

TOKYOPOP

Gosick

THE NOVEL



Kazuki Sakuraba

TOKYOPOP Inc.
5900 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2000
Los Angeles, CA 90036
www.TOKYOPOP.com

Story	Kazuki Sakuraba
Illustrations	Hinata Takeda
Translation	Adrew Cunningham
English Adaptation	Laura Wyrick
Cover & Interior Design	Jennifer Carbajal
Layout	Michael Paolilli

Senior Editor	Jenna Winterberg
Pre-Press Supervisor	Erika Terriquez
Creative Director	Anne Marie Horne
Art Director	Al-Insan Lashley
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Gosick

"An ice
cream
shop."

"What's
that?"

"And that?"

"News
vendor."

"And
that?"

Kazuya
held her
hand tightly,
making sure
Victorique
didn't
wander off.

Victorique
took in
everything
around her.



“Why do you have so much luggage?
You’re weird, Victorique!”

“This is the absolute minimum require-
for travel, carefully calculated using a
the vast stores of knowledge my mind ha
collected.”



She ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

— *Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland*



PROLOGUE

Let the Rabbits Run!

Something big and black sped past him. It was a dog, the child thought, a hunting dog, black as night, blending with the darkness. Its legs gleamed black, its eyes shimmering like blue flames in the darkness.

The child had just emerged from the dark forest onto a village road. It was much too late for him to be running errands, and he longed to be home, to feel the warmth of the hearth again. He was taking a shortcut and had just stepped into the garden of the big house on the edge of town when the dog sped past him.

The child took a few steps backward.

Splat.

Something horrible splashed against his legs. He'd stepped on something soft, which spurted a warm liquid. He looked down and saw a small mangled bit of flesh, red flesh—brown fur stained with blood. Long, fluffy ears peeked out from under

the lump of flesh, and beside them was a round eye not unlike a glass bead, reflecting the night sky. The eye stared up at him, hollow and empty.

It was a rabbit, he realized.

He glanced up and saw a long, vivid trail of blood dripping from the dog's closed mouth.

The dog had killed it!

The child's hands went limp. The bottle of wine he'd been holding tightly fell to the ground and shattered, the reddish-purple liquid spattering onto the dog's head. The dog licked its chops.

Lightning struck, the white line picking out the shape of the house—the big house at the edge of the village, where nobody lived. Someone was sitting on the terrace, someone the child had never seen before. His eyes opened wide.

A figure was seated in a wheelchair, covered head to foot in red linen. The fabric had only the slightest opening, where the head should be—but the opening looked more like the entrance to a dark cavern. A single hand, much too thin and withered to belong to a living human, emerged from beneath the cloth. The shaking hand was clutching a glittering gold mirror.

Three urns were placed near the wheelchair—a silver urn, a copper urn, and a glass urn, each with a sinister gleam.

Suddenly an old, dry voice rang out: "One youth will die soon!"

The child gasped. It was an old woman's voice, and it terrified him, as if the unfortunate event she spoke of would come true.

The voice went on: "That death will begin everything. The world will begin to tumble like a stone."

There shouldn't have been anyone else on that terrace, but several men's voices rang out then. The child searched with his eyes again, but the lightning had passed, so the terrace was dark.

"What should we—"

"What should we do?"

"Roxanne!"

"A box," the old woman's voice came again. "Ready a big box, a box much larger than this garden. Float it on the water. And then—"

Crackle!

Lightning burst again, the white flash lighting up the terrace and the garden. When he saw what lay before him, the child fell over backward with a silent shriek.

There, on the terrace, was the old woman in red, surrounded by a number of figures, all of them covered in white cloth with their hands outstretched, like ghosts. And in the garden, a number of brown, round things were running around—at least ten rabbits, fleeing for their lives. The dog was chasing them, killing them, one by one. Here and there, a rabbit corpse lay in a pool of blood.

An instant later, the light was gone, and the house and garden were shrouded in darkness again.

There was silence, until at last, the old woman's voice came once more: "And then, let the rabbits run!"



CHAPTER 1

The Golden Fairy

One

“When the coast guard got there, the food on the dinner plates in the galley was still warm, the fireplace was still burning red, and there were playing cards on the table, abandoned in the middle of the game, but what? There was nooooo one there—no passengers, no sailors. Everyone had vanished. There were rooms with blood on the walls, places that showed signs of a struggle, but they never found a single body.”

“Mm . . . mmm hmm.”

Ten years later, in the kingdom of Sauville—a small European country nestled at the base of a mountain range—in the corner of the splendid stone building that housed the famous Saint Marguerite Academy, two students were sitting near a flowerbed behind the school, intent on their conversation.

The building was shaped like a C, and a small, three-step staircase led from the back door into the central garden. The two students were seated on the second of these steps, leaning in close. All around them, colorful flowers swayed in the comfortable spring breeze.

One of the students was a small, earnest Asian boy, and the other was a Caucasian girl with beautiful blonde hair. The boy, Kazuya Kujo, was an international student from an island country in the East. The girl, Avril Bradley, also was an international student, from Great Britain. She had only just joined his class, but because they both were from abroad, they'd found common ground and were able to talk freely.

Avril was getting into her own story, and her eyes had gone slightly crossed, marring her beautiful features. Her short blonde hair was swaying in the wind.

"But then—"

"Yeah?"

"While the coast guard was investigating the interior of the vessel, one of them happened to touch a vase of flowers—and out of nowhere, a crossbow went off! It nearly killed him!"

"What do you mean? Was the vase booby-trapped? Or was someone hiding who happened to fire a crossbow just as the coast guard touched the vase? Or . . ."

The moment Kazuya began puzzling things out in earnest, Avril puffed out her cheeks petulantly. Kazuya failed to notice, and he kept talking until she reached out her hand and covered his mouth with her palm.

"Mmph!"

“Just listen, I’m getting to the good bit. You get so serious sometimes! It can be really boring.”

“Sorry. Please continue, Avril,” Kazuya said. He obviously didn’t understand her complaint—but because Avril was a girl, he apologized anyway.

“Right. The rescue workers called the port police, and they started investigating the ship thoroughly, but then water started filling the bottom of the vessel, and before they could investigate anything, the Queen Berry sank to the bottom of the sea! There was a spray of water, a horrible, thunderous noise, and down it went—to the depths of the ocean!”

“Oh, dear.”

“But,” Avril ignored Kazuya’s grandfatherly response and continued her story, her voice rising in pitch with her excitement, “even though it supposedly sank ten years ago, every now and then, the Queen Berry reappears.”

“No, it doesn’t, it sank.”

“Shut up, Kazuya.”

“Sorry.”

“On stormy nights, it suddenly emerges from a bank of fog, with all the missing people still on board. After the living are lured on board, they become sacrifices, sinking with the ship—down, down, down, to the bottom of . . .”

Avril’s voice grew lower and lower, and Kazuya waited, holding his breath.

Then, her blue eyes suddenly opened wide. “The sea! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Eeeeeeeek!”



“Ah ha ha ha ha! Got you, Kujo! You screamed like a girl! So much for being a soldier’s son—you shrieked at a ghost story! Ah ha ha ha!” Avril cried victoriously.

Kazuya hung his head, swearing under his breath. While he bitterly regretted letting that shriek escape, Avril stood up and dusted the seat of her pleated skirt. The hem of it flapped up, giving him a glimpse of her long white legs.

It was a beautiful day, and the sun shined down brightly on the garden, causing Kazuya to narrow his eyes, a little dazzled.

Avril exclaimed happily, “So, back to class! I’m surprised you’re so easily frightened, Kujo. You have good grades, and you always walk around looking so serious, just like a soldier’s son—or so I thought. Such a shock!”

Her pride in victory was so childish that he hung his head again.

“I win! Hooray!” she cried, and she went skipping off into the school.

As Kazuya watched her go, he vowed firmly, “I will come up with a story so scary that she’ll be the one screaming! I will have revenge! As the third son of an imperial soldier, I hereby swear it!”

Then, shaking his head in anguish, Kazuya followed her inside, entering the classroom—wherein, as always, everyone was fifteen years old, white, and of noble birth.

There were rows of finely crafted oak desks, behind which sat boys with expensive cufflinks and glittering tiepins, and girls with well-looked-after hair and nails. White skin, long

arms and legs, and haughty expressions surrounded him. Kazuya Kujo was the only Asian here, and no matter how earnest he might be, he did not fit in.

The moment he entered the room, the other students started glancing his way, avoiding him as they whispered, “The Reaper! He’s back!”

Hearing them whisper in their elegant French made Kazuya all the more depressed.

The Kingdom of Sauville, one of Europe’s smallest countries, shared a border with Switzerland, one of high mountains and comfortable plateaus. The border with France was covered in vast vineyards. And on the Italian border sat a bustling port town.

Sauville was a long, thin country, with one end in the untouched depths of the Alps, and the other facing the Gulf of Lion, where all the noblemen kept their summer homes. And despite the vast powers that surrounded it, Sauville had survived the Great War intact.

The year was 1924, and Sauville boasted a warm, comfortable climate, beautiful scenery, and a long and glorious history.

If the Gulf of Lion was considered the kingdom’s glorious front door, then the far back of the country, in the depths of the Alps, was the secret room in the eaves. At the base of these mountains stood the Saint Marguerite Academy, which itself claimed a long and glorious history—if not quite as long and glorious as the kingdom’s. Saint Marguerite educated the aristocracy’s children, and its name was known in every corner of the kingdom. The school building, made of magnificent

stone, was surrounded by green and, because the school had a strict policy of secrecy, protected by gates that were firmly closed to all but the students and teachers.

After the end of the last war, the first Great War, which had swallowed every country in the world, Saint Marguerite Academy had begun accepting the best and brightest students from Allied countries.

Kazuya Kujo was from an island country in the Far East. He was the youngest son of a soldier, and a first-rate scholar. His two brothers were significantly older than him; one of them was a scientist, the other a budding politician. With that in mind, he had chosen to study abroad. So, half a year before, he'd arrived in Sauville alone.

But his excitement and anticipation had run up against the prejudice of the aristocratic children, as well as a number of strange ghost stories that had become the talk of the school.

Kazuya's grim expression came from his earnest, scrupulously honest personality—but for some reason, it became the source of all kinds of tall tales, and the past few months had proven rather challenging. I'll save the details of that for some other occasion, though.

The bell rang, signaling the start of class. Kazuya took his seat with all the others, glancing over at the empty seat by the window.

Since his arrival here, he had not once seen that seat's occupant in class. It was always empty. But as if everyone was in silent agreement, nobody ever sat there, went near the chair, or put anything on top of the desk. It was as if they all

were afraid of something. And Kazuya knew what they were afraid of.

The teacher entered the room. She was a small woman with a baby face who wore big, round glasses and had fluffy brown hair. She always clasped books or a study guide against her chest with both hands, and her head was permanently tilted to one side, like a puppy's.

The teacher's name was Cecile, and as she took her place behind the podium, she sighed.

Kazuya frowned. Cecile did not look like she was in good spirits.

Someone flung a ball of paper at Kazuya from behind, and it bounced off his head. He picked it up and spread it out. It read, in English: "*Will you be able to go to the bathroom alone tonight, scaredy-cat Kujo? Avril.*"

He turned around, and Avril waved at him happily. Should he take this note as a gesture of affection?



After class, Cecile started to leave the room, but then she paused and turned toward him. "Kujo, do you have a minute?"

Kazuya stood up and followed her out into the hall. He was worried she was pulling him aside to warn him that his grades were slipping, but she simply said, "Mind taking care of these?" before handing him the pages she'd passed out in class that day. She pointed at the empty seat by the classroom windows.

"I hate to ask you all the time, but would you give those to Victorique?"

"Oh . . . certainly."

As Kazuya nodded, a shadow smoothly stepped up next to him. He looked up to see Avril's adorable face. Her short blonde hair gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the window as she glanced down at the handouts.

"Hmm? Miss Cecile, this Victorique is the one who's never in class?"

"Yes, but Victorique *is* at the school. Right, Kujo?"

Kazuya gave a vague nod.

Avril cocked her head, puzzled. "What do you mean? Where?"

"At the conservatory."

"Really? We have a conservatory?"

"Sure, but . . ." Kazuya's expression clouded as Avril stared at him, becoming more confused, "it's in a very high place."

"What do you mean? Kujo, are you friends with this Victorique?" Avril asked.

Cecile nodded happily, but Kazuya just tilted his head uncertainly.

Avril's eyes opened even wider. "Which?"

"Um, I'm not really sure—"

"Be clear! What's Victorique like?"

"Terrifying—really blunt, or just plain mean."

Avril frowned at Kazuya for a moment, but then she shrugged and went skipping back into the classroom.

"Um, Miss Cecile," Kazuya said, calling his teacher back.

“Mm? What?”

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked. “You look a little . . .”

Her eyes opened wider as she exclaimed, “You noticed? To tell the truth, it’s nothing to do with school—but there was a very strange incident in the village where I live. There were police everywhere this morning, so . . .”

“Incident?”

Cecile lowered her voice. She looked a little anxious, presumably because whatever it was that had happened was so close to home. “Well, it’s a very strange affair, and I don’t know anything for sure outside of what the police said. The rest is purely gossip.”

“What happened?”

“Well, an old woman who lived near the edge of town was murdered—and in a very strange manner.”

“An old woman?”

“Yes. Apparently, she used to be a very famous fortune-teller, but she’d been retired for years. Her name was Roxanne, and all sorts of politicians and big businessmen used to come to her for help. They say she could see the future.”

“Fortune-telling? That’s—” he was about to explain that it was superstition, but when he saw how tired she looked, he thought better of it.

“They haven’t caught her killer yet, so I’m scared. And it was such a strange way to die! How could something like that happen?”

Cecile shared what the police had said, as well as some of the rumors that the villagers were spreading. The basic drift

appeared to be as follows: The fortune-teller had been shot to death inside a room that was locked from the inside, but they couldn't find the weapon and had no idea who the killer was.

"So, I'm very scared, but the case shouldn't take too long to resolve—that famous detective, Grevil de Blois, is running around investigating everything, and he has two men helping him."

"How awful," Kazuya muttered.

Cecile looked at him in surprise. Then she continued, "The murdered woman was a bit of an enigma. There were a lot of rabbits on her property, and she used to let her dog hunt them. Poor things, they must've been so scared!" she whispered with a gloomy look.

It sounded as if Cecile was frightened by the sinister air that hovered over the case. But when she saw Kazuya's look of concern, she forced a smile and pointed at the handouts again.

"Right, Kujo, if you wouldn't mind taking care of those . . . I know it's rather high, but . . . um, have a nice climb!"

"Sure thing. I'm used to it by now," Kazuya grimaced as he nodded.



Two

The Saint Marguerite Library was an imposing building that stood at the end of campus that had been built two hundred

years before. The stonework outside was magnificent, and the library boasted one of the largest collections in Europe. It might well have become a major tourist attraction if Saint Marguerite had allowed the public access to it—but as it was, few people ever saw it.

Kazuya came down the dry earth path and into the library—which, he observed, was much taller than it was wide. Each wall was itself a massive bookshelf, but the center was open all the way to the far-above ceiling, which was covered in gorgeous religious paintings. Between the shelves, narrow wooden staircases stood like parts of a gigantic maze, each suspended dangerously above thin air.

Kazuya looked up and sighed. He could see a gold band hanging over the edge, way up near the ceiling.

“Victorique, why are you always at the top?”

He had no choice but to start climbing the staircase maze, muttering to himself, “Occasionally, you could try being a little lower. Does Victorique climb this staircase every day? Such hard work . . .”

The more he climbed, the farther away the floor was. Looking down made him dizzy, so Kazuya kept his gaze fixed firmly ahead and his posture rigidly upright (as befitted the third son of an Imperial soldier) as he tap-tap-tapped his way upward.

He was out of breath before he reached the top, yet on he went.

“Why was the library built this way, anyway?”

According to one theory, the library had been built in the early sixteenth century by the same king who’d founded the

Saint Marguerite Academy. Purportedly terrified of his wife, the king had made a secret room at the top of the library in order to meet his mistress, which would explain why the stairs were a maze.

Early this century, the school had made some modifications to the library, including adding a hydraulic elevator—but that was only for the faculty, so Kazuya hadn't ever been allowed to use it. Instead, he climbed . . . up, up the maze of stairs . . . still climbing.

When he finally reached the top, Kazuya called out, "Victorique! You here?"

There was no answer. Undeterred, Kazuya continued, "I know you're here. I could see your hair. Hello?"

A long stream of golden hair hung over the edge, and a white puff of smoke rose toward the ceiling.

Kazuya stepped forward and took in the conservatory. The secret room at the top of the library was not a bedroom for the king and his mistress, but a greenhouse filled with plants. Tropical trees and ferns grew everywhere, bathed in soft sunlight that came streaming down through the glass ceiling.

The conservatory was brightly lit and utterly deserted. But on the landing of the stairs leading to the conservatory, there was a large porcelain doll, almost life sized at about four and a half feet in height. It was clothed in an extravagant dress of silk and lace, and its long, beautiful, golden hair spilled down to the floor like an unraveled turban. In profile, the face betrayed a distinctive, porcelain coldness. And it had clear eyes—neither a child's, nor an adult's—of translucent emerald green.

The doll was smoking a pipe, puffs of smoke rising from it toward the glass ceiling.

Kazuya stepped toward this doll—not toward this girl who was so perfectly featured that she easily could be mistaken for a doll.

“You could try answering, Victorique.”

The girl’s green eyes were racing across the pages of the books on the floor that were laid out in rays around her. There were books on ancient history, modern science, engineering, magic, and alchemy, and they were in English, French, Latin, and Chinese—all kinds of languages. Victorique was reading them all at once, without any effort at all.

When she glanced up, she saw Kazuya glaring down at her and grunted, “Oh, it’s you again,” in a creaky, low voice, like that of an old woman. The voice was jarringly out of place coming from that tiny body with its fairylike beauty.

Her aloof, superior attitude—which all aristocracy seemed to wear on their sleeves—annoyed Kazuya. But she was always this way; every time he came here, Victorique rubbed him the wrong way.

When Kazuya said nothing, Victorique turned back to her books, her eyes speeding across the pages almost too quickly for her to turn them. “What is it this time, Reaper?” she asked.

“Please don’t call me that,” Kazuya wailed as he slumped against the railing. “Reaper” was a nickname Kazuya would much rather do without. Most students here had an insatiable love for horror stories, and the sheer age of the school had

allowed it to accumulate more than its fair share of legends and beliefs, such as “the traveler who comes in the spring brings death with him” or “a devil lives in the thirteenth stair.”

Because Kazuya Kujo was a black-haired, black-eyed Asian traveler who rarely spoke, he’d quickly been identified as “the traveler who comes in spring.” The students who knew the adage avoided Kazuya as much as possible. He wasn’t sure how many of them really believed in it, but they were all on board, as if they’d all agreed that this would make the game all the more entertaining.

And that had prevented Kazuya from making any friends, although Cecile had taken pity on him and, before he knew it, he’d become a messenger and companion to the most eccentric pupil in the school, Victorique. He was certain that he didn’t spend time with her because he liked it. Nonetheless, he found himself regularly climbing the maze of stairs to meet her.

Ignoring his consternation, Victorique rasped, “Kujo, just because you have no friends is no reason to come to me again. Don’t you ever learn? Or is it that you simply like the stairs?”

“Of course I don’t. Here,” Kazuya said, passing her the handouts Cecile had given him.

Victorique pointed at the floor with her nose, indicating that he should place the papers there. Then, she called out in a singsong voice, “Perfect day for a date in the flower garden.”

“It wasn’t a date, we were just talking. She was telling me a horror story about some luxury ship called the Queen Berry, which showed up without—wait, Victorique . . .”

Kazuya had started to move away from the conservatory, but now he came running back. He leaned down as if he were going to dig Victorique out from under her piles of books. "How did you know? Did you see me there?"

"No."

"Then how?"

"As always, by the usual fashion," Victorique snapped, her eyes never leaving the books, "it welled up out of the fountain of knowledge."

Apparently unaware that Kazuya was waiting for her to continue, she took a long drag on her pipe, and then she sang, "Kujo, your mind is uptight and rigidly particular."

"Sorry."

"People like you would never dream of going outside in uniform without first putting on a hat. The hat has left an impression on the shape of your hair. And the pink flower petal lodged in your collar comes from the pansies blooming in the flowerbeds. That led me to believe you'd been sitting next to them."

"But a date? I might have been alone."

"Kujo, you are in an unusually good mood today. Your footsteps were lighter than usual."

"Eh?" *Really?* Kazuya frowned. He thought he'd come up in the usual fashion, rhythmically and upright.

Victorique spat coldly, "And your responses to my statements are uncharacteristically enthusiastic. Human males behave this way for only one reason: lust. Kujo, you are behaving in a manner quite beyond your means, in a very cheery mood

brought on by uncharacteristic desire. Desire does not arise from sitting around in a flower garden by yourself; therefore, you must have been with a girl, and a girl that you have a favorable opinion of. That is what the fountain of knowledge told me.”

“Um, Victorique, couldn’t you put that a different way? I mean, ‘lust,’ and ‘beyond my means’?” Kazuya sat down, turning red as he hugged his knees. Victorique always knew exactly what he’d been up to without ever having seen anything, but today’s events were particularly embarrassing.

Chin on his knee, he glared balefully at her. “You’re always right. Very impressive.”

Victorique didn’t respond immediately. She read in silence for a while, until at last his words appeared to reach her brain and she nodded. “As I’ve explained, my five senses are on high alert, gathering fragments of chaos from the world around me. The fountain of knowledge inside me toys with them out of sheer boredom, reconstructing them. If the inclination strikes me, I occasionally verbalize this in a fashion that even a terribly ordinary person like you can understand. Normally, though, I can’t be bothered, which is why I remain silent.”

“So, why do you tell me?”

“It would be a fair guess, Kujo, that the very sight of you encourages me to mock.” With that, Victorique turned her attention back to her books, saying nothing more.

Kazuya’s shoulders slumped as he stared at Victorique’s profile.

Kazuya Kujo was a scholar who ranked high enough to represent his country abroad, and he normally would never dream of allowing someone to refer to him as “terribly ordinary.” And this mysterious nobleman’s daughter never went to class—yet when Victorique said something, Kazuya found it hard to argue.

She was incredibly beautiful, incredibly small, incredibly smart, and completely intractable. She had a boy’s name for some reason, and she was a little insane, but she was undeniably a genius. He knew almost nothing about her background, about who she was. From a number of sources, he’d heard that she was the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman, that everyone in her family was terrified of her, and that they’d sent her to this school because they didn’t want to leave her at home. He’d also heard that her mother had been a famous dancer but had gone insane, that she was the legendary gray wolf reborn, and that she had been seen greedily devouring raw flesh. Because of the popularity of horror stories at the academy, the rumors quickly degenerated into those that were extremely hard to believe.

Kazuya never once had asked Victorique about any of this. As the son of an Imperial soldier, he couldn’t allow his base curiosity to show—and Victorique herself was so strange, he had no idea what question to ask first.

So, he kept climbing all the way up here, putting himself on the receiving end of her sharp remarks and continually becoming upset. This had now become part of his routine.

“Tell me, Victorique, you read a lot of books every day,” Kazuya began.

Victorique did not speak in response, but she deigned to nod.

“Are you planning to read every book in the library?”

He was joking, but Victorique looked up and pointed over the railing, replying, “I’m almost done reading this entire wall. Mm? Kujo, what a strange expression—it’s like your eyes are about to pop out. Is something wrong?”

“No, I’m just surprised. What are you reading now?”

“Many things,” Victorique yawned, stretching her back like a cat. “Augh! I’m so bored! I need more chaos to reconstruct. I read and I read, but it’s never enough.”

“I think most people’s heads would explode from reading one of these,” Kazuya said, pointing at a book in Latin.

Victorique yawned again before saying brightly, “Right, Kujo, I’ll explain it to you.”

“Explain what?”

“The contents of this book. This book is about an ancient method of fortune-telling.”

“Fortune-telling? Not interested.”

“I don’t care.”

“Then, why are you explaining it to me?”

“Because I’m bored,” Victorique said, as if that were the only possible explanation.

Kazuya considered running away, but she had already started explaining.

“According to this book, fortune-telling has gone hand in hand with ambition since ancient times. For example, in the Roman Empire, the Romans used to burn animal entrails and shoulder blades, reading the future in how the items split open.

This continued until as recently as the eleventh century, until eventually the Catholic Church banned it. Another popular form of fortune-telling involved opening a book and divining based on what was written on the page. The ancients used the works of Homer, but the Christians tended to use the Bible. The Church Council banned this method, as well, but—stay awake, Kujo. I'm dying of boredom."

"Yes, sorry."

"In other words, fortune-telling is a heresy; however, no matter how often governments or churches ban it, people continue to practice it. Even among the clergy, certain practices continued in secret for centuries. Do you know why?"

"Um . . ."

Victorique took the pipe from her mouth, releasing a large cloud of smoke. "Because it works," she said gloomily.

"Hardly."

"The ancient Roman emperor Valens worried constantly about his own position, so he used to summon fortune-tellers and have them divine the names of those who threatened him. The method they used involved writing letters, piling feed on top, and releasing chickens. Once, when the chickens ate the feed on top of T, H, E, O, and D, the emperor took it to mean 'Theodorus,' and he executed everyone with that name in the empire. However, the man who came to control the empire after Valens actually was named Theodosius. Valens had the wrong name."

"What a violent story."

“Listen seriously! I’m about to pass out from sheer boredom!”

“Sorry.”

“According to any number of books, one of the most reliable methods of fortune-telling involves something called the ‘magic mirror.’ The mirror, shown in Leonardo Da Vinci’s drawing ‘Witch Using a Magic Mirror,’ is the predecessor of the modern crystal ball. The divination takes three days and three nights, and it uses a silver urn filled with wine, a copper urn filled with oil, and a glass urn filled with water. The copper urn tells the past, the glass urn the present, and the silver urn the future, all appearing upon the surface of the mirror.”

Victorique spread out the pages of her book, showing an illustration of a woman wrapped in red cloth, with three urns laid out before her and a golden mirror in her hand. Behind her, a number of men in white robes crouched with their heads pressed against the ground.

Victorique turned a few more pages, continuing her lecture.

Kazuya listened patiently, afraid of making her angry. In the country where he’d been born and raised, females were supposed to walk three steps behind their husbands, so he felt ill prepared to handle the type of girl who would turn around after three steps and yell, “Hurry!” It all came down to training, Kazuya thought. Training was hard work. He was getting sleepy.

“Accounts of the staff divination performed by the prophet Moses, and similar accounts in the Book of Numbers, are

also interesting. To determine which family the leader of the Israelites would be born into, Moses had each family write its name on one of twelve staffs, and he used those to divine the answer.”

“Hmm, surprising.”

“What?”

“That you believe in fortune-telling.”

“I don’t believe in it.”

“Huh?”

Victorique reached out across the rays of books around her and picked up another volume. She opened it, showing the pages to Kazuya—but it was written in extremely difficult-looking German, causing Kazuya to recoil in fear. Victorique’s hands reached out, forcing it on him.

Giving up, he asked, “What is it?”

“Psychology. I am attempting to explain why people believe in fortune-telling, and to do so in a manner that your thick-skulled, half-baked intelligence can comprehend.”

“Oh.”

“Fortune-telling comes true. This obviously is not an objective truth, though; fortune-telling works only as a subjective truth. In other words, people *believe* the fortune comes true. This is actually the power that has kept fortune-telling alive since the dawn of time, it’s supported by a group psychology in which everyone *wants* it to come true. It’s just like the horror-story frenzy at this school—they all cooperate, all subconsciously acting at the same time as a group.”

“Yeah.”

“Three basic things happen. First, only accurate predictions are recorded by history. Dozens of inaccurate predictions hide in the shadows of each of the successful ones. Second, the fortune-tellers themselves are extremely skilled at reading their clients’ expressions, thereby allowing them to say what the clients want to hear. The third results when the answer fits both of these circumstances.”

“Mm.”

“For example, Kujo, imagine that before you came here, you asked for a divination of your life after you studied abroad. If the answer were favorable, when things here were positive, you would think, ‘It was right!’ But if the answer were unfavorable, you still would think the fortune was right—only, it would be anytime things went badly instead.”

“Okay.”

“The situation with the emperor Valens was the same: The letters the chickens selected could have been arranged in any order, but the emperor already suspected someone named Theodorus, and he connected the divination results to that name, making it a self-fulfilling prophesy. In other words, fortune-telling is a superstition supported by a psychological need for a last little push to do something you already have made up your mind to do. It’s a method of avoiding responsibility—Augh!”

“Wh-wh-wh-what?”

Victorique, who had broken off suddenly, clutched her head, groaning. Kazuya leapt to his feet, worried that she finally had lost her mind entirely, but Victorique simply glared at him.

“Trying to explain this to a mind as ordinary as yours has made me even more bored!”

“H-how rude.”

“Argh, it hurts! The boredom hurts! And it’s all your fault!”

“Hey!” Kazuya yelled, but then he remembered something. “Oh, yeah. Victorique, speaking of fortune-telling . . .”

He’d remembered the story Cecile had told him, that an old woman had been murdered in a very strange way in a village nearby, and that although she’d been shot inside a locked room, they couldn’t find the weapon. The victim was named Roxanne, and she had been . . .

“Yesterday, a fortune-teller was killed in a village near here.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Victorique’s shoulders twitched. She looked up, and for the first time all day, she looked directly at Kazuya, with her glittering gold hair cascading in waves down to the floor, her skin so pale you could almost see the veins beneath it, and those emerald green eyes, filled with sadness like that of an old woman who has lived too long, which always seemed to be staring at something far away and unseen.

Despite himself, Kazuya shrank back, away from those eyes.

