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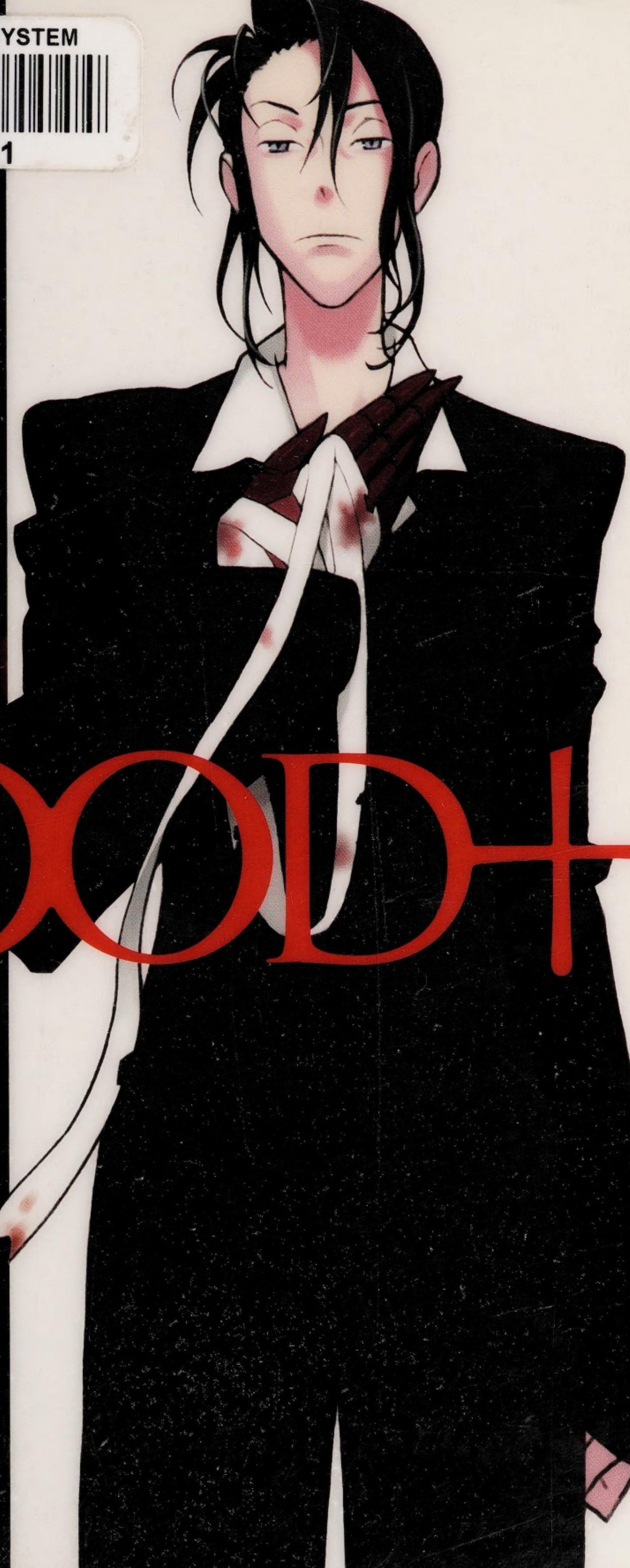
02

CHEVALIER

Original concept by
PRODUCTION I.G
ANIPLEX

A novel by
RYO IKEHATA

Illustrations by
CHIZU HASHII

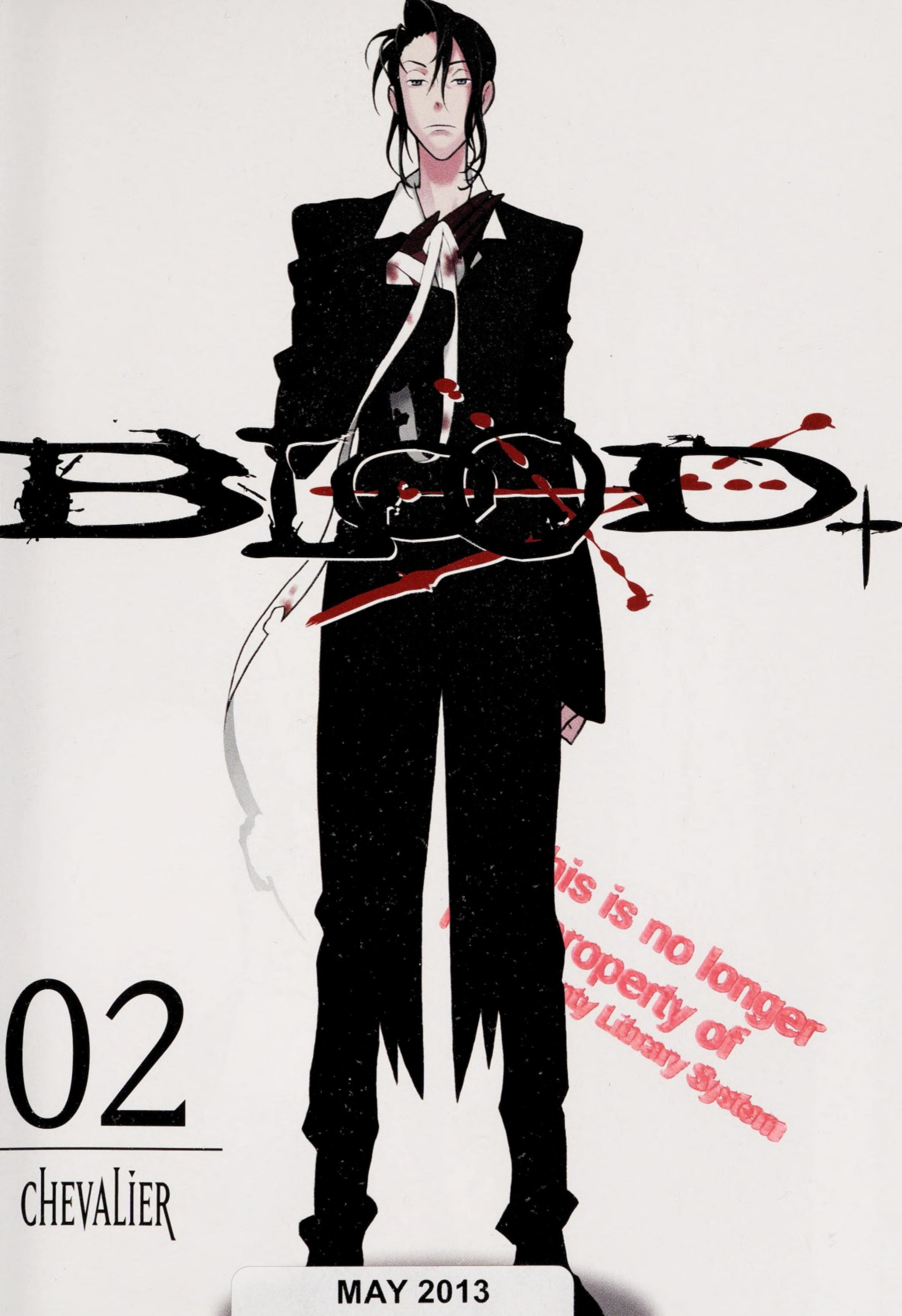


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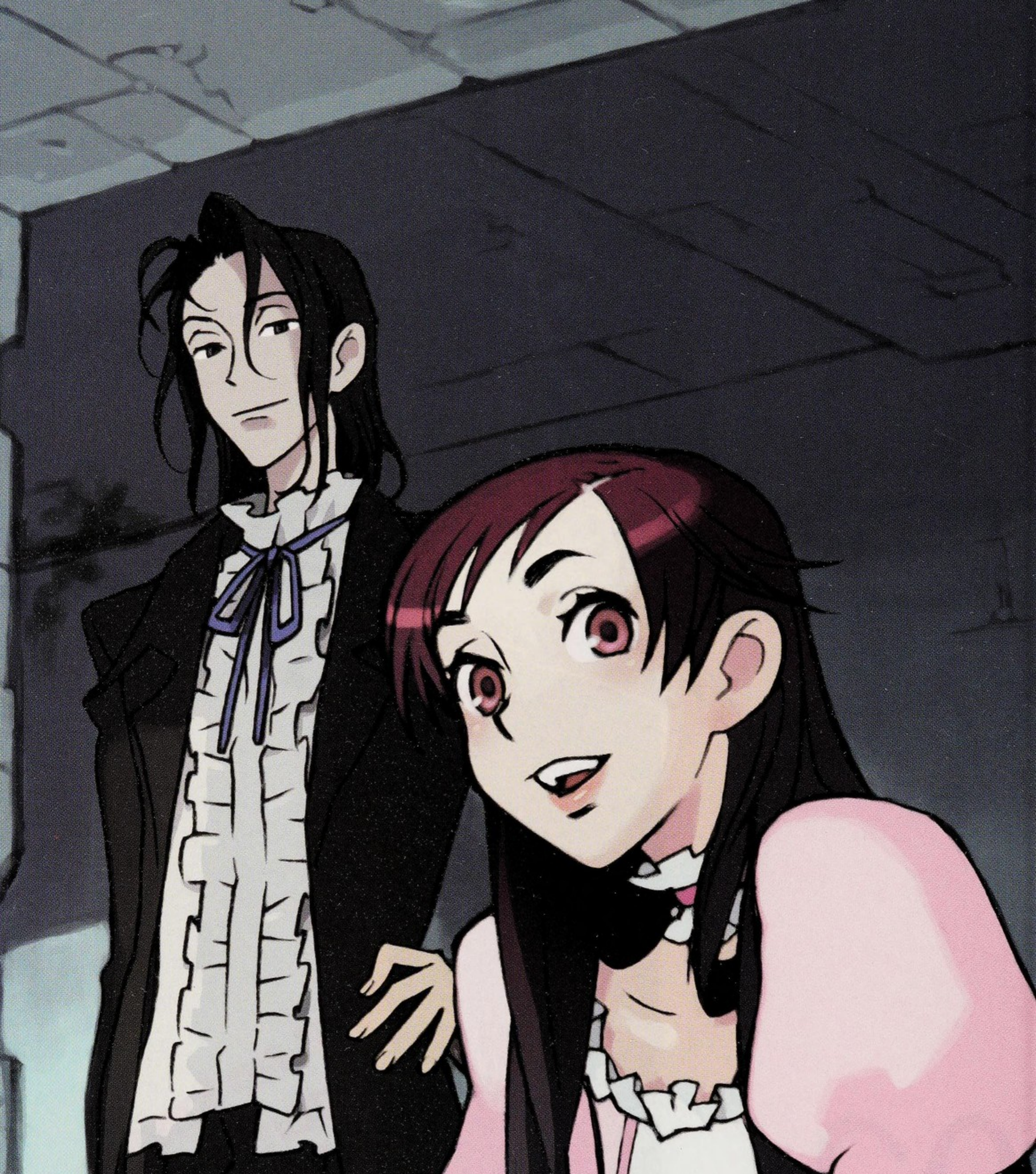


02

CHEVALIER

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MAY 2013



Saya, born in the naturally beautiful region of Bordeaux, France. Not long after came her protector, Hagi. Their tumultuous journey started here, at the Zoo . . .



You and I have been together a very long time . . .



BLOOD+

OTHER *BLOOD+* NOVELS
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Blood+ Volume One: First Kiss

BLOOD+

CHEVALIER

VOLUME TWO

original concept by Production I.G • Aniplex

a novel by Ryo Ikehata

Illustrations by Chizu Hashii

English translation by John Thomas

DARK HORSE BOOKS®

Milwaukie



SAYA OTONASHI—A unique girl who continues her battle against the blood-sucking beasts known as Chiropterans. She remembers nothing about her life before the previous year.



RIKU MIYAGUSUKU—The youngest of the Miyagusuku clan is a kind-hearted boy, especially compared to his brother, Kai. He is reliable and enjoys cooking and cleaning.



HAGI—A handsome cellist, always at Saya's side. It's likely he knows about the past Saya has forgotten.



DAVID—A combat expert and member of Red Shield, an organization dedicated to the eradication of Chiropterans. He pursues Diva with an iron determination.



KAI MIYAGUSUKU—A temperamental but dedicated brother; nothing comes between this boy and his family. He joins the journey of his sister, Saya, whose checkered fate is unclear.



LOUIS—A member of Red Shield, and David's teammate. This cheerful man's speciality is information gathering, and he has a weakness for snacks.



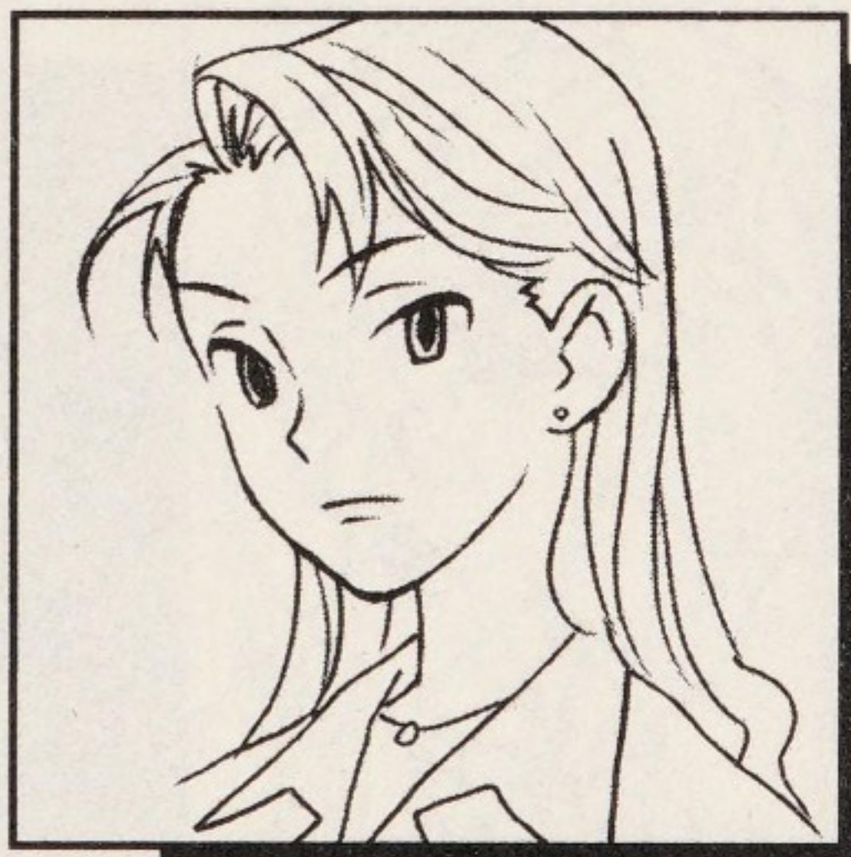
JULIA—A member of Red Shield's medical staff and David's teammate. She accompanies them to manage Saya's physical condition.



COLLINS—Red Shield's number-two man and head of their medical research sections. He is most passionate when it comes to his Chiropteran research.



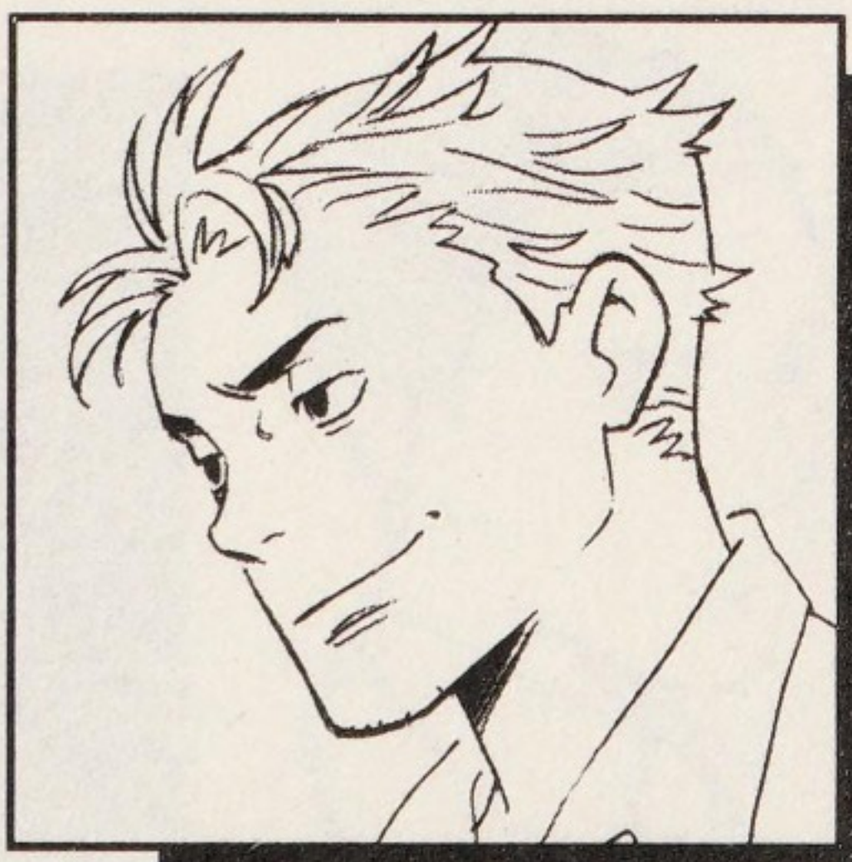
ELIZAVETA—A member of Red Shield, she usually goes by "Liza." As intelligent as she is beautiful, she is called in to support Saya and the others in Russia.



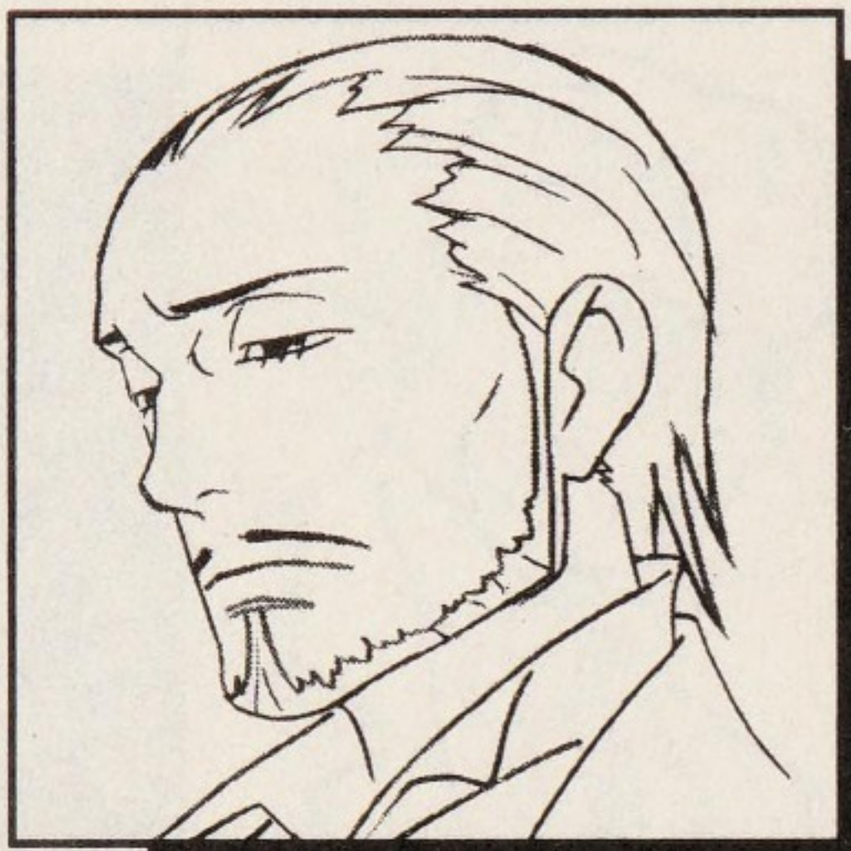
MAO JAHANA—A classmate of Kai's. She joins up with Okamura to search for Saya and her brothers after they disappear from Okinawa.



JOEL—The director of Red Shield and head of the incredibly wealthy Goldschmidt family. He is putting it all on the line to ensure the annihilation of Chiropterans.



AKIHIRO OKAMURA—A reporter for the Ryukyu daily newspaper. He is interested in the series of Chiropteran incidents in Okinawa, and follows Saya's footsteps with Mao.



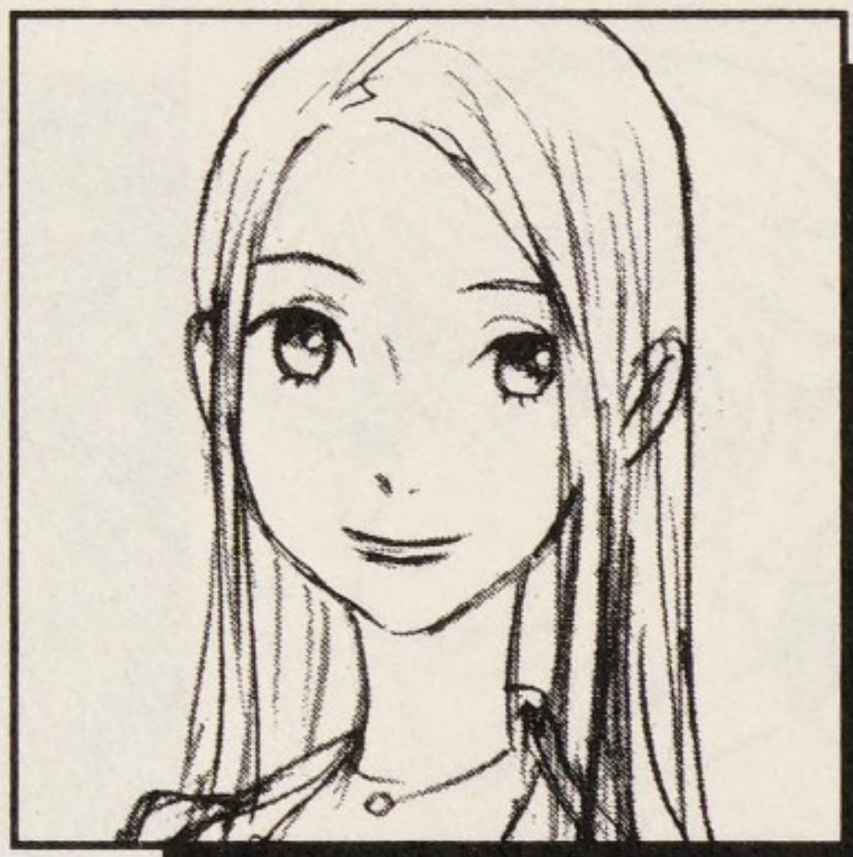
ANSHEL—Executor of Goldsmith Holdings, stationed in England. He knows the secrets of the Chiropteran leader, Diva.



NATHAN—The producer of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. This young man has a garish style and a feminine way of speaking.



SOLOMON—The CEO of France's Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals, a drug company. A calm and handsome young gentleman who has stirred Saya's interest.



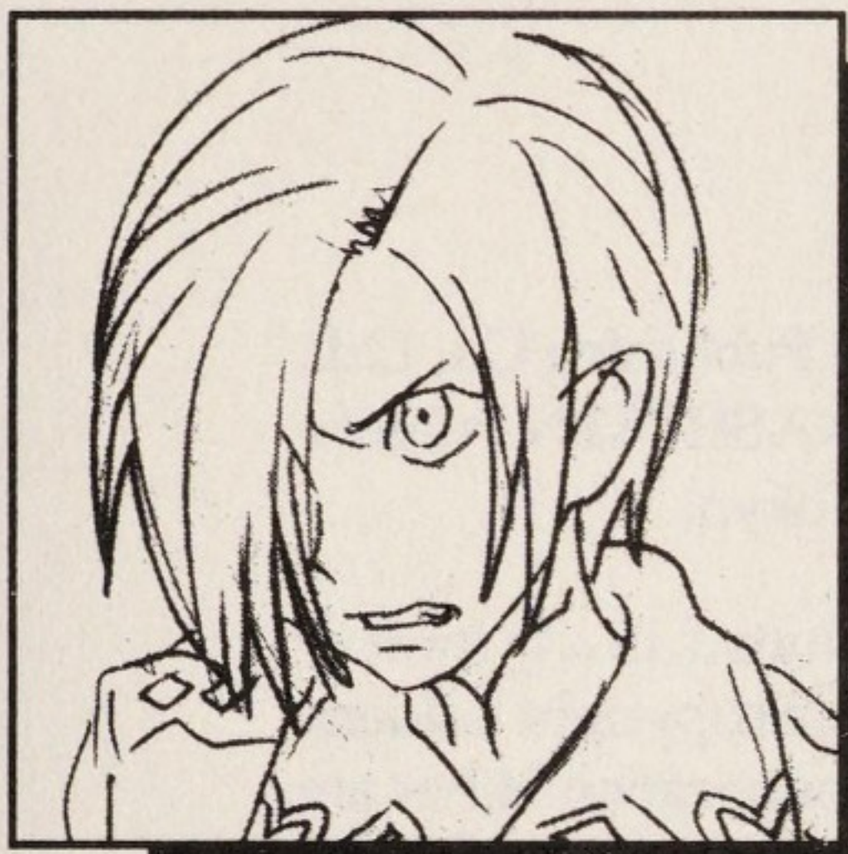
SONYA—A girl living alone in a poor village in Russia. She provides lodging to Saya and Hagi as they pursue the Chiropteran named Rasputin, but . . .



