

*a Tokyo Babylon / X /  
Clamp Campus Detectives fanfic  
by Ann-Kathrin Kniggendorf, (c)2005-2006*

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### Credits

Special thanks to Solo [[http://solo\\_\\_\\_\\_.livejournal.com](http://solo____.livejournal.com)] my beta, who showed great patience and enthusiasm. The presentation of this story in its current state would not have been possible without her!

### Warnings, Spoilers, and Summary

"36°" as a whole is rated R for violence, occultism, sexual connotations, alternative lifestyles, a vocal tree, and geometry (just to be safe). Single chapters may be less restricted.

"36°" as a whole is pre-TB, post-CCD, and post-X-18. No, it is not a time warp fic. I don't retell scenes but I *do* refer to events in both series and I may quote the occasional tag line.

After X-16 the Sumeragi is about to become the Sakurazukamori - with rather dubious qualifications for the position. There are certain... details in Clamp's art – esp. in their drawings of the fight at Rainbow Bridge, Subaru's meeting with 'Kamui', and the layout of Clamp Campus – that just made me wonder...

### Story Codes and explicit Spoilers

drama, Sei/Su, (Tree/Sei), Minor(15), Lime, Lime Tree (*not* 'Citrus aurantifolia' or 'Tilia!')  
Tokyo Babylon: vol. 2, vol. 11, Annex Start – X: 8, 16, 18; 19 (Asuka part 1-5)

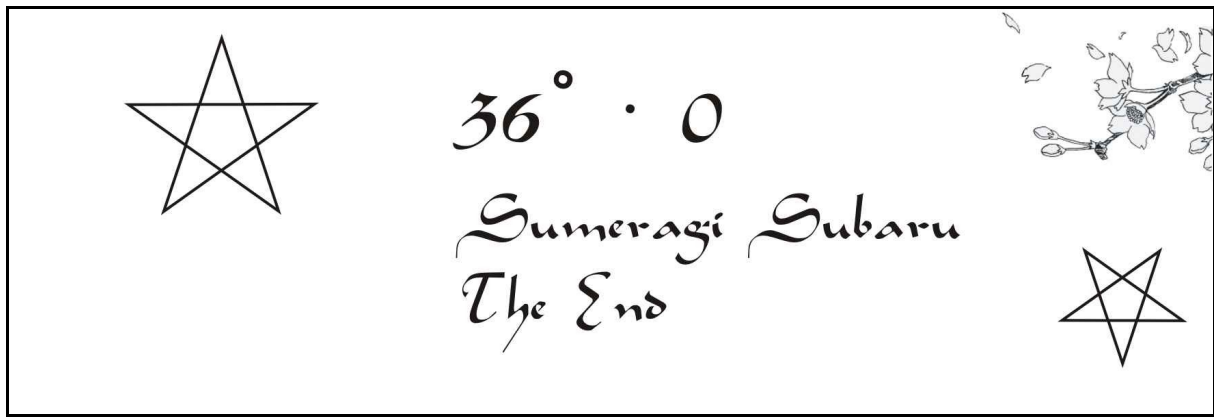
Even the most extensive listing of story codes I've come across so far (AFF.net) doesn't list anything regarding "sex with plants", hence the "lime tree" warning. I think I should start worrying about my imagination here (or at least about my reputation). No, there is no "lemon tree" in this story!

### about Notation

**Pentacle, pentagram.** I use both words in the strict sense in which the pentacle is a one-line five-pointed star with one tip up and the pentagram is a one-line five-pointed star with two tips up. The pentacle and the pentagram are inversions of each other. Hence, the symbol of the Sumeragi is the pentacle, the symbol of the Sakurazukamori is the pentagram.

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*~ A rotation of 36° around its center inverts a pentacle~*

Ueno Park, Tokyo  
December 1999

Darkness came early. The illumination from the distant city did little to remedy the feeling of desertion that permeated the empty paths. Winter held a tight grip on Tokyo this year. The black trunks and bare branches of the trees glistened wetly. An occasional snow flake mixed into the constant drizzle.

Benches stood in regular distances under the trees framing the path. In the distance, the lights of the National Art Museum were fighting a losing battle against the falling night. The lone figure slowly meandering down the tunnel formed by the overhanging branches was no more than a pale shadow in the dark. The off-white trench coat had seen better days. Stains of wetness, grease, something that looked suspiciously like blood trailed down one of the long flaps. Once in a while the long coat tangled between the legs of its painfully thin wearer. Black hair lost itself in the night. Some of the wet strands were matted where they'd been pressed and rubbed by bandages now gone. The face underneath had the color of the stained coat.

Dull mismatched eyes searched along the seemingly endless line of bare trees in the night. Long stretches of darkness separated the park lights. He had hesitated a couple of times but some inner feeling told him to go on, that he wasn't there yet...

...where he didn't want to go but had no will left not to go. The massive trunk that emerged out of the dark slightly off the path to his left... that had to be the tree he was coming for. A bench stood under its wide branches. He didn't remember a bench being there. The last time... When had that been? 1990? 1999? He wasn't sure. He didn't care. The bench had to have been there for a very long time. Gnarled roots had curled around the wrought-iron legs as if holding it in place with a tight caring embrace. If not for the memory of caring for ...someone, he wouldn't be here.

The position vacant here was to be filled or...

If not...

...for the memory of...

He took the ofuda out of his pocket, the perfect white of its paper giving an odd contrast to his stained coat. He slung one of the flaps over his left arm to keep it from tangling between his legs. He focussed. Hands folded.

°°°On. Badarei a sowaka...°°°

The incantation came naturally to him. His voice was hoarse, empty, befitting the park – and his soul. Still, the power flared. He felt pain in the replaced right eye. A golden glow seemed to emanate from the amber iris.

°°°On. Badarei a sowaka... Hoku-°°°

The ancient sakura in front of him burst into bloom. The park disappeared, swallowed by the endless night of the ultimate maboroshi. He didn't as much as blink. He had been here before, Now, there was nothing left to...

...Your sister isn't here, Subaru-kun...

He gasped. That voice. That voice had been... just like... Sei-

...I have no hold on a white soul... Amusement rippled through the branches. Indulgence. A fake lenience. The voice of a dead man mocking him. ...*There is no rule in the Divine Order regarding*

*outrageous outfits...*

Once he'd have taken the bait, now he was beyond that. "What do *you* know of the Divine Order?"

*...I am a part of it. Just like you. Just like Sei-chan...*

"Sei-chan' is dead."

*...So I've been told...*

Subaru was tempted to ask "by whom" but he knew better than to give the tree the advantage of a direct question. "I've come to claim his position."

The tree laughed. Sakura petals danced merrily to the black ground, creating a deceptive pink snow around and across Subaru's worn black boots. *...I don't think so...*

Bony hands, no longer in gloves, refolded. The pentagrams engraved in his white skin flared blue within the maboroshi. He ignored them. They were meaningless now.

°°°On. Ba-°°°

*...You just don't have a sense of self-preservation, do you?...* The tree asked, sounding amused. *...Do you really think there's nothing more to the succession than a violent death?...*

"My thoughts don't matter." Subaru ground out. "There is nobody else to take his place. You'll have to be content with me."

Silence.

*...You are an outstanding onmyoji but you'd be an abysmal Sakurazukamori...* Suddenly, the tree was serious, the mocking undercurrent in its voice gone, the strange, hurtful reminder of the last Sakurazukamori in it as well. The Sakura had stopped playing. *...You are not up to it...*

"If you fear for your food—" Subaru felt his voice crack but inside him there was nothing left to break along with it, "—be reassured."

*...Subaru-kun...* The diminutive was slightly drawled, extended to show the strain on a patience that bordered on annoyance. *...By nature I am a predator but I'm also a cherry tree. There are certain... cravings I – being a tree – have no hope of fulfilling on my own...*

"Crav—?"

*Black leather. Midnight velvet. Red silk. Brass cogwheels.*

*A throat exposed, the head thrown back in orgasm. Wrists caught in leather.*

*A hawk's lonely scream. Slender fingers pressing against a jaw.*

*Steel gliding over flesh. Strong wings bashing the air.*

*A trail of blood pearls across creamy skin. A mouth open in a silent scream.*

*The rumble as the wheels turned...*

The impact of the pictures flooding his mind brought him to his knees, disoriented, panting. His hands clawed into the illusory ground, drawing black fluid that might or might not be— A trail of tears ran across his left cheek.

*...that's why I can't allow you to take over...*

He choked. "There is... no one... else."

*...Then learn... Annoyance. ...Go and learn...*

The maboroshi disappeared. Where the lush, terrifying beauty of the Sakura had stood a moment ago, Subaru only saw the cold rejecting trunk of a tree in midwinter. A bluish flicker like a will-o'-the-wisp danced next to it, glowing painfully bright in his right eye while it was merely a shadow in his left. He wanted to— to—

*...Follow...* A voice ordered. He stared at his right hand. The scars were still glowing. He saw their glow shining through the blood covering his hand. His hand that had protruded from... *his* back. Hot breath had touched his ear, had died on his cheek. The emptiness. The fall...

He never noticed when his feet started walking.

~::~::~~

He left the park through the North West entrance. The way ran past the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music of Tokyo National University on one side and the International Library for Children's Literature on the other to enter a slightly remote residential area afterwards. He crossed the broad street without even a look for cars and continued through yet another, even more remote neighborhood. Shuttered houses lined both sides of the street. The sign of a police station glowed in the dark above them, giving an eerie glow in addition to the weak street lamps. He wondered briefly about its existence in a Tokyo that lay in shambles. Yet the neighborhood he was travelling through was strangely untouched.

The magical flicker led him past the police station across the street and on to the East. The scents on the air changed slightly, now reminding of greenery and incense and stone. The vast

Yanaka cemetery had to be only a single line of houses away. A small side alley going north was where the flicker finally stopped. At its end lay a house with tall unglazed grey walls, almost hugged by the cemetery beyond. An old, wall-mounted iron decoration rusted next to the gate in front of which the flicker vanished. They had reached their aim. Or rather... his?

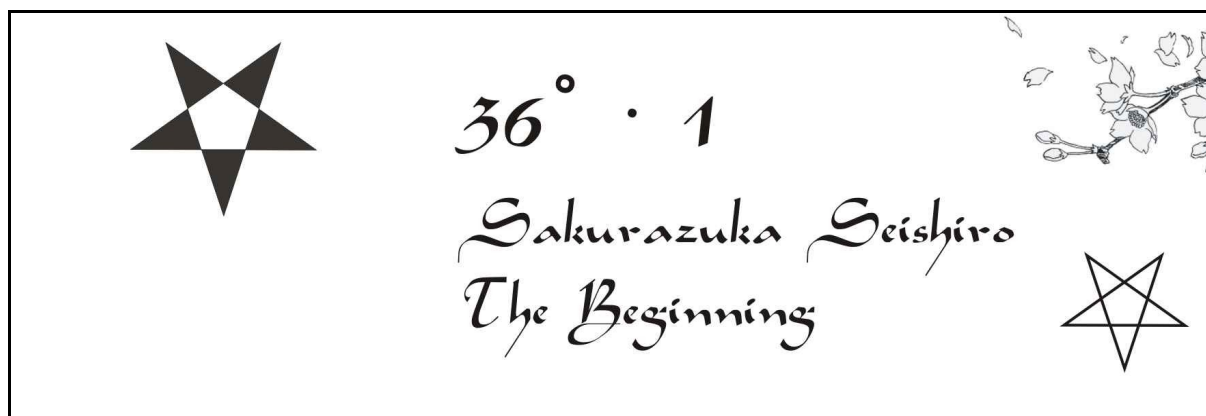
Subaru blinked as if waking from a trance. This had to be Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, wedged between Yanaka with its countless shrines and the large Buddhist cemetery in the north, the Tokugawa Shogun graveyard in the west, and Ueno Hill in the south where the last uprising of the Tokugawa shogunate forces had been crushed in 1868. Two thousand shogitai had been slaughtered there on that May 15. The street he'd crossed earlier had to be the Kototoi-dori, the only major street in this Cho. Though the northeast of the district was quasi-hugged by the Yamanote line, it was never truly touched by the tracks themselves. He shook his head. Remote didn't quite fit this location. In the heart of Tokyo, this was as far off as you could get from the mundane areas like Shinjuku-ku or Shibuya-ku that he associated with Seishiro—

Magic trickled over his back, old magic, strong magic connected with death. The cemetery, the shrines, Ueno Park with its soil drenched in warrior blood... This place was surrounded by some of the strongest spiritual areas in Tokyo, no, in Japan. And none of them was connected specifically with a kekkai... or the end of the world in 1999. Protective lines had been woven around the house in front of him, emanating from the spiritual fields... and the Sakura.

This place... this neighborhood was unharmed from the destruction this year had seen. The people sleeping soundly in the houses around him were unaware that Death was living among them. Death wanted his place to be safe and to achieve that he had kept them unharmed as well. Subaru hadn't even thought about such a possibility.

Ueno-Sakuragi... in a twisted way it made sense.

The wall-mounted ornament made from rusty iron and blind brass swayed in the weak breeze from the graveyard beyond, a pentacle creaked on its uncoiled axis, turning... till one tip pointed down.



*~36° is the angle at the tip of a pentagram~*

Clamp Campus, Tokyo  
Autumn 1980

Clamp Academy, built on newly gained land in the Tokyo Bay area in the years 1970/71 by the Imonoyama Corporation, consisted of kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school as well as a university and associated graduate schools renowned for their world-leading research in natural sciences and art. Privately financed as a tribute to the youth responsible for Japan's future, it was a safe haven for the young to strive and learn. Or so the leaflet he'd been given said.

Rumors had it that Imonoyama had built the campus after his youngest child, Nokoru, had been abducted and existing kindergarten and schooling facilities couldn't guarantee the level of protection he deemed appropriate for his heir. The closed campus formed a complete if secluded city within. Tokyo. A city with boarding schools, laboratories, parks, botanical gardens, even a bank, a cinema, a zoo and a bakery, all closely guarded by electronics and security personnel.

Fifteen-year-old Seishiro considered the rumor more believable than the leaflet.

Not that he cared about that as he stepped down from the tramway, the black book bag over his shoulder. The admission office was located in a small one-storey house to the left of the set of iron gates regulating access to the campus. The tall green-lacquered arcs of the gate reached about three-and-a-half meters up and were clearly meant to be impressive. They failed to impress him. Beyond them, a neatly plastered way framed by tended greenery on both sides and crowded with chatting students continued over a broad bridge crossing a channel to what looked like a subway station. Seishiro pushed through the Plexiglas swinging doors and found something like a ticket window inside. The small office visible behind it was cramped with electrical equipment. Not surprising, considering that the Imonoyama Corporation made most of its money with electronics and computer technology. Apparently, their achievements were already in use here. He bowed politely at the elderly admission official looking up at him.

"Good morning, sir. My name is Sakurazuka Seishiro." He retrieved his papers from his bag and put them on the counter. "I have an appointment with vice headmistress Magami at eleven o'clock about my transfer to Clamp middle school."

"I see." The clerk nodded and began sighting the documents. "Your parents didn't come with you?" he inquired frowning slightly across his half-rimmed glasses.

"No, sir. They believe me well capable of managing on my own."

After all, he had been given private tutoring during elementary and the first two years of middle school and was only here to take the middle school finals to obtain an official record of his schooling. Apparently, even the Sakurazukamori organization had its limits when it came to the inquisitive Japanese school system. Not that he minded. Close contact with his prey would be necessary on occasion in his future line of work. Natural behavior among the prey was essential. The time spent at Clamp Academy would benefit his education in more than one way.

The clerk finished his inspection and Seishiro's papers and a temporary campus ID were placed in front of him.

"How do I get to vice headmistress Magami's office?" he asked while pocketing the files and attaching the ID to the grey jacket of his school uniform.

"It's easiest to take the subway. Your temporary ID doubles as a ticket until you get an official

tag. The middle school is at the fifth station. When you get off the train, it's directly to your right."

"Thank you, sir. Have a nice day."

A cool wind holding the first promise of winter whispered through his black bangs as he left the admission office. His skin prickled when he reached the tall gates. A step further and his neck hair was standing on end.

The place was reeking of power. Vaguely familiar power.

Clamp campus subway – called CCS – turned out to be not quite what he expected. The location on artificially raised land had apparently forced the architect to make some concessions, such as putting the subway tubes above ground. The train was actually travelling through a transparent tunnel allowing for the speed of a subway and the sightseeing of a traditional railway. Seishiro's first thought about it was that the subway served like a rather tight boundary of the actual campus. Therefore, he paid more attention to the land between the fence – or the waters of Tokyo Bay – and the tube than to campus itself. The strip of land was green despite the late season and well tended. But that didn't hide the fact that even the tallest vegetation there was less than ankle high. Not high enough to serve as a hiding spot for someone who managed to sneak across one of the few bridges. After two stations Seishiro was convinced that security was a major issue at Clamp Academy.

"Station Four" was announced from the speakers. He studied the station as the train rolled in. A tall sign above the exit listed the buildings within walking distance. The list started with the elementary school. The rest of the sign was hidden behind a detailed statue depicting Hephaestus, the rather fierce Greek god of forge and fire. It wasn't the typical sort of art to be put up at a station frequented by elementary pupils.

"Fifth Station" he'd been told. So the next one was where he had to get out.

Station Five turned out to be rather crowded at this time of the day, so the train behind him was already moving when he got to read the sign above the exit: Clamp University, Graduate schools as listed... The statue in front of it showed Hecate, the goddess of darkness, mystery, and night. Like Hephaestus before it had been done in revealing detail including a drooping neckline, black beetles, bats, and the occasional scorpion on its sandals. Seishiro felt tempted to give her a mocked salute. Instead he went on search for the stationmaster.

"Middle school? Oh dear." The elderly woman in the navy blue uniform with red lapels almost wrung her hands. "That's near station One. This is Five. You got off a station too early." She threw a look at the clock and shook her head. "Now if this were station Three or if you wanted to go to Two, then I'd just get you onto the transit tram and you'd be there in no time, but from here... I'm sorry, I guess you have to wait for the next train."

Seishiro threw a brief glance at his watch. "I'll walk."

"Ah, that's fine. Always go for some fitness." The woman's smile was positively demented in his eyes. "Follow the transit along the street till you get to the Imonoyama Arcades. You can't miss them, it's one fancy shopping street. Then turn left and follow the next transit line. It stops right in front of the middle school entrance."

Seishiro held a quick pace bordering on light running. After a second glance on his watch he ignored the curious glances that followed him and increased his speed. He was running late. Literally.

Clamp Middle school was a two-storey building made from polished red stone. Its high multi-faceted windows and the broad entrance door repeated the arc motif omnipresent on the campus. The school was surrounded by well-tended trees apparently relocated as grown plants. The campus wasn't that old yet and they reached up to the roof.

The vice headmistress was awaiting him in the director's office on the first level. He clamped viciously down on his panting and the racing pulse before knocking. He entered on reply and bowed low to apologize for being late. A muscle in his cheek ticked in annoyance about the submissive gesture but luckily his bangs hid that well.

"Admittedly, it takes some time to get used to our transit system." The woman in the artfully embroidered kimono laughed behind her fan. "Anyway. I used the time to look through your grades and your results in the entrance exams. I don't think you will have any problems in your new school, Sakurazuka-kun. Aside from getting there, that is."

A side door in the spacious office opened and a serious, brown-haired boy of about Seishiro's age entered, bowing respectfully.

"Ah, Takamura-kun." The vice head's face lit up. Seishiro tensed. "Here are the documents for Nokoru." She indicated a stack of folders at the edge of the desk. "Please be so kind as to show Sakurazuka-kun here the way. He's going to be in 3z from today on." The woman positively beamed

as she practically shooed them out of her office. "And don't forget to wear your ID tag in plain sight or the campus police will stop you."

The door closed with an audible click and Seishiro found himself in the high hallway with the arched windows in regular intervals that reminded him more of early twentieth-century Europe than late twentieth-century Japan. He hoisted his bag, turned and was faced by an inquisitive, distrustful stare from Takamura.

"Is something the matter?" he asked casually with just the right amount of astonishment in his voice.

"Your name's *Sakurazuka*?" Takamura inquired. "Did I get that right?"

"Sakurazuka Seishiro, yes." He casually brushed a piece of fluff off his dark sleeve, carefully keeping the other boy in his field of view; he would not take his eyes off a possible adversary, least of all a *Takamura*. "And you?"

"Takamura Suoh." The other bit off, almost crossing the borderline to offense with the terse reply. He seemed to wait for a reaction that Seishiro failed to provide. "From the Takamura clan."

Seishiro raised his brows and blinked pointedly. "And here I thought you'd be a Yamato with that name!" Takamura's expression darkened and Seishiro proceeded to smile disarmingly at him. "Shouldn't we be going, Taka-kun? I don't want to get in trouble for being late a second time on my first day."

~::~::~~

Ueno Park, Tokyo  
in the evening of the same day

Lost in thought, he twiddled the dry twig between his fingers. The events of this morning were still on his mind as he sat under the tree. It wasn't like him to make mistakes like that and draw attention to himself because of it. The public transport system of the campus was strange...

Was there even a word for an above-ground subway line? Wasn't that a contradiction all by itself? The twig scratched a circle into the dry earth between his knees. There were five stations with the first being closest to the campus entrance. He made a tick on the circle next to his left thigh. They lay in regular intervals along the line... He put the ticks on the circle and – as an afterthought – marked the cardinal points. Astonished, he noticed that station Three lay exactly to the North. Just to be sure, he numbered the ticks according to the stations they represented.

The afternoon was progressing. The light of the sun warming his back even here under the broad crown of the Sakura had gotten a reddish tinge already. The wind rustling in the branches above him intensified and grew colder. He moved slightly, using his body to shield the dirt drawing from the breeze.

Now, the transit trams...

What had the stationmaster told him? He could go from Five to Two. The twig scratched faintly in the dry soil. And from Two to Four. Another scratch. From Four to One. Scratch. And from One to Three to Fi–

...*Sei-chan. Stop drawing that on my roots...*

He almost leaped at the slightly pained voice suddenly rasping behind his eyes. "Wh– who are you?!" he demanded to know.

...*You're sitting under me...*

"Tree-san?" he asked disbelievingly.

A flicker was all the warning he got as the maboroshi enveloped him. The park in his back was gone. The laughing children and smiling people on their afternoon stroll who had been busy packing up their belongings to go home as night fell, his 'mother' with her picnic plate... All had vanished. He found himself enclosed in the broad, intimidating beauty of the Sakura in full bloom. Not that he was intimidated. No. His temper flared. "What do you w–" he spat and stopped. Between his legs the improvised map of Clamp campus' public transport system glowed deep red.

...*Could you please erase that from my roots? It makes me sick...*

Seishiro frowned, then finally saw the symbol as a whole. The pentacle was almost finished. He had almost completed the enemy's sigil at the foot of– He hastily brushed it away with his hands and scattered the earth in all four directions.

...*Thank you...* The wind in the tree's branches sighed. ...*You ought to be more careful with your drawings...*

"Sakura-chan?" His mother's lilting voice penetrated into the maboroshi. "You aren't trying to take my loved one from me, are you?"



A tuft of pink, fluffy blossoms at the very end of a soft green twig tenderly brushed along Seishiro's cheek in a slow, tantalizing caress. ...*As if I would have a chance trying...* the tree replied with a wistful laugh.

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo  
the next morning

Seishiro waited patiently till the train entered station One, then quickly crossed through the car and exited on the other side. Station One had Apollo, the god of light, on display. A somewhat timid deity compared to Hecate who held station Five. But that was just one oddity among many on Clamp campus. The place was formed like the Sumeragi sigil. That it was soaked with spiritual power was no surprise. That it hadn't blown him into Tokyo Bay at first sight, was. What had allowed him to enter? Since yesterday evening, Seishiro's thoughts had revolved around that. Maybe the place wasn't a true pentacle? Maybe it was deformed in some way and therefore less powerful? He would have to try and get—

"Watch out!" Something – or rather someone, wearing a grey school uniform like his own – smashed into him. They ended in a tangled, undignified heap on the ground.

"I'm sorry. Are you well?" The assailant turned out to be a blond boy not quite Seishiro's height, looking positively concerned, a closed fan with red tassels dangling from his wrist.

"I'll live," Seishiro said tersely.

"Aren't you in my class?"

Seishiro shrugged, patting dust off his trousers.

"At least I should introduce myself after I ran you over." The other one proclaimed and extended his hand in a Western manner. "I'm Imonoyama Nokoru."

"That doesn't make the street any softer," Seishiro muttered before he took the hand. "Sakurazuka Seishiro."

"Nokoru, are you hurt?" A breathless black-haired boy rushed over. "That fall looked rather—" he came to a staggering halt when Seishiro glared at him and ran a hand nervously through his hair.

"I'm fine, Akira. Really." Nokoru hurried to tell him. "Sakurazuka-kun here took most of the impact."

Akira laughed in relief. "He never gets the tip turns," he told Seishiro in a low, conspiratorial voice.

"Then why doesn't he stay off the board?" Seishiro replied in normal volume.

"Because I want to make it," Nokoru said dryly, snapping his fan open in a distinctive gesture. "And I *will* make it."

"And in the process you'll make everybody else kiss the concrete."

Nokoru positively pouted. "Hey, everybody has to learn. Don't tell me you could do it on first try!"

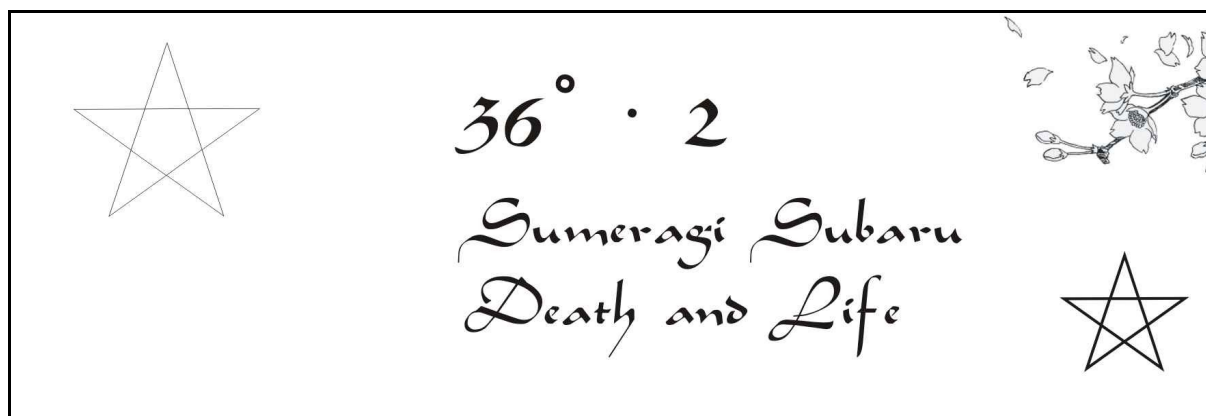
Seishiro's eyes narrowed. "That remains to be seen."

A skateboard rolled against his ankle. Takamura slowly walked towards them, his dark eyes glaring daggers at Seishiro's chest. "Prove it! 'Zuka-kun."

The end point raced towards him. He hurried to whisper the connective spell supposed to hold the board under his feet in the abrupt turn to come. His hand shot out, clamped around the railing, and the impact of the curve nearly dislocated his shoulder. But it actually worked. Nobody was as surprised about the result as Seishiro himself was. Nobody, but—

"Wow! Have you done that before?" Nokoru ran over.

"Not that I remember." Seishiro slowly rotated his left arm to return sensation into it. He stepped forcefully on the end of the skateboard catapulting it up and offering it to Suoh. "Returned with pleasure, *Taka-chan*." He smiled, showing teeth.



*~36° C is the body temperature of a healthy human being~*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
December 1999

The wrought-iron gate was a silvery silhouette in front of a dark opening in the grey walls. A gust of icy wind caught Subaru's coat and threatened to throw him against it. The wall ornament creaked, shuddering on its axis to resemble a pentacle once again. He was cold, had been cold for weeks now. The last of his warmth had bled out of another one's body almost two months ago.

He reached for the gate and found it open to his touch. It moved without much of a sound, giving way to a short stone path that ended at an entrance shielded against sight from the street. The wind increased, whined around the corners. Sand grains on the stone plates crunched under his boots. The wall ornament outside creaked so much louder than the gate. A resounding clunk. A decisive sound. Subaru winced but didn't look back. The gate had fallen shut.

The lights inside went on the moment he closed the door. It made sense. The Sakurazukamori would be covered in blood sometimes when he returned home. Or did he return home to that other house that Subaru had found on his own? The one where 'Kamui' had given him the eye two weeks ago? He didn't know, but bright illumination in front of the Sakurazukamori's door would be... asking for additional deaths. And the police station was rather nearby. Of course, the tree's guardian didn't have to worry much about the police. It was rumored that he worked for the state. Subaru didn't know if that was the truth or not. But truth had always been a scarce article where Seishiro was concerned. He had learned that the hard way.

Inside, he found himself standing in front of a curved sweep of five steps leading up to the living area of the house. A set of slippers stood on the topmost step to the left. A coat rack was on the right, currently holding a long black leather coat and two empty hangers. On the wall by the stairs next to it was a narrow, full length mirror.

Subaru set foot on the first step. Magic whispered. The steps were warded. He reached for an ofuda but found no aggression. Hesitatingly, he pulled the boots off his feet before he went on. The spiritual whisper changed with each step, got louder, then softer, then louder again – a multi-layered warding against spells and spirits, nothing to harm... A soft singing surrounded him in the end, low and harmonic, and... He shook his head against the dizziness. An open door to the left revealed a small, functional kitchen. Through the window he saw the sign of the police station glowing against the night. The raised floor inside gave a view across the wall surrounding its grounds. Seeing without being seen, Subaru shivered.

A narrow staircase went down to a basement and up to the roof. He stumbled in the open door next to it. His feet sunk into black carpet surrounded by white walls; large windows from floor to ceiling, shielded with dark venetian blinds, took up two of them. TV set, stereo– the typical paraphernalia of an expensive living room. The furniture was reduced to the essentials, a chrome-framed couch with kidskin cushions, a low table, a few strategically placed blood-red pillows...

Subaru felt sick.

Book-shelves took up the wall next to the door to another room. Subaru almost dreaded crossing the few meters. The bed there was large, almost rectangular, and took up a good portion of the room's right side. The pattern of the rumpled cover – a blood-red rectangle surrounded by a deep

black frame – was repeated in the pillows. Closed doors of black wood framed the bed on both sides. Again high windows shielded with laminae curtains took up a wall. The space in front of them was taken by a light desk made from chrome and glass. An expensive laptop stood on it. Side shelves held printer, scanner, and other electronic gadgets including a multi-function phone. A dressing gown was thrown carelessly over the chair in front of it.

A low filing cabinet stood against the wall beyond. Documents carefully put in silver frames hung above it. His knees feeling weak, Subaru examined them. A degree. A couple of certificates for awards and speeches. So he had been indeed a veterinarian. Two books lay on display underneath the degree. A thesis bound in red with the title "Mirror symmetry in transplant growth", written 1988/89.

He had dropped out of high school to get closer to Seishiro. Instead.... he had distanced himself even more.

The other book was a yearbook of Clamp Academy, 1981. A page was marked with a dried twig. Subaru found himself staring at a picture of a fifteen-year-old Seishiro looking earnestly into the camera, a bruise marring the perfection of his left cheek. His lip was swollen. Yet, he seemed relaxed, at ease.

"Who were you really?" Subaru whispered, choked. The book fell from his limp hands to land on the floor with a dull thud. He had vowed to kill him, had wished to die by his hand, and in the end... had achieved none of that. The room was spinning around him. The death magic enveloping the house like a protective cocoon was constantly whispering, hissing, as if the dead fueling the spells were singing. His right eye stung. He felt numb. What was he doing here? Amber had no reason to cry. Kamui. Emerald had no tears left. 'Kamui'.

A Dragon of...

...Earth.

He touched his yet again seeing right eye. His fingertips trembled against the lid. The Sakurazukamori was feared, hated... wasn't he?

The song of the dead held no answer.

Strength drained away. Silk whispered. A half-forgotten scent enveloped him. Something caught his weight, something warm, yielding... He curled around it...

Silk. Black and crimson. Power and Blood.

Scent. Tobacco and after-shave. Mild Seven and... something expensive.

For the first time in... he didn't know how long... he felt warm.

He blinked, half-awake, across an expanse of crimson-and-black silk, at a nightstand. A paperback<sup>1</sup> with a silly computer-drawn sheep on the cover lay next to a bedside lamp. A grocery receipt marked a page near the middle. Sunlight glittered on the chrome of the lamp. A used glass stood next to the book, its content of deep red wine reduced to cracked crystals at the bottom. It looked as if somebody had just put the book down, intending on finishing in the evening...

...and had never come back.

A thin layer of dust had already settled over everything. Seishiro would never know how the book ended.

He scrambled out of the bed. He shouldn't have been there, but he'd slept, he'd felt warm, he'd... his stomach was churning and he needed the bathroom. Urgently.

The kitchen and the small storage room adjacent to it held precious little food. A package with instant noodles was all Subaru came finally up with. Strange. He remembered Seishiro being more of a cook, or maybe he'd just been more of a restaurant fetishist, but... instant noodles? The kitchen felt more used than that. A stainless steel water kettle stood on the work table. Lost in thought, Subaru filled it and switched it on.

A coffee mug stood on the kitchen counter, turned upside down next to the sink. Apparently, it had been rinsed and put up to dry. A black coffee mug with a spiked green Godzilla curling its neck over the rim at the content. Subaru found himself clasping it, the memory of Hokuto bringing it back from a shopping spree vividly on his mind, of Seishiro drinking tea out of it, smiling... He hadn't known that Seishiro had taken the mug with him. With trembling hands Subaru put the instant noodles inside and added the boiling water. It didn't take long. It didn't smell good. It didn't have to. He was hungry...

Which was so unlike him. How...?

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1 The book on the nightstand is "Before & After" (ISBN 000648302X) - A novel by British author Matthew Thomas about exploding sheep, Nostradamus, and the end of the world. Published in 1999 it is a delicious satire about the end of the world as it speeds towards year 2000 featuring 500-year-old Professor Mike Nostrus, his trusty assistant Debbie, and his cat Aristotle (which the philosopher was named after). Mike and his cat have an uncanny ability to live through the worst of history like the Holocaust and the French Revolution, and they intend to do so this time around too. The plot starts in September 1999, though that is of no significance to this story.