Victorique opened her mouth and said quietly, “Chaos.” Then, she blew smoke in Kazuya’s face.

Kazuya coughed. “Um, I don’t know that much about it, really,” he said, sitting down next to Victorique. The smoke had made him choke, and he wiped the tears away from his

eyes with his handkerchief. “Miss Cecile just told me a little in the hall earlier. All she knew was what the police had said and a few rumors that were floating around town. But apparently, this fortune-teller had bought a small, comfortable mansion on the edge of town, right around the time the Great War started.”

The fortune-teller, Roxanne, was covered in so many wrinkles that people said she must’ve been eighty or ninety, and she lived in the mansion with an Indian manservant and an Arab maid. Her granddaughter also had been visiting when it all happened the night before.

“Wait. Why was the manservant Indian and the maid Arab?”

“Apparently, she liked having foreign servants. And she was a woman of learning, so she spoke Hindu and Arabic, at least well enough for ordinary conversation. Oh, the maid spoke only Arabic, but the manservant spoke English and French, as well.”

The elderly Roxanne had been shot in her own bedroom. The bullet has passed through her left eye, killing her instantly. The killer’s identity remained a mystery, though. The three people in the house—the manservant, the maid, and the granddaughter—all were considered suspects, but the investigation was getting nowhere.

“Why not?”

“Um, apparently the door and the window both were locked from the inside, and they couldn’t find the pistol that had killed her. All three insist they didn’t do it.”

“Hmm . . .” Victorique looked at him expectantly, obviously wanting more.

Kazuya awkwardly scratched his head. He didn’t know anything more, what could he add? Before he could say anything, he heard someone come into the library down below. Kazuya glanced down over the railing and spotted the police detective Cecile had mentioned, Grevil de Blois.

Kazuya sighed, patting Victorique on the shoulder. “The rest, you can hear from the man with the weird hair.”

“Mm?” Victorique scowled.

They could hear de Blois climbing into the faculty elevator.

Clang! Clatter!

With a hideous noise, the metal cage rose up toward them.

Down below, the detective’s subordinates, two young men in rabbit-fur hunting caps, came skipping in, holding hands. Apparently intending to wait below, they looked up and waved their free hands merrily.

Grevil de Blois was an aristocrat who had forced the local police to make him a detective purely because he had an interest in crime. His two subordinates were forced to follow him around as he engaged in his hobbies.

As Kazuya looked away from the two men below, there was a particularly loud clang before the elevator stopped and de Blois appeared at the end of a little hallway that led away from the conservatory.

Beyond the beautiful plants and the soft light from the window above stood a very strange-looking man. He wore a three-piece suit and a flashy ascot tie, and silver cuffs glittered

at his wrists. He was every bit the image of the wealthy young dandy—yet somehow, gone terribly wrong.

It was his hair. His dark blond hair was, for some reason, curled forward in a spiral to a point, and hardened like that. It was a hairstyle that easily could be used as a deadly weapon.

He folded his arms, leaned against the door in an elegant pose, and said, “Afternoon, Kujo!”

“Hi.”

De Blois advanced toward them cheerily, his attention focused entirely on Kazuya. He never even glanced in Victorique’s direction. She never looked at him, either, simply continuing to puff away on her pipe.

“You remember, surely? How my brilliant mind was able to save your life? That was a horrible case indeed. The memories!”

“Victorique solved it, not you.”

“I thought I would talk over another case with you. For some reason, talking with you seems to clear my mind—my brilliant detective’s mind.”

Once before, Kazuya had witnessed a murder on his way back to school, and he’d almost been arrested by de Blois; however, he’d been saved from forced deportation or a murder trial by the mysterious and beautiful Victorique. Of course, Victorique had not rescued him out of concern for his wellbeing. What she called the “fountain of knowledge” had deemed the fragments of chaos swirling around the case worth reconstructing, so she had explained the truth. After she’d finished explaining her deductions, though, Victorique made no effort to convince

anyone of Kazuya's innocence. He'd been forced to explain her deductions to the police himself, and in that way was able to clear his name.

Remembering how he'd felt that day still made him break out in a cold sweat.

Ever since, the colorful detective de Blois had made his way to the conservatory every time he encountered a difficult case, filling Kazuya in on all the details. Victorique sat next to him, listening, and then she reconstructed the fragments of chaos—whereupon the detective would take his leave, going out to solve the case.

In other words, his reputation as a great detective was entirely dependent on Victorique.

"Talk to Victorique, please. I really won't understand any of it."

"What do you mean? You're the only one here."

Kazuya looked from one to the other, disgusted. Apparently, Victorique and de Blois had known each other since before Kazuya ever got in trouble. However, each adamantly refused to acknowledge the other. It seemed to upset the detective to rely on Victorique. Obviously, he could have simply solved the cases on his own instead, but apparently this was not always possible.

Victorique looked over at Kazuya. "Why not, Kujo? I will carry on reading over here. The two of you can talk as much as you like. I may occasionally talk to myself, but pay no attention. If my random utterances happen to be a hint, that is entirely coincidental."

"No, but . . . that's just so—"

"Great! Let's begin! Now, pay attention!" de Blois declared, folding his arms.

Kazuya gave up and turned toward him to listen.

Detective de Blois produced a pipe from his pocket and placed it in his mouth with a fluid, haughty movement.

Kazuya watched in silence as white smoke rose from the pipe and vanished into the detective's spiral hairdo.

Victorique's attention remained focused on her books as she puffed away at her own pipe.

When de Blois had finished exhaling smoke, he began, "A fortune-teller known as Roxanne was killed last night. She dined with others before retiring to her quarters, a room on the first floor. The manservant was outside her window—according to him, he was returning the rabbits they had let run wild in the garden to their pen."

"Rabbits?" Victorique asked.

De Blois twitched, and then he nodded at Kazuya. "This fortune-teller kept a number of rabbits and one hunting dog. She occasionally would release the rabbits and allow the dog to track them down and kill them. I don't know the reason why, but apparently they divided the rabbits into those to be killed and those to be taken good care of and allowed to die of old age. How they decided which was which, I have no idea. After all, the woman was . . . eccentric."


"I see," Victorique said. Despite the fact that she and the detective were having a conversation, neither one ever glanced at the other. Kazuya was stuck in the middle. He always was.

“The maid was cleaning in the next room. The granddaughter was upstairs, playing loud music and dancing. When they heard the gunshot, they all gathered in the hallway, shocked. The maid knocked on the door, worried about the fortune-teller. She cried out, but there was no answer. The door was locked, so the manservant ran and got an ax, suggesting that they should break down the door. The door was made of very thin wood, so that the old woman in a wheelchair could open and close it herself; he was sure it would take only one swing to break it down. At this point, the granddaughter cried out, objecting very strongly; she wanted the house left intact, because if the old lady had died, this house would now belong to her—a very self-serving individual. The manservant backed down, but the maid was a foreigner, and she was unable to understand what the granddaughter was saying, so she came back from the next room with a pistol she kept to protect herself. Before they could stop her, she shot the lock off the door. Furious, the granddaughter attacked the maid. While the two women fought, the manservant entered the room alone. According to him, the fortune-teller was lying on the floor as if she had fallen out of the wheelchair. She had been shot through the left eye, and she was dead. The window was locked from the inside, and we haven’t found a weapon.”

“Hmm.”

“I have no idea what to make of it,” the detective murmured.

“Is that all?” Victorique said, yawning as if bored out of her mind. She raised her frail arms, stretching like a lazy cat. Then, she yawned again.



Detective de Blois scowled at her profile with an astonishing degree of loathing. He dragged away his gaze and said, “Well, we know who did it, anyway. The manservant was outside the window, which is very suspicious. But the proof . . . !”

“The killer is the maid, Grevil,” Victorique stated mid-yawn.

The shocked detective spun toward her. Remembering himself, he quickly shifted his glance to Kazuya. “What ever do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know! No matter how much you shake me!”

Victorique said quietly, “The maid spoke only Arabic, correct? And only the fortune-teller could understand her?”

“Mm?” Mid-struggle, both Kazuya and de Blois turned to gape at her.

“What do you mean, Victorique?” Kazuya asked.

“It’s simple, not even worth calling chaos. Don’t you see? The maid knocked on the door and shouted in Arabic. There was no answer, so she went to the next room, got a pistol, and came back into the hall. Then, she shot the lock off the door.”

“Yeah.”

“The only person who knew what the maid shouted was the fortune-teller.”

Kazuya turned slowly toward her. “What did she say?”

“Presumably, something like this—although I don’t know if she made the granddaughter or the manservant into the villain—‘They’re going to kill you. Did you hear that gunshot? Get away from the window and move over by the door. I’ll save you.’”



Kazuya and the detective exchanged glances.

“What? What does that mean? Aaarrghhhhh!” the detective groaned, clutching his head.

In his place, Kazuya asked, “So, at that time, the fortune-teller was . . . still alive?”

“Of course,” Victorique nodded. She started to turn back to her books, but then she frowned and looked up again.

Kazuya and the detective both were staring at her, looking puzzled. Light was shining down on them from the window above. The leaves and branches in the conservatory swayed in a gentle breeze, along with de Blois’ hair.

There was a long silence, and then Victorique yawned again. Because no one had understood the first time, she said, annoyed, “Was that insufficiently verbalized?”

“Totally. Thanks, Victorique.”

“My point is that the first gunshot didn’t kill the fortune-teller. That was a fake. The maid shot the fortune-teller right in front of all the witnesses—after they came running to see what had happened. She shouted in Arabic, tricked the fortune-teller into moving in front of the door, where it would be ‘safe,’ and then shot the fortune-teller and the lock at the same time. The reason Roxanne was shot through the left eye is that she’d been trying to peer through the keyhole, on the other side of which the barrel of a gun waited.”

“Hold on a second, Kujo. The first gunshot was . . . ?”

“Detective, I’m not the one explaining this. Victorique is!”

“The first gunshot,” Victorique yawned again, “the maid fired while she was in the adjacent room, aiming to scare the

fortune-teller and bring everyone else running. I have no idea which way she pointed the gun, but if you look through that room, you should find the spent cartridge."

"I see." De Blois stood up, straightening his three-piece suit as if nothing at all had happened and sweeping one hand back through his spiral hair. He walked quickly toward the elevator, as if running away.

Indignant, Kazuya yelled after him: "Detective!"

"What?"

"You should thank her. She helped you a lot!"

"What on Earth do you mean?" he said, turning around with an extremely pompous look on his face. His shoulders straight and his chin up, he glared down his nose at Kazuya, slowly taking the pipe from his mouth and blowing smoke in Kazuya's face.

Kazuya coughed at the smoke.

As he walked away, the detective quickly said, "Kujo, I came here only out of concern, to make sure that the Asian boy I once rescued was doing well. You appear to be in fine health, but you do say the strangest things."

"Grevil," Victorique said quietly, looking up.

Inside the elevator cage, the detective turned slowly around, looking anxious. He stared back at Victorique nervously, as if he were staring at something huge and frightening rather than a tiny girl. It was a strange sight—as if, for a moment, the child and the adult had switched places.

Kazuya looked from one to the other in silence.

"The mystery of the killer's motivation probably will be hidden in whatever object took the first bullet shot."

"What do you mean?"

"Figure that out for yourself, Grevil."

Clang! The elevator began moving. Inside, De Blois' dandified features were twisted in frustration. The cage descended to the floor, and he was gone.

Victorique yawned again, and then she began rolling around on the floor, back and forth like a gate opening and closing, while whining, "Over in a second! Bored again! Aaaaaaugh!"

"Say, Victorique," Kazuya said, scowling.

Victorique showed no signs of caring about his bad mood. She kept right on rolling around on top of her open books.

"Detective weird hair is going to try and take all the credit again, even though you always solve the cases for him."

"That bothers you?" Victorique asked, surprised.

Kazuya nodded. "I don't think it's fair. He relies on you, but he's so rude about it."

Victorique rolled over again, not the least bit interested.

"Right," Kazuya said, looking up, "You know him, right? I mean, I can tell you don't get along, but . . ."

Victorique didn't respond.

Kazuya hung his head, giving up.

Suddenly, Victorique jumped to her feet. "Kujo! Dance for me."

"Huh?"

"Don't just sit there. Stand up and dance!"

"Why?"

Victorique nodded, as if there could be only one explanation. "Because I'm bored."

"No, I'm leaving. Oh, afternoon classes are about to start, so—"

"Kujo," Victorique hissed, her green eyes catching his.

Kazuya froze like a frog transfixed by the stare of a snake. Then, he coughed—she had blown smoke at him again. "Come on, Victorique!"

"Kujo, hurry!" Victorique said, eyes like steel. "Dance."

"Okay."

Kazuya racked his mind before beginning to perform a dance from the summer festival back home. As the son of a soldier, he had spent little time on frivolous things like singing and dancing.

"Hmm. What kind of dance is that?"

"Bon Festival. Will you join me?"

"Of course not. Augh! So bored!"

"You know, you can be really mean sometimes."

"Maybe I should just go to sleep . . ." Victorique's sigh echoed through the conservatory.



Three

The next morning, as always, Kazuya arose at exactly half past seven in his bedroom in the Saint Marguerite Academy's male dormitory. He washed his face and neatly combed his

hair. Then, leaving the other boys drifting around sleepily, he headed for his usual seat in the cafeteria.

The rather voluptuous matron placed his food on the table: bread, milk, and fruit. As he was about to take his first bite, Kazuya suddenly yelled, "Aaahhh!"

The matron, who had been sitting cross-legged in a chair in the corner, smoking a cigarette and reading the newspaper, looked up in surprise. "What's wrong? Bug in your food?"

"No, the food's perfect. But that headline . . . !"

Kazuya borrowed the matron's morning edition and devoured it.

The front page had the following headline: "*De Blois Does It Again, Solves the Shooting of the Fortune-Teller Roxanne!*"

As usual, de Blois had taken all the credit for Victorique's induction. According to the article, the Arab maid had been arrested; because she was incredibly beautiful, the detective himself had taken charge of questioning her. And . . .

"Wha—?"

The granddaughter who had inherited the fortune-teller's fortune—the terrifying one who had grappled with the maid—had, as thanks, bestowed de Blois with a passionate kiss—which was fine—but also a luxury yacht. The detective had proudly announced his plans to spend the weekend sailing around on his new yacht.

"A yacht?"

Kazuya returned the paper to the matron and sat down again. He thought for two or three seconds: *That kiss and yacht*

rightfully belong to Victorique. This mistake is unacceptable. Damn that drill-headed cop! Then, Kazuya stood up.



“Victorique!!”

After Kazuya had run to the Saint Marguerite Library that morning and raced up the narrow maze of stairs, all he found was an empty conservatory. He glanced at the clock: It was not yet eight. Victorique had yet to arrive.

Kazuya ended up climbing all the way back down the stairs. Halfway down, one of the teachers must have climbed into the elevator, because he heard the hydraulic systems rattling to life.

As he came running out of the library, he crashed into another student.

“Eek!”

“S-sorry! Oh, Avril.”

It was the beautiful British girl with long arms and legs and short golden hair. She had dropped the photograph in her hand, so Kazuya bent over and picked it up. It was a picture of a young man, staring out of the frame with a faint smile. He was extraordinarily handsome, with a gentle appeal that made you want to like him on sight.

Drooping a little, Kazuya said, “Morning, Avril. Who’s this, your boyfriend?”

“Ah ha ha! Wow, Kujo, that’s absolutely impossible,” Avril laughed heartily, and she slapped Kazuya on the back.

It hurt. Girls were stronger than he had suspected. "Ow."

"This is Ned."

"Huh?"

"Never heard of him? Ned Baxter. He's a British stage actor, very popular. He's handsome, of course, but he's also a really good actor."

"Hmm. You're a fan?"

"Nah," Avril shook her head. "But a friend of mine from home gave it to me, so . . ."

"Oh."

Avril carefully put the photograph back in her pocket. "See you in class!"

"Y-yeah."

"Wanna hear another scary story?"

"No, this time I'll have a scary story for you."

"Even though you're a scaredy cat?"

Kazuya looked shocked, but Avril didn't appear to notice. She waved merrily and ran off.

Scaredy cat . . . ?

Recovering, Kazuya ran off, as well. He left the school grounds and headed into town, where he ran inside the police station, which faced onto a busy road filled with people, horse-drawn carriages, and—recently—cars.

The building was made of brick, its walls covered in vines. And it was such an old building that it looked ready to collapse at any moment. There were a number of cracks in the glass doors at the front entrance, and the turquoise tiles on the floor were broken here and there.

Grevil de Blois' office was the largest room on the third floor—larger than the chief's office, for no better reason than de Blois' noble birth. There were shelves on all four walls of the room and, despite this being a police station, they were filled with expensive dolls for some reason. It was a bizarre office, clearly showing the occupant's enthusiasms. De Blois himself looked up in surprise when Kazuya came barging in, ignoring de Blois' hand-holding subordinates' efforts to stop him.

"Yo, Kujo."

"De Blois, you idiot!"

"Huh?"

A number of other policemen had gathered outside, wondering what the commotion was. De Blois' subordinates were holding hands, blocking the door; even so, the famous aristocrat detective and the Asian boy glaring at him obviously had attracted interest.

"I read this morning's newspaper. Explain!"

"Um, well," de Blois stammered, growing flustered. "I never asked for that kiss! She just suddenly . . . and she was kind of old, so I wasn't all that—"

"Not the kiss!"

"Eh?"

"The gratitude of the bereaved *and* the luxury yacht! That all never really belonged to you, did it? It all belongs to Victorique—mmmmph!"

No sooner had Kazuya started to say her name than de Blois bounded across the room, slapped his hand over Kazuya's mouth, and glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

The assembled crowd was listening closely. Keeping both his arms wrapped around Kazuya's neck and mouth, the detective sidled over within reach of the door and violently kicked it shut. Only then did he remove his hand.

"Haaaaah!"

"Watch your mouth. They'll find out!"

"Yeah?"

"Ah, okay. I get it, I get it: I can't fight you anymore, your passion has undone me."

"Huh?"

"I'd planned to take my yachting excursion this weekend all alone, one man against the sea, battling the forces of nature in solitude. Oh, well—I'll bring you two along."

The detective sighed dramatically. Then, he perched on the edge of his desk and hugged one of his dolls to him, tenderly stroking its hair.

Kazuya backed away, gazing sidelong at the freak in front of him.

As if to himself, de Blois muttered, "She . . ."

"She?"

"Victorique . . . if I ask for it, I'm sure I can get permission for her to go out. After all, I am the great detective Grevil de Blois. I can pull certain strings. Mm."

Kazuya frowned.

"Permission?"

"Never mind. Well, I will contact you with further details at the end of the week," de Blois said, taking one of the doll's hands and making it wave goodbye. This was so creepy that Kazuya fled the room.



“So, you agreed to go with him this weekend?”

They were in the library at Saint Marguerite. Kazuya had come running up the staircase maze again; this time, he found the beautiful girl sitting in her usual spot near the conservatory, smoking her pipe. Victorique was surrounded by the usual spiral of difficult-looking books. She never bothered to look up, she simply kept on reading, her long blonde hair tumbling out behind her like an unwound turban. Although she was listening to Kazuya’s story, she never stopped turning pages; it was obvious that she could decipher these texts and talk to him at the same time.

“Yeah.”

“With Grevil?”

Kazuya beamed proudly. “I wasn’t able to get the yacht transferred to your name, but at least I scored a provisional victory.”

His fury had all burned away, and now he was a little drunk with success.

Victorique raised her head and fixed him with a disgusted stare. Her eyes were a sad green, like that of an old woman who had lived too long. Her voice was withered and old, but it carried well: “One question.”

“Yes, what?”

“Kujo, do you like Grevil?”

“God, no. I can’t stand him. He makes me sick.”

“One more question: Kujo, do you expect to enjoy frittering away your precious weekend in the company of the despicable Grevil?”

“Of course not! Oh.” Kazuya stood stunned for a moment, and then he slumped to the floor. “How did this happen?”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to ask you. Well . . .” Victorique looked up from her books, puffing on her pipe and showing no signs of caring about Kazuya’s dejection. She gazed up at the soft light spilling in through the conservatory roof, her skin gleaming white.

“Well, I get to go out—out of this prison. Grevil said he could get permission,” she muttered cryptically, but Kazuya was too dejected to notice.

“How did we ever end up going on an excursion with that detective? At least he must be equally put out, just as miserable as we are. If only he could do something about his hair. It’s embarrassing being seen with him—” Suddenly, he noticed that Victorique had stood up.

She was only about four foot seven. And with her long blonde hair, pale skin, and glittering emerald green eyes, she looked less like a human being than a beautifully made doll that was somehow moving on its own.

Kazuya stood up, too.

He almost never saw Victorique stand; every time she did, he was surprised again by how tiny she was. Kazuya was not a terribly tall boy, but her little blonde head came up only to his chest. She had to lean her head back and look up at him like a child.

“We must pack.”

“Huh? The weekend is several days away!”

Victorique shot him a pained expression before walking away in silence. She pushed the button for the hydraulic elevator, opened the bars, and stepped into the cage.

“Aaaaugh!”

“What ails you, Kujo?”

“Victorique, why are you taking the elevator?”

Victorique turned around and took the pipe from her lips. “Because I have permission. This elevator is for the faculty and me. What? You look ready to cry.”

“No, I just . . . I thought you were climbing the staircase maze, too. I thought you were going through the same pain as me.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re the only one dumb enough to waste time climbing all the way up here, Kujo. Come to think of it,” Victorique added distantly, “this morning, when I was riding the elevator up, you were on the stairs, running down much too fast for me to call out.”

“You should have! I was here to see you!” Kazuya said, depressed. Victorique closed the cage. Quickly, he begged, “Let me on!”

“I can’t do that. It’s to be used by the faculty and me alone. You have to trot on down the stairs, suffering and leaving your thighs quivering and exhausted. With all the time you spend studying, the exercise does you good. Make yourself pointlessly strong!”

Kazuya stared at her in shock. He’d been raised on an island country in the Orient alongside his brothers, who had

brilliant minds and honed physiques, so his family constantly had ordered him to run or do push-ups, and he often had gone running around his home. Since he'd arrived in Sauville, though, he'd barely gotten any exercise. Both of his brothers were big and strong; between the two of them, they'd kept all the bad kids in line. His oldest brother, who'd been quite the fighter, was now an academic. The other brother, who'd been so good at running away, had gone into politics. Both of them had proven unexpectedly successful.

While Kazuya thought about home, Victorique grinned and waved. "Well, friend, see you down below."

"Eh, wait, Victoriqqqqqqque!"

Clang!

The cage began to descend without him.



Four

And so time passed. The weekend approached and, disappointingly, a cloudy sky hung over Saint Marguerite.

The student dorms were nestled in the mountains. Although they were called "dorms," this was where the children of aristocrats slept: The building was two stories of the finest oak, and silk curtains hung in every window. Each child had a large room to call his or her own, chandeliers hung in the cafeteria, and the students wanted for nothing.

Outside the dorms, Kazuya and Victorique were arguing.

"Why do you have so much luggage? You're weird, Victorique!"

"This is the absolute minimum required for travel, carefully calculated using all the vast stores of knowledge my mind has collected," Victorique stated, with less than her usual confidence.

Kazuya turned bright red and thrust a finger out toward the massive trunk, which was at least twice her size. "We're staying one night on a yacht! How could you possibly need all this? You aren't running away from home! The two of us could fit in there together!"

"If I say I need it, I need it!" Victorique insisted, growing obstinate.

"You have more baggage than I brought with me from Japan, and I came halfway around the world to *live* here! I was on the boat for, like, a month. Victorique, can you even lift this thing yourself?"

"Of course not."

"Then—"

"Kujo, you will carry it."

"Stupid!"

Ignoring Victorique's feeble attempts to stop him, Kazuya began inspecting the contents of the trunk. Victorique muttered a few things—along the lines of "my luggage!" and "privacy!"—but nobody could've stopped Kazuya at this point.

Cecile, who was walking past, stopped in surprise. "You two certainly are getting along. But what are you doing?"

“Perfect timing. Here!” Kazuya said, tossing something in Cecile’s direction. She caught it with a surprised expression.

Victorique wailed sadly, “My compass!”

“They have one on the yacht already. We don’t need this life preserver either, or this pile of spare clothes. You only need one change of clothing! Mm . . . why is there a set of silverware in here? And a chair? Are you planning on becoming shipwrecked?”

Eventually, he had condensed the items down to what would fit in a bag that Victorique could carry over her shoulders, and then off they went, leaving the trunk with Cecile and setting off for town on foot.

“Kujo, you are less a man,” Victorique grumbled, “than a berserk organizer.”

“Am not.”

“They say even the best of friends often discover each other’s flaws while traveling, and the bonds between them shatter.”

“What are you talking about? Oh, Victorique, run! We need to catch the train leaving at six ’til.”

Victorique groaned dismally as they ran to the village’s only station, a tiny place with a round clock under a triangular roof. The entire station shook each time a steam engine pulled in, the vibrations carrying through the floorboards.

Kazuya bought a ticket and was about to go through the gates when he noticed Victorique staring at him blankly.

“Victorique, your ticket?”

“Ticket?”

"You buy it here. Get out your wallet—" But when he saw how many bills were jammed in her wallet, he quickly closed it again. He bought her ticket with his own money and ran onto the platform, holding her hand and pulling her after him.

They darted through the crowds of grown-up travelers like mice across a kitchen floor. The steam-driven train they wanted to catch was in the middle of the platform, and it was just starting to move.

Kazuya looked back as he pulled Victorique along by the hand. She was running as hard as she could, her blonde hair streaming out behind her. Kazuya lifted her tiny body into the train, and then he jumped on after her.

The train gathered speed, clearing the platform with a screech.

Victorique was standing near the door, holding the handrail, her blonde hair puffed up by the wind like cotton candy. Beneath her hair, her emerald green eyes gleamed.

The train traveled faster and faster. At first, they could see people in the vineyards surrounding the town; but soon, the train was moving too quickly to see much of anything.

Kazuya coaxed Victorique away from the door, toward the seats. She followed without argument.

They sat opposite each other, resting back against the hard seats and catching their breath.

Then, Kazuya cried, "Why do you have so much money?"

"I might need it."

"Not that much! If anyone saw how much you have, they'd steal it! Augh. I can't believe it. Victorique?"

Victorique had both hands on the windowsill, and she was staring out the window like a small child.

Kazuya peered closely at her face. He thought he might have made her mad, considering he'd been yelling at her all morning, but she didn't look angry. She was just staring out the window, her emerald green eyes open wide, as if surprised.

Thick green forests and beautiful rolling foothills sped past, gradually being replaced with roads and buildings as the train neared the city. Victorique watched, fascinated, all the way from the mountains to their destination. Her gaze shifted only occasionally, when she looked down at the clattering wheels or up at the black smoke belching from the smokestack. It was as if she'd never been on a train before.

Kazuya kept his silence, unobtrusively watching her profile as she stared out the window.



They were headed for a station in a bustling town near the Mediterranean Sea. Compared with the village in the Alps, the station was so busy that it was hard to believe it was in the same country. And even on the station platform, they could smell the sea.

Kazuya led Victorique off the platform. This station was much bigger than the one in their academic town. There were a number of different platforms, and the ceiling was so high above them it made Kazuya dizzy to look up at it. If they weren't careful, they could get lost there easily.

Adults who were much more used to travel hurried past them in either direction. Here and there, a red-suited porter darted past while conveying heavier luggage. Hundreds of people were headed for or dismounting trains at each platform, and they jostled one another in the resulting crowd. There were few children, though, and every now and then, someone would cast a curious glance at Kazuya and Victorique.

From the moment she stepped off the train, Victorique's head never stopped turning. Kazuya finally found the exit, and they started to head toward it, but Victorique kept starting off feverishly in all kinds of directions, toward anything that attracted her interest.

Kazuya quickly gave up and took her hand again. She had such a small hand, it made it seem as if he were taking around his little sister rather than someone his own age.

"Try to stay with me, Victorique."

Victorique's head kept spinning. And every time she found something that mystified her, she'd ask: "What's that?"

"An ice cream shop."

"And that?"

"News vendor. Hey! Walk straight! You'll get run over!"

Almost embracing her tiny frame, Kazuya led Victorique out onto the street. There were several lanes drawn on the wide road outside, and cars and carriages hustled by. There were a great number of people on the paved surface, as well, striding purposefully across the road while dodging traffic or clambering into horse-drawn carriages. The sides of the road

were packed with shops, the windows filled with expensive candy, beautiful dresses, hats, fans, and the like.

They could smell the sea again—it must be close.

Kazuya stopped and whistled.

A four-wheel coach pulled up in front of them, to Victorique's great surprise. "Magic?"

"That's how you hail them. Come on, get in."

Even in the carriage, Victorique's attention was devoted to the view passing by. She stared at the people and buildings as if she'd never seen the like before.

After Kazuya had given the driver directions, he asked, "Victorique, have you been outside much?"

She didn't answer, but she frowned a little, so Kazuya let it drop.

By the time they reached the Gulf of Lion, where they were to meet the detective, Kazuya was exhausted.



Five

The wharf faced the Mediterranean, and it was lined with luxury yachts belonging to the rich and noble, as well as any number of passenger ships representing designs from all over the world. The passengers walking back and forth across the docks were of every race and background.

A young man stood on the deck of a gleaming yacht near the cliff, wearing a nautical shirt of horizontal stripes and

gleaming white pantaloons. There was a vermilion bandanna tied around his neck, and his hair was sculpted into its usual weaponlike spike. It was Grevil de Blois.

When he saw the two of them approaching, he waved enthusiastically. "Ahoy, partner!"

Kazuya waved listlessly, looking tired.

De Blois bounced merrily down to the wharf, striking a suggestive pose in front of them, one foot forward. He almost lost his balance.