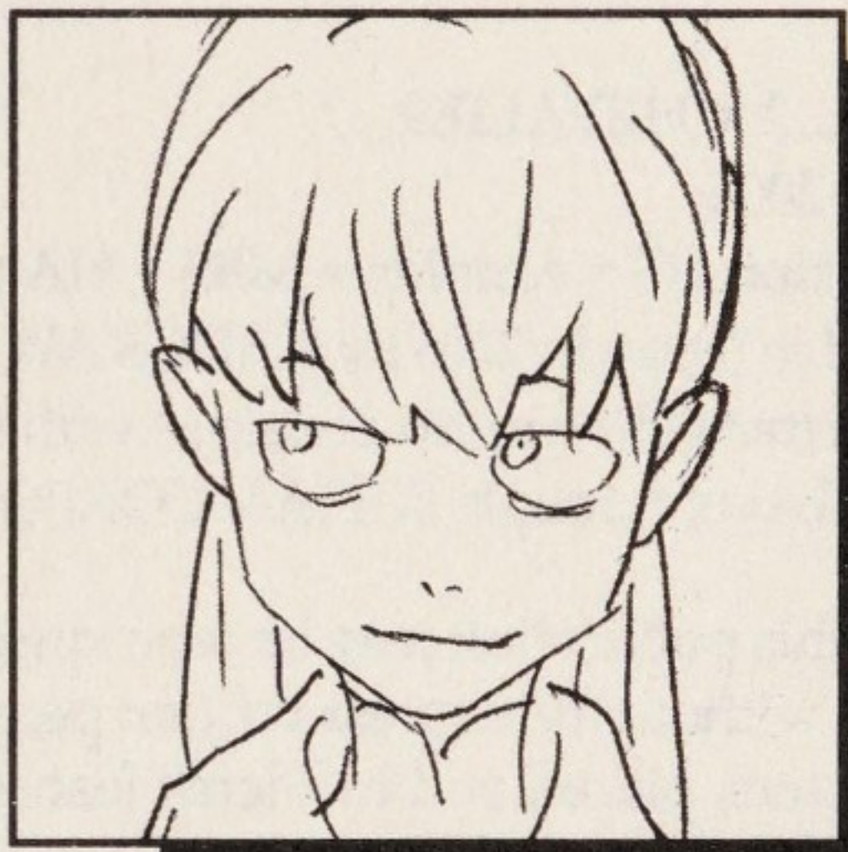
JAMES—The captain of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy. This African American commissioned officer has a straight-laced personality and is somehow involved with Anshel.



VAN ARGENO—An executive at Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals who works under Solomon. He has some responsibility for the development of Delta 67, a drug that changes people into Chiropterans.



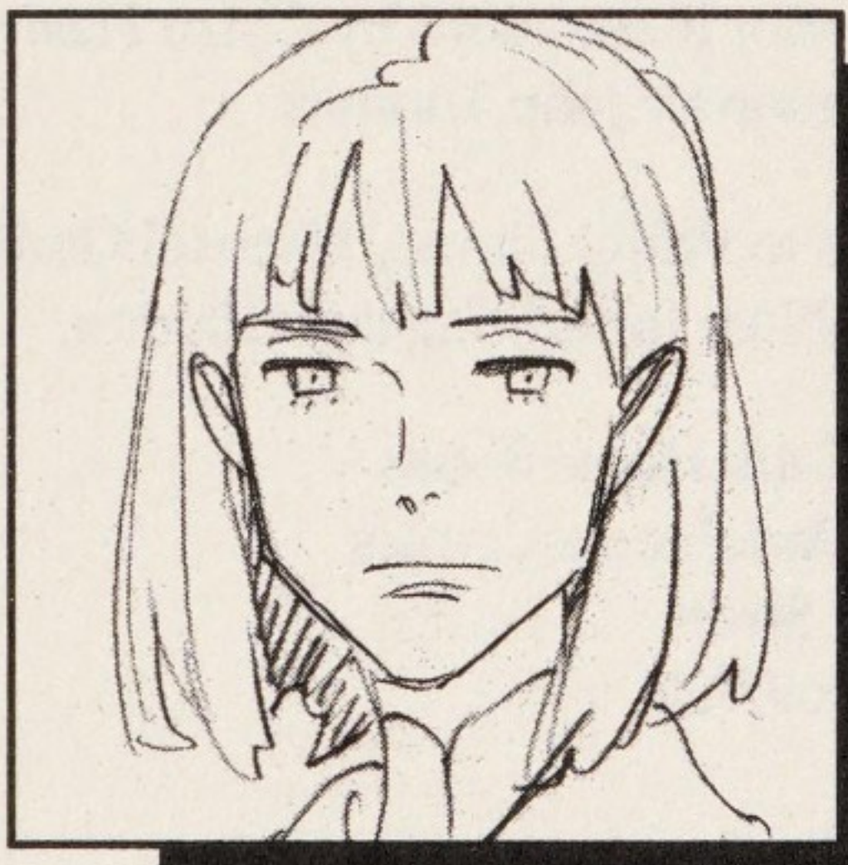
MOSES—A "Schiff," one of the artificial Chiropterans created at a research laboratory in Iceland. This boy has taken on the burden of being their leader.



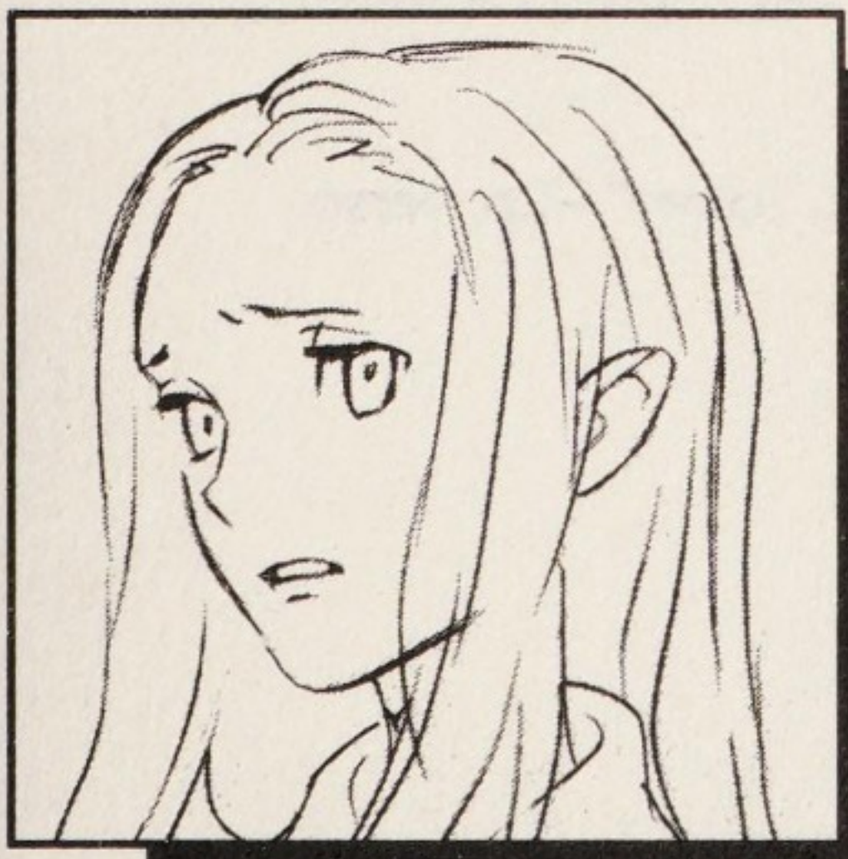
LULU—A member of the Schiff. She acts and speaks like a child, but cares about her comrades intensely. This small girl wields a massive battle-ax as her weapon of choice.



CARMEN—Like Moses, an artificially manufactured Chiropteran, or Schiff. His personality is a combination of theatrical and belligerent, and he carries a long pike brandishing three blades.



GHEE—A handsome boy among the Schiff. He finds out too late how short the lifespan of the Schiff really can be, and yet . . .



AURÉLIEN—A beautiful girl among the Schiff. Among her comrades she has the most heightened senses, and she can hear things happening from far away.

BLOOD+ VOL. 2: CHEVALIER
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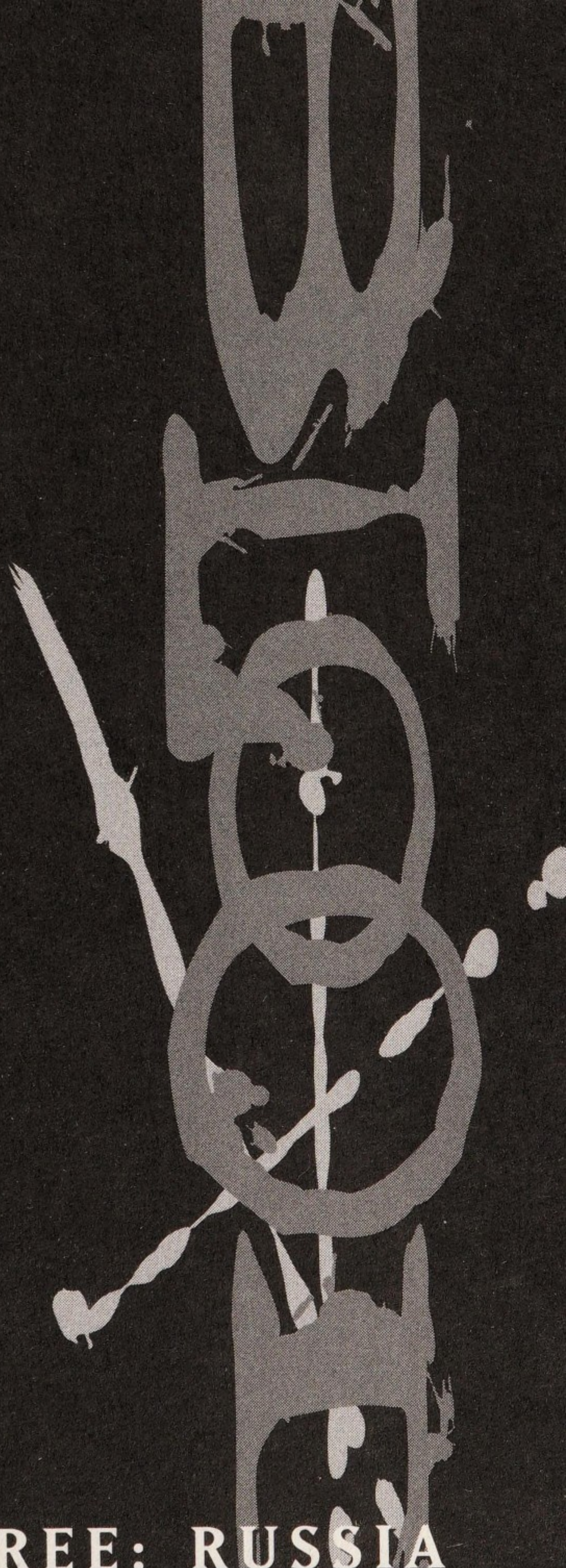
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BLOOD+02



BOOK THREE: RUSSIA

01

"WOW! I CAN see my breath!"

The tiny white cloud could be seen overlapping the gray skyline.

Before taking her first step onto the deck of the ship, Saya flipped up the collar of her jacket, burying her head in the thick material.

She walked down onto the concrete harbor from the combined cargo and passenger ship docked at a port in the northwest section of Zolotoi Rog Bay. Her ears felt like they might completely freeze over.

Saya and Kai followed the more enthusiastic Riku down the iron stairway, with Hagi close behind.

"Look, Kai-niichan, snow! It's really snow!"

Even during the winter in Okinawa it never snowed.

Unlike Kai, who had gone to Hokkaido on a school trip when he was in junior high school, Riku had never seen actual snow before. He stared in fascination as the white crystals landed on his bare hand only to immediately melt. It was natural for him to be so giddy.

"It is really cold."

"That's what happens when you go from Okinawa to Russia."

"Yeah. It must be . . . twenty degrees colder here."

On the way the ship had stopped at Yokohama and Tsuruga, so it wasn't as if the change in temperature was all that sudden.

She had heard that the autumn on the eastern Russian coast was similar to the climate of Tokyo in the winter.

As she gazed over the Vladivostok harbor's evening scene, Saya considered Riku's enthusiasm to be a little bit strange.

Or maybe it was more curious that she wasn't as excited.

Like her younger brother, this should have been Saya's first time touching real snow, but as she walked across the white earth, it didn't feel like a new experience.

"Hey, Saya-neechan! Let's build a snowman!"

"I don't think there is enough on the ground for that," she said.

"This is a loading and unloading zone, so most of the snow has been removed. Maybe if we tried by the train station over there," Riku answered.

Her eyes followed his pointing finger. Indeed, the ground was covered in a thicker layer of snow in that direction.

She saw something that chilly travelers to Vladivostok's harbor going to Vladivostok's central train station certainly appreciated. It was a building which looked to be from the early Romanov era. It resembled a castle you might see in an amusement park.

"Yeah, Kai. Let's go."

"You aren't going to get me to do that kiddie stuff."

Even a bear which had its winter hibernation interrupted wouldn't have spoken in such a gruff tone. Saya glared at the unmoving Kai, who had both hands stuffed in his coat pockets.

"Well . . . Hagi will help us, right?"

"If that is what you wish."

The tall and beautiful man was dressed as he always was, in a thin dark suit, yet he looked completely calm and composed. His ever-present cello case rested on his shoulders.

"All right then, let's go."

"Hold on. Where are you going?"

Saya's feet stopped and turned, entangled in a commanding voice.

A tall white man in a thick jacket leaning on the ship's rusty hull glared in Saya's direction.

It was David.

"We wanted to make a snowman . . ."

"We didn't come here to play in the snow."

"All right . . ." Saya looked down bashfully, trying to escape his penetrating eyes. His icy stare startled her more than the freezing sea air.

A world traveler who doesn't get to sightsee, this is the young girl, Saya Otonashi.

David, whose mood matched the weather, was showing a pendant to a Caucasian woman waiting at the bottom of the gangway. Something shiny and red sparkled at the top of the cross-shaped ornament.

"I'm David."

"Elizaveta. Call me Liza."

As was appropriate for someone from so far north, she had very white skin that Saya found captivating. She was approximately thirty years old, give or take a year or two, and as women go, she appeared to have a perfect balance between intelligence and beauty.

She showed him a shiny silver bangle wrapped around her slender wrist. Like David's cross, it was decorated with a crimson jewel.

David was a part of "Red Shield," an underground organization with a network that spread to every corner of the planet.

In order to hunt and kill the enemy to mankind—the Chiropterans—agents of Red Shield had been dispatched all over the world. In Okinawa, David investigated some highly classified U.S. Army secrets, and in Vietnam special agent soldiers like Clara and Spencer joined them to back up Saya. And now Elizaveta—Liza—was here in Russia. Saya was pretty sure she was assigned to coordinate their movements here.

The secret signal must have been something only fellow members would have understood. Louis, and then Julia, showed their

ornamented items the same way David did and pleasantries were exchanged. Liza then turned to where Saya and the others were standing.

"Let me welcome our guests from Japan."

She spoke impeccable Japanese . . . so good that Kai cowered in surprise.

The tall and slender Liza stepped closer to him.

"Wha . . . wha . . . ?"

What set Kai into a frenzy was the woman's soft embrace and her lips against his cheek.

"That's how they greet people here, Niichan."

Embarrassed by his brother's reaction, Riku accepted the Russian woman's greeting properly.

His back had stiffened when Liza had touched his face, but now Kai smiled as Liza turned from him to finally greet the young girl of the group.

"So this is Saya?"

"Yes," Saya said. Her answer sounded a little stiff because it was then she noticed that in her wise hazel eyes shaded by her long eyelashes, Liza's pupils sparkled brilliantly.

"Is something wrong . . . ?"

"Please excuse me. I was just thinking you are more enchanting than your photographs . . ."

She examined Saya like she was giving an appraisal, and then her face broke into a smile.

As blond hair from her short bob tickled Saya's neck, Liza's lips landed lightly on Saya's cheek. Her adult aroma smelled sweet in the frozen air.

The Trans-Siberian Railway is the longest railroad line in the world.

From Moscow's Yaroslavsky Terminal one must travel 9,297 kilometers to reach the last stop, Vladivostok Central Station.



Their goal was the ancient city of Yekaterinburg.

From the information gathered at the Cinq Flèche plantation in Vietnam, David and his colleagues had decided to focus on a man named Ted A. Adams. He was formerly the head of the U.S. Army's secret Chiropteran research.

In pursuit of his trail, they had come to Russia.

The warmth of the interior of the station allowed for a welcome thawing of Saya's face, but once they got outside to the train's platform, the night wind stole any heat remaining on her skin's surface.

"Does it really take six days to get to Yekaterinburg?"

Saya and Riku stood looking at the route map posted outside the tourist center. Riku spoke in his know-it-all voice.

"The Trans-Siberian Express takes a full week to go from Vladivostok to Moscow. On top of that only one train leaves every two days, so we need to make sure we don't miss this one."

"I didn't know you knew about this stuff, Riku."

"I read about it in a book. But actually I have never ridden a train before, so I might be a little nervous."

Riku wiped his sweating palms on his jacket dramatically and Saya smiled.

"That's right. They don't have trains like this in Okinawa."

Thinking about it, even during her duties in Vietnam, Saya hadn't had the chance to ride a train, either.

Even her untrained eyes could tell the Vietnam National Railway cars were older models, but looking at the No. 002 Russia Express stopped in front of her, this was a completely different experience. Compared with Japan's bullet trains, this behemoth felt like it had much more experience and history.

Along with the Russia Express, on the No. 002 Vladivostok–Moscow line were other trains like the Vostok Express and the Baikal Express, all running somewhere along the rail line at the same time.

"Hagi, have you ridden a train before?"

As Hagi appeared to open his mouth to reply to Saya's question, a loud crash from above their heads made him spin around to investigate.

From the rail overpass above came a giant trunk, slowly clunking down the stairway down to the platform, one step at a time.

Naturally, the owner of the tough trunk was close by and had it by its handle, but it was a little old lady, tinier than the luggage she was trying to move.

"Wait, Riku!" Kai shouted.

Ignoring his brother, Riku sped up the stairs and took the handle of the trunk from the elderly woman.

"I'll give you a hand, lady."

"Thank you. You are very kind."

With a little difficulty, the old woman's hoarse reply was in Japanese. Her Japanese wasn't nearly as smooth and clear as Liza's, but it was good enough for them to understand what she was saying.

"Wha-? Lady, you speak Japanese . . . ?"

"Does that surprise you? Many years ago there were tens of thousands of Japanese people living in this city."

Seeing Riku's eyes open wide in surprise caused the wrinkles around the old lady's mouth to grow deeper.

Listening to the two of them talking as they came down the stairs reminded Saya of her high school history class.

"Wasn't this area a part of Manchuria a long time ago?"

"Hey, yeah, you're right."

Saya saw her older brother's eyes swimming as they reflected the snowy night sky, but Saya had no intention of bringing up Kai's study habits, or lack thereof, in front of strangers.

Louis had checked that their luggage was secure in the rear freight car, and walked back to them, his large stomach jiggling in the rhythm of his step.

"Saya, why don't we get onboard?"

Even though Saya could only imagine the sunglasses-wearing, rotund black man in aloha shirts on the sand in warm weather, she was surprised to find he looked good in the thick jacket and fur cap he had on.

"Oh, yeah, yes. Umm . . . what about David?"

"David and Julia are already inside the train. Liza had something to talk to the conductor about. She's in the waiting room."

"What're they talking about?"

"Hmm . . . good question," replied Louis to Kai's curt inquiry. "It could be they are talking about you-know-what."

"You-know-what?"

"You never know, maybe you will be left behind like last time."

"Don-don't even mess with me . . ."

Kai's shout was drowned out by Louis's loud laughter. Like a barking seal, Louis made his way into the passenger car.

Similar to the situation at Hyphong Port in Vietnam, this Red Shield operation also included Saya and her family. But this time David and Louis saw Riku and Kai as more than outsiders to the mission. They were regarded, reluctantly, as necessary components.

Simply put, they could prevent Saya from going wild and losing control during her battles with the Chiropterans, and that's why they were here now. Saya had decided the number-one priority was keeping herself stable and accessible to her special abilities, but it was Julia who had proposed bringing the boys along.

Regardless, to a professional battlefield veteran like David, Kai and Riku were little more than extra baggage.

The last thing Saya wanted to do was to put her family members in the path of danger, but to say she didn't feel exponentially more confident with Kai and Riku close by would have been a lie. They had been her support system for as long as she

could remember. All the more reason to include them. They could help prevent the bloodbath that had happened last time from occurring again.

"Hey, Riku," said Kai.

"Yeah. Wait a sec—"

Riku didn't mean to brush Kai off, but the trunk was heavier than he had expected.

They were about halfway down the steep stairs. Saya's heart skipped a beat as she saw Riku lose his footing. Before she could react, a slender black mass had moved in front of her, catching Riku in one arm.

It was Hagi.

"Uh . . . Thank you."

"..."

Without a word, the young man set Riku down and grabbed the handle of the trunk.

"Let me take your hand, ma'am," Riku offered.

"Oh, well, thank you."

The elderly woman gladly accepted Riku's youthful kindness. She probably looked at him like she did her favorite grandson.

They moved much slower than Hagi, who was carrying the heavy trunk. With Riku's hand in hers, the elderly lady let out a deep sigh as she made it down the last stair onto the station platform.

"I am supposed to meet someone. Can you come this way?"

Hagi, who had been waiting by one of the passenger-car doors, turned and followed the old woman's direction to a tiny structure.

It was the waiting room that Louis had mentioned earlier.

You could call it a rest area, but it wasn't like the small glass-enclosed structures you saw at Japanese train stations. It was a firmly built structure which could protect against the cold. Like the station building, the mortar walls were painted a light peach color.

"Thank you for your help. You, too, little man."

After giving her thanks and taking the trunk from Hagi, she put her hand on the door.

"You're welcome," Riku said.

Saya looked at the gleaming Riku and couldn't help but smile. No matter what country they went to or what kind of people they encountered, having a little brother who showed kindness universally made this big sister more than a teeny bit proud.

"Have a good trip, you two."

The wrinkled right hand of the old woman found its way to the door's handle. Saya noticed a white ring decorating the middle finger of her driftwood-toned hand.

It didn't look like a wedding ring. On the platinum background she saw a single gem sparkle. It twinkled a deep blue like the reflection of moonlight on a lake.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Hurry up. It's cold, you know."

Riku had jogged back to the rest of the group and Kai violently rustled the hair on his head.

"Knock it off. That hurts."

"No way."

Kai wrapped his arm around Riku's neck and dragged him backward through the door onto the train.

As usual, Kai had a rough way of expressing his love. As strange as it may have seemed, he was complimenting his younger brother's kindness. He truly took after his father.

Smiling and thankful to be able to enter the warmth of the passenger car, Saya noticed the door to the rest stop the old woman had walked into open up once again.

"Oh, you are still out here in the cold?"

"Liza-san."

A snowflake landed on her brilliant red lips and immediately melted.

"Everyone's waiting. Let's hurry and get onboard."

+

The two-person compartments in the first-class car were very clean, but it was hard to be excited about the size of the cramped space.

After dinner, Saya returned to her room, and spent some time before going to bed with her compartment-mate, Hagi.

"It's completely white outside, huh?"

"Yes."

It had already been two hours since they set off to Vladivostok, a name meaning "invade east," and on the other side of the window the world was starkly divided between the black night and the frozen white ground.

The monotone rumbling of the train traveling straight down the tracks was conspicuously coupled with the lonely scene outside.

Hagi, who was sitting across from Saya, was looking down as he polished his cello's bow. Despite being alone with the silent Hagi, Saya, oddly, never felt bored.

There was a different kind of feeling of security than when she was with her brothers, Kai and Riku. It was calmer—like a long shadow in a forest or a wave on the ocean. She felt as though she had entrusted her body to something very deep.

It was like the feeling she had when she listened to him play the cello.

"Say, Hagi. Can you play me a song?"

"Yes."

Just as the young man was about to lift the cello from its velvet resting place with his carefully bandaged right hand, a quiet knock on the door interrupted the performance before it could begin.

"Yes?"

Saya stood from her seat and pushed the door open to find Riku standing in the aisle.

"Is something wrong?"

"We're supposed to change rooms."

Riku lifted up the suitcase that was at his feet and walked into the room.

Saya quickly scooted out of the way to make space.

"Change rooms? But, why?"

"For some reason Kai-niichan asked David to do it."

"Kai? I don't get it."

"I don't know. He's being selfish."

Looking tired of talking about it, Riku put his bag on the rack above the seat where Hagi was sitting and let out a sigh. "Sorry about this, Hagi."

"Huh? Hagi?" Saya had assumed too quickly that she and Riku were the ones switching places, and turned around, confused, as she pulled her luggage out from under her seat.

". . . I didn't agree to this," Kai growled with his elbow resting on the windowsill.

In the last five minutes this was the sixteenth repetition of this monologue to himself.

He stubbornly grumbled, fully realizing there wasn't going to be any conversation between Kai and the man sitting across from him, carefully tuning his cello.

Something about Hagi always got on Kai's nerves.

Even from a male perspective, he was obviously an attractive man, but his demeanor was just a little too cool. And what was up with the classical instrument? Kai couldn't help but be bugged by it.

Of course, he was thankful he had protected Saya—his own family—in Vietnam.

Without his amazing physical abilities, there was no way they would have been able to fight off those monsters, the Chiropterans. David described him as "the one that follows Saya's orders." Kai

wasn't sure what that meant, but this young dude definitely had affectionate feelings for her. That Kai was sure of.

That was partially why—no, that was the only reason why—Kai could not allow even the idea of Hagi and Saya sharing a room together overnight.

As the big brother, if he were to permit even the remotest possibility of something bad to happen to his little sister, he would never be able to visit the Miyagusuku tomb and face his father again.

Kai had gone to David and demanded the sleeping arrangements be changed, thinking Hagi would be kicked out of Saya's room. Kai had nothing to worry about if Riku and Saya shared a room. It was what came after that Kai hadn't counted on.

"Why did I have to get stuck with him . . . ?"

Obviously Julia and Liza were out of the question, but Louis, or even the impudent David, were better conversationalists.

"I didn't agree to this," he mumbled for the seventeenth time as the snow hitting the window painted it white.

Compared to the first-class accommodations on, say, the American Amtrak cross-country passenger cars, the first-class rooms in the Russia Express were far inferior. There were no second-floor observatory seats or shower rooms. Even in the coldest of countries, six days without bathing would make for a long trip.

