lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t take it personally.” She gave Miki a small squeeze. “You’ll be coming back to the party?”

Miki looked down at his watch. “As soon as I’m done here.”

“Good. We need to talk.” She turned to go. “Any idea where our Bride is, by the way?” When

Miki didn't answer, she shrugged. "It was Saionji who wanted to know."

Kamui watched her leave. "She likes you."

Blushing, Miki answered swiftly, "She doesn't like anybody. She's just less mean to me than she is to most people. It's creepy!" he insisted when confronted with Kamui's unblinking stare.

"You're not surprised and delighted?" Kamui asked.

"What?"

Kamui shook his head. "Nevermind."

Miki returned his attention to his watch. "You shouldn't be here yet," he said. "You should go."

Kamui groaned. "That's what everybody says! It seems like everybody knows where I'm supposed to be except me!"

"Go back into the Labyrinth the way you came," Miki told him. "You'd be surprised what I know," he added at Kamui's visible astonishment. "It's not far."

"Where am I going?"

"To retrieve the Rose Bride."

Akantharhodon IX: My Love is Like. . .

In a week, no one had been able to get the emperor to smile. He did not speak of his time away, except to tell Nuriko and Chichiri that he had not seen Tasuki, Tamahome, or Mitsuka-ke. He did not go into the gardens, instead throwing himself into affairs of the empire and pointedly ignoring any suggestion that he'd been gone at all.

Chichiri had not been able to pinpoint whatever vortex might have existed in the garden. "If it's up there, it's a good way up, you know," he told Nuriko. "It doesn't seem to be a threat, anyway, you know." But of course there was the unspoken question of how the others might get home, if there was no door.

Then, eight days after Hotohori's return, the vortex delivered the remaining wayward travelers, plus one prisoner of war, before slamming shut for good.

Miki watched until the figure had disappeared from sight completely, stopping his watch the moment the traveler could no longer be seen. Slipping the timepiece back into his jacket pocket, he prepared to go and meet what was left of the Council, first taking time to collect one of the large white feathers that were now straying across the dueling arena. He looked again to where Kamui had vanished, twirling the feather between his thumb and forefinger. "The strong and the meek," he said aloud to himself and couldn't help a smile.

Touga teetered on the edge of consciousness; the trip through the vortex had somehow robbed him of sense, made him drowsy. He felt the hands on him, knew he was being taken somewhere, felt himself begin to move at the rough prodding, although his legs were reluctant to follow any kind of command, and his eyes refused to open and observe his whereabouts.

The hands released him, and he found a cool, smooth surface that had to be a floor. It was nice, he thought, so nice to lay down.

He heard the voices, they were accusing him; he didn't care. He was the Bride, let him take the blame.

Gasps now, and he heard distinctly one of them say "Highness!" and another "Hotohorisama!" and his eyes opened a little and more hands were on him and he wished they would just leave him alone and let him sleep. "Touga!" And he knew this voice, these hands that were on him now. He tried to open his eyes some more but couldn't.

"I must be dead," he murmured. "I must be dead, they must have killed me already, because Hotohori's here."

"No, you're not dead. They're not going to hurt you. Nuriko, carry him to my room."

When he awoke, Touga found that he was clean and in fresh--albeit, strange--attire. He also found a woman sitting beside the bed, her large, violet eyes focused intently on him. "Hello," he said, for lack of anything better. When she didn't answer, he thought perhaps she might be deaf or mute or both. The way she stared was beginning to make him incredibly uncomfortable, and so he sat up in hopes of moving out of her trace-like line of sight, but the eyes followed him.

"He'll do horrible things to them because of you," she finally said. "He'll punish them."

Touga turned his own wide eyes on her. "But I wanted to come!"

For a moment the woman stared at him, aghast. "You sound--" she began, then shook her head, forcing herself to stay on track. "That's what they told him, too," she said abruptly. "I don't think he believes them." She looked down at her hands, which fidgeted with the blankets as if of their own volition. "They're his friends; they were trying to help, to do the right thing, and now. . ."

"What will he do?"

The woman shrugged. "Send them away, maybe."

"I thought he was dead," Touga insisted. "It was my fault."

She lowered her brow, and the look made her dangerous, almost manly. "You tried to kill him?"

"He was killed on my behalf. You saw the blood, I'm sure, on my uniform."

"His clothes were bloody, too, when we found him," the woman admitted. "He wouldn't say what had happened. He didn't want to talk about it. Is it such a horrible world, your world?"

"The world's not so bad; it'll change soon, anyway. It's my life that needs work," Touga told her.

"I'd say you were lucky. Hotohorisama has given you his room; you don't get better treatment than that. But I will tell you one thing," the woman said, her eyes flashing. "If Hotohori punishes the others, I'm going to punish you. Anyway," she added, her mood suddenly lighter as she rose to her feet, "Hotohorisama told me to bring you anything you might ask for. Is there anything you'd like?"

"Where is Touga?"

Miki didn't answer, staring out over the dark campus from the top of the Rose Tower, his stop-watch firmly in hand. He could hear Saionji coming closer, even sensed the raised hand and anticipated the strike. When it didn't fall, he turned and saw that Jury had caught Saionji's arm. "You won't get anywhere that way," she told Saionji.