"I've been wondering: How on Earth did I find myself wasting my weekend with the two of you?"

"We were wondering the same thing. Nice yacht."

"I've named it the de Blois. By the way, Kujo," the detective said, suddenly serious. He leaned over and whispered, loud enough for Victorique (who, when standing side by side, was a good fifteen inches shorter) to hear, "About that case . . . the first shot in the room next door . . ."

"You're asking Victorique for another favor?" Kazuya growled, but Victorique shook him off. He glanced at her, and she looked like she wanted to hear this, so he held his tongue.

"It was a mirror that took the first shot—shattered to dust. A very old mirror—apparently Roxanne used it when she was telling fortunes."

"A magic mirror?" Victorique murmured, and de Blois shuddered.

"The room was full of objects used for fortune-telling. For example—"

"A silver urn filled with wine, a copper urn filled with oil, and a glass urn filled with water."

"Urp?" the detective looked down at Victorique as if staring into a nightmare.

Victorique shrugged. "Tools often used in fortune-telling, Grevil."

"You know all about things like that, but you can't buy a train ticket?" Kazuya scoffed. They both ignored him. He slumped.

"And as for the Arab maid . . ."

"Mm."

"A vision."

"So the papers said," Kazuya pointed out.

"As for her motivation, the maid spoke torrents, but all in some outlandish tongue. We were unable to find any reputable-looking Arabic interpreters, so we have as of yet been unable to communicate with her clearly. The interpreter we did find claimed she was saying only one thing." De Blois paused for effect before continuing quietly, "This is revenge for the box."

Victorique looked up. Her eyes met the detective's.

This was the first time Kazuya had ever seen them look directly at each other. He held his breath, having no idea what would happen . . . but nothing did. Instead, they heard a strange cry in the distance.

"Detectiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiive!"

All three turned to see a familiar pair running toward them. Both men wore rabbit-skin hunting caps; as they ran, they were holding hands. They were de Blois' subordinates.

"What? Did something happen?" de Blois asked, puffing up his chest and pointing at them dramatically.

They pulled up short in front of him.

"Nice pose, detective!"

"Most impressive!"

As they praised de Blois, Kazuya glared at them sidelong, thinking that de Blois himself (and his hairstyle) had only become so weird because they encouraged him. He was about to say as much to Victorique, but she had vanished. When he looked around for her, he found her aboard the yacht, examining it closely. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her again.

"Detective, it's terrible! The Arab maid—"

"Has escaped!"

"Whaaaat? R-really?" de Blois shrieked.

All three ran off; however, de Blois quickly remembered himself and came running back.

"Kujo, I have to run! You may board the yacht, but don't try and sail it anywhere. I'm the only one with a license!"

"Eh? We just get to sit here? Not going anywhere? That'll be... really boring."

"I know! Perseverance!" the detective snapped, and then he and his subordinates ran off together, holding hands.

Kazuya watched them go, dazed, thinking, *We can't sail? 'Perseverance'? Augh.*

He turned limply toward Victorique, who was getting off the yacht, her frilly lace dress rather dirty and her golden hair a mess.

She glanced briefly after de Blois, but she didn't appear to care that he was leaving.

"So, this yacht once belonged to the fortune-teller's granddaughter, right?"

"Yeah, apparently."

"The daughter inherited Roxanne's possessions, so this yacht originally belonged to Roxanne."

"Probably."

"Hmm. By the way," she started, but Kazuya was still stunned by the detective's sudden departure and was only half-listening; annoyed, Victorique waved the thing in her hand in front of Kazuya's eyes. It was a white envelope.

"What's that?"

"I found it on board the yacht. It's an invitation, addressed to Roxanne."

Intrigued, Kazuya opened it.

They sat down on the edge of the yacht and together read the letter inside. In elegant French, it invited Roxanne on a luxury cruise—dinner on board a cruise ship anchored near the sea cliffs that very evening.

"You noticed, right?"

"Yeah."

First came the dinner menu, deliberately written in an extra-large, fancy script: "*The main dish will be rabbit.*"

Rabbit. The same creature Roxanne had kept in great quantities, which she'd allowed her dog to hunt and kill.

And one other thing: The dinner had a title, "Evening at the Bottom of the Box."

"We heard the word 'box' a moment before."

"Yeah, we did."

They looked at each other. Victorique's expression already was veering toward the stage where she'd make fun of Kazuya and wail that she was bored. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he'd experienced it enough times by now.

He glanced back at the yacht—the gleaming luxury yacht. It was beautiful . . . but if they couldn't go anywhere, also sort of dull.

He nodded. "Let's go."

"Mm."



By the time the two of them had followed the map on the invitation and found the cruise ship, the sun was already setting. The ship was docked near the darkened cliffs, and they were allowed to board when they showed the invitation. As they were the last to arrive, after they boarded, the ship quickly left the cliffs, moving out to sea.

Mm . . . ?

It was a very quiet ship. When it had been lying at anchor, it had nearly melted into the darkness, and they'd had to squint to make it out at all, as if it were an illusion. The unusually thick smokestacks stood out sinisterly against the night sky, making Kazuya shudder.

Mm? This ship's name . . . He cocked his head. *I feel like I've heard it somewhere before . . . no, can't remember. Oh well.*

The ship slid forward across the waves.

In the distance, thunder rumbled. The weather was taking a turn for the worse.

Written unobtrusively on the side of the ship was its name: The Queen Berry.



It was cold and I was hungry. They said Sauville was a rich country—but for the beggars crouching in the alleys downtown, it might as well have been a freezing forest.

I had left the orphanage three days before. Up until now, I'd managed to eat by gathering garbage or stealing—not anymore.

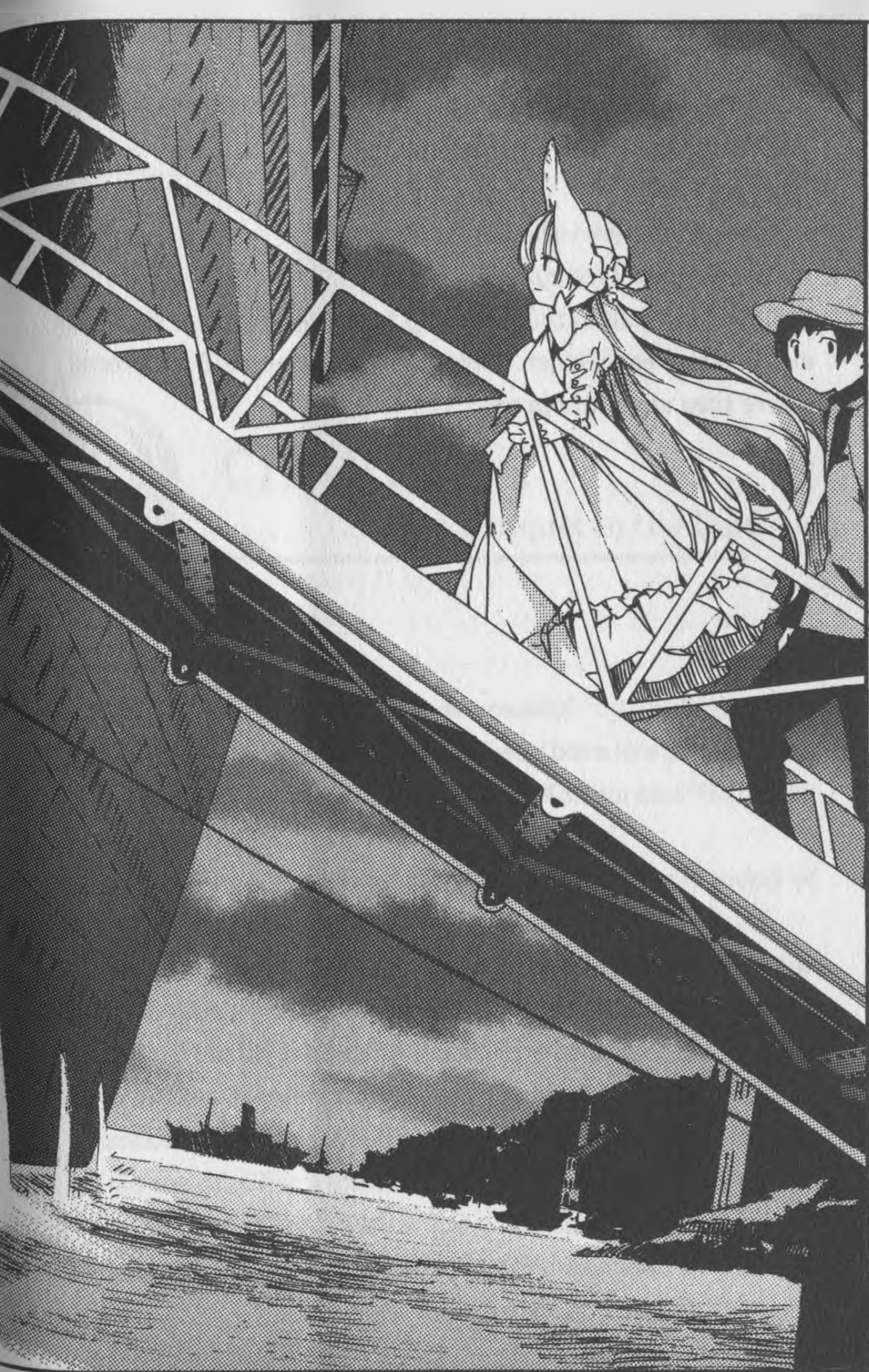
But then, a pair of strong arms lifted me up. They'd found me! At first, I thought I was being taken back to the orphanage, but I was too weak to struggle. Then, I was thrown into a carriage with iron bars across the door—like the cages they keep animals in.

It was dark, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see several other children in there, too. They all were dressed in rags, shivering in the cold. They were mostly boys, but there were some girls, too.

The carriage began to move, and I could hear the horses' hooves striking stone. From the driver's seat came men's voices—two of them, talking.

"Found a Sauville child."

"From where?"



“Probably an orphan. Nobody to look for it. Perfect.”

What? My ears perked up.

“Where next?”

“Need two more—shouldn’t take long.”

“Easier than I thought.”

It was too cold to think. I clung to the child next to me, and we warmed each other. The carriage shook as I wondered where they were taking us. . . .



CHAPTER 2

The Banquet in the Dark

One

The luxury cruise ship was surrounded by darkness. The guide's dark skin suggested he had been born in a distant land, and he spoke not a word as he guided Kazuya and Victorique forward by the light of the lantern in his hand.

It was a quiet evening, and they could hear the sound of waves lapping against the ship's stern.

Kazuya looked up at the night sky, and he realized that the field of stars glittering above was abruptly interrupted, as if a black wall cut off the side of the sky. He peered at the looming black wall for a moment, and he eventually worked out that it was an enormous smokestack. The smokestack was much, much too big for the ship, like a tower dominating the center of the deck.

"Come on, Kujo," Victorique said, and he hurried after her down a staircase into the ship. He'd assumed it would be

brightly lit inside—but for some reason, it was equally dark, the guide's lantern remaining the only source of light.

They were led into a large dining room with a long table and a glittering chandelier. The chandelier was not lit, however, and the room was fairly—no, very dark. The table held enough steaming hot food to feed ten. There were ten candles, as well, providing just enough light to make out the plate and silverware.

There were no waiters, and all the courses, from the appetizer to the main dish, already were on the table.

Nine adults were sitting around the table in the darkness. Dinner already had begun, and the only sound in the room was the scrape and clank of knives and forks.

To the side, there was one empty seat, presumably reserved for the murdered Roxanne. Kazuya turned back toward the guide, "There are two of us, so if you could bring another chair—huh?"

There was nobody there. He opened the door and looked out; the orange light from the guide's lantern was swaying away down the hall.

"Um, hey!"

He must have heard, but he didn't turn around.

This was alarming. Kazuya ran down the dark corridor after him. The lantern started whipping back and forth, moving away from him. The guide was running, too.

Why is he running?

Kazuya burst onto the darkened deck, but there was no sign of the guide. Baffled, Kazuya looked around.

How the . . . he vanished? He must be here!

Splash!

The sound came from below him. Kazuya ran to the railing and leaned over.

The light of the torch was moving across the darkened surface of the sea, with a faint splashing noise. The guide was rowing away from the boat now that the final passengers were on board. It was too dark to make out the figure on the boat, but Kazuya could think of nothing else. He stood leaning over the railing, staring after the boat, unbelieving.

Wh-what's going on . . . ?

He stood there for a few minutes, but then his eyes happened upon the name of the ship again: The Queen Berry. He definitely had heard that name before.

Kazuya frowned. He couldn't remember. There was no way for him to chase the man in the boat, so he walked back to the dining room.

"Hey, Victorique?"

Everyone was still munching away by candlelight in the darkened dining room, and in the empty seat at the end of the table, Victorique was sitting, working her way through the food in front of her.

With her little hands, she moved the silverware, carrying the food to her tiny mouth. Her movements were elegant yet very quick. She was even chewing fast. Her food was vanishing at an alarming rate.

Kazuya hurried over. "Um, hey, Victorique!"

"What is it, Kujo? I'm eating. Be silent."

"I'm here, too."

"I know. So?" Victorique said, polishing off the appetizer and moving on to the fish. She appeared to have no idea what he was driving at.

"I'm hungry, too!"

"The invitation was for Roxanne."

"So what?"

"Roxanne is only one person. Therefore, though we used her invitation to come here, there's only one dinner ready."

"Fine. I knew you'd say that. Do you have some cookies in your bag, at least? I'll make do with those. . . ."

Victorique finished removing the bones from her fish and looked up. There was a sinister expression playing around her lips. For a moment, he mistook it for a smile, but then the edges of her lips twisted, and her cheek twitched. "*I did.*"

"Great! Please?"

"They were in the trunk."

"Huh?"

"My brilliant mind suggested to me that they might come in use: a set of silverware, a chair, and emergency provisions."

"We still don't need the chair or silverware."

"Now they're all in Cecile's room. You dug your own grave." Victorique turned back to her meal. In a low voice, she added, "You may have shown results in the Orient impressive enough to allow you to study abroad, you may be the son of an uptight military man, but the conceited nonsense that comes out of your mouth fools no one. You are obstinate and over-confident. I have no cookies for the likes of you."

Yikes! Kazuya reeled. I can get a little pig-headed, and I do take everything too seriously . . . I know these are flaws, but . . .

Apparently sulking, Victorique concentrated on her rabbit. Evidently, her pride had been hurt when Kazuya had forced her to repack before they'd set out. But calling him "obstinate" and "over-confident," and saying he'd been fooling people with "conceited nonsense"? Those were the last things she had the right to say to anyone!

As Kazuya grimaced, someone patted his hind parts. He turned around, surprised, and discovered a young white man sitting in the next seat looking up at him.

"Oh, sorry—were we getting loud?"

"Not at all. Sit down," the man said, but there were no empty seats. When Kazuya looked confused, the man gave him a friendly smile, patting his knee. "Here would be fine."

"Eh? Nah."

"Sit, Kujo," Victorique growled, and Kazuya reluctantly took a seat on the strange man's knee. He turned his head to look at the man, who beamed back at him.

Kazuya had seen him somewhere before. He was good looking, but with his friendly smile, he came across less handsome than nice. He appeared to be British, and his clipped English reminded Kazuya of his classmate, Avril.

Right, Avril . . .

"Are you an English stage actor?" Kazuya asked.

The man beamed. "You know me?"

"My classmate had a photo. Ned Baxter, right?"

“Good to hear. You may have my meat. No, go right ahead.”

The man had cut a big piece off the main dish, and he was holding it up in front of Kazuya’s mouth. Still reeling, Kazuya ate it. It was delicious—melting on his tongue. Ned Baxter didn’t appear to have much of an appetite, and he’d barely touched his rabbit. Instead, he appeared happy to feed Kazuya.

Victorique watched them out of the corner of her eye, commenting nastily, “Suits you.”

“Victorique!”

“Come now, open wide!”

“Ah, thank you.”

Ned Baxter began discoursing merrily on all manner of subjects, from the British theatre to Shakespeare, his voice echoing through the silent dining room.

The other guests ate on in silence.

Ten minutes later, the sounds of eating had stopped. Ned’s voice, too, had fallen silent.

In the darkness of the dining room, the candle flames flickered dimly as they glowed dully and constantly in front of each seat. As for the guests around the table . . . One had his head on the table and was not moving. The guest next to him was lying back in his chair, his mouth open wide. There was a faint sound, like snoring, and then it was gone. Every single one of them was sound asleep. Kazuya had tumbled off Ned’s knee, falling to the floor with a thud.

The dining hall was completely silent, the only sound the faint hiss of the candle wicks burning.

After a while, the door opened quietly and admitted someone new. This twelveth passenger slowly worked around the table, peering closely into each face to see if all the guests were asleep, footsteps sounding faintly—until the figure stepped on Kazuya and jumped backward in surprise, yelping.

The twelveth passenger gazed down on the boy with a frown before taking in Victorique, asleep in the seat next to him, her long blonde hair flowing over the back of her chair. Victorique's astonishing beauty clearly made an impression. The figure frowned, peering closely at both of them again before leaning down to check the nameplate in front of Victorique, which read "*Roxanne*," further confusing the new entrant as to why this little girl was sitting there.

Meanwhile, the eleven guests slumbered on, unaware of the quiet intruder.



Two

"Hey. Wake up."

"Mmph?"

"Yes, you, the conceited organizer. Open your eyes."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black, Victorique!" Anger awakened Kazuya.

When the smoke struck his nose, he almost vomited. As he waved it away with his hands, he coughed violently. "Stop that, Victorique. You're such a child!"

Victorique shot him an injured glare.

Ignoring her, Kazuya looked around him. “Um, where are we?”

“In a room on the ship—the lounge, presumably,” Victorique said, turning her back on him.

The room was about the same size as the dining hall, but the exquisite chandelier on the ceiling made it as blindingly bright as the other room had been dark. On a small stage near the wall, scores were laid open as if someone had been playing there a moment before. And in the center of the room, several small tables were laid out for playing poker and drinking.

The adults from the dining room all were seated or slumped over in chairs, their heads on the tables in front of them. In the brightly lit room, they all looked to be at least forty, if not older. They wore well-fitted suits with gleaming shoes and cuffs, and those who wore mustaches kept them well groomed. They all looked to be very high class, and they all were clutching their heads and groaning.

There was a strange stench in the room—a smell like paint thinner, which made Kazuya’s nose tingle with each breath he took.

Victorique was sitting next to the chair where Kazuya had been sleeping. Ned Baxter was next to her; he was bent over, holding his head.

Kazuya had a slight headache, as well. He looked at Victorique, but she seemed unaffected. “What happened?”

“Apparently, there was something in the food. When I woke up, we all had been moved here.”

“Why?”

Victorique couldn't answer, so Kazuya looked around the lounge instead. To his surprise, all the male guests were getting on in years, aside from Ned, who was in his mid-twenties and by far the youngest adult there.

“They're all so much older, Victorique.”

“Not all. There's a younger woman over there.”

Kazuya followed Victorique's gaze: A young woman was sitting on her own by the door, her small, shapely hips planted on a table. She was wearing a brilliant crimson dress. And in sharp contrast to the dress, her glossy black hair hung down to her waist. Sensing their stares, she glanced toward them.

Kazuya's eyes were drawn to her lipstick, which matched her dress perfectly. Her shining blue eyes were framed by long lashes. Her face was very young—for a second, she looked like a child trying to dress grown-up—but she was probably in her early twenties. Her lips were pursed, as if she were getting ready to argue with someone at any moment. She was clearly a firecracker.

The lounge was completely silent, save the groans and the occasional frightened whisper. No one was moving; they all simply clutched their heads in pain.

Victorique took her eyes off the woman in the red dress and whispered to Kazuya, “Kujo, there's something strange.”

“What?”

“There's an extra person.”

Kazuya blinked. “Well, yeah. There were only ten seats, but then the two of us came.”

“Not like that, Kujo. An extra person besides us.”

“What do you mean?”

Victorique grew annoyed with his lack of comprehension and stamped her foot. Scowling, she spoke even faster than usual, “I mean, there were nine passengers in the dining room, and then we came, which made eleven. Count them now.”

Obediently, Kazuya counted the groaning figures scattered around the lounge: *One, two, three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . .* When he was done, he murmured, mystified, “You’re right, there are twelve of us now.”

“Exactly,” Victorique said, nodding with satisfaction and relieved that she’d finally gotten through to him. “That means someone in this room wasn’t with us in the dining hall, and that person is behind all of this. That passenger didn’t eat the dinner, but moved us here while we were sleeping. And now, that person is pretending to have been with us all along.”

Kazuya peered around the room. It appeared to him that the headaches the soporific had given them were not the only cause of distress for the guests: Everyone was looking around, terrified of something. They all obviously recognized one another, and yet they flinched whenever their eyes met.

Only the young Ned Baxter was muttering, “Who are these people? I don’t know any of them,” with a puzzled frown.

The woman in red suddenly stood up, shouting angrily, “What’s going on? Where are we? For—hey! This won’t open!” She had grabbed the doorknob with both hands and was shaking it violently. Everyone stared at her. Just as abruptly, she let go

of the doorknob and stared around her as if frightened. “Why? Where are—? Why is the door locked?”

No one answered.

The older men averted their eyes with discomfort. Ned, Victorique, and Kazuya stared back at the woman, who walked over to them and sat down in a nearby chair. As she did, her tiny handbag thumped Kazuya in the head.

“Ow!”

The woman didn’t apologize; rather, she glared at him and snorted.

It was Ned who asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Kazuya said, rubbing his head. *Kind of heavy for a purse*, he thought.

He turned toward Victorique and whispered, “So, Victorique, what’s going on?”

“Chaos,” she growled.

Kazuya looked blank.

“I must admit, there aren’t enough fragments yet to begin reconstruction.”

“In other words, you don’t know,” Kazuya said with understanding.

Victorique sulked, her cheeks puffing out like a child’s. She glared at him. “I merely admitted a lack of information, not that I don’t know.”

“Nonsense.”

“Mm! I understand everything! You should . . .”

“Over-confident.”

“Mmmmm!”

They glared at each other. Sparks leapt between Kazuya's deep black eyes and Victorique's clear emerald green ones.

But a few seconds later, Kazuya gave in: "Sorry."

"Mm. Remember that."

He didn't feel like he'd been in the wrong, but the sheer power in her eyes had caused him to apologize anyway.



Three

Kazuya's lingering headache faded quickly, and he stood up to investigate the lounge. When he peered behind the counter of the bar, he found rows of bottles inside.

Victorique joined him and looked them over. "Wine," she said.

"Yeah."

Victorique popped the cork from one bottle and poured some of the wine into a glass. The lights of the chandelier were reflected in the bright red liquid. After staring hard at the label, Victorique picked up the glass and smelled it. "Old and expensive," she declared.

"Really?"

Victorique nodded. "According to the label, anyway."

As they continued speaking quietly to each other, Ned came up to join them, still holding his head. "What are you up to, boy?"

"Looking to see if there are any clues."

"Be careful what you touch," Ned said in a low voice. Kazuya looked up at him, surprised. Ned grimaced. "They drugged the food. No telling what else they have in store for us."

"Oh."

Ned looked around before heading for a table holding a tennis racket and ball. As if people had been occupying the space a moment before, two glasses of whiskey also sat on the table, the ice in the glasses not yet melted. On the neighboring table, several cards were scattered about, as if someone had left in the middle of a game.

Kazuya made his way behind the bar, back out, and up onto the stage. There were classical music scores on the stands, open to the middle of a piece, as if the musicians had stepped down a few minutes before.

Out of nowhere, one of the men jumped up. "Stop wandering around!" he roared furiously.

Kazuya and Ned both spun toward him.

The man was elegantly dressed, wearing a tailored suit and glittering, jeweled cufflinks. His dark brown hair was perfectly parted to one side, and his freckled cheeks were shaking with rage.

"D-don't you understand? This ship is dangerous! Be still! If you move around, anything could happen!"

"What do you mean?" Victorique's whisper echoed across the silent lounge. The man turned around, eyes flashing, but to his great confusion, he could find no one who fit that withered old woman's voice he'd heard.

"Who said that?"

"I did," Victorique stated calmly, raising one hand.

Everyone stared at her, gasping when they saw the girl sitting in a chair at the side of the room, her green eyes glittering back at them and her golden hair wrapped around her tiny body like an unfurled turban. Several of the men allowed themselves an impressed sigh.

Kazuya could hear people muttering, "exquisite" and "beautiful" and all the men were staring at Victorique's delicate, doll-like features—first in surprise, and then with interest. Without thinking, Kazuya ran over in front of her, blocking their view.

Baffled, Victorique asked, "What are you doing?"

"Protecting you from their sinister gazes."

"Move. You're in my way."

Kazuya reluctantly moved aside.

The man who had yelled at Kazuya now fixed Victorique with a stern glare.

"Children should be seen and not heard!"

Taken aback, Kazuya started to respond, but someone swept past him. When he looked up, he saw that it had been the woman in the red dress, her strong eyes gleaming.

"But sir, this ship is very strange."

The man clammed up, turning his back on her.

The young woman pointed at the table. "Take this table: a racket, a ball, and whiskey with ice that hasn't melted. It's as if someone were playing tennis and dropped by the lounge for a drink. And there are cards all over this table, as well, but there's nobody here except us."

"Silence!" the man yelled. "Woman should not speak."

The woman in the red dress opened her eyes in surprise.

Ned, standing next to her, stepped forward, "Come now, she has a point."

"Hold you tongue, actor!"

Ned looked like he was about to punch the guy, but the woman grabbed his arm and held him back.

Hesitantly, Kazuya opened his mouth. "But—"

The man spun around and glared at him. "Shut up, Asian!"

Kazuya shut his mouth.

He looked around him—besides himself, Victorique, Ned, and the woman in red were the only ones angered by the man's abuse. The other seven men all were of the same age or a little older, and they slowly were gathering together, avoiding the younger foursome.

Ned and the woman came over toward Kazuya. In a low voice, Ned complained, "According to him, only old men are allowed to speak?"

"Mm."

"What a bunch of crap. Conceited jackass. I hate people like him," Ned grumbled.

Beside them, Victorique said grimly, "Chaos."

The woman in red began pacing back and forth, thinking. She took five steps one way, turned, and then took five steps back—over and over. It was obviously a habit of hers, one that Victorique watched with interest.

Of the twelve people locked in this room, eight appeared to know one another. The older men all were blue-blooded,

wearing expensive suits with polished shoes and immaculately groomed facial hair. It was clear that they hadn't seen one another for some time, and they were discussing recent events in low voices. Judging from the few scraps Kazuya could overhear, the eight men were high-ranking officials in the government of Sauville: wealthy textile merchants, ministers from the foreign officer, and other men of similar position. Despite their current predicament, they had fallen back on habit and were boasting about their work or the schools their children were attending. This small talk didn't last long, though, and they quickly grew anxious again, quietly whispering to one another.

"But this ship . . ."

"Yeah, just like that box. I should have noticed when I got on . . ."

"But how . . . ?"

They all sounded worried. Ned was listening intently, trying to piece things together.

Kazuya, too, was thinking things over in silence: *a ship . . . hot food . . . a card game . . .* All those words rang a bell. He was on the verge of remembering something, but he couldn't quite grasp it. Feeling himself start to get worked up, he shook his head.

Victorique noticed and asked, "What?"

"Oh," Kazuya said, looking down at Victorique's puzzled face. "Oh, right. I think I've heard the name of this ship before. It's called the . . . the Queen Berry. And . . ."

As he spoke, he could feel himself starting to get nervous. He grimaced.

Blank-faced and blue-blooded, all the waxwork-like men in the room had turned to gaze at Kazuya.

Kazuya looked up, glancing around at them. *What does that reaction mean . . . ?* Even more unsettled, he thought furiously, *Yeah, something about . . . a vase?*

He glanced around the room and saw a vase of flowers sitting on top of an antique set of shelves. Somehow, he was sure that was the one. He had almost remembered.

But when Kazuya absently reached out toward the vase, all the men gasped.

The angry man from before jumped to his feet and shouted, "Don't touch that vase!"

Shunk! Something whizzed past Kazuya. A crossbow bolt passed just over his head, burying itself in the wall.

The young woman clapped both hands over her mouth, shrieking soundlessly and reeling backward. Ned Baxter's expression was equally alarmed. Even Victorique looked up in surprise, her eyes wide. A moment later, all the men began screaming.

"I knew it!"

"It's the same boat!"

They all stood up and raced for the door, jostling each other. Some of them were shoved aside or tripped, falling to the floor and groaning.

Kazuya stood in sheer shock, frozen to the spot, until Ned and Victorique grabbed him from either side and shook him.

"Are you okay, boy?"

"How does it feel to cheat death?"

Kazuya's lips flapped wordlessly.

He remembered now: When they touched the vase, the crossbow fired . . . the story of . . . a ship. Someone had told him that story . . . Avril.

Just a few days before, they had been sitting on the steps outside Saint Marguerite, and she had told him that ridiculous story . . . about *this* ship.

"When the coast guard got there, the food on the dinner plates in the galley was still warm, the fireplace was still burning red, and there were playing cards on the table, abandoned in the middle of the game, but what? There was nooooo one there—no passengers, no sailors. Everyone had vanished. There were rooms with blood on the walls, places that showed signs of a struggle, but they never found a single body."

"While the coast guard was investigating the interior of the vessel, one of them happened to touch a vase of flowers—and out of nowhere, a crossbow went off! It nearly killed him!"

". . . and before they could investigate anything, the Queen Berry sank to the bottom of the sea! There was a spray of water, a horrible, thunderous noise, and down it went—to the depths of the ocean!"

". . . even though it supposedly sank ten years ago, every now and then, the Queen Berry reappears."