There were bathing facilities for the train's staff, and Saya and the rest of the group had been given very special permission to use them. Saya had found out that was what Liza had been arranging inside the rest area at the train station.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking Russian people can't be convinced to bend the rules a little."

Liza laughed as she said this.

Saya figured getting the Russian crew to overlook the rules for their benefit probably meant a bribe of some kind was involved.

After being left alone in Vietnam, Kai said the credit card David had left him covered enough funds to buy a tank, so Red Shield seemed to be more than financially secure.

"This is weird . . ."

From inside the narrow, rectangular, boxlike space, Saya turned the handle and scowled.

Water wasn't coming out of the shower.

A hot shower sounded perfect before bed, but maybe the shower wasn't working tonight. There was only a limited amount of water a train could carry, and so there was nothing she could do.

"I guess tomorrow will have to do . . . Waa!"

Just as she had given up, the golden flower of a showerhead suddenly rained water onto Saya, causing her to yelp.

It wasn't hot, or even warm water, either. It was closer to the outdoor temperature of Russia at the moment.

"Br-brrrrrr!"

Without thinking she threw her head back, forgetting for that moment how small the shower space was, her back crashing against the shower door.

The door was locked, but being the folding door type, it wasn't nearly strong enough to hold the weight of a person's body.

"Hyaa?!"

Saya's hands grasped at the air, and she fell to the ground inside the almost equally as tiny locker room. She opened her eyes to see two feet planted in front of her face.

". . . Are you all right?"

A young member of the train crew holding a tray to her chest was checking in on Saya, worried.

"Oh, ha ha . . . Yes, I am fine."

Sprawled out on the floor, Saya forced a smile, then covered her blushing face with a bath towel that had slipped from the bar to the floor. The pudgy girl turned her round face to the shower itself, and then seemed to grasp the situation.

"I bet the water was freezing. That happens a lot."

"Oh. Yeah."

"I am sorry. I should have explained that to you before."

The girl turned the handle to shut off the water and held her hands to her cheeks in apology, yet her lips didn't appear to be asking for forgiveness.

"I just graduated from school last year. I don't know this job all that well, really. Even yesterday I spilled a cup in the dining car . . ."

"I see."

Relieved that at least the person who had come into the room was also a girl, Saya hurriedly slipped on her underwear and then pulled her knit shirt on over her head. She was supposed to meet Julia after this, so the shower would have to wait until tomorrow.

While Saya got dressed, the girl from the train crew giggled and kept on chatting.

"My mother worries about me out here. I guess that's normal." The girl leaned forward, opening a locket around her neck. "This is my family. But I live far away from them now."

"Yes, I see."

"This is my father, my little brother, my little sister, and our pet dog, Strelka."

"Oh how cute. He looks like a little kitten."

"That's our cat, Belka. Strelka is over here."

"I thought that was a bear . . ."

As Saya pulled up her skirt, she did her best to look closely at the picture kept in the girl's locket hanging around her neck. Saya quickly turned as someone knocked.

"Saya, Julia's waiting for you."

The person who had tapped on and opened the locker room door was Liza.

"I'm sorry. I'll be right there."

"It must be hard having to get blood transfusions all the time."

"I have gotten used to it."

"You do all that just to fight."

"... Huh?"

As Saya tapped her boot on the floor and pulled, getting her foot all the way inside, she raised her head without realizing it, responding to the lack of inflection at the end of Liza's last statement.

She didn't appear to have any ulterior meaning in her words, and she walked into the room. The train girl didn't seem at all surprised as Liza began to unbutton her jeans.

"I'll take a shower now, if that's all right."

"Oh, you should be careful," said Saya as she got ready to exit toward the corridor.

"That's what I thought after seeing how you ended up."

"Oh—"

So she had watched the whole thing from outside the door. Her most embarrassing moment had been seen by someone else.

Just like Clara and the others in Vietnam, it seemed like Red Shield agents retained a certain level of fear of Saya. It must have been because they expected her to be able to kill Chiropterans. If this were true for Liza as well, then she might have been surprised to see the naked Saya falling out of the shower stall.

Saya noticed something as she walked down the train's corridor.

From one of the first-class cabins, she heard a relaxing sound that was classier than the passenger car it flowed through.

"Hagi?"

He must have been playing his cello from his compartment.

For the first time, the constant sound of the iron wheels grating against the long railway track like grinding teeth sounded further away than the sound of the falling snow.

Julia's and Saya's rooms were in the same first-class car. Julia was sharing a room with Liza.

"Saya, you're late."

"I'm sorry."

She didn't have the white doctor's robe she always wore at her clinic in Okinawa, but looked just as dignified as always as she readied the intravenous drip for Saya. With her blond hair pulled back simply in a ponytail, she looked polished and beautiful. Saya wondered if this was on purpose.

"OK, now just lay down right there."

"All right."

Saya lay down on the long seat and rolled up her sleeve while Julia pressed her finger onto her arm.

The way she looked for a vein in Saya's arm was efficient, and tickled, but in a good way.

Just as the needle in Julia's right hand was about to pierce her skin, a chill ran down Saya's neck and she quickly lifted her head.

She had had this feeling before—!

Julia quickly pulled the needle back and dubiously pushed her glasses up.

"What's the matter?"

"It can't be . . ."

They were on this train.

It was amazing how this beautiful sound quelled the noise of the train moving along the tracks.

Riku gazed at the amber body of the cello standing up in its endpin, held in the young man's arms. It sung its loving song as its strings were caressed by the bow in his hand.

Riku couldn't believe Kai could turn the other way with such a sour look on his face.

Since Saya had gone to take a shower, Riku had come to Kai and Hagi's room to pass the time before going to bed.

Riku usually read a book when he had time to himself. He also liked playing video games, but there was something about

feeling the pages in his hands and letting the words create a path to follow that particularly appealed to Riku.

Unfortunately, on this trip they needed to pack light, and any unnecessary items had to be left behind. This meant he didn't have a single book to read. David was much stricter than any junior-high teacher he knew.

However, Riku found Hagi's performances more moving than anything he had read in a book.

Possibly inspired by his captive audience's attention, Hagi performed with an added fervor before the piece finally wound down quietly.

As soon as the music had ended, Hagi presented the bow to Riku with his bandaged right hand.

At first, Riku assumed he had misunderstood the meaning of the young man's gesture, and looked up at his face.

"Really? Are you sure?"

Hagi bowed his head deeply.

Riku gleefully took the bow into his hand and jumped over to the seat facing him. Hagi moved down, placing the cello on Riku's shoulder.

It was heavier than it looked. Even though the inside of the instrument was hollow, Riku wasn't expecting it to weigh as much as it did. It was designed more for someone as tall as its owner, and Riku's left hand soon got tired of holding it near his neck. Hagi moved the endpin out a little to lower the cello's neck and make it a bit easier on Riku.

He cautiously brought the hair of the bow to the strings.

The cello seemed to be an instrument full of pride. In the hands of a rank amateur, it was unforgiving, and even the most delicate stroke was rewarded with an annoying creak.

"Hold your right hand like this."

Hagi adjusted the position of Riku's right hand.

"Like this?"

Once again, Riku slid the bow over the strings, and a light tone emitted from his conservative effort.

Riku was so happy with the result he got goose bumps.

I can play the cello, too. Just like Hagi.

It was at the moment this thought ran through Riku's head and he slid the bow again that it happened.

The sound that penetrated his eardrums was something completely different, and his hand froze.

If the sound of the cello's song was a flowing river, than this sound was like the scream of wood being crushed.

It was a horrible sound!

"... What's wrong?"

Kai turned from his position staring out the window.

Riku couldn't immediately answer. He gripped the bow in his sweaty palm and looked at the door.

"This voice ..."

It was getting closer.

Hagi could probably hear it too. He already had his hands on his cello case on the floor when a tremor shook the train and the lights in the compartment went dark.

"Power outage?"

A few moments later, an orange light illuminated from the ceiling and Kai looked up.

That was when Hagi moved.

He hit the wall with the armored metal box.

The noble job of protecting its cello was not the only responsibility the case had, and Hagi was presently demonstrating its other destructive duties.

Bits of wood, metal, and insulation flew about as the wall was wretchedly disemboweled.

Riku heard the painful shriek of what sounded like a primitive ape. The giant running beast wasn't expecting the lateral attack through the wall, and it couldn't help but be forced to fall over.

The glass in the compartment's window began to crack as the entire passenger car shook on the tracks.

"What the hell?!"

Kai stood up and as his body rocked back and forth the blood-red eyes of the monster looked at him through the giant hole in the wall.

And there was no mistake. This creature was definitely a monster.

It was hunched forward like a monkey and its tan and gray skin could hardly conceal the massive muscles beneath its surface. The framework of its hideous face looked like that of a long-extinct carnivorous beast.

Chiropteran.

That's what David and the Red Shield people called this understandably hated creature. In reality, it was a ferocious beast that fed on human flesh.

It wasn't hard to see the monster's muscles tighten under the orange emergency lights.

The heavy sound of gunfire echoed in succession.

Blood exploded out of the top of the beast's shoulder, and a chunk of wet flesh stained Riku's foot.

"Why a Chiropteran here . . . ?"

The one asking questions to himself between bursts of gunfire from his beloved gigantic revolver was David from the room next door.

Behind him stood Louis, who quickly stuffed the remains of the chocolate bar he had been enjoying into his mouth. One of his virtues was his inability to waste food, no matter what the situation was.

"Chiropterans in Russia?! There hasn't been any record of them here since 1918."

"Nearly one century since last confirmation."

David shot his weapon again, blowing away half of the monster's head.

However, that wouldn't buy them very much time. David knew it, and Riku knew it, as well.

This bloodthirsty enemy of Red Shield was practically impossible to kill, and despite all common sense, was essentially immortal.

Too fast for Riku's eyes to follow, David expelled the empty shells of his gun and refilled the weapon as the missing part of the monster's head began to regenerate.

"—!"

What kept David from pulling the trigger was the appearance of a middle-aged woman screaming at the end of the hall followed by her husband.

It wasn't only them. Several doors in the corridor had opened up and passengers were sticking their heads out to see what was going on.

The human's hesitation wasn't lost on the monster.

The beast rushed at David, its flailing right arm smashing a window. Shards of glass mixed with snow as the heavy wind blew into the moving train car.

"Urgk . . ."

David turned his head away, squinting his eyes. Unable to aim his weapon, he grunted to his rear.

"Louis-san!"

"Yeah?!"

"I'm sorry."

Riku saw them.

From far down the corridor in the other direction was Julia. Between them, Saya bounded like a fawn toward them, apologizing to Louis as she jumped off his back.

"I'm sorry."

Giving her apology, Saya flew, nearly scraping the ceiling.

"Am I a diving board . . . ?!"

In the narrow hallway there wasn't a better way to get to the front, though there was no excuse for leaving a footprint on Louis's back.

Saya flew over David's head and planted the heel of her boot into the forehead of the Chiropteran.

Her specialty on the track-and-field team was the running high jump, but she also excelled at the running long jump. The force of her leap and body weight focused on its head knocked the monster to the floor, but she took nothing for granted as she leapt again off its cranium.

"Hagi, my katana!"

The words probably weren't necessary.

The young Hagi had already hoisted the precious blade into Saya's path, and she gripped its handle fluidly. Continuing on her direct path, she unsheathed the blade and pointed it downward.

"Yaaa!"

The blade sliced through the beast, splitting through flesh and bone.

Saya landed straight down on one knee, and her field of vision was filled with the image of the giant beast's top half splitting in two.

"Not another one!" groaned Louis as he hunched on his hands and knees, looking like a giant tortoise.

From behind Saya, on the opposite end of the corridor, appeared another Chiropteran.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine. But where are they coming from . . . ?"

As Louis rose to help Julia, Saya was able to respond to his question in transit.

The Chiropteran, with its body split from its head through its chest, rose up on one knee.

The beast wasn't finished. The two halves of its upper torso flailed until its arms pressed the two sections of its bleeding head together. They bonded upon contact.

The wound extending through its body healed almost instantly. The clean cut would have come back together quickly for humans and monsters alike.

In only a few moments, the half-bisected beast was one complete monster again.

Saya's blood was required to kill a Chiropteran. Saya hadn't infused the blade with her blood yet, so this result wasn't surprising.

The goal had been to give the passengers of this car some time to escape, so they were no longer an issue. However, she had missed her chance to fell the beast as she was distracted by a silver flash.

It was the broken chain and locket from that talkative girl on the train's crew.

This Chiropteran was a she.

In the secret facility under the Nature Conservation Center in Okinawa, George had almost turned into one of these monsters because of that medicine, Delta 67.

This Chiropteran had not come onto the train from the outside, but was created inside it.

The other one might have been a member of the train's crew, as well.

"Who did this . . . ?"

Someone had brought D67, illicitly manufactured by the U.S. Army and Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals, from faraway Vietnam to Russia to set a trap. And that someone was on this train.

There was no way that the appearance of the Chiropterans here was a coincidence. Again, innocent lives were sacrificed to block their progress.

Unforgivable.

That girl from the crew, and George, and Forest, too, and all those children in Vietnam—they all had their own lives. To manipulate and use them as beasts like this was absolutely unforgivable.

Saya wanted to help this girl, but to do so there was only one thing she could do.

George pleaded so hard for her not to let him lose his self. He said he wanted to die while he was still human.

It was too late for this girl. She had surely watched in horror as her body morphed from human into this monstrous form.

Saya wasn't sure if ending her life was compassionate or not. But what she knew for sure was that this girl saw her as an enemy, and she had no other choice but to kill her.

Saya slid her thumb across the L-shaped jut in the rear near the base of her blade.

Red lines of blood ran down grooves in each side of her katana.

Hearing the sound of gunfire and a horrific howl, Saya turned and looked over her shoulder.

Even with most of its chin and neck blown away by David's hand cannon, the other monster still came, swinging its arms downward. The claws that cut deep ridges into the wall of the passenger compartments bounced off Hagi's cello case.

This passageway was too narrow. Hagi's back slammed against a compartment door, knocking it off its hinges.

"Goddammit! Do this someplace else!"

Saya could hear Kai's shout, and he was surely trying to protect Riku in his compartment.

Probably not because of Kai's words, but just because it was the strategic thing to do, Hagi decided on a change of location.

Hagi swung his monsterlike right hand up, penetrating through the creature's lower jaw with his long claws.

The monster retched as the five blood-splattered claws cut through the roof of its mouth.

Hagi didn't stop, and his claws continued up through the giant gorilla-sized head and into the ceiling.

The ceiling boards broke away and a hole was torn at the point his beastly hand hit, sending shards of debris to the floor.

Carrying the beast upward, Hagi disappeared through the gap to the outside.

Much stronger than any person, Hagi had leapt vertically straight through the roof.

The exit they had opened became an entrance for the snowstorm raging outside, and the cold wind immediately chilled the rail car.

"Saya!"

Before Kai had a chance to yell her name through the hole on the wall to his room, Saya was already on her way.

She raised her sword to block the claws swinging downward and sparks flew as the two weapons met.

She was adequately prepared for this attack. But the other Chiropteran, now completely recovered from its injuries, was more powerful than she.

"Urk!"

Her knees began to quiver and she slowly sunk lower to the ground. She was on the losing side in a battle of brute strength.

"Saya, there are too many obstacles here! We need to move!"

David was thinking the same as Hagi. Julia, and then Liza, who had showed up late to the scene, were shuffling passengers out of their rooms and away from this passenger car. This was necessary because the worst-case scenario imaginable was a passenger getting struck by a bullet, or worse. It was also too cramped for Saya to be able to swing her sword.

"Got it!"

Once she was sure that Kai and Riku had joined with David and had made it through the door to the next car, Saya quickly pulled back.

The pressure had almost completely overcome Saya as the monster leaned forward onto her katana. Saya took the chance and kicked forward into the monster's abdomen. The flexible muscles of the beast's belly tightened, springing Saya backward.

She turned to find herself quickly catching up with the others who had escaped ahead of her.

Bom! Bom! Blunt thuds could be heard from over their heads.

Hagi and the Chiropteran were fighting on top of the moving train.

The jet-black night was splattered with the white snow of the storm. The pantograph flashed an arc of electricity, illuminating half of Hagi's face.

Sharing a place on the roof of the speeding Russia Express was the silhouette of a creature shaped like an oversized monkey, and it was racing straight toward him.

On a crash course for the tall, young figure, the monster swung its metallic claws forward.

Blasting through the crystals of snow, Hagi stopped the clawed weapon with only his left hand. Unfortunately, the roof of the train was slick from the snow, and Hagi slipped and slowly lost his balance. The monster thrust his claws downward.

With a savage ripping sound the shoulder of Hagi's tailored suit was torn apart.

Wind-carried snow mixed with the warm fresh blood.

The muscles were torn deep enough to clearly expose his shoulder blade. Despite the pain, the young man didn't even wince.

"..."

His long narrow eyes glared quietly at the insane vision staring back at him.

Hagi raised his right hand and grabbed the wrist of the claw that hacked apart his shoulder.

The monster pulled both arms closer to its chest, and let out an annoyed guttural cry before it was dancing through the air.

Hagi used an overhand judolike move to toss the beast just as the train was about to pass under a bridge. The Chiropteran crashed into a girder in the overpass, knocking bricks into the train and snowy field below.

A typical living creature would have been reduced to a pile of flesh. However, Hagi, realizing this creature was anything but typical, stood up, and pulled a dagger from inside his jacket, wasting no time in sending it soaring.

From the smoky darkness above, once again the creature landed on top of the train, bringing debris from the bridge down with it.

But the Chiropteran wasn't uninjured. Its face had been crushed, and its left arm had been mangled and hung at an unnatural angle. The unshapely mass toppled onto the last car of the train, and as it tried to push up off its claws Hagi noticed a silver handle sticking out of its Adam's apple.

Hagi dashed toward the beast and plunged his bladelike right hand into his enemy's chest.

He felt his hand smash through ribs and tear though its lungs; and yet, this was not a killing blow.

That would have to come from Saya's blood.

The monster's left arm remained a disfigured mess but, naturally, arms come in twos. In an act of retribution, the beast batted its right arm at Hagi, which he blocked with his left.

Arm against arm, they pressed back and forth; he'd been in this position before. This time, however, Hagi had the impression that this goblin had learned from previous experience.

Sharp claws were not the only weapons of wild animals.

The monster exhaled a long white breath, exposing its fangs before leaning in closer to Hagi's head.

At that moment—

"Hagi."

He heard the voice, but probably not aurally.

It was clearer than that, and it gave an unyielding message.

Without a half-moment's hesitation, Hagi pulled his head backward.

Just as he did, the Chiropteran bit down on nothing but air as a bright glimmer entered the head of the beast from below.

The naked blade entered through the neck and the tip exited through the top of its head.

By the time the blade had been pulled out from below, the soul of this monster had already been placed into the hands of the gods of death.

The entry and exit wounds were turning white, and its entire body briefly transformed into a mineral statue of itself before being slammed by a gust of wind.

The brittle form broke against the base of a pantograph, and it quickly was reduced to red sand mixing into the snowy landscape. The final form of the beast was beautiful.

Saya pulled the katana she had thrust through the ceiling boards back out again, and turned toward Kai, nodding slightly.

The situation with the Chiropteran that Hagi was dealing with on the train's roof looked to be settled.

Her young face was cold and tense, and her fighting spirit reflected clearly in her crimson pupils.

Used to the clumsier version of Saya, he was still confused every time he saw this version of the katana-wielding warrior Saya.

Whenever she was in this mode, his little sister, whom he would lay his life down for without question, seemed like a completely different person.

"Saya! Go on with them ahead!"

As David put his back to the wall of the car, he called out his order after they had heard the cry of the other Chiropteran come from the passenger cars close by.

"But . . ."

"Retreat to the freight car in the back. I'll be right behind you."

"Got it."

As he and Louis turned back forward, Saya realized they must have been worried about Riku, and she obediently disappeared through the door connecting to the next car to the rear.

This was the dining car.

Thankfully, the car was empty at this late hour, and was the best place to meet the approaching Chiropteran.

Kai stood next to David as he flipped tables over to make an instant barricade.

". . . I thought I told you to get out of here."

"I don't take orders from you," spat out Kai as David pressed a table against the door.

It wasn't that Kai didn't have confidence in David's ability to lead, it was that he wasn't a member of Red Shield. The main thing was he didn't like being treated like a kid. This big brother's job was to protect Saya and Riku.

"And what can you do?"

"That part I . . ."

How could he know if he didn't try? That was Kai's counter-argument, but his mouth went silent when he saw what David held out to him.

It was a shiny black automatic pistol.

He hadn't forgotten it. It was the gun George had stashed back at their house.

"I'll let you have this. Think about what you are going to do."

". . ."

Kai felt the weight of the gun in his hand and swallowed his breath.

He had fired this weapon at a Chiropteran before, but that time his body was carried by violent fury. He was just trying to get revenge on his father's attacker, and that was it.

This time was different. The riddle of Saya's origin, and the enemy, the Chiropterans, that were being hunted by this organization, Red Shield—a lot of factors intertwined had created the complicated fate they were executing now. Kai had felt that during all this he had wanted to fight, but that idea was looked down upon as outrageous.

How much terror and anxiety had Saya been forced to endure as she fought battle after battle on her own? Kai looked down at the weapon he held in his hand.

"Why do you . . . put your life on the line like this?"

The connecting door had been blocked and they were waiting in the rear end of the car when Kai choked out his question to David, who sat next to him.

Using a chair as a shield and gripping his pistol, David glanced at Kai.

"Because it's my job."

"Wha—?"

Dumbfounded by the unexpectedly frank answer, Kai looked at the man bathed in the dim light reflected from the snow falling outside the window, before realizing David was biting down on his lower lip.

As if his molars were glued together, David continued speaking.

"I have lived when others have died so I must continue to fight. That is the job I must do."

Kai opened his mouth as if to ask a question, but his voice was stuck in his throat.

It was because the look on David's profile indicated that the conversation was over, and he didn't know what he should ask, anyway.

"It's here."

David's short grunt was drowned out by a thunderous roar.

The barricade David had struggled to put up did very little to fulfill its intended duties. One table's legs broke off, and the top was split in two.

Kai covered his face to keep from getting hit by splinters while David fired his weapon in succession. The flash from the muzzle

fire illuminated the large black frame of a monster rushing at them at tremendous speed.

"Gyaa!"

Kai lifted his upper torso from behind the chair and fired his gun.

He was far from being used to firing a pistol, but at the very least he knew how to hold it. He wasn't anywhere near the skilled marksman that David was, but shooting at a large target in a narrow space like this wasn't very difficult. Pummeled by a barrage of bullets from two guns at the same time, the monster reeled back, spraying mists of blood into the air. The force of the fire knocked the creature back into the wall of the small kitchen next to the entrance.

Smashing chairs along the way, and crashing into the wall, the large-caliber bullets from David's pistol continued to assail the Chiropteran's chest.

The creature folded over as its ribs were shattered, and from its gaping mouth came a wall of regurgitated blood. The red liquid painted the wall in waves as the creature squatted on the floor.

Regardless, the damage to the Chiropteran would only be temporary.

Already Kai could hear the sound of bullet fragments hitting the floor.

As blood spewed out from the gaps between its fangs, the red eyes of the goblin rose up.

"Retreat."

"What? But it's still—"

"We've given Louis as much time as possible to get ready."

David stood up as he filled the empty chambers of his pistol with a speed loader.

At the same time, the recovered Chiropteran exuded a wicked-looking substance as it released a brain-splitting yell that cracked the windows. The Chiropteran took off toward them.

"Run!" yelled David as his pistol answered the monster's threat.

Bullets tore through the tendons of the bounding beast's right leg. The monster rolled sideways, crashing into the windowed wall, sending showers of glass onto the floor.

Kai ran through the connection to the next car and down the corridor.

From here back were second-class passenger cars.

"Danger! Get back!"

Kai held up his gun at the suspicious riders who popped their heads out of their rooms to see what was going on as he continued running toward the freight car.

The freight car was the last car on the Russia Express, behind the passenger cars.

It was not like the giant container cars you often see on Japanese railroad tracks. The exposed flatbed carried two covered automobiles that were firmly attached to the bed from their hoods. There was David's car and Louis's van, which likely held all their weapons and ammunition. After Saya jumped through the door of the final passenger car, she kicked off the metal handrail, which was cold enough for bare skin to stick to, jumped into the freight car, and turned around.

"Saya-neechan."

"Riku, get down!"

As she readied her sword, Saya spoke sharply to her younger brother, who was standing in the shadow of the van with Julia and Liza.

The sporadic sound of gunfire was heard over the sound of the train's wheels on the track. She could see the reflection of the gunfire in the passenger-car windows getting closer.

The door opened.

"It's coming!"

It was Kai. He was carrying a gun.

Right behind him appeared David on the balcony at the rear of the passenger car.

They were followed by a third and unwelcome figure, which smashed through the door's frame and stepped into the snowstorm.

It immediately bellowed a thundering roar that numbed Saya's eardrums.

Like popcorn dancing in a frying pan, the Chiropteran's body bumbled backward as its flesh and blood was splattered about the rear wall of the passenger car.

While its body was being dismantled by a countless number of bullets, the Chiropteran spilled off of the balcony.

"Got 'im!" said Louis, satisfied, resting the long heavy weapon he had pulled from the rear of the van. The barrels of the Gatling gun pointed at the sky were still spinning.

"Not yet."

David, who had moved to the freight car, pulled a shotgun from the rear of the van.

He cocked the pump-action and moved to the front of the freight car where it connected to the passenger car. Pointing the gun down between the two train cars, he fired off two shots.

Even from her location, Saya could see what was happening.

The battered and bloodied Chiropteran hanging on the coupling had its hand blown away by the shotgun slugs, and it literally lost its grip and rolled onto the railroad tracks.

As the train's wheels tore through flesh and bone, the rear car shuddered from the impact.