Saionji growled. "He knows and he won't tell!"

Jury smiled. "Miki knows all sorts of things he doesn't tell, don't you Miki?"

Miki turned away again. "He's gone."

"Where?" demanded Saionji. When no additional information was forthcoming, he shouted, "He is my Bride!"

This time it was astonishment that caused Miki to turn. "Hardly!"

The impertinence of the underclassman's statement shocked Saionji into silence. Jury chuckled.

"You just killed someone, and all you can think about is the Rose Bride?" Miki went on, his expression one of decided disgust. "Besides, you didn't win." He clicked his watch, checked it, re-set it, started it again.

"No corpse, no crime," Saionji said smugly. "And if a dead opponent doesn't mean a victory, I can't imagine what would."

"You're not wearing a rose," Miki said.

"What?"

"Perhaps you missed the part where Saihitei knocked the rose from your chest while you were running him through," Miki suggested dully. "But he died with his intact."

Now Jury was clearly confused. “But how can you have a dead champion?”

Stop. Check. Reset. “We start again.”

Kamui watched his own bare feet as he walked, thinking that he was glad to go. That world wasn't very interesting, he told himself, refusing to acknowledge that it had hurt to be unwanted. . . again. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans (such uncomfortable garments, compared to his usual robes!), and walked along the dirt path of the Labyrinth, fully expecting to end up back in Destiny's garden.

Well, he was half right.

“I don't understand,” Hotohori said. He and Touga lay side by side on a sunlit patch of grass at the far end of the garden, where they were least likely to be disturbed. Not that anyone really wanted to bother the emperor, who had, it seemed, recently developed quite a temper.

“I don't expect you to,” Touga told him.

“You're not. . . like the Touga I'm used to,” Hotohori went on uncertainly.

“Because I'm the Bride. Your Bride.”

“And you wanted to come here. Even though you thought I was dead and they would execute you.”

“It was that or go with Saionji, and I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.” The bitterness made Touga feel good for some reason. Like himself. But the tide was soon out again. “You shouldn't take it out on them. It's all really been my fault.”

Hotohori didn't reply. Then, suddenly exasperated, “You take the blame because you are the Rose Bride! As if you're just supposed to lay down and die!”

“I will. If I have to.”

“Then you really aren't the Touga I know.”

“I want to be.” This much was true. “I didn't ask for this to happen. No one knows how it works, exactly.” He reached out to play with a stray strand of the emperor's hair. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I won't be until you're you,” Hotohori retorted shortly, absent-mindedly swatting at the hand by his ear. Touga caught Hotohori's own hand, then, and when the emperor turned to look at him, he felt the interior bands that had been holding his true self hostage begin to give.

“That's a start,” he said.

Hotohori shook his head in wonder. “I don't understand,” he sighed again in defeat.

Kamui paused to consider what he saw. A red-headed boy rested his head on the chest of a dark-haired girl. The girl fiddled inattentively with the boy's hair. Kamui wondered if they were surprised and delighted at having found such affection in one another. He felt his own features harden in envy at the notion.

Time to break this up.

“Are you the Rose Bride?” Kamui asked without introduction as he neared the couple. He had meant the question to be directed at the girl, but it was the boy who opened his eyes and sat up.

“I'm the Rose Bride,” the boy said.

Kamui blinked at him. "Must be the hair," he said. He looked again to the girl. "Who is she, then?"

Hotohori now sat up as well. "I'm the emperor."

Kamui looked between the two. "You sound alike."

"So we've been told," said Touga narrowly. The fetters inside him were beginning to feel the strain of jealousy.

Kamui lost interest in this one. "Are you really a man?" he asked the other.

Hotohori smiled. "Yes. And I'm really the emperor."

Kamui only stared. No one had ever smiled at him like that before.

"Who are you?" Hotohori asked.

"I'm Kamui," he answered, sounding as if any other suggestion would have been absurd.

"Yes, well, Kamui," said Touga, now ripping idly at the grass beside him, "what are you doing here?"

"Some boy named Miki sent me to bring him the Rose Bride. I guess he meant you."

Not for long, thought Touga. The longer Hotohori smiled at this Kamui, the more Touga felt like taking the kid apart—definitely not something the Bride would consider. "Miki. . ." he murmured, and he knew that Miki had known exactly what he was doing when he'd sent this one along.

"He had a watch," Kamui went on, as if somehow that piece of information might be helpful.

Hotohori laughed, clearly charmed by the boy's candor.

The chains were not going to hold.

"Now who is this kid?" Nuriko asked Chichiri as the emperor, Touga, and someone unfamiliar entered the palace.

Chichiri frowned slightly and removed his cheerful mask. "He has strong magic in him," he murmured.

"As strong as you?"

"Stronger. And less disciplined. Not good, you know?"

Hotohori swept over towards them before Nuriko could answer. "Nuriko, Chichiri, this is Kamui."

"You're not as young as you look," Chichiri observed, striving to be light-hearted once again. "How old are you?"