“On stormy nights, it suddenly emerges from a bank of fog, with all the missing people still on board. After the living are lured on board, they become sacrifices, sinking with the ship—down, down, down, to the bottom of . . .”

Kazuya remembered it all: the tables that looked as if they'd been abandoned a moment before, the warm food, the scattered cards, the vase that triggered a crossbow if you touched it . . . And the name of the ship was the same as the one in Avril's story, the Queen Berry—Kazuya was sure he'd seen the name earlier that night.

“What is it, Kujo?”

“V-V-Victorique . . . listen carefully. The boat we're on . . . is . . . promise you won't scream.”

“What?”

“Or laugh. I swear this is true. Promise?”

“Sure.”

“A ghost ship!”

Victorique looked very serious. She opened her mouth wide to let out: “Ah ha ha ha ha!”

Kazuya's knees buckled.

Victorique looked down at him, shaking her head. “How very comical you are.”

“Let me explain. Honestly, I'm not making this up,” Kazuya said, recovering. He explained the story Avril had told him—as he did, the angry man left the crowd engaged in a shoving match at the door to listen intently. The more he listened, the more frightened he looked.

Victorique, however, remained highly skeptical. "A ghost ship? Kujo, surely you can't actually believe that?"

"No, well, but . . . maybe?"

"This ship?" Victorique muttered, "I was sure you were joking, forcing me to laugh. You're a very strange guy," she grumbled. Then, she went over to the bar, collecting the bottle of wine and the glass she had filled with the contents and heading back toward Kazuya with them. "Look at this wine carefully."

"Why?"

"Brightly colored wine and a bottle with a label that claims it's very old."

"So what?"

Victorique pursed her lips, annoyed.

A second later, the lights went out.

In an instant, the lounge was plunged from an almost overly bright state into an intense darkness. The men who'd been struggling at the door began to panic; soon, they all were shouting, alternating between bellows of rage and screams of terror.

Between their voices and the darkness, Kazuya began to get pretty scared himself. His knees rattling, he reached out to try to protect Victorique. When he couldn't find her, he softly called her name, groping for her.

But the lights were out only for a second. When they came back on—once again much too bright—Victorique looked over at Kazuya, who was hunched over with his arms outstretched, and asked, surprised, "What on Earth were you trying to do?"

Kazuya quickly pulled back his hands.

A deathly silence spread over the room. As if awakening from a dream, the screaming men snapped their mouths shut and stared at their feet, embarrassed. None of them said a word, either from relief or because they hadn't yet recovered from the shock.

Suddenly, Ned screamed.

Everyone swung around to look at him.

He was staring at the wall, the wall near the bar. The woman in red was standing near him, looking back at him in surprise.

With a very actorly, dramatic gesture, Ned raised one hand and pointed at the wall.

The woman, who had been leaning on the counter, turned around, following his finger. She gasped. And then, she let out a long, sad cry, almost a sob: "Aaaaaaaahhhh!"

As the others noticed, they cried out, too.

There was something on the wall that hadn't been there a few seconds before: big letters, which appeared to be written in blood. And those bloody letters spelled out the following message:

"Ten years since then.

How time flies.

This time, it's your turn.

The box is ready.

Now . . .

Let the rabbits run!"

The angry man let out a blood-curdling scream.

The fat man next to him flew into a panic, shouting, "Those invitations!"

"Evening at the Bottom of the Box!"

"The main dish is rabbit!"

"We aren't here to enjoy a rabbit run . . . we *are* the rabbits!"

Some of the men collapsed into chairs, others clutched their heads in anguish, yet others were quivering with rage.

Kazuya had no idea what they were talking about, but they obviously were terrified.

"Ghosts! Those children have come back, and they're going to sacrifice us!"

"The letters in blood prove it!"

The fat man stood up and ran across the room, trying to flee the lounge. He reached the door, grabbing the knob and giving it a good pull. It had been locked a moment before, but this time it opened easily.

The man took a step outside the door . . . and something black and linear came flying toward him from the hall. To Kazuya's eyes, it looked like a black line drawn by a thick brush. The line hit the man between the eyebrows, came out the back of his head, and stopped.

It was red at the tip, like red magic marker had been applied on top of the brushwork. But it was not a brushstroke. The black line was a crossbow bolt, fired from out in the hall.

Everyone watched in stunned horror, unable to move.

The bolt had cut through the man's head as if making its way through something soft. The tip jutted out the back of his skull, stained with blood and brain fluid.

His momentum stalled, the man stood there for a second, and then he fell over—*whump!*—onto his back.

There was a momentary silence, which was broken by the woman's screams. She started babbling, "I-I tried to open that door a moment ago! It wouldn't open! Really, believe me! But if it had opened . . . I'd be . . ."

As the woman quivered in fear, Victorique watched her closely through narrowed eyes.

The seven surviving men weren't listening to the woman, though; they jumped to their feet, freezing for only a second, and then they all bolted out into the hall, each of them shouting very strange things.

"The door's safe now! The trap's been sprung!"

"To the deck! To the deck!"

"Run! Before the ship kills us all!"

They jumped over the body and into the hall, running down it before bursting up the stairs and onto the deck.

The other four passengers exchanged glances. With surprise and puzzlement mingling on his features, Ned asked, "Should we follow them?"

Kazuya, Victorique, Ned, and the young woman hesitantly stepped out into the hall, which was lit by flickering lanterns. It was lavishly decorated, and their feet sank into the plush crimson carpet. They found the stairs and climbed them. Ned took the lead, stepping out onto the deck.

"It's raining," he said, sighing. "Quite a storm."

They were on the small deck by the stern. Rain was pounding down, and thunder rumbled from the night sky and darkened sea. The rain made the deck slick, and they had to be careful not to slip and fall.

Clouds, dark and heavy, covered the stars above, while black waves churned wildly on the sea. Just looking down at that sinister darkness made Kazuya feel like he was about to be sucked in. The sound of the waves was thunderously loud.

The woman scrunched up her face. "Too rough."

Ned turned toward her. "We can't take the lifeboats out in that, can we?"

"Of course not," she said. "Taking a boat in this weather would be suicide. You'd sink instantly."

The men heard her and turned around.

"Then, what can we do?" one roared.

"Um . . ."

Suddenly, Ned cried out, "Oh! To the helm! We can turn the boat around and head back to land!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the men began running. They slid across the deck, falling over in their haste, twisting their ankles and roaring in anger every time.

They reached the control room, but the door was locked. Ned heaved himself against it and broke it down. He went in, but came out a moment later, grimacing.

"What?" the men roared.

Angrily, Ned replied, "The rudder's broken. We can't steer the ship."

"Liar!" several of the men pushed past Ned into the room. Ned staggered, almost losing his balance. But the men came back out a moment later, shaking their heads. "It's true. It's broken!"

"That's what I said," Ned snarled, but he received no response.

Apparently, the Queen Berry was adrift in stormy seas. There was no crew, and they had no way of telling just where they were.

The men gathered around Ned, firing questions at him. They appeared to have decided he knew the most about boats.

But Ned simply shook his head in response. "What should we do? I don't know either . . . um . . . well, there's the wireless. We could try calling for help. The coast guard . . ."

"Then do it! Don't waste any time!" The men shouted.

Ned frowned for a second, and then he shook it off. He pointed along the deck, toward the prow. "The wireless is at the front of the ship. That way!"

"Hurry!"

The rain was coming down so hard it hurt.

The stern deck was about sixty-five feet wide, and the prow of the vessel was far away, invisible in the darkness. Ned ran toward it, but he suddenly stopped and shook his head.

"What?"

"We can't," the woman cried, following close behind him. "That decorative smokestack . . . it's too big—unnaturally big, completely wrong for the design of the ship. We can't get past it!"

It was shrouded in darkness, and they could barely see it, but the gigantic black smoke stack was looming over them. It wasn't the darkness that hid the prow: Their view was blocked by the smokestack, the same smokestack Kazuya had noticed when he'd first boarded the ship.

Decorative smokestacks were common on cruise ships, where design was ranked over function, but this one was so large that it made the entire ship feel off balance, and it completely disconnected the front of the ship from the back of it, while at the same time being unusually short for a smokestack.

Kazuya and Ned each took a side and ran forward to check, but there was no way past. The strange smokestack completely blocked all paths connecting the two halves of the deck.

With her dress and hair soaked by the driving rain and her pale skin glistening, the young woman turned toward the older men. "There's no way past above. We'll have to go below deck."

"No!" the men screamed, trembling. "If we go inside, we'll all be rabbits! Absolutely not!"

"Rabbits? What do you mean?" the woman screamed back, losing her temper.

Ned stepped into place next to her. "Yeah, you keep saying that, but it doesn't make any sense. And those letters in blood . . . you gentlemen know something, don't you? Tell us what you know! You owe us that much! Ah, hey!"

The angry man had shouted something, pointing at the lifeboat. The men began lowering it, working together. But the

sea was rough, and the waves and rain were too strong for such a tiny boat.

Ned, the woman, and Kazuya tried to stop them. "If you launch the lifeboat in this weather, it'll turn over, and you'll all drown!"

"Shut up! Go away!"

One after another, the men jumped into the boat, fleeing the ship and ignoring Ned's attempts to stop them. Just before the angry man stepped aboard, he looked back, frowning.

"It's dangerous! Stay here!" the woman shouted.

The angry man's bloodshot eyes wavered, hesitating. After a few seconds silence, he said, "Okay." He looked at the violent sea, the boat, and the faces of the four younger passengers.

The men in the boat never looked back, never cared that he was not on board. As he watched them go, the angry man's eyes were filled with anxiety and indecision.

Despite the woman's insistent cries, the boat was lowered to the surface of the water. It hit the waves with six men on board.

Kazuya and the others leaned over the railing, watching. For a moment, the waves shook the boat. Then, a big wave struck the boat's side, swiftly overturning it.

Kazuya cried out, but he had no way to save the drowning men: They were pulled beneath the surface so quickly that they never had the chance to scream. All that was left was the white foam of the waves. It was over in seconds.

The rain beat down violently on the five who remained on deck.



Kazuya looked at Ned and the woman, who stood beside him. Ned was white as a sheet and trembling. His lips had turned purple, and he said nothing at all. The woman . . . the woman was staring down at where the lifeboat had been with a bizarrely satisfied smile, a coldness in her eyes that made Kazuya shiver. Her red lips moved, and she whispered something.

She hadn't intended for anyone to hear, but the whisper reached Kazuya's ears. The woman said, "I told you. I gave you fair warning." Then, she noticed Kazuya looking at her. This time, she looked at him, murmuring in a bored tone, "Grown-ups are so stupid. They're filled with confidence, yet nothing they do makes sense."

She shrugged and began walking back toward the stairs leading below deck.

"Hey, how can you say that? Show some respect!" Kazuya shouted, but she didn't seem to hear him. Kazuya watched her walk away, half furious, half shocked.



Four

The five survivors attempted to return to the lounge, trudging down the hallway and through the open door. However, when the woman stepped inside first, her eyes widened, her hands slowly rose to cover her mouth, and she gave a silent scream.

Kazuya tried to step in after her, asking, "What?"

“Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . .” the woman closed her eyes, and then she screamed: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Ned came running down the hall, shouting, “What? What is it?”

Tears were running down the woman’s cheeks. Trembling, she raised one hand and pointed inside. “The room . . . the room . . .”

“What?”

“I can’t stand this any longer!”

Kazuya poked his head inside—and gaped: The lounge looked nothing like it had a moment before. In the few minutes they had been outside, the walls, ceiling, and floor had become badly water damaged. The bar, the tables, even the bottles were all just as they had been, but the walls were rotting, water-logged, and drops of filthy water were falling from the ceiling, as if the room had been underwater for a long time. The water-damaged lounge was lit by the faint light of the lanterns.

The woman was crying really hard now, losing all control. Ned stood next to her, unsure what to do. He made a soothing noise, but she spun toward him, “What’s going on? Somebody, do something!”

Ned shut his mouth. He looked around, confused. “This is the lounge, right? That writing is still on the wall, but . . . how could this happen?”

The writing in blood was still there on the wall, lit by the sinister lantern light. Ned stepped in, kicking a rotting table, which crumpled easily. The shattered remains smelled like the

sea. The floor was soft and rotting, and there was an unpleasant squelching with each step.

“Hey,” Ned said, turning around. He stood in the center of the lounge, looking back at the others, stunned. Slowly, he pointed to the floor near the door. His voice trembling, his eyes begging for help, he stared at the others and asked, “Um . . . that man . . . the one killed by the crossbow bolt . . . where’s the body?”

The woman stopped crying. Kazuya looked around in surprise. The body was gone. There was no sign of it anywhere in the water-damaged lounge. No blood, no bits of brain.

The woman started screaming, “The missing one must be behind it! He did it! He locked us in, pretended he was dead, and laughed when we were scared! Come out! Where are you?”

She ran across the lounge and started looking under tables.

Annoyed, Ned said, “Calm yourself. He was dead. I checked the body. Really.”

“Then, you’re in on it, too?”

Ned grimaced. “Please.”

They glared at each other.

The soul surviving older man stepped in. “Stop fighting. It gets us nowhere.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Sit down. I’m tired.”

The five of them regarded one another. Then, they sat on the less-wet chairs.

Ned was nervous and irritable, tapping his foot. Every time he did, the floor squelched. The young woman was pale, and she sat holding her head, her black hair covering her knees. The older man was very quiet. His lips were blue, and he looked terrified. Victorique alone looked just as she always did, elegant and collected. Kazuya found his own mind growing calmer just looking at her.

All five introduced themselves. The older man started: "Maurice, director of the Foreign Ministry of Sauville." He clearly had no intention of saying more than that.

The woman followed: "Julie Guile. I don't work. My father owns a coal mine."

Apparently, she was rich. Maurice snorted.

She looked annoyed. "What? I can live without working, so why shouldn't I?"

At this, Ned Baxter grimaced; as an actor, he worked pretty hard.

Kazuya and Victorique introduced themselves, as well, and Maurice seemed to recognize Victorique's name. His manner changed abruptly—but not as far as the other three were concerned.

All five of them sat still, worn out and staring at one another.

The woman, Julie Guile, appeared to have calmed down a little. She murmured, "So, what's going on? Where are we? Why is any of this happening?"

"That's what I want to know.

"Me too."

Maurice said nothing. All three of them looked at him as they spoke, but soon they were devoting equal amounts of attention to Victorique, who was watching Maurice intently.

There was a quiet tension in the room. When that tension reached its peak, Victorique broke her silence. Her withered voice carried when she said, "Maurice."

He twitched.

The others watched with bated breath.

Maurice sat transfixed, like a frog charmed by a snake, waiting for Victorique to say more.

She opened her mouth again. "Earlier, when my friend went to touch the vase, you tried to stop him."

"Y-yeah . . ."

"How did you know it was booby-trapped?"

Maurice bit his lip.

Julie and Ned both cried out softly.

Silence settled on the water-damaged lounge.

Drip . . . drip . . . The unpleasant sound echoed through the room.

When Maurice didn't answer, Victorique continued, "Everyone knew except for us, the four younger people. The eight older men all said things we didn't understand. And Maurice, *you* are the only one still alive. Do you feel no responsibility to explain things to the younger people on board?"

Maurice bit his lip even harder.

Drip . . . drip . . . The water falling from the ceiling was the only sound.

At last, Maurice looked up, resigned, and said in a heavy voice, "It's the same."

"As what?"

"As ten years before. That's why we knew." His face was white as a corpse. His blue lips parted. "This is the Queen Berry, which sank below the waves ten years ago. That means it has begun again. That's how I knew."



One

Someone was shaking me.

When I opened my eyes, I found a pair of black eyes peering down at me, looking worried. Long hair as black as those eyes hung down to the floor, glistening as if it were wet. Both belonged to a very pretty girl about my age.

"Unh . . ." I tried to sit up, but my head hurt and I let out a groan.

The girl murmured, "ah," as she supported me with her thin hands.

Where were we? What was happening?

Holding my head, I looked around. We were in a big lounge. Expensive-looking chairs and round tables, probably antiques, were scattered around the room. There was a bar in the corner, with a lot of liquor bottles behind it. There was even a little stage, with a score open on a stand.

Scattered across the gleaming, polished wood floor, there were a number of boys and girls our age—more than ten of them. They all were holding their heads and groaning.

These children were of all different backgrounds, I noticed. Most of them were Caucasian, but even among the white children there was a quite a range, from a big, blond-haired, blue-eyed, German boy to a curly-haired boy with a deep tan that suggested he'd been raised near the Mediterranean Sea. They all were obviously from different countries. One small boy had yellow skin. Another boy had light brown skin. There was a girl of the same skin tone, but these two had discovered that they spoke different languages, so they were standing around awkwardly.

All the children complained about their throbbing headaches. I could understand the English and French, but others spoke quickly in foreign languages that I couldn't make out at all.

The yellow-skinned boy came over to me and helped me up. I thanked him in French, saying, "merci," and he nodded as if he understood.

"Where are we?" someone shouted in crisp English. Everyone turned toward the voice.

One of the white boys had stood up. He was thin, with short-cropped hair, and his freckled skin looked healthy and tan. "Some grown-ups caught me, put me in a strange carriage, and fed me. I fell asleep and woke up here with a headache . . . what's going on?"

I stood up tall and said the same thing had happened to me.

The boy looked around anxiously. "Everyone?"

The children who spoke English nodded.

The freckled boy looked around the lounge. He wandered irritably all around the room, at last stopping and staring at the door. He reached out and turned the knob. The door opened.

I went over, too, peering outside. The door opened onto a long hallway with blindingly bright lamps, elegant wooden walls, and crimson carpet.

The freckled boy frowned anxiously and looked at me. "Um," he said, tilting his head dubiously. "Is the floor . . . swaying?"

"It is." Now that he'd pointed it out, I could tell the floor was rocking back and forth a little. The rhythm was regular, taking several seconds to move in each direction.

Where were we? Why were we here?

One of the girls stopped clutching her head and shrieked in a shrill voice, "An earthquake? It's an earthquake!"

Everyone jumped. Several children dove under the tables. But before everyone could panic for real, the Chinese boy, the one who had helped me stand up, spoke up. "No," he said in English, with a perfect accent.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"This is no earthquake."

"Then, what is it?" the freckled boy asked.

In a quiet voice, the Chinese boy said, "We're not on land."

"Then . . . ?"

"This rocking . . . waves. We're at sea. This room is on a boat. This isn't a building, but a ship."

The lounge fell silent.



Two

The freckled boy went out in the hall with a few others whose headaches were fading. The Chinese boy and the girl with black hair who'd awoken me were among them. The hallway was brightly lit by a number of lamps. The crimson carpet was plusher than anything I'd ever stood on before. With each step I took, my foot sank, making it hard to keep my balance.

When I whispered this, the Chinese boy said, "Yeah, I'm sure this is the top floor of the ship."

"Why?"

"Ships like this always have luxury rooms for the rich first-class passengers on the top floor. The lounge, the rooms, and the hall all are designed for them."

"Oh . . ."

"As you go down, the rooms get smaller for the second- and third-class passengers, and for the ship's crew. The lights aren't as bright, and the carpets are old. At the bottom of the ship are the storage rooms and the boiler rooms. Those are so dirty, you'd never think it was the same ship."

"You sure know a lot," the freckled boy said suspiciously.

The Chinese boy grimaced. "Don't look at me like that! I've just been on a ship before, as a third-class passenger."

"Huh."

As we walked, we introduced ourselves. The freckled boy was named Hughie. The Chinese boy was Yang. "And you?" they asked.

"Alex," I answered.

"You're French? I mean, you spoke French first, and you have a slight accent when speaking English . . ."

"No, not French—I'm from Sauville."

"Oh. They speak French there, too, right?"

The black-haired girl spoke neither French nor English, but she could tell everyone was introducing themselves, so she said, "Ree," and held up ten fingers—her age.

Just as Yang had said, the lounge was on the top floor. We found some stairs that took us right out onto the deck. One after another, we came outside, our footsteps echoing as we stepped onto the wooden deck. Once there, we all stood in stunned silence. We really were at sea. The night sea . . .

A deep black darkness, unthinkable in the city, surrounded us. Black waves rocked the boat gently. In the distance, the blue-white moon reflected a single trail of light across the surface of the ocean. In every direction, there was nothing but water. We could find nothing on the surface but this ship.

One boy went running across the deck. "Hey!" he shouted. "Anyone there? Help!"

The sound of the waves was the only answer.

Someone else started running, a girl from Hungary. She was a big girl, stout. She grabbed the railing and was about to scream—Fwip! There was a strange sound, like something cutting through the air, followed by the girl's shrill scream.

Hughie called out, "What is it?"

"Something brushed past my face . . . I was standing here, and something from over there came flying past and fell into the water . . ."

Hughie reached out and touched the girl's face. Even in the darkness, we could make out the fresh blood on his fingertips.

There was a shallow groove across the girl's right cheek, as if something had scraped across her skin. Blood was welling up out of it. When she noticed, the girl shrieked, and her legs buckled out from under her.

Ree and I helped her up.

Hughie and some others checked the direction she'd pointed in, but it was dark, and they couldn't figure out what had happened.

Yang checked out the steerage room, but he came out shaking his head.

"The rudder's broken . . . has been broken."

"Why? Why are we even here? And why is there no one on board but us? Why are there only children?" one boy shouted.

Yang shook his head. "I don't know."

Hughie stood up. "If we stay on the boat, we'll just drift at random. What about the wireless? A boat like this must have one."

"Yeah. Alex . . . the com station's probably at the prow, right?" Yang asked, but I'd never been on a boat like this before, so I simply shrugged in response.

"That way?" Hughie asked, and the two ran off. But they came back quickly, hanging their heads.

"What?"

"No good . . . the smokestack is really big, and there's no way past it. There's no way to get from the stern to the prow on deck. I think the smokestack's just for show, but . . . it's too big! It's like they deliberately made it too big, to stop us from getting to the wireless!"

"So, what can we . . . ?"

Hughie looked up. "There is a way. We can't cross over on the deck, so we have to go back inside—go down the stairs, along the hall toward the prow, and up the stairs on the other side. That way, we can get to the other side and call the coast guard on the wireless.

"Yeah. Shouldn't take long," Yang said, nodding.

I felt something soft on my arm: Ree was clinging to me, anxiously. She couldn't understand me, so I just nodded reassuringly.

The Hungarian girl's cheek was still bleeding. Supporting her from either side, we went back down the stairs.

The hallway was as brightly lit as before, but the soft crimson carpet felt different than a moment prior. The color looked like blood now. The Hungarian girl began crying. Ree and I glanced at each other and tightened our grip on her.

When we got back to the lounge, all the children had recovered from their headaches, but they were spooked by the Hungarian girl's injury.

The kids who had stayed behind all were sitting in one chair or another, looking scared. In the light of the chandelier, they looked pale. Some of them stood up when we came in.

“Hey!”

“What happened?”

They came toward us, but Hughie waved them back.

“Okay, listen up.” He filled them in on what had happened on deck, and that our plan was to head for the wireless on the prow of the ship. Nobody disagreed.

We all introduced ourselves: names, ages, nationalities, how we had come to be on board. Only one thing was always different, nationality: England, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, America, Turkey, the Middle East, China . . . and Sauville. There were a few like Ree who didn’t speak any language the rest of us could understand, but it seemed like all eleven children were from different countries, like one of us had been gathered from each part of the world. And we all had one thing in common: We all were orphans. If we vanished, no one would ever look for us.



Three

We set off down the hall again—this time, all eleven of us, and in the opposite direction.

Sheer anxiety threatened to bring the headache back, so I clutched my temples, groaning, stopping Ree in her tracks.

"Alex," she said, pointing to the heart-shaped pendant she had hanging around her neck. It was pink and made of glossy enamel. She clutched it in her hands, closed her eyes, and made a relaxing gesture. Apparently, the pendant was her lucky charm. As long as she had it, she would be fine.

Her big black eyes glittered soothingly. She was a nice girl, I thought. I nodded gratefully, and we moved forward again.

Suddenly, Hughie and Yang, at the front, both cried out. Everyone stopped in surprise.

"It's sealed off!" Hughie wailed.

"What do you mean?" the Hungarian girl yelled, clutching her injured cheek. She forced her way to the front.

The children stayed at the sides of the hall, so even at the back, I could see ahead: There was a wall, a black wall blocking the hallway, stretching all the way to the ceiling. There was no way through.

Yang turned around, looking very pale, and ran back down the hall.

"Yang?" I called.

He half-turned. "There should be more than one hall! I'm going to see if I can find another one!"

Everyone nodded, running after him. But the same black wall blocked all the halls.

The Hungarian girl started crying first. Several of the others looked like they were going to join her.

Hughie and Yang began whispering to each other energetically. A minute later, they turned toward us. "Right, everyone! We need to find an elevator!"

Everyone looked up.

Hughie said firmly, "We're going farther down. There might not be any walls on lower floors. Okay? We need to find the elevator."

Yang pointed down the hall. "There was one this way."

Without waiting for an answer, the duo walked away.

The elevator was in a particularly bright corner of the hallway. The sinister iron cage had a black gleam to it. Next to it was a glittering staircase of white tile; but for some reason, the lights were out, and it quickly grew dark inside the door.

Hughie looked around at the other kids. "There's a staircase, as well . . . what do you think?"

Everyone looked around at the others. The dark staircase must have looked scary, because they started getting into the elevator. Hughie watched them pack themselves in, somewhat surprised, but then he recovered and said, "Looks like two more can fit in . . . Yang, Alex, you take them down a floor."

"What about you, Hughie?" I asked.

He took Ree's hand and started toward the stairs. "Ree and I will take the stairs. We'll see you down below."

Ree looked back and waved. Cute. Yang caught my eye, and we quickly stepped on board the elevator.

Clang clang! The cage door shut. With a whirring sound, the elevator slowly began to descend. Everyone stood in silence, nervous, bathed in the pale lamp light. And then . . .

"Aaaaiiiieeeee!" We heard a girl scream. It was Ree's voice.

Yang quickly tried to open the gates. The elevator stopped a floor below, shook for a moment, and then the cage opened. We all spilled out.

“Ree?”

“What happened? Hughie!”

I stepped into the dark stairwell. It was so dark that I hesitated and ended up just calling. I could hear someone sniffing above me. “Ree?”

I was about to run up the stairs toward her, but Yang came up behind me with a tiny flashlight—he had found it in the elevator, presumably in case of emergency. He turned it on, and it cut through the darkness in the stairwell. The round white feeble beam of the flashlight picked out a corpse.

Everyone gasped.

Hughie was lying on the landing above us, like a broken marionette—face down, with his left hand tucked under his body and his right hand against his back.

Ree was huddled up next to him, too scared to stand.

“What happened?” the German boy roared at her. He was big and intimidating—only fourteen, but almost as big as a grown man.

No matter how much he yelled, Ree couldn’t tell us much. She waved her hands a little and managed to explain that she’d followed Hughie down the stairs when he’d suddenly fallen over.

The German boy spoke English with a thick accent, which grew worse as he got angrier. “Stop waving your hands around and talk!”

I went over to Hughie and tried to take his pulse. I put my hand on his right wrist, the one not under his body. There was no pulse.

"Why is he dead?" someone shouted.

Ree just shook her head. She didn't know.

The only source of light on the stairs was the circular beam from the flashlight in Yang's hand. But he dropped it in his surprise, and it fell. We could hear it clanging as it rolled down into the depths of the stairwell. It was dark again.

The silence was as heavy as death, but then a scream broke the quiet: "No more! No more! I'm going home!"

It was the Hungarian girl with the cut on her cheek. We heard her running down the stairs. I tried to run after her, but Yang gasped.

"Hey! Where are you going? Stay with us!" There was no answer. Yang shouted again, "We have to stay together. It's dangerous!"

When we reached the first floor hallway, we looked around and spotted her running off into the darkness. She rounded the corner and was gone.

"Hey!" A couple of kids had run a few steps after her, but they stopped and looked at each other.

We couldn't just forget about her, though. Promising to meet back at the elevator, we all spread out, searching the floor for her.

Four

The hallway felt kind of dark. We were only one floor down, but there were far fewer lamps than in the first-class lounge and hall, and the wood on the walls was not particularly high quality. The crimson carpet was old, occasionally stained, and worn away in the center where people had walked on it.

Single rooms lined the sides. I walked and walked, but the hallway never changed. It felt like I was going in circles. Walking alone along that carpet, which was still much too soft, I began to get scared: Something bad was going to happen.

My heart was beating really fast, and I really didn't want to turn the next corner. My feet felt like they were about to stop on their own. I was trembling, but I forced myself to round the corner, slowly. And there . . . stood the Hungarian girl I'd been looking for, all by herself, not moving, her eyes wide open in shock.

When my eyes met hers, I tried to tear them away, but I couldn't do it: She was dead. Before I knew it, my mouth was open, and from it emerged a scream so loud I could not believe it was mine.

She was not standing—there was a massive tactical knife jammed through her throat from the front, pinning her to the wall. I staggered toward her and reached out, feeling as if I should do something. The moment my trembling fingers touched the knife, it slid out of the wall, and the corpse fell into my arms. It was heavy, very heavy.

The other children came running, drawn by my scream. They came around the corner, saw the corpse, and shrieked, as well.

Yang came over to me. "Alex, are you okay?"

I nodded weakly.

The children exchanged looks, shuddering. The big German started shouting angrily, "Who killed her?"

"I don't know," Yang said.

"You don't know?" the other boy bellowed.

"None of us had a knife. We all were left here empty-handed. And why would a cruise ship have a military knife?"

"Then . . . ?"

We all looked at one another.

A moment later, Ree came running, last to arrive. She saw the girl's body and gasped, covering her mouth with one hand.

In the silent hallway, we stood around the corpse, unable to say anything.