". . . Now that's that," exhaled Louis.

The fierce roar immediately following told them that Louis had spoke too soon.

"Uwaa!"

A look of terror came across Riku's face from where he stood near the car. A blood-soaked claw gripped Riku's ankle.

From the edge of the flatbed appeared half a monster. The bottom half was completely gone.

Even with tubes like washing-machine hoses hanging out of the cross section of its abdomen, the monster still lived.

"Riku!"

Saya lowered her body and blew past Louis like a gust of wind. She got down on one knee and skated across the slick freight-car floor holding her katana straight out like a fencer until it entered the flesh of the half-Chiropteran.

The katana penetrated the monster's temple and slid through skull and brain before poking out the opposite side.

For a moment, the heavily panting Chiropteran stopped moving. Its existence was transformed into a white coral-like substance, and its body was now fully under gravity's control.

Its right hand still gripped Riku's leg, and was like a ball and chain pulling Riku with it.

With no hesitation, Saya leapt, determined to free her brother from his restraint.

She sliced through the arm of the Chiropteran and clutched her brother in the air.

But they were no longer above the freight car.

A burst of wind ruffled her hair, and large clumps of snow beat against her cheeks.

"Saya!"

She was able to hear Riku's cry in a break in the wind.

With Riku in her arms, Saya's body rode the wind and they flew far.

Kai's arms were outstretched to the rear when the crowlike shadow flew over his head.

From the roof of the passenger car, Hagi had rose through the air as simply as if he were walking.

The young man ripped through the falling snow and his revolving body nabbed Riku and Saya protectively in both arms.

As the train had been on a curve when they flew off, the group of three eventually landed on the white earth, far away from the train tracks.

The snow probably softened the impact of their landing, but it was still no piece of cake. Kai was able to see the three of them rolling separately in the snow.

Moments later, the curtain of snow completely blocked his shrinking view of them.

"Make them stop the train!"

"Got it."

Receiving the order from David, Louis's large body made its way through the doorway of the passenger car.

On a Japanese train, the slightest disturbance would have caused the train to stop, but this former–Soviet bloc Russia Express hadn't even begun to slow down.

"Liza?!" shrieked the usually calm and composed Julia.

Kai turned his attention and was shocked to see the beautiful figure of Liza disappearing into the snowy landscape. She had jumped from the rear of the freight car.

Wait. He needed to follow Saya and Riku to help them.

As Kai leaned forward, a stiff hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Let go!"

"And what do you think you are going to do?! Leave it to Hagi and Liza."

Kai shoved David's hand off his shoulder, but in the end, he didn't jump off the freight car.

Kai was very aware he didn't have the superhuman abilities of Hagi or the high level of training Liza did.

The biggest problem now was that they were moving further and further away. At this point, rather than jump off the train and try and trek through the heavy snowstorm, it probably made more sense to ask the engineer to back the train up to the point they had lost them.

However, they shouldn't be alone.

Hagi sprung into action a moment after they had left the flatbed.

His reason for existence was to protect Saya, and everything Hagi did was ruled by that objective.

He is different from me . . .

This much Kai knew. However, it didn't matter that he could follow her without worrying about injury. If he really wanted to protect Saya and Riku, his family, he should have jumped off that train without a second thought.

"Shit!"

Kai punched the door of the van, and the pain, along with the freezing cold of the metal, registered in his brain at the same time.

02

THE WIND WHISTLED in the heavy darkness.

A snowstorm.

"—Saya."

A soft voice like smoke brushed about, nudging her consciousness.

Saya opened her eyes and realized she was lying down wrapped in a warm blanket. She could also feel the heat from a fire near her cheeks.

She was able to make out two dancing shadows against the orange rock wall. This looked like the inside of a cave. A cloth was hung up over the entrance to protect against the snowstorm. Occasionally a gust would blow some flakes in, but they were soon swallowed up in the flames of the bonfire.

Even near the fire, her breath still appeared as white, but it was certainly warmer here than it was out in the snowstorm.

"Hagi?"

As Saya pulled her body up, she directed her inquiry to the young man seated near her.

Just a few moments ago, they had been walking in the snow.

"I collapsed."

"... Yes."

He must have seen her fall, carried her here, and set up this impromptu shelter.

Although his tweed jacket, inspired by French high society, was very stylish in some circles, outside of Europe it looked out of place. Especially here in Russia. On the other hand, on this long-locked lovely young man, it looked better on him than on some Goldschmidt nobleman.

"W-what?"

Hagi slowly leaned forward and extended his right hand.

As Saya pulled back slightly, his warm hand landed on her forehead. She expected to feel the hard leather skin brandished by the sun and the snow and the rocks and the trees, but instead she felt the soft, supple skin of a young woman resting on her head.

"Your fever has broken."

"Suddenly I got sleepy."

That level of cold and snow would have been a threat to any person's life, but that wasn't the problem Saya experienced. She knew the reason she had fainted.

The *sleep* had grown closer.

Saya had realized that she had spent much time and had many experiences on this personal life cycle. After a few years of activity came approximately thirty years of deep sleep.

"Has it been three years since you awakened?"

Hagi placed a piece of wood on the fire, stirring sparks up into the air.

Already three years—there wasn't much time left.

"The next time I wake up, there may not be anybody who remembers me."

With her arms around her knees, Saya faced the flames.

For most people, being asked to wait thirty years for something was too much.

Until now, most of her memories had been lost during her slumber. But the body had a mind that drew out the memories over time.

"I will wait for you. For however long it takes . . . always."

"I know . . ."

Hagi always knew the right thing to say, and he was never anything but completely sincere.

There was only one person in this world she could depend on. He was the only other one whose time was at the same pace as hers.

Saya stood up from the blanket covering her and walked toward the cave entrance.

She opened up a gap in the cloth and looked outside. Snow blew in with a gust of wind that briefly fanned the flames.

"We will arrive at the village tomorrow. Are you still tired? Why don't you rest a little more?"

"I'm fine."

Saya's words were clear to Hagi as he wrapped a warm top around Saya's shoulders.

"Hagi, you should take a rest."

"I am fine. I cannot sleep, so it is nothing to worry about."

Sensing a feeling of loneliness from the young man's gentle smile, Saya regretted her thoughtlessness.

Now he didn't need sleep.

There was no distinction between day and night for Saya's eternal protector.

". . . I'm sorry."

Hagi grinned at Saya's sudden apology.

"Please think nothing of it. Let me play the cello until you get to sleep. The song you taught me."

He walked to the rear of the cave and sat down on a natural rock stool. Saya gazed at the young man as he began to play his instrument.

She did not know how she could repay his undying dedication. He never once asked for anything in return for his service, so what should she do for him? . . . If Joel were alive he would have had an answer.

The comforting Bach piece lured Saya to a place of tranquility.

Saya closed her eyes.
"You still don't have it down."
". . . You are very strict."
Hagi smiled as he concentrated.
With her eyes still closed, Saya let out a little giggle.

The snow poured from the sky all night, but seemed to stop on schedule with the rising of the sun.

Above the thick field of snow and trees spread a pale blue sky.

This could be considered good weather, as Russia's severe winters didn't get above freezing.

It is a good thing they had a clear field of vision, as they were on a tight itinerary. Saya and Hagi arrived at their destination just after midday. They were right outside of Pokrovskoye in a village that didn't have a proper name.

There were many places that didn't appear on the maps.

It likely didn't matter if you were a member of the ruling class, or the revolutionary factions; Pokrovskoye was considered a desolate place by all Russian people.

This was the birthplace of a certain monk.

Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin. A member of an unorthodox Christian sect of flagellants, this gangly and unattractive man was brought into the favor of the Romanov dynasty. Nicolas II monopolized the power of the government, leading to violent uprisings from the intelligentsia on both the left and right.

During the revolution he died at the hands of that hatred.

Fearful of the power Rasputin had attained, a group of nobles led by a prince named Yusupov poisoned Rasputin.

"Yusupov was cooperating with us."

As Hagi gave Saya the details, they left a long line of footprints in the fresh snow.

"I see."

Saya had heard Rasputin's story before, but didn't know many of the details.

The stubborn prince may not have been a wise man, but he was careful, at the least. He took no risks and spared no expense in erasing Rasputin from existence.

"He invited Grigori to his mansion and fed him potassium cyanide. However, Grigori didn't absorb a lethal dose, and he didn't die."

Among the unenlightened commoners, it was believed that Rasputin used black magic to negate the effect of the poison, but intellectuals agreed that the poison didn't work because of a gastric acid disorder Rasputin suffered from.

But to the end, that's how the gossip went.

He had a reputation among the people for his special powers in the dark arts, but in reality the man was a monster.

It was not clear exactly when the shift happened, but there was no question that he was a Chiropteran at that point in time. There was a certain irony in the fact that it was Saya and Hagi who were concerned about the superhuman state of his former existence.

Despite his efforts, Yusupov must have been confused by the poison's ineffectiveness on Rasputin. Using the butts of their guns and sticks, they beat Rasputin to a pulp, but even then, he refused to die, so it is said they turned their guns on him.

"He was then bound and tossed into the freezing waters of the Neva River."

"But Grigori was still alive . . ."

"Yes."

"To ensure the job was complete, nothing should have been better than sinking his body to the bottom of the river."

But no matter how hard one tried, Chiropterans were not killed so easily.

If you couldn't kill it, the only other option was to bury it in a way it couldn't reach the surface.

However, what was recovered from the river was not actually Rasputin, but a member of Yusupov's mansion staff.

After that, Grigori Rasputin had never been seen again.

"So did he come back here?"

"Yes. According to rumors."

At the outbreak of the revolution Russia became a place of chaos. Except for the imperial princess, Anastasia, the entire Romanov family, descendents of the Eastern Roman Empire, were executed, and remaining aristocrats were busy attempting to flee the country.

If a Chiropteran had a sense of sentimentality, had been tossed from splendor and wanted to appear to no longer be alive, it wasn't so bizarre to think that he might return to his hometown.

But back in Pokrovskoye there would be people that knew his face. So that was why he secluded himself in a nearby village.

It was certainly possible there was a more realistic reason . . .

"What happened to Anastasia?"

"Surely she is still in hiding somewhere."

The enemy Saya truly had to kill was her.

With the loss of the cover of her royal palace and her "double-headed eagle" heraldry, she was much less defended than she had been before.

For a hunter, this was the ideal opportunity.

Of course, the first rule of hunting was to not reveal the hunt.

Saya's pace naturally picked up across the snow. They didn't have much time.

Saya sensed Hagi matching her pace, and his worried glance at her.

"Anastasia trusted Grigori . . ."

"Right. We go from Grigori."

To get to the queen, best to take care of her Chevalier one at a time. Eventually, the trail would lead to Anastasia.

An unnatural splash sounded in the still air.

It seemed to come from the community well, a fixture in most towns and villages.

Raised up from the deep well, a pulley carried a tin bucket of fresh spring water to the surface.

A hunched-over old lady raised her head to meet them.

Apparently used to seeing strangers, she showed little interest and her red hands lowered the bucket once again into the well using the rope and pulley.

"Excuse me . . ."

Saya was the first one to attempt communication.

"Do you know this man in—"

"Hello, Madam."

A chirpy birdlike voice cut Saya off mid-sentence.

As springy as her tone, a single young girl had skipped up through the snow.

She looked to be a bit younger than Saya.

Her clothes were typical of rural farmers, but her face was beautiful and vibrant.

Her long straight hair flowed over her shoulders. She looked like an unlikely sunflower in the middle of this snowy country, as her hair sparkled golden in the sunlight.

Despite the polite and cheerful greeting, the old woman's sour look didn't change, and without a response or nod she lifted the buckets and carrying pole onto her shoulder.

The second bucket wasn't even half full.

Unperturbed by the brush-off by the old woman, who walked away minding her own business, the girl set the bucket she was carrying at her feet and smiled at Saya and Hagi.

"Hello."

She had an innocent and charming face.

"Are you in town on business?"

"We're looking for someone . . ."

"A person?"

With great interest, the girl cut Saya off mid-sentence.

"A man named Grigori."

"This man," continued Hagi, as Saya held out a photograph to the girl.

She looked at the picture and appeared to give it some thought, but then shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I came to this village only two years ago, so I don't know the neighborhood well."

"... I see."

This could hardly be mistaken for a highly populated village, so going door to door, Saya assumed, might be the quickest way to make results.

As she leaned back on the edge of the well, the girl's eyes glittered expectantly at Saya.

"Say, where will you stay tonight?"

"Hm?"

"Why don't you stay at my house? I haven't spoken with anyone close to my age in so long. I'd really like to talk more with you."

"But, won't your family ..."

It may have not been polite to consider, but she didn't appear to be a child from an affluent household. Unexpected visitors can create chaos in terms of food and sleeping, especially in poor homes.

"My father isn't around anymore."

As she stared down at the earth peeking through the melted snow, the girl continued, but her voice had grown hoarse.

"He died ... I found him and his body was completely white ... he looked as if every drop of blood had been drained from his body ... that white ..."

Saya's eye immediately met Hagi's.

Without a word, Hagi nodded.

+

The girl's name was Sonya.

She said she lived in a house in the woods a little ways from this already remote village.

She had no family. When they were together, her father had studied medical science at the imperial capital of Yekaterinburg, but since he had died, this young girl had lived all by herself.

"That's my house over there."

From the well it had been a solid thirty-minute walk.

Sonya pointed to a very modest-looking structure.

"You live there, all alone?"

"Yes."

A creek ran across the path to her home. It was only about ankle deep, but was rather wide, and an attempt to cross on foot would likely have led to a broken tailbone.

Thankfully, there was a bridge, so there was no need to get their clothes wet. Not constructed of stone or concrete, the span was a very old and dilapidated wooden arch.

"Carrying full buckets of water is always a little scary. But today I feel all right."

The bucket hung from Hagi's hand.

"C'mon, let's go."

Sonya spun around, flashing her skirt, and wrapped both arms around Saya's arm, pulling her onto the bridge.

"B-be careful. It doesn't look safe to walk too close together."

"But this bridge is so old. It scares me!"

That's the very reason we shouldn't walk together across the rickety bridge . . .

At that very moment Saya's fear became reality.

Sonya's mischievous grin froze.

As she clung to Saya and looked behind her, Sonya stepped onto a rotten board.

"Kyaa!"

"Uwaa!"

When Sonya fell, Saya had no choice but to follow.

Saya extended her free arm, and Hagi grabbed it with his right hand.

With Hagi's strength, pulling up two bodies in free fall from the bridge shouldn't have been a problem. However, his legs were not firmly planted.

The sound of cracking timber was followed by Hagi, too, falling through broken planks of wood.

For a moment in space, Hagi was the surprised third member on the journey Saya and Sonya had begun down toward the stream's surface.

A giant splash erupted in the nearly frozen creek.

The citizens of Russia called the revolutionists "The Children of the Land," and if the frozen winter land were the parents, then the children were better protected by the thick walls of their homes and the Russian-style hearth and heating system—the pechka.

Integrated into the walls of the home, the pechka was fired up to dry everyone's clothes, which were now all hanging on a clothesline in the house. But on top of that, the nearly airtight stone walls did an excellent job of keeping the whole house warm.

The pechka, which is constructed in the center of the home to conserve precious firewood, effectively distributes heat evenly via the walls throughout the house. In theory, it wasn't dissimilar to the central heating systems found in English and French apartment buildings.

As warm as it was, naturally they weren't about to sit around naked waiting for their clothes to dry.

Saya and Sonya sat next to each other in front of the pechka, with thick blankets wrapped around their shoulders to keep in the heat.

Everything Hagi had been carrying, along with his clothes, got wet in the ordeal. It would have been fine to borrow clothes, but Sonya was even shorter than Saya.

"Why don't you get changed?"

"I'm fine."

"But you'll catch a cold like that."

"But, I'd like to do this with Saya-san."

Under the blanket, Sonya wrapped her arms around Saya, and Saya could feel the skin of Sonya's breasts and stomach against hers. This sudden sensation of Sonya's body heat made Saya uneasy.

"W-w-wait a minute . . ."

She had said she was happy to find a friend her age, but this was different than Saya's definition of friendship.

Naturally, Saya wasn't savvy to all of the world's customs. It reminded her of the time right after she had left the Zoo . . . or . . . it could be this was how Russian people showed affection.

"Saya-san, your body is very smooth."

"Hey . . . don't . . ."

"Very soft and delicious-looking."

"N-no . . ."

Despite Sonya's playful nature, the desperate tone in Saya's voice led to the young man darkening the door of the center room, and Saya raising the fallen blanket back over her shoulders.

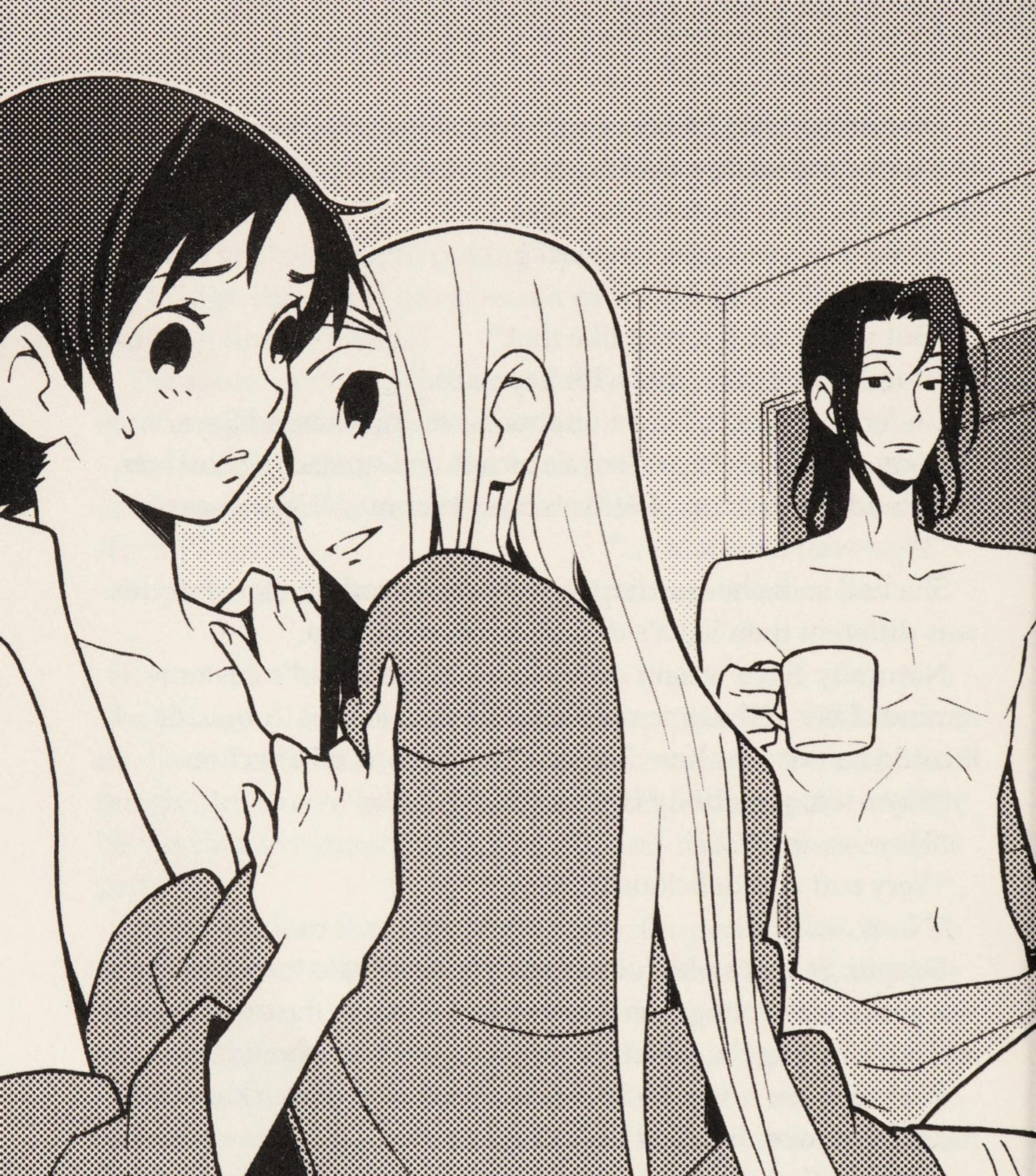
Realizing her lower body was exposed, Sonya quickly pulled her blanket over to cover herself.

"Here . . ."

The young man held out two steaming porcelain mugs, and the situation wouldn't have been so strange if he had been wearing his clothes instead of the blanket wrapped around his waist.

Saya turned her eyes away from the young man's chest and took the cup.

She held the cup to her nose and took in the sweet scent. She brought the cup to her lips and tasted honey.



"It's sweet."

"It's called Sbiten. It's honey tea," said Sonya as she took a cup from Hagi.

It was the first time Saya had tasted a flavor like this. She had only drunk kudzu gruel and plum liquor in Russia until now.

"I found it in the kitchen and made it without asking. It's very exquisite."

"Hagi, go to the other room."

Saya's harsh command drew a confused look from Hagi, and she sighed into the steam from her tea.

"You are among girls, see?"

A while back Saya might not have said anything. The older and wiser young man didn't seem to find the situation strange at all.

". . . Having him here is all right with me. I don't think it's strange."

"Neither do I."

"Well, I do!" Saya snapped, cutting off Sonya's giggling.

"Understood."

Giving his assent, Hagi turned to go back to the next room.

Glancing at his back, Saya sighed once again.

When she had first met Hagi, he was an impertinent and nasty child.

And Saya was probably the same way back then, too.

At first, all they did was argue with each other. She lost her temper more than once when her "servant" wouldn't listen to what she said, and she complained to Joel many times.

The problem may have been that they were too much alike. After they resolved their conflicts, a strong trust was built between them. It was very much like a sibling relationship.

It was about the time when the mischievous little brother passed her in height to become a tall big brother that she felt able to rely on him for just about everything. He wasn't simply a servant but a one-of-a-kind knight.

But every so often his boorish behavior, like this incident right now, made her see him as a younger brother again.

"Are you and Hagi lovers?"

"Wha—?"

Saya's voice revealed her surprise in the illogical conclusion Sonya had come up with.

Moving her body close to Saya's, Sonya stared into Saya's eyes in a strangely serious fashion, her head turned downward with her chin close to her collarbone.

"Hagi is . . . like family to me."

Sensing a slight change in the beating of her own heart, Saya tried to escape Sonya's gaze by looking around the room.

It was not a large space.

The house itself was small and snug. This room served as both a living room and a bedroom, and there was one more bedroom in the back, and then the kitchen.

Saya noticed something unusual, for a private home, sitting on a desk by the window in the living room.

There were glass beakers, flasks, test tubes, an alcohol lamp, distillation equipment, and finally, countless jars of chemicals . . . a veritable university research lab. It also was much like the Zoo Saya knew all too well.

A look at the bookshelf revealed leather-bound volumes toting names like Lamarck, Mesmer, Mendel, among other well-known scientists.

"Those books belonged to my father."

"He was an academic?"

Saya was a little surprised to see the sad look in Sonya's profile after she asked the question.

For a moment the girl that looked like a flower blooming through the melted snow had the face of a completely different person.

"Yes. He shut himself in the house all year working on his experiments."

"What kind of experiments . . . ?"

"On how to create humans."

The expressionless Sonya smiled ever so slightly.

" . . . Humans?"

Saya looked once again at the desk by the window and her eyebrows creased together.

Outside the window.

The scattered black tree trunks rising from the ground outside in the falling white snow.

Standing in front of them was an old woman.

It was the same woman they had seen at the well earlier in the day. Her arid skin, like dried-up bread, surrounded the unmoving eyes that stared in through the window.

Her gemlike eyeballs, not unlike those of a deep-sea-dwelling squid, reflected such intensity that Saya had to catch her breath.

The next morning Saya was awakened by a gentle breeze across her cheek.

In order to protect her eyes from the sunlight peeking between the thick curtains on the window, Saya turned over only to find herself nearly lip to lip with the soundly sleeping Sonya. She kicked off the blankets in surprise..

" . . . ?!"

Realizing she wasn't wearing a stitch caused Saya's cheeks to turn beet red.

". . . Good morning."

Her soft sleepy breathing had stopped, and Sonya's eyelashes rose up and she smiled.

She smelled sweet, like the honey tea, and her scent filled Saya's nostrils.

It goes without saying that Sonya was in the same state of undress as Saya.

Saya sneered as she pulled the blanket up around her body while Sonya shamelessly threw open the curtain making no attempt to cover her naked body.

"It's nice weather today, too . . ."

Sonya squinted in the sunlight and then did a half turn only to dive directly onto Saya.

"Woah!"

"—Saya-san . . ."

Catching the weight of Sonya made them both fall back on the bed, and Saya couldn't help but smile as Sonya nestled her head into Saya's chest.

"You can just call me Saya."

"OK. Saya, why don't you live here with me?"

"Huh?"

She certainly was an uninhibited young girl.

Saya was surprised by nearly everything that came out of her mouth.

"Actually, I am really sad."

Sonya sat across Saya's midsection like she was riding a horse, and had absentmindedly put all her weight on Saya's body. Lowering her face close to Saya's, Sonya's honey-colored hair spread over the sheets.

"But it would be better if I could live with you, Saya. I think we would get along great living together. And also . . . I feel attraction from you."

Sonya's breath was warm against Saya's ear.

"Wha-what are you . . ."

Saya had just realized that Sonya was holding both her hands from above.

Her light-peach-colored upper body heaved over Saya's and naked skin rubbed across naked skin.

Sonya's flushed cheeks leaned into Saya.

"So?"

"If you are sad . . . you can talk to the other townspeople . . . right?" groaned Saya in response as she took in Sonya's childlike scent.

At the same time, Sonya's intoxicated smile froze and disappeared.

"Not these awful people!"

Saya jumped at Sonya's contemptuous words.

The pressure on Saya's hands went away. Sonya turned and sat at the edge of the bed with her back to Saya.