"I don't know. I haven't been born yet."

Chichiri drew himself up suddenly, as if slightly horrified. Nuriko sent him a questioning glance, but the magician did not respond.

If Hotohori thought the answer was strange, he didn't show it. He gave Kamui's shoulder a small squeeze. "Come on, we'll find you a room."

Scowling, Touga followed Hotohori and his new-found pet.

"Not good at all," said Nuriko.

“What do you mean, you haven’t found him?”

“There are many worlds, My Lord. It may take some time.”

“Time is the one thing we have the least of,” Morpheus snapped, then sighed. “I want him back!”

The Corinthian could not disguise his surprise at the statement. “But—if I may, Sire—why? I didn’t think—”

“The boy should have been born ages ago,” Morpheus announced tightly. “He was my responsibility, and I will rectify his father’s oversight directly. Keep looking.”

The Corinthian hesitated, trying to decide if he should attempt to discourage the Dream King from interfering with Durandios; such things never had happy endings. In the end, all the nightmare could bring himself to do was give a small bow. “As you wish,” he said and swiftly departed.

The table had been set with two extra places, which Nuriko found to be somewhat odd, considering the three seats he felt sure would be vacant for the meal. He, himself, sat next to Kamui, who had been placed on the emperor’s right. Touga sat on Hotohori’s left, and Chichiri was next to him, his own expression unnaturally grim. The group waited to be served in silence, Touga’s attention entirely on Hotohori, Kamui watching their interaction keenly, and Nuriko watching the three of them collectively. Once in awhile Nuriko would glance over at Chichiri, who seemed lost in his own dark thoughts.

And then Miaka arrived. “Sorry I’m late!” she called loudly. Then, spying the empty chairs as she took a seat beside Nuriko, “Oh, but not everyone is here yet anyway!”

Nuriko felt his breath halt, and his eyes darted over to Touga, who was still intent on the emperor. Hotohori simply said softly, “Please, Miaka, not so loud. We have guests.”

“Oh, cool! Hello! I’m Miaka!”

Touga and Kamui turned to look, and Touga’s eyes widened as he realized she wore a typical school uniform, the kind they would wear in his world, not this one. “I heard the others were back,” Miaka went on when neither of the guests bothered to respond to her introduction. “I hope they get down here soon; I’m starving!”

Again Nuriko looked to Touga, then Hotohori. And then the others entered the dining room, slowly, their eyes on the floor, and took their seats. Hotohori motioned to the servers to begin. “I heard you were back, but—Oh! What happened to your hands?” Miaka gasped as she caught sight of Tamahome’s bandages. Tasuki and Mitsukake sported similar wraps. “Did that happen while you were away? I’d love to hear—”

“Miaka,” said Hotohori sharply.

She froze and looked at him, not sure exactly what she’d done wrong. It was the first group meal they’d had since the emperor’s return, and she was very excited about having everyone back and safe. But something obviously wasn’t right. Deciding it could wait, she dove into the first course, taking a few seconds to take in the visitors. “Hey!” she said, having finished long before any of the others, “you must be about my age! Are you an exam candidate, too?”

Kamui became very still, his large eyes wary. Miaka thought he looked like a petrified deer. “It’s your clothes,” she explained. “You’re wearing jeans, so you can’t be from here. Did you fall into The Universe of the Four Gods like me?”

Kamui stared at her as if he wasn’t convinced she was sane. He looked to Hotohori, who gave him a small, apologetic smile. “They aren’t very comfortable,” Kamui said softly. “I’m not used

to them.”

“Really? What do you usually wear in your world?”

“Wings.” This was astounding enough to make even Tamahome, Tasuki, and Mitsukake look up. They then regarded one another, in some brief and silent communication, before returning to their plates. Nuriko and Chichiri exchanged a glance. Touga glowered at the attention Kamui seemed to draw to himself, without even trying.

Hotohori signaled for the second course.

“You were with him, weren’t you?” Touga asked softly when Hotohori finally came to bed. Dinner had ended almost two hours before.

Hotohori sighed, taking a seat at the dressing table and letting down his hair. “I only wanted to make sure he was comfortable.”

Touga didn’t answer, instead automatically rising from the bed and grabbing a brush from the table. “Are you staying in here with me?” he asked after a moment of silently pulling the brush through the shining black hair.

“I hadn’t. . .” Hotohori frowned. “To be honest, I hadn’t even thought about it. I should--”

“It’s all right; I don’t mind sharing.”

Hotohori’s frown deepened. “Funny, I would have guessed otherwise.”

Touga threw down the brush and turned back to the bed. “You’re the emperor, do what you want,” he said, flinging himself down.

Hotohori regarded him a moment before removing his shirt. “Move over, then.”

Kamui wandered the long, dark halls of the palace. Most of the guards were asleep at their posts, so there was no one to stop him from going room-to-room, restless and unwilling to sleep. Sleep meant dreams, and dreams were-- Snapping to attention, Kamui realized that there was a dream loose nearby, an odd sort of nightmare. . . He went to the door of the room in question and slammed it open.