An antique set of drawers stood at the side of the hall, with one drawer open. From where I was standing, I could see inside. There was a tiny pistol in the drawer, gleaming black and sinister.

There were weapons here, all over the ship. But . . . why?



CHAPTER 3

The Queen Berry: The Ghost Ship

One

Gloom had settled over the water-damaged lounge. Only Victorique appeared serene—the other four all were alternating between hanging their heads and glaring at one another.

Drip, drip . . . Filthy water from the seawater-logged walls and ceiling fell to the floor. Damp air smothered the lounge.

“Ten years ago, eleven children were placed on board this ship—the ‘rabbits,’” Maurice said at last, clutching his knees like a child and shuddering.

The other four exchanged glances.

Julie Guile jumped to her feet and advanced on Maurice. “What does that mean?”

In a low voice, Ned Baxter asked, “What happened to them?”

“They died. They killed one another.”



“Wh-why?”

“That’s how we designed it,” Maurice whispered, looking up fearfully.

The bloody letters were still dancing macabre across the walls of the lounge. Maurice looked up at them, fear and despair quivering in his eyes. His colorless lips parted.

“I can’t tell you anything more than that. It goes against the principles of my profession. But . . . after that fateful night, we collected the children’s bodies, and this ship, the Queen Berry, sank beneath the waves. We knew the coast guard arrived a few minutes after we’d completed our work and left the ship, but by then it was deserted. There were a few booby traps left behind that the children hadn’t managed to spring, as well signs of the struggle, so the coast guard made ready to investigate the ship thoroughly, but it was sinking too fast. You said . . .” Maurice glanced at Kazuya. “You said a girl in your class told you a horror story. That was based on what happened here ten years ago. When you told us the Queen Berry was rising to the surface again and enticing people on board, I was sure.”

His voice was filled with darkness: “This is a ghost ship!”

Ned and Julie glanced at each other. Neither one of them quite believed him, but they both looked nervous. Ned reached out and picked up the tennis ball. He began tossing it into the air and catching it again. Meanwhile, Julie remained standing, but she’d started to pace back and forth again.

Maurice continued. “This is a ghost ship, brought to the surface again by the grudges of the dead children. Ten years since that day . . .” His shoulders were starting to tremble.

“They gathered together the adults who had brought about their deaths, and now . . . most of us have died.”

Maurice’s face was ashen. “They’ll kill us all!” The tremble spread across his entire body, no trace of hope remaining. “We’ll never reach the wireless! We’ve been cursed by those children—by the rabbits!”

“Ppft,” someone snorted.

Maurice glared at Kazuya, who quickly shook his head and shifted his gaze to his side, where Victorique was sitting with her head down, hiding behind her long golden hair, her face obscured. Her shoulders were shaking.

“Uh . . . Victorique?”

“Hee hee heee heee heeeeee!” she cackled. Kazuya reached out and parted her hair. Tears were streaming down Victorique’s cheeks. She was laughing that hard. “Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Hey! What’s so funny?”

Ned stopped toying with the tennis ball, Julie stopped pacing, and both watched in surprise as Victorique laughed.

Her movements elegant, Victorique took her pipe out of her purse. Ignoring the circle of staring grown-ups, she lit it and took a long drag. A cloud of smoke escaped her lips, blown directly at Maurice’s face; he coughed violently, wiping away his tears with his fingers.

Victorique puffed away on her pipe for a while; finally, she pushed her free hand inside the pocket of her lacy dress. The hand emerged holding an envelope. Kazuya recognized it—it was the invitation Victorique had found on Roxanne’s yacht.

When Ned saw it, he said, “Oh, I got one of those.”

“So did I, inside a locked car.”

“Let me ask one thing, Maurice,” Victorique said, chuckling despite his being three times her age. “Do you really think a ghost ship can send out invitations?”

Maurice’s eyes widened. The others were similarly affected. They all looked at one another as if they’d just woken up from a nightmare.

Maurice opened his mouth to argue, but his head was tilted slightly, and he didn’t sound very confident. “But . . . but even so . . . this place is strange. I know for a fact this ship sank! And the letters in blood on the wall . . . the lights were out only for a few seconds! Nobody could write such big letters that fast. And this lounge . . . it’s nothing like it was?”

There were tears lurking in the corners of his eyes. Insistently, he yelled, “Explain! If it wasn’t a ghost, what was it?”

“A human, obviously,” Victorique said, finally done laughing. Her voice was quiet.

Ned squeezed the tennis ball nervously.

Julie had begun toying with the heart-shaped pendant around her neck as she paced, as was her habit. Five steps and turn. Five steps again. Her movements were subconscious but precise.

Victorique glanced at her and frowned slightly.

The pendant was enamel, shaped like a heart. It was pretty old, and the paint was chipped here and there. It was a very childish design, one that failed to match her crimson dress, but Julie was stroking it in her palm as if it meant a lot to her.

“Humans can do all those things. Think about it.”

"How? What do you mean?" Maurice said, leaning forward.

Victorique leaned back, scowling. She turned to Kazuya and said grumpily, "Kujo, explain."

"Eh? What?"

"Chaos and reconstruction."

"Me?"

Her clear green eyes bored through him. Three long seconds passed, and Kazuya lost. Hesitantly, he said, "Um . . . chaos, or all the mysteries in this world . . . they all, well, fragments of them all get stuck in a pot and boiled away, sort of a potluck. Then, they get put in bowls or, ultimately, reconstructed, which means that the mystery is solved and the detective can take all the credit again . . . why am I talking about this?"

"Enough. Your mind remains mediocre."

"Vii . . . !"

He muttered to himself that you could never study abroad with a mediocre mind, but Victorique ignored him, moving forward: "First, ghost ships do not write invitations. Understood?"

Ned nodded first, Julie followed, and then Maurice joined them.

Victorique waved the invitation around. "Somebody wrote this and gathered us aboard this ship."

"But this ship sank!"

"How do you know this is the same Queen Berry that sank ten years ago?" she asked quietly.

Maurice started to answer, but then he shut his mouth.

Victorique continued, "Allow me to suggest a possibility."

Everyone gulped, watching her as she spoke, the picture of confidence.

Her voice utterly calm, Victorique said, "Someone who knew what happened has reconstructed the ship exactly."

Silence descended on the lounge. Ned and Maurice glanced at each other but said nothing. Kazuya sat stunned. The only sound in the water-damaged lounge was the constant dripping.

Julie was the first to recover. Hesitantly, she asked, "What do you mean?"

Victorique turned toward her, confident as ever. In her low, withered voice, she explained, "Extremely simple and logical: First, the Queen Berry sank ten years ago. This is a verifiable fact, so the ship we're on now must be a very well done replica."

"Huh?"

"And that idea turns everything around. It's much more logical than trying to insist it's all supernatural."

Julie frowned and thought about it. Eventually she said, feebly, "Um, so . . . ?"

Victorique frowned. Puffing her pipe, she said languidly, "Use your noses."

Kazuya sniffed the air, but all he could smell was Victorique's pipe smoke. It blocked everything else.

Victorique added, "Smell fresh paint?"

"Oh!"

Kazuya remembered the scent of paint thinner he had smelled when he woke up in the lounge. That smell may have been half the cause of his headache.

“And the wine I investigated—Kujo, you remember it?”

Kazuya did now. When he had first suggested this was a ghost ship, Victorique had looked disgusted and had been about to show him the wine bottle and the glass she'd poured. But a second later, the lights had gone off, and they'd forgotten all about it.

“That exact same bottle of wine is behind the bar in this lounge, as well,” Victorique said, pointing. Everyone turned and looked. There were rows of bottles behind the counter.

“The cork I pulled and the glass I poured are back in place, as if I'd never touched them. Strange, yes?”

“Oh . . .” Kazuya murmured.

He couldn't see the uncorked bottle or the glass she had poured anywhere here. He went over to the counter and checked; there, he found a bottle with the same label, the cork still in it.

Victorique waved him toward her. She took the bottle and said, “This wine was made in Sauvile in 1890—more than thirty years ago. I imagine whoever is behind this put this bottle on board in an attempt to replicate everything on board the Queen Berry as closely as possible. Except . . .”

Victorique shrugged. She pulled out the cork and poured the wine into a filthy glass on a nearby table. It was the same bright red liquid as before.

“The contents are fake. You can tell by the bright color. Only freshly made wine looks like that. Old wine has a much murkier hue. And this smell . . .” she sniffed the glass. “See? New wine.”

“What do you mean?”

“This vineyard was burned to the ground in the summer of 1914, in the midst of the Great War. You can’t buy it anymore. So, someone had to re-create the label place it on a bottle of new wine.”

The four of them exchanged anxious looks.

“B-but!” Maurice cried. “What about the letters in blood? The water-damaged lounge? Where is the body?”

“No need to shout, Maurice. I can hear you perfectly well,” Victorique said, frowning. Then, she hopped out of her chair and started walking. As she opened the lounge door, she said, “This room is not the lounge we started in. We all went up on the deck, and then, when we returned, we came down the same hall. Why did we enter this room?”

Julie said uncertainly, “B-because the door was open? And all the other doors were closed. . . .”

“Exactly. So . . . hey, Kujo.”

Summoned, Kazuya stood up.

Victorique went out into the hall and pointed. “Go open the doors on this side, in order.”

“Okay . . .” Kazuya opened the next door: It was a luxurious first-class cabin. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, and there was a big bed with a canopy, along with a plush sofa. Even the tablecloth and the closet looked magnificent.

He opened the door next to that: another cabin, same design.

When several more doors appeared to be the same, he started to give up. But Kazuya came back to the lounge; this

time, he opened the next door over in the other direction. What he saw inside made him gasp. He turned back toward Victorique, his jaw flapping wordlessly, and she returned a satisfied nod, beckoning to the other three.

They all peered into the room. It was the exact same lounge, as if they were looking at a photograph: the tables, the bar, the little stage, and . . . letters in blood.

The open bottle of wine and the glass Victorique had poured were inside, and on the floor lay the corpse of the fat man, the crossbow bolt through his head.

Julie and Maurice both shrieked. When they spun around, Victorique nodded, extremely pleased with herself.

"This is the room we started in. I don't know who closed this door and opened the other one, but . . . it was a very simple trick."



Two

The five of them entered the original lounge, stepping over the corpse.

Compared with the water-damaged lounge, the chandelier was almost blindingly bright, which made it harder to feel comfortable. They all sat down and stared at one another.

Victorique looked up at the wall with the message in blood. She glared at it, her eyes narrowing. At last, she pointed at the bar next to the wall. "Kujo, look behind the bar."

“Eh?”

“The chaos had been reconstructed, leading me to this answer: There will be something behind the counter that was not there when we first looked.”

Confused, Kazuya stood up, going over to the bar as he’d been told. There was something balled up behind it, hidden there. A big cloth . . . ? No, not cloth, it was . . . “Wallpaper!” Kazuya cried.

Julie and Ned jumped up and peered over the counter, as well.

“Ah!”

“But that means . . . ?”

A sheet of wallpaper, the same pattern as that on the wall, had been balled up and tossed behind the bar.

Maurice reached the bar last, shouting, “Th-this is . . . wallpaper?”

“Yes,” Victorique nodded calmly. “See, Maurice? Certainly, there’s no way to write a message that long in the short time the lights were off. But it was more than enough time to tear away the wallpaper that was plastered over letters written beforehand.”

Ned gasped. Next to him, Julie shook her head, toying with the heart pendant. Her black hair swayed.

“I see.”

“So simple!”

Ned was tossing the tennis ball again, and Julie had resumed her five-step pacing. Neither of them had relaxed at all.

Maurice glared at them, his shoulders shaking. He stood bolt upright on the floor, looking at each of them in turn.

"You little . . . !" he snarled.

Victorique scowled. "Mind your tone."

Maurice backed over to the wall, glancing at Kazuya, Ned, Julie, and Victorique, one after the other. "Which one of you was a rabbit . . . ?"

All four of them stared back, puzzled. "By rabbit, you mean . . . ?"

"That's what we called the children, the children that died here!" Maurice said, shaking like a leaf. He looked at the message in blood. "Isn't it obvious? If this isn't a ghost ship, not a curse, then what is it?"

Everyone exchanged looks. At last, Julie gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. "You mean . . . revenge?" she asked, only half-believing it.

"Oh, of course!" Ned said.

"Don't play dumb!" Maurice roared. "Who sent those invitations? Someone summoned me here, and the others, too. They've all died, and only I've survived! But the four of you . . . who are you? None of you were with us ten years ago! So, why did you have invitations?"

His shoulders shaking violently, he continued, "Not all the rabbits died. Several of them survived and were released. We made sure they were well looked after. They should have wanted for nothing. But one of you must be a surviving rabbit! And now, ten years later . . ."

Julie was furiously stroking her pendant. Ned was squeezing the tennis ball tightly.

"You made this replica and invited us here to get your revenge!"

"No!"

"Not me . . ."

They looked at each other helplessly.

"Then, why do you have invitations?"

Hesitantly, Kazuya explained how he and Victorique came to be here: They were classmates, and had intended to go yachting this weekend. But their plans had fallen through at the last minute. Bored, they'd found the invitation on the yacht . . . The yacht's owner had been Roxanne, the famous fortune-teller.

When Maurice heard of her death, he went white as a sheet. "Roxanne . . . was murdered?"

"You knew her?" Kazuya asked.

Maurice didn't answer.

Ned went next. "I was an orphan. I have no family. I stayed at the orphanage until I was eighteen, and then I found work, training as an actor on the side. Fortunately, I was able to take the stage. Somehow, I found myself fairly famous. And this week . . ." He trailed off. As if not sure whether he should say this next bit. "In the dressing room of a theater where I was performing, I found a bouquet and the invitation. Not my first invitation from a fan, so . . . the play had just finished, and I thought it would be a good vacation." When he finished, he hung his head.

Julie explained, "Like I said, my parents operate a coal mine. They brought me up with a free hand. I grew up in a big mansion, allowed to do whatever I wanted." She spoke much

faster than Ned, like she was trying to get through it as fast as possible. "But last week, in my private car—it was locked, but the invitation was inside. I thought it was a little strange, but it's almost my birthday, and I thought a friend of mine was just joking around. I came on board giggling. Boy, was I wrong . . ."

Maurice stared at the floor, thinking. His eyebrows clenched together. When he looked up, he pointed at Ned and Julie. "So, it's one of you, right?"

"Wh-what? No!"

Maurice glanced at Victorique. "I know who this girl is. She's of noble birth. She would never do this, nor would her friend. Both of them are too young. They would have been only five years old ten years ago. There were no rabbits that young; they all were in their early teens."

"How can you be sure? How do you know who these two are? We have only their word for it! They could be anyone!"

"Don't be stupid. You can tell a true aristocrat on sight. The air around peasants is different. A nouveau-riche girl like you might not understand, but I myself am a viscount, and I've spent many years in high society. I guarantee it: That girl is the real thing."

"N-nouveau riche?" Julie snarled, lunging for his throat. Ned stopped her.

Maurice sneered at the two of them. "The rabbits were all orphans. It's easy to tell when someone is of such vulgar birth: one an actor, the other the daughter of a nouveau riche? Either one of you could be one of the rabbits that failed to die!" Maurice looked up at the ceiling and began laughing.

Julie struggled like a wild thing, trying to throw herself at him. Ned called Kazuya over to help, and together, they held her back.

Julie roared like a caged animal, "Maurice, I suspect you!"

"What?"

Julie stopped struggling at last, and they let her go. Her eyes still gleamed like a beast at bay, glaring at Maurice. He had his back to the wall, and he was staring back at her in terror.

"Maybe those rabbits had parents, or adults who served as surrogate parents—adults who were fond of them. Possible, right?"

"Ten years ago, Maurice, you were in your mid-thirties. You could have had a child while in your twenties who then would've been in his or her early teens, the same age as the rabbits!"

"My daughter is attending a first-class school."

"But we only have your word for it that you're a nobleman, that you work for the foreign ministry. As long as we're on this boat, we have no way of telling for sure. You might have made this boat to get revenge for your dead child! Nothing like a dead child to drive a parent mad! That's what you are, a crazy father, mourning the loss of his kid!"

"Nonsense," Maurice snorted. He glared at Julie. "I shall not forget this insult."

In that moment, Kazuya was sure: Maurice was an aristocrat. He had seen that pride, that bearing, so many times since he'd arrived here. This man was not lying about his status.

"And that detective girl . . . I was near her when we woke up. I heard her say there was an extra person in the lounge.

There were only eleven of us at the dinner table, but when we woke up, there were twelve. Whoever wasn't in the dining hall is behind this. They joined us in secret and watched us scream and die, laughing all the while!"

"Ah!"

"The actor was in the dining room. It was too dark to see anyone clearly, but I heard him go on and on and on, telling tiresome stories about the stage."

Ned flushed, embarrassed.

Julie bit her lip, glaring at Maurice.

"But nouveau riche girl, you weren't there."

"I was!"

"Prove it."

"But that goes for you, as well. Nobody saw you either. Guess one of us is behind this."

"Tch!"

They glared at each other.

Her voice trembling with anger, Julie said, "Maurice, why didn't you get in the lifeboat?"

"B-because . . ."

"Everyone else jumped in, trying to run away. And going for the lifeboats was your idea! But while everyone else was lowering themselves toward the water, you stayed behind."

"Well, you told me it was dangerous."

"And you listened to a nouveau riche? Some aristocrat you turned out to be," Julie said nastily.

Now, it was Maurice's turn to take a swing. Ned hastily stepped between them.

Julie was breathing heavily, glaring at Maurice, but suddenly her shoulders twitched. "Shh!" she said, putting her finger to her lips and listening carefully.

"What is it?" Ned whispered.

"Water," Julie whispered, terrified. "I can hear water!"

They opened the door and burst out into the hall. Standing there, they pricked up their ears, and—*splash, splish, splash*—they could just make out the sound of water, far below.

As the others stood there puzzled, Maurice groaned, "It's sinking!" and he fell to his knees.

Ned shook his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

Maurice didn't answered. When Ned shook him again, Maurice's eyes opened slowly. Abject fear on his face, he said in a low voice, "Open a little hole in the bottom of the boat, and water slowly comes in, creating a time limit."

"Eh?"

"This . . . this was my . . . my idea."

"Huh?"

For a long moment, Maurice's shoulders shivered in silence.

Then, he looked up with desperation in his eyes, shouting, "Hurry! To the wireless! The ship is sinking!"



One

"There are weapons here!" The cry echoed.

A group of children stood in the hall, lit by lamplight, and I was standing in the center, holding a corpse with a tactical knife through its throat. For a long moment, nobody moved, nobody spoke.

There were nine of us left. Hughie and this Hungarian girl were already gone.

It was the German boy who had screamed. He was big for fourteen, almost as big as a grown man, and shaking with anger. He grabbed the hand Ree, the last girl to arrive, was holding behind her back, forcing it out in front of her.

"Stop!" I yelled.

"Look! There are weapons! This bitch has one!" his thick, intimidating German accent echoed down the hall.

When they saw what he was talking about, everyone gasped. For some reason, Ree's hand was clutching a little knife that was curved in a shape like an elephant's tusk. It glittered coldly in the lamplight.

The boy snarled, "She did it! She killed them both!"

Ree tried to shake free of his grip. The knife dropped from her little hand, and the German boy bent over and picked it up, without letting go of Ree.

Ree shook her head, denying everything, about to cry.

Yang stepped forward. "Stop it!"

"When did you yellow monkeys earn the right to order me around?"

"Wha—?" Yang gasped, furious.

Another boy stepped out in front of him—a big, muscular boy, who had been with the German since the beginning.

Their personalities were very similar. This boy was Austrian, and he joined the German boy, taking Ree's other hand. "If we take care of her, the rest of us aren't in danger. She's the one who had a hidden weapon and was pretending she couldn't understand us!"

"No! She really doesn't understand!" I shouted, but they never even glanced in my direction.

With Ree pinned down so she couldn't move, the German boy hit her in the head as hard as he could. Her little head wobbled, and her long black hair whipped through the air.

Yang jumped forward to stop them. The other children stood frozen, watching.

"Yeah, and there was no one else around when Hughie died. You locked us up here so you could kill us one by one!"

"But that won't happen now, because we're going to kill you!"

Both boys began hurting her. They were insane. They'd been driven over the edge by the fear of being trapped in a place like this, the fear of other children dying right in front of them.

Yang tried to stop them, but either one of them was twice his size, and he was tossed aside like a rag doll.

It was then that the German boy shouted, raising the knife. All the children screamed as he swung the knife down as hard as he could, aiming right for Ree's heart, Yang tackled him, trying to stop it. The children around us were calling for the German boy to stop.

Yang's blow was enough to move the knife away from Ree's heart. It brushed across her side, and the force of the blow sent it plunging not into Ree, but into the red carpet on the hallway floor.

But the knife was sharp. Bright red blood sprayed from the shallow cut on Ree's side, as if a red flower had bloomed from her skin.

Everyone froze.

Ree let out a frail scream . . . and fainted.

The blood shook the Austrian back to reality, and he let go of Ree. But the German's eyes were still out for blood, and he raised the knife again.

I let go of the corpse I was holding. Yanking open the drawer, I snatched up the little pistol. Then, holding it in both hands, I shouted, "Get away from Ree, or I'll shoot!"

The German turned around and stared at me like he couldn't believe his eyes, his hand freezing in mid-swing. Both boys slowly raised their hands.

The other children stared at me in shock, and silence settled on the hall.

I knew the hands holding the gun were shaking. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, but I had to save Ree regardless. She had been so nice to me; she was a good girl, and I knew that even without being able to speak to her.

Yang opened his mouth and said quietly, "Alex, stay calm."

"Yeah . . ."

"Where'd you get that gun?"

"It was in the drawer," I said. Everyone's stares followed my pointing finger. "I noticed it a minute ago. I don't know why, but there are weapons all over this ship. I'm sure Ree found that knife lying around somewhere. I don't know if she picked it up to protect herself or to tell us about it, but it was just a knife she'd found somewhere."

"Wha—?"

"Both of you, get away from Ree. Yang, take care of that cut?"

Yang nodded, and he got down on his knees. He tore his own shirt, tying it around Ree's body.

I looked at the two boys holding their hands in the air. "I'm not going to shoot. I can't do that. But we can't go on suspecting one another. We all have to work together. We need to get to the wireless room as fast as possible."

"N-no!" the German screamed, his voice shaking. He was very stubborn. Dragging the less certain Austrian after him, the two of them walked away.

"Hey!"

"There are weapons everywhere? Then, we'll just have to arm ourselves! How can we trust you? How can we trust anyone hiding a weapon?"

They glared balefully down at Ree and began opening every drawer all the way down the hall, moving steadily away from us, searching for weapons. They were some distance away before we heard them shout, "Found one!" But they already had rounded the corner and were out of sight.

The Turkish boy stood up. He had long arms and legs with dark skin. He shouted something angrily in a deep voice. We couldn't understand, but he probably was telling them to come back because it was dangerous. He pointed down the hall and pointed at himself, and then he nodded and ran off down the hall.

We saw the thin boy vanish around the corner. And a moment later . . . there was an explosion. It felt like the floor, the walls, the air around us shook. The boy's body came flying back into view, landing face up, not moving.

Silence.

Finally, somebody screamed.

Still holding the gun, I ran toward the Turkish boy. I tried to lift him, but there was a big hole in his chest. For a moment, I could see the pattern of the carpet underneath him, but it was soon obscured by the blood flowing from the hole.

He'd been shot with a very strong gun. The Turkish boy was dead, his features frozen in an angry scowl—dead before he even realized what had happened to him.

I looked up and saw the German and the Austrian running away, the German clutching some sort of machine gun.



Two

Three children were dead now: Hughie, the Hungarian girl, and now the Turkish boy. Ree was unconscious from the pain

and loss of blood, so I carried her as we headed down the hall, headed for the wireless at the front of the ship. There were six of us left: the Chinese boy, Yang; Ree, with her black hair; me; a big Italian boy with chiseled features, and his polar opposite, a thin American boy with angelic curls; and finally, a petite French girl with her long brown hair in braids.

We all walked in silence, looking scared. The lower floor was dark and sinister compared with the luxury of the upper level. The lamps on the walls, even the doorknobs, were of a functional, plain design.

"Ah!" the French girl, who was walking in front, cried out in a dismal voice. She turned around and shook her head.

There were walls across the corridors on this floor, as well. We couldn't get through. With no choice but to go down another level, we headed back toward the stairs.

Yang came over to me. "Alex, that was very brave."

"No, you were much more—"

"Do you still have the gun?"

I nodded.

"Let me see," Yang said, and I handed it over. "This is the safety. You have to turn it off, or the gun won't fire."

"Oh," I said. "Th-then, even if I'd pulled the trigger, I wouldn't have shot anyone?"

"Right. But I knew you wouldn't shoot."

Our eyes met. There was a smile in Yang's slanted eyes.

We took the stairs down another level.

It was even darker down there. The five of us walked along, Ree still unconscious on my back. I was worried, and I

wanted to see if her bleeding had stopped, but all we could do now was continue walking.

The hallway went on and on. We prayed it would not end in a wall. This hall had second-class rooms and dining rooms for the engineers, so it was old and drab. The halls were dark, and the carpet was little more than fuzz.

The French girl suddenly began babbling in a low voice, talking about the country village where she'd grown up. We all were a little flustered by this.

"We kept sheep. We were poor, so not a lot of sheep, but we milked them and made cheese and all of us ate it. We were all healthy then. I was friends with someone from a family with money, and I often played in the wine cellar at their house. So much fun . . ."

The rags she was wearing looked like they had been boys' clothes. She had a fairly cute face, but now it was pale and twisted with fear.

The American boy forced himself to join her. "Ew, sheep cheese smells so bad! How can you eat that?" His voice had not yet changed, and he sounded more like a girl than a boy.

Vexed, the French girl argued, "But it tastes good!"

"Hmm. Where I lived, there was nothing but cornfields. Do you like corn? We had corn soup almost every day, or roasted it with meat. So good."

Yang joined in, talking about his own life in a gentle, calm voice. He and his father had traveled together when his father was still alive. But after his father's death, he had worked in

the harbor, unloading ships. Traveling had been a great way to live.

Then, the Italian boy snorted. "Why are we talking about this? This is not the time."

Everyone fell silent, dejected.

We walked on wordlessly for a while, but eventually the American boy opened his mouth again. "I don't think there's anyone behind this."

Everyone looked at him with surprise.

In his girlish voice, he said passionately, "I've been thinking. Sure, it seems like we're the only people on this boat, and there are weapons hidden around. But I don't think any one of us is behind this. I'm sure of it."

"Yeah," the French girl nodded happily. "I think so, too! There's someone evil on board, someone besides us children. I don't know why, but they put us on board this ship, broke the rudder, and are having fun doing horrible things to us. That's why they made these walls across the halls! That . . . that wasn't anything to do with us."

They both nodded, but the Italian with the strong cheekbones snarled, "Please! Then, why did Hughie die? There was no one but us there. There was no one but Ree there when Yang shined the flashlight on them. And then . . . that knife through the . . . girl's throat . . ." His voice started trembling at the memory.

"That Hungarian girl would have screamed if she'd seen anyone but us. But she was stabbed without so much as a squeak! That means, one of us must have killed her."

"Um . . . well . . . that means . . ." the American boy trailed off, hanging his head.

Silence fell.

Then Yang looked up, "Alex, do you remember when we went up on deck?"

"Uh, yeah . . ."

"The Hungarian girl got a cut on her cheek. Remember what she said?"

I did. She had been standing at the railing, yelling for help.

"Something brushed past my face . . ."

Right, she had said, "I was standing here, and something flew toward me from over there . . ."

Yang nodded. "She stepped on something. Then, something, maybe an arrow of some kind, flew past her and cut her cheek. But the direction she pointed in . . . there was nobody there."

"So, you mean . . . ?" the Italian said, leaning forward.

Still groping toward the meaning himself, Yang said, "It's possible that whoever is behind this set a lot of traps all over this boat. Same goes for the knife—it might've been set up to fly toward whomever walked past, which would mean nobody actually stabbed her."

"Really?"

We all started crouching low on the floor, opening doors and moving furniture around. When we opened one door, a crossbow bolt shot out of it.

The Italian went inside and inspected the room carefully. There was no one there.

In another place, a hammer fell from the side, almost crushing the French girl. Yang pushed her out of the way just in time, and a big slab of iron slammed down right next to her. The hammer apparently moved if you stepped on the wrong part of the floor.

Not all rooms or halls had traps. There was a madness and malevolence behind them that terrified us. We all walked huddled together, like we were trying to warm one another.

Eventually, the French girl's shoulders shook.

"What?"

"I can hear water."

We all listened carefully.

I couldn't hear anything and was about to say so when Yang said, "Shh!"

At length, I could hear a faint lapping: shh shh sshhh.

What did that mean?

I stood there, confused, but Yang shouted, "The ship's leaking!"

"No!"

"There's water coming in at the bottom. It isn't very fast, but by morning, the boat will sink! We have to hurry! We need to reach the front of the ship!"

We all exchanged glances and nodded. And then, we heard a boy screaming. We all ran toward the voice. We rounded the corner, and there was the elevator, bathed in incandescent light. With each floor we'd descended, the halls and rooms had become darker and darker, so it was like this one place was brightly lit.

The voice had come from here . . . but we couldn't see anyone.

I looked around, confused, and suddenly an arm came out of nowhere, grabbed my hair, and pulled. I screamed. Then, I heard the voice belonging to that arm in my ear. "Help me!" it pleaded in a German accent. I knew that voice.

I turned around, and the arm was reaching through the bars of the elevator cage. The German and Austrian both were on board. Their oversized bodies were quivering with fear, reaching out toward us.

"Wh-what?"

"Help us! The lock—the lock!"