His gaze fell onto a porcelain kitchen clock with red LED numbers: 13:48. It was past midday already. He had slept more than ten hours! A second, smaller set of LEDs gave the date beneath the time. Subaru stared, then slowly found himself sitting down woodenly on one of the kitchen stools. Almost numb, he sipped at the steaming noodles, slurping a mouthful of the distasteful pulp over his lips. *Thirty-six hours. He had slept thirty-six hours!*

His eyes wandered across Seishiro's kitchen, trying to focus, trying to find anything to make sense of this. A calendar with ice-skating cartoon penguins hung on the wall next to the door. It still displayed October. A couple of very cryptic notes were scattered across the date fields. On October 29 was a symbol that stood out: a pentacle, Subaru's very own sigil, drawn in red. An arrow curved around its upper right quadrant as if to mark a rotation.

October 29. The day...  
...of the bridge...  
...of Seishiro's death.

Cold crept along his spine. Something whined. The sound rose to a high-pitched hiss, then nearly disappeared only to rise again. The staircase in the hallway formed in front of his inner eye. The half-emptied mug still in his hand, Subaru stopped halfway down and stared at the black-lacquered basement door. A pentagram was carved into it, and a Chinese symbol that looked as if it had come directly from the Guodian<sup>2</sup> texts, and something that looked suspiciously like a rune. The spiritual energy flashing over and around the marks sneaked and curled like a ghost dragon. Subaru tentatively reached for an ofuda to gauge the intensity of the spell that was awake there. The pentagrams on his hands flashed. He never got to touch the paper in his pocket.

The Godzilla mug fell from his hand, bounced off one step and shattered on the next. Shards and noodles spilled down the stairs. Subaru gasped. Blood welled freely from three deep gashes around his wrist; clasp it, he stumbled back up the narrow staircase. The Sakurazukamori seemed to be serious about declaring the basement off limits. He wondered briefly what Seishiro had done to set this spell. Blood magic for sure. The door below sizzled audibly now. It had been warm to the touch, as warm as a human body... Apparently, the spell was fueling itself with the blood drawn from its victims. He watched the blood running between his fingers. He had to get a bandage, now; or...

No. That wasn't an option any longer. Tightly clasp his wrist Subaru hurried to the bathroom to find a wrapping.

Using his unhurt hand and his teeth to tie the wrapping firmly around his bleeding wrist, he slowly returned to the kitchen. He contemplated cleaning up the mess with the noodles.

*...You just don't have a sense of self-preservation, do you?...* an amused voice whispered in his memories. No, he wouldn't go near that door again anytime soon. He stopped, finding himself in the living room in front of... a kotatsu. What his sleep-clouded mind had taken for a black couch table yesterday was indeed a traditional kotatsu<sup>3</sup>, an admittedly cluttered one, covered with a thickly padded black quilt. A loose stack of... tax return forms secured with a solar powered calculator piled up on it. A set of thinly rimmed gold-framed glasses lay, unfolded, on a corner. A notepad with scribbles...

Most of it looked like interim figures, often scratched out and redone; some were descriptions... business dinner, gardening supplies, hotel suite for... investigative purposes, work clothes (Armani), and bold and thick over half a page: *Tax return forms = ultimate atheistic curse!* and *brought to you by Doomsday Enterprises Torture Division's Prime Executive*; next to it was a sketch of a penguin showing its bottom to a stick figure that somehow had a striking resemblance to Miyazawa Kiichi<sup>4</sup>.

Subaru blinked. He saw the ghost of the older man sitting at the kotatsu, his feet comfortable in the warmth underneath, his back resting against the leather seat cushions of the couch, frowning over his tax return. The image was painfully vivid. It didn't belong... not to him... not to the Sakurazukamori... but to whom then?

Who would fill out tax return forms while he was fighting to end the world as it was? Subaru put the notepad back and turned his back to the kotatsu. It didn't make sense. Nothing did anymore. He swallowed dryly. Maybe it never had.

The painting above the couch called his attention. It was done in acrylic lacquer that allowed

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2 **Guodian texts:** The oldest known version of the Tao Te Ching, the source of Taoism (or onmyo in Japanese) was found in a tomb in the town of Guodian in the Hubei province of China in 1993. It introduced fourteen new verses to the previously known Tao Te Ching.

3 **Kotatsu:** a low table covered with a thick, padded often electrical blanket that falls down to the floor to warm the feet in winter. The place in a Japanese home where the family gathers to tattle about the neighbors, check the grocery bills, or plan the next family holiday.

4 **Miyazawa Kiichi:** Finance minister of Japan in 1999.

for brilliant, contradictory colors: blood red and black, midnight blue, and a silvery white. Daring strokes, rough, almost sloppy dots, and even splatters formed an intriguing picture: the Sakura, drawn in blood and night, with rays of silver light touching an edge of its trunk. Diagonal beams of a light too cool, too pure to be from the sun, yet...

It wasn't a masterpiece. It spoke more of enthusiasm than talent, yet Subaru found himself mesmerized by the aggressiveness yet delicacy in it. A vertical line of daring silver grey kanji flowed down from the top left corner. He needed a moment to decipher them: "Emperor Sushun's Grave"<sup>5</sup>.

His eyes fell on the opposite corner of the painting. Again grey kanji. He swallowed. He didn't have to decipher those.

"Sakurazuka Seishiro, 1981"

He shuddered and practically fled from the room. An emperor's death... Fled from the house... He hastened down the front steps. Something whispered against his mind, stopping him. He turned, concentrated on the sensation.

He kneeled in front of the steps and tentatively tested each of them as he should have done at his arrival. He kept his incantation soft, barely above a whisper. There was something inside this house that he felt he had better not disturb.

As expected, each of the five steps was carefully warded: the first against spirits, the second against sakanagi, then spells, curses, and sakanagi again. Considering that the Sakurazukamori followed dark onmyodo, the double layer against sakanagi wasn't surprising. But just on the edge between the spell ward and the one against curses was a faint whisper vibrating against Subaru's spiritual probe. A sleeping spell. Powerful enough to knock out even someone as gifted as himself for thirty-six hours, yet so elusive that even he hadn't noticed it among the wards until he felt it a second time. This was subtle, intricate work which stood in stark contrast to the straightforward and flashy Sakurazuka magic he'd come to expect.

Subaru found himself wondering just how many nosy delivery boys and inquiring neighbors Seishiro had found sleeping peacefully on his carpet and what had happened to them. Yesterday, he would have sworn that it hadn't been pretty, but now... he wasn't so sure anymore. The spell stopped people effectively from snooping, and the embarrassment of being found sleeping where they weren't supposed to be by the very owner of the place would have ensured their silence. Somehow, he could see Seishiro sending the harmless ones on their way with a fierce scowl on his face, and amused laughter hidden behind it.

Subaru shuddered and looked into the mirror. Was he deluding himself yet again?

His reflection stared back at him and he winced slightly. He looked like a beggar in his coat, speckled with blood and rumpled from having been slept in. It looked dirty, abandoned, a rag garment compared to the sleek black leather coat Seishiro had left hanging on the coat rack. When had he turned so painfully thin? Subaru averted his eyes and finally left the house without looking back.

~::~::~~

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
in the afternoon

The Sakura burst into bloom the moment Subaru walked into sight. It didn't exactly welcome him, though. *...Enjoyed your stay?...* This time it was the tree who initiated the conversation. *...Sei-chan's real house is quite cozy, isn't it?...*

*Cozy!?* Subaru wouldn't quite go that far. "Why did you send me there?" He inquired warily.

*...Why don't you have a seat while we talk?...*

Subaru gave in and sat on the edge of the bench with a sigh. The old wood creaked under him. "What did you want me to do there?"

*...You were nearly dropping in your boots the day before yesterday. I couldn't allow that...* Imaginary wind rustled in the blossom-laden branches of the tree. *...I knew Sei-chan's sleeping spell would do you a world of good...*

Subaru's eyes flew open at that.

*...and it did...* the tree insisted. *...You look much better than last time, Subaru-kun...* It emphasized the whispered name with a silky, sweetly flavoured whisk of blossoms along his cheek.

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5 **Emperor Sushun** (+ 11. Dec. 592) was the 32nd Emperor of Japan (587 - 592). He was the twelfth son of Emperor Kimmei. His mother was a daughter of the politician Soga no Iname. After the death of his brother, Emperor Yomei, he claimed the throne with the help of his mother's clan Soga. He was murdered in the year 592 by the courtier Atai Goma. Sushun is the only Japanese emperor known for sure to have been assassinated. Most important: he is also the only emperor without a known grave.

Subaru found himself unwittingly turning into the tentative touch. He shouldn't... he...

"May I take a seat with you?" a quiet baritone voice asked.

Subaru blinked, disbelieving, at the speaker who seemed to have come out of nowhere. A middle-aged man in a brown business suit under an unbuttoned wool coat was standing in front of him, a briefcase under his arm. Manners kicked in: "Of course, sir. I mean this isn't a private b—" he stuttered hastily, and the man's round face lit up in an amiable smile. Somehow, the smile made Subaru regret his manners.

"It's such a rare occasion to find the park not completely deserted these days," his new... companion stated and leaned relaxed against the back of the bench, somehow taking up more than a half of it. "A year ago, this place was bursting with life... Christmas shoppers, lovers strolling..." He shook his head, sadly, and the crumpled flap of Subaru's dirty coat somehow got stuck between the bench and the man's thigh. "Are you waiting for someone? For your beloved?" he asked dreamily. "You're a beauti—"

The tree struck.

Subaru stared, uncomprehending, at five thin dark twigs suddenly protruding from a chest that somehow was only inches away from him. Blood was dripping along the sleek wood. A strange mixture of lust and horrified realization marred the round face. The twigs shuddered. The blood flowed faster. The tree was drinking...

*...You might want to move aside, his sympathetic system<sup>6</sup> is going—...*

The distinct smell of feces and urine mixed into the sickening sweetness of spilled blood.

*...—to fail soon...*

The gauze-like shimmer of the soul appeared around the round face as it slackened, quivering. The spirit was leaving the body to— The twigs were reaping the ethereal essence. The ghost screamed as it was torn apart, sucked into an uncountable mass of buds and sprouts. Cherry blossoms flowered around the body, vibrantly pink. The surrounding spiritual fabric fluctuated under the fragmented soul's wail. A deep voice hummed a happy melody about eternity. The twigs moved in rhythm with it...

Subaru staggered back, heaving, falling—

Surprisingly tender branches caught him before he reached the ground, supported his shoulders, his head, as the little food he'd eaten returned with a vengeance. He was retching... tears streamed over his face.

*...Shhhh...* Soft, calming sounds slowly wormed their way into his consciousness. *...There's no need to cry...* Blossom tufts were blotting the tears from his cheeks. Blossom tufts on... twigs... twigs... sucking... blood... life...

With a cry he tore himself out of their grasp. He fell, tried to scramble out of their reach. But there was nowhere to go. This was the maboroshi again. The corpse lay under the tree in full bloom like... like the little girl so many years ago. The man looked like a broken puppet as she had. Blood pooled around him. The gaping hole in his chest looked as if... as if someone... Greedy roots soaked up the streaming blood. Sakura petals fell in a joyous dance all around them.

He took another step back and the edge of the bench slammed against the back of his knee. He sat down with a thump. There was blood on the wood under his hands. Blood and—

*...Do you feel better now?...*

The tree's branches were still moving silently. The body at its trunk wasn't much more than a knot of gnarled roots. The blood... the stench... all that was left was the soft fragrance of sakura blossoms dissipating in a dreamed wind.

"Wh—" He swallowed convulsively and tried again. "What is this... thing?" He touched the bench and winced at the wet sound his hand made.

*...Sei-chan's version of a watering ball...* The tree sounded amused. *...He puts it up when he isn't sure he'll be able to fulfill his duties. — Ah, unrepentant rapists are such a luscious meal...* The branches quivered in contentment. *...He first put it up when he had entrance exams while the organization demanded his full services...* The tree radiated disapproval. *...They kept saying that since he had a calling he wouldn't need an education. Needless to say, even at fifteen Sei-chan saw that rather differently. The bench was our compromise...*

The idea was sickening. Yet... compromising between duty and school sounded awfully familiar. Of course, for him duty had always come first. Had Seishiro seen that differently? A nightmarish truth dawned him. "You— you could have k—killed wh— whoever sat here!"

*...Yes, I could have...* The tree admitted calmly.

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6 **sympathetic system:** short for "sympathetic *nervous* system" that among other things is responsible for the subconscious control of bladder and intestines. I don't think that the tree can deal for years with Seishiro without learning one or two words from him. ;)

"How— how could he do that?" Subaru leapt to his feet. "That's atrocious!"

*...He had a life, Subaru-kun. You have yet to find out what that is...*

"Because he took it from me!"

*...Now, isn't that a bit melodramatic, my dear?...*

"Melodramatic!? You killed an emperor!"

The temperature dropped sharply. Subaru hadn't noticed that the tree had kept it comfortably warm for him. Now his breath fogged in the still air. The sound emanating from the swishing branches could only be called disdain. *...You understand nothing...* the tree dismissed him harshly. *...Go... Learn...*

"What do you want me to learn!?" Subaru yelled in frustration. "It doesn't make sense!"

The tree was completely still for a moment; not a twig moving, no petal falling. Then...

*...Are you less of a murderer because this man's life was ended by my twigs and not your hand piercing his heart?*

*...Are you less of a murderer because he was a bad person?...* A soft breeze rustled the branches and twigs in the endless night surrounding the Sakura in its maboroshi.

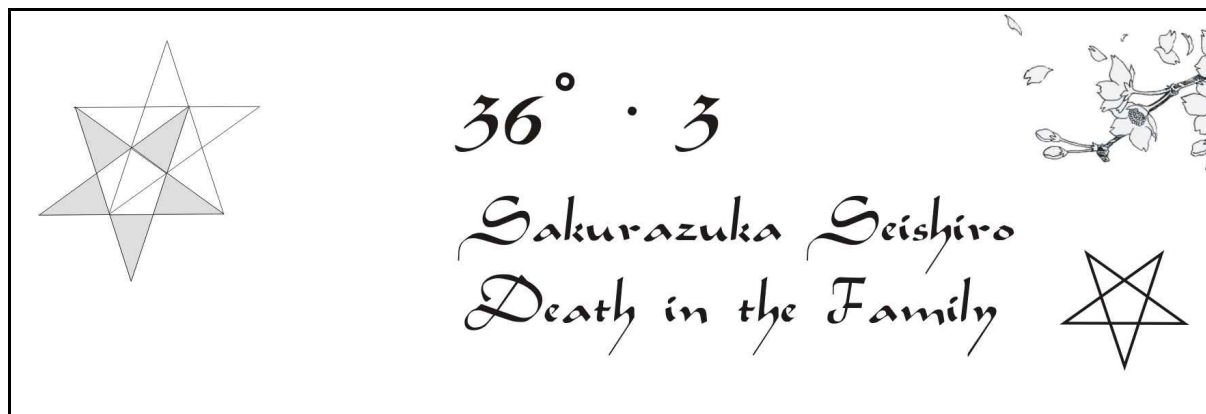
*...Is he any less dead because he wasn't an innocent? Because he lusted after your body that you wouldn't have given willingly?*

*...Is there less blood on your hands because I made you lounge seductively on the seat? You knew what I am. Are you less of a murderer because you preferred to be ignorant of my likely intentions?*

*...Are you less of a murderer because you are...*

*...Sumeragi?...*

The maboroshi collapsed with the name. Subaru found himself in the ordinary gloom of an early evening in a partially destroyed Tokyo. The bench next to him was empty, no stain, no blood, nothing. A small layer of frost covered the slightly rough wood of its seat. No one had sat there next to him. Or...? He froze, staring at his hand smeared with something that looked reddish-brown in the dim light.



*~36° C separates the living man from the dead thing~*

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
1981 January

Ueno railway station was a crowded place. Seishiro, still in his grey middle school uniform, the book bag over his shoulder, stepped calmly down from the 10:48 train and searched his way through the milling throng. The house he shared with his mother since he had been given to her six years ago lay to the East across the Showa-dori and South into Taito-cho. Naka-okachimachi was his usual subway stop, not the giant Ueno station that came next.

Seishiro headed west. Snow crunched under his feet. It was still snowing. At the station, the feet of countless passersby had slogged the snow to a wet, greyish pulp. Here, deeper into the park away from the museums, it was a homogeneous white cover. Black trees glittering with frost on their bark appeared out of its sparkling expanse. He left the path where people sauntered enjoying the crisp winter air and ducked under the trees. Laughter arising from an impromptu snowball fight among school children followed him. Apparently, Clamp Academy wasn't alone in deciding that its students were not to miss the rare event of several centimeters fresh snow across Tokyo. Seishiro intended to use the unexpected free day well.

His breath fogged in the air, dissipated, fogged again. It was well below average winter temperatures today. A slight shine of frozen breath covered the rim of his upturned collar. The cloth was wet where his exhalations warmed it regularly. Pale winter sun percolated through falling snow and ice-laden twigs. The gnarled, intimidating trunk in front of him was glittering with frost. Ice drops hung like pearls on the bare branches. A dangerous beauty.

Seishiro knew more than most about how dangerous a beauty. He wasn't supposed to be anywhere near it without his mother being present, too. He put his clammy gloved hands under his arms. "Tree-san?"

*...You shouldn't be here...*

The ghost of a maboroshi flickered pink around the black skeleton of the branches above and was gone. Seishiro wasn't inclined to leave. Tugging one of his gloves off his hand he fumbled to retrieve a small notepad from his bag. "Tree-san. I have a question." He flipped open a page with a pencilled pentagram.

Silence. The paper remained what it was. Paper with pencil lines. A faint blue glow emanated from it. "Tree-san?"

Silence.

He began to turn the notepad on his open palm. The branches above rustled faintly. Snow flakes fluttered. A couple of them melted on the pad and the paper became wavy in a few spots. The blue glow vanished and returned and vanished... Seishiro's eyes narrowed slightly. He stopped when the blue was gone and began to follow the lines of the turned symbol with his finger...

*...Stop it...*

A single tuft of sakura flowers had appeared on the twig just above him. "Will you answer my questions now?" he asked calmly, crumpling the page around the faint red shimmer that had begun to manifest itself above it.

*...You are a most persistent creature, Sei-chan...* the tree sighed as the maboroshi enveloped them.



"The campus is formed like the Sumeragi sigil. It's constantly redrawn by the ring subway and the trams." Seishiro, his padded jacket opened in the warmth the Sakura provided, sat on the lowest thick branch. His back rested comfortably against the massive trunk. "A sigil with a diameter of over a mile and redrawn every fifteen minutes. It should have blown me across Tokyo Bay the moment I touched the gate. Instead... it felt cool."

*...Cool? As in cold?...*

"As in—" He searched for an appropriate description. "...exciting." Seishiro stretched his arm to enjoy the caress of sakura blossoms running along the tender skin of the inside as far as the sleeve allowed. "Something is going on there, Tree-san, and I don't know what it is. You saw it on the paper. If I rotate the paper by thirty-six degrees, our power is gone and we see the Sumeragi pentacle. But it holds no power of theirs. But if I as much as follow the lines with my eyes..."

*...The Sumeragi put spirit above matter, intention above the physical fact. That is what the pentacle stands for...*

Seishiro sighed. "I know. Spirit is singular. That's one tip. Matter is represented by dualities like 'Flesh and Blood', 'Life and Death', hence it's represented by two tips." He laid his head against a thick bunch of blossoms. "I've been studying the texts since I was taught to read."

*...Even the old ones?...*

"The old ones, the new ones, the in-between ones." Seishiro snorted. "Recently, even some I'm not supposed to know about until I'm twenty-one. But they were of no help with this. I asked mother and my instructors but they weren't interested." He drew his legs up and rested his chin on his knees. "They want me to leave school after the middle school finals this month."

*...And you don't want that?...*

"No. I want to understand." He drove his hand sharply into the blossoms next to his head tearing them as he pressed them against his lips to breathe in the intensified scent of the crushed petals. "Life and death, flesh and blood." He purred. "They somehow cancel the spirit."

*...Or they overwrite it...*

"How?"

*...You should find out. This is a complex, fast-living world...* There was something entirely anticipatory in the way scented flowers and dark scratchy bark were dancing along his skin. Blossoms fluttered against the pulse in his wrists and throat. Youngest twigs, barely more than sprouts, the only ones without a bark that would abrade his skin curled along his sides. Soothing. *Exciting.*

*...Learn to be part of it...* The twigs at his wrists pulled tight, bark rasped across his pulse, pain flared as it cut in. Blood welled over his skin... and vanished. He tried to tear free. The twigs tightened their hold, cutting deeper, moving rhythmically against the torn skin, drinking... A dark whisper inside his head, the Sakura, telling him of power, of strength, of... succession. The abrasions on his wrists were barely more than a memory when the tree released him.

*...Your mother will be home soon... the Sakura said softly. ...Go now. Don't keep her waiting...*

Taito-cho, Tokyo  
two hours later

"Sayonara... mother."

He breathed it against her lips as he gave her the kiss she desired and he didn't mind giving. Her lips were cold; from the chill and the snow still falling in thick white flakes all around them not from her death that she breathed into his mouth.

Old blood trailed her path through the house and out into the snow. Her white kimono with the burgundy stains of her last victim and the crimson of her life flowing out of her, the crimson that spread in the snow under her and around his black-clad knees, the soot of her hair... together it strangely resembled the camellia flowers she'd liked in life.

He stood and studied her body calmly. He would have to change clothes. This school uniform was clearly out of commission. He would also have to take care of the trail of blood she'd left across the house. It hadn't been his kill.

She was.

*Take her to you, Tree-san,* he demanded in his thoughts and the energy tickled along his veins. More and more of the immaculate snowflakes turned into pink-tinged blossoms. He concentrated and redirected a whirl of them down the path and across the living room. *How good are you compared to forensics teams?* he asked the tree in his thoughts.

*...I'm as good as you let me be...*

I see. Seishiro decided he would take a blood detection set to the living room floor sometime soon. He headed up the stairs to his room to change into his second uniform. Outside, crimson camellia glittered above the frozen bamboo fountain. The shadow of the house was drawn in deep blue on the immaculate snow.

"Hello, Seishiro-kun." The man in front of him actually acknowledged his presence. "I've come for your mother. Our lectures will resume tomorrow. If you would—" The man slipped out of his heavy shoes and hung up his coat and woolen scarf.

Seishiro closed the door dutifully behind him. He couldn't address him. Instructors never held a name for him. They weren't supposed to. "Say, are you close to my mother, sensei?"

"Of course, I'm close to Setsuka-san." The man proudly puffed out his chest. "She is like a sister to me! I've been entrusted with the clan's financial and business obligations ever since she claimed her position."

"I see." Seishiro nodded amiably. "I shall call you ojisan<sup>7</sup>, then."

"Oji—! How dare—?"

Seishiro slowly tilted his head studying him curiously. "After all, you are my mother's brother, right? I apologize for having forgotten to ask about relatives. I kind of figured there wouldn't be any, so I didn't ask before I killed her."

Seishiro took a comfortable seat on the couch and waited patiently till 'ojisan' came to grips with that particular piece of information. Finally, he released a trickle of power into the air of the small house to snap the man from his stupor. He allowed a few sakura petals to scatter in the room just for effect. He still felt dizzy at the amount of power suddenly at his hands, at the implications, the possibilities that came with it.

A few more petals fluttered across the low traditional table. These were of a slightly deeper color, tinged with the crimson of a fresh death. A deep, amused voice in his thoughts reminded him that he wasn't supposed to play. Seishiro obeyed, not without another gust of petals – for the heck of it! – "Now, if you don't mind, ojisan. I'd like to have the proceedings."

The man's mouth fell open. "W— what!?"

"The proceedings." Seishiro's slender, once again clean right hand fluttered vaguely. "You know, everything you took care of: case files, contacts, names, places, certificates of ownership..." He allowed his words to trail off as if he were lost in thought. "Ah yes!" He snapped his fingers. "And don't forget the bank accounts and the government contact codes, please."

Again it took some time for his words to settle in before the man finally stood to take a large, embossed brass key out of his pocket. It fitted the sealed trunk next to the sitting group. Pentagrams on the key and the trunk, a Chinese character, tassels, and several wards – it was a rather obvious place if you knew what to look for. The man threw him another long lasting look before he turned the key in the lock.

"Yes, I am only fifteen." Seishiro allowed himself a humorous smile when he answered the unstated question that had been hanging in the air since 'ojisan' understood with *whom* he was talking now. "But my teacher said I was quite precocious."

The documents, papers, and code keys were slowly placed on the table in front of him. "You know—" The man gulped and wiped at the sweat beads on his high forehead. "You— you don't have to kill m—"

"I fear you are mistaken, ojisan," Seishiro replied amiably getting to his feet. "Of course I have to kill you. It wouldn't be a proper succession otherwise." The whirl of sakura petals thickened. 'Ojisan' actually stood his ground. Seishiro acknowledged the unexpected bravery of the man with an appreciative nod as he struck.

He pulled his hand free from the dead man's chest and used the refreshing tissues on the table to wipe off the blood. With a frown he noticed that part of it had soaked into the sleeve of his school uniform. He'd have to wash and dry one of his jackets somehow before tomorrow or—

He shrugged. It couldn't be helped. He covered the soaked sleeve with a paper towel and proceeded to add the files and other paraphernalia to his homework in the tightly packed book bag.

"Sayonara, ojisan. I fear our lecture tomorrow has been cancelled."

The door fell closed behind him. The sakura petals scattered on the wind, taking the evidence of blood and fingerprints and a dead body with them. The house belonged to the clan. Nobody would come looking for a generation or two. Though Seishiro would make that forensics experiment when he came for the few possessions he was leaving behind now. It wouldn't do to start out sloppy.

Today, there was still his homework: an essay about an emperor of his choice and a sketch of

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<sup>7</sup> **ojisan**: Japanese for "uncle" - it doesn't have to be in the strict sense of the word.

said emperor's last resting place. He hummed a happy melody, a giddy bounce in his step, as he headed through the winding streets back to Ueno Park. The National Museum at its northern end was open till 5 pm. If he held a good pace he would have over an hour to collect the facts and make a first sketch for his project.

The first symptoms appeared when he crossed through Ueno Station for the third time today. The bright illumination burned into his eyes, causing the crowded masses milling around the trains to blur before his eyes. Sakanagi. It was still scattered and weak. Slipping into a corner, he used the relative peace in the crowd to send out a tracer. The advancing backlash was threateningly close. He had to get out of the crowd, out of...

Sakanagi. He had taken care of it. Had redirected it, to be disposed...

The lights of the festival hall glittered on his left. He averted his eyes. Pain rose in his temples. He used the edge of an ofuda to draw blood from the pad of his thumb. Sigils in the open weren't the best choice. He called the shadows. The maboroshi. It wouldn't shield him from the sakanagi but from possible witnesses when he drew the symbol with his blood on the card...

He staggered under the trees. Black trunks danced around him in an afternoon that was night to his eyes. He followed a path his eyes couldn't see any longer. Snow crunched underneath. Footsteps in the snow without a form to make them. Seishiro cursed. He was making mistakes. The path. Sandy. Footfalls. Blunt claws tapping on the ground. Yipping.

The blood-marked ofuda fell onto reddish fur as he leapt and was caught.

A wet sound accompanied by a yelp cut short followed him up into the crown. An eerie silence followed, accentuated by the slow, slightly unsteady walk of an old woman along the sandy path and the sound of something slick and tangled being dragged along.

"Pochi?" A frail old voice asked fearfully. "Pochi, don't tug on the leash—"

The scream made Seishiro wince. His head throbbed. He felt sick. The second scream would have caused him to fall off the tree if small, smooth sakura twigs hadn't been curled around his shoulders and waist to hold him.

He gritted his teeth against the pain in his temples. He should have given the sakanagi to the old hag and not the damn dog. She wouldn't be that dreadfully noisy if it were her entrails trailing behind...

Blossom tufts dabbed the sweat off his temples and cheeks. Wind whispered soothingly along his clammy skin. The tree caressed the pulse at his throat and wrists. *...Shhhh... It's only the second kill in so short a time. I should have watched you more closely. You are so tall compared to your predecessor. I keep forgetting that you aren't a grown man yet, that I can't leave as much to you as I left to her. Your execution was perfect. It's the blood. It left you lightheaded...*

"Not lightheaded enough..." Seishiro rested his aching head against a cool pillow of flowers and forced himself to weave an illusion. Underneath, the sobbing woman screamed again. A white Tosa-inu<sup>8</sup>, fangs and chest smeared with blood, trailed back across the blood-stained path to disappear between the trees. "Now they'll look only for the dog..." Seishiro sighed and, closing his eyes, sank deeper into the blossoms. The tree, supporting his head, dabbed his temples again. "I have to... homework..."

The wind rose in the now impenetrable dark of the Sakura's maboroshi. The swishing of the twigs and blossoms grew louder and drowned out his sleepy whisper. A long twig topped by a single tuft of thick buds crept over the skin of his waist.

*...Sleep...*

He fought against it, against the caress, the touch, the... Another branch, thick with flowers, wound around his shoulders and curled up to cushion his head. Twigs tugged at the notebook that stuck in the cramped book bag. He thought he saw a green sprout winding itself around the pen he'd left clipped to the paper. The sprout wriggled, readjusted. Finally, the pen's tip scratched across the paper, forming characters...

...he was dreaming. He shouldn't...

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<sup>8</sup> **Tosa-Inu:** Japanese breed of fighting dog; actually a mixed breed between the native Shikoku-inu and various European dog breeds to increase size and strength, including English bulldog, German pointer, Mastiff, Bull terrier, St. Bernhard, and Great Dane.

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
the next day just before dawn

*Fog arose in the darkness, silver and translucent. A figure took form in it. A slender frame with delicate limbs and narrow hands... a traditional Chinese tunic... bent over him, touched his cheek, fingertips trailing his jaw line as if in awe. A name floated by... Chen Yue<sup>9</sup>... A formal bow. A noble's long braid down the figure's back flew with the movement. A mocking glance out of long sparkling grey eyes... Laughter. A batting of the hand. Pieces on a Go board<sup>10</sup>. A frowned 'you cheat' flowed on the wind. An emperor's death...*

*...no, a dead emperor. And Yue was laughing.*

*...Sei-chan... Something downy dabbed at his face. ...Time to get up...*

Seishiro blinked against the soft light surrounding him in the tree's realm. Flowers whisked around his head again. He struggled to sit up in the nest of twigs and branches the Sakura had woven around him while he'd been... out. He frowned at the realization. That was not supposed to happen. The tree couldn't be trusted that far. He— "Where is the Chinese guy?"

*...Chinese?...*

"Don't play around." Seishiro chided and rubbed his eyes with his palm. "He was here just... He... Yue." He stared at the collection of tiny light-green leaves his hand had found in his hair.

*...Yue was Sakurazukamori in the troubled times at the end of Emperor Sushun's reign<sup>11</sup>... the tree complied. ...Chen Yue. He arrived as a refugee, he stayed as... something else... The Sakura shivered. Petals danced in the air. ...He was someone special, not unlike you, Sei-chan. So curious, so... vividly alive in his work for death...*

"Do you remember all my predecessors?"

*...Some. Those who made a change. Who left me something more than mere sustenance...*

The tattered notebook fluttered on the rough bark next to his feet. Sap stains covered the open page, sap stains and scribbles. Surprised, he deciphered the first line as ~The history of Emperor Sushun~. The branches rustled. He hadn't dreamed that? A bunch of blossoms danced across his cheek. Seishiro, irritated, brushed it aside but the tree was persistent.

*...Your mother was a curious one in her youth, too...*

The tuft of flowers returned to his cheek. The sweet scent of sakura blossoms arose. A thin twig proceeded to curl along his throat and worm itself into his collar. A titillating sensation ran along his skin as his chin was raised to expose the spot where the arteries pulsed under his skin.

*...But you will be so much more than she ever was. The Sakurazukamori is meant to be my eyes and ears, my way to understand the world of the living. They crippled me when they turned Setsuka-chan from the girl she had been to that empty shell of a woman you knew...*

The tree sounded possessive, no, aggressive now. *...They are meant to serve me...* The rough bark of the twig inside Seishiro's shirt scraped across something very sensitive calling an involuntary gasp from his throat. *...They are not supposed to take what is mine!...* A thick gnarled branch wound around his left thigh forcing his legs apart, curling against his groin. His body arched in unexpected heat. His fingers clawed into the rough bark for hold, bloodied themselves. *...Yesssss...*

A slim twig whisked about his mouth, touched, teased. Seishiro's teeth closed sharply around it, drawing slightly bitter sap with the tang of old blood from its veins. He drew the symbol blindly with the blood from his torn hands. ~Politeness~. The tree shivered, retreated. *...You want to bind me with manners?...* it asked, amused.

"It is polite to ask, right?" Seishiro cursed silently at the tremor of unwanted lust lacing the anger in his voice as he warned the tree off. "You won't subdue me!"

*...Nor you me...* The tree laughed as he pushed free. *...Equal...* it offered.

"We'll see." Seishiro adjusted his jacket, straightened lapels and sleeves and ran a hand through his disheveled, sap-stained hair. "Next time I won't be so nice!" His bag over one shoulder he leapt down onto the path. He didn't look back.

9 **Chen Yue:** The Chen Dynasty (557-589) was the fourth and last of the Southern dynasties in China, eliminated by the Sui Dynasty. This dynasty had very little chance of survival. The devastation of the last years of the Liang Dynasty severely crippled the Chen Dynasty. It was ended by Sui Emperor Wen who invaded and reunified China in 589.  
Note that Chen Yue itself is a fictitious character supposed to have fled the war-torn Chen empire in favor of Yamato Japan (via the Kingdom of Baekje in Korea).

10 **Go:** The game Go was first mentioned in literature in 625 about a quarter century after Yue's time. But it is based on the Chinese Wei-ch'i game which was developed about 2000 BC.