Touga sat upright at the sudden noise, and even the sleepy guards stirred slightly. But Hotohori was still fast asleep. “Mother,” he murmured. “Please, you’re suffocating me. . .”

Touga ignored him, scowling at Kamui, who stood in the doorway, his eyes wide with horror. “What are you--”

“Wake him up!” Kamui shouted. “Quick, it’s a death dream!”

When Touga didn’t move, Kamui advanced and took rough hold of the emperor. “Hotohori, wake up!”

The eyes opened but didn’t seem to see. “There’s someone. . . There’s someone standing on the other side of this tree. . .”

“What’s he talking about?” asked Touga.

“It’s a dream of the sakura tree,” Kamui replied absently. He shook Hotohori again. “Wake up!”

Hotohori’s brows knitted in confusion, although his vision did not clear. “Kamui?”

“Yes, it’s me, you must wake up.”

Hotohori blinked as this information registered, and this time Kamui knew the emperor saw him. “I was dreaming. . . I’m sorry; I hope I didn’t wake you both. It was a very vivid dream.”

“You mentioned your mother,” Touga said.

Hotohori offered a faulty smile. “I was dreaming about her. That she had called me to the place where she and my father were buried.”

“A cherry tree,” said Kamui.

“Yes. There’s a whole grove of them at the far end of the palace.”

“And your mother was there?” asked Touga.

“Mmm. And someone else, too, but. . . Kamui woke me before I got to see who.” He sighed.

“Ah, well. Sorry for disturbing you. Funny, though. I don’t usually dream.”

“You spoil him,” Nuriko was saying the next day. He stood next to Hotohori’s throne, where the emperor had just sent a flock of his tailors to create a fresh wardrobe for Kamui.

Hotohori shrugged as if it was of no consequence. “He said his clothing was uncomfortable. . . Have you noticed he sounds a little like Chichiri when he speaks?”

“No,” answered Nuriko, “but I have seen the way he watches you. This cannot end well.”

Hotohori looked over at his friend in plain surprise. “What do you mean?”

Nuriko knelt down beside the arm of the throne. “Hotohori, I have cared for you long enough to be aware of others who feel the same way--I would be an idiot if I didn’t know who my competition was!” Nuriko attempted a blithe smile, but Hotohori only blushed and turned away, so Nuriko went on more seriously, “Touga cares for you the way I do. And Kamui, he’s been watching the two of you. He will learn from what he sees, and then he will make his move.”

Hotohori turned back to Nuriko, frowning deeply. “He’s just a child!”

But Nuriko shook his head. “He’s the same age as Miaka! And you’re treating him like he’s two!” Nuriko sighed and tried another tact. “Chichiri is especially concerned; he says Kamui is no normal boy. Do you know he doesn’t sleep?”

“Chichiri?”

“Kamui.”

“I’m sure if he didn’t like his room--”

Nuriko rose again, growling with frustration. “You don’t see because you don’t want to! It’s always been that way with you! If you’d pause long enough from falling in love with every pretty thing that falls into your lap from another dimension--” At Hotohori’s startled expression, Nuriko forced himself to take a deep breath and start again. “Your Highness, if that boy came to take Touga back to his world, then it would be better to let them go now. Prolonging it will only make it worse. For you and for them.”

Hotohori rested back hard against his throne. “I don’t want to lose them.”

“You will. Even if they stay.”

“I think this one will suit you nicely,” said the emperor, holding up a large piece of midnight blue silk that was the exact shade of Kamui’s eyes. He’d come to check on the boy and had found him paralyzed in the middle of a frenzy of tailors, some of them draping, some of them measuring, others holding up drawings for Kamui’s review. Although it was the sort of thing Hotohori went through often, he saw immediately that the noise and attention had only bewildered and frightened Kamui. The relief had been obvious when Hotohori sent the tailors away again. “Is there anything in particular you like?” Hotohori went on soothingly.

Kamui reached out and fingered a soft silver fabric. "This one. And that one over there."

Hotohori nodded. "Kamui," he said suddenly, "is it true that you don't sleep? I'm the emperor," he added at Kamui's wide-eyed astonishment, "I know everything. Why don't you sleep?"

"Because I might have a bad dream. Besides, I don't need to sleep the way you do."

"Because you haven't been born yet."

"That's right. Maybe--" Kamui suggested abruptly, "maybe if you stayed with me. . ."

"What, while you slept?"

Kamui nodded, his eyes large and hopeful, and Hotohori sighed, quickly clearing the bed of fabric and taking a seat. "Alright, come here and lie down. Now close your eyes and be still."

Kamui snuggled in close to Hotohori and did as he was told. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and asked, "Is this sleeping?"

"If you're talking, you're not sleeping."

"Well, then, how do I sleep?"

"Close your eyes and don't open them again. I'll know if you do."

Kamui shut his eyes. "Now what?"

"Now nothing. You just sleep."

"Am I supposed to think about something?" asked Kamui.

"You can think about whatever you want," Hotohori told him in exasperation. "Just keep your eyes closed and go to sleep."