I lowered Ree to the floor and ran back to the elevator. I shook the cage, but it was locked from the outside. We asked the boys inside what had happened, but they were paralyzed from fear and said nothing that made sense.

"We saw a ghost!"

"He took the gun away and pushed us in here!"

Yang turned around and shouted, "Alex! The gun!"

I took out the gun and the boys inside screamed.

"Move aside!" I shouted as I aimed at the lock and pulled the trigger.

A violent shock went up my arms and slammed into my shoulders. My ears rang from the sound. I missed, so I fired as second time.

Chink! There was a dull noise, and the lock broke.

"Good!" I said, genuinely pleased. The boys inside looked relieved, as well.

Yang quickly reached out and tried to open the cage.

But then—ktatatang!—the elevator suddenly began descending.

The boys' faces twisted with fear. Their eyes opened so wide that their eyeballs nearly popped out, and their thick arms reached out toward me, grabbing my hair again.

I screamed, too, my voice mingling with theirs. I could feel a number of hairs tearing from my scalp. It hurt, and tears welled up in my eyes.

The boys' face twisted with fear and anger behind the bars of the cage. And then, with a clang, the elevator shook, and the cage dropped like a stone, vanishing toward the bottom of the shaft.

Their screams, loud enough to shatter eardrums, moved quickly into the distance. Then, there was a splash from far below. The elevator had broken, and when we tried raising it, it didn't budge.

Yang and I desperately tried to get it working, eventually resorting to hitting things and sobbing, until the American boy put his hands on our shoulders. We turned around, tears streaming down our cheeks, and he shook his head quietly. Behind him, the French girl was crying silently.

"They're . . . already dead."

"But—"

"It's been ten minutes. They're underwater . . . they've both drowned."

The Italian boy roared like an animal, punching the wall.



Three

We couldn't just sit there forever—the ship was slowly sinking. Ree was still unconscious, so I shouldered her again, and all the remaining children began walking once more.

We walked carefully, mindful of potential traps. We encountered yet another wall, and so we went back to the stairs. The deeper we went, the darker it was, and the uglier the halls. The sound of water was getting closer.

Yang muttered to himself, "It was locked from the outside, they said."

I nodded. "Yeah. They saw a ghost."

"What does that mean?"

I shrugged.

Yang continued, "The traps we found all were automated. But this was different. There's someone else here, hiding in this ship, picking us off . . . that's the only thing that makes sense."

We walked down the hallway, which was so dark that we could barely see our own feet. None of us spoke. The only sound was our footsteps. Then, Ree, still on my back, moaned.

"Ree? You awake?"

Ree opened her eyes and winced in pain. She looked at me and smiled gratefully.

I carried her for a while longer—but suddenly, she shrieked and began thrashing around violently.

I let her down and asked, “What?”

Half insane, Ree pointed at her throat.

“Ahh!” Her pendant was missing.

That pink enamel pendant, shaped like heart—her precious charm.

Realizing this, Yang said, “We don’t have time for it. You can buy another one. If we live through this, we can do anything. Forget about it.”

Ree’s black eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head over and over again.

Her wound had re-opened, so Yang bent down and used his shirt to stop the blood again. It looked like it might take some time.

I remembered how gentle her smile had been when I’d first woken up here, how concerned she had been about me. She had taken my side and looked after me. Seeing her like this hurt. She’d even let me touch her heart pendant, trying to cheer me up! Now, though, she was lying there, looking pale and bearing her pain in silence.

When I jumped to my feet, Yang looked at me in surprise. “What is it, Alex?”

“Um, I . . . I’ll go get it.”

“Huh?”

“The pendant. I bet it’s lying where Hughie fell. Afterward, with all the screaming and knives . . . I’m sure Ree’s pendant was already missing.”

"Alex!" Yang shouted. "It's too dangerous. Stay here. If we get separated . . ."

The other children agreed.

"Yeah, it's just a pendant! She can buy another one!"

"Too dangerous. We have to stay together."

"We've got more important things to do."

I looked down at Ree's bloodless face. I'd carried her this far, but there was no telling if she'd make it all the way. I wanted to find the pendant and give it back to her. She couldn't understand me, so there was no other way for me to tell her how grateful I was for her kindness.

"The landing on the stairs isn't far. I'll be right back," I insisted, and I broke into a run. I could hear them shouting after me.



I climbed the pitch-black staircase. Having found the flashlight Yang had taken from the elevator, I was using it to light my feet and taking one step at a time, making sure not to set off any traps. The white tile stairs glittered coldly in the round flashlight beam, making me nervous. Once separated, would I ever find them again? Would I have to cross the length of the ship alone? The thought was enough to make me tear up. Forcing gloomy thoughts out of my mind, I kept climbing.

Just as I thought I was almost to where Hughie's body lay, I stepped on something round and rubbery, almost falling over. For a second, I thought it was a trap and panicked.

Quickly, I shined the light at my foot: It wasn't a trap—it was a little ball, a tennis ball.

I wondered what it was doing there as I picked it up, and I started climbing again. Then, I gasped: The corpse was gone. There was nothing where we had left Hughie, nothing to suggest a dead body had been laying there a short time ago—not a trace of him.

Stunned, I sat down heavily.

I shined the light around and quickly found the pink heart on the stair near my feet, the pendant Ree had been looking for. When I saw that, I felt as if the bond between us had grown stronger, and I relaxed. I picked up the pendant, holding it tightly.

I had no idea why, but tears were flowing down my cheeks.

Where was the body? Who had hidden it, and why? Was there someone else on the boat?



CHAPTER 4

The Rabbits and the Hound

One

The five of them walked along the hall in silence. Victorique and Kazuya were at the back of the group, walking side by side. Julie Guile was in front of Kazuya, dragging her red dress along, her long black hair swaying with each step. Ned Baxter was in front, with Maurice walking quickly and well away from the others.

The red carpet was soft, and their feet sank into it with each step. It was magnificent, but hard to walk on. The lamps were of a ridiculously ornate design, and they were shining down on them brightly.

“Wh-what the—?” Ned asked, stopping.

Everyone else stopped, too, looking up: Their progress toward the front of the ship had been blocked by a black wall built right across the hall. The same wall blocked every hall on this level, and they couldn’t go any farther.

Maurice clicked his tongue. "Just like ten years ago . . ."

Ned and Julie pressed him further, and he gloomily explained, "It hardly seemed worth it if the rabbits could reach the wireless room easily. They had to set off the traps and die, or find the weapons and cause each other harm. We needed to reduce their number."

"Why?" Julie asked.

Maurice didn't answer.

There was a long silence, and then he sighed, "We need to go down three levels. The floor under this and the one below it also have walls—if this ship is the Queen Berry."

They went back down the hall, looking for the stairs.

Kazuya glanced down at Victorique. She hadn't said anything for quite a while now, but he'd just now heard her sigh. Worried, Kazuya peered closely at her face. Beads of sweat stood out on her pale, doll-like forehead.

"Victorique, are you tired?"

She didn't answer.

"Are your legs starting to hurt? Are you hungry? Ah, that bag's getting heavy. Let me carry it."

"No."

"Really? That doesn't seem like you."

"Kujo, having you manage me . . ." Victorique looked up—her cheeks were puffed out like a sulking child; she looked a lot like a chipmunk with its cheeks stuffed full of nuts, presumably not at all what she had intended—"makes me very cross."

"What? I'm not trying to manage you! I'm just . . . concerned, you obstinate sore loser."

“You’re the obstinate one.”

“Victorique!” Kazuya yelled, taking her bag by force with one hand and taking her tiny hand in his other.

Julie glanced over at him with surprise, while Ned was pretending not to notice.

As they walked, Kazuya spoke to Victorique. Questions were piling up inside his head, and he had to talk to someone.

“Victorique, what’s going on here?”

No answer.

He glanced down at her profile, and she did appear to be listening, so he proceeded, “What really happened ten years ago, on the original Queen Berry? Why were children put on board the ship? What happened to them there? And why would someone go to all the trouble of making an exact replica now, ten years later?”

Victorique didn’t answer. She just kept walking along next to him.

“Who is doing this and why?” Kazuya said.

He remembered the dinner in that big dining room, that dinner in the dark. Then, there was the guide who had rowed away in a boat, the lantern floating on the surface of the darkened sea—and the eleven people sitting in that darkened room, who had been moved to the lounge while they were asleep from the soporific in the food . . . and the extra person who had joined them there.

Someone in the lounge hadn’t been there during dinner. Was that person the one behind this re-creation of the ten-year-old blood-stained tragedy?

"We know Ned was there."

"Because you were sitting on his knee," Victorique said, breaking her silence at last.

"Y-yeah, which means the twelfth guest must be Julie or Maurice. And based on age alone, Julie seems suspicious. Ten years ago, she would have been in her early teens, the same age as the children on that ship."

Kazuya thought about this.

"But in that case, why did Ned get an invitation? Maurice is obvious, because he was one of the people who put the kids on the ship, which explains why he was summoned—and nearly killed. But Ned? He's the right age to have been a kid, too—which ought to put him on the victim's side."

"Kujo, you've been stating the blindingly obvious for several minutes now," Victorique said, completely disgusted.

Kazuya looked down at her, hurt. "But we don't understand anything."

"Wait, maybe . . . Ned's in on it, too? Working with Julie? No, in that case they wouldn't need to be so roundabout. They could just team up and kill Maurice."

"Yes, that also is transparently obvious."

"Augh. Okay, so before we got on board, when the fortune-teller Roxanne was murdered . . . She was one of the people behind the Queen Berry, and the maid who killed her escaped . . ."

"Exactly, Kujo."

"Um, so . . . ?"

"So?"

"Uh . . . I don't know."

"Your chaos is extremely boring," Victorique said, losing all interest.

Kazuya sulked in silence, holding her hand as they walked along.

At last, they reached the stairs. The gleaming white staircase had no lights for some reason, and it appeared to plunge away into darkness. Next to it was an elevator, bathed in incandescent light. There was a light inside the cage, as well, and it looked much less frightening. But when Kazuya pointed at the elevator, Ned looked spooked and shook his head.

"Let's take the stairs—they're safer, I think."

Victorique shrugged. "Fine."

The five of them began to descend carefully—slowly, one step at a time. And just as they began to think they'd come a fairly long way—*thwck!*—there was the briefest of sounds.

Maurice let out a throaty yelp. The other four jumped as if a hand had just wrapped itself around their hearts.

"Wh-what is it?"

"L-look!"

Everyone followed Maurice's trembling finger: A crossbow bolt had narrowly missed Maurice's face, and it was now sticking out of the wall. When they looked around, they found a button hidden among the tiles on the floor. Maurice had stepped on it accidentally.

Maurice stared at the arrow closely, going slowly cross-eyed, and then he swung around, glaring at everyone. "H-how dare you? The nerve!"

"Are you okay?" Ned asked.

This just set him off. "Am I okay? One of you is a rabbit, and you set this trap for me! Or you're all in on it, and you're all out to kill me!"

"Give it a rest," Julie said, scowling. Toying with her heart pendant, she continued, "If that were true, I'd have let you get on the lifeboat. Stop flinging accusations around."

They glared at each other.

Kazuya's voice cut through the tension. Sounding rather relaxed, he said, "Victorique, you be careful not to step on any traps. Obviously, I'll try to look out for your share, as well, but . . ."

At his peaceful, earnest voice, Julie's scowl softened.

But Victorique's answer showed she was not as pleased. She said with utter confidence, "I'm in no danger."

Kazuya blinked at her. The adults all frowned, turning toward her.

Ned took a step forward, scowling, and said, "What do you mean?" There was some genuine power in his voice, but Victorique didn't budge an inch.

In the same calm voice as before, she said, "This boat was designed to kill adults. That means I'm safe."

"But the traps could hit anyone! Open the wrong door, step in the wrong place, touch the wrong thing, and even you could . . ."

Victorique tilted her head sideways and smiled like an angel. "The traps are all set up for someone as tall as you, set to fire a bolt through the head of someone five and a half or six feet tall."

"Ah!" Kazuya gasped.

She was right. The first crossbow bolt, and this one—they both had been at that height, which meant . . .

A tiny little thing like Victorique, only a little more than four and a half feet tall . . . the bolt would pass right over her head.

Kazuya gaped at her while Victorique, with all the innocence of a child simply stating what it had learned, continued, "Kujo, you might want to crouch a little. They wouldn't hit your brain, but they might scrape your scalp."

"S-scrape . . . eeek!"

Still clutching Victorique's hand, Kazuya started walking forward, gripping her hand much more tightly than before and watching her face to make sure she wasn't tired.

Walking behind them, Julie stared at this intently.

The staircase remained dark. They had to go slowly, watching for traps, and it felt like they had been descending these stairs for a really long time.

From behind, Julie addressed Kazuya, "You're pretty nice, aren't you, kid?"

Kazuya looked up, puzzled, and Julie glanced down at Victorique. "You're really serious about protecting that girl," she teased.

Kazuya turned red. "N-no, I just . . . I mean, all she ever does is complain."

"You spoil her," Julie nodded.

This didn't make sense to Kazuya. "Spoil her?"

"She's a girl. She might be a little curt, but she does trust you. She lets you hold her things and doesn't try to free her hand."

Kazuya looked at their hands. Despite Victorique's grumbling, she was grasping his hand tightly. Maybe she did

trust him a little. Or was she, in her own way, a little frightened by their predicament?

From her manner and words, he couldn't detect so much as a trace of anxiety, but it seemed like there were such emotions behind their clenched hands. Kazuya squeezed back.

"People like her, kid, would never let anyone hold their bag unless they really, really trusted them. I'd bet money on it."

"But I made such a fuss about opening her bags and making them lighter before we left . . ."

"If someone else had tried that, she never would have let them. If they'd attempted it, she would have stayed home—turned on her heel and gone back inside."

"Hmm . . ." Kazuya thought about this.

He looked up at Julie, who was beaming down at him, and said awkwardly, "I just feel . . . responsible for this."

"Oh? You built this boat?"

"Please don't joke about that. I just meant . . ." Kazuya's expression clouded over.

It had been his idea to take Victorique out traveling. He'd only ever seen her in the library conservatory, that beautiful glass room on the top floor, made for a king to meet his lover. Sitting there, reading at blinding speeds and occasionally pausing briefly to instantly solve mysteries from the world below, she was like some sort of spirit inhabiting Saint Marguerite—a little god, a mystic being.

He was sure her days passed peacefully, surrounded by strangeness and mystery.

And then, he'd gone and invited her out for the weekend, taking her to this place of danger. If anything happened to Victorique, it would be his fault. All she had was her mind. She was tiny, and frail. He himself was just a child, and powerless, but he had to at least protect her.

That was how Kazuya saw it, even though he knew this meant he was earnest and uptight. But his father had been as strict with himself as he'd been with other people, and he and Kazuya's much older brothers constantly had told Kazuya to protect those weaker than him, even if he himself was weak.

Honestly, he'd believed he could never do that, that he was nothing so heroic and it was totally out of the question. But now that he was here, he couldn't admit such feelings to Julie. He was, after all, obstinate.

With no idea what was going through his head, Julie said, teasingly, "How heroic."

"No, I'm the third son of an Imperial soldier."

"By which you mean a man," Julie giggled.

At her laughter, Kazuya turned bright red.

But Julie said happily, "I like kids like you. Let's live through this together."

Her words sounded so innocent, but they embarrassed him horribly. He had no idea how to respond, so he said nothing.

They finally reached the floor they needed. Ned, at the head of the group, sighed with relief. "We're here," he said.

Kazuya sighed as well, and told Victorique, "Just a little more."

But then, Maurice stepped out behind Ned and let out a cry of despair.

Kazuya and Julie glanced at each other and hurried down the last few stairs.

As they hit the last two steps, their feet splashed, water swirling around their shoes. The incandescent lights were reflected in it.

It was sea water. The leak had progressed rapidly, and the water was up to their knees.

This floor had storage and engine rooms, and it was nothing like the floors above. It's like they were inside a big earthen pipe—no decoration at all, to the point of being unsanitary. Little ripples ran across the filthy water. It was an awful sight.

Ned and Maurice looked at each other in horror.

Then, Maurice began wailing, "How could this be? How can we get to the front of the ship now?"

Ned clutched his head, groaning.

Julie stepped down off the last step, and she began walking down the hall, the water splashing around her knees.

The two men stared after her. She spun around, looked directly at Kazuya, and said, "What are you doing? Hurry up! We haven't a moment to waste!"

"Ah, right!" Kazuya hesitated a second, and then nodded firmly.

He crouched down and said to Victorique, "Climb on!"

For a second, Victorique appeared to have received the shock of her life.

From down the hall, Julie shouted, "Do as he says!"

“Hurry, hurry! No time to waste!”

Moaning, Victorique reluctantly climbed onto Kazuya’s back.

She seemed a little too light to be a human—she was more like a dog or a cat. But her light weight was soon offset when her thin arms wrapped around Kazuya’s neck and squeezed tightly.

“Ack, Victorique! You’re strangling me!”

“Tough.”

“No! You’re killing me!”

But even as he argued, Kazuya had begun to slosh forward through the water. He heard Maurice and Ned following after.

At last, Julie, in front, shouted happily, “Good! There’s no wall on this floor! We’re in the front of the ship! Hurry, to higher ground! Up the stairs!”

Kazuya walked faster. Victorique, presumably out of happiness, began leaning forward and waving her arms around. He almost dropped her into the water and had to tighten his grip on her legs. She appeared oblivious to his torment as she kicked merrily.

They reached the stairs at the prow and began climbing them slowly, watching for traps.

Maurice muttered, “How could this happen? One of you must be a rabbit. I won’t let my guard down! I won’t!” he shouted before suddenly running off down the hallway above.

They were still pretty far down, and the hallway was dimly lit. They could barely make out how worn away the carpet was. It might have been crimson once, but now it was dark, stained,

and threadbare in the middle from the passage of countless feet. The lamps were unadorned and functional, and the walls were made of metal plates with visible rivets.

Maurice ran off down the hall, opening every door as he passed. This area was third class, and each room had four beds, piled one on top of the other, right up to the ceiling. Every room had the same layout. As Maurice peered into them all, he seemed to be looking for something.

Ned cried out, "What are you doing?"

"If this ship re-creates that box, then there should be some around here . . . there!" Maurice's face twisted in victory.

Ned ran toward him, but he quickly drew up short, yelping in surprise.

Maurice had turned back toward them, holding a gun in his hand. He held it up with both his shaking hands, his eyes glittering like darkness.

"Yikes!" Ned screamed, running back toward Victorique and Kazuya. He hid behind them.

Grinning, Maurice pointed the gun at him.

"There are weapons hidden all over this ship! In the drawers, in the cases, under the carpet . . . everywhere. This is one of them!"

"Why?" Julie asked.

She was staring sadly at Maurice, her hands trembling, looking ready to cry. Maurice stared back at her, expressionless. And then he spat, as if the answer were obvious, "So they would kill one another."

"What?"

Maurice shrugged. "Some of them got caught in traps and died. Others found weapons and killed one another. That was all part of our plan. There was no point to it if they all survived."

"What *point*?"

"You don't need to know." Maurice grinned. "And there was also a hound."

"A hound?"

"Yeah," Maurice said before shutting his mouth.

He pulled the slide slowly. With a sinister click, a bullet entered the magazine.

"The rabbits get to die!"

Kazuya realized the gun was pointed directly at Victorique and shouted, "Wait, Maurice, why? You're the one who said Victorique was a real aristocrat and not behind this!"

"I'm not sure of anything anymore. Good thing I have six bullets! I can kill you all and escape alone!"

"Huh?"

"The boat's about to sink. The proof will be at the bottom of the sea, just as it was ten years ago!"

Kazuya stepped in front of Victorique, shielding her.

He stared down the barrel of the gun, a cold sweat pouring down his face, his legs shaking. He gritted his teeth and held his ground.

From behind, Victorique poked him in the back, sounding utterly relaxed. "Kujo, what *are* you doing?"

"Wh-wh-what am I . . . p-p-protecting you from the d-d-d-deadly bullets!"



“Leaving you dead?”

“M-m-maybe. But if I do this, y-y-you won’t die.”

“Sure, but . . .”

“I . . . I brought you here. I have to send you back. It’s my duty as the third son of an Imperial soldier.”

Kazuya remembered his father’s perfect posture, and his older brothers, who resembled their father in every way. He remembered one beautiful afternoon, when they had taken him to a nearby *dojo*. Kazuya had been thrown aside by an adult, and he’d been too scared to face him. He’d clung to the white *tatami*, on the verge of tears, feeling ashamed, miserable, and cowardly as his brothers stared down at him with obvious disappointment.

“The youngest child is always spoiled,” someone had whispered—one of the adults watching, probably. That offhanded comment had left a deep and permanent scar in Kazuya’s heart.

“So, V-Victorique . . .” he looked grimly down at her. But Victorique was—her glittering emerald green eyes were wide open, looking up at him.

For the first time, Kazuya realized that Victorique looked very, very surprised. Until then, she always had pounced happily on any chaos—by which he meant mysteries—that he’d brought her. That happiness also had been mixed with a trace of surprise. But the expression on her face now could not have been more different: This was pure surprise, as if she’d found something remarkable, and all her attention was focused on observing it.

At last she murmured quietly, "Kujo, are you, perhaps . . . a good person?"

"What? Is that a compliment?"

"No."

"You're making fun of me?"

"Why would I be? I am merely pointing out a truth. What are you getting so upset about?"

"Augh" Just as Kazuya was about to get angry—*bang!*—there was a gunshot.

He fired . . . ?

Kazuya shrank down, still shielding Victorique with his body. He closed his eyes tightly, his mind screaming.

Everything that had happened to him—his childhood spent looking up to his brothers, frantically studying in a desperate attempt to follow in their footsteps, deciding to study abroad, setting off, his life at Saint Marguerite, his fateful, irreversible, or at least dramatic first meeting with Victorique—they all passed before his eyes like a phantasmagoria.

Um?

Kazuya was not dead. He slowly opened his eyes, and Victorique was twisting away from him, scowling.

"That hurts. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Hey!" Kazuya protested. That was no way to speak to someone protecting you, he thought, letting go of her.

Maurice was lying on his back. There was a hole between his eyes, and he looked very surprised.

Kazuya turned around, and Julie was down on one knee, with a little pistol in her hand. Her gleaming white leg

protruded from her red dress. Expressionless, she lowered the gun and stood up.

Then, as if making excuses, she said, "I found one, too, against the wall, in the shadow of a lamp. I didn't know why it was there, so I kept quiet about it."

Ned went over to Maurice's corpse, looking scared. He took the gun from the body's hand and threw it down the stairs into the water below.

Splash!

The gun sank into the water, leaving behind only a few sinister bubbles.

Ned turned back to Julie. "Toss your gun, as well," he said.

"Huh?"

"We're all jumpy enough. Once something like this has happened, we really will start killing one another. I threw mine away, you throw yours."

"But—"

"Or is there a reason why you need a gun?"

Julie clicked her tongue. She tossed the pistol down the stairs, and it hit the water with a splash.

She clicked her tongue again, saying, "Come on. Let's get to the wireless room."

As she started up the stairs, her handbag slipped out of her hand.

Victorique picked it up, to Kazuya's surprise. (She didn't seem the type to do someone a favor.) But Victorique didn't appear to have any intention of giving the purse back politely. Instead, she threw the bag at Julie. It wafted lightly through

the air, and Julie caught it easily before turning around and starting back up the stairs.

The other three followed.



Two

With every step they climbed, more water dripped from Kazuya's, Julie's, and Ned's wet clothes. Victorique was the only one to have avoided a moistening, but her exquisite lacy frilly dress and the silk socks underneath were covered in dust and grime.

Glancing down at that, Kazuya felt incredibly pathetic and apologetic. Victorique belonged in the library conservatory, surrounded by books. She was a dignified, hollowed creature who never should have been brought to this filthy, sinking ship.

When he squeezed her hand, Victorique looked up at him. "I've been wondering," she said.

"What?"

"Kujo, you said you were the third son of an Imperial soldier."

"Yes."

"Is there any meaning to being the third son?"

"Augh!"

Kazuya angrily flung Victorique's hand off his.

Victorique appeared to be surprised by his rage. "Wh-why are you angry?"

“Oh, come on! First, I’m a ‘good person,’ and now this thing about being a third son . . . are you trying to pick a fight with me, Victorique?”

“N-no, just pointing out the truth. It’s all part of the chaos!”

“Let me tell you, I might be the third son, but I had the best grades!”

The two sides of their conversation weren’t matching up.

“In your country, is a particularly worthy third son promoted to oldest?”

“No. It’s just pride—my brothers got all the attention, so I had to study hard to compete.”

All his efforts had been dashed that day in the dojo, though—at least, as far as he was concerned. Because of that, he’d left the military academy and thrown himself to Sauville. He’d completed the paperwork and packed his bags before his mother and sister—before anyone from his family—had time to stop him, fleeing from his country, his family, himself. And now, Kazuya was here.

“Hmm . . .” Victorique nodded. She was silent for a minute, and then, her voice as beautiful as a song, she said, “The aristocrats here are the same. It’s always the eldest son who receives the title.”

Victorique had the strangest expression, like she was peering intently at something strange and fascinating. “Pride, you say?”

“Mm?”

“Kujo, you’re not only a good person, you’re also sincere.”

“Huh?”

“Your soul is pure and beautiful enough to admit pride.”

“Is that a good thing—or a round about way of making fun of me?” Kazuya asked, angry again.

Victorique stared back at him, mystified. Then, she looked away, saying nothing. Her cheeks were puffed out again, like a chipmunk’s. She was sulking.

Perhaps the last few minutes of conversation *had* been an attempt at praising him, or of thanking him for protecting her. Had she been trying to express her friendship with him aloud?

Oblivious to this, Kazuya muttered to himself until Victorique said sulkily, “Don’t be silly. I’m just stating the truth, verbalizing the reconstructed chaos.”

She said nothing else.

Kazuya could tell she was mad at him, but he couldn’t figure out why.

The four of them climbed on in silence.

Ned was in front, tossing a tennis ball up and down. He reached a darkened landing, turned a corner, and vanished. A moment later, there was a dull thunk—and a tiny scream.

Kazuya and Julie exchanged a look.

“Ned?” Julie called out. There was no answer.

Kazuya tried, “Something wrong?” The staircase remained silent.

Kazuya and Julie looked at each other again.

A second later, they both bolted up the stairs. When they reached the darkened landing, they saw something they never would’ve imagined: Ned, lying on his face—dead.

Shouting, Kazuya ran over to him.

The body's legs were thrust out toward him, the right arm pinned under the body. The left arm was out, the palm of his left hand resting oddly on his hip.

Kazuya took the left wrist and checked for a pulse. There was none.

How? Why? What could have . . . a trap? There was a trap here? But what . . . ?

"Kuuuuuujo." Victorique called, her voice raspy. He turned around, and she was looking back at him, more worried than he'd ever seen her. "What?"

"Come here, Kujo."

"Wait a second. He's dead! There must have been some kind of trap . . ."

"Do as I say, Kujo!" Victorique insisted stubbornly.

Annoyed, Kazuya snapped, "Victorique, this is no time to be selfish!"

"I'm scared. Please stay with me. Please, Kujo."

Kazuya froze. One knee on the floor, he stared up at her.

She stared back at him, as always, accepting no argument. It was like she was chanting, "Hurry, hurry, stand up!" in her mind. What she'd just said didn't sound like anything Victorique would normally say.

His mind reeling, Kazuya could only think that Victorique was lying. *She's definitely not scared. And she would never, ever say "please."* He gasped. *Oh, I get it! She wants me to move, to move away from Ned's body!*

Kazuya stood up and resumed his place by Victorique's side. He glanced sideways at Julie, who'd gone stiff. Her hands were clasped over her mouth, her eyes wide open as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"No . . . no . . ." she said, her voice very small. "The same . . . the same! Just like . . . but why?"

One eye on Julie, Kazuya whispered to Victorique, "What's going on?"

"Listen, Kujo," Victorique said tensely. "When the three of us get to the top of the stairs, we will go into the hall and hide. We should find some weapons. They should be all over."

"Huh?"

Victorique's face was grim, her words cryptic. "One of them, three of us—but that's two kids and one woman, and we'll have a hard time beating a grown man. I should never have let her throw the gun away, but there's no point in dwelling on that now."

Julie whispered, "What? Why?"

Victorique looked up, her green eyes open wide, wavering anxiously. Her thin, colorless lips moved, stating clearly, "He's going to kill us."

Kazuya opened his mouth to say something, but then he closed it again. He'd decided they were better off doing what Victorique said. Julie still looked stunned, so he pulled her after them—passing by the corpse and heading up the next set of stairs.

Quietly, Victorique instructed, "Run!"

Kazuya gripped her hand tightly.

They were fairly high up now, so the carpet was soft and fluffy, and the lamps were of an ornate design. They jumped into a nearby door and found themselves in a reading room for first-class passengers with glittering chandeliers and magnificent bookshelves along the wall. Watching out for traps, they began searching the shelves and desk drawers, as well as under the carpet.

Kazuya found a pair of brass knuckles in one drawer and put them on. Then, he turned around and looked at Julie; she was breathing heavily, holding a large letter opener. When their eyes met, Julie put her index finger to her lips, silencing him. Kazuya responded with a nod.

Nobody made a sound.

Kazuya could hear his heart beating—it sounded really loud, and it was making his head throb.

Several minutes passed like this . . .

Nothing happened.

Kazuya and Julie glanced at each other, frowning. Then, Kazuya turned back and met Victorique's eyes. He was about to ask her to explain, when the door opened, without a sound.

And standing in the doorway . . . was the dead man, Ned Baxter.