11 **Emperor Sushun** was slain in 592. The date of his death marks the beginning of the Asuka period (593 - 710) in Yamato Japan, which brought strong influences of Chinese culture into Japan (including a strict land reform, fixed court ranks, a first law code, a calendar, and the furthering of Buddhism and Taoism (Jap.: onmyo throughout the country). Tree-san has a nose for future events, it seems.

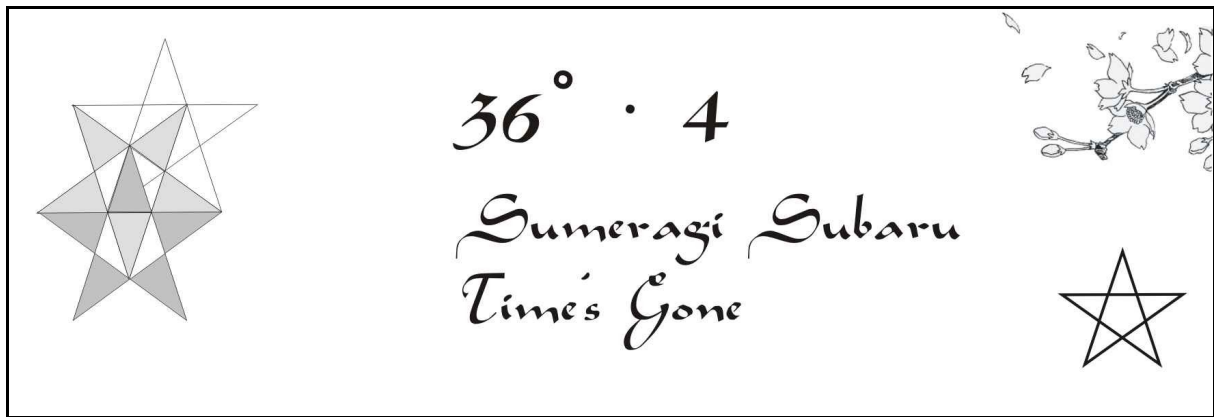
*...Just like Yue...* The branches whispered and rustled behind him. Petals sailed down around him. A single one came to rest on the grey cloth on his shoulder. Annoyed, he brushed it off.  
*...Exciting prospects...*

The park was deserted at night. Empty. The remains of yesterday's snow, frosted by a night with temperatures well below zero, crunched under his shoes. Wind stirred his hair and hissed in the empty crowns of the ghostly trees.

Ueno Park was a dangerous place before dawn.

The danger had a new name.

Its name was Seishiro.



*~36° N 138° E is the geographical location of Japan~*

Kabuchi-cho, Shinjuku  
December 1999

Footfalls echoed behind him. The faint crunching of plaster fragments scraped over cracked concrete. Involuntarily, Subaru quickened his pace, walking through empty streets, deserted neighborhoods. He felt... threatened, exposed. For the first time since the Rainbow Bridge— no, since Seishiro had betrayed him? Betrayal, that was what the Sakurazukamori had called it. He hadn't cared enough about his safety to feel threatened since then. Now he was glancing over his shoulder, looking down a debris-strewn street, expecting to see faceless shadows darting into the dark.

The apartment house in the Sakura-dori<sup>12</sup> was deserted. The plain plaster had cracked, parts of it had rained down onto the sidewalk and onto the once carefully tended sakura trees that had given the street its name. His apartment was on the top floor. From the roof of the house, you could see the Shinjuku Cho office in the Ayame-dori. Subaru vaguely recalled the light plays the neon advertisements had drawn on his plain white walls. The houses on the opposite side of the street had been plastered with them. Had been...

Shards covered the ground. Shards and rubble and...

The door to the house still hung in the frame, askew on its hinges. Nothing had kept this place safe. He wondered if he could have.

The dust had piled up in his rooms. One of the windows was cracked, though the glass still protected the interior to some extent. Plaster from the ceiling had covered the excuse for furniture he had bothered to put in: a ghostly layer stretched over his narrow bedstead and the unused desk in the corner by the door. The result of one or more of the earthquakes that had rattled Japan's capital during the last year.

His wards sizzled faintly as he crossed into his room to sit down on his bed despite the dust and plaster crumbs. Expected warmth spread over his hands when the uncovered scars reacted to his wards. In its wake, burning pain shot through his gashed wrist; he gagged, claspng it. The implanted eye throbbed with the rhythm of his pulse. Slowly, the white-hot ache in his wrist subsided to a more bearable level as the sigil scars on his hands shone.

Sakurazukamori.

He trembled – and hated himself for it. Again and again, he saw in his mind's eye the spirit being torn to pieces, heard its last panicked scream in his head, saw its hopelessness in incorporeal eyes overlaying the physical ones that had broken only a moment before, ever more sprouts winding around the corpse, greedily sucking the spirit through countless veins into the Sakura's black core.

He had known that the Sakurazukamori bound the souls to the tree. But he had always assumed they were bound... whole. This... Sitting up on his plain, plaster-strewn bedstead in his deserted apartment in Kabuchi-cho, claspng his hands tightly around his elbows, Subaru admitted to himself that he didn't know. He didn't know if he was up to... being...

Sakurazukamori.

Hunting souls for the tree to tear apart.

<sup>12</sup> The Sakura-dori in Kabuchi-cho, Shinjuku, exists indeed and runs parallel the Ayame-dori with the Shinjuku-cho office building. However, I don't know if there are sakura trees and countless neon ads as we see in volume 5 of Tokyo Babylon.

He felt sick but his stomach was empty. Yet again, he hadn't been able to eat.

Torn apart.

He buried his face in his hands, pressed his palms against his eyes.

*...You are not up to it...*

Even in Seishiro's picture, the Sakura was unmistakable in its bloodied darkness. 1981. Seishiro had been sixteen when he'd made it. He'd been Sakurazukamori already. He had known what the tree did to its victims.

Yet... he had added a streak of white touching the tree's bloodied trunk. Moonlight? Artistic license taken because it looked good, or...?

Subaru shuddered. *Emperor Sushun's Grave*. The Sakurazuka, the slayers of emperors... if it was true, it took the whole affair among their clans to a completely new level. *Sushun, the 32nd emperor since Jimmu descended from the Gods, ruled Yamato Japan at the end of the historical Kofun period. He was killed in the fifth year of his reign and there is no known grave...* It could be. The Sakurazukamori didn't leave anything behind to bury.

Had the tree really sucked the ghost of one of Japan's spiritual leaders into its veins?

Then why had it been so irritated when he'd said as much?

Subaru pulled himself up, ignoring the pain still throbbing in his wounded wrist. Somehow, Sushun was important. Using his shirt sleeve, he brushed the thick layer of dust off the books that piled up on his long-abandoned desk in the corner of his bleak room. Now that he thought about it, he should have locked them away safely somewhere. There was dangerous magic, dangerous information to be found in the Sumeragi texts. But...

...he just hadn't cared. The tremor returned to his body at the realization.

Determinedly, he opened the first chronicle.

There were several accounts of Sushun's reign in later chronicles. He ignored them. Writing in the form of Chinese characters had come to Japan during the rule of Empress Suiko, who had claimed the throne after Sushun's demise. The first chronicle had been written in her time. It was difficult to read, even for someone with his intensive education.

The Sumeragi had been an obscure clan then; if one of the royal princes, Shotoku, hadn't taken an interest in their arts and expressed a wish to be taught, they'd have gone mostly unnoticed. But the prince soon became renowned for his predictions, including one of a violent death for Emperor Sushun. Although the art described in the book was a far cry from the onmyojutsu Subaru performed nowadays, he had to admit that Shotoku's predictions had been astonishingly precise.

A precision that seemed to have shocked the prince himself. He had tried to avert the Emperor's fate when a trail of events seemed to confirm his prophecy. However, his attempts to accommodate the Emperor's offended enemies with gifts taken from his own money case had failed, and Sushun had been slain. His actions had earned the prince an even deeper respect at court and his rise in favor had taken the Sumeragi along.

Many had expected "the Prince of Peace" to ascend the throne, but his aspirations had been thwarted by the head of the powerful Soga clan, Soga no Umako, who had put Empress Suiko on the throne instead. Subaru had found quite a few comments on the man, none of them favorable. It was said that Soga no Umako had had the Emperor assassinated by one Atai Goma, a courtier of a rivalling clan. But Sushun's body had never been found, and Soga no Umako had remained in power. He, followed by his son and grandson, had all but ruled Japan for more than two generations.

Sushun's reign had been the time when onmyojutsu as Subaru knew it had reached Japan, coming from China. The Sakurazuka performed dark onmyojutsu. Had they come to Japan on behest of the Soga Clan? Had they accommodated their host and protector by eliminating a perceived threat to him? There were a few rather unfavorable comments about the Chinese artists and priests the Soga clan had supported at court. But why had the Sakura been that angry then when he'd said as much?

*...because you are... Sumeragi?...*

That didn't make sense... Subaru's head sank down onto the old book. He breathed the scent of ancient leather and dust and a hand long perished. The book had been copied manually. The script, its characters, were too old to have been reproduced artificially. The scent, the sweat...

*A whiff of candle wax and fire smoke and whispering silk... ...a man in formal attire knelt in front of a priest – no, a practitioner – in what looked like a makeshift shikifuku. Prayer beads hung low over his chest, his nails were tinged with henna. A shallow earthen bowl with water stood between the two men. Ceremonial daggers stuck in the ground left and right of it. The dagger handles had been tied with tassels and ancient Chinese coins carefully polished to high gleam. Crane feathers dangled next to the tassels, feathers and ribbons...*

*Flickering light from a fire bowl on a high tripod behind the pair illuminated the scene. Yet the*

walls were filled with shadows. Shadows that seemed to swirl, to move on their own, independent from the glow of the fire. Dark hair curled down to the shikifuku's embroidered collar. Soot had been used to emphasize the practitioner's eyes, currently downcast. A bird fluttered on its perch... a shikigami? No...

"Prince..." The practitioner's gaze remained downcast. His voice was low, almost soft, as he addressed his client. "There is more to a successful prediction than merely a similar set of events—"

"Yet," the other interrupted, "he will see me sooner or later for my prediction." Dark eyes glared in an aristocratic face.

"Whatever prediction comes to your mind shall come to pass," the practitioner said with a decisive wave of a slim, white hand over the mirror-like surface of the water between them. Light danced over the pendant tied to the string of prayer beads adorning his narrow shoulders. Gold glittered in the firelight as he bowed to his client. A pentacle. "The onmyodo won't allow anything else."

The lights flickered more strongly. Sakura petals danced across the room, some of them turning to ash, sizzling faintly in the flames of the fire pot. The client cursed and reached for his sword. The magician laid a hand on his sleeve, calming him without even looking up.

A shudder ran through the lean frame of the practitioner as he held his client back from baring his blade. The folds of his shikifuku whispered. Faint words were uttered.

The practitioner's head flew up. Emerald green eyes stared directly at him, bright and open, glowing with a light of their own and glaring with...

...hatred.

Subaru jerked back. He couldn't wake, couldn't breathe. Pain shot through his head, culminating in bright white agony in his right eye. Sakura branches reached for the practitioner, for the client... Petals blinded him briefly. The client escaped. The practitioner, howling in his fury, was struggling, an iron twig curled tightly around his throat. The earthen bowl lay broken. The mirror of water had splintered. The band of prayer beads was torn, beads were bouncing all around the dirt floored room. The pentacle fell in slow motion. A greedy hand with henna-colored nails grasped it. Sakura branches curled around the wrist and arm, twisted, turned. The pentacle was thrown from broken fingers. The fire light shone through it. Its shadow on the dirt floor...

...turned it upside down.

Inverted it.

Created its opposite.

A pentagram.

The shadow grew and swallowed the room, becoming deeper, darker, and tinged with crimson blood and sakura petals...

...with a gasp, Subaru jerked awake—

—and fell off his chair. Pain shot through his spine as he landed on his bottom. His pulse was racing. He pressed his palm against his throbbing right eye and the burning gashes of the injured wrist against his chest. He— he hadn't had a nightmare since— since— at least not a nightmare not involving Seishiro and—

He'd looked into the past...

...and his own eyes.

He'd looked into a mirror...

...into his opposite.

Seishiro's embrace was dissipating as he... whispered against Subaru's chest. ...are now like a mirror image of the past...

Subaru trembled. They were mirrors within mirrors within mirrors...

...and if he looked too hard they burst into shards. Like the picture; if he looked too long, too hard, it changed in front of his eyes to something else, something new that he wasn't sure was there in the energetic, slightly psychedelic mix of brilliant colors, of strikes and blotches. The picture was... no, it didn't show talent... but vitality, energy... curiosity? The wish— no, the desire to try and see what came of it.

He'd never done anything like that. His own walls had always been bare. Walls painted white around plain, dark brown, functional furniture. Color in here had come from his schoolbooks, neglected for the sake of duty, and...

Hokuto.

What had been alive in these walls had been hers. Plants, postcards, sticky notes, silly coffee cups, plush toys, bunny slippers... He didn't want to think about the clothes she'd stuck him in.

He hadn't had a life. His sister had had a life. And he had been watching it. His happiness hadn't been his, but hers. ... \*you\* have yet to find out what that is...



He stood. He couldn't stay here. This wasn't his place any more than Seishiro's house or his garden had been.

He tugged his stained, crumpled coat tightly around himself and—

The books. He couldn't leave them unsealed again. He searched his pockets for an unstained ofuda, concentrated, and placed it on the heap of volumes. It wasn't ideal, but it would have to do. He couldn't transport the tomes right now. The room was suffocating him. He studied the pattern of plaster dust on the tatami floor as he finally closed the door behind him, adding another spell to the lock, before turning around to leave— He stopped. His eyes rested on the open wardrobe, but they showed him his reflection in a mirror in someone else's house. He patted the grey dust off the charcoal coat he'd left behind when he'd moved over to the campus. A scarf of the same color stuck in one of its sleeves; matching leather gloves peeped out of a pocket. He wouldn't look like a beggar in it when he went to Imonoyama's house.

He closed the front door on his way down to the debris-strewn street. He hesitated, then put on the gloves. There was no longer a reason to keep the scars visible all the time, was there?

He forwent the scarf.

~::~::~~

He'd followed the Shinjuku-dori across the downtown area. Tokyo had become so much larger now that most of the transport systems were out of commission. Not that it mattered much. Again he was walking through deserted streets. Gusts of wind were blowing litter across the street in front of him. Tokyo had fallen deep under the assault of the Dragons of Earth. Just the area near Chiyoda with the palace was strangely untouched. Yet another shielded area disconnected from any supportive kekkai. It seemed that those additional, other structures only became visible in the kekkais' destruction. He was briefly tempted to enter the Hanzomon Gate and cross the imperial grounds. His rank as clan head of the Sumeragi was sufficient for that, yet... he was Sakurazukamori, a slayer? ...of an emperor? He shuddered. No. That kind of person was not to set foot on grounds. He followed the Uchibori-dori instead, which skirted the area.

He felt the kekkai going up while he was still crossing downtown. Ginza. After a moment, he crossed the street diagonally and entered one of the houses and climbed the stairs to the roof to sit on the edge and wait. The long, dark coat flapped in the wind. He'd folded his arms across his legs. It wouldn't take long. It never did...

*"What is your wish?"* Three hours later, his own words echoed in Subaru's mind as he watched the sleek figure of the 'Kamui' leaping rooftops in the distance. The conversation had been strange, disconnected. Wishes. What kind of wishes? Had the other not known where he was heading now? Or had he just not cared? Was that all? Then... why...?

The questions were endless. The streets of Ginza still whole and gleaming in the afternoon sun. Yet... it was past Christmas now, wasn't it? The streets should be bursting with life, with glitter and jingle, the Namiki-dori he was crossing right now should be a sparkling Christmas scene with countless bulbs and neon figurines lining the skeletal trees. But it was bleak, empty. The energy of Ginza's preserved kekkai crackled faintly at the edge of his perception, probably aware of another Dragon of Earth crossing its perimeter. Subaru ignored it.

Nataku had died.

He felt nothing. Shouldn't he feel something? Seishiro had told him once that the Sakurazukamori didn't feel anything; did that mean that he—? Or was it merely that Subaru didn't bother to care about... his own wish? Other peoples wishes?

Had the 'Kamui' ignored Subaru's wish or had he failed to perceive it?

Did he even *have* a wish anymore?

*"There's nothing left that I want to do."* —

He certainly didn't want to go to the campus and run into one of the Seals. He certainly didn't want to—

But he would. He had a responsibility towards the tree, towards his... house, towards... Japan? He wasn't sure about that one after the last revelation. Did the Sakurazuka have a responsibility to Japan, to the emperor, like the Sumeragi? Then... how?

Seishiro was gone, and yet, he was there with him, now, touching him, seeing for... him.

Or... not?

*"Such an egotist,"* 'Kamui' had said. Yet...

Legend had it that with your left eye, you gave half of your powers to someone else. *"That's why you can't die... right?"* Was that selfish? Wasn't that... something else?

Cold crept over his once-again leather-encased hands. He increased his speed.

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
December 1999

The campus formed a strange contrast to the deserted city around it. The streets were brightly illuminated. Light shone from the windows. Slightly distorted dance music wavered out of an open basement door. Transit trams clattered along the streets in never-stopping rhythm. This was the third one that had passed Subaru on his way to Imonoyama's private mansion.

Paper stars were taped to the panes of a window. A girl was laughing in the distance. It was as if the students of Clamp Academy were asserting their vitality in the face of the destruction all around them. And in some weird, fragile way, it seemed to work.

Subaru's pace slowed when the mansion came within sight. The house given to the Seals was the next one. He had to be careful now, if he didn't want to run into one of them. Darting another glance across the brightly lit streets and the plaza with the gloomy park behind him, he headed up the wide, unlit stairs and pulled the knocker.

It took some time until the door was answered. It took even more time until his opposite said something.

Subaru hadn't counted on the master of the house answering the door in person. He also hadn't counted on the temperament of Clamp campus' headmaster. "Sumeragi-san! Where have you been? Kamui-kun's worried sick about you. You ought to call him immed--"

"Imonoyama-san." Subaru shook his head. He stepped closer to the other man, until Imonoyama retreated a little, allowing Subaru to slip inside. "It is better if I'm not here."

"But Kamui--"

Subaru sighed and finally looked the other straight in the eye, waiting, then watching the realization dawning in the other one's face. "I'm no longer a Dragon of Heaven, Imonoyama-san," he said calmly. "I cannot stand by his side any longer. It will be better if he doesn't know about me."

"Your eye..." A trembling hand came up briefly as if to touch, but Imonoyama let it fall back to his side. "I see..." he said slowly. "Yes." His expression changed slightly, became hesitant, wary. "So... what do you want then?"

Subaru blinked, taken aback at the chairman's unexpectedly fast acceptance of the changed situation. He had expected to argue, to-- No. That wasn't necessary now. "I need to find information about a rather distant era of Japan's history. My... new position caused some... questions I don't want to leave unanswered as they may affect... the balance of powers involved in the battle. I don't think I have the time left to inquire in Kyoto." He waited.

Imonoyama nodded, slowly. "I see."

...if we ignore the hearsay of the prince's intentions given in Nijiren's letter and look closely at the described actions of the involved persons, it can be theorized with equal validity that Prince Shotoku, while working hard to appease the offended nobles in the name of the irate Emperor, ordered said Emperor's death by the hand of one of his minions to minimize the risk of being confronted with the Emperor's wrath himself in the future.

The prince then tried to place the blame on the rivalling Soga Clan, whose head, Soga no Umako - despised for his ongoing support of Chinese immigrants - was spinning intrigues to claim power at court, and possibly the throne Shotoku desired for himself. Various rumor spread that the dead Emperor's body was hidden on the grounds of the Soga.

The plan failed in one respect: Sushun's body wasn't found and the accusations against the Soga never solidified. In the end the blame was put on the hapless courtier Atai Goma, who lacked sufficient resources and allies at court to avoid execution as a scape goat. Sushun, however, remains

the only emperor in Japanese history without a known grave.

The ensuing shuffle of power ended with Soga no Umako putting his niece Suiko, a daughter of Emperor Kimmei, onto the Chrysanthemum throne as the first female ruler. Shotoku and Soga both had considerable influence on the events during Empress Suiko's prosperous reign of thirty-five years, in which great achievements and influences from China were established throughout the realm.

It is said that even Empress Suiko herself was often accompanied by a soft-spoken Chinese master of the arts who never ventured far from her side.

This alternate hypothesis of the death of Emperor Sushun also accounts for the description of Atai Goma as "subservient to the Emperor" in the Yamato letter fragment #42 - a character reference which has previously been discounted as untrustworthy, for no other reason than that it contradicts the account of events given in Nijiren's letter.

The microfiche also held a handwritten teacher's note next to the last line:

*"Controversial yet brilliant challenge of the content and facts given in Nijiren's letter. Mark: A"*

He scrolled the microfiche back and looked at the data:

Clamp Middle School, homework assignment: An Essay about a Japanese emperor of choice and a sketch of his grave.  
Title: "The History of Emperor Sushun" by Sakurazuka Seishiro, 1981.

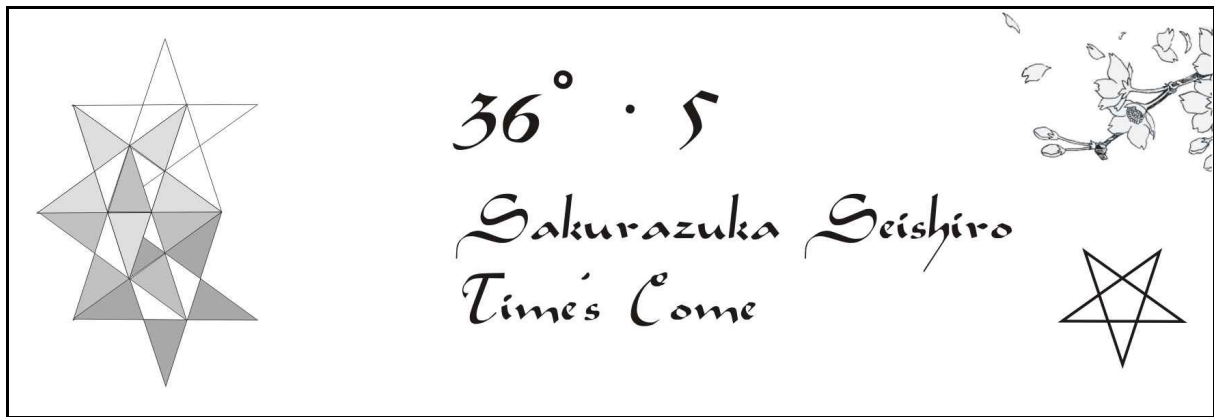
Subaru's hand trembled.

He crossed the plaza in atypically swift strides. Imonoyama had offered him a bed for the night, but he had politely declined. He needed sleep, needed rest. But he had made do with a minimum of sleep for most of his life. At the edge of the park at the campus' center, he looked back. A gust of wind caught his coat, batted it against his legs. The scars on his hands warmed briefly, triggered by the enormous spiritual energy the campus had collected over the years. The energy was enough to keep the plants green even in mid-winter<sup>13</sup>.

A curtain on the first floor of the mansion he'd just left fluttered in the wind. A tall shadow retreated into the darkness beyond.

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13 Clamp Campus is said to be climatized in Clamp Campus Detectives. Partial climatization of parks with heating pipelines has been achieved in the past. I picture the central park of the campus as being something similar, hence the trees we see in X-18 are green while snowflakes are falling.



*~36° F is the temperature at which trees survive in absolute darkness<sup>14</sup>~*

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
1981 January

He put his bag down next to the door and looked around. The room was on the first floor, overlooking the street. Not bad, and first floor wouldn't be a problem. Getting a single boarding room at Clamp Academy from one day to the next had been a challenge, but it was remarkable what impact a 'guardian' with a 1-Chiyoda address<sup>15</sup> had in that regard. Seishiro smiled wryly and continued his inspection of the room.

Pale yellow walls, white frames, yet the door was made of dark wood. The wall behind it was the only space in the room left free for a picture or poster. An assortment of old sticky tape and pins suggested that whoever had occupied the place before him had used the space for exactly that. Seishiro shrugged. He had nothing to hang up right now.

A small wardrobe and a nightstand took up the right wall. A functional reading lamp was screwed to the wall above the head of the bed. The bed itself stood under the window, its length stretching from one wall to the next. A greyish blue wool carpet lay in front of it. The remaining free space on the left wall was filled with a desk holding the – at Clamp Academy apparently inescapable – computer system and a plain set of writing utensils. A dustbin stood underneath the desk. A double-bookshelf took up the wall above it.

The corner left of the door was claimed by a plain but lockable cupboard. Seishiro ran his hand along its side and over the shelves inside. Yes, with a few spells this would suffice. Something to shield, something to hide, and something to divert attention away from it. He was tempted to tap into the oddly familiar spiritual energy accumulated by the campus, but decided against it. He didn't fully understand yet where it came from and who was behind it. As long as he didn't know, it was better to lie low and observe, and therefore anything too clearly his own brand of magic was off-limits inside this room for the time being. He would look into that later.

A knock on the door interrupted his inspection. The technician showed him a government ID, actually bowed to him, and proceeded to install the secured phone line. Five minutes later, the man made a call, gave a codeword, hung up and left. The phone rang immediately afterwards. Seishiro answered. Connection established. He wondered briefly what the 'guardian' had told the school about the necessity for a separate line, but then he just shrugged. There were more pressing issues now. The emperor essay was due this afternoon and he had still to complete what the tree had... written?

The memory of blossoms and wood, sap and blood on his tongue invaded his mind. An unwelcome thrill tensed his spine. Annoyed, he forced the frisson from his thoughts. No! The essay. Now. Everything else later!

He'd skimmed through the spidery scrawlings on the page sticky from tree sap on the train back to the campus this morning. And it had read well. The Tree's version of what Nijiren had written in his letter made a lot more sense than the letter itself. But he had to come up with some sources for the claims in the Tree's scribbles, or the teacher would toss him out for writing fiction instead of facts.

<sup>14</sup> Actually, 36° F is the temperature at which *bonsai* trees are proven to survive in absolute darkness.

<sup>15</sup> **1-Chiyoda:** Chiyoda-ku is the center of Tokyo. Chiyoda-cho as part of Chiyoda-ku holds the Imperial Palace (kokyo), the Imperial Household Agency, and the Imperial Guard HQ (and not much else according to my city map). Interesting detail: the south-west moat of the palace grounds is the "Sakurada".

The Imonoyama Research Library – named after its donor, of course – was a wide, screamingly modern one-storey building in one of the side streets away from the central plaza and the rumbling tram lines. Somehow, it had even escaped the omnipresent arcs, if one ignored its oval shape. The inside held a small selection of teacher studies, a group workroom, a small cafeteria and the huge research area taking up most of the ground floor and all of the top floor. Instead of the endless rows of books and magazines Seishiro expected to find in a library, he was confronted with spacious, light-grey computer desks, each holding a small screen and a keyboard. The latter was connected to the side of the desk with a spiralling cable.

With a fatalistic shrug he put his bag next to an empty booth and slipped into the chair. After searching for a moment, he found a button labelled [ON]. The screen lit up. A cryptic sign blinked in the upper left corner: "C:\>". Seishiro blinked, too.

A "How To..."-list was printed on the desk pad. He read it attentively and finally started to type.

*BEEP*

```
C:\>INVALID SEARCH REQUEST: SYNTAX ERROR. PLEASE SPECIFY REQUEST.
```

He tried it again, entered slowly the information he wanted to extract from the electronic data archive, one finger hovering over the keyboard till he had found the letter he needed next, only tapping it after he had checked it twice.

So far, the IRL's computer system was not being cooperative.

*BEEP*

```
C:\>INVALID...
```

Seishiro winced. The fact that the library hall was also dead silent didn't help either.

*BEEP*

```
C:\>INVALID...
```

"May I help you?" A friendly voice said next to him. Looking up, he found Imonoyama standing at the edge of the terminal. "You seem to have problems with the search routine."

"It doesn't do what it should," Seishiro grumbled, frustrated. "I'd go to the museum and look it up myself, but the essay is due this afternoon. I won't make it to Ueno and back in time."

"I see," Imonoyama reached over and pulled the keyboard towards himself. "What are you looking for?" he asked. At Seishiro's suspicious glare he laughed faintly. "Don't worry, I won't snoop. I'm hopeless in history anyway."

```
C:\>RESOURCE: "JAPAN NATIONAL ARCHIVE"; SEARCHMODE: TITLE; QUERY:_
```

"So I can search directly for the title with this?"

"If you know the exact title, then yes. If you aren't sure, substitute missing syllables with asterisks." Nokoru shrugged. "Or you can search inside the documents themselves."

Seishiro stopped. "You mean... like looking for a name mentioned?"

"Sure. Who are you looking for?"

"Atai Goma. He lived sometime around 590."

"Guess, we won't find an employee file for him, then," Nokoru grinned. His fingers flew across the keyboard, typing.

```
C:\>RESOURCE: "JAPAN NATIONAL ARCHIVE"+"NATIONAL MUSEUM"; SEARCHMODE:
TEXTBODY; QUERY: "Atai Goma"+TIMEREFERENCE: pre-1000
```

He hit [Enter] with verve.

No beep. No error message. A line of dots crept slowly from left to right across the screen. "It's going to take a while now," Nokoru told him. "He's searching."

"He?"

"The computer." Nokoru looked calmly at Seishiro for a moment. "You don't know much about computers, do you?"

"I'm here for the first time. The things haven't been too friendly so far."

"So you're a newbie, Sakurazuka-kun." Nokoru laughed and finally pulled a chair over to sit

down. "Let's see if we can remedy that."

One-and-a-half hours later, Seishiro knew at least the most basic set of commands and had a vague idea of how they had to be arranged to actually get the machine to do something. Though right now, he didn't care too much about that. He was busy copying the information he'd pulled up on the screen into his notebook and writing a more complete, 'fact-based' version of the Tree's essay. It was late. He would have to hurry to get to the lecture in time and his hurried handwriting was probably only slightly more readable than the Sakura's, but at least it wasn't mostly written in ancient Chinese characters. What finally found its way into his homework book probably wasn't the best analysis he'd ever done, but he hoped it would suffice.

As expected, the lecture had already started when he arrived. He knocked faintly, bowed his apology for being late, and handed over the essay.

"You needn't have come today, Sakurazuka-kun." The teacher seemed astonished when accepting the notebook. "The school directory informed me about your mother's demise and that you just moved to boarding school this morning."

"My homework is due today, sensei." Seishiro was tense. He hadn't expected this. "I- didn't want to miss class."

The teacher looked at him thoughtfully. "You are very composed about it."

"Her death was to be expected, sensei," Seishiro said calmly and nodded his respect. "It didn't come as a surprise." He proceeded down the class aisle to his desk.

"His mother passed away just yesterday?"

"Then why is he—"

"It must be horrible to—"

Seishiro cursed inwardly. It seemed he had made a mistake in working today. People were strange. He just hoped they didn't get suspicious and—

"I'm sorry for your loss, Sakurazuka-kun," Imonoyama at the desk on the other side of the aisle from his own said calmly. "I didn't know when I kept you at the library."

"I had to complete my work, Imonoyama-kun. Without your help, I would have failed. There is nothing for which to apologize."

The other nodded slowly, but the sad expression stayed in his eyes. "I understand. I buried myself in work when my mother passed away." He hesitated a moment. "Call me Nokoru."

"Seishiro." He looked briefly at the other boy across the aisle. "Do you still want that help with history?"

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
1981 Spring

"...it is possible to construct a series of embedded pentagrams to form a larger pentagram as follows: if the central pentagram has center (0,0) and circumradius 1, then the subsequent pentagrams have radii  $r_n$ ..."

The door to the classroom opened and one of the school assistants slipped in, handing a note to the teacher who frowned at the interruption of his lecture in advanced geometry. He read it quickly, while the assistant waited.

Seishiro used the interruption to ponder the problem. According to his sketched calculations, the constructed larger pentagram had to be a pentacle<sup>16</sup>, actually, or—

"Sakurazuka-kun."

He looked up at the teacher's call.

"There's a lady waiting for you."

He made no attempt to hide his surprise. "For me?"

"Yes. A Mrs Jushinohara. She's in the front reception room. Go now, don't keep her waiting."

He closed his notebook and stood. "Yes, sensei." The lecture resumed behind him.

"...radii  $r_n$  equalling the golden ratio to the minus n and center coordinates of—"

The door closed on the teacher's words. Seishiro's steps echoed over the polished marble floor of the empty corridor.

The reception room was on the ground floor, on the right side, with a long row of arced

---

<sup>16</sup> A series of embedded pentagrams can be constructed to form a larger pentagram according to Williams 1979, p. 53. BTW Seishiro's sketched calculations are true: a series of embedded pentagrams form a pentacle!

windows allowing a nice view of the large trees lining the yard. The woman waiting for him was surrounded by an aura of dignity as she looked out onto the sun-sprinkled yard. He judged her to be in her late forties. Her classically done hair showed the first streaks of grey. She wore a prim European style costume. A leather purse stuck under her arm. There was a determined tension in her posture. She seemed to be... on a mission. A mission that somehow had brought her here, demanding to see him.

"Jushinohara-san?"

She started at his address and turned abruptly towards him, scrutinizing him, cautiously, for a long time. Seishiro allowed a frown to creep onto his face. He definitely hadn't met her before. So...? The tension seemed to flow out of her, leaving her looking older than before.

"No, you aren't," she said finally.

Seishiro was intrigued. "What am I not?"

"Your name's Sakurazuka?" she inquired as if acting on an afterthought.

"Yes. Sakurazuka Seishiro. You sent for me."

"Then I'm sorry to have taken your time, you aren't it."

"What am I not, Jushinohara-san?" he pressed, allowing his annoyance to lace his curiosity.

"You come here, I'm called out of my class, and all you tell me is that I'm not... what?! Don't you think I deserve an explanation for that?"

The woman looked wide-eyed at him, finally she laughed uneasily. "Yes, I think I owe you that much. Would you care for a walk outside?"

"Of course, Jushinohara-san." He offered her his arm in the same chivalrous manner he had seen Imonoyama use on occasion. "I'd be delighted."

She laughed faintly at the gesture, for a moment she appeared fifteen years younger. "You're a charmer, Sakurazuka-kun. You'll break your share of hearts soon enough, I'm sure."