Kamui didn't have the heart to tell Hotohori how boring this was. He wondered why people thought it was so important. He listened to the emperor's heartbeat, which was nice, and thought about how warm he was, which was also nice; he couldn't remember ever being warm like this before.

After a few minutes, Hotohori's breathing became soft and even, and Kamui knew he was asleep. Kamui opened his eyes. The door to the room had been left open by all those wild tailors; Kamui could just see it from over Hotohori's shoulder. He could also see Touga, who stood there with shock and anger stamped on his features. Then Kamui saw the blur of red as Touga turned and abandoned the scene.

Kamui smiled.

Lord Morpheus stood in his gallery. Having finally forced a good part of the tale from a nervous and highly apologetic librarian, he now waited for his brother to respond. "Destiny--" he said impatiently, and in a moment found himself standing in a clearing. The hooded figure was gliding up the path. "Destiny, where is he?" Morpheus asked without introduction.

"You are going to interfere with the fate of the world."

"Kamui is overdue; he will be born. Where is he?"

"You will have waking visitors tonight," Destiny told him. "I suggest you allow them an audience."

"What does that--?"

"You will see."

"I want to leave," said Touga a few days later. He might have withstood finding Hotohori asleep in Kamui's room, but not a moment had passed between Touga and the emperor that was not stolen, thanks to the continuous and clinging presence of Kamui. Every walk in the garden became a trio, and he was faced with the little brat at every meal. What was worse, Hotohori did not seem to find it a problem at all, constantly treating the boy as a pet or a novel toy. The strain had successfully broken whatever internal chains had made Touga the Bride and had killed any lingering emotion he'd harbored for Hotohori.

Hotohori stopped combing his hair and turned away from the mirror to where Touga sat on the bed. "Why?"

"Miki sent Kamui to get me--I don't know how--but that must mean that they need me. I shouldn't have stayed so long."

"You're no longer the Bride," Hotohori said.

"How do you know?"

"Because you're you." He turned back to the mirror. "Since you are no longer the Bride, you shouldn't have to go. Unless you want to."

"I do."

"You're homesick?"

"I'm sick of being here," said Touga. "I'm sick of watching you with Kamui."

Hotohori turned again, swiftly. "You don't understand! I care for you both; you're not in danger of losing me!"

"It's sharing you that bothers me."

Hotohori sighed. "He's just a child, a troubled child from an unhappy family."

"I suppose he told you this?" Touga asked lightly. "I suppose you swapped stories about your manipulative mothers, fathers who had no time for you?"

Hotohori went white at the offense, and Touga pressed on, "He's not a child, and he will continue to demand more and more of you until there's no longer enough for anyone else." He rose from his seat on the bed and started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To find him. I want to leave as soon as possible."

"How did you know?" Hotohori asked as Nuriko approached him. "How did you know he doesn't sleep?"

"He watches you and I watch him. They're leaving, aren't they?"

Hotohori stared out at the torn and barren patch of garden. Just days ago, roses of every size and color had filled this place. He'd had Tasuki, Tamahome, and Mitsukake remove them, manually, without magic. A hard task, considering the thorns, but they had not complained. Perhaps they had thought they were getting off easy, but Hotohori knew better. He knew he'd been wrong to punish them at all.

"Touga wants to go. He's gone to find Kamui to arrange it."

And then, as if on cue, Kamui came tearing around the corner of the garden wall, running straight to the emperor. "Don't send me away!"

"I'm not sending you anywhere," Hotohori told him as he caught him. "But Touga wants to leave, and you said when you arrived--"

Kamui shook his head furiously. "I can't take him the way I came! A mortal can't walk through Destiny's Labyrinth!"

Nuriko frowned, not sure what to make of the reference, but then decided to press on with the business at hand. "Then how does he get back?"

"How did he get here in the first place?" asked Kamui, his chest heaving as he tried to calm himself.

"A vortex. But they've all been closed." Nuriko peered at the boy. "Can you create one?"

"No," Kamui answered mournfully. "No, you're going to have to ask my uncle." He looked up soberly at Hotohori. "He'll ask for something in return," he cautioned, and Hotohori nodded.

"Hold on," said Nuriko, "what are we talking about here? Who's your uncle?"

"The Dream King."

"And how do we get in touch with him?" Nuriko asked, thinking in the back of his mind that this was becoming a rather bizarre conversation.

Kamui shrugged. "You might get lucky and catch him in a dream, but usually you don't. I'd summon him for you, but. . ." It was clear Kamui was not fond of the idea.

"Could Chichiri do it, do you think?" Hotohori asked him.

Kamui nodded. "Uncle Morpheus' realm isn't hard to enter. Even pretty average magicians can do it."

Nuriko grimaced. "I'm sure Chichiri would be glad to hear it."

"Kamui is sure this spell will work?" Chichiri asked. He had not been thrilled to learn that Kamui claimed relation to the Dream King; it put the boy in a pantheon that Chichiri was not comfortable dealing with. But what amazed the magician most was Hotohori's calm acceptance of Kamui's claims and sometime fantastic assertions. Even now, as they stood before the large mirror that would supposedly become the gate that would allow them into The Dreaming, Hotohori appeared unconcerned.