Ned wielded a huge ax in his right hand. His face was completely expressionless, looking nothing like it had earlier. And the moment he entered the reading room, the temperature seemed to plummet like a stone falling to the bottom of a river.

He swung the ax menacingly.



The first person he found was Julie, standing against the wall and glaring at him. He stepped slowly toward her, raising the ax.

She raised the letter opener and called to the other two, "What are you doing? Run! Get to the wireless and call for help!"

At this, Ned slowly turned around, finding Kazuya standing protectively in front of Victorique.

His eyes were dark and empty, like two holes in the middle of his face. But when they lit on Victorique, they began to glitter.

"A girl. A rabbit!"

"Huh?"

"I have to hunt the rabbits, because I'm a hound!"

He raised the ax, kicked the ground, and lunged forward.

Ned came right for Victorique. Kazuya shoved her to the ground and punched Ned in the face as hard as he could.

Ned was far bigger than him, but Kazuya was wearing brass knuckles, and his punch was astonishingly powerful. He could feel it in the impact. Ned collapsed, landing flat on his face.

Thud!

Julie came running toward him, and she rubbed Kazuya's head. "Good work! You are a real man!"

"No, I'm the third son of . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, an Imperial soldier. We should run."

Julie snatched up the ax. The three of them exited into the hall, shoving a big cabinet in front of the door. Then, they ran up the stairs.

Ned had regained consciousness, and they could hear him pounding the door behind them.

As they neared the deck, the staircase grew lighter.

Kazuya was running with Victorique's tiny body cradled in his arms. Victorique was staring with a kind of intent curiosity at Ned's blood on the brass knuckles Kazuya was still wearing.

Julie caught up with them, bounding up the stairs, clutching the ax in both hands. Her expression tragic, she said, addressing not Kazuya but Victorique, "How did you know that he wasn't dead?"

Kazuya started to point out that they could explain that later, but Julie's face was ashen, and she really seemed to need an explanation.

Victorique frowned slightly. Then, in a voice so normal it sounded terribly out of place in their current situation, she explained, "It's very simple: It welled up out of the fountain of knowledge."

"Victorique, explain that, verbalize . . ."

"Mm," Victorique said reluctantly. "It was very simple: His posture was very unnatural. He was lying on his face, with his right hand under his body, like he didn't want us touching it. But his left hand was out toward us, begging us to check his pulse."

"I guess . . ."

"If you were hit with some unexpected trap, would you land in a pose like that? Most people would end up with both hands stretched out in front of them. You should've noticed something was odd."

"But he had no pulse! I'm sure of it."

"Yeah," Julie whispered softly.

Her face was as pale as death, her lips trembling. As if to herself, she murmured, "Just like it was then—no pulse, none at all."

"Then?"

"N-nothing. Go on, little detective."

Victorique sniffed at the nickname, but she continued, "You can stop your pulse temporarily."

"How?"

"Hold something in your armpit, like a tennis ball."

Kazuya and Julie both cried out at once, and then they glanced at each other, blinking.

"Oh!"

Ned had been tossing that tennis ball around the whole time. If he'd placed it under his left arm and held it there tightly . . .

"You can stop your pulse temporarily, and anyone who touches that arm will believe that you're dead. When I figured that out, I called you back."

"Not because you were scared?" Julie said, teasing.

Victorique blushed. Hastily, she said, "That was a lie! I had to say that, or this third son of an Imperial soldier never would've moved!"

"Stop calling me that."

"Would you prefer 'the accomplished third son of an imperial solider'?"

"Augh! You're just trying to make me mad!"

As she watched them argue, Julie looked very lonely.



Three

By the time they reached the deck, dawn had broken, and the rays of the morning sun were reflecting off the wet boards. The rain, so violent during the night, had given way to a slow drizzle, but it hadn't yet stopped completely. The sea was dark, the waves still frighteningly high.

The wireless room waited for them like a tiny, solitary hut halfway up the side of a mountain. The deck was slippery, and Victorique nearly fell over any number of times—but Kazuya always caught her.

They'd almost reached the wireless room when, behind them, they heard Julie scream: "Aiiieee!"

Kazuya whipped around and saw a man's arm yank Julie's black hair, pulling her backward.

It was Ned Baxter.

Julie screamed again: "Noooooooooooo!"

Like a vicious beast out of a child's nightmare, Ned Baxter's eyes were bloodshot, his mouth open wide.

Julie's neck twisted, and she screamed like one possessed. The ax slipped from her fingers and spun across the deck.

Ned flung her limp body onto the ground and strode rapidly toward Kazuya and Victorique.

"V-Victorique, this way!" Kazuya cried. She was paralyzed with fear, so he dragged her forcefully after him, slipping on the wet wood.

He was able to get the door to the wireless room open, and he shoved Victorique in, trying to slam the door shut behind her—but she reached out her hand and pulled him after her.

“Victorique, you stay in there! Call for help!”

“Kujo, what about you?”

“I have to do something about him, or he’ll kill you!”

“Kujo . . .”

“It’s just that”—Kazuya shook like a leaf as he watched the hound lope slowly toward him—“I brought you here. It’s up to me to make sure you get back.”

“No!” Victorique shrieked, her voice trembling. She looked absolutely anguished, as if she desperately wanted to tell him something but didn’t have the words to do so. Her mouth flapped wordlessly, opening and closing in silence. Finally, she found words: “I’m the one who wanted to come here. I found the invitation, and you—”

“No, it’s my fault.”

“Think about it logically! Which of us is really responsible?”

“D-doesn’t matter!” Kazuya said, stomping his foot.

Victorique stomped several times in return.

At last, Kazuya said, “Look, if I’d don’t save you, then as the third son of an Imperial soldier . . .” Suddenly, Kazuya felt like this phrase was a chain wrapped around him. If he used it, he would never be able to make Victorique understand how he really felt—as had happened before, their two sides of conversation wouldn’t match up.

"No, that's not right, that's not it," Kazuya said, forcing himself to be honest. "I want to save you."

Victorique's face crumpled. She looked impossibly sad, but she opened her mouth to say something.

Kazuya tried to force the door closed.

Victorique looked nothing like the calm, cynical, collected aristocrat she'd been since he first met her. The thin veil that separated her from the world had vanished, and all that remained was an anxious little girl.

Kazuya pushed harder. The last thing he saw was her green eyes, worried like a lost puppy.

"K-Kujo . . ." her voice was so faint he could barely hear it. "Kujo, please, stay with me. Go home with me. I don't want to be alone, Kujo!"

Kazuya closed his eyes, and the door slammed shut.

A moment later the hound attacked.

Kazuya tightened his fists around the brass knuckles, raising them. He tried to remember the moves his brothers had taught him occasionally, back on that Eastern island. They'd taught him well, and Kazuya had a good memory, which is why he excelled in school. He pulled his fist back and thrust it out toward Ned's nose.

Ned took the blow hard to the face and swayed a little. Then, he spread his fingers and brushed his face from top to bottom. When the hand moved away, there was a creepy smile on Ned's face, which scared Kazuya, who punched again, harder, trying to drive away his fears.

There was a dull thump, and blood began spilling out of Ned's nose. Again, Ned passed his palm across his face,

leaving a smear of blood on it. When he saw that, one of Ned's eyebrows began to twitch in anger.

Ned kicked the deck, lunging forward. His body fell onto Kazuya's, knocking him down. Kazuya's back hit the deck hard. Sitting on top of him, Ned punched him in the face again and again, until Kazuya started to black out.

Just like that day, he thought, in the dojo, when he'd been defeated on the tatami and lay there trembling.

But . . . he'd had his brothers waiting for him then. They were adults, much stronger than Kazuya. This time was different. He was in another country, far from his own, alone with a little girl he'd made friends with. If he lost, both of them would die so easily—a simple, emotionless punctuation mark stuck at their end of their lives.

Kazuya gritted his teeth and held on. He waited for Ned to slow, and then he thrust his own fist upward, toward the sky. His fist hit Ned's face again and again.

For some reason, he wasn't out of breath. *Why not?* he wondered, and then he realized: every day for the last few months, he'd been running up and down the staircase maze in the Saint Marguerite library. Victorique had made fun of him for it, calling the activity "good exercise," but it really had been making him stronger.

Each one of Kazuya's punches was knocking Ned's head back. But no matter how many times Kazuya punched him, Ned's head kept bobbing up again. Ned's face was covered in blood, transformed to a horrible red blob, yet Kazuya kept on punching it.

Ned began to strangle him, and Kazuya could feel his mind slowly beginning to drift away. *I can't lose . . . I . . . can't . . . lose!* But the hands around his throat were tight, and the grown man was much stronger. Kazuya could feel his punches losing strength.

Victor . . . ique . . .

Although Kazuya's eyes were open, it was as if there were a white mist in front of them.

He gritted his teeth and slammed the brass knuckles into Ned's temple as hard as he could. When the hands around Kazuya's neck weakened, Kazuya took a ragged breath and opened his eyes. His vision improved with each breath he took, and he was able to stand up and stagger backward, his back coming up against the railing at the edge of the deck.

Ned stood up, too, his face covered in blood, swaying as he staggered after Kazuya.

Kazuya blinked. There was someone standing behind Ned: Julie. She had come to and crept quietly over to them, the ax in her hands. Her eyes met Kazuya's, and she held her finger up in front of her lips. Kazuya nodded in response.

Ned raised his fist again, swinging it toward Kazuya's head—but Kazuya abruptly crouched down, sliding between Ned's legs and moving behind him.

Ned had put his weight behind the punch; with his target gone, he staggered forward.

Julie raised the ax and swung it at him as hard as she could. The blade of it sank diagonally into Ned's back, causing Ned to roar like a wild thing. Julie let go of the ax, her hands trembling.

At the same time, Kazuya grabbed Ned's leg as the hound tried to turn around, and he yanked it upward.

"Augh!"

Ned's body spun in the air.

With the ax still in his back, he fell head first over the railing and into the water below.

Kazuya ran to the railing and looked down. There was a splash, and Ned Baxter was swallowed by the sea. White bubbles frothed as two or three high waves rolled over the body, and then Ned vanished to the depths below.

Julie joined Kazuya at the railing, breathing heavily.

"Thanks, kid," she said.

"No, thank you."

"You did good." Julie smiled faintly.

They stood in silence, gazing down at the dark water that had swallowed Ned. Waves tossed on the water below, the sea gradually quieting as the sun rose.



Using the wireless, Victorique sent the coast guard an SOS. She sat dismally in front of the big square machine, like a doll someone had put there for laughs—but her face was white, and her hands were moving frantically, proving that she was no doll.

The door opened, and Victorique's shoulders shook.

When Kazuya entered, for a second, Victorique seemed so relieved that she nearly burst into tears. But a moment later, she resumed her normal calm, slightly sarcastic expression.

“You appear to be safe and sound.”

When Julie came in after him, Victorique didn’t appear especially pleased.

Julie didn’t notice. She asked brightly, “You called for help?”

“Of course. They should be here shortly. Apparently,” Victorique said gloomily, “we are not far from the harbor we started in. They were most puzzled by how we could be in trouble this close to land. It was extremely difficult to explain over the machine.”

Then, Victorique stood up and went over to Kazuya, who was busy taking off the brass knuckles. It was as if a tiny, finely crafted doll was walking over to him; but the expression on her face, which cannot be described, proved she was no doll. Her expression spoke of relief, exhaustion, and something else, something transparent . . .

Victorique said nothing; she simply took Kazuya’s hand and held it tightly.



Four

A few minutes after the coast guard arrived and the three survivors were safely on board their ship, the Queen Berry sank beneath the waves with a horrible noise.

It was an impressive sight to behold, a ship that large sinking and leaving nothing behind it but the silent sea and

a few churning ripples, as if it had never existed in the first place.

The coast guard ship was nothing like the Queen Berry—it was a sturdy vessel, free of decoration. The deck showed signs of hard use, and the paint on the railings was chipped and spotted.

A pair of young men in rabbit-skin hunting caps skipped toward them through the coast guard. For some reason, they were holding hands. They were Grevil de Blois' subordinates. They both looked quite pale, and they cried out loudly when they saw Victorique safe and sound.

“Oh good! You're alive! Miraculous!”

“What a shock! The ship sank? *Mon Dieu!*”

There was quite a commotion.

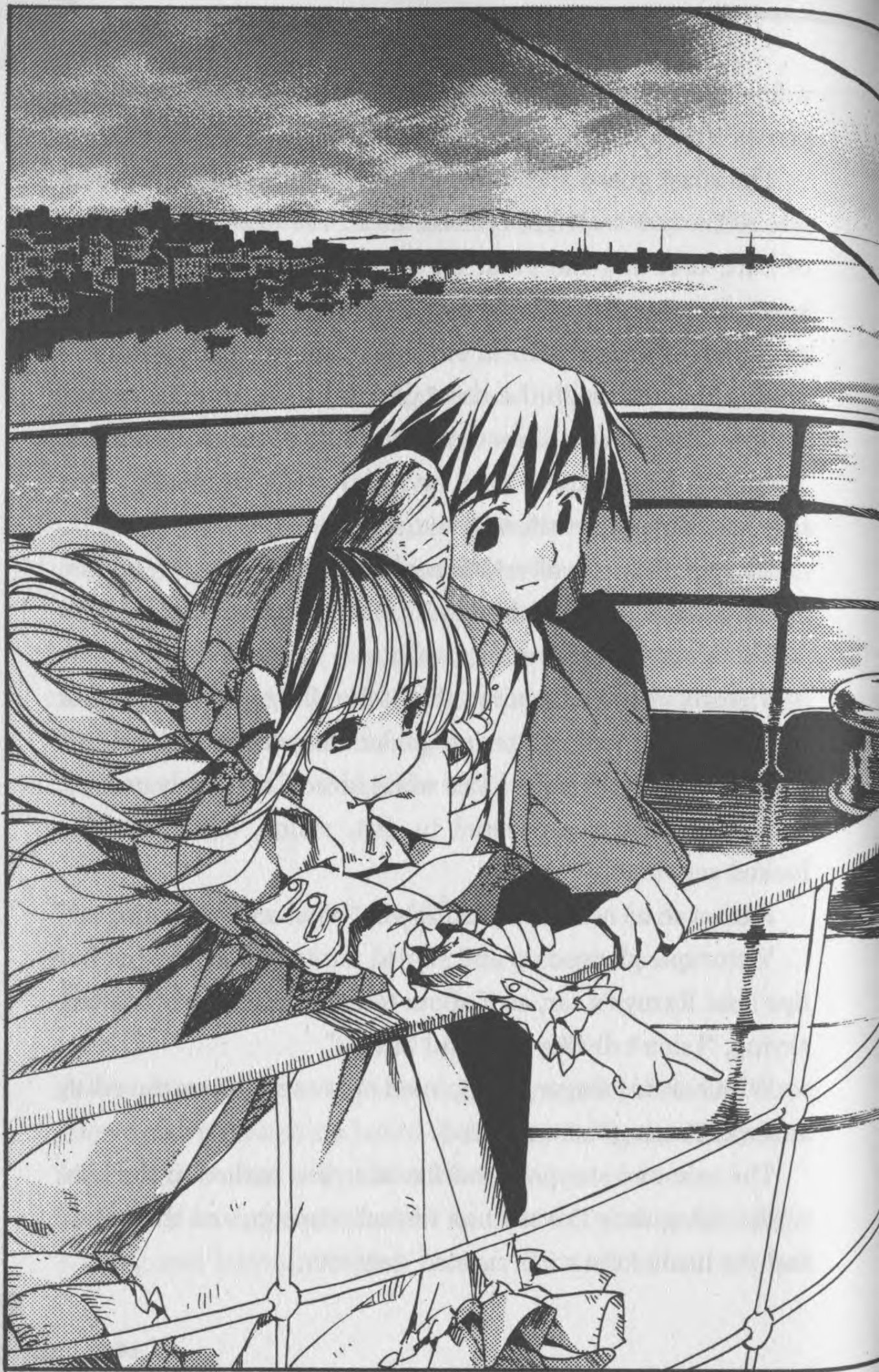
Victorique leaned against the deck railing, staring down at the water. Her long, glittering golden hair drifted behind her, lifted by the salty breeze. The white lace of her finely crafted, exquisite dress was covered in dirt, stains, and runs. She looked very lonely.

Kazuya stood next to her and asked, “What are you looking at?”

Victorique glanced up and smiled faintly. Then, she put her lips near Kazuya's ear, as if about to let him in on a big secret, saying, “I don't dislike beautiful things.”

With her tiny finger, she pointed out to sea, where the rising sun was turning the waves red.

The rain had stopped, and the boat was bathed in the light of the rising sun. The sea had turned crimson, and they could feel the heat of the sun's rays on their skin.



It occurred to Kazuya that this was the first time his little golden girlfriend had ever expressed a preference aloud. He felt like he'd been given privileged information. Kazuya smiled.

They stood together, taking in the view.

After a long while, Kazuya said, "We should come again."

"Again?"

"Yeah, come and see the ocean again."

Victorique smiled sadly. "Again . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Nothing, Kujo. Nothing at all."

The red sunrise was beginning to fade, the light turning softer. The boat neared land, and the waves grew smaller.



Five

Julie Guile stepped down from the boat. She kept her head down, avoiding attention, walking quickly away. Soon, she was running, running away from the boat.

It all makes sense, she thought.

The harbor was filled with boats, and people were flooding off them. Figures were noisily unloading cargo, and sailors hustled back and forth busily. There were crowds of people waiting to start their voyages, families waiting to see them off, porters carrying their baggage around. As the sun rose higher, the commotion only increased.

Julie flung herself through the bustling crowds, trying to hide herself among them. Obviously, the police had told her to stick around, but she didn't intend to heed their instruction. She walked on, sliding through the harbor crowds.

All she had to do was step off that boat, and the woman named Julie Guile would vanish. In the bustling city, they'd never find her.

Julie walked quickly, never noticing the men following her: two men, skipping along, holding hands, each wearing a rabbit-skin hunting cap.

Julie muttered to herself, "It all makes sense. You did the same thing back then, didn't you?"

There were tears in her eyes as the memories came flooding back to her. No, "memories" is much too beautiful a word for these thoughts—these were nightmares, visions of one long, nightmarish night.

You fooled us all, Hughie . . . The hound hidden among the rabbits: Hughie . . . Ned Baxter. That night, you pretended you were dead, just like you did today.



I pushed the heart-shaped pendant I'd found on the steps into my pocket before standing up and going back down the dark stairs, heading for the hall where the others waited.

But before I could reach the hall, something unexpected happened: I heard a gunshot in the distance, and children screaming.

I ran down the stairs and out into the drab, dirty hall—and I froze, astonished.

“Hughie?”

The other children were laying in a heap on the floor: The little French girl was lying protectively on top of Ree; the sturdy Italian had his back to the wall, staring vacantly at the blood flowing from his shoulder; the thin, curly-haired American boy was lying on his back, groaning; Yang was standing in front of them, his arm bleeding. And in the middle of them all was a thin boy . . .

He was supposed to be dead, but that was definitely Hughie.

I had called out despite myself, and now he slowly turned toward me. I gasped. There was no expression at all on his pale face. He was like a marionette, controlled not by his own will but by some larger power.

“Found another rabbit!” he hissed, grinning.

He had some sort of machine gun in his hand. He must have stolen it from the boys who had drowned.

So those strange things they’d said . . .

“We saw a ghost!”

“He took the gun away and pushed us in here!”

By “ghost,” they’d meant Hughie. He was supposed to be dead.

And now, the other children were lying on the ground, bleeding.

The blood rushed to my head. I pulled the pistol out of my pocket, pointing it at Hughie’s chest.

"Drop the gun, Hughie!"

"You first."

Grinning, Hughie pulled the trigger.

There was a hot, powerful blow to my right shoulder. By the time I realized I'd been hit, I was on my knees. The gun had fallen out of my hands, and a cold sweat formed on my forehead. I shivered.

Hughie sauntered over to me, obviously enjoying himself. He pointed the gun at my head.

"Stop!" A boy screamed.

Blood streaming from his arm, Yang had jumped between Hughie and me. His voice shaking with rage, he roared, "I don't know why you're doing this, but don't you ever point a gun at a girl!"

"Like that matters. Male, female—in this box, they're all the same."

Hughie's voice was shaking, too. His eyes wavered, as if he were desperately afraid of something.

"What matters is nationality, not gender."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm helping them out. I'm the hound, placed among you rabbits. They told me to do what I could, getting you to kill one another . . . each for his country . . . until the bitter end!"

"Hughie?" Between his horrifying expression and his mysterious words, all I could do was stare up at him, confused.

Hughie raised the machine gun. "What happens here is the future. It will all come to pass!"

Yang jumped on him. His chest hit the barrel of the gun, and Hughie pulled the trigger.

Yang's body was knocked backward, and drops of his blood splattered on my face. The bullet hit him at close range, opening a hole right through his body. He landed on the ground with a thump far louder than I would have imagined possible. Blood flowed out onto the threadbare, filthy carpet around him, turning it red.

I screamed, and Hughie pointed the gun at me, grinning.

His thin lips parted, and he said, "Beg."

I glared up at him. Hughie's expression did not change.

"No."

"Then . . . die!"

He took a step closer, and I closed my eyes.

There was a small click. He'd pulled the trigger, but . . .

I opened my eyes: He was out of bullets. I grabbed my gun off the floor, holding it in my left hand.

Hughie turned and ran, and I fired after him.

Each gunshot made a lot of noise, but none hit him. I felt faint from the blood flowing from my shoulder. I realized I was crying. Tears blocked my vision, and I couldn't see to aim. My shoulders were shaking with the force of my sobs.

I looked down at Yang's lifeless body, and I stood up. Staggering, I walked over to the other children.

The American and the Italian had been shot in the side and shoulder respectively, but the bullets had just grazed them, and they managed to stand up when I called their names. The French girl seemed to have fainted from sheer terror.

When they all three were up, I hoisted Ree onto my shoulders—she had passed out again. Her heart pendant was still in my pocket. I had to give it to her, I thought. We started walking.

When the American boy staggered, the Italian boy started talking to him, talking about his hometown.

“I lived near the market. In the morning, I used to make money working the stalls. There were so many stalls, all of them with mountains of vegetables. I knew we had the best-looking, best-tasting vegetables in all the world.”

The American boy smiled softly, showing that he heard.

The French girl moaned, “How?”

The boys looked at her.

Directing her question at no one in particular, she asked in a choked voice, “He was alive? That boy—but he died!”

Nobody said anything. We didn’t know the answer.

I went over and over it in my mind, like I was going crazy. I was sure of it: Hughie hadn’t had a pulse!



CHAPTER 5

Game, Set

One

Julie Guile had left the harbor and was traveling in a horse-drawn cab that she'd hailed in town. Her long black hair was swaying in the wind, covering and uncovering her face. In the bumpy seat, Julie stared into the distance, lost in thought.

"Yeah," she murmured at last, "I was the one who took Hughie's pulse when he was on the ground. There was no pulse, and he looked dead. I'd been wondering about that all this time, but I never understood. . . ."

The carriage was headed into the center of town; the more crowded her view became, the more Julie relaxed. She had completed her revenge and escaped.

In a surprisingly cheery voice, the driver said, "Beautiful weather today, isn't it, miss?"

She ignored him.

He continued anyway, "It was cloudy a few hours ago, but it looks to be sunshine the rest of the day."

"Yeah," Julie said.

She smiled to herself—she had remembered Victorique and was unable to stop herself. She was sure Victorique, that strange, beautiful girl, had no idea that the question she'd taken only an instant to dispel had been bothering Julie for more than ten years.

The tennis ball that had been laying where Hughie's body should have been . . . Hughie had pulled the same trick ten years ago, making everyone frightened and pushing them toward fighting one another. Once separated from the group, Hughie had been able to pick them off.

"It all makes sense," she said again, toying with the heart-shaped pendant around her neck.

Her revenge had gone perfectly. The adults who had put the rabbits in that box and killed so many of them were gone, and so was the hound. It was all over. All she had to do was run—far, far away.

Then, Julie noticed something was wrong: The cab had turned the corner and was now heading not toward the station, where a train waited to carry her away to foreign lands, but in the opposite direction. She turned to the driver hastily, "Where are you going?"

"Where, miss?" The driver turned around. He was a handsome young man, with an aristocratic bearing and a cynical smile, and he was much too well dressed for a cab driver—there was even an expensive silk tie around his neck.

“Who are you?” Julie said, staring with disbelief at the driver’s bizarre hairstyle, a sort of pointy spiral unlike anything she’d ever seen before.

“Grevil.”

“Grevil who?”

“The detective.”

“Huh?”

The driver pulled the reins, and the horses neighed as they came to a stop.

A great number of footsteps could be heard outside. Julie gulped. The cab was surrounded by police officers.

She took in her surroundings: They were parked outside the police station, a square building with square windows covered by iron bars that clearly had stood here for many, many years. It looked just like a prison, and she felt as if the orange brick walls were advancing on her.

Julie looked up at the building and spotted a boy and a girl standing outside the station—the Asian boy, the third son of an Imperial soldier, Kazuya Kujo, stood next to the one Julie had called the “little detective,” the aristocratic blonde girl, Victorique. They were holding hands and staring at her.

Julie hung her head. She turned to the driver. “Game, set?”

“Exactly.”

The driver jumped down from the carriage and opened her door from the outside, holding out his hand for Julie to take. His aggressively sharpened hair nearly stabbed her in the face. She took his hand and stepped out of the cab.

“Julie Guile,” he said proudly, “you are under arrest, charged with murder!”

Julie smiled for the briefest of seconds, and then she walked toward the station, her expression as cold as ice.



Two

Inside the station, Julie Guile sat across from de Blois, Victorique, and Kazuya.

For some reason, the two subordinates were locked outside; they were standing in front of the door, holding hands.

This station was not within de Blois' jurisdiction; but when Victorique had called him, he used his noble birth to wrest control of the entire operation.

The room was dark, but fairly large. There was a long, plain table in the center and a single bare light bulb hanging overhead. The rough-hewn wooden chairs they were sitting in creaked every time one of them moved.

In one of those chairs sat Julie Guile, looking mystified. She turned to Victorique and asked, “How did you know? That I was behind everything?”

Their movements synchronized, Victorique and de Blois both reached into their bags, pulled out pipes, and put them to their lips. Then, they both lit them, taking long drags and simultaneously blowing smoke toward Julie.

“The fountain of knowledge,” Victorique said curtly.

Then, she realized that Julie, the detective, and Kazuya all were staring at her patiently. Annoyed, she brushed back her long golden hair and continued, "To explain: You began by lying."

"Lying? I did?" Julie said, blinking.

Victorique nodded. She looked up. "When you introduced yourself as Julie Guile, a rich girl who'd grown up in a huge mansion—or so you said."

Kazuya frowned. "How did you know that was a lie?"

"Kujo, do you remember what she did whenever she was thinking?"

Victorique stood up and, toying with an imaginary pendant, she started walking. She took five steps, turned, and came back. She took five steps more and turned once more. She repeated this over and over again.

"Right?"

"S-so . . . what?"

All of them were baffled.

Irritated, Victorique snapped, "Think about it! People who have grown up in a huge mansion do not move this way!"

"Why not?"

"A habit like that develops when you've lived somewhere tiny—small enough that five paces takes you to the opposite wall."

"She lived in a small room?"

"Certainly, but let's narrow it down a little," Victorique said, settling back into her chair. In her low, withered voice, she continued, "For example, a solitary cell in prison or a hospital

room . . . or a room in the attic of a mansion. If you stayed inside any one room for a particularly long time, you'd end up like her."

De Blois shifted uncomfortably, coughing.

Victorique glanced at him. "I was speaking in general, Grevil. Don't read too much into it."

The detective didn't respond.

Victorique continued, "I'm grateful for the permission."

Kazuya looked from one to the other, confused by the strange tension between them.

Victorique turned back to Julie. "You were lying about your identity. And there was one other important thing: You had a weapon, from the very beginning."

Surprised, Kazuya cried out, "A weapon?"

"Yes. When Maurice found a weapon and tried to use it, she pulled out her own gun, killing him with it. She claimed that she'd found the gun along the way, but she was lying."

"How did you know?" Julie asked.

"By the weight of your purse," Victorique said, pointing at Julie's handbag. "When we first met in the lounge, that bag was very heavy. When it hit you in the head, Kujo, it made a loud clunking sound, remember?"

"Yeah, of course."

"The gun was already inside. That's why the handbag was so heavy. But after she used the gun and threw it away, she dropped her purse, and I picked it up."

"I remember," Kazuya said. Victorique had tossed it back to her, and it had fluttered lightly through the air.

“Ned Baxter wasn’t trying to kill us because he was behind everything—he, too, was one of the people involved in the incident ten years ago, though. Just like Maurice, he was secretly terrified that one of us was a rabbit out for revenge, so he tried to kill us before we killed him.”

Silence settled on the room.

Finally, Julie nodded. “Right.” Her expression was oddly upbeat. Even though she’d been caught and arrested, she seemed more relieved than anything else. In a very frank tone, she said, “I did it. I prepared the boat and wrote the invitations. I planned to sink the ship and kill them all. But something happened I never expected: Roxanne was already dead, and the two of you came in her place. You had nothing to do with what happened ten years ago, and I couldn’t let you die, so I spent the rest of the night frantic.”

Julie smiled faintly. “When I saw you, I remembered the past. There was a Chinese boy named Yang there, who was kind and steadfast, and whom we all trusted. In the end, he was killed by Ned Baxter . . . but when I looked at you, Kujo, I remembered him.”

“Will you tell us what happened ten years ago?” de Blois asked.

She nodded. “Okay.” And Julie Guile began talking about the events that had occurred ten years before. She explained how she had been put into a cage drawn by horses in this very town, and how she and a number of other boys and girls had found themselves on that ship, the Queen Berry. Then, she told of the nightmare that had awaited them.