They circled the house slowly. The far side of the schoolyard gave into one of the small parks that were scattered throughout the campus. Spring flowers were sprouting through the grass left and right of the path. The smaller parks weren't as strongly climatized as the central section, allowing for a more natural run of the seasons. Seishiro actually preferred them. Mrs Jushinohara walked calmly beside him, making the occasional comment about the unexpected beauty of the campus grounds here in the depths of Tokyo's industrial front line. Her pumps crunched rhythmically in the sand.

"I have to warn you, Sakurazuka-kun," she said in a quiet voice. "My story is gruesome and possibly hard to believe. I don't want to scare you. If it gets too much for you, you have to tell me, yes?"

He nodded solemnly.

She drew a deep breath. "My husband was killed almost three months ago."

"My condolences."

"Thank you. But it wasn't just that he was murdered. He was... slaughtered." Her voice trembled as she continued. "It was... as if his heart had been ripped from his chest and been carried away." She dug her slender hands into the folds of her suit jacket. "I found him. The blood... trailed out of the house and down the street and— The police investigated, but it led nowhere. They stopped answering my calls. The officers were taken off the case and then I was told to let it be."

"I am deeply sorry about your loss, Jushinohara-san, but how does that bring you to me?"

"I didn't let it be and I stumbled about an old legend of an executioner who kills people with magic. The Sakurazukamori."

Seishiro laughed faintly. "Surely, you don't believe that fairytale."

"I have every reason to believe it, Sakurazuka-kun," Mrs Jushinohara stated firmly. "My husband was killed in exactly the fashion described in the legend. The blood was trailed all across town and instead of hunting down the killer the police covers it up." She gave him a level look, her chin raised in calm defiance as she flipped open her purse. "I'm sure I even know who holds that... title nowadays!"

Seishiro tensed. He expected her to produce an weapon from the depths of her purse, but all she came up with was a handkerchief she used to dab her eyes.

"I'm sure it's a woman not quite my age." She folded the handkerchief daintily and put it back into her bag. "You see, I'm here because I tried to find information about the Sakurazuka and your name in the school registry was all that came up. You were of about the right age to be her son, so—" She laid a trembling hand onto his sleeve briefly. "I was sure you'd be related to— to that creature. But you're so tall and the woman my neighbors described was a small, typically Japanese beauty while you—" She stopped, blushing. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to offend you."

"Don't worry, you did nothing to offend me." He smiled amiably. The trees stood thick here.

Something flickered in their depths. The wavering of the maboroshi being woven around them was hidden by the sparks of spring sunshine between twigs sporting the first flush of green. "I do believe you."

"You do—?" She looked at him wide-eyed. Her eyes were beautiful, hazel with flecks of burgundy and brown. She was still looking at him when his hand pierced her heart.

"You were right, Jushinohara-san." Seishiro said gently as he called the cherry blossoms to transmit her essence to the Tree and divert the impending sakanagi. "I do break my share of hearts."

His expression darkened as he slowly released the maboroshi around him after her body was gone, keeping just an illusion of her walking slowly beside him back to the school house. He knew his mother had been careless, but this— He shook his head. He was going to have a talk with the Tree about this as soon as possible. If there were more traces, he had better take care of them before they came knocking at his door.

Apropos traces... he nodded his farewell to the illusion. Sitting down on the edge of the yard wall as if overwhelmed by disturbing news, he looked after it as it walked around the edge of the school house. His mind's eye traced it along the street and across the small place in front of the subway station. A gust of wind tousled its elegant short hair just as it reached the gates. Twenty-five meters on and to the right was the monorail station...

He dissipated the illusion among the people pushing and shoving around a newly arrived train.

He stood slowly. A slight headache throbbed behind his temples. He had better excuse himself for the day. Mrs Jushinohara's disturbing news about his recently deceased mother should suffice for that. Surely, they would understand that he just had to visit her grave after that. He felt the ghost of a smile tugging at the edge of his mouth. In a way, that was even the truth.

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
one-and-a-half hours later

A small branch shot out, curled around his right arm, encircling his wrist the moment the Tree's maboroshi flared up. Seishiro tried to disentangle himself, but the bark cut into his skin. A bunch of smaller twigs bound his left hand as well. Roots were reaching for his feet. The Tree was holding him tightly and it was deadly serious.

*...I hate to remind you, but I cannot forgo sustenance forever...*

"You got an extra snack right this afternoon," Seishiro pointed out calmly. There was some desperation in the Tree's actions that seemed all wrong – and dangerous – despite the casual wording.

*...only because of your mother's inconsiderateness... the Tree returned. ...and even Setsukachan didn't leave behind enough witnesses for me to ignore your tardiness over three months. You have duties as Sakurazukamori. Some of them involve keeping in touch with me...*

"I'm in the middle of entrance exams for high school," Seishiro protested. "If I miss the top five percent, I won't get a scholarship. Do you want to convince the organization to cover the school fees?"

*...there are the official funds...*

"I'm underage, Tree-san," Seishiro sighed. "I need an adult to sign. You may be a thousand—"

*...Two-thousand-six hundred-and-something...* the Sakura corrected.

"—but you can't walk into a bank and sign the check for the cashier." He held himself up, despite the tugging twigs and the painful pull of the branch around his arm. The Tree had caught him. He knew he couldn't free himself. He knew also that the Tree couldn't risk to dispose of him, as long as there was no other— Another twig rustled closer, this one cushioned with blossoms. The Sakura raised his chin as if to study his face closely.

*...you've lost weight...* it observed, apparently not too pleased with the discovery.

"Going with two hours of sleep every night does that to you," Seishiro snapped. "What did you expect? That it was going to be easy?"

*...That you stay in touch with me...* The Tree's branches shuddered, twigs curled closer, winding into his shirt, his pants. He tensed, hissed. Surprisingly, the Tree retracted the offending twig. *...you are only real to me when you're here, or when you're sending food...*

"But I didn't..." Seishiro's head was swirling. "I thought you'd call me when you needed me. There are some contracts, but the exams—" He stopped. "You mean... you don't see me at school?"

*...I feel... power... but not you...* Blossoms whispered against his neck, lay against his cheek.

Seishiro ignored them. An idea was forming, a concept... "White noise..." he whispered, concentrating. "All that power of ours in the campus..." He felt the death grip on his wrists and ankles



loosen as the Tree took the concept from his mind. "What if...?"

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
one-and-a-half hours later

Seishiro wove the maboroshi closely around himself before he left the monorail station on his way to the gates. It had grown rather late; evening was falling already and while the monorail station was still crowded with those commuting home for the night, the way into the campus was almost deserted by now. He leaned against the bannister of the bridge that connected the main gates with ring station One and tried to judge the height of the bridge.

The sun was hanging low in the west. The bridge threw a huge black shadow in the reddish evening light. He landed smoothly about two-and-a-half meters below on the bare strip of land that separated the transparent tube of the subway ring from the oily waters of the harbor basin and Tokyo Bay. Waves, stirred up by one of the great container ships heading to and from the Ariake docks, were lapping at the black, oil-slick covered stones.

Sea gulls were shrilling above. The iron smell of tang and oil, rotting shells and fish burned in his nose. The subway tube with its sealable station entrances kept more out of the inner campus than the occasional high tide caused by a typhoon.

He worked hard to keep the maboroshi hiding him perfectly. In the low-hanging sun he threw shadows impossible to miss on the red-tinged ground. He knew there were cameras out here. Cameras which were closely monitored. He would be in trouble if he was spotted out here. Whoever had planned and built the campus was a practitioner. The knowledge built into the structures was way too profound, the accumulated spiritual energy way too high for it to have been accidental.

Imonoyama had given his money, likely for the prospect of his son's safety, but the driving force behind this had to be somebody else. Somebody who *knew*. Somebody, Seishiro was sure, who wouldn't be too pleased to find the Sakurazukamori investigating the perimeter. And the school uniform wouldn't distract them.

So he searched his way across the barren stretch of land, avoiding the low patches of salt weeds that looked strangely orangey-green in the late sun, and tried not to slip on the slick stones, not to bend a twig in the wrong direction, not to make a sound—

It took him longer to reach his destination than he had thought it would. The sun had almost vanished completely and the subway trains in the tube to his left looked like burning caterpillars racing through the night. But the brightly lit stations on the ring were good landmarks by which to judge his position and the metropolis' light dome provided enough illumination for him to find his way in the dark.

He stopped when both stations appeared to be equally far away. He waited for the next, brightly lit train to rattle past before he crossed the last few meters towards the tube; slowly; warily.

He retrieved a card from his pocket. An unmarked black card, not an ofuda. He *thought* of writing a weak symbol on it, for a moment imagining it glowing in blood on the sleek surface. The *intention* should be enough. He was conducting a test here. He didn't want to cause a spiritual disturbance strong enough to raise the hackles on every ghost dog within Tokyo's spiritual barriers.

Magic trickled unpleasantly along his veins. A red glow, like a miscolored will-o'-the-wisp, wavered on the black surface of the card, and across his hand that held it. It flashed. He gasped. It hurt. Was that how the Tree had felt when he had accidentally drawn the pentacle on its roots?

He ground his teeth against the increasing pain. Pins-and-needles were racing along his arm, numbing it. With a determined move he touched the card against the tube wall—

Black, oily, chemically polluted harbor water closed over his head. He slashed and fought in the darkness. He coughed and gasped when his head finally broke the surface. Spitting out a mouthful of foul water he struggled to pull himself up onto the slippery stones framing the artificial island. For a moment, he just sat there in the dark - wet, cold, heaving, spitting, and generally trying to get fresh air into his protesting lungs.

He shivered. His uniform was ruined. The wet cloth stuck to his body, chafing his skin. The dirty water had irritated his throat and he couldn't stop coughing. His hair was plastered to his skull. Something slick stuck in it and he had likely swallowed enough industrial pollutants for his body to end up as toxic waste sometime in the future, but—

—he was laughing, laughing hard, almost choking on it as he fought to keep the noise down.

He had been right. Sumeragi. And probably Magami, but Sumeragi for sure.

The silent laughter increased, only interrupted by frantically suppressed coughing fits.

*Intention.* They had made a mistake. No, scratch that, they had screwed up. Royally!

Intention over physical fact. Spirit over Matter. – Pentacle.

One tip up. You get what you want.

Matter above Spirit. Physical fact over intention. – Pentagram.

One tip down. You get what you see.

*...You should get dry, Sei-chan...* the Tree commented in this thoughts. *...and stop risking your health. You aren't dispensable right now...* Hesitation, then. *...though it is interesting, that I can reach you at the moment despite your proximity to that place...*

*It might be due to the fact that right now, I'm sitting in front of a pentacle and have just attempted to touch that pentacle,* Seishiro stated, putting considerable effort into not giggling madly. *And if you don't mind, I'd like to return to my pentagram and get some dry pants, now.*

It was well past midnight by the time he finally got back to the boarding house. He'd had to cross the channel in the dark and walk around to appear at the entrance gate. He couldn't just appear on campus; the computer systems would register such an anomaly for sure. The gates had been closed already and he had had to call up security to be allowed in. At least, his soaked state had provided a suitable excuse for his late return. Japan Railways rejected passengers who would dirty the cars<sup>17</sup>.

To his surprise, the place was brightly lit and crowded with people. He drew his share of curious and disapproving glances as he slipped inside. "Sakurazuka-kun! There you are!" The house warden hurried towards him, assessing him. "Where have you been? How did you get into this distasteful condition?"

"I'm sorry for my tardiness, sensei. I had a little accident on the way back from my mother's grave and—"

"Are you feeling well? Are you sick?"

"No, sensei. Why—?" But the house warden had already disappeared from his side. Seishiro shrugged and made his way towards the stairs. The uniform was drying on him, and he wanted to get out of it and under a shower as soon as possible. Maybe some of his skin would remain intact then.

He spotted Nokoru sitting on the stairs, a fiercely scowling Takamura standing behind him to make sure nobody bumped into his One in this hubbub.

"What's up?" Seishiro asked him when he reached them.

"The refectory served bad food this afternoon." Nokoru pulled himself to his feet using the railing for support. "It was horrible. Over five hundred people are sick." He fell in step beside him.

"That's why all these people are here?"

"Yes, they're mostly parents and teachers." He shrugged. "And some investigators from the public health department. My father is currently down there giving a press conference." He sighed. "They still don't know what caused it."

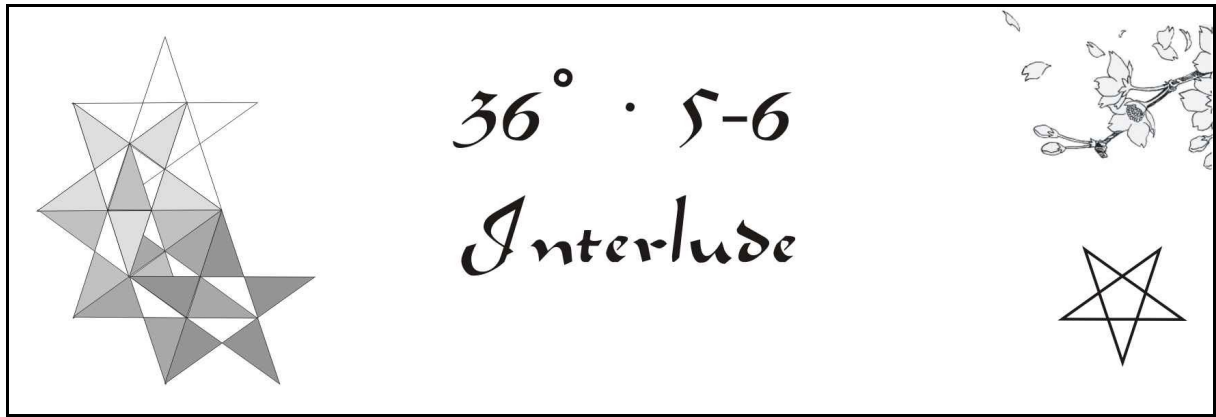
"I see..." Seishiro patted his pockets for his door key and drew a face when something slimy touched his hands before he could pull it out. "And why are you here? Did it hit you, too?"

"No, Suoh and I were eating at Akira's so we weren't affected. But I was worried about you. Did you know that somebody from the Ministry of the Interior asked about you? The staff weren't too happy when they couldn't find you."

Seishiro winced. He would have to find a different disposal for sakanagi around here. Apparently, the refectory wasn't crowded *enough*.

---

17 No idea about the "dirty passenger rule". It's just a suitable excuse that came to mind.



Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
Spring 1983

"...that you are the prey of the Sakurazukamori."

The small hands were incredibly soft to the touch of his lips. The face of the child in his arms was calm. Pearls of deep red blood flowed slowly across the white skin from the cuts towards the narrow wrists. Perfect pentagrams, one tip pointing along the arm towards the heart. He'd taken the pain of the cuts like a token to himself. The scent of the blood filled his senses...

...Sei-chan...

The maboroshi wavered. Twigs were reaching for him. He blinked, confused, felt the presence of another practitioner coming closer. His hands involuntarily tensed around the small body in his arms.

...You have to—...

A whiff of magic supported the child under the flowering sakura... the real flowering sakura of springtime in Ueno, while he wrapped himself deep into the illusion of the tree.

"Obaa-chan..." the child called out.

The tree's branches curled around him, actually holding him back. ...*It's dangerous...*

"He's a child, Tree-san." Seishiro shrugged, leaning into the blossoms.

...*He will grow up...* The tree's branches moved, agitated. ...*and remember...* It pulled him protectively close. ...*What could you gain by it?...*

"Something... special."

Flowers brushed his cheeks. Rough bark underneath warned of darker, bloodier pleasures following the silky touch. His body shivered at the contact, conjuring the image of the bloodied, surprisingly soft hand of the boy trembling over his cheek, his lips... The blood had smelled sweet, tempting, promising a power to come... a power to rival his own one day...

Heat flashed along his spine as blossom-cushioned branches wound deeper into his clothes, speaking of a promise already kept, a power long awakened. Cloth gave way like creamy skin under a splinter of cherry wood... Sap oozed onto his skin...

Blossoms. Blood. Wood. Skin. Heat...

He turned into the touch, arched instinctively into the flowers, seeking, searching...

The twigs were suddenly still around him.

He moaned, distraught, at the lost caress, his body protesting the denied release.

A tuft of blossoms dabbed hesitatingly at his temples. ...*Sei-chan?...* the tree asked, cautiously, reluctantly, and... strangely sad.

*~Five times the pentagram has rotated by 36°~*

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Biomedical Institute  
Summer 1992

He extracted the key card from the reader and waited for the confirmation that the lock was sealed. The LEDs on the panel went from red to green, one by one. Airtight seal, room sterilization, environment controls, alarms. Satisfied, he slipped the card into his pocket and turned to leave. All five

sterile growth boxes had looked fine. Cell proliferation was as expected, the formation levels within acceptable boundaries. He'd intensified the protective spells as well as the adaptive magic. It would still take years...

The midday sun fell hot on his shoulders as he left the building, his jacket over his arm. Gulls shrieked above his head, sailing on the sea breeze that kept temperatures at a bearable level on the campus. He turned his face to the wind and, giving in to the moment, sauntered down to the south bulwark. He was glad he still had his keys. Clamp Academy did care about its alumni and their careers... at least those careers they knew about.

The other...

Seishiro lit up a cigarette after he left the subway station and walked down towards the harbor. The summer wind blew up his white shirt. He leaned against the railing of the south bulwark, looking across the harbor at the partially occupied Ariake docks. New and old ships, shining white ones and rusty pots. Sea birds landed on the sun-sprinkled water batting against the stones a meter beneath his feet. He inhaled the hot smoke. For once, his fingertips didn't smell of sakura and blood but of disinfectant and sterilox.

He was outside the campus grounds down here. The Sakura's presence whispered in the back of his mind, causing Hokuto's spell to trickle along his spine, reminding him how upset the tree had been about that, about a Sumeragi spell on him, about... the sacrifice itself.

He wondered if the Sumeragi fully understood what Subaru's magically illiterate sister had done in order to rouse her brother from his self-chosen death bed. For a protection to work you needed strong magic. The strongest magic out there, strong enough even for the illiterate to use, was death... more precisely the life within death, the blood. But she couldn't spill the blood herself. For her magic to work she had needed to be pure. The only one who remained pure in blood magic was the sacrifice.

She couldn't have someone unconnected spill the blood for her, because the magic would still have recognized her as the instigator.

So she had asked the victim to spill the blood for her.

From her. For her to cast her spell.

On him. For her brother.

Fueled by...

...him.

He had accommodated her.

He drew at his cigarette again. What did that say about him?

*~Three pentagrams and two pentacles form the first figure~*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
Autumn 1999

Seishiro shrugged into his black trench coat, then stopped and threw a last look around the house. Windows closed. Blinds down. Stove out. Good. The kitchen was cleared of perishable foods. He opened the cupboard holding his mug collection, took one out, and filled it at the faucet. Leaning with his back against the work table, he cast a long, contemplative glance at the penguin calendar as he drunk slowly.

The pentacle. October 29. Time to go.

He emptied the remaining water into the sink and placed the mug upside down to dry. He closed the entrance door and locked it carefully behind him. Habit, mostly. On his way out the gate he gave the rusty wall ornament next to it a rough spin with his hand. The creaking of its unsteady rotation followed him down the alley.

Crossing the street diagonally, his open coat fluttering in the wind, he headed towards Ueno Park. He kept his face down. The morning sun was blinding despite his sunglasses. He hadn't intended to see the tree today, but with the Yamanote line gone, it was the direct way down to the harbor and his destination. 'Kamui's impact on the public transport system was a nuisance sometimes. As expected, the Sakura was waiting.

*...The day has come...*

"Yes."

*...Are you sure?...*

Seishiro shrugged. Branches, cushioned with blossoms, reached out for him. He stepped into them, enjoyed their soft, almost tender embrace as he allowed his companion of many years to hold him tightly. The Sakura didn't draw blood this time. The tree knew that he was going to need every

ounce of magical strength he possessed. Seishiro closed his eyes at the caress as he gave in to the moment. For a moment.

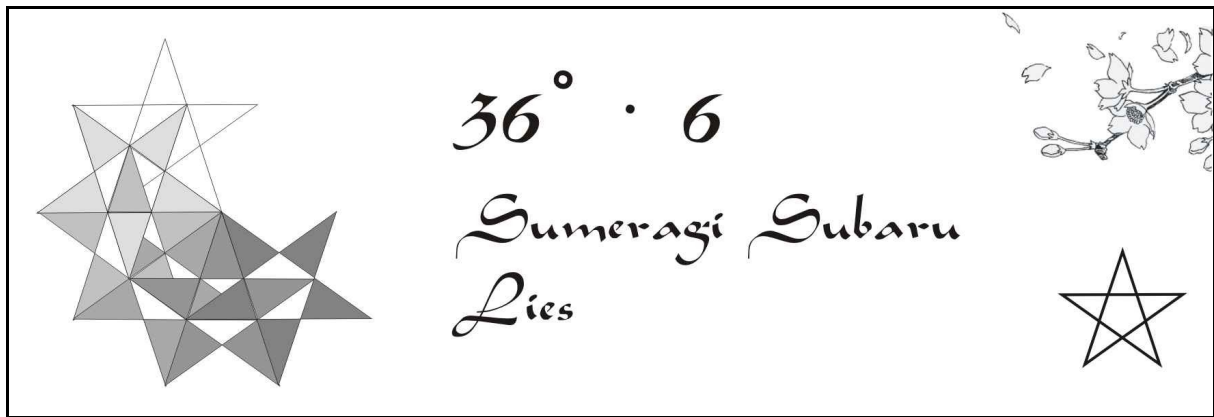
"Ueno-Sakuragi-cho is still inhabited, as are parts of Ueno and Taito. The bench should sustain you for a while."

The tree's touch intensified briefly.

"I have to go. Tokyo's so much larger with the public transport system down." He almost purred when a blossom tuft brushed along his cheek.

*...Take care...*

"You too." Seishiro laughed faintly as he walked away, towards the Rainbow Bridge.



*~36° is what separates the pentagram from the pentacle~*

Odaiba, Tokyo,  
December 27, 1999

Midnight had passed by the time Subaru left the campus through the northwest entrance at Station Two. Low-hanging, strangely solid clouds reflected the lights of the city and the campus behind him. Parts of the harbor were still in use, the Ariake docks a brightly shining line to his left. The Metropolitan Expressway he followed now was also still lit, though not all of the street lights were working. The smaller side streets were dark, gaping mouths. Most of the houses were untouched, but showed hints of disuse. Closed shops and office buildings, their neon signs dark and sometimes splintered, lined the street.

The municipality was running several initiatives to revitalize the area, though given the current situation it was questionable at best if they would ever be finished. Construction sites were scattered between the industrial buildings, but with the partial evacuation, they had been closed down. Fragile-seeming steel cranes reached for the clouds behind their hoardings. An occasional truck rumbled along the broad street, reminders of the fact that Japan couldn't forgo the capacities of Tokyo's harbor and docks just because of some earthquakes and a partially evacuated city around them.

The light was unsteady. The unlit gap of a construction site on his right had him wander through almost-darkness whenever one of the street lamps was broken.

A hawk's lonely cry shrilled through the night. The silhouette of the sleek raptor was briefly visible against the pale ghost of a waning moon among the clouds. Another cry. Wild. Angry. The bird swooped down into the darkness ahead.

A scream. Hollow. Human...

Subaru shuddered, tugged up his collar and headed on.

He saw the bird behind the next corner under a streetlight, strong wings flapping for balance. Was it really a hawk? An eagle? Something else entirely?<sup>18</sup> It was perched on a man's head, claws sunk deeply into the slack skin of the throat. Its strong, hooked beak came down onto the man's face. Blood soaked the green cloth of a rough shirt. Brown-clad legs with heavy boots twitched slightly.

Another cry. The animal focused on Subaru with golden, unperturbed avian eyes before it hacked at the man's face again. When it looked up again, a human eye was dangling from the strong beak on its optic nerve. The man's legs shuddered. Subaru hoped it was because the raptor's claws had pierced the spinal cord and not because...

The incantation came naturally to him as he raised the ofuda. He couldn't just stand and look, he—

The beating of strong wings interrupted him. The bird swung itself into the air. Its piercing cry mocked Subaru from afar when he knelt to check on the victim. A look into the destroyed face and two fingertips on the side of the bloodied throat searching in vain for a pulse told him that there was nothing left to be done for the man. His spirit was gone; only an empty shell remained.

<sup>18</sup> Actually, Subaru saw Seishiro's shikigami when they first met each other in 1999 in X-8 p 66 (Nakano). But since he isn't an ornithologist, he might be excused for not recognizing the animal instantaneously. It is also not quite clear to which species Seishiro's shikigami belongs: hawk or eagle. I decided on hawk for mostly two reasons. Number one: a hawk has a more reasonable size for sitting on Seishiro's shoulder than an eagle, and number two: a hawk is a less suspicious animal to be spotted in a metropolis like Tokyo than is an eagle.

Subaru straightened. The hawk's lonely call followed him through the night.

A pontoon bridge, put up by the military, ran from the south end of Odaiba Park to the Shinagawa pier. It replaced the Rainbow Bridge, which was now a pile of rubble blocking the main canal of Tokyo harbor. A pile of rubble... a grave.

Subaru stood still, unable to move, staring at the strip of torn concrete across the water. The sea had forced its way over it in some places, in others... One of the pillars, its left forking crumbled, the other one still tall, rose like a memorial out of it. Another unmarked grave.

Seishiro's grave.

Subaru shook. Seishiro had... been killed by his hand. Seishiro's blood had flowed along his pulse. But... he hadn't been the predator, he... Seishiro...

He stared transfixed at the white broken fork of the still standing pillar. An unknown grave... like Emperor Sushun's.

Sushun's grave was the Sakura.

Had everything buried under the Sakura been the Sakurazukamori's prey?

Subaru shivered at the memory of a body pulsing around his arm.

The first Sumeragi chronicle said that the Soga clan had opposed prince Shotoku and ordered the Emperor's death. But the essay he'd found in the Campus' archives said that Shotoku himself had ordered the Emperor's death...

What was lie, what truth?

*"Whatever prediction comes to your mind shall come to pass."* Deadly cold crept along Subaru's spine, wound itself into his soul at the line from his recent nightmare. The prince's predictions had been awfully precise... *"The onmyodo won't allow anything else."*

Why should it not? If the Sakurazukamori hadn't killed the Emperor, then who...?

The furious screech of a hawk in the dark stirred him out of his stupor. He wrapped his coat tightly around himself, seeking a warmth he hadn't known he still cared about, as he hurried on towards the pontoon bridge and the city beyond, seeking answers he hadn't known were still important to him.

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
December 27, 1999

He reached the tree together with the very first beams of morning light. It was cold. He had pulled up the coat's collar. His gloved hands were stuffed deeply into his pockets. The thick cloth of the dark coat was much warmer than his old one had been and he found himself thankful for it. Ice crystals glittered on the dark bark and the wood of the bench between the gnarled roots. The frost gave an ethereal beauty to this place of death.

Shaking a cigarette from the packet, Subaru sat down with his back to the tree and lit it. The white fog of his breath mixed with the bluish smoke of his cigarette.

*...That's not good for you...*

Subaru shrugged, "So I've been told." He inhaled again. The familiar timbre of the voice hurt, but he'd come to expect the Sakura's mind games.

*...I can still kill whoever sits on this bench...*

"You didn't." Another nicotine-loaded drag. He wouldn't be lured. His hand holding the cigarette was cold within the leather.

The tree's branches quivered. *...So, are you less of a murderer because you are Sumeragi?...*

"No." Another draw on the cigarette. Slow. Deep. "I'm not a murderer because I didn't kill anyone."

*...So you are innocent?...*

Subaru snipped the cigarette butt onto the frozen path and straightened, finally turning to look at the tree behind him. "I am guilty of not preventing that man's death. I am guilty of not having been aware that I was your bait for him." He drew in a deep breath of cold, crisp air. "That doesn't make me a murderer, it makes me... ignorant."

*...Ignorant. Yes...* An imaginary wind moved the branches, had countless blossoms whisper in the dark. Figures formed in the shadows under the tree. A familiar scene. He had seen it countless times, in his dreams, in his nightmares... of him, of his so much younger, so much more innocent self, lying in Seishiro's arms, bleeding. The sigils shone under the blood welling from their cuts. Yet he lay calm as if asleep in the teenage Sakurazukamori's arms.

Subaru watched, transfixed. Wood scratched over the leather of his boots, the cloth of his pants. A hawk screamed.

The youth's embrace was strong... protective even as he raised chubby hands covered in blood to his face. Seishiro was smelling, tasting... The golden pins on his school uniform glowed in the twilight under the tree.

The scars on his hands prickled. Bark scratched across them. Twigs quivered over his wrists. He couldn't bring himself to move. Something touched his throat, curled...

Subaru choked, wood pressing against his larynx.

The silence broke under the batting of wings. The hawk screamed again, tearing through the maboroshi. The picture of the past splintered, broke, rained in giant, sharp shards onto the ground of the tree's realm. A large splinter falling towards Subaru showed a fragment of the young Seishiro, the golden pins still glowing on his collar. Involuntarily, Subaru reached out for him, and hissed as the illusion's shard cut his palm. Thick red drops fell to the ground. A thin root of the tree curled up, greedily catching them. The hawk's angry cry reverberated in the dark.

Roots and twigs retreated hastily. Subaru, claspng his aching throat with his bleeding hand, staggered back, away from the tree. The animal hovered above him in the maboroshi. The wind of its beating wings brushed his cheeks and shook the Sakura. Golden eyes glared.

His eyes widened. He'd seen that bird before, doing something very similar...

Watchful golden eyes pierced him; the bird of prey screeched its victory. Strong wings whapped the air. Illusion shards were blown off the dark ground at his feet. The Sakura whispered in the background, but like in the dreams that had troubled his nights nine years ago, wind drowned out the words. The hawk swept past him, spiritual feathers brushed along his face, smearing the blood across his cheek...

He found himself on the empty ground in front of the bench under a barren tree. The terrifying beauty of the Sakura was gone, as was the ...shikigami? The blood on his hand had congealed. He shivered. It had been close. The Sakura... had been serious, had tried to consume him.

*"I've dreamed that the Sakura blossoms were taking you away."* His grandmother's warning of long ago reverberated in his mind. It seemed he still was prone to—

He blinked. The park around him was strangely surreal, as if it, too, was an illusion. Frost glittered under a dusty midday sun. A layer of clouds lay over the city below. Wafts of mist wavered through the streets. The upper stories of the tall buildings downtown stood like islands in the endless billowing sea of silver white.

The fog.

It was cold. It was wet. It wandered in tendrils across his worn boots, swallowing the sound of his steps as well as the stains of earth and dirt. Trees formed out of the fog. A slightly tilted wall of large grey stones appeared. Subaru's steps slowed. This was the Hirakawa-mon, the north gate of...

...the Imperial East Garden, the Higashi Gyoen. He'd lost his way in the clouds. He'd come too far west. He...

Startled, he realized that he'd followed the lines of power. Down from Ueno to the... Imperial grounds? A connection between the Sakura and...?! No. Impossible! Yet...

He shivered, felt suddenly cold as he remembered. He'd followed that line before. Sixteen years ago when he'd been nine, on the evening after his initiation, he'd been called by the Sakura from...

...the East Garden of the Imperial Palace, where Obaa-chan had left him to wait while she... reinforced the spells of the campus. Back then, she'd spoken of an appointment at the Ministry, but today he was sure she'd been at the campus instead. What ministry would still be open that late?

The Sakura had called him and he had come. He shook his head. No...

The pull of the Sakura was still there. He knew it well enough to recognize it without a doubt. No, he had followed... something... someone else back then. Someone who was no longer up in Ueno, no longer on Ear—

Someone whose power now whispered along the line coming up from the other end. The other end...

The picture formed in front of his mind's eye. The campus.

His speed increased.

The campus protected the shinken until the final day. The campus was meant to preserve the balance till the very end, the final decision.

The Sakurazukamori had meddled with it. Seishiro had been there. He shouldn't have been able to be there. Not even as a student sixteen years ago. He should have realized that the moment he'd found out who wrote that essay. He—

The essay was the proof and his mind had been too numbed to realize it. He should have



seen it whenever he dreamed about the bet, about the golden pins on Seishiro's uniform collar, about that whisper of power...

That whisper of power that had led to the sigils of his opponent being engraved on his own hands.

That whisper of power that he couldn't ban from his soul.

The campus. The balance. What had Seishiro done there?

What?

Subaru ran.

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
December 27, 1999

It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours that he was standing on this doorstep. The second time that he faced the chairman of Clamp campus in private. He knew the man had no reason to support him any longer, that they were technically enemies now... but despite this he was quickly losing patience with the fact that he was getting no answers to his questions. What Imonoyama might not appreciate fully was that he *needed* answers and, for once, didn't care about being considerate. He couldn't take that risk.

"Imonoyama-san. I know that Sakurazuka Seishiro was a student at Clamp Academy!"

"Clamp Academy has been a renowned institution for many years. It is not surprising that an old family like the Sakurazuka—"

"I remember the emblems he wore on his uniform sixteen years ago! The pin wasn't the crossed Z of Clamp Academy."

The chairman arched a brow at the statement. "If he didn't wear the school insignia, what makes you think—"

"I found his essay about Sushun in your archive!" Subaru snapped. "But the pin on his collar looked like— like a Greek pillar." At Imonoyama's blank stare, he forced himself to calm down a little before he tried again. "Like the Latin character 'I'. Do you know that?"

Imonoyama sighed and nodded slowly. "Yes. It's a symbol for a rather exclusive scholarship my family finances for the top five percent of Clamp's students no matter what form they are in."

"You mean?"

"It's the symbol of the Imonoyama-scholars. They wear it instead of the school pin. My father chose the Latin 'I' because our family logo would have looked too much like branding and he kind of liked the double-meaning of 'I' for 'Imonoyama' and 'I' for being the Number One."

"These scholars... you do know what they did here, right?"

A muscle twitched in Imonoyama's cheek, but he remained silent.

"What was Sakurazuka Seishiro doing in this institution?" Subaru's voice trembled and he broke off, tried to explain. "He shouldn't have been able to touch these grounds." He held the chairman's eyes. "What did he do here, Imonoyama-san?"