Chichiri did not fail to notice that Touga stood a good three or four feet from the emperor. Nuriko made up for it, though, by staying next to Hotohori's shoulder. Kamui had made himself scarce.

Chichiri swept the group with one last glance to make sure they were ready. Then, pressing his fingers together, he began the incantation.

Akantharhodon X: Wait of the World's End

"Oh my," said Lucien, shaking his head.

Hotohori, Touga, and Nuriko stood in the Great Hall; Chichiri had opted to remain on the Konan side of the mirror. "Where is the Dream King?" Hotohori asked the librarian.

"Oh dear," Lucien went on. He glanced at the books under his arm, then back at the sudden company. "I wasn't aware we were having--oh my." He didn't relish the thought of perhaps upsetting Lord Morpheus again, not twice in one day. "If you'll just wait here--" he said, absently handing the books to Hotohori before rushing off.

Nuriko craned for a look at the tomes. "Wonderland Revisited?" he read off the top volume. Hotohori shrugged, and they all turned as the librarian scurried back into the hall.

"Oh, I'd wondered where I'd set those. Here--" Lucien said as he retrieved the books. "Lord Morpheus is, you know, if you'll just--"

The Dream King was waiting. Beside his throne stood a tall, pale man who wore sunglasses, even in the gloom. A large raven was perched on the back of the stone and onyx chair. It cocked a bright eye at the visitors.

"Where is Kamui?" Morpheus asked them without introduction.

"We've come to ask a favor," Hotohori told him.

"You'll get nothing until I have my nephew."

Hotohori felt his defenses rise in protection of Kamui. "Why? You've never wanted him before."

"It is time he was born," Morpheus told him. Hotohori didn't respond. He wished Kamui was there to tell him whether that was something he wanted. As emperor, Hotohori made decisions for everyone in his country, but somehow making a decision for Kamui seemed impossible. What did Kamui want, exactly? To stay in Konan? Hotohori would have had it that way; he found the idea of losing both Touga and Kamui unappealing. One or the other, perhaps, but both? It was too much. Before he'd known them, he'd been just an emperor--they'd made him into something more; they'd made him into a happy teenager.

Touga stepped forward. "If we give you Kamui to be born, you'll send me home?"

Morpheus leveled his dark eyes on him. "Is that your request?"

"Yes."

Hotohori shot a glance at Touga, who smiled languidly back at him. Touga was not going to just leave, Hotohori then realized. Touga's parting goal was to make Hotohori miserable. No Bride there. Only Touga, a thousand fold. And it might have been so different. Or had fate already determined otherwise?

"You would not deny me this, would you?" Touga asked, almost sweetly. "After everything else, surely you'll allow me this dignity?"

What could he say? He felt almost faint, felt Nuriko move in next to him. "All I ask is that Kamui not be harmed," Hotohori said dully. Not too much to ask, certainly?

"He will come to no harm in my realm," Morpheus promised him. When Hotohori nodded, he said to the raven, "Matthew, fetch Mervyn. I'll send him along to set up the vortex."

"Uh, couldn't you just--I mean wouldn't the whole thing be easier if--" the large black bird be-

gan but then caught the Dream King's dour expression and changed his mind, flying up and away.

"That is a !@#%ing pumpkin!" Tasuki cried in amazement as he and Mitsukake watched Mervyn set up to paint one of the exterior palace walls.

The healer, who had been assigned with Tasuki by the emperor to supervise the construction of the vortex, looked from the jack-o-lantern scarecrow to his companion. "That is indeed a !@#%ing pumpkin," he agreed gravely after a moment's observation.

"Hey, Snaggletooth!" Mervyn called over his shoulder, "why don't you come help me with this?"

Tasuki's eyes grew wider. "It talks?!"

"Evidently," Mitsukake replied.

"What are you, deaf? Or just stupid? Hey, White Fang, I'm talking to ya!"

Tasuki reached for his fan, but Mitsukake halted him with a firm hand on his arm. "I don't think the Dream King would be very happy."

Gathering himself, Tasuki started over. "Hold the ladder, will ya? I can't believe the old guy! I mean, he could do this with one flick of his wrist, ya know? What he wants me out here for is anybody's guess. I mean, what did I do?" Mervyn started up the ladder with his bucket of paint and a brush. "A vortex for one lousy person," he went on. "And it has to be the size of Manhattan. Can't do anything small in The Dreaming. Doesn't even give me a goddam team to do it, either." He began painting in large, curving strokes, the paint slowly becoming wisps of mist as it dried. Tasuki peered up at him, holding the ladder as requested, still in awe as much as he was wary.

"Got a cigarette?" Merv asked suddenly. Tasuki only blinked at him. "Cig-a-rette?" the scarecrow asked more slowly. "Ah, nevermind. Here, hold this a minute." He handed down the paintbrush and Tasuki--albeit obliged to let go of the ladder with one of his hands--took it.

The ladder wobbled a little as Mervyn searched for his pack of smokes. "Cuff link?" he asked himself, pulling a small gold knot from one pocket. "How'd that get in there?" He tossed it away, the motion causing the ladder to upset fully and sending Mervyn back on his ass--and the bucket of paint right over Tasuki.