"They hate us. They think our research is the work of the devil . . . I mean, what's wrong with people creating people?!"

Her doelike eyes turned and peered back at Saya.

"People have improved wheat grain, making it stronger against the cold. We have made it so domesticated animals give us more meat, milk, and eggs. Horses run faster, dogs are more obedient . . . fiddling with God's handiwork in these ways is forgivable . . . so what is wrong with making people stronger than people . . . stronger than God?!"

"For what reason?"

Saya had leaned forward to not miss a word, and asked her question directly.

For a few moments Sonya stopped breathing.

Saya looked at Sonya's face, which was about to break into tears, with serene eyes.

Sonya obviously believed in her father's research. The simple townspeople's inability to understand his research and their cool reception to their living there may have profoundly hurt Sonya.

Regardless, Saya wasn't able to simply affirm her feelings and hug her to make her feel better.

"Those created wish for nothing. What we wish for is—"

Saya caught her tongue and her eyes turned down toward the hemp-toned sheets.

For a moment her eyes looked across the young girl's head.

In the dark, cavelike room she saw the damp twinkle of a pair of blue eyes.

As close as Saya was to her physically, at that moment Sonya was as alone as a person could be.

What was it she was wishing for?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything."

Sonya shook her head in silence before speaking.

"It's OK."

She meekly raised her eyes to meet Saya's and they stared at each other in silence for a moment before Sonya's voice rose an octave higher back to normal.

"You must be hungry."

"No, I'm all right."

This was not an inn, and this girl obviously wasn't rich, so Saya felt awkward accepting a meal from her.

However, her stomach gave an audible counter-opinion.

Gwrrr . . . Saya's hands immediately moved to cover her grumbling belly as her ears turned red. Sonya smiled as she stood up off the bed.

"Hee-hee . . . I'll go and make breakfast."

After Sonya had left the room, Saya put on her dried clothes and went to the room Hagi had slept in.

"Hagi?"

The young man wasn't in the living room.

Even though his body didn't require sleep, he usually passed the time until morning repairing his clothes or tuning his cello. Waking up without Hagi nearby caused Saya to feel a wave of helplessness.

It appeared that his coat was gone, so Hagi must have gone outside.

"Could he be taking a walk . . . ?"

Saya was aware of his penchant for moonlit strolls.

It would be a lie to say she didn't wonder how he occupied his time while she slept, but she was not about to interrupt

whatever pattern he had established.

Saya noticed and picked up something on the desk covered with research equipment that hadn't been there the night before.

It was a sealed letter.

It was placed prominently between the pages of an open book. It was addressed to someone named Yuri. Obviously, this was Sonya's father.

What surprised Saya most was the name of the sender.

Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin—

"Could this be true?"

Sonya's father was researching human creation. Grigori was involved with this, and it could be concluded that there was a Chiropteran in this area. It's possible that Grigori was near . . . and maybe Hagi had left to track him down.

Right then, the high-pitched sound of glass breaking filled Saya's ears.

Outside.

Saya quickly made her way through the front door, only to step into a gruesome scene.

It was on the path, cleared of heavy snow, between the pile of chopped wood and the shack storing frozen food.

There lay the fallen Sonya.

The snow she was buried in was stained the color of red wine, and steam rose from her body. Blood seeped between the strands of her beautiful golden locks, and to Saya, her hair looked like a gigantic spider's legs spread over the snow.

"Sonya . . . !"

Saya ran close to her and pressed her hand against her cheek.

It was still warm.

But, as the crystals of snow pressed against her pupils, her eyes did not blink or show any signs of life.

"Why? Why did you do this?"

Rising up from one knee, Saya called out toward the pile of firewood.

Behind the wood stood a small and pruney figure.

The old woman from the day before.

In her right hand was a hatchet for chopping wood.

The thick blade was stained with dripping blood.

"That woman is a devil!"

The stiff countenance of the screaming old woman suddenly changed. As she spoke, her violent voice betrayed her stoic expression.

"She is a monster! I've seen it. I've seen her suck the blood of other townspeople! This girl—"

What the old woman intended to say next remained a mystery to Saya.

From beside Saya's head shot a long ash-brown arm that grasped the old woman's head by the ear.

With a fleshy crack, the woman's skull was completely crushed and blood splashed down onto the snow below.

Saya watched in amazement as the long, tentacle-like arm carried the remains of the old woman's body back to the girl.

Sonya was smiling.

Spreading from her neck down across her chest, staining her dress, was a mixture of her own blood and the old woman's blood.

The long bare limb gracefully returned to its position as the girl's right arm without fluttering her sleeve. The hand still holding the woman's remains shook the body a moment before tossing it into the air like a bag of garbage.

The body spinning through air sprinkled blood all over the ground before it cleared the roof of Sonya's house, only to land on the pechka chimney.

The dead body fell back to the roof with a crash, rolled down and off the roof, and landed in a pile of snow under the eaves.

"Aren't you going to applaud my nice throw?"

Sonya drooped her head in mock sadness, and then giggled. She brought her blood-soaked fingers to her lips and slid her pink tongue over them.

Saya gazed at Sonya's tongue, which looked as innocent as if she were licking syrup, and then her eyebrows drew close together.

"You are a . . . Chiropteran?"

"That's what you people call us. But you couldn't tell? I knew what you were from the moment I saw you."

". . ."

Unlike normal people, Saya was able to hear a Chiropteran's voice and sense its presence. In the case of Sonya, however, Saya had no inkling she might have been anything other than human.

Hagi had this same ability, but he hadn't seemed to notice anything, either.

Chiropterans that could pass perfectly for humans were very rare.

Saya used only her eyes to scan for something she could use as a weapon, and soon spotted the hatchet the old woman had dropped.

The moment the muscles in her legs moved toward the axe, it appeared that Sonya was aware of what was going on.

A moment later, her Chiropteran tentacle swooped over the snow and scooped up the hatchet before Saya even had a chance.

"Without something like this, you can't even kill a rabbit. What an oddly pathetic creature you are."

Sonya glanced at the hatchet disinterestedly, then brought the blade to her mouth.

Her pearly white teeth came down on the dark steel.

The metal blade came apart in her mouth as if it were a piece of chocolate.

She spat the chunks of broken blade onto the ground as she let the remaining axe handle slip from her fingers. Sonya took a step forward.

To keep distance between them, Saya took a step back.

"It was the flow of time and changes in the environment that gave beasts their fangs and claws and gave flowers their thorns."

As she smiled, Sonya took another step forward, closing the gap.

"But from the time humans developed from monkeys, they abandoned them by choice. Humans refused to walk hand in hand with nature. So what do you think they got in return?"

Her third step forward, Sonya was suddenly thrown back. Between her final footsteps in the snow sparkled a silvery flash.

A cross-shaped dagger.

"Hagi!" called Saya. She found him standing behind her, facing them from the house.

Hagi glared at the Chiropteran between the disheveled strands of his long hair as a long wooden stake stuck out from his chest. The blood covering his overcoat glistened wet, meaning this was a fresh wound.

"What's this? Back already?"

Sonya retreated high into the air and landed on the very top corner of the gabled roof. She looked at them and laughed cynically as she rubbed her face.

"Just as Saya and I were having a girl-to-girl talk . . . You really should be more polite! I should have paid more attention and made sure you were dead."

Obviously Sonya was the one who plunged the giant stake in Hagi's chest. They must have exchanged blows in the forest sometime during the night.

"Saya!"

She caught the Oriental-looking sword in the air with her left hand, and in one motion unsheathed the blade while she leapt into the air. Her bare sword was aimed at the girl standing on the edge of the roof.

To kill a living thing, or in this case, a Chiropteran, was the one reason Saya bared her fangs, but as the collision between the

blade and flesh grew more certain, the girl exposed her white throat and gleamed a shining smile.

At an unimaginable speed, Sonya crossed her right arm and rose up as it morphed into the membrane of what looked like a dragon's wing.

"Uaa!"

A tornado-like force of wind and snow came straight at Saya, sending her careening backward.

That was the result of one flap of Sonya's wing.

Saya was completely defenseless against the wind pressure, and she was hurled spine first into a pile of firewood, sending splinters flying in all directions.

Yet, a moment later she had spun up and stood on one knee, and before all the pieces of wood had hit the ground Saya's head was up and she was scanning the area above her.

For a second Saya thought it was a giant bat that flew in front of the sun.

Just then Saya saw an arrow shooting up at the giant bird's wing.

It was the stake that had been stuck in Hagi's chest. With his own hands he had pulled the deadly weapon from his front, aimed it at his intended target and launched it into the air.

"Saya, she is Grigori."

Hagi fell to one knee, coughing violently, as he grasped the wound in his chest. Like the Chiropterans, his flesh was hard to kill. However, the healing process took time, and it was painful.

"You mean Sonya?"

"Grigori stole Sonya's form. When she and her father, Yuri, used to live in Yekaterinburg, they assisted Grigori with his research."

Hagi must have read the letters exchanged between Grigori and Yuri.

"After the assassination attempt on Grigori they secluded themselves in this village in fear of being accused, but by that time it was already too late for Sonya . . ."

"You mean she was already Grigori . . ."

Those known as "Chevalier" were high-order Chiropterans who had the ability to consume humans and assume their likenesses.

With her wing pierced, Sonya's strong lift was lost and she stumbled in the air and began to lose altitude.

As she looked in Sonya's direction, Saya was reminded of her experience waking up in that bed this morning.

When the conversation had turned to her father's research, Sonya had been very earnest in protecting its merits. Given the equipment on the desk in the living room, possibly the scientist Grigori was being nostalgic about his past.

". . . Hagi, how is your wound?"

"It's just about closed. Let's follow Grigori."

Saya nodded and took off in a sprint.

It wasn't wild speculation to imagine that this path could lead to Anastasia.

With their trophy having fallen to the ground, Saya and Hagi didn't have to run very far.

In the forest surrounding the house, on the opposite bank of the creek they had fallen into the day before, stood Sonya.

She fell from quite a height. Judging from the broken tree tops scattered on the ground near her, it was no easy landing.

Without a doubt a normal person would have been dead by the time they hit the ground. But she was—that is, Grigori was—only rubbing the back of his neck as if he had woken up after sleeping in an awkward position.

It was then that Saya's gaze moved away from her target.

Near the girl there was something very unexpected.

It was something typical of London or Vienna or another big city: a four-horse carriage. The deep black lacquer of the coach matched the coachman's uniform, and the whole spectacle wouldn't have looked at all unnatural in a funeral procession for a nobleman.

But what a carriage like this was doing in the outskirts of a remote and desolate village was unexplainable. Possibly an aristocratic escapee from the revolution . . . No . . . Saya was able to eliminate that theory with ease.

Even in the crowded streets of Montmartre, Saya would have sensed this presence.

"Anastasia—"

Saya's jaw tightened and she felt a rustle run through her hair.

Her eyes boiled the brilliant color of lava.

"—Diva!"

Her brain burned down to nothing but revenge, Saya kicked off the ground into the air.

The snow blew back behind her like a small explosion, and she bounded over twenty paces, clearing the wide stream.

She gripped her katana in a backhand position with both arms and focused all her weight on the target of her downward descent.

A heavy return countered her sword and sparks flew.

Like a feline, Saya spun over in the air and landed on all fours, searching for the annoying enemy who had interrupted her impassioned strike.

"Saya, you really don't think you can get anywhere near Diva with that sword, do you?"

A tuft of Sonya's long hair had transformed into what looked like a throwing knife used by an African tribe or a Muslim half-moon saber.

"Grigori . . ." came a morose voice, which sounded like leaves of the forest rustling together. At the front of the carriage the

driver sat, but didn't turn his head. "Withdraw for now. Diva is hoping to sleep."

"Great brother Anshel . . ."

Still holding her own with Saya, Sonya expressed her disinterest.

"The one who attacks just before your eyes is Diva's hunter. Keeping Diva out of harm's way is our charge as Chevalier. Am I mistaken?"

". . . Understood."

The driver snapped his whip at the horses, and the carriage started moving.

"Wait!"

Saya couldn't allow them to leave. If they escaped now there was no telling when she would have another chance like this.

Saya's attempt to follow the carriage was blocked by Sonya's blade, which swung laterally at neck height. Saya raised her own sword to deflect it.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what Sonya expected her to do.

"Hagi!"

Her call may have been an unnecessary distraction. Hagi had already leapt off a rock in the stream and had traveled from behind Saya high through the air and past Sonya.

Just as Hagi was about to land on the roof of the carriage and smash the head of the driver with his cello case, a beastly appendage grabbed him by the ankle.

As if it had no joints, what looked like an octopus tentacle stretched straight back from Sonya's shoulder and nabbed Hagi while he was still in the air.

Saya sprung forward. Her target was that arm.

Her attack came too late.

Even before the off-balance Hagi had landed his devastating blow, the driver had turned his whip upward and landed a strike across Hagi's collar.

The thick leather strap hit Hagi like a club, and he tumbled to the ground, raising a cloud of snow.

The giant cedar that broke his slide shrieked as it crashed toward the forest floor.

"What a shame."

Sonya's sarcastic remark was referring to Diva's escape. On top of that, she was probably also pointing out that in the frenzy, Saya had overlooked the need to soak her blade in her own blood.

Her amputated right arm had already sprouted new flesh, and would soon be whole again.

"Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin—"

Saya's brain snapped into another mode.

She needed to reduce this fever. Following the carriage was becoming more difficult by the second.

Losing this golden opportunity was devastating, but if she could cut down one of Diva's imperial guards, a Chevalier, then that would still be major progress.

"—Now I will kill you!"

Saya placed her thumb on the ridge on the back of the blade and pressed down, feeding her blood into her sword.

Filled with her poisonous blood, Saya's beloved blade became a venomous snake. For a Chiropteran it delivered inescapable death. A messenger from hell.

". . . It really is too bad . . ."

Again, Saya spoke in a condescending sigh.

"I thought we might become very close friends . . . I truly did."

Sonya's head and body began to swell.

Her clothes were soon split to shreds from the inside, revealing growing, dark-gray-colored skin.

Moreover, her beautiful face turned into that of a goblin. It would be better described as the skull of a monster chiseled from stone.

Saya wasn't about to give this creature the time it needed to morph itself.

Her sword struck down onto the beast, but struck a surprisingly hard surface. Her sword couldn't penetrate the flesh of her target.

It was pulled away in the birdlike talons at the end of the Chiropteran's leg.

The flapping figure that existed in front of Saya no longer had any features that could be called human.

At the very least, it could be said her figure was more female than not. The arms had extended like an ape's, but had wing membranes extending from them like that on a giant bat. The legs looked like those of a reptile.

If the succubus, Rusalka, of Russian folklore were real, this was what she might have looked like.

A high-pitched wail bent the atmosphere.

"...Oof!"

Saya turned to protect her chest. A talon caught her in the shoulder, tearing her Cossack uniform. The rip was soon soaked red.

As blood trickled into the snow, Saya covered the wound with her hand and moved backward. She threw herself flat onto the snow to avoid another strike by the flying Chiropteran.

The beastly bird passed over Saya's body and back up into the air where it did an arc in the blue sky and turned to come back at an ungodly speed.

Her weapon—it was still being carried in her enemy's talons.

Saya took off running.

Where Saya had been lying was the path used by the carriages, where the trees and foliage had been cleared and there was a wide field of vision. It was not an advantageous position against a flying enemy.

Saya made it into the dense forest. When she turned around, she saw that her enemy was right behind her.

Saya threw herself to the forest floor, but once again the claw of the Chiropteran penetrated her, this time in her back, and a red mist sprayed into the air.

Like a fish swimming in the water, the winged monster slipped between the trees without slowing down.

Saya quickly got up and ran to the opposite side of a nearby cedar tree. She held herself close to its trunk and listened carefully.

The cold flap of the beast's wings could be heard, and she tried to determine its distance and direction.

Saya held her breath and didn't move a muscle.

Not quite yet . . . Wait for it . . .

—Now!

Saya shot straight into the air like an arrow. She pushed off from the top of the tree with her hand and kept rising.

A moment later, a burst of black wind flew just beneath her.

Just ahead of it, Saya rolled in the air and came down onto the top of another tree with both feet. The tree bent down from the force of her impact, and with all the snow shaken off, it sprung her back with an even greater force.

Saya was flying even faster than her opponent and came at the flying beast from the above rear, finally planting her hands firmly at the base of its wings.

Having come in from Sonya's—or rather, Grigori's—blind spot, it must have felt like a surprise attack.

She, or he, gave an agitated shriek as Saya held both arms and pulled with all her might, pressing both feet into the place where the shoulders met. Krck Krckle . . . It was the clear and painful sound of the bone structure of the Chiropteran's arms breaking apart.

A bird without wings can no longer fly.

The broken and confused Grigori knocked snow off the cedar branches as he fell crashing through the trees and plunged back toward the carriage path.

The snow exploded on impact and before the monster rolled head over heels across the pathway, Saya was thrown from its back, crashing, once again, onto the ground.

"Kaff kaff."

She was dizzy from rolling along the ground, and the wind had been knocked out of her lungs.

Still in a hazy state of consciousness, she could see movement in the sky. A tremor had come across the forest and snow.

Spread-eagle in the snow, Saya was very aware that she had just escaped death.

Even though she was quite a distance from the large body of the Chiropteran, she could still see it squirm.

The monster looked at her and exhaled white breath as it exposed its fangs.

"You truly are a heartless hunter. A veritable Artemis."

The breathy comment by the injured Chiropteran couldn't be taken as defeat, and Saya only assumed it was part of a further ruse.

Even with the power of regeneration, its injuries had still only begun to heal.

Regardless, the monster stood up, dragging its broken wings as threads of blood dripped from its body.

"You will never be allowed near the sleeping Diva."

It may have been the Chevalier tenacity that drove Grigori to advance toward her one slow step at a time.

"In order to keep you from moving for the time being, I may need to take your legs."

The beast's long hair hardened into two low-protruding horns when Saya looked for the metallic glare in the monster's grasp.

"Oh . . ."

Squeezing the snow in her fists, Saya got her upper body upright.

But her sword wasn't there.

In the fall to the earth, Grigori had released her katana, and the blade had fallen to the ground. It now stuck out like a silver lily in the snowy field. However, it was further than her outstretched hand could reach. Before she could grasp its handle, she would surely be intercepted by the enemy.

But Saya had no teeth other than her weapon.

A leap at her blade was a shortcut to defeat. Without hesitation, Saya ran.

The monster didn't move.

As Saya fumbled toward the sword stuck into the ground, her vision was abruptly filled with a lance cutting forward.

As quickly as the lance appeared, the tip was suddenly repelled by a large shield.

It was the coffin-shaped cello case thrust in the way of the spear by the tall young man.

The red pupils of the goblin glared.

". . . You are getting on my nerves."

As uncomfortable as the monster sounded, it acted as it spoke.

Two tufts of hair penetrated Hagi's legs, spearing him to the ground.

"Hagi!"

"Saya! Fight!"

Pinned to the ground on both knees, Hagi still kept the cello case up to block the spears from advancing.

Exasperated over the unexpected turn of events, Grigori's body lurched forward.

"My only pleasure in life as a Chevalier is protecting you."

She wished she had time to nod in response. But there was only one way to reward his efforts.

As Saya reached forward and grasped the handle of her beloved blade she turned toward the target and thrust forward.

She slid her finger across the back of the blade, once again filling its veins with her own blood.

"Grrraaa!"

"Sayaaa!"

Grigori shouted as he attempted to shake off Hagi, ignoring the blood coming from his palms and fingers. He wasn't about to let go.

With all her might, Saya forced her body forward, pressing the sword against the monster's chest.

The blade sunk into flesh, exactly as it should. Saya's sword slipped through Grigori's middle and the red tip of the blade poked out his back.

A golden light erupted from the creature's head and Saya drew closer to gaze into its eyes. Its eyelashes shook as a blade came through its head. Hagi must have planted a dagger in Grigori's skull at the same time Saya hit the body. One more centimeter and Hagi's dagger would have cut into Saya as well.

"..."

That blade was what Saya mistook for a golden flash.

The long and beautiful blond hair fell across her pale shoulders.

At some point the Chiropteran had transformed from a beast back to the beautiful young girl.

"Saya . . ."

The longing in her murmur reminded Saya of her tone when they were in bed together and she had described how lonely it was living by herself.

Her shaking hand drew closer to Saya's face; Saya could not decline it.

Sonya smiled.

The tips of her fingers gently caressed Saya's cheek before her hand succumbed to gravity.

The energetic rosy skin tone faded into a white the color of the snow.

When a Chiropteran dies, it loses control of its outward appearance. The body becomes brittle and cracks under its own weight. It was no different in Sonya's case.

Saya's eyes fell as the remains of Sonya broke into red pieces and scattered onto the snow.

Grigori had murdered his research assistant, Sonya, and stolen her appearance.

Could that really have been what happened?

Maybe Sonya had received the power of the Chiropteran, killed Grigori, and stolen his name and position.

It would mean that, as she expected, there were female Chevalier. Saya couldn't know what the truth was, but she couldn't believe that she was captivated emotionally by a Chiropteran putting on an act as a girl.

Her vision went blurry.

"Saya!"

Hagi skillfully caught Saya and held her in his arms like a fine piece of glasswork.

It was difficult for her legs to hold her up. Saya treated his sleeve as a pillow and laid in his arms.

"I'm so sleepy . . . I wonder if the long sleep is coming."

Three years may have been as long as she could go.

She knew once she fell completely asleep it would take decades before she could come back to this world from the unchanging eternity of slumber. While tranquil, the idea of absolute isolation was truly dreadful.

". . . I'll be waiting."

Hagi laughed calmly.

"Yes . . ."

Realizing that since Hagi didn't know sleep, and that the wait for him must feel multiple times longer than for her, her chest suddenly felt tight.

As her vision faded, Saya stimulated her senses by sliding her hand into Hagi's.

For now, before she drifted away completely, she could feel the warmth of another body close to her.

"Hagi . . . do you remember . . . the promise?"

Saya was unable to see the look of pain that crossed over Hagi's face. Her eyelids were so heavy she couldn't keep them open.

The response was slow in coming.

". . . Yes."

"Once I destroy Diva . . . you will—"

Her final words ended there, though her lips kept moving, as her last breath passed through her lungs and was carried away in the wind.

Saya gave in to the soft darkness.

Hagi's voice, as soft and somber as the sound of his cello, chased after her.

"I will watch over you. Even if you turn into something else, or we somehow are separated, I will find you . . . So for now, good night."

"—Saya."

A quiet voice called her name and Saya opened her eyes.

With his back to the tall blue sky, Hagi's graceful face gazed down at her.

Hagi raised her back up, as she seemed to have fallen asleep in the snow, and she noticed his black coat wasn't the same as his nineteeth-century European aristocratic garb. Examining herself, she was no longer in the Russian clothes, but was wearing a knit top under a duffel jacket. After a moment, she was aware of herself and where she was.

"That's right. I was . . ."

She had fallen off the Russia Express, and she must have lost consciousness after that.

It was possible she was weak because she hadn't had a recent IV treatment from Julia.

Sitting up, she could see the hazy white mountain range beyond

the trees. The sun had just begun to rise and the snowstorm had ended.

Looking up at Hagi's emotionless face, Saya spoke.

"Hagi, you can laugh, too."

Without a word, Hagi's face looked troubled, and Saya couldn't help but giggle.

"It was in my dream. You were laughing."

At that moment she wasn't able to exactly remember how the dream went. But Saya did remember that in her dream Hagi was more tender. Oh yes, she had the feeling he was a much more emotional person.

"And I had made some sort of promise with you."

" . . . That wasn't a dream."

"Really? Then what was the promise we made?"

Saya's casual question acted like a sword that cut Hagi to pieces, and she was surprised by his reaction.

"When the time comes, you will know."

His face didn't reveal any change, but his voice had the inflection of someone in pain.

Understanding there was no hope in his reply, Saya stood up.

"Saya-neechan!"

Saya turned to the spirited voice.

She saw Riku run down a snow-covered slope toward her.

Seeing that her little brother was safe made Saya smile.

From behind Riku appeared Liza's tall frame. Like Hagi, she must have jumped off the train to follow her.

"We were worried about you."

"I'm so sorry. What about David?"

"I already contacted him. They've gone ahead to Yekaterinburg to Ted's house."

"Are they going to be all right?"

"Ted is a researcher, not a Chiropteran. I think they will be OK on their own."

It was easy for Liza to say, but there had just been a Chiropteran on the Russia Express.

As long as David was there, Kai shouldn't act unreasonable . . . Saya hoped.

"For now, let's find a nearby village."

"All right."

Saya bowed her head in assent as Riku stroked her arm consolingly.

"Neechan, are you OK to move?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now."

Saya smiled to relieve her younger brother's anxiety, and she began to walk, but her legs still felt sluggish. She felt her shoes being caught in the snow and Saya pitched forward.

Hagi quickly grabbed her shoulder to keep her upright, and her hand landed atop his.

"Thank you."

The bandaged monster hand of the young man had been his own in her dream. What could have happened in the last hundred years to change his physical appearance and steal his sense of humor?

Yet, the warmth of his hand was the same as she remembered, and that was somehow comforting.

03

CINQ FLÈCHE HAD become a global corporation with branch offices and production centers all over the world, but none of the facilities could beat the Paris main headquarters.

As could be expected, compared to the nostalgic smell of one's own homeland, everywhere else smells like a rotting, garbage-filled cesspool.

"Yes, there's no place like Paris."

As he walked down the corridor, Van Argeno tossed away the wrapping from the hard candy he took from his breast pocket and popped it into his mouth.

"From Okinawa to Vietnam . . . I've dragged you all over, but now you are getting refreshed working at the best research laboratory around. I am quite relieved."

"I am very thankful, Van."

Van quickly fluttered his hand in response to the words of the young former Nature Conservation Center researcher. "There's no need to thank me. I was looking for a highly capable individual and in you I found someone who could do more than research, who could also efficiently control and advance the project."