"I can't possibly give you insight into our institute's proceedings, Sumeragi-san," Imonoyama protested firmly. "I'm sure you understand that."

"Imonoyama-san." Subaru startled himself with the sudden decisive cold in his voice. "I thought I made it clear the last time I was here that I have no time left to spare." He raised his hand. The ofuda gleamed threateningly white between his black-clad fingers. "You might want to recall that I *can* use the spiritual energy the campus collects."

The chairman paled, but stood his ground. His eyes kept flitting back and forth between Subaru's face and the ofuda. Then something inside him seemed to falter. "It might be easiest if you just follow me upstairs, Sumeragi-san." Without waiting for a reply, he indicated the door and walked ahead into the depths of the house.

A wide, sweeping flight of stairs led to the first storey. The floor there was of a dark wood, polished to a gleam rivaling marble. The double doors at the end of the hallway were nailed with reddish brown leather, the typical noise protection of an expensive private library. Imonoyama opened the right hand door and stepped aside to let Subaru enter.

The door closed behind him. Subaru's boots scratched on the expensive wood of the floor as he turned around and stared at the closed door. Imonoyama hadn't entered with him. Something whispered in the dimly lit room behind him. Subaru's hand closed more tightly around the ofuda. Dark bookshelves filled with expensive leather tomes covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Heavy velvet

curtains shielded most of the windows. His feet sunk into a deep, blood-red and golden patterned Kirmani carpet<sup>19</sup>.

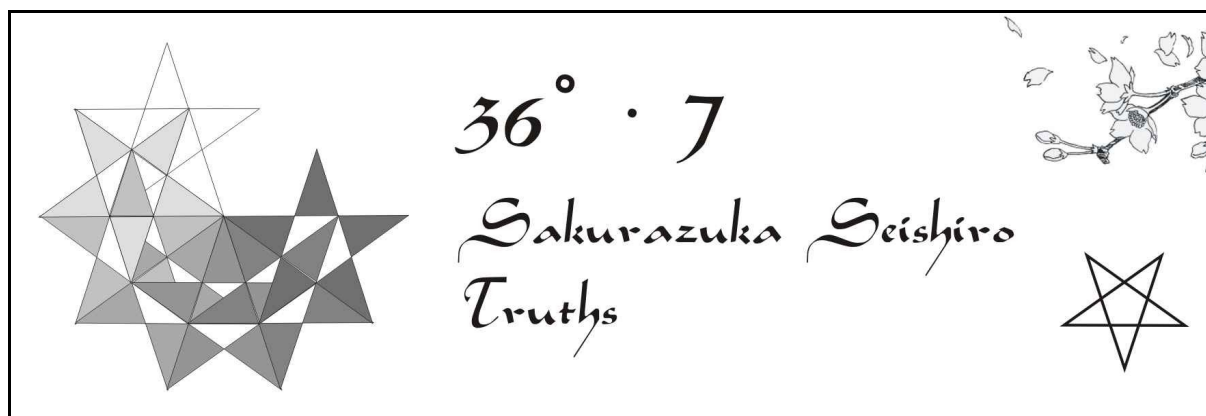
One of the curtain shawls was pulled back. The weak light of the winter sun framed a high-backed armchair with a small table next to it. A brass lamp with a cognac-colored glass screen stood on it, its light brighter than the pale afternoon outside.

The man occupying the armchair calmly put a reading mark onto the page. Long, unstained fingers closed the book and placed it on the table.

"Hello, Subaru-kun."

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<sup>19</sup> **Kirman carpet:** An Indian wool carpet with roughly 155,000 knots per square meter and a typical intricate pattern of a blood-red crest (called a "mirror") in the middle that is surrounded by very fine, intricate ornamental pattern of pale cream, gold, and red that from a distance looks like pale gold and reveals its pattern only under close observation.



*~36° is what separates the Sakurazuka from the Sumeragi~*

Rainbow Bridge, Tokyo,  
October 29, 1999 - 21:57

The sun was falling fast behind Tokyo's skyline. Its blood-colored beams passed nearly horizontally under a low, dark-grey cloud cover and glittered off the distinctive triangular shape of the white skyscraper beyond the yurikamome loop on the west end of the bridge. Faint thunder rolled in the distance. The gusts of wind, tugging at his coat and hair, grew stronger, blowing dust and dead leaves from the Odaiba park and the cannon battery islands around his feet.

Seishiro narrowed his eyes behind his dark glasses. The first blood had touched the bridge when the sun had touched the horizon, the beginning of nightfall. It wouldn't take long...

He snipped the cigarette over the railing into the churning sea below and attached the last blood mark, shielding it carefully. The tip of the pentacle glowed crimson in the eerie light. Seishiro allowed himself a wry smile as he turned the ofuda until one tip pointed down.

A second coat fluttered in the wind. Its wearer turned to protect the flame of a lighter from the gusts with his body. Subaru was a figure of contrasts these days: black clothes to go with the hair, a white coat to match the skin and the bandages still covering the recently blinded eye. 'Kamui' would pay for that. The tip of the cigarette glowed as he sucked the flame into the tobacco, firelight and smoke lining his face. He smoked with his right.

Fire on the Yang of the Yin<sup>20</sup>. Seishiro used his own right to catch the slender hand holding the lit cigarette from behind. Fire on the Yang of the Yin in the Yang. As expected, Subaru turned left, favoring his seeing eye. Seishiro's chest stopped the move. The unbandaged eye widened at the unexpected contact. Startlement. Shock. They served well as distractions. Seishiro smiled as his prey caught himself, directing his attention to the cigarette in their grasp.

"The ash is going to fall on your hand."

Calm words, but the pulse under Seishiro's fingers quickened. Yes, Subaru's calm was a deception, too. Albeit... a flawed one.

"And you're still kind enough to care. You haven't changed."

"I *have* changed..." Subaru twisted out of his hold, trying to free his hand. Defiance. Interesting. "You have changed me. Though you don't care about that at all."

Oh, he cared very much about that. In fact, right now he was counting on it. It just wouldn't do to let Subaru know that. His bloodied left hand unwound the cigarette from his opposite's suddenly limp fingers and brought it to his lips. He dragged on it, inhaled tobacco smoke, nicotine and the scent of spilled blood. The glowing tip flared. Fire and blood on the Yin of the Yang, nothing on its Yang. Nothing for the Yin.

"You just killed someone here, didn't you?"

He took his time with his answer, finishing the drag first, then taking the brightly lit cigarette from his lips with his right. Blood on the Yin. Fire on the Yang. Time to begin.

<sup>20</sup> Yin and Yang. Associations (list incomplete!) are

**Yang:** sun, day, light, warm, active, masculine, south, summer, left, extroversion, heaven, odd, up, forward, expansion, raise, fire, energy, movement, active

**Yin:** moon, night, dark, cold, rest, feminine, north, winter, right, introversion, earth, even, down, backward, contraction, fall, water, matter, inertia, passive

"Well, after all, I'm Sakurazukamori..."

As expected, Subaru was still naïve enough not to notice that his question hadn't been answered...

Debris rained all around them, fragments of ofuda, concrete from the shaken bridge. Magic flared— Dozens of doves<sup>21</sup> splattered on his spiritual shields, feathers and blood raining before the torn bodies turned back into the ofuda they'd sprung from and ended as scraps on the storm. He had to act now, or Subaru would notice... notice that he was holding back, reserving strength. He used his coat to cut through the next flock of shikigami as he raised the maboroshi. The fragments of paper and feathers slowly turned to petals, dancing like snowflakes between them, fluttering towards Subaru as Seishiro called in the previously prepared spells in the blood marks.

A whisk of touch as the Tree's presence passed, taking care of the Sakura illusion for him. The Tree's manifestation was a relief. The spells that had been in place when the kekkai was formed were working. Matter over spirit. Reality over intention. Two tips over one. The kekkai shielded the physical world by forming a duplicate in which the fight took place. He hadn't been sure it would duplicate the spells as well, hadn't been sure it would allow them to connect with the outside. Twigs shot forward, reached for, entangled...

*Remember, you have to let him go.*

*...I know...*

The second illusion formed in his mind. A mirror image of himself in a mirror. A mirror in a mirror giving a perfect image for all the five senses – and the spiritual. He felt it pulling at his resources, knew he had to act fast now, knew he wouldn't get away from it without being harmed...

He left his mirror image in his place on the edge of the burst upper deck where Subaru was held in the Tree's illusion. He couldn't go far, or he would lose control; couldn't wrap himself in a hiding illusion, either, because that would limit his resources even more. The shadow of the Odaiba tower of the bridge provided a decent view and would keep him out of sight. He looked back at the mirror of his mirror, at a dark coat flying, dishevelled hair, and congealed blood on his hand. Sufficient.

Blood touched the white ofuda in Subaru's hand, screamed along the strings of magic spanned unknown to the Sumeragi. Seishiro tensed. He wasn't the only one using his opposite's magic tonight. "Subaru-kun... Who'd have thought..." He quickened his pace. Behind him, sakura petals turned from pink-tinged white to green-touched black. The Tree's illusion was about to splinter. He ducked into the shadow of the pillar—

"No need to use such an illusion. I'm the captive of the Sakura anyway... ever since that day."

Dark glasses were removed from mismatched eyes in reply. "The Kamui of the Dragons of Earth said that your true wish is one only I can grant." The bandage around Subaru's eye came loose, its end battering on the wind. A hand reached out, caught the strip of white cloth, held it up to the face. For a brief moment, Subaru's scent filled Seishiro's nose... "but that it doesn't seem to be what I think it is." Subaru looked at him when the bandage fell from his blinded eye. The physical connection severed, the spiritual one—

Seishiro felt Hokuto's spell tickling along his spine, running searingly hot across his abdomen and up to his chest. It was as if the magic knew it was going to serve its purpose.

"So your wish isn't to kill me?"

"No!"

Interesting.

Unfortunately, it was a tad late to alter the plan now. Subaru would have to deal with it.

Subaru raised his spiritual shield again. White ofuda glared in the light of the thunderbolts. Seishiro answered with his own while he called on the black ofuda holding the blood marks, each of them carrying the pentacle as a pentagram. Intention over reality. Matter over spirit. Spiritual energy coming from himself, his opposite, and the spell raced towards the mirror. The forces met. Blinding light flashed up. The bridge shook under an impact that was both real *and* intended. Matter over spirit. Spirit over matter. If he had calculated wrongly— If he had misjudged the nature of the spell—

He hadn't. Magic flared. The spell, channelled through the ofuda, triggered on the mirror. Subaru's hand pierced his twice reflected body. Pain tore through his chest. He gagged at the blood in his lungs, struggled. The kekkai was crumbling, dissolving, leaving an untouched building and a touched soul in its wake. A mirror in a mirror. He knew precisely how a body pulsed around an arm through the chest, the scent of blood, the texture of the still living flesh...

Hold it. No matter what, hold it. He felt the dissipating whispers along the connection he didn't

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21 Subaru's shikigami is no less controversial than Seishiro's. In Clamp no kiseki #3 Clamp themselves say that Subaru's shikigami is supposed to be a white crow. However, the birds he directs in Tokyo Babylon and later in X look decidedly like slender doves. A crow is a distinctly strong creature, who would give Seishiro a true "fight for his eye". Besides, who could resist the image of "Hawk and Dove"?

dare cut yet. The contact was too close, Subaru would feel, would know...

"Wh... why...?"

He had better come up with an explanation. He better... He couldn't risk having Subaru perform a seance later to get an answer...

"Your sister..." He felt Subaru's arms around his body, Subaru's breath in his hair. The illusion was close, so close, too close... He allowed the words to flow automatically, didn't have the strength left to direct the talk in addition to covering the senses, he...

"...I... you..."

Subaru remained still, clutching the illusion, blood on the concrete, tears, storm, dust, dissipating warmth... so many details to be kept in mind.

"You never said the words for me which I expected to hear... did you?"

He was dead! What else did he have to do for the Sumeragi to *finally* let go? Dark spots danced in front of his eyes. Blood was slowly filling his lungs. He couldn't keep it up much longer. He already needed the pillar at his side for support or he would have fallen for real. His breath sounded loud in his ears even over the howling wind.

Kamui. And the Ise girl. Two more pairs of eyes to deceive. Sadness. Pain. He released what magic had remained inside the double-edged ofuda. If the bridge shook enough...

"The bridge is falling!" Kamui. "SUBARU!"

The scream came barely before the rumble. The double decks fell. Steel cables were severed; released from tension they snapped upwards, lashed against the pillars that had previously held them. Seishiro looked up in time to see half of a pillar falling towards him—

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
October 30, 1999 - 00:36

Blood was falling in thick drops onto the street, scattering on the stones in loud, angry splats. He didn't have the resources to prevent trails any longer. Had there always been five high steps leading up to the door?

He cursed as he dragged himself on. His blood-covered hand fell on the doorbell. Steps approached on the other side of the thick wooden door. Dark livery flashed in front of him. Whatever was said, he ignored it, forced his way past the startled servant into the house.

He collapsed on the last few steps toward the elegant man who had stopped dead at the top of the wide flight of stairs, framed in the light emanating from the open door behind him. Someone hastened down the stairs. Running footfalls resounded on the marble. A hand caught his blood-soaked shoulder in the moment his bloodstained lips whispered the words he wasn't supposed to know, much less supposed to use for himself:

"Help me..."

"Sei—" Hands held him up, supporting. "Takeshi! Help me getting him upstairs!"

Darkness. His feet staggered up steps. A dark wooden floor followed. He was sat down. The soaked coat was cut off his body. Somebody hissed at the sight of his shoulder.

"—Akechi-sensei. Now!"

Running steps receded. A door closed. Someone was dabbing at his face, apparently trying to remove some of the dust glued to it by sweat and blood. Blond hair flashed through his vision. His hand clenched around Nokoru's wrist. He needed several attempts to get the words past the blood in his mouth. "They— must find... something... from me... or... h—he'd never believe me gone."

"That doesn't make sense, Sei."

"It does." Necessity gave him the strength to tell what shouldn't been told. "I'm... involved... foreordained..."

A gasp. "Dragon... *of Earth*?"

He coughed blood. "Not... any more, if... I can help it."

"I can't possibly leave you in a condition like this!"

He tightened his grip. "You... have to..." The words were coated in blood; the next hurt his tongue, and his pride. "*Please*... Can't go... myself... Biomed— Insti... One... to Rainbow Bridge..." He coughed again, ignored the blood dripping over his chin as he fumbled for the keycard in the depths of his pocket. He handed it over with shaking, blood-stained fingers. "Don't... be seen."

The other's hand closed around the blood-covered plastic card. "You will be here, when I

return," he demanded.

"I... don't intend... to... go..." Pain seared through his back when he slumped against the soaked upholstery of the chair. He didn't have strength left to care about that. The coughing intensified, as did the bleeding. Darkness came closer. Darkness and—

"Sei! Don't— Sensei!!"

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
November 1, 1999

Consciousness dawned slowly, crawling through the polluted fog of anaesthetics, antibiotics, and something he couldn't label. Rhythmical electronic beeping forced itself into the silence. Next was scent: disinfectant. Then...

Reality slowly took shape in the fog. He blinked across an expanse of pale yellow cotton cloth. An instrument table stood next to the bed, a portable life signs monitor – the source of the beeping – was put carelessly on the polished, dark red wood of a carved nightstand.

"Time hasn't been kind to you, my friend," Imonoyama Nokoru said quietly from an armchair next to the nightstand.

"It was... most of the time." Seishiro winced at the scent of blood still on his breath. He coughed. New blood.

Nokoru quietly offered his handkerchief to him. The yellow-and-green globefish logo was artfully embroidered into the visible corner of the pale yellow cloth. "I always seem to hand you a handkerchief for your bloodied lips." Nokoru settled back into his seat while Seishiro dabbed the blood from his chin. He made a dismissive gesture when Seishiro attempted to give it back. "My physician says you were lucky. The shoulder wound is serious but neither muscles nor ligaments were fully severed. It will take time but heal completely." Nokoru's eyes were fixed on the bloodied cloth. "There's bleeding in your left lung for which Akechi-sensei has no explanation, but it's already subsiding."

Seishiro had expected as much. Since the lung injury was a spiritual wound, the familiar energy stored unintentionally by the campus was helping with it. The shoulder was of greater concern. That was a real one, caused by the falling debris from the bridge, which shouldn't have fallen at all. He wondered if Subaru had lived. If not, his plans might be foiled and—

"Of all the Seals, only the Sumeragi has fought recently."

"Really?" Seishiro arched a brow at him. "Did he survive?"

"In a way..." The sad expression on the other one's face was a surprise. "Kamui said that he killed his opponent." Nokoru hesitated briefly, tapping his index finger against his lower lip, studying Seishiro calmly. "Somehow, I don't quite believe that now."

Seishiro shrugged. "Let's just say, that 'the report of my death was an exaggeration'<sup>22</sup>." He coughed violently. Fresh blood soaked into the silk.

"I guess there's more 'tale' than 'fairy' in that fairytale of your family you told me back then." Nokoru leaned back in his seat, crossing his legs seemingly relaxed. "Am I right?"

"Probably."

"You should consider a straight answer, Sei." Nokoru set his elbows onto the armrests and looked across his folded fingers at him in best business mannerism. "Because I'm not going to leave until I get one."

"If I say 'yes', you won't leave at all." Seishiro dropped the handkerchief onto the cover.

"Probably."

"Definitely." The blood glowed brightly on the embroidered cloth. The crimson would stain the silk forever. He caught the other's gaze and held it, waited for the finality of the statement to sink in. "I owed you a life," Seishiro said quietly when Nokoru averted his eyes. "You've just called that in."

~::~::~~

November 2, 1999

He woke atypically slowly, drowsily, his uninjured shoulder faintly aching. The injured one was

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<sup>22</sup> "The report of my death was an exaggeration." - There are various versions of Mark Twain's quote about. This is the original one from a handwritten slip of paper dating back to 1887.

still numb – the anaesthetics hadn't worn off yet. He found the slight pain to be the result of his right arm being stretched uncomfortably over the edge of the bed. A brief attempt at changing his position revealed a sleek, polished set of high-security handcuffs connecting his wrist solidly with the bed frame. Charming.

Turning his attention to his other side, he blinked – likely not very intelligently – at a black, white, and yellow something sitting next to his pillow. A penguin. A *fluffy plush penguin*. About twice the size of his hand.

"I remembered your affinity to the Penguin's mascot back then," Nokoru said from the door. "Didn't you name yours Darwin?"

Instead of answering, Seishiro quietly raised his right wrist as far as the cuffs allowed. "I guess Suoh knows."

"He noticed Akechi's visits and—" Nokoru actually looked embarrassed as he entered the room, balancing a tray. "Our last conversation wasn't very reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be." His faint incantation was followed by a distinct, metallic snap. Seishiro handed the cuffs over when Nokoru put the tray onto the bedside table. The life signs monitor had disappeared overnight. "Tell him I appreciate the gift, but I prefer Cartier's." He made a face as he pulled himself awkwardly up into a sitting position that didn't put too much strain on his bandaged – and he assumed, stitched – shoulder. A dull throb had begun to pulse underneath the wrappings. So much for anaesthetics.

"Akechi-sensei said that you lost your eye quite a while ago. Why didn't you have it replaced? You of all people know about the options the Biomedical Institute has."

"Lack of time, mostly," Seishiro croaked, his chest contracting painfully around the spiritual injury in his lung as he reached for the water glass on the tray Nokoru had brought. He squinted up at the standing man after taking a sip. "Do you mind sitting down? I get a stiff neck this way."

Nokoru watched him, cautiously claiming the armchair he had occupied the last time. "You said you wouldn't be a Dragon of Earth any more – if you could help it. Would you care to elaborate on *that*?"

Silence.

After a moment, Nokoru said quietly, "I think you owe me that much."

"What do you know about... all this?" Seishiro waved weakly, his hand not losing contact with the bed covers. "About the end of the world? About Destiny's Chosen Ones?"

The answer came promptly. "It's the final battle to decide the fate of the world, the decision whether it remains as it is – embodied by the Seven Seals – or if humanity is wiped out and the world restarts fresh – embodied by the Seven Angels."

"Aptly put," Seishiro mocked. "Why seven?"

"Huh?"

"Why seven *pairs*? If it's just about helping Destiny decide, it should be enough to have the two Kamui cutting each other up and be done with it." He put the glass down. "So why all this fuss? Why a year? Why this year? Why mess up the lives of fourteen people and countless others when two should suffice?"

"I—" Nokoru stopped. "Don't know. But it's the end of the millennium..."

"That would be next year on December 31 2000, doofus," Seishiro snorted, annoyed. "Besides, it's not as if the Gregorian calendar is very significant for the history of Japan. For all that counts we're in the year Heisei<sup>23</sup> 11, not a very remarkable date, if you ask me. The only ones who care about 1999 at all are the fools who are too stupid to read their own calendar!" He coughed and wiped his lips with his hand. A crimson smear shone on his skin afterwards. His hand involuntarily clenched around the plush penguin at the sharp pain that raced through his injured shoulder. He lashed down on his temper. "And us. Why?"

"You wouldn't ask if you hadn't figured it out already." Nokoru said dryly. "So what is it?"

"Do you happen to know Matthew Thomas' book 'Before & After'?" At Nokoru's hesitant nod, he asked on. "Do you remember the 'Second Law of Thermotheology'<sup>24</sup> quoted in it?"

"You don't want to imply—" Nokoru sat straight up. "But it's a *satire*!" he protested.

"Wasn't it you who said that it's not important where an idea stems from, as long as it leads to

23 The era **Heisei** "be there peace" begins in the year 1989. So the year of the bet is "Heisei 2". ;)

24 **Before & After**. Had Subaru opened the book on Seishiro's nightstand where the recipe was put in, he would have found this paragraph marked on page 159:

"[...] the **Second Law of Thermotheology**. Simply put, this states that the Multiverse is awash with faithons, the smallest measurable particles of belief. When enough sentient beings concentrate these sub-belief particles into one particular form the new god appears in a flash of fidelity and in full accordance with the Laws of Conservation and Conviction. [...] when enough entities accepted the Second Law as fact, the Second Law would itself spring into existence in a hail of faithons." [Matthew Thomas, *Before & After*, Voyager Press, 1999, p. 159 (ISBN 0-00-648302-X)]

a result?" Seishiro arched a brow at him. "The *Law* itself is nonsense, of course; the whole book is nonsense, though amusing... But there is some truth in it. Notably: If enough people believe in something, it gains power. That is a fact in my profession. And that's what's going wrong here."

"And you want to change that?" Nokoru asked disbelievingly. "I don't think—"

"I don't think that the decision about the fate of the world should be based on erroneous assumptions. I don't think that the fate of this state should be decided by a foreign faith. And I certainly do not intend to die when it's not meant to be a matter of life and death!"

Nokoru's head jerked up. "What do you mean by that?"

"That it is meant to be about finding a balance between the Yin and Yang on each of the seven planes of existence for the next cycle. A balance means that both sides coexist, though one may dominate the other. It doesn't mean the annihilation of one side. That is the ultimate disbalance." Seishiro felt suddenly tired. "You need both sides to define something, both sides for the world to exist. If the final battle is about one or the other in absolute terms, there might be nothing left, no matter who wins. I cannot allow that."

"Because you are—?" Nokoru stopped short at Seishiro's glare. "You cannot fight Destiny," he said softly. "It's not possible."

"No. But I can cheat."

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
December 27 1999, 00:28

"He's gone." Nokoru pulled the door shut and ventured over to Seishiro still standing behind the open window. "I don't know if he found what he came for."

"He did. He wouldn't have left otherwise."

"You know him quite well, don't you?"

"He's supposed to be my opposite in this." Seishiro's eyes followed the slender figure heading across the plaza. The dark coat seemed to absorb the light of the street lamps. Now, Subaru had changed indeed. Seishiro wondered briefly if 'opposite' was still an appropriate description. He turned away from the window and crossed towards the bar. "Care for a drink?"

"It's my house."

"And my suggestion." He raised the glass suggestively.

Nokoru took it and gulped its content in one deep swallow.

"You seemed to need it." Seishiro commented dryly. "You looked like you'd seen a ghost."

"He's got your eye," Nokoru said in a flat voice. "The one I brought to the bridge."

"Indeed?" He shrugged and stared into the depths of his glass. "Interesting."

"It was odd. The eye..." Nokoru turned the emptied glass up-side down. "I think I see why the Ethics Commission puts such a tight control on regrown transplants." He shuddered. "How is yours doing?" he asked.

"It sees."

Seishiro leaned on the other side of the bar. The golden liquid swirled in his glass as he slowly turned it in his hands, following the ever-changing pattern of reflections in glass and liquor with his eyes. Eyes... He put the half-emptied glass down briskly. "Excuse me for a moment."

The library door closed audibly behind him. The distraction spell he whispered towards the doorknob would counteract any wish Imonoyama might entertain to leave the room while he was gone. The corridor stretched from one end of the large building to the other. It widened near the center where the stairs to the ground floor and up into the second storey ended. Both corridor ends held the high, arched windows that were typical for buildings on the campus. He chose the south one and opened the left wing of the window. Subaru had headed across the plaza, so it was the south or the west side. That meant Odaiba. Not the safest place in Tokyo, especially at night, especially in a state of evacuation.

He retrieved a golden lighter from his pocket and flicked a flame into existence. "Nandaro<sup>25</sup>." The familiar frame of his shikigami hawk took form on his right shoulder; a moment later, its claws dug into his jacket as its weight settled in. "Follow. Protect."

With a hollow scream, the shikigami dived through the open window into the night. Seishiro

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25 **Nandaro** (roughly: "Let's see") is the name of Seishiro's shikigami according to the interview Clamp gave in Clamp no Kiseki No. 3 about Tokyo Babylon.



followed it with his eyes into the dark, before he snapped the lighter shut and slid it back into his pocket. He closed the window quietly. Subaru had always been inattentive about his personal safety. It wouldn't do to have him killed by a felon right now.

Nokoru stood still at the bar when he returned to the library. Seishiro reclaimed his abandoned glass and emptied it before refilling it with slow, precise movements.

In front of his inner eye he saw what the shikigami was seeing: Odaiba's dark streets, broken lamps, closed sites...

His glass was nearly full. He straightened the bottle.

Small bodies scuttled away in the dark, squeaking at the shadow of the predator drawn onto concrete by the waning moon.

The glass of the bottle scraped over the polished wood as he put it down.

Black alley mouths... the lone figure ahead passed them one by one, ignorant of what they held. Someone was lurking. Golden eyes spotted the gun—

"—used to having depth perception again? Sei?"

"Hm. Yes," he answered distractedly.

The shikigami screamed, dived, claws extended in front of him for the prey whose face filled Seishiro's vision. The Glock fell out of hands raised in panic to save their owner's face from the avian attacker. The dull black weapon skittered over the stones...

He cursed silently. The shikigami's claws had missed the carotid. The prey was struggling. The shikigami wouldn't be able to hold him down long. Without hesitation, he ordered it to go for the eyes...

"Sei?" Something snipped in front of his face. Nokoru's face replaced the prey's torn one. "Are you still here with me?"

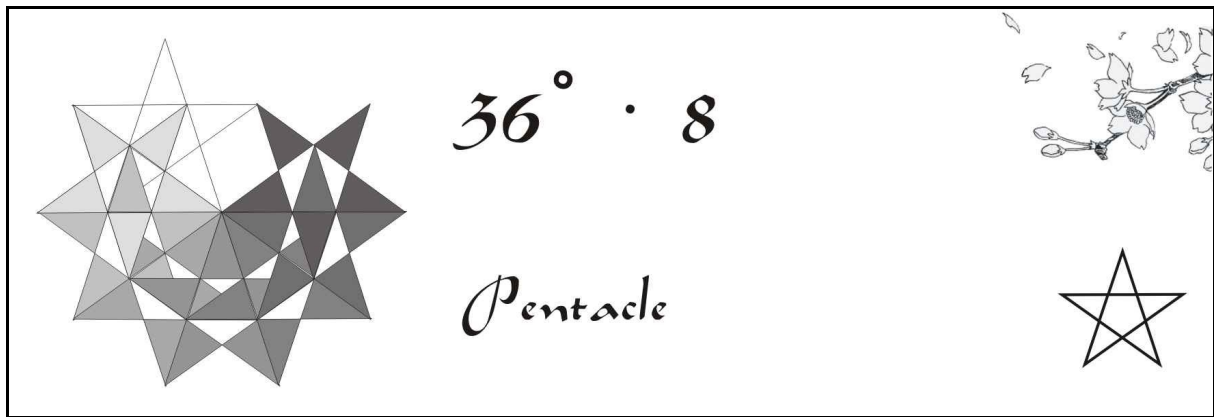
"Of course." He shook his head to clear his vision, leaving the shikigami to its own devices for now. It had its orders. "If you don't mind, I'd like to catch some sleep."

~::~::~~

The indirect light of the weak afternoon sun outside was a welcome relief from the strenuous focus training he'd performed all morning. Most of the curtains were drawn. He'd left open only the one behind him. It was still strange not to have a blind side anymore, and he caught himself 'testing' it once in a while to see if it was true. He still relied a lot on his hearing. Strange but useful. The optometrist had adapted his glasses last week. Seishiro was amused about the fact that the owner of a hawk shikigami was needing glasses; it held a touch of the absurd in his eyes. Pun intended.

Steps were coming up the stairs. The door bell had rung a while ago. December 27. Four more days and this nonsense would be done with. The library door creaked faintly. Someone entered. Someone else closed the door...

Seishiro closed the book silently, not without marking the spot first, and put it down on the table next to his elbow. His prey's face was ghostly white. He called an amiable smile onto his face while he secretly cursed Imonoyama to the depths of whatever hell came to mind. "Hello, Subaru-kun."



*~36° is a tenth of a circle~*

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
in the afternoon of December 27, 1999

...a book was neatly closed and put under a brass lamp. Yellow-tinged lamplight drew the man's features softer than they were, emphasized the soot of the hair, and glittered on the golden wire frame of the glasses. Large glasses, slightly tinged.

"Hello, Subaru-kun."

He took a step forward, awkward, as if his heavy boots suddenly stuck on the feet of a sixteen-year-old. His hand raised to touch, to verify. A choked sound came from his lips—

A hand filled his vision. Soft merciless words reached his ears. He fell. He was falling...

...falling...

...ever since...

December 28, 1999

Subaru woke slowly, gradually, in a nearly dark room. A weak glow along the horizon on the other side of the window, visible through a not fully closed curtain, told of day to come. A day that hadn't arrived yet. The room was silent. He lay on a couch with a flat, pillow-like armrest supporting his head. The cushions under him whispered faintly as he shifted his weight, squinting to make out details. Something soft touched his wrist above the leather glove he still wore. He blinked, stupefied. A plush penguin was sitting next to him.

The leather of the couch had a soft, velours-like texture. A warm, fluffy blanket was thrown over him, tucked around him. Muffled talking, barely more than a murmur, came from somewhere outside. Seishiro-san must have stopped by—

He was dreaming about Seishiro again. About him not being dead. About him waiting...

He propped himself up into a sitting position. The penguin tumbled over his hand into his lap.

He'd never owned a plush penguin to begin with.

He'd never been tucked in on a—

Subaru blinked. He was indeed neatly tucked in under a fluffy blanket on a very comfortable nubuk couch. An edge of the blanket had been carefully placed under his cheek. The soft fur-like fabric was almost sensual to the touch. Somebody had even removed his boots and folded the blanket safely around his feet.

The murmur in the distance grew louder.

Determinedly, Subaru put his feet onto the floor. The plush toy fell over the edge. Involuntarily, he reached for it and froze in the movement. A dried smear of blood across its white chest was visible in the streak of light along the floor. Subaru's fingers trembled.

It hadn't been a dream after all.

Nothing had been a dream.

He walked warily towards the narrow strip of light shining through under a closed door. The

white stripes of his socks seemed to glow where the light touched them. The polished wood of the floor was cool and slightly slippery. The rest of the room was shrouded in gloom. The murmur that had roused him separated into two different voices, still low but nonetheless strangely urgent. A shadow moved across the yellow beam of light. Someone was talking agitatedly on the other side.

"—not as if Sumeragi-san being here changes anything." That was Imonoyama for sure.

"Wrong. Things are already changed." A derisive snort. "Thanks to you."

Subaru froze. Seishiro... that was really... *Sei—*

"In case you've forgotten, I'm no magician. I cannot stand in front of one of you and walk away unscathed! I—"

*—shiro!*

The slap resounded in the room. "How dare y—" Subaru stared, transfixed, at his black-clad hand caught by Seishiro's larger one against the Sakurazukamori's cheek.

The golden eyes behind painfully familiar and now slightly askew glasses glittered predatorily. "You should divest yourself of these gloves, Subaru-kun. I think we both know that they don't work." Subaru tried to jerk his hand back, but Seishiro held tight, actually rubbing his cheek sensuously against the leather-covered palm.

"Why aren't you dead?" Subaru whispered, choked. His hand felt warm. The skin within the leather tickled as if—

A brow arched. Seishiro's gaze wandered along the arm to Subaru's face. "Because you killed an illusion, of course." The yellow light reflecting on the gold frame of his glasses competed with the amber of his eyes behind them— of his *two* eyes—

Subaru trembled. The cheek under his right palm was warm, was solid, he wasn't dreaming, yet... this was a dream, wasn't it? His dream. No, a wish. A wish he hadn't even dared to have. "How...?" His left hand was pushed away before it reached Seishiro's face.

"Grown transplants, soaked with adaptive magic. *Not* a miracle if you attained your degree in a biomedical institute specializing in transplant preparation and had roughly eight years of time."

Subaru's left hand reached out again. His fingers splayed over the chest where they had pierced through, his black glove a stark contrast against the white shirt. Again warm and solid. No blood. He wished for the glove to be gone. He felt a heart that had fluttered to death around his wrist, beating steadily against his palm, strong, fast, unbelievably *alive*. "Why?"

"I didn't want to face the two Kamui without adequate depth perception," Seishiro shrugged. "At least one of them knows how to use that against me."

Subaru shook his head. "That's not what I meant." He looked up at where his hand was still held flush against Seishiro's cheek. "Why..." He shivered, his left hand clawing fiercely into Seishiro's shirt. "...did you do that to me? — And why confront the Kamui?"