She explained how one after the next had died, how Hughie had betrayed them, and how the wounded survivors had emerged on the deck.

She also told what the surviving rabbits had found waiting there for them. . . .



We moved down the water-logged hallway and up the stairs at the front of the ship, heading for the deck.

I could feel Ree's body getting heavier and heavier on my back. With each stair I climbed, my knees shook, but I had to carry her. The two boys were bleeding from Hughie's bullets and were turning very pale, and the girl was crying from shock; if I couldn't carry Ree, we'd have to leave her behind.

At this point, I didn't even know if she was still alive or if she had died ages ago—I couldn't put her down to check. Her black hair swayed with each step I took, but her smooth chocolate skin had lost its healthy sheen.

Finally, we reached the top of the stairs and emerged onto the deck.

Dawn had broken.

The night before, when we'd stood on the stern deck, the night had been so dark that we barely could see anything. But now, the pale light of dawn from the east lit the deck. The sea was gray, and gentle waves rippled across it.

On trembling legs, we advanced toward the wireless room, one step at a time.

When we opened the door, a mist like white smoke filled the room, blocking our view.

As we staggered inside, covered in blood, the nine men in the room all turned to face us. Several of them had been playing cards, others were smoking cigars, and yet others had been reading.

White cigar smoke curled upward toward the ceiling.

When the men saw us, their mouths dropped open.

Then, they all began shouting.

“Which countries?”

“Tell us your nationalities! Where were the dead children from?”

“Great, that one’s from Sauville! Where are our allies?”

They grabbed our shoulders, shaking us.

One man stood up, holding a glass of brandy. He was comparatively young, in his mid-thirties. He grabbed the arm of an elderly gentleman as he spoke, “Now, now. First, let us express our gratitude.”

“Maurice—”

“So,” Maurice said, looking down at our stunned faces and lifting his arms. Then, he began clapping. “Welcome, brave rabbits!”

The other men joined him, applauding—and smiling, smiling, smiling . . .

I felt like I was going mad. I must have let me arms go limp, because Ree slid off my back onto the floor. I cried out her name and bent down, and one of the men joined me.

He glared at Ree’s black hair and chocolate skin before snorting, “The Arab?”

Then, he kicked Ree's unconscious body.

I screamed.

Ree never moved, and I realized she might be dead . . . I put my hand in my pocket, squeezing the heart pendant I had meant to give to her, tears spilling down my cheeks.

The men looked at us, muttering.

"The English boy is still alive, I assume?"

"Of course! He was the hound. He came back alive."

"So, that leaves . . . France, Italy, America . . . and Sauville."

They looked at one another and nodded.

In the back of the room, a sinister figure sat in a wheelchair, her head wrapped in red linen. Flaps of wrinkled skin hung down, half-hiding her eyes. She was an old woman. And in front of her were a silver urn, a copper urn, and a glass urn. Her wrinkled hand clutched a golden mirror.

"One youth will die soon," she croaked.

The men turned around. "Roxanne!"

"That death will begin everything. The world will begin to tumble like a stone."

Silence descended on the room.

The old woman, Roxanne, screamed, "Do as the prophecy has foretold! Only then will this land continue to prosper!"

The men bowed.

I stood still, my head reeling. Prophecy? What did that mean?

At last, the old woman shook her head, her withered voice laughing as she proclaimed: "Thus, the rabbit run ends! Sink the box, and fatten the rabbits!"



CHAPTER 6

Hold That Hand Tightly

One

In the police station chamber, Julie finished her long confession, and silence settled on the room.

Two streams of white smoke trailed upward from the pipes Victorique and de Blois were smoking, but no one said a word.

At last, in a low voice, Julie said, “It always baffled me—it drove me half mad . . . Victorique, little detective, you know the answers, don’t you?”

Kazuya looked up to see Julie biting her lip and staring fixedly at Victorique. He glanced sideways at Victorique: She seemed to have finished reconstructing the chaos, and she was currently focused on the verbalization.

Julie’s story apparently had surpassed the capacities of de Blois’ mind, and he was staring absently out the window at

some passing birds. The twisted point of his hairdo gleamed like molten gold in the sunlight. He had removed the pipe from his lips, and it rested forgotten in his hands, trailing smoke.

Victorique opened her mouth and spoke slowly, carefully, "In all probability, I would speculate that it was a large-scale fortune-telling."

"Fortune-telling?" Julie shrieked. She shook her head. "So many died, and the ship sank! What could you mean? What were they trying to find out, and how? They spent a lot of money on it. . . ."

"Kujo, I explained this to you."

Kazuya jumped, not expecting this. "Y-you did?"

"Ancient fortune-telling . . . the staff technique employed by the prophet Moses."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar."

"In order to determine which tribe of Israel the next leader would come from, Moses prepared ten staffs, each with the name of one of the twelve tribes inscribed upon it. The fate of those staffs represented the fate of the tribes."

"Okay . . ."

"The fortune-teller Roxanne kept a number of rabbits in her garden, but she would occasionally allow her hound to kill them. Some rabbits were killed, others survived—the survivors were well looked after and allowed to grow fat."

Victorique paused.

Julie's expression grew darker.

"Presumably, Roxanne used the rabbits in her fortune-telling. She would give each one a name related to what she

wished to prophecy before releasing the hound. The future was foretold by which rabbits survived.”

“And those rabbits . . . we were the same?”

Victorique nodded.

“But why? We were human!”

“I would speculate the particular prophecy they were engaged in was on a scale far greater than anything they’d done before. We have a number of fragments of chaos to base such speculation on: There were eleven orphans of different nationalities, gathered from around the world. Roxanne’s words: ‘One youth will die soon. That death will begin everything. The world will begin to tumble like a stone.’ The question one man asked: ‘Where are our allies?’ And then, two things Hughie said: ‘What happens here is the future’ and ‘What matters is nationality.’”

Victorique lowered her voice. “And there is what happened ten years ago, in the spring of 1914.”

“Ah!” Kazuya yelped.

Everyone turned around. Embarrassed, he stammered, “Um, I mean—sorry. Ten years ago, in June, there was the incident in Sarajevo, so I thought she meant the beginning of the Great War. Guess I was wrong.”

“No, you’re exactly right, that’s the answer,” Victorique said. Julie cried, “What do you mean?”

At the end of June, 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne was assassinated in Sarajevo. Austria demanded that Serbia hand over those responsible, but the Serbian government refused, and other countries stepped forward to support them. Austria,

Hungary, Germany, and other countries joined together, and the war began. When Italy and America joined the fight, the war soon spread across the world.

In a low voice, Victorique said, "Obviously, this is nothing but a guess, but I imagine those in power could smell something coming, and they hired a famous fortune-teller to predict the future of the world. They prepared a massive box, the Queen Berry, and released 'rabbits' gathered from all around the world. The box was filled with traps, and the British boy played the role of the hound. Inside that box, the children acted out the future of their countries."

"But . . . that's . . ."

"And the prophecy came true," Victorique said, brushing back her blonde hair. "Think back on the Great War, Kujo—use your mediocre mind."

"Hey!"

"Tell us the results of the war."

Still annoyed, Kazuya did as she asked. "The war began as a conflict between the Central Powers and the Allies—and um, the Allies won. By the end, the Central Powers were . . . Germany, Austria, Hungary, and . . . Turkey . . ."

"And the Allies, Kujo?"

"Um, France and Italy, Britain, America, and then . . . Sauville."

Victorique stared hard at Julie.

There was no expression in her eyes. Julie was biting her lip hard, trying to suppress the violent emotions raging within.

"But that means . . ."

"The prophecy came true. The children on that ship divided into two groups: the Central Powers and the Allies. First, the Hungarian girl was killed by a trap, and then the Turkish boy was shot and killed. The British boy survived through duplicity. England was the trickster in that war. The German and Austrian boys both died, and the Chinese boy was shot, as well. And the Arab girl . . ."

"Ree!"

"The Ottoman Empire was dragged into the war, lost most of its leaders, and emerged barely alive."

Julie sobbed.

When she saw that, Victorique appeared to be at a loss. She pulled out an expensive handkerchief and gingerly held it out toward Julie.

Julie took it, wiping away her tears, causing Victorique to look relieved.

Drying her tears, Julie asked, "Then, afterward, they . . . the government acted according to what we had done?"

"Yes," Victorique nodded. "Sauville entered the war on the side of the Allies. It all became history. How much of it was coincidence and how much of it by design . . . ? Now that Roxanne and everyone else involved are dead, we'll never know. But the prophecy came true—obviously, not as objective fact, but from a subjective perspective. I hardly need say that the results of a rabbit run on that scale affected the politicians, noblemen, and diplomats psychologically, driving them to evade responsibility."

Julie looked up. "So awful." She slowly began to talk about what had happened to her afterward. She'd spent some time in

a sanatorium, unable to recover from the shock. Then, when she had at last calmed down and been released, she'd begun investigating what had happened.

Of the surviving children, one had committed suicide and another had killed someone and was serving a life sentence; she was not able to meet with either of them. She couldn't discover if Ree was alive or dead, but she'd imagined that Ree was dead when they'd reached the wireless room.

Only Hughie was alive and well, living under the name Ned Baxter. When Julie found an article about his stage performance, he was added to her list of targets.

And now, ten years later . . . she had quite a lot of money, because the men had been instructed to keep her fat. She'd used all of it to re-create the box, the Queen Berry. And then, she sent out her invitations.

They all had come, except for Roxanne, who'd already been murdered.

The police station room was oddly quiet. Considering the topic at hand, everyone seemed very calm. Julie herself, under arrest, sat quietly, talking.

When she finished, Julie was silent for a long time, and then she regarded Victorique. "How quickly did you realize I was behind it?"

Victorique said nothing at first, but then, "I was sure of it when you killed Maurice. But I suspected you from the moment we woke up in the lounge."

"Why?"

"You were sitting near the door, and you tried to open it, shaking the knob and shouting that it was locked. But after that, someone else opened the door easily—and the crossbow bolt came flying in, killing him."

"Yeah."

"That door was never locked. You only pretended it was to keep them in the lounge. You needed time to pull off the trick with the wallpaper, and to let them know what was happening there. You'd made up your mind to kill them after that, right?"

"Right," Julie said, staring at Victorique's tiny face quietly.

Victorique looked away first. "I wasn't certain. At the time, it was nothing but an idea."

"Oh," Julie chuckled. Then, she pointed at Kazuya. "So that's why you held his hand so tightly, little detective? Because he was chatting happily with me, unaware that I was the villain?"

"Mm!"

"No matter how snotty you were with him, you never let go. You were worried about him."

Victorique pretended to have no idea what she meant.

Kazuya looked from one to the other, surprised. He remembered running through the ship. He'd thought he'd been holding Victorique's hand protectively, but Victorique had been worried about him, too?

Just before Julie was taken from the room, she whispered again, "Little detective."

"Don't call me that."

“Aw . . . When I first met you, I thought I had seen you somewhere before.” Julie looked Victorique over carefully. “I remember where now.”

Beside her, de Blois stiffened.

“In the sanatorium. I knew a woman there who looked exactly like you. That’s why I recognized you. Who was she?”

Victorique’s green eyes widened for just a second. Then, she shook her head. “No idea.”

“Your sister? Or . . .”

Victorique said nothing. She simply waved goodbye.



Two

The interview over, they all exited into the hall, which was filled with uniformed policemen and detectives bustling back and forth. Every now and then, someone would frown at Kazuya and Victorique, wondering why children were there.

The two men in rabbit-skin hunting caps came running around the corner, pulling up in front of de Blois.

“Detective!”

“We just heard!”

Still holding hands, they waved them around excitedly.

“The maid who killed Roxanne and then escaped, they caught her!”

"They're bringing her here now—look, there she is!"

Julie Guile turned to look and gasped.

A beautiful Arab woman was being brought in, officers holding tightly to each of her arms. Her black hair and glossy chocolate skin gleamed in the lamplight.

When she looked up and saw Julie, she gasped, as well.

They were both adults now, and their faces had changed a lot—but each still held the same sparkle in her eyes. Half disbelieving, they called out to each other.

"Ree?"

"Alex?"

Ten years apart, and their reunion lasted only a second as they brushed past each other in the hall.

Her gaze following the Arab maid, Julie asked, her voice trembling, "Detective, is that who killed Roxanne?"

"Yes."

"I see . . . Ree, as well. Revenge, after ten years."

Julie reached up to her neck and grasped the heart-shaped pendant, the pendant she had kept safe for ten years, ever since that day—Ree's lucky charm. She had picked it up on the stairs to bring back to Ree, but she'd never managed to return it. Now, her hand pulled on it hard, yanking it off her neck.

"Ree!" she shouted.

Ree turned around.

Julie threw the pendant, which sailed through the air.

Ree shook off the policemen, reaching out her hand to catch it.

"I brought it back to you."



Not understanding, Ree just shook her head. Then, she raised one hand and waved it gently before the policemen got hold of her again. They rounded the corner and were gone.

Julie Guile stood there for a long moment, staring down the corridor after her.



EPILOGUE

The Promise

“And so the Queen Berry sank again. The ghosts had their revenge, and they took it back to the bottom of the sea.”

It was a beautiful morning, and in the garden behind Saint Marguerite Academy, two children were sitting on a short staircase with a view of the flowers, leaning close together.

Brightly colored flowers surrounded them, and the sun shone brightly in the sky above. With each breath, they inhaled the sweet scent of the flowers. They could hear the voices of the students wandering along the little paths through the garden. But this staircase was little used, and there was no sign that anyone else was going to come close enough to overhear. There were a lot of people in the garden, but the stairs felt like a private spot in the middle of it all.

The two students sitting there were a small, earnest Asian boy, and a slim white girl with short blonde hair that waved in the wind.

The girl, Avril Bradley, a foreign student from Great Britain, was listening to the boy's story, her eyes open wide.

Kazuya Kujo was gazing back at her, secretly quite proud.

Good, good. Looks like I've managed to scare her this time. Hers was just a horror story, but mine actually happened. He nodded, certain of victory. *I win! Hooray!*

"Pfffffft!" Avril snorted.

"Huh?"

"No good, Kujo. Ah ha ha ha ha!"

Avril kicked out her legs, leaning back and laughing hysterically. Her slender legs gleamed each time the wind yanked her skirt back.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because it's so impossible!" Avril said, laughing so hard that she had tears in her eyes. She wiped them with the back of her hand. "Seriously, Kujo."

"But it really happened!"

"Come on! I'd never fall for *that!*"

Avril held up her index finger, wagging it back and forth; trying to focus on it, Kazuya went cross-eyed.

He remained baffled as Avril continued, "I mean, Victorique, the one who never comes to class? He's really a girl, and very beautiful, and . . . a detective?"

"Sh-she is! Come to the library with me! She'll be there!"

"Ha! You won't trick me that easily!" Avril stuck out her tongue.

She was just as cute like that as she was smiling. Kazuya fell silent.

“And there’s no way I’m climbing all the way up that maze of stairs. I can’t believe anyone would do that.”

Victorique had said much the same thing.

Avril’s voice dropped low again, like it had been when she was talking about the ghost ship. “And there’s a story about that library. At the top of the staircase maze, lives a golden fairy . . . Aiieeeeeee!”

“Aaaugh!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Got you again! Made you scream! Kujo, the scaredy-cat!”

“No! You screamed suddenly, and it startled me. I’m not scared! And that story is right. She’s human, not a fairy, but she does look like something more than human. Victorique is . . .”

“Yeah, I’m done listening to that nonsense,” Avril said, cracking her knuckles.

Despite himself, Kazuya said, “Sorry.”

He had apologized again. He felt like he’d done nothing but apologize to girls his age for no reason since he’d arrived here. Was he just imagining that?

Avril grinned. “What I really don’t get is why you had to invent a detective. I know where you got the rest, though; I read today’s paper.”

“Today’s paper?”

“Ta-da! See here? Like you don’t know . . .”

Kazuya looked down at the newspaper Avril was holding up proudly.

“Sh . . . ah . . . aaaaaaaahhh!” he roared.

Avril flinched, surprised.

She poked her cheery, cute face out from behind the paper.
“Something wrong, Kujo?”

“H-he did it again!”

“Eh?”

The newspaper headline read as follows: *“Once Again, Detective de Blois Solves the Case—of the Ghost Ship Queen Berry!”*

Crumpling up the paper, Kazuya stood up.

Avril gaped up at him. “Wh-what is it, Kujo?”

“Urgent business. See you later, Avril!”

Leaving her by the flowerbeds, stunned, Kazuya ran off.

On the narrow paths through the flowerbeds, he met a small woman with brunette hair cut to her shoulders. She wore big round glasses, and her eyes were droopy, like a puppy’s. It was his homeroom teacher, Cecile.

When she saw Kazuya, she beamed. “Oh, perfect timing, Kujo!”

“Uh, I’m in a bit of a hurry . . .”

“But you’re hurrying to the library, right?”

“No . . . Mm? Uh, yeah. How did you know?”

Cecile giggled. “What else would make you run? Here. Give these to Victorique.”

As always, it was the handouts from class. Kazuya took them and ran off, muttering, “What else . . . ?” Her certainty confused him.

Avril, walking slowly along, stared after him, muttering to herself, “Huh . . . going to see Victorique? Hmm . . .”

Cecile smiled, nodding. “Yes, they’re the best of friends.”

“What’s he like, then?”

Cecile blinked a few times, and then she waved a finger.

“Oh, no, Avril—Victorique’s a girl.”

“Ehhh?” Avril shrieked. “She really is a girl? With that name? Then, what he just told me . . .” She frowned for a moment, but then she shook her head. “No way. He made it all up.”

A warm spring breeze brushed past her, making her hair and skirt flap. The sky above was clear, and it would stay so for the rest of the day.

“So, Victorique is a girl. Hmm . . .” Avril pursed her lips, sulking. “I’m a little jealous.”

The warm spring breeze came past again. Avril’s short blonde hair and skirt swayed, and a shock of colorful petals that were scattered across the garden swayed with them.



Two

“Victoriqqqqqqqqque!”

The Saint Marguerite Library was more than two hundred years old, and it ranked among the most important historical buildings in Europe. The walls were massive bookshelves, but the center of the building was hollowed out, open from the ground to the ceiling far above, which was covered in gorgeous religious paintings. Between the bookshelves were a number of thin wooden staircases, structured like a giant maze. People said the library had been deliberately

constructed like a maze to allow the king and his mistress to meet here in secret.

And once again, Kazuya was racing up the staircase maze, calling out a girl's name. "Victoriqqqqqqque!"

"No need to shout. I can hear you perfectly well."

At the very top, a thin trail of white smoke rose toward the ceiling. A girl sat smoking a pipe, her long golden hair spilling down to the floor like an unwound turban. The smoke was rising from the pipe, drifting toward the brightly glowing glass ceiling of the conservatory, which was overflowing with plants. She sat half in, half out of the conservatory. Her books were laid out in rays around her, and she read them with a bored expression but at astonishing speeds. Victorique looked like a broken doll placed among them.

She glanced briefly at Kazuya, who was still fighting to get his breath back, and said, "Your daily endurance test."

"Hey!"

"Racing up those stairs shouting as your heart strains, your thighs ache, and your mind reels each time you look down—you've made *that* a daily routine? You've chosen a very strange way to spend your time abroad."

"Oh, it doesn't concern you? I mean, I'm here to see you."

"I'm aware of that . . . merely pointing out the truth."

"Liar! You were being mean!"

"So, what if I was?"

"Ah, forget it."

Upon her return to school, Victorique had reverted to her usual calm, cynical self, the same girl he had met every time he came to the library.

Kazuya was well aware he was no match for her verbally, so he dropped the matter. Instead, he spread out the newspaper he'd snatched from Avril.

"More important, look at this, Victorique!" Trembling with anger, he watched to see Victorique's reaction—but she was completely unruffled.

She skimmed the article quickly and nodded. "I see."

"This is all exactly what *you* told them! They only caught the criminal because you tipped them off, and everything else is just what you explained in the police station, while de Blois was staring out the window watching the birds, gazing into the distance like he didn't understand anything happening around him! I just can't . . . !"

"Hmm," Victorique yawned, disinterested. "My brother's a bit of a heel."

"Yeah, that detective is just a total—wait, Victorique, what did you just say?"

"I said that my brother's a heel."

"Tell me, who's your brother?"

Victorique looked surprised. She took the pipe out of her mouth and exhaled a long stream of smoke before speaking. "Grevil."

"He's your brother?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. You sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Hmm . . . Howwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww?" Kazuya shrieked. He stared at Victorique's tiny, delicate, spellbinding features

in horror, trying to find any similarity to that handsome, flamboyant, bizarrely coiffed detective de Blois.

There was none.

He clutched his head. He could feel his eyes being dragged down to the handouts Cecile had given him, which were lying on the floor beside him. He'd been taking them to Victorique every day, but he never looked directly at them until now.

He knew Victorique was of noble birth. He could tell from her manner and bearing. And her name was Victorique de something . . .

"Augh!"

Victorique's name was written on the handouts: Victorique de Blois.

Kazuya looked up at her with hollow eyes. Victorique gazed calmly back at him, puffing on her pipe.

"Are you feeling well, Kujo? You look ghastly."

"Why do you have the same name as the detective?"

"Because we're siblings."

"Nooooooooooooooooooooo!" Kazuya shrieked again. But now that he thought about it, there were more links between the two than their social status. They both smoked pipes and they both enjoyed blowing smoke in people's faces, and that could be taken as a similarity, even if their appearance and intelligence were nothing alike.

Gravely, Kazuya asked her, "Why?"

"It's not my fault," Victorique said, getting cross. She turned away, but Kazuya just kept echoing "Why? Why?" over and over.

As last, she snapped, "You never knew?"

"No!"

"Strange."

"B-b-but . . . Victorique, did you tell me?"

Victorique cocked her head. Her golden hair swayed, glittering like a silk curtain. At last, she yawned, annoyed. "I did not."

"Then, how would I know?"

"Oh, shut up."

Clearly displeased with this conversation, Victorique scowled, and she then proceeded to ignore Kazuya, reading her books without interest, rather deliberately forcing the knowledge into her mind.

Kazuya, however, continued wailing and muttering to himself until Victorique finally looked up and snapped, "I said, silence!"

"But . . . !"

"Look," she said, explaining as if it was the last thing she wanted to do, "he is Grevil de Blois, the direct male heir to the de Blois name from the Marquis de Blois. He may be a heel, a playboy, and a terrible detective, but he is the eldest son. He will take over from my father. We are family, but we would never acknowledge each other in public."

"Why not?"

"Well," Victorique scowled, "my mother was a mistress, whereas Grevil's mother is the proper wife, with full aristocratic blood. In other words, we are half siblings."

"But then—"

“And my mother was a very dangerous individual. She was a dancer, but she was also insane, and during the last war, she—no, never mind that.”

When she spoke of her mother, Victorique’s tongue almost got the better of her. But she quickly stopped herself.

Kazuya remembered the rumors floating around the school, a number of them specifically about Victorique. They claimed that she was the illegitimate child of a nobleman, that her family feared her and had sent her to the school because they didn’t want her at home, that her mother had been a famous dancer who’d gone insane, and that she was the legendary gray wolf reborn.

And then there was the beautiful woman that Julie Guile had seen in the sanatorium, who’d looked just like Victorique . . .

Reluctantly, Victorique spoke again. “So, half my blood is aristocratic, and half of it is dangerous. As my own behavior was markedly different from ordinary children, I was raised cut off from the world in the depths of the de Blois mansion. And then, I was sent off to school, under strict orders never to leave the campus.”

“Wow.”

“The only reason I was able to leave here last week was because my brother arranged special permission, on the condition that he remain by my side. He completely forgot about that and ran off along the way, but . . . I have no way of telling when or if I’ll ever be allowed to leave campus again.”

“Victorique . . .” Kazuya could think of nothing to say.

He remembered how she had acted while they were out, how everything had seemed unfamiliar to her, how she had leaned out of the train and coach, staring at the view around her, and how she'd stared at the sunrise over the water.

She had said she didn't dislike beautiful things, but when he'd suggested they come again, she'd smiled sadly. . . .

Victorique took a long drag on her pipe and joked, "I am a princess held captive. Perfect for me, isn't it?"

Silence filled the conservatory.

Through the glass ceiling, the soft light of the spring sun was shining down upon them. The vibrant plant life swayed in the faint wind coming from the vents. It was far quieter here than on the ground. Unless one of them spoke, there was no sound at all.

Victorique broke the silence. "So, the princess is bored."

"Yeah. Mm?" Kazuya stiffened. That word never boded well.

He looked up and saw that Victorique was about to start sulking. He had been with her enough to sense the warning signs.

"Ah . . . boredom!"

"Well, my classes are about to start," he said, jumping to his feet, but she grabbed the hem of his trousers and he fell over. "Ow!"

"I'm bored! Didn't you hear me?"

"Sorry . . . ?" he said, adding the question mark because there obviously was no reason for him to be apologizing.

Victorique thrashed her body around. "The princess has declared herself bored! Mysteries! I demand mysteries!"

“Demand away. Nothing strange has happened.”

“Then, Kujo, descend into the world below and return with something strange!”

“No. Nothing out there, anyway.”

“Then, cause it yourself! Get mixed up in something, put your life on the line!”

“No way.”

Victorique was getting worse. She must be very bored indeed.

“Ah, the tedium! So bored! Dying of boredom! I shall die soon! Kujo, you are moments from losing one of your very few friends.”

“That’s just mean. I’ll get mad, you know.”

“I’m bored.”

She grew silent.

“Hmm?” Kazuya looked closely into Victorique’s face, and her head lolled toward him.

“W-wait, Victorique? Did you die? Did you die of boredom? Boredom isn’t really a cause of death, you know!”

“Zzzzzzzzz . . .”

“Oh, just sleeping. How confusing!”

Victorique was sound asleep, her golden head resting on Kazuya’s shoulder. All those yawns had been because she was sleepy, not bored.

Feeling sleepy in the mornings the week after an adventure was a common occurrence, but not one Victorique would be familiar with . . .

Kazuya resigned himself to missing his next class, and he let Victorique continue to slumber.



Sitting here like this was boring. He picked up one of the books she'd left open, but it was a book of philosophy written in difficult Latin, so he tossed it aside before he got through a single page.

In the distance, birds sang. It was spring, a beautiful time of year.

He sat holding his knees, whispering softly to the sleeping girl next to him. "Victorique, someday . . . the two of us . . ." He was slightly embarrassed, but he went on—she was asleep, after all. "We'll go outside, and we'll see the sun rise over the sea once more."

Victorique's green eyes snapped open instantly. "That's a promise," she said, and then she closed her eyes again.



GOSICK VOLUME 2 PREVIEW

Coming October 2008

The town had only one inn.

“Mountain climbers, here? No such thing. The slopes around here are much too steep, and no one would go higher without good reason,” the innkeeper informed Kazuya.

The town was very isolated, and the cobblestone street outside the inn—presumably the biggest street in town—was virtually deserted. There was a German automobile of the latest model parked outside the inn, but it was hard to imagine that gleaming exterior looking at home anywhere local.

For some reason, there was a dead mountain bird pinned to the doors of the shabby three-story inn with an arrow. While Kazuya was staring at it, a strong gust whipped past him. The dead bird’s feathers were tugged upward by the breeze, making a faint but unpleasant sound, and a couple of drops of blood dripped down from the arrow wound, hitting the stones below.

The entire building creaked constantly in the wind.

And the wind carried a strange animal stench.

“Gonna be a rough night. Don’t you go outside after dark.”

Kazuya turned around to address the innkeeper, “We should stay inside?”

“Yeah. Night like this, the wolves come out.”

“Wolves?”

“The gray wolves.”

Victorique, who was standing by the creaking front desk, looked up. When he noticed that, the innkeeper assumed the distinctive smile of one about to scare a child.

“For many years, the gray wolves have lived in the depths of the mountains here. When the wind is strong, they come down the mountains and kill people. If you don’t want the cheeks of your cute little face gnawed off, then don’t leave your room.”

Victorique failed to look even remotely scared, to the innkeeper’s obvious disappointment.

“Legends of the gray wolves can be found all over Sauvile,” Kazuya said.

“No, the ones in Horowitz are real—they actually exist.”

The innkeeper pointed at the door. “That bird’s corpse is hanging there to keep the gray wolves out. It’s said that they don’t like birds. Whether that’s true . . . ? There are many wild wolves in the forests around here, and we must always be careful—but higher up the mountain is a village, where the real gray wolves live. We’ve lived in fear of them for four hundred years.”

* * *

As the innkeeper led them up the stairs to their room, he continued, “A pack of terrifying wolfmen live in that village.

They look peaceful enough, but you must never anger them. They are far better looking and far more intelligent than any ordinary human. It's absolutely uncanny. But no matter what you do, you must not make them angry."

"Um, wolfmen? You mean that the people in the village aren't ordinary humans?"

"They're human only in appearance."

They reached the second floor. The dark hallway was made of wood, which creaked underfoot. The white plaster walls were cracked and stained. And the faint light of the lanterns on the wall shivered from the vibrations of their footsteps.

They reached the rooms that had been prepared for them. Old bead curtains covered the window—beyond those rested the nighttime mountains.

The innkeeper called after them, "They look human, but they aren't."

"Pull the other one."

"Think about it, about their hair and skin, up there in the mountains."

The innkeeper's shoulders shuddered.

"They have waves of golden hair, pale white skin, rose-tinted cheeks, and tiny little bodies—all of them looking almost exactly the same. The people of Sauvile have much greater variation in size and hair color—brown hair, black hair, red hair. But the gray wolves . . ."

The innkeeper's eyes widened as he stared down at Victorique. His eye twitching, he whispered, "Yes . . . they look just like you, the terrifying, silent gray wolves."