"Terrific," the pumpkin growled, "now I've got to--Hey, that's pretty impressive!" he said to Tasuki, having caught the long list of curses now pouring steadily from the bandit's mouth. "There's a few in there even I haven't heard. But, hey, do you know these?" And he began to recite a few expletives of his own. "Now this one's AElitian, really obscure--"

"Well how about--?" Tasuki was saying.

"And then there's--" Mervyn went on.

"You have to slur this just right," said Tasuki, demonstrating.

"You know, maybe if you rub your hair against the wall. . . Just kiddin'!" the scarecrow laughed, throwing up his hands as Tasuki glowered. "Hey, what're ya gonna do, bite me? We'd better get that paint off you, anyway, or you might cease to exist. Come on, I'll show you how to spit."

"Oh, please," Tasuki replied disdainfully as they started around the corner to the fish pond where Tasuki could clean up, "I can spit farther than anyone in Konan."

"Oh yeah? Well, what's Konan in the big scheme of things? Now I. . ."

As the voices trailed, Mitsukake just shook his head. Must be one in every world, he thought. But in a way, he was comforted by it.

"I'll kill him for you, if it'll make you feel any better," offered Nuriko as he picked his way through what was left of the rose garden.

Hotohori's gaze did not shift from the distant figure of Touga, who was relaxing on the grass next to a fountain, waiting for the vortex to be completed. Just beyond him were the cherry trees. . . "I should say goodbye," the emperor murmured. "He is still a friend, after all."

"Is he?"

"Then a guest, at least."

"Good riddance," Nuriko growled, and Hotohori pinned him with a sideways slice of his amber eyes. "He was a kind host to me when I was trapped in his world," he told Nuriko sternly. "He did not have to take me in, but he clothed and sheltered me, and--"

"And did you ever once wonder what he might want in return?" demanded Nuriko. "Hotohorisama, here you are emperor. People do things for you here and do not require anything for it. But that's not true in--" Nuriko choked a moment on the name and reverted to a quick jab in the proper direction with his finger--"his world, and he has exacted payment, both physically and emotionally. You owe him nothing."

"But. . ." And again the emperor turned to regard the far off plume of bright red hair, "we were happy. I was. . . happy. . ."

"Are you sure?" asked Nuriko.

"I wasn't emperor! I wasn't anybody! I wasn't responsible for anyone but me! I was--"

"Free?"

Hotohori didn't answer, instead weaving his way through the now barren walls of the rose garden until he reached the open grass. But when he reached the fountain, he found he had nothing to say. Touga looked up at him, a self-satisfied smile curling his lips. "My champion, hoping to win me once more."

"Your friend," Hotohori corrected, "coming to tell you goodbye."

"Friend?" Touga asked archly. Hotohori knelt to stare into the unforgiving face, and out of habit, Touga reached for a lock of the dark hair, twirling it in an idle, thoughtful manner. Then, with the strength of resolution, promising himself he would not be bound again, he took a fistful of the hair and yanked it forward viciously, bringing the emperor's face inches from his own. "I hated you all the time that I was your Bride, and I hate you now. Everything inside me despises you."

"That wasn't always the case," Hotohori answered evenly.

Touga released him. "What do you want to hear?" he asked darkly. "That I fell in love with you the moment I saw you?" Touga forced a harsh, sharp laugh past the lump in his throat. "I don't believe in such off-the-wall romantic notions."

"You must believe in something," Hotohori pointed out, "with your duels and that Rose Bride game."

Anger swept the smug expression from Touga's face. "It's not a game! I explained it to you--"

"Hey!" an abrasive voice called, carrying across the lawn from the palace. Touga and Hotohori turned as one to see a walking pumpkin flagging for their attention.

"Hey!" Mervyn called again, "tell the Flower Princess his vortex is ready!"

Hotohori rose, smiling thinly. "Goodbye, Touga."

Touga stared for a moment, scowling, before rising and forcing himself to smile as well. "Goodbye, Saihitei." He turned and walked away without looking back.

Hotohori stood for a long moment, unable to think. Then the sensation of fingers wending their way into his own caused him to turn. "The roses are gone," said Kamui softly. When there was no response, he added, "He didn't need you."

"Kamui--" Hotohori began with a frown, unsure of how to tell him the price his uncle had exacted for Touga's trip home.

"Don't worry," Kamui was saying, "I still need you. I'll stay for as long as you want me."

Hotohori sighed. "It's not a question of want. It's a question of fate."

Kamui turned his large eyes up at the emperor. "I have no Book of Destiny," he stated.

"Just because it isn't written down doesn't mean it hasn't been defined."

Kamui's face set itself into the stony lines of stubbornness his family was so well acquainted with. "What do you mean?"

"If you are the only one without a decided destiny, does that not simply mean that your future is determined by the destinies of those around you? You may have choices, Kamui, but others do not. And it is not in my destiny that you remain with me."

"But--" Kamui began, pausing to consider, his eyebrows quirked in puzzlement. "Then how am I supposed to change the Fate of the World?"

"Who said you had to?"