"I'm surprised, Subaru-kun," Seishiro scolded as he took Subaru's hand from his cheek and firmly freed his shirt. "You of all people should know that I'm capable of betrayal."

"The fight about the end of the world is flawed."

Subaru started at Imonoyama's quiet sentence. He hastily pulled away from Seishiro, actually felt his cheeks growing warm. The chairman was looking at them calmly. Subaru took a step back, ran a hand through his hair. There was no space to retreat further in the small, cluttered study. He desperately wished for a cigarette, if only to occupy his hands. He clasped his elbows, felt himself shaking.

Seishiro leaned casually against one of the book-laden tables lining the wall on the left, arms folded loosely, his legs carelessly crossed at the ankles, apparently waiting. Three of the shirt buttons at his throat were undone, leaving his collar to fall open. A half-emptied coffee cup stood, forgotten, next to him on the table. Seishiro's right cuff showed a brown stain. Coffee? The flaw of a coffee stain on— Flawed.

"What do you mean by 'flawed'?" he focussed on Imonoyama, on the problem.

"I found indications of at least five previous fights," Seishiro answered instead. "None of them normally claimed the lives of the losing team, and for sure not those of the winners! The most prominent one was before 1640 during the Tokugawa regime. You might notice that 1637 is the year of the Shimabara Rebellion<sup>26</sup>, followed by the Seclusion in 1638. The forces of Yin, the Seals, won that one on most of the levels."

"Yin had to win, or humanity would have ceased to exist," Subaru stated.

"If that's the case, Subaru-kun, then we aren't here." Seishiro returned calmly. "There was also one at the end of the sixth century during the time Empress Suiko claimed the throne. Her reign saw a

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26 The **Shimabara Rebellion** was followed by a ten generation long era of relative peace with no major combat until the 1860s!

lot of change in the land. Scripture, Buddhism, foreign contacts." He tapped onto an overflowing file folder with a prominent coffee ring on its cover. "That's Yang, the *Angels*."

"Suiko's reign..." Subaru whispered, staring out of the single window in the wall behind the computer desk. The first light of day was creeping up behind the partially bared trees outside. Suiko had followed Sushun... He turned toward his opposite. "Where did you get that information?"

"It should be in the first chronicle of your family." Seishiro said. "It sure is in mine."

"The Sumeragi chronicles start near the end of Suiko's reign, with the foundation of the On-Myo-Ryo<sup>27</sup>." Subaru shook his head. "I have to look those chronicles up." He straightened, brushed his hair out of his face with his hand. "I won't act without seeing for myself."

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
House of Sakurazuka Seishiro,  
Midday - December 28, 1999

The rusty wall ornament creaked faintly as Subaru walked swiftly down the small alley. The red rust of the iron and the green of the blind brass wound around each other to form a pentacle... a pentagram... a pentacle... as they circled the axis.

A tenth of the circle and the pentacle turned into a pentagram.

A tenth of the circle and the pentagram turned into a pentacle.

A tenth of a circle... He groped for almost forgotten geometry lectures.

A tenth of a circle... a tenth of 360 degrees... 36 degrees.

36 degrees separated pentagram and pentacle. Not 180. They weren't complete opposites, they were but a fifth of that apart.

Was it the same with Seishiro and himself?

Sakurazukamori and Sumeragi. They both had each other's blood on their hands. They each had sought the death of the other, had sought their own death by the hand of the other, though only one had succeeded...

...his leather-covered nails pressed hard against his palm as Subaru clenched his fist. No. Alive. Seishiro was alive. Was... His fist hit the rough wall. The ornament creaked again, spun from pentacle to pentagram in front of his eyes. It was rough, handmade. The imprints of a hammer could be seen where the midday sun hit it fully. Ice crystals glittered a bluish-white in the shallow dents.

He wondered if there was any difference between them at all. He shuddered. Even if not, if Seishiro was right about the fight for the fate of the world, then... Determinedly, he pushed against the gate, found it locked. He pulled his right glove off and fumbled in his inner coat pocket for the set of keys Seishiro had given him.

A moment later he sat on the bottom step and pulled his boots off his feet. The first ward whispered against his shields. He concentrated, but found no surprises. He hesitated before he went up the rest of the steps. Seishiro hadn't mentioned the sleeping spell. It was possible that he wanted Subaru out of commission until whatever he was planning was over; still—

Subaru stopped. The sleeping spell was on the third step, but nothing connected with him. He frowned. Had Seishiro disarmed it from afar? Or—? He shrugged and put the keys back into his pocket. The faintest whisper of the spell touched him. He froze, took the keys out again. The humming faded. He held the keys away from the step and the humming increased. He hastily pulled the keys close, the spell subsided instantly. It was linked to the entrance keys.

The spell itself was impressive, but this... He silently acknowledged the imagination behind this piece of magical craftsmanship as he climbed the last steps and crossed swiftly over to the computer desk in the bedroom.

The dressing gown lay still over the chair in front of it. He threw it onto the bed and slipped onto the seat. A little awkwardly, he opened the silver lid of the laptop. Fax machines he knew how to use, telephones, pagers.

*"Young onmyoji are so trendy these days..."*

*"...up to the latest fashions!"*

"Look who's talking," Subaru muttered at the remembered teasing as he searched the button to switch it on. Finally, there in the upper right corner of the keyboard was the symbol Imonoyama had shown him. The screen lit up and glowed bluish. Cryptic white text scrolled over it. After a moment a small box popped up with a blinking black vertical line. That was where he had to enter the password.

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27 **On-Myo-Ryo** (about Yin-Yang-department or authority) is mentioned in Clamp no Kiseki vol. 3 p. 22.

..."You'll have to be content with the scans." Seishiro mentioned casually while he searched his pockets for the keys. "I scanned the pages ages ago. The book itself is in a safe place well out of reach."

"Scanned?" Subaru asked.

"As in digitizing them into files." Seishiro finally found the keys and tossed them over to him. Subaru caught them. "They are encrypted on my laptop. Nokoru can tell you how to access them."

"Why don't you download them?" Imonoyama asked. "Our bandwidth is more than sufficient."

"You don't believe I'd keep anything valuable on a connected system, do you?"

"Would have been practical," Imonoyama sighed. "Remember, he'll need the password."

"The password..." A wistful smile ghosted over Seishiro's tight mouth. "Place and date of birth of Sumeragi Subaru." He caught Subaru's wrist in a hard grip. "The real ones, not the fakes you gave me at Sunshine 60. Place in simplified Western writing. Year. Month. Date. Separated by hyphens." Seishiro held his gaze firmly. "When you are there, do yourself a favor: don't snoop."

Subaru still shivered at the intensity of that last glare. What idea did Seishiro have of his abilities? He couldn't snoop on a computer. Most of their talk had gone straight over his head anyway. He just hoped not to get lost in Imonoyama's explanations. Or had Seishiro meant the house? But he'd been here before.

The black line seemed to blink faster, more angrily. Concentrating, he typed: KYOTO-1974-02-19. Black stars filled the space toward the right of the line. Then he hit the key with the bent arrow. The box with the line and the stars disappeared and the screen turned black. In the center of it glowed a crimson pentagram. Various symbols lined the right side of the screen. Another box with a blinking vertical line – this one light blue on black – showed in the upper left corner.

Subaru fumbled the slip of paper out of his pocket and began to type.

```
cryptoview -ssv-access:"C:\Archive\Chronicles\001\scn-0001.png" -r -dcrpt -vrf -pnfoe
```

He was glad when the first page was finally displayed on the screen. The chronicle was written in ancient Chinese by a Chen Yue.

~...to find the balance between the Yin and the Yang that best befits the realm. Seven pairs<sup>28</sup> as personifications for the seven levels of existence, as there are Divinity, Spirituality, Nature, Ego, Life, Love, and Humanity. Each level is governed by a combination of Yin and Yang, passive versus active, consolidation versus change. Each level stands on its own but their impact on the other levels vary, with Divinity reaching all, Spirituality all but Divinity, and so forth...

~Part of Yin is in Yang and part of Yang is in Yin. There are always traces of one in the other and the absolute extreme of one always transforms into the other.

~It is natural in this, that we are more connected with our opposite than with our companions of the same kind. My opposite in this shows indeed remarkable abilities, though he lacks the schooling I've come to expect from a scholar of the Arts. He is still of barbarian demeanor, yet it is a shame that I am forced to oppose such a beautiful creature.

~As I write this, decisions have already fallen for Divinity, Ego, Life, Love, and Humanity – all in favor of Yang, of change. This land is going to see remarkable changes in the years to come and I am confident that at some point down the times, my opposite and I will sit together and fondly remember our contest for the realm's spiritual fate...~

```
Enter password for file scn-0036.png: |
```

Subaru stared, puzzled, at the dialog box that had popped up instead of the expected next page. After a moment, he tried the password Seishiro had given him for starting the laptop.

```
Invalid password. Access-attempt logged.
```

```
Warning: three wrong attempts lock the system until master password is given.
```

```
Enter password for file scn-0036.png: |
```

Subaru reached for the phone.

=Pages holding magical information require an additional password.= Seishiro sounded tense over the phone. =You don't need those.=

28 The seven pairs are shown in X-11 p 98f. (Actually, they show six, but the two Kamui are pretty much self-explanatory.) The others are: Seishiro-Subaru (Spiritual), Kusanagi-Yuzuriha, Nataka-Arashi, Kakyo-Aoki, Yuto-Sorata, Satsuki-Karen.

"Maybe not the magic, but the remaining text."

Silence, filled with the electrical background noise of the connection. Then: =Mister Donuts.=  
Seishiro waited a moment. =The page should be displayed now.=

"Yes..." Subaru's eyes followed the narrow vertical lines.

*~...Alas, it was not destined to be. I was confronted with the dead body of the current Yamato Emperor Sushun lying in my protector's garden. After I disposed the damning evidence by the way of the blossoms and calmed the agitated Sakura, which was infuriated by the lack of respect for a divine ruler, I followed the spiritual trace extending from the body which was moved after the Emperor's untimely death. The connection led to my opposite's hut and it is a shame that I was forced to dispirit the beautiful creature that was my opponent.*

*~Yet it is Destiny's cruelty that she puts such a horrid soul into the most appealing body. I couldn't possibly risk having this vengeful spirit roam free and I wasn't able to ensure the Sakura's safety during dispelling him, therefore I find myself forced to bind his spirit so that he may not be reborn, and that his shell shall be the vessel for a soul befitting its beauty next time it walks the earth. The symbols as they are:...~*

The following line was inked in a different shade and the characters were unknown... yet familiar. Subaru frowned. He had seen them, had seen them recently, where...? He put the receiver onto the desk and stood. He had seen them. And they had seen him. They were calling, calling...

The black wood of the basement door was warm against his cheek, welcomed his embrace, held him; carvings embossed themselves in his skin, his blood sang. Excruciating pain shot through his right eye. The pentagram scars on his hands shone white.

The world faded to grey—

Someone told him to be still and leave things to the head of the house.

Someone ancient. And cold. Cold.

He fell, crashed onto a ground he couldn't see in the wavering grey fog. Deadly cold bit into his hands and knees, reached up his arms and legs for— He bit his lip, scrambled to his feet. Red crystals glittered where his pants were torn at his knees. *Frozen blood?* His hands were numb, white, covered with ice.

Storm gusts battered against him, no warmer than the ground had been. He sheltered his frozen hands in his armpits. Within. He was Within. But... *within whom?*

:::Begone:::

Scathing contempt for his very existence washed over him.

"Why?" he whispered into the fog, felt precious warmth escaping his mouth with the single word.

A picture formed in the haze, wavered, took shape. A blood-soaked body, the heart ripped from its chest and lying on the corpulent belly, fluttering through its last beats like a gory butterfly feasting on the embroidery. Rice-paper ofuda with primitive spiritual markings were scattered around it.

:::Sushun was a small man in life who took too long to die. The violence he sowed in life, he now harvests in death:::

The picture changed.

The darkness of night obscured the bent figure carrying the body, leaving it in a neatly decorated garden near a well-kept, fortified house.

Change.

:::Whatever prediction comes to your mind shall come to pass, my prince. The onmyodo won't allow anything else:::

That was from his nightmare. He—

Change.

A slender man in Chinese garb walked in front of him, long grey hair in a narrow braid, its tip swishing at every step. He bowed towards a Japanese lord, whispering something, and they ascended the stairs towards the Imperial hall while he was denied access.

Icy determination erased the scene.

:::And by it I shall silence not only the Soga but also my rival under his protection. Your body belongs solely to me. I won't have you interfere in the Emperor's timely demise:::

Himself. He was within himself, controlled by a foreign spirit about to use his body as a vessel to kill—

—he choked at the thought. No, that couldn't happen. He couldn't allow it. He— He needed help. Cold ate away at him. Breathing hurt. The fog was like acid, burning in his throat and lungs,

suffocating him. He coughed, choked, desperately fought not to fall. He needed help. Help—  
—to save the Emperor.

The sigils on his hands blazed hot in the darkness. Five corresponding points of painful heat burned through the fog. A pentacle... no, a pentagram — he was looking at two tips in front of him — shone around him on the ground. Subaru's skin sizzled and burned where he touched it, yet it erased the fog, the cold, and allowed him to breathe. Subaru curled up when scalding hot air thawed his almost frozen lungs.

Help.

The pentagram under him wavered. A picture, diffuse, moving, appeared in the right tip near his face. Houses... Ueno... *the Sakura*. If the Tree got hold of his body again, if it devoured him now, the fatal spirit would be sucked in, too... Ueno Zoo. Subaru wanted to scream in frustration. The spirit had avoided the ancient entity. The seeing eye was moving fast. He didn't have time. What could he do? The image of a lake wavered in and out of view with each step. A lake with ice-covered reed grass. A curved roof raised above it from a small island in its midst. Shinobazu Pond with the Bentendo Hall... Bentendo Hall. *Benzaiten*<sup>29</sup>.

The goddess of all that flowed, of knowledge and wisdom, of music and eloquent speech. A protector of the realm. A realm whose spiritual leader was in grave danger from a spirit possessing the spiritual protector's body...

He struggled to sit up, folded hands that looked burned and frozen, signs of his soul's slipping hold in his body. He bowed his head, put all his devotion and discipline into the single syllable.

°°°Om.°°°

Raw power flowed around him. Benzaiten's mantra was the Word, the syllable, its power was a signal flare on all existential planes the goddess touched. And which plane was not touched by *knowledge*?

°°°Om.°°°

The flowing power took his last remaining warmth with it. If he lost hold again, he would burst into a million shards and evaporate on the burning ground, as if the Sakura had sucked him into its veins. He fought to keep the shiver out of his mental voice. Somebody had to hear him, had to hear him *soon*. Somebody—

°°°Om.°°°

A swan sailed past him, stirred the fog wavering outside the pentagram with the strong bashing of its wings as it circled him in increasingly smaller loops. Its deep call echoed in the dark as the red shine of the pentagram illuminated its breast. Hard wing feathers scratched Subaru's face.

Something trickled over his cheek. A thin sheen of blood covered his fingertips after he felt for it. He stared at the brilliant red on his hand, and color exploded in front of his eyes. Images appeared, pictures, he was *seeing*.

The thick walls of the Tenshukakuato, the ruined donjon of Edo castle, loomed high up to his right. Their slightly tilted, irregular form made of nearly man-sized ashlar in different shades of grey was unmistakable. Bare trees raked their skeletal branches into the cloudy sky beyond. Once, the Tenshukakuato had been the foundation of Edo Castle, the donjon built to protect those within its walls. Now it was the symbol that told Subaru how close to the Emperor the deadly spirit in his body had already come. He didn't have illusions regarding the chance the Imperial Guard stood against the spirit controlling him. If they noticed him at all and understood the danger he posed. If they had the nerve to shoot the current chief of the Sumeragi clan straight into head and heart. If—

A slender man stepped out of the shadow of the Tenshukakuato, straight into Subaru's path. Pale grey hair, banded in a long narrow braid, fell down to his ankles. The braid's end and the traditional tunic of a Chinese noble fluttered in the wind, strangely familiar. Long narrow eyes calmly watched the spirit approach.

A *jian*<sup>30</sup>, its straight, double-sided blade engraved with a snake-and-flame pattern along the ridge, was raised to shoulder height. Chinese characters surrounded the guard. Black and crimson tassels were tied to the handle. Once, people had died for baring a blade within Edo Castle, but the man in front of him was already dead.

The ghost stood tall, unperturbed, waiting, a two-handed hold on the sword, the blade

---

29 **Benzaiten** is the Japanese name of goddess Sarasvati. She arrived in Japan during the 6th through 8th centuries, mainly via the Chinese translations of the Sutra of Golden Light.

She is the goddess of everything that flows: words (and knowledge, by extension), speech, eloquence, and music. In Japan, she is a protector-deity of the state, the people, and closely associated with snakes and dragons.

A temple of her is on a small island in the Shinobazu Pond at the south end of Ueno Park.

30 A **jian** is a double-edged straight sword used during the last 2,500 years in China.

horizontally in front of his chest. An armed ghost to intercept a murderous spirit?

The swan landed at his side. One of its wings was tipped crimson.

Was it the same swan who had returned his sight to him?

Subaru's hands rose; ancient words were forced over his lips against his will. The ghost's narrowed eyes gleamed a steely silver. The swan spread its wings, hissed as the ghost turned the sword, the cutting edge now aimed at Subaru's throat. Help had come, help for the Emperor.

The spirit dodged as the blade sang, skidded down the embankment separating the paved place from the grass. Dark evergreen was crushed underneath heavy boots, then Subaru's feet sank into the soggy ground of the winter lawn. Dry, ice-crusting reed grass lined the pond skirting the meadow in the east. A lone pine ahead marked where a path ran through the grass. The spirit headed straight towards it, stopped, and turned—

—saw the ghost was following, calm and deadly—

—focussed. A new set of ancient syllables in a foreign voice spilled out of Subaru's mouth as the spirit attacked its hunter.

Black daggers struck the earth around his body, nailing black, blood-marked ofuda to the soggy ground, marking a banning field in the form of a pentagram. A tall figure, obscured by the wavering barrier, appeared in front of him. Subaru stared at the glowing black markers. Those were Sei—

The spirit tore at Subaru's barely healed wrist to dip his fingers in blood and draw the pentagrams on Subaru's hands as pentacles. Intention above Reality. Spirit above Matter. *No, don't*— Subaru struggled, but his hands were forced through the sizzling banning field, striking at the man beyond. One hand, its nails dark with blood, the pentacle glowing crimson on its back, aimed straight for the heart—

—and pierced a white-feathered breast instead.

Lightning flashed; for a heartbeat, the Sakurazukamori was a stark figure against its brightness, the ghost a vague shadow at his side.

A flash of silver, tracing the banning field, slashed through Subaru's arms in the darkness that followed. The Jian cut smoothly through skin and muscles, separating the bones. Hokuto's voice cried, "I didn't want it to be like that!" The crippled spirit screeched.

Subaru reached for her, stared at the bleeding stumps of his arms and *felt* the swan dying around his hand. The thunder of shattering concrete erased her crying. The swan's heart was beating against his wrist, feeling so very much like... when— The bridge was falling again— No, the swan had protected... Protected! Seishiro was *alive*.

The spirit's control over Subaru's body wavered under the assault. For a brief moment, Subaru saw both, the spiritual and the reality, bleeding stumps and uninjured hands.

The blood of the dying swan washed away the pentacle, revealing the bluish glow of the pentagram underneath. Subaru choked, fell to his knees when spiritual pain set the nerves of his arms on fire as the spirit lost its hold. Yet he forced his hands up, clasping them, focussing. It was his own voice that came from his lips now, his own incantation...

°°°Om. Bazala Darma. Rinpyo Tasha Kaichin Retsu Zai Zen!°°°

The spirit screamed, tore at Subaru's soul and body, trying to strangle, to *silence* him. Subaru felt his blood freeze. The cold bit into him. Ice scraped in his lungs as he chanted to isolate and expel the spirit. His voice—

The hem of a Chinese tunic ghosted over his cheek.

°°°Om. Barzala Darma. Rinpyo—°°°

The ghost dropped to one knee in front of him. An arm was laid comfortably around his shoulder. An elegant, narrow hand performed a perfect arch, outstretched fingers striking beneath his ribs. Pain exploded in Subaru's chest. He gagged at the sensation of the ghost's hand groping inside him, of a spirit being torn out of him like a beating heart. Calm silver eyes held his gaze. A tender smile on sensuous lips guided him into darkness...

Kokyo Higashi Gaien, Tokyo,  
December 28, 1999 - 15:48

Swan feathers were lying on and around him. A blade stuck in the ground in front of his eyes, its edge gleaming silvery white in the late sun. Blood beaded in the snake-and-flame pattern along its ridge. Someone was chanting...

A strong singing voice, rich, seductive in timbre, the result of the intensive schooling



demanding by a profession – or better: a calling – which involved incantations. A voice few were destined to hear, fewer yet meant to hear and live to dream about. He knew it. Knew it without a doubt. It was painfully familiar, he–

Subaru drew air into his protesting lungs, turned his head towards the source of the chanting.

Where the path crossed the lawn, black daggers marked a banning field that held a raging blood-colored apparition. A puddle on the pavement served as a makeshift mirror, reflecting the field's blue flicker.

Seishiro knelt in front of it on the stones, his white shirt torn and blood-stained at the sleeves. He had opened a vein, was dipping his fingers again and again into the crimson fluid that collected in his palm to draw something with it on the pavement. Sakura petals fluttered around him, but didn't condense into the torrent that took away trapped souls. The banning field flashed and contracted, forcing the screaming spirit into an ever smaller space.

The Sakurazukamori stood in one fluid move. A narrow dagger appeared in his hand, was torn in a savage strike across his left lower arm. Subaru gasped at the blood welling freely from the deep cut. *What–?* Seishiro's fist struck into the banning field.

"FEIR!" Flames exploded in the compressed banning field. The sickening smell of burning flesh wafted over the lawn. Subaru gagged. The spirit screeched again.

"REID!" The banned area flickered and... disappeared<sup>31</sup>.

Seishiro stood motionless, his hand unburned but the blood still flowing from the cut. Almost in slow motion, he dropped to his knees, his ragged breaths loud in the crisp air.

The sword was pulled out of the soil next to Subaru's head. Someone took a long step across him. Grey sandals walked towards the kneeling figure without disturbing the blood-sprinkled winter grass, hesitated, returned to him. Subaru looked up, found considering silver eyes resting on him.

*Whoever sees the Sakurazukamori at work is to die...* He couldn't bring himself to care. He was cold. The Emperor was saved. The apparition... gone? Seishiro... If his life was the price for that, he would pay it. He met those winter eyes calmly. He just wished it were Sei–

"Yue!" Fiery gold met cold silver. The sigil scars on Subaru's hands flared. *"My prey!"*

A thoughtful look. The bloodied jian in the ghost's hand glistened in the late afternoon sun. Seishiro had risen to one knee, was dipping two of his fingers into the blood still flowing from the open cut in his arm. Amusement glittered in the grey eyes as they returned briefly to Subaru. A slow nod of recognition, then the past Sakurazukamori gave a courtly bow to the current one. The bow of an equal.

Sakura petals fluttered in growing numbers. A thin twig grew out of a gushing pink wave, brushed along Seishiro's cheek, raised his chin, ran over the skin under the torn shirt.

The hot stab in Subaru's heart at the sight was unexpected and he averted his eyes.

When he looked up again, Seishiro stood alone in front of him. The place behind him looked strangely untouched, as if– as if nothing had happened. The wounds and cuts on Seishiro's arms seemed gone. If not for his tattered, bloodied clothes, and the taut lines around his eyes...

The ground under Subaru was wet, but even the icy water soaking into his clothes felt warmer his body. He struggled to sit up, slung his arms around his knees to steady himself and felt bile on his tongue. "What happened...?"

"He wanted a body." A cigarette was lit. The thin curl of smoke smelled of incinerated corpses. "Yours, to be exact."

"He– he–" Subaru turned over and vomited. He expected ice crystals, but the mud of steaming, partially congealed blood that poured from his mouth was worse. Strong hands held his head, supported his shoulders. The torn shirt sleeve at his cheek smelled of burned flesh, fresh blood, and sakura blossoms. Subaru gagged. A cool cloth was wiped over his lips and chin, then tossed into his lap, as the Sakurazukamori stood. "–murdered the Emperor."

"Emperor Sushun, yes. Emperor Akihito, no." Seishiro shrugged casually, taking a deep drag from his cigarette that had the tip glowing brightly in the dimming light, revealing the tremor in his

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31 The idea behind the **rune magic** in this is, that for binding a magician of a similar strength to himself, a magician needs to use magic the other one is not familiar with. Clamp used a similar approach in the figure of Clow Reed (Card Captor Sakura) whose magic included both Chinese and English components.

About the used runes in specific: **Feir** is the rune of Fire and Ownership. **Reid** (or Raido) is the wagon (German: Rad = "wheel") or a journey completed (German: Reise), together they cause a relocation by fire (back into a certain basement) *grin*.

There's a detail in the myths concerning rune magic saying that during the time the rune is evoked, its wild nature is real. If you show hesitation, fear, or weakness, then the effect will be real. So if Seishiro had as much as twitched while his arm was burning to the bone when he evoked "feir", his arm would have been burned for real.

Why runes at all? I didn't want to do yet *more* research for a small detail of this story and - compared to the magic we see in Clamp's works - runes are like a two-handed battle axe compared to a scalpel.

hand. "This time he failed in all aspects of his plan."

"This time?" Subaru struggled to his knees. "There have been more?" He forced himself up, away from the bloody mess and the icy ground. "How could—?"

"Come." Seishiro's voice was rough. He flipped the cigarette into the falling night. "I doubt Imonoyama can keep the helicopter on standby much longer. The Imperial Guard is rather protective of this place."

"This isn't one of your games!" Subaru's hand clasped hard around the Sakurazukamori's wrist. "You owe me an answer."

Danger flared in the amber eyes as they returned to Subaru's face, then lowered to stare at the offending hand. Seishiro broke the hold with a single twist. "I don't think so."

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
December 29, 1999 – 02:39

He was awake in the dark, sitting upright on his bed, the cover a damp, haphazard twist at the foot end. He didn't know how often he'd jerked awake, freezing cold yet soaked with sweat, panting. His chest was a sea of pain. He still smelled blood on his breath, and the handkerchief had been stained red after he'd coughed earlier. Magical wounds. He wondered how much had been torn when the ghost had dragged the spirit out of his body.

He'd actually given up on meditation and accepted the painkillers someone had left for him on the nightstand, but to no avail; after all, it wasn't a physical pain. The sigil scars were pale thin lines on his hands, but they felt as if they were on fire and wanting to escape from his skin to return home. The large LCD numbers of the alarm clock on the nightstand covered the room in a weak, mocking amber glow.

Amber. Subaru shivered.

He remembered the flicker of weariness he'd seen in those eyes, just before the usual bland mask of anger and threat had slipped into place. Exhaustion.

He thought of the blood that had been spilled to ban the spirit, the power that had been evoked, the pain... He still had the smell of burning flesh in his nose, still felt sickened even by the memory of it.

Was the spirit the kind of soul the Sakura was meant to devour?

Was that what... what Seishiro-san hunted when he didn't go after the innocent?

Was that why the Sakurazukamori was a part of the system in spite of all the bloodshed? Because he could go after those too powerful to be exorcised?

Subaru's head throbbed. He hugged himself, waiting for the tremor to subside, and wondered if he would ever feel warm again.

Ancient Chinese characters in Chen Yue's neat hand appeared in front of his inner eye.

*~Part of Yin is in Yang and part of Yang is in Yin. There are always traces of one in the other and the absolute extreme of one always transforms into the other.~*

Had he been the Yue who'd fought the spirit with Seishiro today? Subaru hid his face against his drawn-up knees. It hadn't been a pentacle that had kept him from freezing Within.

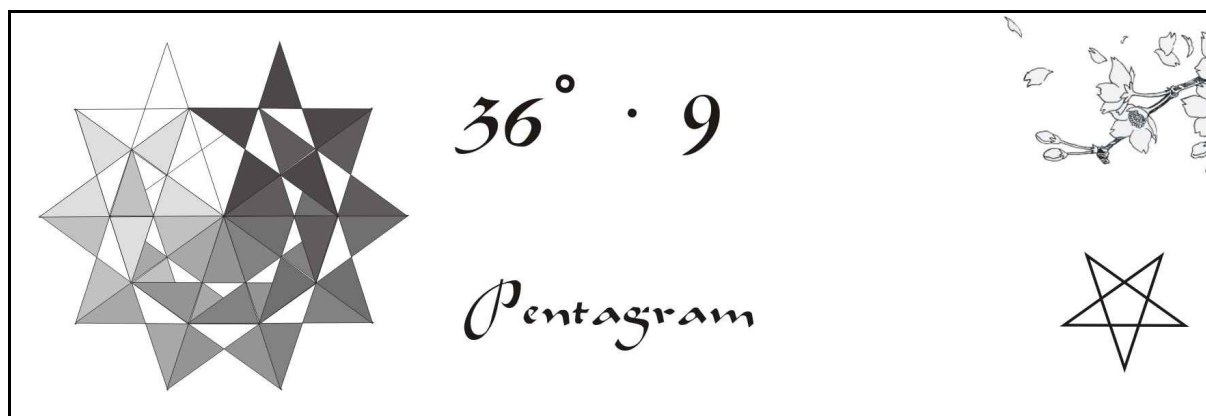
*~It is natural in this, that we are more connected with our opposite than with our companions of the same kind.~*

Soft, even breathing whispered in the darkness as Subaru eased into the unlit room. Soundlessly, he slipped under the cover. His hurting hands moved on their own account in the warmth, reached for—

The pain stopped at the contact. The nauseous throbbing behind his eyes eased; he closed them, wearily. The pulse beating against his skin was strong, vivid; no separating gloves this time. Soothing warmth crept into the cold—

A hard hand clasped around his neck. Subaru froze as heat rushed into his cheeks as if— as if he was still a sixteen-year-old who had no reason to be here. He *had* no reason to be here, none but the words of a Chinese killer written down fourteen-hundred years ago in the secret books of a rivalling clan. Sweat formed on his skin. His breath caught in his throat as he waited for...

The sharp, final snap didn't come. Seishiro's hand clasping his nape slowly eased its grip. Long moments passed. Subaru felt his head being turned... to rest on a silk-covered shoulder. Sakurazuka Seishiro was asleep.



*~A rotation of 36° around an outer tip of a pentagram~  
 ~makes that tip completely sweep across its own area~*

Darkness. Warmth.

He felt warm... strangely safe. Something smooth touched his cheek and temple. A heart beat against his cheek. Even breathing moved through his hair. He was held, embraced. Something heavy lay across his legs, holding him...

Subaru blinked in the dark, felt his lashes brush over silk. Arms were folded around him. A chin rested on his head, keeping him tucked under. The sigils on his hands tingled with power.

Seishiro. He was lying cuddled up to...

*Seishiro.*

Safety was an illusion...

...in the Sakurazukamori's arms, whose heat kept the ice Within at bay. He pressed his hand against the other man's chest and received an annoyed, unconscious grunt in return. The hold intensified as Seishiro involuntarily curled tighter around him, warming him even more. Sleep reached for him again. He nuzzled into the silk, breathed in the scent of sakura and blood and tobacco... Safety was an illusion...

...but the illusion felt good.

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
 Imonoyama Mansion  
 December 29, 1999 - 07:28

Seishiro woke suddenly, tense, skimming the dim room through carefully lowered lashes, not for the first time cursing his impaired eyesight. Something touched him. The heat of a living body was warming his side; even breathing spoke of someone sound asleep. A hand, fingers spread wide, had slipped onto his skin beneath his pyjama jacket.

Subaru, huddled against him in a small, defensive ball, if not for the forward hand that slid down to his waist when Seishiro propped himself on one elbow to study his "guest" more closely.

He had contemplated a similar setting once or twice, though admittedly under considerably less dramatic circumstances. The Emperor's Murderer was a spirit he hadn't been keen on taking on. He had to find out how it had been able to leave its prison despite the rune seal. Even the presence of another powerful onmyoji in the house shouldn't have had an effect; certainly not in what little time Subaru had taken to access and read the files.

He replayed the events of yesterday in his mind...

Subaru's whispered "yes..." when his attention had already been on the screen again. The open line with the faint sizzle of the scrambling component that prevented magic from entering his house via the phone. The sudden thud of the receiver, the sound of footsteps leaving the room. Seishiro had called but there had been no reaction, and then the screams had come.

That was when he'd dropped the phone and run.

Frustrated, Seishiro ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. That didn't explain what had happened. He looked down on the sleeping Sumeragi, noting how lamentably the silky strands of his hair had been cropped. "I doubt your sister would have approved of this," he mused, brushing his hand

through the short strands, earning himself an involuntary mumble as Subaru huddled even closer. "Neither do I."

The bright green LCD numbers on the alarm read 07:36. Seishiro's eyes wandered back to the sleeping figure curled up next to him. Subaru in a wrinkled yukata wasn't dangerous and the warmth of his body was pleasant. Too pleasant. Seishiro didn't want to get up and that was dangerous.

He pushed himself up and rolled out of bed. Behind him, Subaru, bereft of his heat source, moaned and snuggled into the dent he'd left. Seishiro shook his head. Cute.

Ten minutes later, he was on his way to the breakfast room. Imonoyama breakfasts were a distinctly Western affair with bread and coffee instead of the traditional Miso soup and rice dishes. Seishiro secretly hoped that the Inamura Shozo patisserie near his house had survived the year. He would certainly miss hot bakeries for breakfast otherwise.

The distinct aroma of fresh baked buns and steaming coffee welcomed him in the door. The table was already set, though Nokoru was nowhere in sight. The benefit of having a functional set of house servants. If not for the required secrecy...

Ah well, couldn't be helped. Seishiro slipped into a chair and claimed one of the still-warm buns to cut it deftly in half. Butter...?

People approached in the corridor. Suoh, arguing in an agitated voice with someone who could only be Nokoru. It seemed like his security advice was being ignored yet again. Seishiro smirked as he proceeded to butter his bun. Breakfast with entertainment.

"No, I'm not going to leave you alone with *him* again!"