The grateful attitude he showed was looked upon as very favorable to this particular superior.

American-style efficiency principles certainly were useful, but at the end of the day, everything depended on the abilities of the people employed. Building mutual trust was essential.

"Please, continue with your report."

"Yes."

As he matched the speed of Van's gait, the researcher scanned a file.

"Looking at the concrete numbers from Phase Two, we have reduced the rate of zooanthropy to thirty percent."

"That is quite impressive."

With an elbow on the metal handrail, Van looked down upon the barred area adjacent to this passageway.

Beyond the iron bars were individual cells split by acrylic planks evenly spaced like the grid of a Go board.

Inside the cells were the humanely confined "mice."

The gaudy red and yellow raincoats were worn by subjects given low doses of D67.

Those that had lost their sense of self and had turned into beasts were not in section D1.

In the entire Cinq Flèche institution, this was the largest and most powerful research center, though it didn't exist, officially. Four stories underground, and six above: what happened above the surface of the earth was just for show. It wasn't as large as the Stade de France, but had a magnificent open space about half the size of a second-tier stadium with connecting corridors to the surrounding mouse sleeping areas and research facilities.

"Regarding that thirty percent, have you made arrangements for disposal?"

"For now we have them isolated in Section D2. Our only recourse is to drop them into concrete and dispose of them . . ."

As he spun the candy in his mouth around with his tongue, Van pushed up his glasses with one finger.

It was a labor-intensive solution, but disposal couldn't be avoided. Guns didn't work. Poison didn't work. Neither did overdoses, radiation, or extreme heat or cold . . . the only solution was a pragmatic one, and despite the expense, the cost of not doing it was even higher.

"If only we had a samurai man who could come here and take care of this for us."

Unfortunately he hadn't received any updates on the young girl, but that didn't reduce the fact that her talents could come in very useful for this project.

Why the CEO, Solomon, was rushing production of a medicine that transformed people into monsters was a mystery to Van.

He considered himself a close subordinate to Solomon, but despite the wise young manager's social exterior, Van felt one never actually got to know him. Through work they built a tight relationship, yet the closer they communicated with each other, the further Van felt from him.

It was his personal feeling, and not a significant problem. At any rate, Van had developed this project superbly, and right now Solomon was very pleased.

Van was deeply interested in the Delta Project, which had been rejected by his university genetic research lab, and felt it was worthy and valuable work.

"That reminds me, I wonder what she is up to . . ."

"What's that?"

"No, no. I was talking to myself."

The researcher looked at Van dubiously as his eyes returned to the other side of the iron bars. It was Julia Silverstein from Professor Corinth Eiston's laboratory. Even among her contemporaries, she stuck out as an incredibly talented woman.

She had been the one to inform the young Van that he had been rejected. As much energy as he had put into his work,

until then he hadn't known how the hierarchy functioned at the university he attended.

Giving up on his path to becoming a researcher, Van felt he was very lucky to presently be a high-ranking member of a top-notch operation like Cinq Flèche. Van was conscious of the fact he could coordinate a large group of people to execute his instructions quite skillfully. He was also well-attuned to the smell of authority. He wasn't fit to be the boss, but rather slid perfectly into the position of number two.

The important point was in choosing the right head.

It had to be someone who could respect his talents and give him the freedom to do his job—

Van's meditation was interrupted by a warning siren.

"What in the world?"

A synthesized female voice alternating between English and French repeated that an intruder had entered the premises.

Intruder? At this research facility with the highest-grade security?

Van pondered whether that sweet-looking Asian girl with the samurai sword could be behind this.

However, as a shock came up from below, rocking the handrail Van held on to, what he saw when he looked below wasn't the young girl.

"What? They are . . . ?"

Van saw two individuals near the stairway going up from the first floor below.

They wore dark robes like those of traditional Catholic monks. With their hoods up, their faces couldn't be seen, but one was tall with a solid build while the other was small and slender.

"Where did they come from?"

He would soon receive an answer.

From the protective doors on the same side of the corridor where Van and the researcher were appeared another kind of invader.

With no authority there should have been no way for the barrier wall to Section D2 to be opened. Naturally Van didn't give permission. The thick metal and ceramic protective door with a resin laminate was sliced through like jelly, and it fell into pieces onto the ground. What came through from the other side were large and repulsive beasts with hunched-over shoulders like gorillas.

"The mice . . . We need to remove them immediately!"

"Roger!"

The machine guns the facility guards held would not be necessary against the intruders. The invaders who had broken into this institution weren't nearly as dangerous as the escapees now trying to get out.

And yet, Van and the researcher had no need to panic.

Five mice had escaped from Section D2.

From the moment they had crossed over from human to monster, they hadn't been given one iota of food to eat. To their red eyes, sluggish from hunger, the two cloaked intruders surely looked like bags of delicious fresh blood and meat.

Strands of saliva dripping from their fangs stained the clean floor.

The five fearless monsters surrounded the pair, when suddenly the invaders moved.

One of the mice was one beat too slow and it lost sight of its target as the intruder's large arm swung through the air.

That mouse's head slipped off its shoulders and fell onto the floor.

The open cross section of the neck gushed, sending heaving spurts of blood into the air. The blood fell like rain, staining everything around it red.

At the exact same moment, another mouse suffered the same fate, its throat regurgitating inordinate amounts of fresh blood out of the spot where its head had rested moments earlier.

"Stupid beasts . . ."

Van noticed at some point the intruders had produced some vicious-looking weapons. The larger of the two held a metal rod with a large ball at one end. This enormous blunt weapon was called a maul. In one hand the smaller invader had lowered a giant battle-ax that looked to be several times heavier than its owner.

More than primitive, these weapons looked like they should have been a part of a museum collection rather than actually used in battle. If they could use those tools to slaughter the half-immortal monsters, then there was something atypical about this pair. They must have also been the ones to tear the protective doors of the operation's nucleus apart like they were made of paper.

Two figures moved quickly inside the crimson showers.

Van had a hard time seeing what it was they were doing.

He could, however, guess from the results.

The remaining monsters could put up no defense against the heavily armed couple, and they ended up as scattered chunks of bone and flesh across the now completely red-soaked ground.

Van watched the entire scene unfold before his eyes, and he stared in silent shock. Yet, the strangest part was yet to come.

The smaller of the two monster killers lifted the decapitated head of a mouse off the floor and held it up.

For a moment the face under the hood was revealed.

It was a girl.

She was still in her early teens, possibly old enough to attend Lycee. Her reddish-purple hair was tied up and hung above her shoulders. Her carnivore eyes were those of an animal and had an eerie look to them.

She held the mouse head close to her face, and then bit into it.

The warning alarm shut off.

Van's eyes were fixated in the frozen silence as he watched her throat swallow blood.

She was eating a mouse.

She was eating a man-eating monster.

The passageway trembled and Van heard the sounds of countless footsteps coming from the second-floor passage. The heavily armed squad ran into the situation unprepared. Their assault rifles loaded with explosive shells had the power to stop mice only temporarily.

However, their arrival was a bit late.

The couple below, who had finished the guards' job for them, briefly exchanged words.

"So?"

"I don't know. Nothing's happening."

The inquiry came from the one with the robust muscles like a fairy-tale dwarf. The girl answered in a dissatisfied tone, then looked to the upper floors.

"Dars, let's go. There's no point in staying here."

"Right."

The man who nodded in agreement had a face chiseled from stone and a clean-shaven head.

Having felt they were looking at him, Van stepped back in a panic and something suddenly appeared before his eyes.

The girl who had been standing on the bottom floor only a second earlier was jumping across the handrails like a little bird and landed near Van.

"Leave them be, Lulu."

The man was a few moments behind her, and he pushed himself off the handrail straight up.

The girl the man called Lulu glanced at Van for a moment and then sprang up to follow him.

A crosswind hit Van in the eyes and he looked up just in time to see masses that looked like transparent sugar candy fall from above.

It was pieces of glass from the windows in the ceiling.

Van looked down to see large shards of glass crash onto the floor below, and turned his head up once again.

A perfectly symmetrical hole had appeared in one of the ceiling windows.

The pair of intruders was nowhere to be seen.

Yekaterinburg had followed the influences of the Eastern Roman Empire, and was a beautiful city.

It was reminiscent of a great empress during a time when Russia stood in line with the most powerful countries in the world, and people say the city was named after Piotr's wife Yekaterina.

If you were to ask Liza where this city fit into this country placed between Europe and Asia, she would say it was more European than Russian, but Saya, who had lived in Japan, enjoyed seeing many familiar-looking buildings.

"It was in this very city about a hundred years ago that Nikolai the Second's Romanov Empire suffered a huge massacre, sending the Russian Empire into peril."

Liza gave the doorman a tip in paper bills as she walked through the opened front doors.

"The only surviving member was the imperial princess Anastasia. She hid and escaped from the imperial capital . . . then she headed to Europe or the American States, apparently. It sounds like a historical novel, no?"

"Anastasia?"

As they walked through the warm lobby and across the carpet, Saya gazed at Liza's back.

"But ever since her remains were discovered in the twentieth century, the tales of her wanderings as a princess of a ruined country have been much scrutinized."

"..."

However, *another* Anastasia slipped away smoothly, with the help of a trusted single knight close to her.

Saya glanced at Hagi's face.

That dream wasn't a dream. That's what he had said. During the rumblings of revolution in Russia, she and Hagi had tracked Anastasia—tracked Diva.

The sensation of causing Sonya's death filled Saya's consciousness.

Saya dug her nails into the palms of her hands.

"What's the matter?"

"N-nothing . . ."

The question from Riku, who was walking beside her, elicited an unnatural laugh from Saya.

He must have sensed a certain repulsion from Saya. Part of it was the guilt from killing a living being, but there was more to it than just that.

Liza walked across the lobby to the elevators where Saya and Riku were waiting.

"Any word from David and the others?"

"Yes, they left a message with the front desk."

Between her fingers Liza held a gold-bordered white envelope.

"In order to find Ted, they are headed to Sverdlovsk. It says they'll be back tonight."

"Kai . . . too?"

"You are always worried about him, aren't you?"

"Yeah, well . . ."

It was natural to be concerned about family.

Liza looked like she wanted to dodge the subject as she pushed the elevator UP button.

"Yes, it said that Kai accompanied David and Louis."

"But isn't that dangerous?"

"Maybe David didn't take Kai with them. I mean, the Chiropterans were on the train, even. They might even be right . . ."

Riku's eyes followed Liza's gaze at the dining area connected to the lobby, and the ding of the bell indicating the elevator's arrival made him jump. Saya couldn't help but laugh at Riku's docile and gullible nature.

"I was just kidding. Let's take showers and then grab a bite over there."

Liza also laughed at the success of her teasing, and put her arm around Riku's shoulder as they entered the elevator.

"When we get upstairs, do you want to take a bath with me, Riku?"

"I . . . I-I-I can take a bath by myself I am not a kid!"

It appeared that Riku, who always got high grades, had forgotten how to use punctuation marks. Riku's face was flushed to his neck, and the flustered rebuttal made both Saya and Liza cackle even louder.

"Oh no! I've been turned down!"

"Your face! Totally red!"

Since it was a Russian restaurant, Saya assumed they would serve only Russian food, but what came to the table was French cuisine.

"At a first-class hotel like this, they feel like Russian cuisine is commoner food, even to this day. Piroshoki and okroshka are much tastier at the restaurants in town."

"Is that right?"

"If only we were on a sightseeing trip, I could introduce you to some of the delicious places . . ."

Even as she said that, Saya noticed Liza hadn't taken a bite of food. She just took sips from her teacup every once in a while.

On the other hand, Saya's meal was being attacked, and her food quickly disappeared off her plates. The empty plates were starting to pile up next to her like dishes at a rotating-track *kaiten* sushi place. Taken aback by the white tower of plates Saya had

built, it wasn't so surprising that the young and handsome garçon who was serving them forgot to take the dishes away.

If this had been a meal served in courses, Saya would have eaten the equivalent of five people's servings of the main meat and fish.

Riku and Hagi were used to this sort of spectacle, but that wasn't true for Liza.

"You have a real appetite. Just watching you eat is satisfying."

"Oh . . . A ha ha . . ."

Even as she laughed, embarrassed, her fork didn't stop moving. Maybe it was because she hadn't gotten her regular blood transfusion in several days, but Saya's appetite was even more voracious than usual.

"Liza-san, aren't you going to eat?"

"I'm just fine with this."

As she lifted her hand to indicate her teacup, the sparkle of Liza's ring caught Saya's eye, and reminded Saya of an uncomfortable event.

It wasn't unnatural to wear rings, but this one was a bit thicker than women usually wore. On the wide platinum band appeared a bat with its wings spread, holding a blue-colored gem.

"I won't eat any more than I need. I don't want eating to become too much of a pleasure."

"Excuse me . . ."

Saya felt like she was being looked down upon, suspending her fork holding a chunk of chicken sauté in midair.

A small chuckle passed Liza's cheeks.

"No, no. You have no reason to apologize. You need that intake for the work you have to do."

"I see."

"Living things need to live, so they eat other living things. The Chiropteran is the same as every other species in that way. In order to live, they feast on human blood."

Saya's hands didn't move, and she stared at Liza, sitting at the table across from her.

It was probably due to lack of sleep, but Liza's eye glistened in a somehow suggestive way.

"Have you thought about this before? Have you asked yourself what Chiropterans really are?"

"What they . . . I have never thought about it."

It wasn't that many weeks ago that she couldn't imagine a creature like that existing outside of a special-effects-laden Hollywood horror movie.

A monster that attacks people, and cannot be killed by anyone but Saya. In fact, that was the only thing that Saya understood. There was nothing in her thoughts but the fight. No other details had ever crossed her mind.

"It's your opponent in battle, is it not? You actually fight them and kill them. How do you feel?"

"How . . . ?"

Saya hesitated in her answer as her spoon did circles in a bowl of potage.

The grinning Liza took a sip from her cup and set it back onto the saucer.

"You've never thought about this before? 'For what reason do Chiropterans exist?' You've never pondered the meaning of that question?"

"Meaning . . . ?"

"Why humans and Chiropterans have been allowed to exist. Where we came from, and where we're going. What do you think?"

"Well, I . . . I mean, I don't know anything about Chiropterans."

Looking at the restaurant in the reflection of her water glass, Saya chose her words with care.

"But, here's what I think. If Chiropterans kill people and cause misery, then I want to fight them to protect everyone . . . I am the only one who can do it, so I have no choice but to fight."

Her feelings of sadness when George had died rose again in her chest, and it felt as if a rusty blade was piercing her heart.

The world would be a better place without people that thought that way.

David, Julia, Louis, Clara, Spencer . . . the agents of Red Shield, important people who were snatched away, all chose to fight against the Chiropterans, she was told. She felt for them, as it was from battling alongside them she had learned the value of those that fight.

"An engaging and beautiful answer. However, there is just one problem . . ."

She rested her chin on her hand and looked at Saya fondly as her eyes narrowed.

"Killing Chiropterans. That is your mission. However, is that really what your heart wishes to do?"

"Wish . . . ?"

Saya was confused and her eyes began to swim a little.

Sitting silently, diagonal from Saya, Hagi looked up and glared at Liza. There was a faint look of wariness in his eyes, and she returned his cold and silent stare.

"Saya, are you not mixing up that which you must do and that which you want to do? I would expect what you truly desire is something else."

Saya was confounded.

Why would Liza ask a question like this? She was an official member of Red Shield. She had fought Chiropterans together with them, and now, suddenly . . .

A high-pitched metallic sound cut through the knotted yarn ball of her thoughts.

Riku, who was sitting across from Hagi, had dropped his spoon.

Saya noticed that the usually soft-spoken boy truly hadn't uttered a single word since they had sat down.

"Riku?"

Riku's head fell to the back of the chair and his mouth was half open. Saya could see his breathing was shallow.

The beads of sweat on his forehead couldn't have been from the temperature of the restaurant. Liza, sitting next to Riku, extended her palm and placed it on his forehead.

"He has a bad fever. We need to get him to bed."

Before she had finished her statement, Hagi had already stood up. He lifted Riku into his arms as if he was a very fragile package.

A dull tremor interrupted his sleep.

David was immediately wide awake and his hand went straight for his shoulder holster.

But, his holster wasn't under his jacket, and his hand grabbed nothing but air.

Thankfully, this wasn't a place he would need a gun.

"Did that wake you?"

The gentle voice belonged to Julia, who was sitting in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel.

Still unused to driving on snowy roads, the sensitive Julia only glanced at her passenger for a moment before returning her gaze to the road ahead.

"... Where's Louis?"

"Behind us."

In the side mirror he could see the headlights of Louis's van.

As David adjusted his position in the passenger seat, a pain ran up his spine like an electric shock, but he gritted his teeth and didn't succumb to it.

"Try not to move. You're injured and you could reopen your wound."

"..."

The snow mixed with the darkness and flowed past the window.

Seeing his reflection in the glass, David realized how haggard and exhausted he looked. The cut in his back was not superficial. He had probably passed out from the pain, and he must have woken up because the anesthesia was wearing off.

But pain and fatigue were not what he needed.

Anything that took away from his abilities to fight was a waste.

David ignored his pain, grabbed the holster hanging from the back of his seat, and slipped the gun into its familiar position in his hand. In order to strap the holster to his chest, he took off his jacket.

It was then that he discerned that it wasn't his.

It was at Sverdlovsk 51 that he had been so severely injured in an encounter with a Chiropteran. His coat and suit jacket had been torn up in the fight.

"It's Kai's."

David could see Julia try and hide the giggle in her profile.

"Nice boy, don't you think?"

At first, David didn't say anything, and buckled the holster in place.

" . . . It's the nice boys that die first on the battlefield."

That kid had been pulled from death's grip when anyone else would have been dead, but no one thanks the sly and cruel professional that kept him alive.

But George's son had a short fuse and the childishly strong sense of determination of an amateur. The purity of his nature was what was going to shorten his life expectancy.

If his being here didn't help Saya battle Chiropterans, then David wouldn't be traveling with him now.

"You really are something."

The sudden shift in topic caused David to look at her suspiciously.

Her smile was subtle, but had the merry wit of a teasing young girl.

"Until recently, you were like an iron-cast robot."

"... And how about now?"

"Hmm ..."

Julia glanced quickly in his direction before chiding him again.

"Now you are more like an android or a cyborg."

Was that supposed to be funny?

His eyebrows drew together and he placed his elbow on the door's handle.

From a robot to an android?

"I am not as strong as I was."

"I think that's good, actually."

"There is no use for weakness in this line of work."

Worse than pain or fatigue or any physical ailments were mental weaknesses. You do the job you are assigned. Your ability to get the job done was all Red Shield asked of you.

"People don't live on strength alone."

He found Julia to be proud of her mental capacities and to him, Julia's proclamation was a bit cliché.

Firstly, David sensed that she was the type to deny any weaknesses. But if one didn't, one wouldn't be likely to throw oneself so deeply into Red Shield work.

"That's an old and stale line. Is that your medical opinion?"

"Womanly advice."

David didn't laugh.

Julia didn't laugh either. The moist sound of her voice made him think it wasn't meant as a joke.

"Bullshit ..." David exhaled and leaned back in the seat.

The wound in his back began to pulsate pain. He felt the cold of the blood that had soaked through his bandages.

The conversation in the vehicle faded away.

Judging from the amount of snow hitting the windshield, the snow was falling harder.

"—really sticking."

Julia turned on the wipers with her right hand.

David pretended not to hear her whispered complaint and he continued to stare at the movement of the wipers clearing the snow.

Their reason for coming to Yekaterinburg was to get information regarding Diva from a former U.S. military officer who headed up the Delta project.

However, that goal had not been reached.

The officer's home had been abandoned.

Inside the fireplace, they had discovered a partially burned letter. The address on the letter had led them to an industrial park that was standing in ruins. There they had discovered a sickly, bedridden old man named Philip Rosenberg.

He had done similar research as Ted, only in Vietnam. He had also been a high-ranking official.

After the war, he had moved to Russia, like Ted had, and taken the name Boris.

Because of his advanced state of senility, it had been difficult to communicate with Philip, but what they had learned from documents and photographs was that both he and Ted had been very interested in the abandoned nuclear facility, Sverdlovsk 51.

They had all hurried to the old power plant on the outskirts of the town just in time to run into Ted and his "son."

His son's name was Andre.

He had been administered D67 and despite looking like a normal human in every way, his four limbs had been restrained in concrete. He couldn't die . . .

David hadn't known how Andre had gotten into that situation, and there hadn't been a chance to ask. It appeared the father was experimenting on his son on a sort of operating table. It was possible his son was weak or sickly and he had wanted to give him a strong healthy body, but chosen the wrong way of going about it.

The Chiropteran had broken from the concrete bindings and devoured its father before he had realized what was happening. The still-famished beast had then set its sights on the blood of the visitors.

Without their trump card, Saya, slaying the single Chiropteran had been a very dangerous proposition, but somehow they had managed to contain Andre.

The fact that it was Kai that had gotten Louis and him out of a tight spot was a fact David couldn't deny.

He was reckless and rash, but had potential.

David wasn't sure if giving George's pistol to Kai had been the right choice or not . . . but the young boy needed a source of strength.

"..."

He could see the outline of the van behind them, but couldn't see Kai inside.

David was cautious of his affinity to this young man, whose sole desire was to help his sister with a gun in his hand.

George was one of the only people he had been able to call a close friend. The way George's son acted, he was on the fast track to hell. With George dead, one way he could pay him back was to take some responsibility for Kai.

At the very least, David couldn't allow Kai to die before he did. It was far too soon for Kai, and also Riku, to be meeting George again.

"Now that Ted is dead and we have no clues on Diva, there is no reason to stay in this town. Once Saya and the others get to the hotel, we are leaving."

David spoke slowly, giving Julia the plan.

He did it to sever the line of thinking in his head.

"Understood."

Julia's expression and tone had already reverted back to that of the intelligent and capable researcher.

+

Riku shared a room with Hagi.

The size was incomparable to the compartments on the Siberian Express.

The bathroom wasn't as tiny and cramped, either, and there was a separate room for the toilet. Saya brought in ice to break into pieces in the sink. She was making an ice pack to help bring down Riku's fever.

The block of ice, supplied to chill wine, was too big, so Saya was using an ice pick to break it into smaller chunks.

There was a mirror in front of the sink, and as Saya whittled away at the surface of the ice block she felt bad about not noticing her little brother's condition sooner.

The long trip and unfamiliar Russian climate were no doubt influential in wearing down Riku's body. He had never been particularly resilient, and he occasionally had missed gym class at his junior high school due to fevers.

The real root of the problem was that in order to not be a bother to others, the serious Riku put his own health on the back burner.

Since he hadn't grown as tall as a lot of boys his age, he was sometimes mistaken for an elementary-school student, or in the worst cases, for a girl—but at least on the outside, Riku was patient in those situations. He probably didn't want to be seen as weak.

"I can't believe I let this happen . . . I am supposed to be his big sister."

If Kai had been there, he would have been able to sense Riku's sickness, even if Riku feigned healthiness. Kai would have forced him to go to bed, without fail. Kai sometimes came across as cold, but nothing in the world was more important to him than his younger brother.

In the bedroom where Riku slept, Hagi was keeping watch, but even still, Saya couldn't help but worry about his condition. If Julia were here she could have prescribed a proper treatment . . .

Saya had given Riku some fever medicine they got from the front desk, but if his temperature didn't go down she was considering asking them to call a doctor.

"It's really strange, isn't it?"

The sudden voice coming from right behind her caused Saya's hands to stop moving.

Liza's reflection looked back at her in the mirror.

"That a person like you would be a hunter of Chiropterans."

"Huh . . . ?"

"One that doesn't know the meaning behind the fight or the opponent. You don't even realize that you are being forced to fight."

Liza was leaning against the doorjamb with her arms crossed. Her sarcastic smile faded.

She must have wanted to return to the conversation she had started in the restaurant. Saya thought she may have been teasing Saya because she saw her as a child.

Saya averted her eyes to hide her irritation and jammed the tip of the ice pick into the ice block. The sound of the ice cracking chilled the atmosphere in the room.

"Once you kill all the Chiropterans, then what do you plan to do?"

". . . I'd like to live with Kai and Riku back in Okinawa."

"Is living with them really that important?"

"Of course. They are my family."

"And how many people will be sacrificed for you to achieve that goal?"

Those words slipped through her back and landed straight on her heart.

The downward-striking ice pick skidded off the surface of the ice block and cut the thumb of her left hand, which was holding the ice steady.

"—Ouch!"

Red drops fell into the standing water in the sink.

"Are you OK?"

"It's fine."

The gouge had already closed up and all that remained of the cut was a worm-shaped scar.

"What amazing healing powers. Just like a Chiropteran."

"..."

Saya didn't respond as she made a fist with her left hand. Her nails dug into the palm of her hand, and she could feel the pain. She was only seconds away from breaking the skin and soaking her hand in blood.

"In order to hunt Chiropterans, you must be superior to them . . . and you have that strength. However, as you destroy the Chiropterans, you also suck the people around you into battle."

A peaceful lifestyle, family, even one's own heart—

"That's the sad reality."

Saya slammed the ice pick down on the edge of the sink.

She was satisfied at the bang that resonated through the room. She wasn't going to listen to another word of Liza's speech. This was the signal that the conversation was being cut off here.

She picked up the washbasin and walked out of the room.

Heading to the bedroom, she could feel Liza's insistent stare on her back, and halfway through the living room Saya turned around. She felt her ability to leave in complete silence slip away.

"Liza-san, you are acting too weird. Earlier you seemed normal. What happened?"

Liza reacted to the strong words by brushing the blond hair from her ears and letting out a gentle sigh.

She posed like a teacher dealing with an out-of-control student, but her clear eyes were as deep and as dark as the night sky.

"I just have an interest in you. You, the hunter of man-eaters."

"If you have something to say, please say it!" Saya found Liza's response discomforting. Or, more accurately, it felt like a rusty razor blade was slowly cutting away at her skin.