"I don't. . ." He was sure there had been something. . . Kamui shook his head, unable to remember.

"If you wish to change your fate, Kamui," Hotohori told him, "your goal must become to change someone else's fate. Then your own path will also change." He gave Kamui's hand a small squeeze. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To bed."

Miki's only wish was that it would end quickly. He'd been in this situation too many times before to hope for more than that. His arm hurt, painfully twisted behind him, another arm around his throat and holding him tightly. He'd been caught unawares on his way home from the Tower, and he cursed himself for not having thought it through properly. Be very still, Miki thought. Be still and it will be quick.

"Did you miss me?"

"Touga-sama!" Immediately Miki let out a sigh of relief and Touga released him. "Miss you? You've only been gone a couple of hours."

Touga frowned. "It's been almost a week!"

"Wherever you were, maybe," Miki replied with a shrug. "But here. . ."

"I'm no longer the Bride," Touga informed him, and Miki nodded as he checked his watch. "Is it Anthy?"

Miki shook his head.

“Who then?” Touga demanded impatiently.

Miki’s hand trembled slightly. “It’s me.”

“You lied,” said the Corinthian.

“I did not. I said he would not be harmed in my realm, and he will not.”

“Aren’t you at all afraid that Durandios might. . .” He couldn’t think of a way to put it nicely.

“He has forgotten us; he will not care.”

“Then why bother?”

Morpheus did not answer.

“Aren’t you going to lay down?” asked Kamui.

Hotohori shook his head. He sat next to the bed, still clasping Kamui’s right hand in his own. Kamui’s eyes roved the room nervously, searching out possible predators. “This is your room.”

“Yes.”

“I’d feel so much better if--”

“No, Kamui.”

Kamui hesitated. “What should I do?”

“You’re going to go to sleep,” Hotohori told him. “And when you wake up, you’ll have been born.”

“What if I don’t want to be born? What if I want to stay here?”

“Why should you?” Hotohori asked him. “Ever since you arrived, all you’ve talked about is--”

“Because you surprised and delighted me,” Kamui answered with a smile. “Because you wanted me when no one else did. And what if they hate me? They might--” He gave an involuntary shudder, not sure what it was that frightened him, only knowing that he was afraid.

“Your uncle promised me you would not be harmed,” said Hotohori. Kamui looked unconvinced. “Close your eyes, Kamui.”

Again Kamui hesitated. “I didn’t before, you know,” he said suddenly, his huge eyes full of shame.

Hotohori frowned. “Didn’t what?”

“I didn’t sleep. You know, before. I waited until you were asleep, and then I opened my eyes. I couldn’t. . . I couldn’t do it.”

“You’ll be fine. Now close your eyes.” Kamui took a deep breath and did as he was told, grateful for the hand that anchored him. As long as Hotohori had hold of him, he wouldn’t slip. . . But no, a bad dream was coming, he could feel one of his uncle’s nightmares trying to take hold. Wishing Hotohori would hold him, promising himself he would not open his eyes, Kamui tried to curl in on himself. But he couldn’t. His right hand was still being held, and not unkindly, by someone--Hotohori, of course, who else--but his left hand throbbed with dull pain; his shoulders, too, were pinned to something, not the bed, no, too hard and solid and uncomfortable for that. Hotohori had moved him, then, but why? Why, he wanted to ask, and there were so many questions behind that one word as the pain began to sharpen, and then he did consider opening his eyes to see and make sense of it, but he couldn’t. The pain he could bear--and now he could feel the hot and sticky blood, his blood--but he could not stand to see

Hotohori hating him. Touga he would have understood, his family, even, but Hotohori never. Questions, he tried to form them, and knew that Hotohori was speaking to him, too, although he couldn't quite hear. He realized then that he was screaming, that, incapable of asking, he'd simply screamed. And then the scream died and he panted instead, unable to catch his breath.

"Such a nice voice, Kamui," said a voice in his ear--the breath was hot, but the hand on his face was gentle--and he shut his eyes even more tightly to keep from looking, because he wanted to so badly and yet was terrified to see. And then a new pain, this one tearing through his thigh, and he knew a sword had been thrust through it and couldn't keep his eyes closed any longer--the pain was too great.

All he saw was amber eyes glaring back at him, smoldering with hatred. "Fu. . . u. . . ma?" And he wondered if there hadn't been someone else, another name, just moments before, but he couldn't think past the pain, couldn't even breathe, and right now there was only Fuuma in this world, and up there, Kotori--

Miki pitched forward in bed, sweating. Without conscious thought, he reached for the watch that rested on his bedside table, tilted it toward the moonlight that cut through the window of the room he shared with his sister. His eyes widened. "There are two! He's created two. . ."

Miki leaned over the edge of his bed, reached under it and hauled out the huge, leather-bound tome. He flipped to the back and found the page effortlessly; he knew it by heart.

"Of course," he whispered to himself, not worried about Kozue, who slept like the dead. "He created a second Kamui to relieve the burden of the first."

He slammed the book shut as the moon crept behind a cloud, sending Miki into shadow.

Stop.

Check.

Reset.

"It begins."