"But Nagisa-san—<sup>32</sup>"

"She knows about my family's duty!"

"Surely even your wife would like to see her husband once in a while."

"Nokoru! He leaped out of the helicopter at fifteen meters above ground and walked away from it! There's no chance that he's not the Sak—"

Nokoru's hand clamped hard over Suoh's mouth. "Hello, Sei. How are you?"

"Good morning, 'koru. Splendid," Seishiro stated cheerfully. "I hope you don't mind that I started. I'm ravenous after last night."

"It seems Sumeragi-san has left us," Nokoru said quietly, taking his seat opposite Seishiro with Suoh as usual in between them. "He couldn't be found anywhere in the house. Do we have to worry about that?"

"No." Seishiro put the half-eaten bun down and poured himself a black coffee.

"He might tell the Kamui," Nokoru reminded him, taking the coffee pot from him.

"He won't." Seishiro added sugar to his coffee and stirred it leisurely, before he inhaled its sweet yet slightly bitter tang.

Nokoru raised his own filled cup. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes." Seishiro took a tentative sip. "He's in my bed."

Nokoru's coffee went down the wrong throat. Suoh hurried to pat his back.

"Strong magic has its side-effects, 'koru." Seishiro remarked casually. "Though somebody might go and get him. Considering recent events, I doubt we can let him skip any meals."

"Sumeragi-san. How nice of you to join us." Imonoyama smiled, and indicated the remaining free chair at the table. "You slept well?" He exchanged a contemplative glance with Seishiro.

"Y—yes."

Seishiro hid his smirk behind his coffee cup. Subaru's blush at the silent implication was really too cute.

"I apologize for my inappropriate attire, Imonoyama-san. But my clothes—"

"—are still being washed." Nokoru waved it aside. "Don't worry."

Seishiro wondered if it could be enhanced. "I'd rather have you in my bed in a clean yukata than in a dirty suit, anyway... or better, *out* of a clean yukata—"

"Stop right there!" Subaru glared at him.

"Now, now. *Who* spent the night with *whom*?"

"I think I have to apologize for the embarrassment, Sumeragi-san." Nokoru's fan flipped, slightly agitated. "Sei, it was easier to find clothes fitting you on short notice two months ago because you have the same size as my physician."

"Not that I needed much anyway," Seishiro said casually. "Stuck in bed as I was until the wounds were closed." He touched his chest in mock drama, noting Subaru's slight wince at the gesture with satisfaction. "*All alone.*"

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32 **Azusa Nagisa**, Takamura Suoh's girlfriend. In *Clamp Campus Detectives* book 2: File 7.

"Just with a firm set of handcuffs." Suoh reached for a glass with red jam.

"Which I returned immediately because they didn't match the décor." Seishiro pointedly indicated the empty chair to his right. "Aren't you here to eat, Subaru-kun?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to share a table with the so-called Sakurazukamori who might just be spying on his next victim," Takamura quipped. Nokoru and Subaru both froze and stared at Seishiro.

"Really, Suoh, don't be childish," Seishiro sighed with mock patience, watching how Subaru hesitatingly sat down. "If I *were* that bogey-man, would I spend more than two months at Nokoru's before finishing him off?" He buttered the other half of his bun and bit heartily into it. "It seems an awful waste of time to me," he added after chewing.

"It is said that the Sakurazukamori chased his prey a whole year once," Suoh pointed out sternly. "Do you have any information about that, Sumeragi-san?"

"R—really?" Subaru reached for a slice of bread before he looked wide-eyed at Takamura. "Whatever would make him do that?" He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Do you think he could maybe have become infatuated with his prey and—" He winced when Seishiro firmly kicked his shin under the table.

"I cannot believe that you don't know about the affair!" Suoh's fierce look rested on Subaru, who busied himself with his bread, an annoying little smirk around his half-hidden lips. "It's—"

"Really, Taka-*chan*." Seishiro intervened calmly. Next to him, Subaru suffered a coughing fit at the diminutive. "How on earth would Subaru-kun know that? He's the Sumeragi Head. He and the Sakurazukamori, they've been arch-enemies for centuries." Under the table he took revenge by trailing his foot up along Subaru's leg. "Nokoru, before I forget. I owe you a set of Laguiole steak knives." Subaru pressed his knees together in a vain attempt to stop his foot from advancing further. "Remind me about that when all this is over, please."

"A set? How did you lose six knives?"

"I didn't." Seishiro wriggled his toes against Subaru's inner thigh, examining the jam pot in front of him, while secretly observing the deepening blush with satisfaction. "But they are no longer in a condition to be used at the table." The silence was complete for a couple of heartbeats.

"Keep them," Nokoru said at last. "Consider them my contribution to Sumer— uh— Japan's rescue."

Seishiro freed his foot with a decisive twist and ran his toes slowly along the side of Subaru's heel. A narrow foot connected painfully with his ankle. "Thank you," Seishiro nodded politely, and with a last brush along a slender, hastily retreating calf that earned him a second kick hooked his foot under his own chair. "Is there still honey somewhere?" Suoh reluctantly handed the honey jar over and Seishiro added a thick cover of honey to his third half-bun this morning. "Now that's cleared up, did anything interesting happen while we were indisposed?"

"Another earthquake, more flooding downtown—" Nokoru ticked it off.

Seishiro waved it aside. "Saw that yesterday from the helicopter." He shrugged and sipped at his coffee. "Anything *not* expected?"

"Kishuu-san disappeared overnight," Takamura said in a low voice. "She is nowhere to be found."

"Yes," Nokoru nodded. "Arisugawa-san is most upset about it. It seems like their relationship wasn't entirely professional in the end."

"Kishuu..." Seishiro frowned. "The Ise-girl? There was no fight involving her, right?"

Subaru looked up. "Nataku died the day before yesterday, when I... came here." He searched Seishiro's eyes. "Could she be Nataku's opposite? Like I am yours?"

"Quite possible," he nodded.

"But... Kishuu-san and Nataku?" Nokoru frowned. "What could be represented by them?"

"Ego," Seishiro said dryly. "Don't know the girl, but Nataku had none."

"Kishuu-san is a very centered person, resting deep within herself," Subaru said calmly. "So Ego fits. You think she's been called to become a Dragon of Earth instead of Nataku?"

"I wouldn't be surprised." Seishiro's eyes held Subaru's gaze. "After all, you were called to take my place after they presumed me dead."

"It still doesn't make sense to me that when an Angel is killed, the corresponding Seal should have to fill the position." Subaru shook his head. "The ancient chronicles said nothing in that regard, and it doesn't work from a Christian point of view, either."

"Think of the original definition. Yin stands for passivity, for consolidation. The change is Yang's domain." Seishiro smirked. "Not only in tarot cards is Death the symbol for the ultimate change."

Subaru nodded. "So if the contest on one level is decided by death—"

"—it's automatically claimed by the Angels, no matter who dies." Seishiro sipped at his coffee.

"But you're right, it's the Christian faith behind most of the superstitions around 1999 that causes the problems. More precisely, it's inherent fatalism of a world-wide battle, Good versus Evil, to be won once and for all."

"Because of it, it's no longer about whether Yin or Yang govern the various planes, but about one destroying the other. But Yin and Yang form the Whole, the Dao; each cannot exist without the other. So if one destroys the other, there will be nothing left—"

"—never mind who wins," Seishiro nodded. "Kind of beside the point of the whole thing, don't you think?"

"Yes. *If* one side wins, that is." Subaru sighed. "We have to talk with the two Kamui—"

"Forget it," Seishiro snorted. "I don't know about yours, but talking sense into mine is a waste of time."

"Kamui will listen, he—"

"And he has such a successful record of keeping his counterpart from doing anything! How long do you think the Twin Star will listen to him before he declares the final battle started and slices him up? Five seconds?" He shook his head. "I'd say keep them apart till New Year's Eve."

"I don't think we could hold a Kamui when he's called to the final battle," Subaru sighed. "But there is no mention of a deadline in previous fights of this kind, so we might be able to prevent a decision." Subaru pushed his plate away and rested his elbows on the table to lean his chin against his folded hands. "You and I, we're the Spiritual that connects the Divine with everything else. If we forgo a decision, even if the Divine between the two Kamui is decided, then..."

"We have a reasonable chance that the whole thing will be nullified."

"At least not enacted." Subaru lowered his head till his nose rested on his fingers. "Or that the system reverts to what it's supposed to be, a contest to decide the balance between Yin and Yang on the spiritual planes."

"1999 will last only two more days. We'll see what happens then." Seishiro put his napkin onto his plate and stood. "If you'll excuse me, there's an issue I have to look into now."

~::~::~~

Subaru closed the library door quietly. The curtains had been pulled back and most of the spacious room was flooded by daylight. It wasn't bright, but sufficient. He put the letter paper he'd obtained down onto a table beneath one of the windows, and took a seat on the edge of the armchair in front of it.

Since he would be dealing with magical matters, he first brushed the paper slowly from top to bottom for ritual cleansing, then carefully marked the corners of the sheet with the symbols for the four protectors. Afterwards, he put his name, rank, and position in the upper left corner, together with a brief summary of what would be found on the paper and the formal warning of magical content written by a practitioner. He enclosed the traditional header in a thin double line and placed his family's sigil in the top right corner.

Bowing his head over the prepared sheet, Subaru concentrated on what he knew about the layout of Clamp campus; what Imonoyama, what his grandmother had told him over the years, what he'd seen of it himself, in reality and on the maps. He envisioned the form, the structure, the items of power placed within it to direct its forces, the implied meanings of these items. When the image was clear on the inside of his closed eyes, he looked up, took the pen, and began to draw.

He drew precisely as he had been taught: added brief summaries to the marked items, indicated the position of the shinken, the central plaza, Imonoyama's house, even the speed and direction of the subways. No unneeded line, no spot or blotch marred the page as he placed his sigil underneath when he was done.

Subaru put the pen, carefully closed, at the top of the sheet and rested his chin in his right hand, trying to discover what made it possible for the Sakurazukamori to enter. What was it that not only allowed him to prosper within the largest, most active Sumeragi sigil that had ever been built but that also seemed to hide him from even the Kamui's perception?

Subaru frowned. There had been something... recently. During Seishiro's battle against the spirit in his body... Subaru's eyes involuntarily wandered to the scar on the back of his left hand. The spirit had drawn the pentagram scar as pentacle, putting Intention above Reality, Spirit above Matter... Subaru stopped, straightened. What if...?

He turned his drawing on the table in front of him until he was looking at a pentagram. He blinked. In reality, he would be standing in front of the main gate near Station One now. He turned the page again, looked – metaphorically – through the entrance gate near station Three: pentagram; the gate at station Four: pentagram. There were no gates at stations Two and Five because they faced

the waterfront, but even there a tip of the pentacle touched the subway ring: pentagram.

The pentagram with its two tips above one stood for Matter above Spirit, Reality over Intention; both, Matter and Reality, were represented by dualities. The two strongest dualities he'd come across were Life and Death and Flesh and Blood. He had learned as much when he'd tried to figure out Seishiro's magic.

Every time the subway travelled around and through the campus it drew the pentacle: intention.

Everybody entering or leaving the campus marked it a pentagram: reality.

Human beings with their current life and future death, their flesh and their blood were the perfect embodiment of the two dualities. That they were unaware of this and of the pentagram they were marking had no significance for the Sakurazuka.

The sigil of the Sakurazuka was superimposed on the sigil of the Sumeragi.

The campus was *both*.

Pentacle by intention.

Pentagram by reality.

His grandmother and no doubt countless other spiritual counsellors had made a mistake in their disdain for the dark onmyojutsu the Sakurazuka practised. Intention didn't matter to the Sakurazukamori; only reality counted.

Subaru shook his head, got up and looked out onto the real campus, lying grey under the constant drizzle. It was one of the things that had surprised him most. The Sakurazukamori fought with lies and illusions, but his work relied solely on truth and reality, hard and painful without any cushioning for the hunted... or the hunter.

He was strangely tempted to laugh. His grandmother had scolded him so for his 'interest in dark magic' but because of it, he was *seeing* now. The construction of the campus had begun before he was even born. Subaru sank down onto the cushioned windowsill and pulled one leg up, resting his chin on it. The Sumeragi power stored in the campus was used to protect the shinken until the Final Day; but the Sakurazuka power served no purpose. It was all here, forming a diffuse background that outshone the personal signature of the Sakurazukamori like a floodlight a candle flame, hiding Seishiro even from the Kamui. His eyes followed the raindrops trailing down over the pane. He shivered.

Behind him, the library door opened. Silence. The door closed. After a few moments, faint steps came closer. Imonoyama took his time to cross the room and claim the other half of the window sill. In a mirror-image of Subaru, he pulled one leg up, laid his arms around it.

"I think I have to tell you something about Sakurazuka Seishiro, Sumeragi-san," he said calmly, waiting for Subaru to finally acknowledge him. "He is competitive to the core. He doesn't perceive anything that doesn't challenge him."

Subaru's eyes returned to the rain. "Why are you telling me that?"

"I've known him for twenty years. I've spent the last eight weeks in his company, and the last two days." Subaru stayed silent. After a moment, Imonoyama sighed and got up. "Let's just say I had a hard time missing the exchange at the breakfast table."

"I don't know what you mean," Subaru said quietly, cursing the warmth in his cheeks as he looked after his leaving host. "We had a fairly civil conversation."

"Interesting, that you have to limit it to the 'conversation'" Imonoyama reached for the door.

"Imonoyama-san." Subaru's voice stopped the man. "How do you happen to know him?"

Imonoyama didn't turn, when he answered he spoke against the door. "We were in the same class."

"A lot of people were, I'm sure."

"I'm a dangerous person to know, Sumeragi-san. To be friends with me means to be a target for whoever tries to force my family to support their plans either through influence or money." He drew a deep breath. "There were several attempts to abduct me when I was younger; later they tried to use those I hold dear to blackmail me. I learned early that to be friends with me endangered these friends, so I kept my distance."

"Takamura-san being the exception?"

"Yes, Suoh and Akira being the exceptions since elementary school." He hesitated, looked finally back.

"I don't think that anybody could use Seishiro and survive," Subaru said quietly.

"Exactly." The door closed behind Imonoyama.

The door to the study stood open. A computer was running, the bluish glow of the monitor competing with the artificial lights from the ceiling and the grey light from outside the high, arced

window. Subaru hesitated.

Seishiro occupied a swivel chair, one leg drawn up, sitting leisurely on his foot, balancing a large, linen-bound book on his bent knee while leaning forward to scribble something on a notepad that lay in a precarious balance on more open books. The computer keyboard stood askew, partially on one of the books, partially covered by the notepad.

More, even larger books, also open, lay on the floor surrounding the chair. Seishiro actually seemed to be using the big toe of his free foot to keep a passage marked in one of them. Countless notes and papers covered the workplace, secured with pins, office utensils, and... cookies?! Subaru blinked. A row of painted runes was taped to the side of the monitor, fluttering in the occasional breeze from a window not fully closed despite the constant drizzle outside.

The white shirt that had been impeccable over black pants at the breakfast table was again casually open at the collar, the cuffs unbuttoned, the sleeves rolled up over the forearms. The ceiling lights caught in the slightly tinted glasses that had slipped down to the tip of his nose as his eyes flew over the narrow, neat lines of text. Left to right. Left to right...

Hesitation. The hint of a frown appeared under the slightly tousled hair. Seishiro heaved the book off his knees onto the desk and retrieved the one under his foot from the floor, searching rapidly through the passage he'd held with his toe. The frown deepened. He tapped a sharp fingernail onto the text and raised his head to look out into the rain.

Subaru swallowed. Seishiro didn't look like an onmyoji, he looked like... a teacher, a—

"Subaru-kun." Seishiro didn't turn, his voice a deceptive, velvety soft caress. "How did you happen to bleed on my basement door?"

"I'm going to have a word with that shrub," Seishiro muttered under his breath. "It can't send whoever strolls past into my bed!" Subaru shifted his weight uncomfortably at the comment. He hadn't mentioned *that*. "Go on." Seishiro tapped impatiently onto the book still lying on his knees.

"The door sizzled. I tried to gauge the spell, when—" He pushed up the sleeve to show the bandage still covering his wrist. The sudden attention he saw in Seishiro's face was disconcerting. "It was as if your marks were pulling me downstairs and—"

Seishiro stood, left the thick book behind on the chair. "Let me see the wounds," he demanded.

Warily, Subaru undid the bandages. Seishiro pulled the wrist into the lamplight, turned it around to study the three scabbed-over slashes closely. His hand lay warm on Subaru's palm, close to the wounds but safely on uninjured skin. Subaru remembered the sudden pain of the cold tearing the wounds without any real touch.

"You weren't drawn by my marks," Seishiro stated calmly, still examining the wounds. "In fact, they were keeping you safe the first time until your blood deactivated *Thurisaz*<sup>33</sup>."

"Thurs—?" Subaru stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

"The Thorn. A protection rune meant to keep nosy visitors at bay." Seishiro shook his head. "You have to pay for access as well as departure with your blood."

"Which a spirit doesn't have."

"At least not until you came into the picture somehow. Here. The deepest cut is near the pulse." Seishiro indicated the slash at the inside of his wrist. "He wanted the blood to spray."

Subaru pulled his hand close after Seishiro released it. "Who is he?"

"The Emperor's Murderer." After a moment, Seishiro clarified: "Sushun's murderer. But why did the rune accept your blood for his?"

Subaru felt freezingly cold. "I think I know..." He almost flinched at the intense stare those faint words earned him. "There's something Yue-san wrote in his chronicle. About him being forced to bind the spirit so that he could not be reborn and his shell could be the vessel for a different soul the next time it walked the earth." Subaru hesitatingly stretched his hands into the light. "What... if this *is* his body after all? If I am... the replacement?"

"That would certainly explain it." Seishiro leaned against the desk, crossing his legs casually at the ankles. "Those wounds look deep enough to provide the amount of blood the Emperor's Murderer needed for his release." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I should have set a larger quantity."

"Why didn't you?"

"You have to offer the same quantity in the evocation – in addition to what the rune itself takes

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33 **Thurisaz** (modern translation: Thorn). Rune.

Symbol: Thor's hammer lying on its side, and the thorn from a rose bush.

Concept: Protection from one's own folly, when one is unable for oneself to influence the situation for yourself. The ability to circumvent problems before they get out of hand. Thorn gives a distinct warning that can involve injury depending on the way the rune is evoked.



for being called – and frankly, I didn't think his body would be around in my lifetime." He kicked the paper bin in annoyance. "Yue should have gone after that sister of his and tied up the loose ends properly."

"S– sister?" Subaru straightened. "Don't tell me–"

"Where do you think your clan comes from?" Seishiro asked mockingly. "Did you grow in a field? But then, your books begin conveniently late in your clan's history."

"They start with the acknowledgment of our family at court. With the foundation of the On-Myo-Ryo." Subaru stiffened.

"Which is near the end of Suiko's reign, a timely thirty years after Sushun's unfortunate demise." Seishiro shrugged. "But I'm not surprised that you don't know that. Your clan has a tradition of ignoring what doesn't fit into their neat black and white categorizations – like a killed emperor in the closet or the sacrificed sister of a clan head."

"Keep Hokuto-chan out of this! She's got nothing to do with it!"

"She doesn't?" Seishiro asked, arching a brow. "Did they never tell you why she died?"

"She died because you murdered her!" Subaru balled his fists against the old pain. "In my stead!"

"Sorry to tell you, Subaru-kun." Seishiro pushed himself off the desk, caught his clenched fists before Subaru could retreat, forced the glowing pentagram scars up into the light. "But by these marks, I own *your* death, not hers. Hers is of no significance to me. Because of these, you survived your ancestor's claim of your body. And in spite of these, I'll let you live!"

Subaru jerked his hands free.

The Sakurazukamori studied him briefly out of cold, narrowed eyes. "In your place, I'd ask myself why my magically inept sister had to ask my arch-enemy to spill her blood for her magic to work. The Sumeragi are a powerful clan, Subaru-kun. Don't you think there should have been a relative to lend her a hand?"

Subaru stared for several heartbeats at the wood panels, vibrating from the suppressed force with which Seishiro had closed the door in front of his nose until the last words, the *dismissal* registered.

No. Not again. The door banged against the wall as he rushed out. "Wait!" The Sakurazukamori kept walking. "Wait for me!" Without as much as looking back. "We aren't done yet!" Not even a shrug.

Subaru's steps faltered. The distance increased; Seishiro had almost arrived at his rooms, was reaching for the door already.

*Competitive.* Imonoyama's calm voice said in Subaru's thoughts.

"Are you running away from me?"

Seishiro stopped in his tracks.

~::~::~~

He caught the Sumeragi's throat in his hand, pushing him back to make his point. "A warning. Letting you live is one thing, sparing you is another."

Subaru grabbed the hand around his throat. "Maybe I don't want... to be spared." Anger shone in his dark eyes. The narrow fingers claspng Seishiro's wrist sizzled with a power equalling his own. "Maybe I want this settled."

Seishiro broke the offending hold easily. The slender wrist was hot in his grip as he turned it, forcing Subaru backward into the next room. It wouldn't do to have this out in the open. It was small, one of the minor guest rooms. A neat stack of clean clothes lay on a table beneath the window: folded pants, black buckled top, underwear... Subaru's room, how fitting. He slammed the door shut behind them. "This isn't the time for that."

"Because of the final battle?" Subaru glared at him. "This has got nothing to do with it. This started sixteen years ago under that cursed tree of yours!"

"Or fourteen-hundred years ago when Yue didn't finish his business."

"Do you want to finish it now?" Subaru stood close, too close. "You made a good start in 1990. I wonder why you let it slide." There was power behind those eyes, power and anger and something entirely too close to sorrow. Subaru *had* wanted to die on Rainbow Bridge. That wasn't acceptable!

"You were closer to destroying my family than Yue-san ever got."

Seishiro pushed him back in annoyance. "What's there to destroy of a house whose head has wanted to die ever since he learned that the world isn't pretty in pink?"

"I don't–"

"So you didn't want to die on that bridge as you told me? You didn't lie back and await Yue's

judgement in the Kokyo Gaien?" Subaru flinched under the rapid questions. "What is it that you want from me? Your death? Too bad that right now it would endanger the state we're both sworn to protect. So what is it, Subaru-kun? What are you really? Dead or alive?"

"I—"

"Is this about you or your sister?"

"My sister is dead. I am alive!" Green eyes widened in shock at the outcry. "I—" Seishiro's hand closed Subaru's mouth.

"Good answer," he purred next to Subaru's ear. "Keep it in mind." He tipped Subaru's head back, searching his reflection in those wide, frightened eyes. "Life can be a lot more interesting than death."

Subaru averted his eyes, Seishiro forced his gaze back to himself. Erratic breaths fanned over the back of his hand, Subaru leaned into the touch, closing his eyes.

Annoyed, Seishiro hardened his grip. "See," he demanded.

Subaru shivered. "No. I won't. I—" He twisted free, retreated till he slammed against the table with the clothes stack. "You don't understand—"

"Then make me."

"No!" Subaru turned away from him, his hands clasping the edge as if to keep him from falling. He stood shaking, head hanging low, breathing in sharp, hard gasps as if he had been running. The grip was hard enough for the knuckles on the slender hands to stand out stark white. "No. I..." Subaru whimpered, breathless. "...*can't*. I—"

Seishiro closed in slowly, calmly, caught him against the table's edge, their images overlapping in the mirror of the window pane, as he cupped Subaru's chin from behind, working his thumb in between Subaru's lips, forcing them open.

"Please..." A moan against his hand. "Don't..."

Subaru's flight from himself was going to end here and now. Seishiro undid the knot of the yukata sash with a sharp jerk. Subaru's shaking was enough for the soft cloth to come loose. "I want you to see—" He slowly forced Subaru to look up again. "—precisely what's being done to you." His fingers pressed against the exquisitely racing pulse in Subaru's throat, his thumb brushed the trembling lips. "And *who* is doing it to you." The mismatched eyes finally met his narrowed stare in the reflection on the window glass. "No self-deceptions, my dear."

A low, frightened whisper. "Help me..."

He almost felt something breaking, some frayed barrier giving way; the narrow body in his arms arched back, falling against him, twisted, turned; his lips were claimed, bitten; arms slung around him, hands clawing into his shirt; cloth was torn— Seishiro staggered under the impact, connected with the edge of the bed, tumbling.

Blood in his mouth. Frantic hands on his skin, clawing into his hair, his face, tearing his glasses off. He caught slender, barely healed wrists in a violent grip before the nails reached his eyes.

"Yes..." Subaru's voice was husky, desperate. "Yes..." Tears fell onto Seishiro's face, their salt burning on his bitten lips as he turned the two of them over.

"Calm down!" He forced the hands away, pinned them above Subaru's head. "You—"

"Please..." The word was lost in the harsh, ragged breaths that followed.

Seishiro studied him closely. Subaru certainly didn't see, didn't seem to hear him either. He remembered the fright in those mismatched eyes, realized with displeasure that this had happened before. Subaru had known what was coming. Seishiro listened to uneven sobs. Wherever the Sumeragi was right now, he was alone there, alone and scared.

Tears trailed over the pale cheeks as he held him down, talked to him, calmly, persistently, words without sense, using all his strength to maintain control over the writhing body; Subaru's frantic moves a sensual assault all of its own. It seemed to take forever until just a flicker of recognition appeared in those wild, abandoned eyes, but even then restraint was lost when Seishiro claimed him. Subaru's teeth caught around his collarbone, biting down hard, breaking the skin. Blunt nails carved into his back; they too drawing blood.

He'd never expected to see the shy Sumeragi like that, lost in sensations, his eyes glazed with lust. Deliciously tight heat. No words any more. The hoarse gasps of a body blindly driven to the edge by its own need even more than his thrusts. Subaru would be sore in the morning. Closer. Deeper. Slender legs clamped around his waist, desperately pulling him in.

Salt. Blood. Pain. Heat. Head thrown back into damp sheets, pulse exposed. Hands in his hair. Legs sliding down his back, falling limp. Sobbed breaths. Exhaustion. Darkness.

December 30, 1999

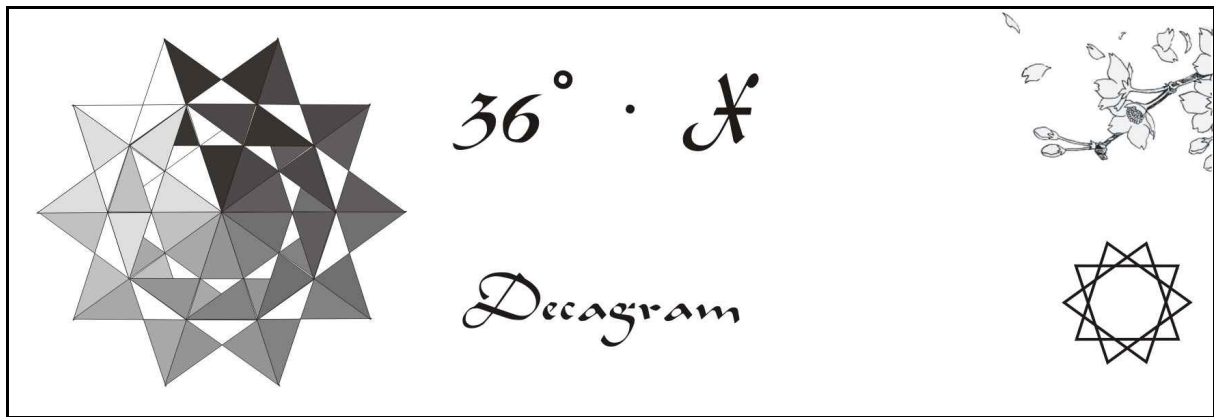
He looked down onto the sleeping man between the stained, rumpled sheets of his bed as he closed the last buckle on his shoulder and pulled the gloves back over his hands. He was aching. It was a familiar ache, and a familiar shame.

The call to Judgement, to Tokyo Tower for the final battle was churning in the back of his head. Still faint, distant, but its strength was increasing. It meant they had failed.

He threw the grey cape around his shoulders and hid his face in the hood.

After a long last look, he averted his eyes and slipped out the door.

"Sayonara, Seishiro-san."



~A rotation of 36° preserves a decagram<sup>34</sup>~

Shiba-Koen Park, Tokyo,  
December 30, 1999

Subaru pulled the cape tighter around himself. Trees, their bare branches swaying under the low hanging clouds, lined both sides of the narrow street. To his right, the majestic wooden structure of the Sangedatsumon, main gate of the Zojoji temple, rose two storeys high above the trees. The vermilion color under its dark roof glowed warm in the eerie light. The recent devastations hadn't reached it, as if the Tower's kekkai enclosed the temple as well – or maybe another entity held its protective hand over the ancient place. Zojoji belonged to Amida Nyorai. The gate and the sacred tree next to it had survived even the fire bombings of World War II unharmed while everything else in the vicinity had been burned to the ground. Amida's infinite compassion was a powerful spiritual source.

Subaru's steps faltered and he found himself looking at the gate, thinking about wrapping himself in that compassion and forgetting about the impending end of the world and his role in it, forgetting about it until everything ended and existence itself ceased.

"Life can be a lot more interesting than death," a calm, cruel voice said in his thoughts, the suggestiveness of its tone reminding him that he was now as far away from abiding by the five precepts as he'd been seven years ago. Again he had blood on his hands, had caused harm to another while his heart had been filled with the most selfish of desires. He was twenty-five now and nothing had changed.

He'd been eighteen when they'd sent her to his bed. He'd have been younger if not for the months spent in a catatonic state, and his sister's violent death by Seishiro's hand. He'd insisted on the full year of mourning despite the fact that Hokuto wasn't officially declared dead until 1998, when the statutory seven-year period for missing persons had run out. The Sumeragi had known better. *He* had known better.

He'd had to fight hard for his mourning to be respected. The recent reminder that he, too, in spite of his youth could be taken from them had been enough for the elders to be insistent. The line – that exceptional power running in his veins – had to be preserved for the clan.

Respect, compassion, his own wishes didn't have a place in those vital considerations. The day the mourning ended, his grandmother had sent for him. The talk had been brief. Subaru had known he had no choice.

The following day, he'd met the Mikage family for the traditional mochi rice offering – the first time he ever even saw Akiko, the woman he was to marry. Even during the offering, he hadn't been able to exchange a word with her, though her parents had seemed delighted to connect their clan with the Sumeragi. The betrothal ceremony had been held on the next auspicious day of the calendar. The night afterwards...

The memories were only disconnected images in his mind.

One of the shoji doors had opened. The fire bowls on the engawa flared in a gust of wind, causing the shadows of the protective ofuda outside to dance across the paper walls.

<sup>34</sup> **Decagram:** There is no "official" name for a one-line ten-pointed star that I know of. But decagram – with 'deca' standing for 'ten' where 'penta' in 'pentagram' stands for 'five' – may serve the purpose here.

Note that a pentacle and a pentagram drawn over each other are *not* a decagram; they form a two-line ten-pointed star.

Akiko-san.

Had a child come out of it, she would have been his wife. The Sumeragi followed the old tradition: no child, no marriage.

She'd sat quietly in front of him, her hands neatly folded in her lap, waiting. For him. He'd been frozen in place, mortified at the prospect of making the first step, of—

Shyly, she'd raised her eyes to his face.

It had been as if a hand clasped his throat, constricting his breath. He'd wanted to shove her away. No, he couldn't do that, he had to—

Darkness and searing heat and something cool that had touched his face, a craved, *dreaded* contact pushing him over the edge. Someone had cried, begged, *let me go*. Terrified, he'd lashed out...

Subaru clasped his arms around himself, shivering, until the sudden panic of the memory faded.

There had been blood on the tatami when he'd regained consciousness. He'd been lying on his side, his blood-encrusted fingers limp on the floor in front of his eyes. Aching with exhaustion, he'd been too weak to move even after what he was seeing, hearing had finally made sense, even when his grandmother had come for him.

He'd spent weeks in seclusion afterwards, his days filled with meditation and purification – and overcoming the fright. When the elders had sent for him again, he had obeyed.

This time, his family had made concessions: he'd been given time to talk with the girl. But the more she'd relaxed in his presence the tighter his throat had become; dark spots appearing in front of his vision; the walls rushing in, threatening to crush him. With the memory of blood on his hands, he'd fled the room.

His grandmother had said nothing afterwards, but he knew that he was failing in his duty to the family, had been failing ever since.

Now he stood in front of Zojoji's Sangedatsumon and the ever strengthening wind, battering the cape against his legs, threatened to shove him through the gate. He thought of the old blood on his hands, of the scars he'd left in his bride's face, and the new blood, Seishiro's blood, Seishiro who'd left scars in his soul, and hesitated. The final battle was about to bring the end of the world; he owed it to his clan not to pass over with bloodied hands, didn't he?

But...

Did it really make a difference? In the eyes of his clan, he was soiled anyway. Even if his sacrilegious love for his opposite might be forgiven, blind lust could never be<sup>35</sup>. It was anathema to the purity his grandmother had demanded, had preached since he'd been old enough to wear a shikifuku and stay on his feet in it.

And now he was guilty of surrendering to it in his arch-enemy's arms, finding solace in the bed of an assassin. A killer, whose concept of purification was probably a hot bath, who considered fasting obscene, and put a park bench under a murderous tree so that it could catch its snacks on its own.

Subaru stood frozen in the raging wind, then briskly turned away from the ancient temple, heading towards Tokyo Tower and the final battle with long, determined strides. His body prickled and hurt. But this time he remembered hands holding him, words soothing him, easing the panic that ate at his sanity, satisfying the devastating heat...

No amount of purification, no extent of meditation could clean him of that – and of the fact that he didn't want to be cleansed.

~::~::~~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion

The hot water beat down onto his back and shoulders. Seishiro propped his arms against the wall and leaned into the jet. The heat caused a sharp pain on his back where the Sumeragi's nails had broken the skin. After a moment, he increased the temperature another notch, allowing himself a wistful smile. He hadn't been surprised to find himself alone when he woke up.

The rest of his prey's behavior was an intriguing puzzle, though.

He held his face into the shower jet, allowing it to massage his eyes and temples.