When she had met other members of Red Shield, she had received cold and suspicious looks, but Saya had never before gotten the provoking and argumentative attacks that Liza was now giving her. She didn't know what David and Julia truly felt in their hearts, as their communication was pretty much limited to the job of fighting Chiropterans and nothing more. Saya sometimes felt they were a little cold, but would take that any day over Liza's roundabout way of communicating.

Saya knew she was special. But what did that mean? She wanted to destroy the Chiropterans. It wasn't a different desire than that of the people around her.

"Haven't you ever wondered why we never talk about your past?"

A chill ran up her spine like a cold tongue sliding up the back of her neck.

My . . . past.

"We don't play fair. The truth is, we know all kinds of things about you, but only give you a fraction of that information."

"But, you said—!"

Saya was taken aback at the desperation reverberating in her own voice.

To escape Liza's gaze, Saya turned away and restarted her statement on a more subdued tone.

"But, you said I had to remember those things on my own . . ."

Yes, that was right.

As they had waited for Saya to get her memory back, Red Shield had asked George to watch over her.

Hagi had said it, as well. The time may come when she remembered, he had said.

If her memory hadn't returned, it meant it wasn't necessary yet.

He wouldn't have misled her . . . on purpose.

"And what is it you have remembered?"

"..."

Said as soft as silk, the steel of the assumption that Saya had already recalled memories struck her eardrums hard.

What she recalled was—

"—Memories of battles."

Hearing Liza's words, said so directly, made the muscles in Saya's back tighten suddenly.

She felt like she was peeping through a hole.

Liza's plain voice began to spin. Her words weaved into images.

"Vietnam at night, covered red and engulfed in flames. Using your sword to fight against a goblin on the white earth of Siberia."

Saya faintly realized her body was shaking.

The washbasin she held in both hands leaned too far, and water splashed across her clothes and the carpet.

"And you remember this one. The time those hands were stained with blood—"

"...!"

The washbasin appeared to be filled with bright red blood.

Inside it wasn't ice. It was chunks of flesh. A girl's. It was the flesh of a girl who had tried to get away in a village in Vietnam. The face of the girl floated in the pool of blood. Her eyes met Saya's.

She looked like Kaori. Like Min, like Anna-Marie, like Riku . . . and then, like Saya herself. The sound of the washbasin hitting the floor sounded loud enough to split open the earth. It rolled over her feet.

The ice and water darkened the carpet.

"Ooh . . ."

A wave of nausea came over Saya, and she put a hand to her mouth. She held her head down briefly and the pain felt like every strand of hair on her head was being pulled.

She tried to find a way to escape the memory of her vomiting blood.

"You saw it, didn't you?"

Liza couldn't hide the satisfaction in her voice.

"What did you see? Tell me."

"I was . . . I was . . . That . . . wasn't me!"

The people running away. The children. The elderly. Chased down and hacked with a blade until there was nothing but warm corpses.

There was no way I did that. No way I could have done it. It wasn't me.

"It would have been better if it weren't."

The ridiculing laugh in her voice whittled at the resistance in Saya's heart.

As Saya hunched on the floor, she heard the sound of the bedroom door open and sensed someone come close to her, but heard no footsteps.

". . . Saya!"

The deep whisper had an air of worry.

Hagi held Saya in his arms and gave Liza a piercing glare.

"You . . ."

Liza seemed unaffected by the emotional outburst from the normally stoic young man.

Saya felt Hagi's anger through his grip around her shoulders and her vision cleared enough for her to see Liza's form standing facing them.

"Why? Why can you see my dreams . . . ?"

"Because I was there when they happened."

Liza's thin scarlet lips looked like a smile sliced into her face with a knife.

It was a cold and penetrating grin.

Saya was certain. This was not Liza.

"Who . . . are you? Who?!"

Her chilling smile widened. Her lips parted to reveal the fangs of a beast.

"Elizaveta's face was beautiful as she died. And how delicious her blood was . . ."

When Saya consumed blood she tried to take no pleasure in eating. Yet she saw pleasure on this creature's face, as its lascivious tongue licked its lips as it spoke.

"That's why I drank every last drop."

In that same moment, Hagi's right hand began to quiver.

The sudden movement in the room's air came from the speed of Liza's right arm.

Just in front of her face, between her index and middle fingers, a silver dagger was stopped in midflight.

The dagger Hagi threw moved through the air faster than the human eye could follow. Liza's reaction was more evidence to the fact she wasn't human.

"Chiropteran!"

The transformation must have occurred long before.

Saya gazed steadily at the ring wrapped around her middle finger.

It was now that she was able to remember. It was the same ring as the one she had seen on the withered hand of the old woman that Riku had helped out on the platform at Vladivostok Central Train Station.

That old woman.

When they had passed each other at the door of the rest area, Liza was already no longer Liza.

She must have administered D67 during the journey on the Siberian Express and turned the train's staff into Chiropterans.

But Saya had never sensed it. Liza was a high-level Chiropteran like Karl, who had gotten away in Vietnam, and Grigori, from her vision of the past.

"A Chevalier who has strayed off his path bares his fangs at me?" What came from her mouth was a gravelly, masculine voice. It sounded like the words were spoken by a man in his thirties or forties.

The silver flash was returned with a flick of her wrist.

Saya stared dumbfounded at the dagger coming her way like an arrow. Her body wouldn't move.

The dagger buried itself deep into an arm that appeared before Saya's forehead.

The mist of blood that grazed Saya's skin felt like a slap in the face.

"Hagi!"

"It's fine."

He pulled the blade out from where it had entered the dark sleeve of his coat and deep into his arm.

The blood from his wound soaked into the carpet.

"Last question." Liza raised her index finger to her lips. Her voice returned to the feminine tone matching her outward appearance. "For whom do you live? What do you wish for yourself?"

"My wish is to kill Chiropterans for the people that need me!"

There was no hesitation. There was no question about that. She was a different person from before. She was no longer afraid to fight.

"I see . . . What a shame." She sighed as if she were disappointed, but her lips unveiled a smile revealing an opposite reaction.

Hagi broke into a sprint.

In a blink of an eye, his beastly right hand had its claws around Liza's throat.

Liza moved only slightly in response to the attack. She leaned her head forward and her hair tore through the bandages wrapping Hagi's hand.

Right after that, her right palm slammed into Hagi's body, sending him into convulsions.

"Agh . . ."

The air trembled enough from the impact to rustle Saya's hair, and the young man's eyes opened wide as he vomited blood.

"You haven't changed. Still just as weak."

Liza leapt into the air and came down on Hagi's chin with her right knee, forcing him backward. With blood streaming from

his mouth, Hagi's long body twisted in the air as he crashed through a torchère lamp before slamming into the wall. The concrete wall shattered, sending a tremor throughout the structure of the hotel.

The cloud of dust raised by the impact created a dim haze, and Saya lowered her body and ran. Propped in the corner of the living room near the bedroom was the cello case. In it rested her beloved blade, and that's what Saya was going for.

"Where do you think you're going?"

A large mass rushed forward through the smoke to Saya's side.

It was the heavy three-person sofa. As the sofa was about to tackle Saya, she leapt and twisted her body backward in the air like a high jump, clearing the sofa as it traveled under her.

Completing a full loop, Saya was on the ground for hardly a second before she bounded up once again.

A half moment later, the space her body had filled was invaded by a flying wooden table that continued in the same path as the sofa before it, and crashed into pieces against the wall.

Saya flipped through the air again and bounced her feet off the ceiling. She spotted her target below and her crimson eyes narrowed.

Liza looked up and laughed. She must have caught on to Saya's plan.

As Saya started to fall to the ground, she reached out and grabbed the chandelier with one hand. Her body became a pendulum and she extended her legs for a horizontal kick.

Her timing was off, but the unexpected direction of the attack seemed to take her enemy by surprise. Still, the strong momentum of her kick was stopped in the palm of a beautiful hand.

"Careful!"

"Aah?!"

As if she were pushing back a curtain blowing in from an open window, Liza tossed Saya aside with a light turn of her wrist.

But before Saya was slammed sideways into the wall, she twisted her body like a cat and landed feet first. She softened the impact then sprung horizontally from the wall to Liza's rear.

Watching Liza's back, Saya kicked off a pillar next to the bathroom and broke off a candlestick-shaped light. It sparkled in her hand like a dagger.

Perfectly lined up in Liza's blind spot, Saya's decisive strike on the hunter was blocked with only two fingers.

Saya's acceleration was suddenly stopped, and she couldn't believe her eyes.

The sharp point of the candlestick-shaped light was caught between the tips of Liza's thumb and forefinger.

She didn't look back at the catch she had made over her shoulder.

"You trust your eyes too much, don't you think?"

Saya could hear the mock pity in her smile, and then Liza gave a demonstration of her abilities.

The G-forces Saya felt were almost enough to separate her soul from her body. This time she flew spine first into the shelves above the fireplace. Fragments of ornamental plates and porcelain vases flew about the room.

"Gu . . . uaa . . ."

Saya rolled over the carpet and she lifted her head up when her body stopped moving.

Liza casually walked in Saya's direction, but then stopped.

Hagi flew through the smoke right into Liza, carrying the two of them toward the window.

"My, how daring!"

She sounded like a lady suddenly hugged by a gentleman, demure in her words, but as she wrapped her arm around his neck it was under her power, not his, that they crashed through the window and out into the night sky.

"Hagi . . . !"

Saya ignored the creak of her spine and ran to the window. The wind rustled her hair as she looked down below.

Hagi's fall had been broken by the now-caved-in roof of a car four stories below.

He had landed face up, and Saya expected that there were no real injuries. However, he was soon crushed by Liza, who landed boots first on his abdomen, causing him to lean forward.

The second impact totaled what remained of the imported Japanese car. Tiny pieces of glass from the car's windows littered the surrounding snow.

"Kooff!!"

Saya concluded his ribs must have pierced his lungs, judging from the volume of blood that poured out of his mouth.

This opponent might be difficult for Hagi to beat on his own.

Saya turned back into the room and quickly went to the cello case. Saya opened the compartment inside the lid to reveal her blade. When her hand touched the hilt of her katana, she had a sensation like all the downy hair on her skin had been toasted off, and she spun around.

"This feeling—"

A silvery light surrounded the door leading to the corridor.

A heartbeat later, the door burst into pieces like it was built out of wooden toy blocks and a dark figure flew into the room.

What speed! Saya only caught a glimpse of his face, but could see it was a young male, just about twenty years old. Without hesitation her blade left the scabbard and was raised just in time to cross blades with his, emitting sparks and an odd metallic sound.

"—Chevalier?!"

"Thk—"

From behind the hood of the youth's monk garb came a negative click of the tongue.

He gave Saya a short-tempered glare through his glasses.

"Carmen, you're too quick to fight. I think I can handle this on my own."

"You, Moses?"

The voice that came from behind him caused the youth to respond disappointedly, and he pulled back his three-pronged pike and leapt backward.

From under his feet appeared another figure to take his place.

The figure in similar robes, who had quickly drawn near, was a young man. In fact, it may have been safer to call him a boy.

His right eye was almost completely hidden behind his split bangs, but she could see he had a graceful look.

The sickle-shaped sword he held in his hand bisected the air without a sound.

Saya backpedaled across the carpet as fast as she could and leapt to the side. His swinging curved sword intersected with the long sword of a third enemy who had entered the room without Saya noticing.

With the wall at her back and her sword drawn, Saya quickly scanned her surroundings.

In the living room were three opponents.

The bespectacled youth, Carmen; the curved-blade-wielding boy, Moses; and the long-sword-carrying young man. He wore sunglasses and the long hair that tickled the tops of his shoulders gave him a snobbish ambiance.

To make matters worse, Saya spied two more silhouettes behind these three, and she bit her lip.

"..."

One Chevalier was intimidating enough, but five? The other one on the ground fighting with Hagi made six opponents in all.

"Saya, we will be taking your blood!"

Carmen attacked at the same moment Saya sprung.

His trident, which looked like something Poseidon might carry, and her Japanese sword struck each other.

With a whooshing whip of wind, the carpet was ripped and one wall was torn through, the shelves it held broken.

In only a few seconds, her blade had parried his pike twenty times, if not more, and in the next moment Saya and Carmen flew back from each other as if they were synchronized.

An exceedingly heavy weapon grazed Saya's foot and crashed through the floor.

A war hammer with a beak-shaped protuberance had been swung at her by a stocky man in his late twenties. He wasn't very tall, but his face was unusually rigid.

Saya jumped again backward, retreating in a zigzag pattern, as the pursuing youth in sunglasses thrust his sword and Moses swung his curved saber with a swoosh.

The carpet was peppered with cuts and holes, and the back of one sofa was lopped off.

Having put some distance between herself and her pursuers, Saya spun around with her katana ready and surveyed the scene once again.

Looking closely, Saya could see that under their monk robes they all were wearing military-type uniforms. Also, they carried not modern firearms, but ancient weapons of combat.

"Chiropterans . . . ?"

Until now, she had never encountered Chiropterans like this.

The "mouse" type, lower-level Chiropteran rarely looked like a human and usually didn't know how to speak. Even when she fought the Chevalier, Karl, he didn't appear to like using manmade weapons. That was surely because his own body was a stronger weapon than anything he could have picked up.

However, it wouldn't be going too far to think that her five attackers were human. They looked like humans. They used



manmade weapons. And yet, they were showing abilities far beyond those of mortal men. They moved more like Chevalier.

Something was different, though. Saya could feel it.

Yet, Saya wasn't ready to believe there was an unknown enemy species of Chevalier that had taken on Liza's body. All she knew was they were the hunters, and Saya was the target.

Right now this wasn't the place to be. She was worried about Hagi.

On top of that, she couldn't allow the damage and danger in the hotel to reach the bedroom and involve Riku.

The first contact with Saya wasn't going as planned.

The problem was this young girl with the Oriental sword was in reality a wolf (although he had never actually seen one, Moses knew they lived in the forests of Europe) in her speed and smarts, and she wasn't going to let them take her life that easily.

"So this is the famous Saya. She's no pushover."

"So you are saying we should give up?"

Receiving a heated look from Carmen, Moses looked to the floor and let out a deep sigh.

"No. I don't believe we have a choice."

When attempting to complete something, there is no choice but to go all out. That is the way we can meet another tomorrow.

This Saya wasn't a dangerous opponent, just a feisty one.

This level of opponent shouldn't have been that difficult, really.

"This is a chance for us to make a kill with a Chevalier. By numbers alone we should have no problem."

"That's the spirit!"

As his lips transformed into a wide, belligerent grin, Carmen readied his three-pronged pike.

His usual partner in battle wasn't there now, but his sister and he had similarly ferocious personalities that, at times, had rubbed Moses the wrong way.

"Gudrif, Yan, you're on!"

"Right. At the same time."

In his typically sarcastic way, Gudrif pushed up his sunglasses with one finger.

"Check."

With an indifferent tone, Yan lifted his war hammer.

The three of them went into motion.

With the speed at which they moved, a typical human would be able to detect nothing but movement of the air. The three drew closer from their separate positions and in the same breath their three separate weapons attacked.

The tip of the pike and sword thrust forward as the pickax smashed down through the floorboards.

But Saya wasn't there.

She had sprung straight up, negating their attack.

But her move wasn't unanticipated. The flying Moses was already there to meet her.

Saya flipped up her katana to block the downward slash of his saber as he came down from above her head, but Moses's forceful swing slammed her back to the floor.

"Ooof."

"Aurélien!"

Saya was down on her hands and knees. This would be the place of her death.

Waiting in anticipation, one of the crew—Aurélien—had her feet already planted on the ground.

The attacks of the other four were designed to herd Saya to her.

One more strike, and it would be all over.

As she stood before her enemy, Aurélien declined to raise her sword, longer and heavier than her own body.

"What's wrong?!"

"Aa . . ."

Awoken by Carmen's chiding, Aurélien's emerald eyes turned down to her enemy. Pulling free the tip of her sword stuck in the floor, the blade rose in a silvery arch. Its target was Saya's neck.

Her hesitation, however, was the chance her target needed.

Rolling to the side to avoid decapitation, Saya slapped the floor with her hands and pushed herself into the air. In support of his sister, Carmen thrust his trident forward, but the blades were cut short before slicing Saya's clothes.

Saya flew through the room and landed closer to the window. She looked in Moses's direction and then took off to the side.

She was headed toward the source of the cool wind filling the room—the broken window.

"Don't let her get away!"

Moses raised his sickle-shaped blade and threw it without jumping.

At almost the exact same moment, Carmen and Gudrif launched their respective weapons.

The spinning saber as well as the long sword and straight-flying pike crossed the room at Saya from three different directions. All three embedded themselves in the opposite wall. Faster than the blink of an eye, the vision of Saya looked as if she were sucked through the open window as her body flew toward the gaping exit.

That second, Yan's accurately flying pickax was thrown off by an intersecting sword. Saya reacted by somersaulting in the air and falling into the darkness of the night.

The spinning pickax landed head first into the floor with a thud.

"Dammit."

After Carmen pulled his trident from the wall, the butt end banged into the floor with an unnecessary clang.

"Let's go after her, Moses!"

"No! We stop here for today."

As he tried to calm his hot-blooded brethren, Moses pulled his saber from the same wall and stowed it under his robes.

"Why? We almost had her!"

"Just look at Aurélien."

His eyes turned to meet hers as she leaned against her sword, which pointed into the ground. Of all those in the group, the one he cared the most about was her. Putting it in biological terms, she could be considered his younger sister. It wasn't like people, but rather like the strange Schiff feelings mammals absorbed over one another that influenced how they acted.

Their true parent Schiff, that dirty Boris, would likely be laughing at them now.

However, Moses thought the kind of love between Carmen and Aurélien was something sacred. They weren't only siblings. Everyone in this circle felt a strong bond to the others.

That was the most sacred thing of all.

To Moses, who knew almost nothing of this world, there were only nine Schiffs he could trust absolutely. That would never change.

"It's because she hasn't had enough blood to drink."

Yan's comment had a critical tone.

Moses nodded in agreement. Aurélien didn't take to the blood of her last victim. It was natural that without the proper nourishment, anyone would be less than tip-top in battle.

"Please . . . forgive me . . ."

Her wavy light brown, almost blond, hair spilled out from underneath her hood. By human standards, it may have been appropriate to call it "beautiful." Her delicate profile looked brutally despondent.

He never saw her look like this when the ten brothers and sisters were in the garden in Kilbed.

This usually stoic young girl had been hiding her sensitive side . . . but, no, it wasn't only her. Moses, too, maybe, used to feel more like a doll. Thinking wasn't necessary from inside a cell.

However, living in the real world had created the need to live by their wits and intelligence. In order to find food, they had to hunt on their own. Moses had no inkling of how stressful that was for Aurélien.

But no matter how you looked at it, that's what was needed to live.

In order to fill that need they captured and they killed.

"Aurélien, where's Saya?"

"She is still near."

Aurélien hid her eyes as she answered.

She had an acute perception of where her fellow family members were.

Moses and the others had a vague sense of others' presences, but among the ten of them no one could pinpoint another, and at long distances, like Aurélien could.

"What about the Chevalier?"

"The two of them are in battle . . . one is big, and has tremendous strength . . ."

"It's him."

Moses clenched his teeth. The sense of dread made his skin crawl. There was nothing to be gained by encountering him. The only choice was retreat.

"Let's go back. Ghee, Lulu, and the others might have some results."

They should consult with the other five taking a different angle, Moses thought, and then take another stab at Saya. That was the best path to follow for now.

"Hey, Moses. How about getting some food for Aurélien?"

Gudrif pointed to the door to the next room with his chin.

That must have been the bedroom. Moses also could hear the respiratory sounds of someone sleeping.

The irregular and rough breathing indicated someone who might be weak from sickness. Clearly Saya was trying to lure them away from this infirm individual, and that was why she had jumped outside.

It was a perfect catch. But—

"Moses."

The way Aurélien held her upper arms in her graceful hands implied her rejection of this plan. She glared at something as she shook her small head.

Moses turned his attention from the bedroom door and shifted his body toward the way out.

". . . The blood of a sick person. Best to leave it be. Besides, we have already made a lot of noise inside this building."

"Shall we leave?"

"Let's."

Moses put the hood of his robe back over his head and exited into the corridor.

The five shadows brazenly pushed past the unprepared hotel staff in the corridor like wild animals and slid down the emergency staircase.

Saya fell into the dark of night, twisting her body to land on the hotel's exterior with both feet.

The friction from the soles of her shoes kept her from falling too fast, and just as she passed a second-floor window, she pushed up off the wall.

She could see Liza's silhouette just ahead.

With one hand resting on her hip, Liza looked bored. Dangling from her right hand was the body of Hagi. Liza had him by the neck, and he appeared to be in great pain as he pulled at her arm.

"How dare you?!"

Saya's momentum carried her above Liza's head and Saya swung her katana downward with all her might.

Saya looked like the powerful wind monster, Kamaitachi. Her blade bisected snow crystals on its path, but alas, it was a futile attempt.

As she landed and slipped across the pathway, Saya turned around. There stood Liza, a full six or seven steps away.

"You're late. I've been here waiting for you."

The liberated Hagi stood on his knees with his hands to his throat and his face covered in blood.

"Hagi . . . are you OK?"

"Yes. But more importantly . . ."

Sounding as if his trachea had been crushed, Hagi spoke in a hoarse voice as his eyes moved up the side of the hotel. He was aware of them, as well—the unidentified group of Chevalier that had come into the hotel.

They hadn't followed, even though she had tried to lure them outside to keep them far from Riku.

"It's Riku-kun that you are fretting about? You no longer need to worry."

It was as Liza said.

The five Chiropteran beings she had sensed in the hotel were moving further away at a great speed.

"Just when things were about to get fun, they had to go and escape. Maybe they were worried about us."

From the way Liza spoke, it didn't sound like she and the five were partners.

Chiropterans must not have existed with a single and unified path in mind. This was a question to be explored at another time.

"I won't let you escape, though."

"Let me escape?"

Liza laughed like a mother caught off guard by her child's joke.

"You didn't notice? I could have taken your life any number of times."

Saya's jaw clenched.

A strong, snow-filled wind whipped around her, and slowly converged with the loud laughter echoing through the barren pathway.

The laugher reverberating off Liza's lips eventually spun into words.

"You must have figured it out by now. The fact that you aren't a person. Don't you think it's funny—you playing make-believe human? You surround yourself with your fake family and fake friends, and for what reason? What do you think you are going to do?"

"I am—"

"What? You think you're fighting for humans? Get real. Listen, you are—"

Her smiling face was beautiful enough to snatch Saya's eyes out.

"—one of us."

Saya's anger drained from her body.

The groan of the whipping wind suddenly gusted far away.

One of them? The Chiropterans and . . . me?

"Something must have told you already. Your body and the beasts you hunt are one and the same."

Maybe she is right.

I knew it. I knew it but I pretended I didn't.

Saya had pretended, because if she were to completely know and accept that, then everything up until now would become a lie.

Her familial relationship with Kai and Riku and George, her friendship with Kaori, her battling alongside David . . .

"I . . . I am . . ."

"That's right. You, too, are a Chiropteran."

Colder than the snow hitting her face, it was Liza's words that were chilling her heart.

Without realizing it, Saya sat down onto the snow.

She felt a sense of repulsion when she cut down Chiropterans . . . was it because she was killing her own kind?

The entire time, she had been committing a sin.

"Saya!"

The shout felt like a slap on the cheek, and Saya looked up.

It was Hagi.

His wounds couldn't have completely healed by now, but with the strength of his own determination, Hagi stood on his own two feet. His standing figure was an even more gorgeous sight than his beautiful face.

"Fight, Saya!"

Feeling the strong affection in his voice, Saya couldn't help but nod her head.

In the dream where she saw her past he was also dyed scarlet with blood, but still did what he could to support and protect her. He did what he could to stay by her side, and that might have been why Saya was able to fight.

And now the sword that she received from him—wasn't it in her hands at this moment?

Liza looked upon Hagi and frowned.

"You knew everything, but told Saya nothing. Could it be out of cowardice? Or is it that you want to be close to her that badly? That's bending the boundaries of a Chevalier, I would say . . ."

Hagi did not raise his voice or show any anger.

He instead chose to extend the sharp claws of his right hand and dash through the snow to silence his talkative opponent.

Liza calmly turned to meet him.

The moment the two entangled, Saya opened her eyes.

Liza held Hagi from behind and Saya saw her thin right arm come straight through the front of his chest.

"It's hot, and it beats strong. Your heart."

Mouthful after mouthful of blood poured out from between Hagi's lips, and crimson puddles in the snow looked like strawberry syrup on shaved ice.

"Sa . . . ya . . ."

Hagi's arms and legs went into convulsions and his body fell back slack, relying on the strength of his enemy to hold him up.

His unfocused eyes were mainly trying to assess his body's condition.

"I told you that you were weak, but you wouldn't listen. Why don't I squeeze your heart until it bursts, and then you can die for me?"

"UWAAAAaa!"

Limited to her voice, Saya responded in the only way she could.

The blood in her veins passed the boiling point and her head was white hot.

Unforgivable!

Saya stood up from her knees. She pressed the palm of her left hand against the bare back of her sword's blade.

At the same time, she pulled her sword sideways, and broke into a sprint. Her mind was filled with one single thought.

Like a used newspaper tossed onto a train luggage rack, Hagi's body was thrown to the ground carelessly before she turned around.

Saya's hatred was focused on that face as she bisected it.

In the last moment of the beautiful woman's life, before her head and body were split in two, Saya saw that her expression was not one of surprise, but—

Had her blade cut through a vision? Liza's body was not lying below Saya's sword.

"And now what?"

With her arms crossed below her chest, Liza smiled from a few paces away.

"Damn you!"

Saya pressed through the cloud of snow she had raised in her missed attack.

The tip of her blade nearly grazed Liza's chin as it flew up from the ground.