Sumeragi Subaru, austere 13th head of the Sumeragi Clan, turned into a wanton demon in

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<sup>35</sup> Lust itself is not considered a sin in Buddhism, Shintoism, or Taoism – the main ingredients of Onmyodo. However, *mindless* lust is, see the 3rd and 5th of the Five Precepts.

bed, fighting viciously for dominance but responding only after being completely subdued. How did that connect with the reserved, self-conscious man his prey had become?

His prey, who had snuggled close in the aftermath, unconsciously seeking shelter while sleeping, utterly exhausted, in his hunter's arms. Seishiro had been as close to him as physically possible and yet a slender foot had wandered up and down his ankle again and again, as if Subaru continuously had to confirm that he wasn't alone, that there was something, *someone* with him. It hadn't mattered who.

Seishiro turned off the water with a sharp, angry twist.

Someone had meddled with his prey, someone who wasn't... *him*.

The fogged mirror cracked diagonally at the dark look he threw into it as he pressed the excess water out of his hair.

*Someone* was going to answer to him.

He reached for the white terrycloth robe on its hook next to the door. Tying it briskly, he stepped out of the tiled bathroom into the slippers he'd left on the doorstep and went to get dressed.

"Sei." The knocking at the door was sharp and determined. "May I have a word with you?" Nokoru asked from outside, the tone of his voice belying the polite request.

"Come on in." Seishiro said, shrugging into a fresh shirt.

"I hate to talk about this," Nokoru said calmly, the indignation clearly visible on his face above Seishiro's shoulder in the mirror. "But there are certain activities I cannot condone in my house."

Seishiro arched a brow at Nokoru's mirror image, noticing the bloodied sheet in his host's hand. "Certain activities such as sex?" he asked.

"Such as bloodshed."

"You're talking to the wrong party, 'koru." Seishiro allowed his shirt to slip off his shoulders, observing, amused, how Nokoru's eyes widened.

"Sei, I'd never thought that Sume— I'm sorry, I—"

"What for?" Seishiro pulled the shirt back up. "Occasionally, I like it rough." He took his time closing the buttons, then stuffed the shirt into his black pants. "Don't tell me you're up before breakfast just because your two houseguests enjoyed their stay last night." He straightened his cuffs and finally turned around. "So what is it?"

"Kamui took the shinken. The final battle has begun." Pause. Nokoru seemed to be waiting for something. "Sumeragi-san has already left," he added.

"I noticed his absence." Seishiro ran his fingertips contemplatively over the welts his prey had left on his cheek. "Though I ascribed it to something else."

Nokoru didn't take the bait. "Shouldn't you leave, too?"

"What for?" Seishiro shrugged. "I can spoil their fun simply by being alive."

"I've thought about that, Sei. About all you told me about the final battle and what it's supposed to be and what not." Nokoru focussed him squarely. "I think you're making a mistake."

Seishiro stiffened. "In which way?" he asked coolly.

"If you do nothing, you're being passive. Passivity means that no decision is actively sought, right?"

"Yes."

"That's *Yin*, isn't it? It means the Seals' side takes the point, if the two of you deliberately choose not to fight."

"And if we decide to fight, it's the Angels'." Seishiro snorted. "No choice. Which is why originally I had it rigged for Subaru not to know."

"What if you work together?"

"Tell me again, why *you* of all people need me," Takamura growled, while going through the startup routine of Imonoyama Corporation's much abused VIP helicopter. The hangar doors had been rolled back. A howling wind sent waves of fine debris and dust into the hall.

"Because Nokoru isn't up to flying in that kind of storm." Seishiro replied while strapping himself in on the first passenger seat. "And neither am I."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. So plainly: why do you bother?"

"Because the end of existence itself would be a tad inconvenient."

For a moment, there was only the eerie whining of the wind in the hall and the scraping of its dust load on the windscreen.

"Suoh." Seishiro looked at him squarely. "I have to get there in time. I'm not officially part of the party any more or I'd have been summoned along with Subaru. So I *can* be too late, and I *will* be too late on foot. The destruction downtown is too extensive even for the resources of... a Dragon of

Earth."

"We can't risk that, Suoh," Nokoru in the co-pilot's seat urged. "You know that. We have to get him there before it all starts."

"No," Seishiro said quietly. "Before it all ends."

Takamura started the engines.

Ten minutes later the strong double engines of the BK-117 were working at their upper limit to keep the madly dancing machine in the air. Their high-pitched whine and the deep throbbing of the protesting rotor blades were lost in the howling of the storm when Seishiro, still safely strapped in, pulled open the side door to lean out and squint at the flat, wind-beaten roof of Tokyo Tower's base building. Dust clouds, ripped up by squalls and magical clashes, obscured it from sight again and again.

Both Kamui were down there, engaged in one of their haphazard contests. Subaru was a slender, veiled figure in the shadow of the Twin Star. None of the others – neither the Seals nor the Angels scattered across the area – were engaged in the fighting. Not yet, but the two Kamui were heating up. He had to get down there, but landing was out of the question. The roof was already badly damaged; some spots had caved in, and cracked beams jutted up through the broken concrete in others. It wouldn't carry the helicopter.

Besides, there was no way to predict what the Twin Star might do if he spotted Seishiro before he could reach Subaru. He pulled himself back into the seat without bothering to close the door before taking off his glasses. He folded them neatly and handed them over the back of the copilot seat to Nokoru. "Keep them for me," he shouted over the thundering of the storm.

"Sei—"

"I'm coming back to collect them." He laid his hand onto the safety belt release. "Suoh, bring us ten above and as close as you can to the observation deck."

"That's too high!" Takamura protested. "You'll never make it in this storm. I can give you two in an overflight."

"Good."

Seishiro gripped the handrail firmly as the helicopter swept down, the whine of its protesting rotors just one more note in the cacophony of the storm. He leaped, hit the riffled steel plates and scraped over the surface, feeling skin abrade under the cloth of his suit. He caught the handle of a maintenance hatch and the sudden halt nearly dislocated the joint, sent searing pain through his once torn shoulder. He pulled himself up to his knees. An opening spell took care of the lock and he let himself fall into the deserted observation deck where he'd once spent a night exorcising a haunting with Subaru. Who'd have thought they'd decide the fate of the world right here nine years later.

A severe blow shook the tower. Steel screamed. The observation deck vibrated, another clash had it almost buck under his feet. Seishiro ran for the stairs down to the base building; couldn't risk the lift under these conditions. He had to reach Subaru before the Kamui decided their part.

He raced down the stairs three steps at once, four, sometimes leaping half a flight to the next turn. His feet clattered on the steps, seemed to resonate in the steel mesh that surrounded the steep stairs. He threw an illusion around himself and hoped that the raging storm would hide the noise from those below just as it had masked the helicopter's approach earlier.

One more turn and he saw the scene: the Twin Star had Kamui already pinned, the sword positioned to pierce the boy's sternum. For once, Seishiro was glad that the brat was fond of dragging things out.

He reached the base building's roof level, kicked in the locked maintenance door to the flat roof. No time left for finesse, and the damage and gusts of wind provided ample reason for a banging door. He saw Kamui's hand tightening around his sword's hilt. The Twin Star was rather... careless in his attitude. If the strike hit, it would end the world, if not, then the Twin Star's retaliation would. Seishiro dropped the illusion...

~::~::~~

"*That's my wish, there is no other wish...!*"

The desperate cry fogged as a silver cloud in the cold, dust-burdened air in front of the boy's face. His violet eyes were wild with anger.

Subaru's hand cramped into the tattered grey cape he was hiding in. *I want to bring Fuma back*, Kamui had said, *even if I hurt Fuma myself...* But that didn't have to mean destroying the Twin Star, didn't even have to mean fighting him. Three days ago, Subaru would have said that Kamui's death would bring Fuma back, because then the Twin Star's existence would be no longer necessary,

but now—

Death was no option. It was ultimate change, it was Yang, so Kamui's death would be a decision as well. And Seishiro was right about denying Destiny a decision. Unfortunately, in agreeing not to fight each other, he and Seishiro had reached a consent, a Yin decision, and therefore a result for their level. But the two Kamui...

*Let me make your wish come true*, the Twin Star had said.

What if Kamui wished to forgo fighting? It wouldn't be a consent then; as a wish it would be a part of the contest itself and—

"There is one, Kamui." He pulled the hood off his head. "You don't realize it, but it's in there."

"Subaru..."

"If you don't realize it, nothing will change."

"That's why you can't beat me, Kamui," the Twin Star sneered.

"I—"

Subaru froze. Seishiro stood on a strut protruding over a gaping hole in the roof, seemingly unperturbed by the wind battering his coat to the side like a battle banner. A whirling dust cloud obscured Subaru's sight, and when it cleared again, he saw magical energy curling in spirals around the tall figure as the true Sakurazukamori raised his left towards the sky.

"Yang!"

Thunder rolled over the barren city in ruins. Flashes struck the flooded streets. The wind strengthened, circled. Subaru clamped a hand around a steel beam. The wind was tearing at him, threatening to throw him into the shattered building below. The cape was torn from his shoulders. Seishiro's right stretched out for him.

"Trust..." a whisper nearly unheard in the fury of the raging elements. "...me..."

He had no reason to trust him. Most of his words were well-crafted lies — but Seishiro had already called on his power, *trusted him* to come forward and balance it. *Trust me*. The words might be lies, the deeds weren't. Intention meant nothing to the Sakurazukamori, reality was everything. Subaru had learned to judge the Sakura by what it did and did not do. He had to do the same for its guardian.

Subaru's hand left the steel. Strangely untouched by the storm he stepped away from the hold, out onto the steel beam, out towards... his opposite.

"Yin..."

he whispered. His left reached for the distant ground, his right stretching out to catch his mirror, his opposite, his... Seishiro.

Their hands met, clasped, held. They stood between Heaven and Earth, withstanding the roar of the elements. The sigil scars flashed violently, bleeding for the first time after sixteen years, shining through flesh and bones. Blood sprayed from the backs of Seishiro's hands as the sigils broke through as inverted pentagrams: pentacles.

Subaru felt their circles of power forming around their feet: a fiercely red pentacle, a cold blue pentagram. Both symbols rotated about a tip, both drew a figure on their spin. The symbols were different, the figures the same in the end. No longer two, but one; a one-lined ten-pointed star with walls of Sumeragi and Sakurazuka power. A decagram of Yin and Yang surrounded them, holding their clasped hands in its center. Yin and Yang formed the Whole, the Dao. A tiny fraction of this kind of power, left in torn, soaked ofudas, had flattened the Rainbow Bridge...

This was no fraction.

Two dragons raced skywards, dancing, curling, winding around each other. Their magic sparkled and rained down on the destroyed city, into crumpled kekkai marked by death, by destruction...

Death and Life; change and consolidation. Dragon of Earth and Dragon of Heaven; Dragons of Dao.

One couldn't exist without the other.

Subaru's hands curled around Seishiro's. The power burned through them both, feeding on their reserves. The words of Seishiro's incantation differed from his, but the melody was the same. Touching his opposite, he was touching his equal. Magic flared...

...and stood fast. Tokyo's kekkai unfolded and wrapped the city in protective energy.

The Twin Star screamed as the magical front burned through him, forcing the shinken off Kamui's chest. He whirled, attacked, deadly sword raised in fury - Seishiro shifted, blocked Subaru's line of sight. Rotor blades throbbed close— Kamui— A shadow from above— The dull wet sound of steel burying itself in flesh— A choked, gurgled wheeze— Sei— Subaru felt the life pulsing against his hands, through his hands...

The entwined dragons raced towards them, splitting in the last moment to pass them on both



sides. Fangs glittered. Scales scraped over Subaru's back, throwing him against Seishiro's body.

A long narrow dragon snout closed around the Twin Star's wrist. Sharp teeth tore the flesh, ripped the shinken free. With a triumphant cry the dragon took to the sky, slashing a three-fingered claw across the Twin Star's cheek.

The other dragon's gleaming fangs reached for the hilt of the second Divine sword. Kamui didn't let go of the weapon, jerked it against the dragon's teeth. Dragon blood splattered across his face, yet the sword was torn from his hand and the bleeding dragon, its glittering prey in its snout, followed its companion.

The shinken born from life, born through death, not alive but certainly not dead either, were sparks of light in the sky as the dragons twined around each other again, becoming translucent, becoming... one.

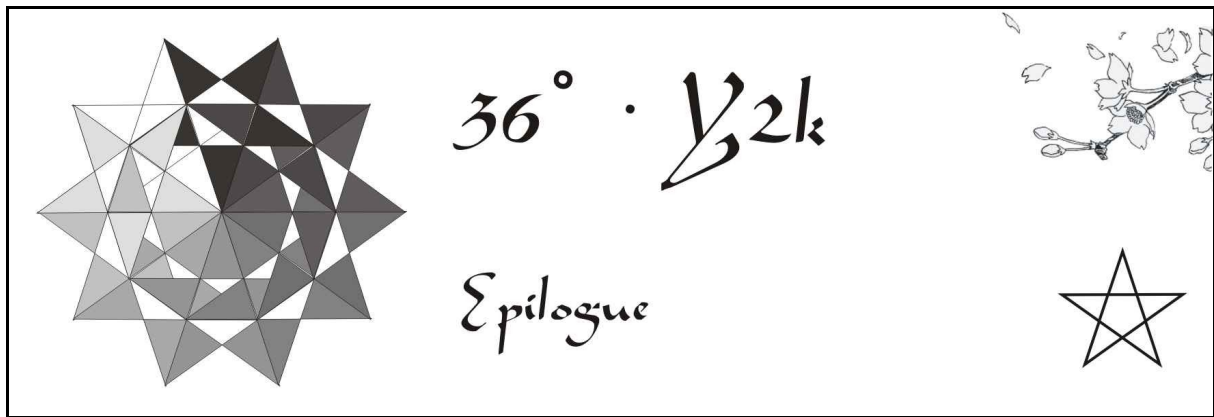
One dragon, hovering above them. Two large silver snake-teeth gleamed in its snout; the decagram was a brightly shining sigil between its horns. Its call was strong, deep, *wild*, rippling the kekkai glowing all over town as...

...it dissolved, spreading its glow over the world.

Something hit the ground with a loud thud. The throbbing of a gradually slowing rotor was strangely clear in the suddenly quiet air. Metal screeched. Running steps came closer. Someone called a name, anguished. S—

Subaru shook, his legs supporting him no longer. He fell to his knees. Seishiro's chest filled his vision; the black coat fluttered against his side, fell around him, dulling the sounds. Darkness, filled with the scents of concrete dust, blood, and sakura. Their blood-coated hands still entwined, he felt Seishiro nuzzling the hair at his nape.

Everything faded against the sound of a heart beating in synch with his own...



~A rotation of 36° around its center inverts a pentagram~

Clamp Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
January 3, 2000

Dust motes danced in pale sunlight falling through high-arched windows onto a soft yellow damask pillow. The dark polished wood of the bed frame gleamed red in its shine; a red that was repeated in the panelling of the room.

Subaru blinked dully, trying to decide...

...where he was, whether he was alive, what had happened...

Warmth touched his side, murmured something unintelligible.

He froze, looked...

"We brought you back by helicopter," a calm voice said next to him. Imonoyama, occupying one of the high-backed chairs that seemed to be the primary sitting furniture in his house. Subaru tried to turn, but his hands were held in a tight grip. "You wouldn't let go of each other," the chairman explained. If he was amused about it his manners were good enough not to show it.

...Seishiro...

The end of...

"...the world?" Subaru whispered, after cautiously freeing his hands to sit up. His throat felt parched dry.

"Didn't take place," Imonoyama said calmly. "The water dissipated. The destruction since... November, I think, has been reversed."

"The bridge..." Subaru reached with a shaking hand for the carafe on the bedside table. "Everything since the Rainbow Bridge fell..."

"Actually, everything including the bridge." Imonoyama poured a glass of water and handed it to him. Subaru drank slowly.

"And the people...?" he asked as he gave the glass back.

"Those connected with the end of the world remained unchanged... mostly. The ordinary people of Tokyo..." Imonoyama shrugged, putting the glass down in disregard of the polished wood. "The data isn't conclusive. But it looks as if everything else has been reversed."

"The course of destiny changed."

"Yes." The chairman stood slowly, hinted a bow. "Welcome in the Year 2-K, by the way. You slept for over three days."

The mattress shifted. The warmth at Subaru's side vanished when Seishiro sat up. "Nokoru. Get out."

"|—"

"Now!"

The door closed behind Imonoyama.

Subaru turned. "You know that this is his house, don't you?"

"Yes. And we've got to *talk*."

Subaru stilled at the sight of the dark-scabbed pentacles angrily engraved in the backs of Seishiro's hands. The cuts looked deep, formed perfect mirrors of the pentagrams marked – yet again

in dried blood – on his own. He remembered the spray of blood, the sticky fluid running along his wrists, and–

"Concentrate!"

He winced at the snapped order and stared, dumbfounded, at his fingers, entwined with Seishiro's again. "Why do you do that?" he asked.

"That's not me," Seishiro said calmly, disentangling himself from Subaru again. "That's entirely you." He got up and put some distance between them; at the other end of the room he leaned against a windowsill, becoming a shadow against the light outside.

"But I don't–"

Seishiro shook his head, showed him the cuts again. "These are marks, Subaru-kun. You're reaching for them."

"Why?"

Seishiro, the arms crossed in front of his chest, merely looked at him, waited. Sunlight shone through the loose cloth of his sleep-crumpled shirt, drawing the shape of the body underneath. Someone had removed the dirty outer layer of their clothing, had cleaned them of blood and dust, while they had clung to each other, dead to the world. An uncomfortable thought. Subaru averted his eyes and felt it suddenly, consciously: a faint pull, a soft, almost tender yearning of... magic calling home. A part of his magic, the essence of what he and his art were, was separated from himself... lodged in another one's body. That it was Seishiro's didn't make it any easier to withstand the impulse to join with it.

"How... can that be?" he whispered, feeling cold.

"Bear with me if I don't tell you all the secrets of the Sakura," Seishiro said dryly.

Subaru looked, embarrassed, down onto his hands clasped tightly around his elbows to stay himself from reaching out. He felt sick. He'd worn Seishiro's marks since he'd been nine. Seishiro dealt with that for sixteen years– "Does it ease with time?" he asked faintly.

"You wish!" Seishiro's wry sound could have been a laugh. He stilled at a faint knock on the door.

"Subaru?" Kamui asked from outside. "Are you awake? Imonoyama-san told me you'd woken up and–" The door handle was tried cautiously. "Subaru?"

"I'm here," he answered finally in a faint voice.

Kamui looked weary, wearier even than he had looked at the final battle. There was relief warring with caution warring with– "I'm glad that you're safe. How are y–" Kamui stopped in mid-step, stared wide-eyed at him. "Your eyes, how–?"

"My eyes?" Subaru asked, uncomprehending.

"The Dao demands symmetry in its source, Subaru-kun." Kamui started at Seishiro's dry remark. "You might want to consult a mirror about that."

He knew better than to ask for an explanation. An artful flower arrangement on one of the sideboards was accentuated by a mirror behind it. Subaru got off the bed and peered into it past the long, dark green blades of ornamental grass...

...and his reflection looked back at him with equally green eyes. Rattled, he raised an uncertain hand towards his right eye.

"Did you think I'd be the only one marked by it?" Seishiro's casual tone sent a shiver down Subaru's spine. He looked back, caught a glimpse of a pale, tense Kamui when Seishiro pushed himself off the windowsill. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to get my glasses from Nokoru."

~::~::~~

Fifteen minutes later, after a brief stop by his room for fresh clothes and a moment spent considering whether to take painkillers for his torn shoulder which he had most definitely sprained again on Tokyo Tower, Seishiro knocked briskly on the tall double doors at the end of the corridor. "Nokoru?" He entered without waiting for a reply.

"...no, no Nagisa, you've been right to call me. I understand... yes..." Nokoru raised a warding hand, then opened a desk drawer, pointing vehemently towards it. "The fever's still that high?"

Seishiro retrieved his glasses from the drawer and leaned against the desk, checking the lenses for specks.

"Can you put him on the line for me, please? – Yes, I'm waiting." Nokoru pressed a hand over the mouthpiece and looked at Seishiro, who rubbed his glasses across his sleeve. "I'm trying to talk some sense into Suoh. His wound from the final battle is severe and it isn't healing."

"I suspected." Seishiro checked his glasses again, frowned, and retrieved a cleaning cloth from one of his pockets. "The shinken is a divine sword. The wounds caused by it can't be treated with

some stitches and a bandaid, and he caught it full force."

Nokoru ran his hand wearily through his hair. "What can we do?"

"The injury is as much a spiritual as physical. Both aspects have to be treated if the wound is too severe to heal on its own." Seishiro finished cleaning his glasses and put them on. "I'm no healer, but I know that he—"

Nokoru's hand went up, silencing him. "Suoh? Heavens, you sound awful. — Yes, I know. But there's something you have to know. I—" He summarized what Seishiro had told him, added emphasis to the spiritual aspect of the treatment, listened briefly... "Yes, Sei told me. Why—" A short, rather loud comment from the other end had him barking irately into the receiver: "Suoh! Don't be foolish! Please, do take—" The sound of a disconnected line followed. Nokoru stared at the offensive phone before banging it, frustrated, onto the hold and burying his face in his hands. "That stubborn fool won't even consider it."

"Then he'll die." Seishiro shrugged. And froze. Around the dark scab on his hands the cuts suddenly glowed an eerie deep red.

"What the—" Imonoyama began as a thundering noise reverberated through the mansion.

~::~::~~

Subaru walked slowly downstairs, following Kamui who'd begged him to come see Fuma the moment Seishiro had left. There was an ache in his left shoulder that he couldn't explain and a strange urgency to go upstairs rather than down. Kamui led him to one of the large ground-floor rooms in a corner of the house. There was no reason for safety measures, because the Twin Star was able to break any obstacle should he wish to do so. He hadn't. Or maybe someone else hadn't. The room was comfortable enough, if a bit old-fashioned. Nothing of the polished luxury of the first floor. But maybe that was better. Maybe...

The youth sat slumped on the bench by the window, one arm bandaged and tied in a sling. He'd propped the other against the window frame to support his head with the unbound hand. Pain added hard lines to the lean face but there was a wetness to the eyes that softened the expression again.

Contradictory. Like the two souls warring about the body.

Subaru, standing silently behind Kamui in the door, watched warily how the youth's hand balled into a fist against his mouth until the knuckles shone white through the skin. Wet eyes. Human eyes, and teeth digging into the cramped hand until blood flowed.

A whisper. "Kotori..."

Kamui froze briefly, his outstretched hand keeping Subaru from following him into the room. "Fuma?"

A look out of eyes that had seen too much. "You shouldn't be here."

"I have to." Kamui reached him, unsure yet determined.

"I don't know how long I can keep him in ch—"

Suddenly blood from the dragon's bite soaked the sling. The dragon had attacked the Twin Star, not... Subaru, reaching for his ofuda, opened his mouth to warn— A backhand caught Kamui across the face, threw him with a sickening crack against the wooden table and from there to the floor.

"You!" The Twin Star came at him instantly.

Subaru dodged the blast by leaping across the threshold, accepting closer proximity in exchange for more room to act. Shiki were useless against the Twin Star, but they would buy time. Time to place the ofuda. The ache in his shoulder exploded into pain as he drew in his power. He had to trap him—

Ofuda crumpled in the Twin Star's bleeding hand. "No repetitions, *Subaru-kun*," he mocked, the blood-soaked empty sling dangling from his neck like the travesty of a tie.

Subaru dodged another blast that left molten plaster and smoldering wall-paper where he'd been just a breath before.

What could he do against a stronger enemy whom he had fought before? Who knew his tactics? Mocked him with Seishiro's voice... about repetitions.

Repetitions. Reflections. Mirrors. Mirrors in mirrors...

Subaru dodged, whirled, distracted the Twin Star from where Kamui, dazed, used the table to pull himself up. Mirrors in mirrors. His fingers ran over the edges of the ofuda, counted, folded...

He threw ten ofuda.

Five of them became shiki...

...to carry the other five to where they were needed.

He threw up his personal shield right afterwards, taking the next assault head-on, praying that the scattered power would blind the Twin Star just like it blinded him. He felt the tug of the ofuda forming the ring, felt the power unfolding, the pain in his shoulder gradually receding now. The banning field flared up, singed the carpet, sizzled, sparkled. Blood from the dragon bite splattered the carpet as the Twin Star tried its strength in earnest. Subaru felt sweat trickling down his temples; he wouldn't be able to maintain this much longer, not at this level. The barrier was beginning to thin, the Twin Star about to break free—

A hand gripped his shoulder, added strength if not power. Seishiro. Irrational relief flooded through him. A minuscule decagram, woven of red-and-blue light, suddenly spun in the air in front of him. An illusion; Subaru felt no power in it. The banning field flickered and fell as his power ran out. Yet the Twin Star stood still, didn't attack, hatred glaring in the dark burning eyes as blood from the dragon's claw mark trickled over his cheek and soaked the collar of his school uniform.

"I see you remember this," Seishiro said coldly.

"Kamui!" Nokoru squeezed himself past them, giving the Twin Star a wide berth. "Are you hurt?"

The boy shook his head, holding himself upright with the table for support.

Nokoru turned towards them. "Out. Both of you!" he snapped. "Let Kamui handle this."

"You can't possibly—" Subaru protested. Seishiro simply turned to leave.

"Subaru." The forced smile Kamui gave him actually hurt. "What do you think I've been doing for the last three days?" He pressed a hand against his ribs when he cautiously let go of the table to limp towards the Twin Star. "I can stop him," the boy said. "He's not entirely... here any more." His hand came to rest on the dark, blood-stained sleeve. "Fuma, please..."

The Twin Star staggered, blinked... "You shouldn't—"

Imonoyama closed the door firmly in front of them.

"I don't think the Twin Star can be considered to be a spirit," Seishiro said lightly, as he opened the library door to allow them in.

"Maybe not," Subaru agreed calmly. "But the situation is possession or something very similar to it. I've been possessed." He shivered. "I know what it's like."

Silence.

A faint rustle of wool threads when Seishiro crossed the crimson-and-gold of the carpet was the only sound. Subaru looked outside, chilled, at a sun that was about to vanish beyond the horizon. The campus' central plaza, covered with the remains of a New Year party – a week ago, Subaru wouldn't have expected it to take place – glittered in the waning sunlight and the faintly glowing street illumination.

Glass clicked against glass behind him. Some liquid was poured. Subaru looked over his shoulder. His eyes needed a moment to adjust to the darkness already governing the room. Seishiro leaned casually against the small bar that took up a corner of Imonoyama's vast library. Languorously he put the stopper back into the crystal carafe, took up the stout glass and swayed the amber liquid briefly, inhaling its scent – and downed half of it in a single swallow.

The scent reached Subaru. Alcohol. Strong. An onmyoji shouldn't drink. Spirit went in Spiritual but didn't agree with it, as his grandmother was wont to say. But then, an onmyoji shouldn't smoke either and they'd both been guilty of that for years; he was supposed to be pure and—

"It isn't over yet." Seishiro had put the glass down.

"No, it isn't." Subaru turned back towards the glitter outside. "As long as the Twin Star is still here, there can be a decision."

"But what will be decided? The balance between Yin and Yang as it is meant to be, or—?" Seishiro didn't bother to finish the line. It wasn't necessary.

"We can't risk that. We have to—"

"—continue."

Subaru turned at the sound of the closing door. He was alone in the room.

~::~::~~

Ueno Park, Tokyo  
January 4, 2000 – 00:28

The night was dark around him. New Year's Eve had broken the spell of thunderstorms, bringing clear nights with brilliant stars and grim cold. Most of the autumn's damage had been undone

and the air was no longer reeking of dust and destruction – a peculiar smell that became only noticeable by its sudden absence; the multicolored lights of the metropolis glowed brightly beyond the dark shadows of the ancient trees, competing with the glitter of the stars and the frost.

Seishiro's breath fogged silvery white in the crisp air. Frozen grass crackled under his shoes as he crossed the park without caring for paths. He drew deep breaths, welcoming the cold. A faint ache in his left shoulder was all that reminded him that the Rainbow Bridge had indeed once fallen, even if it now stood untouched down in the bay – that, and the tingling pentacles engraved in hands that right now were deeply buried in his coat pockets because of the cold.

No, he wouldn't wear gloves.

The scent of sakura came on a warm breeze smelling of spring and promises better left unsaid. The next moment, he was wrapped in the ultimate maboroshi.

*...You sure took your time to come to me...* the Tree scolded. *...Reality shifted five days ago...*

"I was inconvenienced." Seishiro shrugged nonchalantly, without taking his hands from his pockets. "Preventing the end of the world engendered some side-effects."

*...Side-effects?...* the Tree asked in a deceptively soft hush of blossoms and wind.

"Someone sloshed ramen onto my basement stairs. You don't happen to know who that was?"

*...How did that keep you from coming to me?...*

"I needed sandpaper to get it off." He leaned against the dark trunk, bathing in the hot, magical pulse beneath the rough bark. "Besides, I figured since the world still exists, you'd conclude that it worked—"

A twig smacked him across the cheek. *...Insolence. You're reeking of their magic! You've dallied with them again. You...* He blocked a second twig with his hand before it could touch his skin, and the Tree suddenly stilled.

*...Sei-chan...* It was but a breath of trembling petals. A flower-cushioned twig moved cautiously against his palm, brought the back of his hand up into the magical glow of the Sakura's flowering crown.

"I told you preventing the end of the world had its price," he said calmly.

Blossomed twigs whispered over the scabbed backs of his hands, disturbingly cautious. *...The price is too high, Sei-chan...* the Tree scolded softly. Magic flowed around him, through him as the Tree examined the marks. A thin branch wound around his wrist; its bark rasped his skin but didn't draw blood.

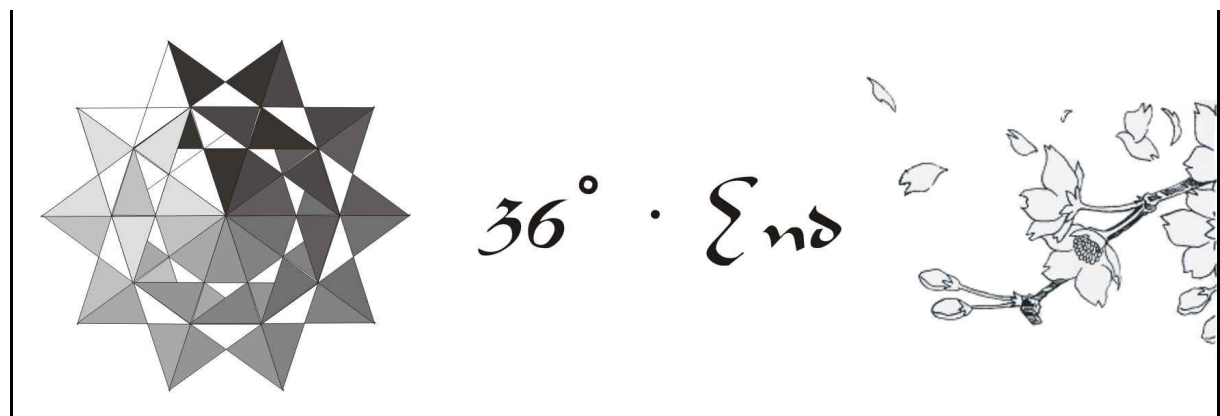
*...They aren't guarded...* The tree seemed astonished.

"He doesn't know how to use them."

*...He will suffer...*

"Yes."

A tuft of flowers ghosted along his jaw. *...As will you....*



## Additional information:

### Chapter 4:

1. In the extra of Wish 3 – Hisui & Kokuyo (pp. 173): The demon Kokuyo, the son of Satan – no, he doesn't look like Seishiro, though he sometimes wears dark glasses and his left eye is white while his right is dark – gives his left eye to the wind angel, Hisui, claiming that among their kind, it would be a token of love. With that left eye the gifted one received the half of the demon's magical power...  
In X-17 'Kamui' gives Subaru the Sakurazukamori's *left* eye to replace his destroyed right.
2. **Nijiren's Letter** (excerpt):

[...]The 32nd Emperor Sushun was the son of Emperor Kimmei and an uncle of Prince Shotoku. One day he summoned Prince Shotoku and said, "We hear that you are a mall of unsurpassed wisdom. Examine Our physiognomy and tell Us what you see there!" The prince declined three times, but the Emperor insisted that he obey the Imperial command. Finally, no longer able to refuse, the prince reverently examined Sushun's physiognomy and then reported, "Your Majesty's countenance indicates that you will be assassinated by someone."

The Emperors complexion changed color. "What evidence do you have to support such a contention?" he asked. The prince replied, "I see red veins running over your eyes. This is a sign that you will incur the enmity of others." Thereupon the Emperor asked, "How can We escape this fate?" The prince said, "It is difficult to evade. But there are soldiers known as the five great principles of humanity. As long as you keep these warriors on your side, you will be safe from danger. In the Buddhist scriptures these soldiers are referred to as "forbearance", one of the six paramitas."

For some time after that, Emperor Sushun faithfully observed the practice of forbearance. But, being irascible by nature, he violated the precept one day when one of his subjects presented him a young wild boar. He withdrew the metal rod that was attached to his sword scabbard and stabbed the boar in the eyes with it, saying, "One of these days this is what We will do to that fellow We hate!" Prince Shotoku, who happened to be present, exclaimed, "Ah, what a fearful thing to do! Your Majesty will surely arouse the enmity of others. These very words you have spoken will be the sword that wounds you." The prince then ordered articles of value to be brought out and divided among those who had heard the Emperor's remark (hoping to buy their silence). One of them, however, told the high minister Soga no Umako about the episode. Umako believing that he was the one the Emperor hated, won over Atai Goma, son of Azumanoaya no Atai Iwai, and had him kill the Emperor.[...]

Nijiren, the eleventh day of the ninth month of the third year of Kenji (1277).

### Chapter 8

1. The complete Tokyo Babylon technology quotes (as taken from the German version) are:  
"Young onmyoji are so trendy these days – receiving work details via fax!" (vol. 2: Dreams)  
"Looks like even onmyoji are up on the latest fashions these days – carrying pagers and all." (vol. 3 Call.A)
2. Baring a blade within the boundaries of Edo castle, the Shogun's residence during the Tokugawa regime, was considered a grave offense that was usually punished by the order to commit seppuku. For an example, in the Legend of the forty-seven ronin.