Again, her rising sword switched direction. She thought she had cut nothing but air until a spark of lightning flashed off the edge of the blade.

A few strands of Liza's hair fell onto her shoulder.

But that was all.

As hard and as fast as Saya's sword fluttered through the air, it couldn't find Liza's skin.

It seemed as if all she was trying to do was cut through the snowy cloud.

In response to the dizzying frenzy of thrusts and cuts, Liza slowly moved backward.

After many small hops and leaps, her feet planted firmly on the ground. Saya sliced through the air with a diagonal sweep.

Contact! There was a heavy metallic ring.

The sword had passed through the street lamp behind Liza. The lamp met its reflection in the snow as it fell. Saya jumped over it and closed in on her fast-moving opponent.

The steel-slicing iron blade flashed as it bit into the tip of Liza's shoulder.

The cool sound like fingers hitting glass resounded through the outdoor passageway.

As Saya pulled her katana back, she held her breath.

Momentarily ignoring her surroundings, she stared at the blade of her beloved sword.

The line of blood flowing through the groove in the sides of the sword's silver blade had been broken.

". . . That's not . . ."

Spinning in the air, reflecting a silvery glint, a shard of metal finally lodged itself in the fallen snow. It was the top half of Saya's katana.

Saya's claws had been snipped.

"I'll let you in on a little secret."

Liza had stood like nothing was happening as she slapped Saya's blade with her hand. She'd moved so fast that her arm clipped the blade as if the katana were made of bamboo.

"You have a family. A real family, with a younger sister—our Diva . . ."

Liza's confession hit Saya in the head like an invisible weapon.

"A sister . . . ?"

That couldn't be.

The queen of the Chiropterans was . . . my sister?

Saya's body went rigid, like an elderly person's, as she raised her head to look up at the beautiful Chevalier who had stolen her consciousness.

"Yes. Red Shield has ordered you to murder your own sister."

"But . . ."

"David? He knows that. They all do."

It was unbelievable. Saya had never heard anything even hinting at this.

Diva was the root of this catastrophe. A natural enemy of mankind. An enemy that must be killed . . .

Liza said that was her younger sister.

It was a lie.

"They all knew about it. Of course, your friend sleeping over there, too . . ."

"Hagi . . . ?"

Saya scoffed and rolled her head in disbelief.

It was a lie.

She couldn't allow herself to be tricked.

Hagi, tell me the truth. Reassure my ears that this Chiropteran song is made up of nothing but lies.

"..."

The pallid skin of the beautiful young man shook in pain as his body lay in a scarlet pool of mud. If it were only physical pain, it was unlikely his face would have been that contorted.

It was then that Saya understood.

No matter what, Hagi was unable to tell a lie. His silence affirmed this. What Liza said was true.

"Why . . . ?"

Saya's wrung-out voice dripped with hatred. Why didn't he tell her? How could he be so caring and so hurtful at the same time?

Hagi said nothing in response.

The silence Hagi and the falling snow had created was broken by a nasty response by Liza.

"Well? What does it feel like to be stabbed in the back by those who were supposed to care about you?"

Saya stood, speechless. She wouldn't even look at that woman.

Her senses were dulled by overwhelming feelings of shock and despair.

From the chill of the cold, snowy wind to the darkness of the outdoor pathway, Saya had no sense of the present reality.

At some point Liza had come from behind Saya and put her arms around her. Buried in her cruel warmth, Saya didn't care if Liza killed her or not.

If Chiropterans were the enemies of humans, then so was she.

If she were to die here, there would be one less monster in the world, and that would be a good thing.

However, Diva's protector didn't seem to wish such an easy end.

"If you want to learn more about yourself, go to the Zoo."

"The . . . 'Zoo' . . . ?"

As Saya repeated Liza's words like baby, Liza's fingers toyed with Saya's hair.

"Yes. That's the place where it all began—your devoted Chevalier should know all about it."

Hagi appeared to be waking and struggling in the pool of blood. Liza glanced at Hagi, then stroked Saya's cheek and kissed it.

"*Do svidaniya,* Saya. I enjoyed getting to know you."

Just like that, the warmth radiating from Liza's body was gone.

Her katana spilled from her hand once again, and an empty sound rang out.

The snowstorm was growing stronger, but Saya stood there without moving and looked toward the spine of the Chevalier laying a distance away in the darkness of night.

Saya only vaguely realized her sword was no longer in her hand.

There was no longer anything to believe in.

"What the hell?"

The words fell from Kai's lips as he examined the disastrous scene of the room.

Kai returned from the confrontation with the Chiropteran at the closed nuclear power plant only to find the hotel in complete panic and disorder.

The spinning lights on top of the police cars parked in front of the main entrance had filled Kai with a sense of dread.

Leaving David to ask questions at the front desk, Kai had run straight to the room Riku was staying in, and cursed his heightened intuition.

According to the conversation he had heard in the lobby, the police were trying to call the incident an attempted robbery, but that was a difficult theory to believe.

If someone wanted to steal cash, there was no need to destroy furniture and smash holes in walls.

Chiropterans were here.

"Saya! Riku!"

"We're OK," said Julia. "He's safe. He has a fever, though, so he's sleeping."

After walking into the bedroom and seeing Riku lying on the bed with Julia's hand to his head, her words calmed Kai's racing heart.

Saya, however, was nowhere to be seen.

She was probably chasing the Chiropterans.

Thinking so, Kai went back into the living room. Looking over the damage, something on the floor caught his eye.

A katana.

Kai had no doubt this was the weapon Saya gripped when she fought in battle.

If her sword was here, then Saya couldn't have been hunting Chiropterans.

Noticing that the blade was broken in two sent a chill through Kai's body.

Did something happen? To Saya?

Under the handle was a piece of paper.

Kai picked up the paper folded in two and when he opened it only one word came from his mouth.

"Liars."

What it said was powerful enough to cut through to the bone.

Reading the single word on the page, Kai understood why Saya needed to go.



PART TWO

THE SURFACE OF the sea was the color of the sky.

The shadows of seagulls danced over the low waves of the temperate day.

All Kai could hear was the massive rotor spinning overhead as he looked at David, who sat in his folding seat with his arms crossed over his chest, a sour expression on his face.

Without question, Kai himself bore a similar expression.

"Aren't we going to look for Saya?"

"That is the plan."

After leaving the hotel in Yekaterinburg, they had crossed the border into Eastern Europe and traveled through several countries before landing in Paris earlier that morning. Without any explanations, they boarded a jumbo helicopter in the city and made it to their present location on the Mediterranean Sea. As usual, David didn't have much to say and seemed irritated.

"So wouldn't it be faster to use this helicopter to fly around and look for her?" asked Kai.

"But we don't know which direction Saya-neechan went," Riku responded; his exceedingly sensible statement made Louis laugh.

"That's it exactly," said David. "Before we can start, we need to get properly prepared."

With no rebuttal, Kai kept his mouth shut and glared out the window. They couldn't find his sister by running around recklessly.

Kai understood this, but he didn't like taking such a roundabout way of getting to it.

After living with George as a family in Okinawa for a whole year, Saya was suddenly supposed to give up her relationship with them, and erase who she had become.

When she had arrived, it was initially difficult for Kai to treat this stranger they had taken in as his sister. He knew nothing about the existence of Chiropterans then, but ever since they entered the picture he had felt indications that their lives were going to be completely turned upside down.

Right then he remembered Mao's words.

Just shoot first and ask questions later. That was Kai.

Right. If there was time to think, then there was time to move and attack the problem. That was how Kai Miyagusuku took care of business.

On the other hand, through Vietnam and then Russia, he was with David the whole time. Despite the fact that they made it through some situations that common sense would have defined as certain death, now David seemed to be doing things much less recklessly and much more methodically.

David, Louis, Julia—they were all adults. In order to accomplish a goal, they considered what was required and the best means to achieve it. Kai could also see they worked with complete dedication and with all their strength. There really was no difference between him and them.

Yet, now, he could feel the impatience rising in his undivided emotions.

I am Saya's brother.

I need to protect Saya.

On their last night in Okinawa, he had held his sister's hand and made a promise to her. No matter what happened, he wouldn't leave her. He would always be by her side.

In the hotel, Saya had left a note with her sword.

Liars.

Who that word was referring to, Kai couldn't begin to guess. However, as his hand touched the paper, he could feel his sister's pain as she wrote it.

At the very least, he knew he wasn't a liar. He would keep his promise.

Kai stared at the ocean, which looked like a thin sheet of silver as it reflected in the sun, and he clenched his teeth together.

"Don't worry," said Riku. "She's with Hagi and Liza-san."

"Yeah . . ." Kai muttered. It was only after he responded that Kai noticed how half hearted his reply to Riku was.

He turned to see a look of worry on his little brother's face. It wasn't Saya he was concerned about.

Only a few days ago, Riku had been drifting in and out of consciousness with a high fever. After all that, for him to feel the need to worry about his big brother was pretty deplorable.

"Have we heard anything from Liza?"

"At this point, no."

David didn't react to Julia's answer.

It had been a week since they left Yekaterinburg, and in that time there had been no contact, which apparently was very unusual. Even as he sensed that, Kai did everything to try to believe that no news was good news.

"Oh!"

Suddenly Riku popped up from his folding seat.

Since he had a seatbelt on, he didn't make it very far, but he stretched his neck as far as he could to look out the window.

"A ship . . . ?"

Kai squinted his eyes to see what Riku was looking at.

Plopped in the middle of the turquoise-blue landscape was what looked like a white leaf.

Its grand size became more clear the closer they got. Leaving a white wake behind it, the three-hundred-meter passenger vessel slowly traveled across the waves.

"Red Shield headquarters."

Julia's comment came just as the helicopter began its decent.

As David exited the helicopter, he noticed something different about the mood around him.

The room the black-suit-wearing guide led them to was not an executive office, and not a conference room. The dreary store-room atmosphere implied that, depending on the situation, it could also be used to cross-examine prisoners.

Certainly expecting a nice guest room, Kai and Riku looked around at the barren walls suspiciously.

David turned his eyes toward the black suit standing by the wall and cross-examined him without saying a word.

"I was ordered to bring you here."

David's brow creased at the mechanical answer from the man who looked too stern to be on such a luxurious ship. Before he could respond, a voice called out from a speaker in the ceiling.

"—David."

The clear and lively voice belonged to a young man.

David knew the young man sitting in his office in front of the microphone very well. He was the kind of person that exuded an honest and open personality though his voice.

"Chief."

Joel Goldschmidt.

He was a member of the royals, and even in Europe, where there are too many royal families to count, the Goldschmidt name was very well known. The high-pedigree individual was the leader of Red Shield.

"Elizaveta's murdered body was discovered in the rest area at Vladivostok Central Station."

David's breathing paused a moment.

"The body was discovered in a large trunk in the waiting room there. Her clothes had been removed, and an older set of clothes was discovered in the trash."

Joel had maintained his usual calm and comfortable tone, but there was a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Elizaveta checked into the hotel you stayed at one week ago. The time of death was estimated at ten days ago . . . You know what this means, don't you?"

After a moment, David replied, "The Liza that we rode with on the train wasn't really her."

During the short time between their meeting at the harbor and their boarding of the Siberian Express, the capable and talented Russian Shield agent had been taken and replaced.

"No way . . . Liza . . . ?" Riku was trying to express his disbelief, but his voice sounded frozen in his throat. After the Chiropteran attack on the train which had separated them into two groups, Riku had spent much time traveling with Liza. It was natural he would be shocked by this news.

"If it was when we were by the waiting room, it must have been that old lady . . ."

"Old lady?" said Louis

"Before Liza came out, an old lady had been in the waiting room. She was having a hard time with her big trunk so I—"

It was then the pieces fell together in Riku's mind.

Liza's dead body had been hidden away in that trunk.

Louis's eyebrows scrunched together as he rubbed the top of his round head with his hand.

"It looks as if there is no mistaking."

"Yeah . . ."

The elderly woman Riku spoke of more than likely hadn't been human. She had killed another person, and taken on her looks and voice perfectly. David knew of only one living being that could accomplish that.

"If you go through the 'diary' you should be able to find the answer," Joel said, his voice brimming with pride. "The Elizaveta you traveled with was a Chevalier."

"..."

Both of David's hands balled into fists.

As hunters of Chiropterans, they couldn't even smell their enemy residing with them in their own camp. To make matters worse, the creatures had stolen away one more member of the team.

To be able to get that close for that long and observe their damage without being detected must have been quite satisfying. It was also very possible that Saya's disappearance had something to do with this Chevalier.

"So, that's where we're at right now."

The voice from the speaker switched to that of a much older man.

"Starting now, you will be under seventy-two-hour observation, during which time your movement will be limited."

"Now who is this?" snapped Kai.

Louis took the liberty to answer the obviously irritated Kai's question.

"That's Collins. He's Red Shield's number two."

The medical branch of the organization, which focused on the biological research of Chiropterans, was not exclusively led by Collins, but also counted on Joel's advice.

However, David didn't have much experience in getting support from him like this. There was no question as to Collins's abilities and authority—he just wasn't a soldier. If he could have understood what it was like on the battlefield, rather than only in the laboratory, his advice and directions might have saved a few more lives.

For this very reason, from time to time David went over Collins's head and spoke directly to Joel. He may have come from a sheltered upbringing, but Joel knew the pain and suffering of battle. David felt like their relationship was based on a mutual respect of each other's strengths.

It was very likely that protocol-loving Collins didn't appreciate the pecking-order breaches David had often committed.

"Once it is clear there are no Chiropterans among your team," Collins continued, "you will be released."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Kai looked at the speaker with contempt.

Naturally, he was in a hurry to search for Saya, so David could understand his resentment for being accused of possibly being a monster.

David knew too well that Kai's father had been killed by that very beast—the Chiropteran.

Joel's voice returned over the loudspeaker. "It's unfortunate, David. We can't be sure just yet . . . Why don't you all consider this a brief rest? Understand—I have to protect Red Shield like I would my own family."

" . . . Understood."

Joel had made the right decision.

For the weaker human race to continue the fight against the monsters, mutual trust was essential. However, underestimating the sly power of the enemy, and exposing the entire organization, was dangerous, and must be avoided at all costs.

David found satisfaction in the fact that Joel, in Collins's style, didn't apologize or make excuses.

The examinations took place in a separate room, where they would be able to tell if any members of the group had melded with a Chiropteran. Seeing the armed men in black suits behind

the men and women in white robes told Kai that they weren't taking any chances.

"Then we are going to take your blood," Julia said ominously.

"Wha—? I'm scared!" said Riku.

Kai's scowling face caught Julia's teasing grin, and he grimaced even more. "She's messing with you," he said.

"They just need to prick the tip of your finger, and it'll be over before you know it," Julia replied. She'd already had her blood sample taken and lifted her index finger to show Riku. Her finger was wrapped in an ivory-colored bandage.

According to Julia, in order to differentiate between people and Chiropterans, fingerprint and retina confirmations were not enough.

"The most reliable evidence is the same as a regular criminal investigation," Julia continued, implying that genetic information was the best indicator. "According to Dr. Collins's research, human and Chiropteran genes have different characteristics which we've been able to isolate."

"But the Chevalier ones can completely change into you, right? What happens to the genes—"

Kai's question was interrupted by Julia's laughter. It appeared his question had come at her unexpectedly.

The black suits and researchers were surprised by the sudden outburst, and glanced in her direction.

"I'm—I'm sorry." She raised her hand to her mouth and looked to the floor in shame, but she had trouble getting her giggling to stop. Kai was astonished. He had never seen Julia lose control like a little girl before.

"That's nothing to worry about. Even if they could change their genes into a human's temporarily, they would then be human, and not Chiropteran."

"Is that how it works?"

It was an innocent question from an amateur, but directed at a researcher like herself, it was apparently a tricky-enough question

to make her burst out laughing. Kai sat down in one of the steel chairs and extended his arm to the examiner as he looked up at Julia.

"I don't really know much about it, but didn't Chiropterans used to be people? Has their DNA been changed that much?"

"Well . . ."

The signs of her uncontrollable laughter remained in her flushed cheeks, but Julia's face grew slightly foggy with this question. An effort should be made to answer every one of a student's inquiries, but with this one Julia looked a little like a bewildered teacher.

"Make no mistake, human genes and Chiropteran genes are not the same. In the transformation process, the DNA is altered. This we know. What we don't know is how . . . that's the major task of the researchers."

Julia wrapped up the conversation with a little smile that was more along the lines Kai was used to seeing from her.

"Hey! You skipped right to the end!"

"Oh?"

At some point a bandage had been attached to Kai's index finger.

It would take seventy-two hours for the results to be finalized, so they had no choice but to wait during that time until they were declared clear.

After that, Kai left Julia as she talked to Collins on the phone and went back to the ship's hold, only to find David there all alone.

Kai expected Louis and Riku, who had finished their exams before him, to be here, but they were not.

"Where's everybody?"

"Riku has another exam besides the blood test."

David, who was concentrating on cleaning his pistol, didn't look up as he answered.

"Riku? Why him?"

"It's just to be on the safe side. From the time he was sick to when he got here he's had no time to rest. Louis is with him."

"I—I see."

Kai could feel his body heat up with anger as he felt he was having another conversation where the other person wasn't being completely truthful, but he gave David the benefit of the doubt and pulled out the chair across from him.

After listening to what that man, Collins, had said, Kai doubted he was being accommodating, but David could have made special arrangements.

Parts of his pistol had been laid out on the table in a row, and David finally picked up the cylinder to put it back in place.

He replaced the gut of the weapon and as it spun in the air—KLAK—David flicked his wrist, sending the cylinder back into the center of the pistol. David lowered the weapon.

Seeing that David's work was finished, Kai opened his mouth to speak.

"It said 'Liars.' You saw it."

". . . The note that Saya left," David replied as he opened his jacket and put the pistol in its holster.

In reality, people under house arrest usually weren't allowed to carry firearms, so this was a generous exception. Thinking about it, Kai realized that if David was a Chiropteran, he wouldn't need his pistol to tear through human flesh, so having it probably didn't make a difference.

"I have asked you this before. Tell me everything you know about Saya!"

As he made his demand, Kai stared straight at David's troubled profile. His face had held this expression ever since Saya was born.

"You aren't going to leave anything out. I don't want my family to be lied to a minute longer." Kai truly felt that if he knew everything about Saya's past he could help her carry her pain. He was prepared to do anything for his younger sister, even if it helped just a tiny bit.

David stared at the ash-toned wall, then suddenly turned to face Kai.

"If you learn everything, you will never be able to return to your normal life. You might no longer be able to see Saya as a member of your family."

"I am not blind. I can see that Saya is not like the rest of us."

She had superhuman skills and amazing swordsmanship. Her wounds healed as soon as they appeared. And most of all—the blood that flowed through her body had the power to destroy Chiropterans.

Sometimes when Saya was fighting, the face of the person gripping her sword didn't look like his sister, but like a young woman from a distant country.

"But, you know, that year we lived together wasn't a joke. No matter what happens to her, just like Riku, she's family."

Without a word, David stared across the table at Kai. His grim look was as hard as iron, but Kai didn't flinch.

After what felt like a very long time, David slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"To know all there is to know about Saya, in order to continue the fight against Chiropterans—are you prepared for what that means?"

Kai felt his heart fill from the bottom with a sense of dread. He took a breath and gave his answer.

". . . I am."

It would have been stupid to nod in agreement without acknowledging his fear and hesitation. He knew the danger, but one must face his fears with courage. This was Kai's belief. Back in Okinawa when he used to get into fights a lot, it was mostly without thinking.

As he stared at the back of the man turned away from him, Kai felt like something inside of him might have changed.

"There is something called 'Joel's Diary.'"

David balanced a laptop computer in his right hand and opened it.

"Joel? You mean the guy from befo—"

"It contains a record of all Chiropteran confrontations as well as Saya's entire history." The screen of the laptop lit up white as it powered up. With both elbows on the table, Kai leaned in to see the changing computer screen.

"History . . . ?"

"You have been in battle with Chiropterans. We have a reason to fight, and we are determined to fight. Only those who are also determined to fight are allowed to open Joel's Diary."

David pushed the computer his way just as the beginning of Saya Otonashi's history appeared on the screen.

The original text had been converted to digital form and translated into several languages, so Kai was able to read about her in Japanese. Having traveled through a variety of countries, Kai's limited language skills had gotten him to the point where he could have a simple conversation in English, but his reading and writing skills were not nearly to the point that he could read Joel's diary in English and understand it.

Reading a stranger's—or even a friend's—diary would normally sound about as boring as could be. However, in this case, Kai poured over the words like heavy rainwater onto dry sand.

As he read the contents of the work, Kai's fingers shook over the keyboard.

". . . Unbelievable."

That was the only word that came to mind.

Embarrassed by his limited vocabulary, Kai continued to stare at the laptop screen until he realized he was sweating profusely.

"That is the reality we know."

David's deep voice rang in Kai's head like a cracked bell.

"Can you still call Saya a member of your family?"

Kai's parched lips moved in convulsions, but all that came out was air.

Any words of affirmation were stuck in his throat.

Suddenly the doorknob turned.

"—so then we'll look for Saya-neechan?"

"Just relax. We'll find her. Red Shield's intelligence network is designed to do just that. I used to be in the CIA, so I know what I am talking about."

As Louis continued talking, Riku followed him through the door.

Kai quickly clicked the laptop closed. Riku could not be allowed to see the contents of this "diary."

"What's wrong?"

Riku was a well-attuned child. He was able to sense the tension in the room.

"Nothing."

Kai wasn't confident that his answer sounded calm or convincing.

The bright light that seemed to illuminate from every direction reflected off the green leaves of the plants and highlighted their rich colors. The shrubberies had been carefully pruned and the simple lines and curves made them look like gigantic building blocks. The natural stones of the walkway showed fossilized forms of ammonites, trilobites, and other long-extinct creatures trapped at their surfaces. Armored mammalian ancestors and carnivorous fishes—the rebuilt skeletal structures of prehistoric beasts stared into the empty sky as if they were cursing the goddess who destroyed them.

From the top floor of the Cinq Flèche headquarters building, this garden, which represented the progressive evolution of life on this planet, looked a little like an open toy box.

It went without saying these toys were meant for Diva.

It was meant to look like the "zoo" of ancient times.

Solomon walked through the green, leafy arch at the garden's entrance and went toward the rear of the oblong-shaped garden.

Shadows cast by the light darkened the skeletons of giant-sized reptiles along the path. These former rulers of the aboveground world now only saw life in the occasional sci-fi movie.

Solomon looked down as he walked.

The stone path mapped out the entire evolution of living beings in a flowing dendrogram. At that moment he was stepping on *Homo sapiens*. Solomon's elegant lips suddenly spread into a smile. "Right on time," he said, amused.

"But of course," came a voice from the shadows.

A navy-blue figure stepped away from one of the Corinthian-style stone pillars. He had beautiful skin the color of black coffee. The American navy officer's uniform didn't accentuate his muscular body, but it still looked very nice on him.

James was always the first to arrive.

Among his brothers, he was famously methodical and punctual. Like most military men, he loved order. Solomon was able to trust his assessment of his arrival time without looking at his watch.

This might cause strain in his other line of work, but as a Chevalier he was completely trustworthy. On this occasion, he was able to bring Diva's bed—the container—safely all the way to France.

Without someone like James, who was able to employ the use of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to transport the container, the entire Cinq Flèche group would have been at a loss.

The U.S.-hating Van Argeno would have been quick to sarcastically demean such assertions, but in reality that country had quite a bit of sway in worldly situations. Not utilizing them was not an option.

The young naval officer removed his official hat and held it between his upper arm and side as he looked over his surroundings.

"Where are the others?"

"According to his communication, Anshel-niisan will be a little late. As usual, we didn't hear back from Nathan."

In order to meet here at this time, each member was given more than enough notice. Eventually, the five Chevalier would join together. The only exception might be Karl, whom they hadn't been able to contact.

"... Have we still not been able to determine Karl's location?"

"Correct. We still haven't sniffed out his trail."

They had received no word of his condition after leaving Vietnam. James initiated an investigation from his post in the Navy, but so far no word had come back.

"..."

Thinking about his younger brother made Solomon's heart sink.

The fact that Karl was as obsessed with Saya as he was in love with Diva was etched clearly on his body. Solomon's ears had been prepared for news of the crumbling of Karl for quite a while.

They shouldn't have left him on his own with Saya. But it wasn't as if Karl would have listened to him, anyway. In order to get Karl in line, they would have had to leave Diva on her own. And when it came to Saya, Anshel expected his orders to be followed to the letter.

"He really can be difficult, that Karl . . ."

Even among the five remaining Chevalier, Karl was something special.

He was the only one who didn't receive Diva's blood simply for himself.

Solomon remembered the bright tear in the corner of the eye of that trembling and frightened little boy. Another possibility was that it was he who had broken them down.

"Karl's insolence is intolerable. His loose-cannon style is interfering with our strategy. He should lose his title of Chevalier."

Solomon accepted the opinion of his young brother with a generic smile.

"Unfortunately, that decision isn't up to us."

Of course, it wasn't Anshel's either. In this world, the Chevalier waited upon only one: Diva.

James's serious and determined face flinched at this response. To him, Diva was more than a goddess. The thought that he had selfishly and irrationally gone against Diva's will must have flashed through his head.

"Oh, even the world's police are flustered by the Phantom."

The words of a pale-skinned man rained down from the domed ceiling above.

Suddenly, the tall, white man was behind James and he wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

"I missed you, my brother."

"I was thinking just the opposite about you."

Obviously annoyed, James raised his palm to block the man's lips from planting themselves on his cheek.

His long, wavy blond hair was parted in the middle, and the delicately featured man turned his body away and held his hand to his forehead dramatically.

"My! You military men are so strait-laced."

Solomon laughed as he shifted his weight from one hip to the other disapprovingly.

He was the polar opposite of James, the happy-go-lucky type.

"Good to see you, Nathan."

"Wow! How long has it been? As always, the garden looks gorgeous."

With both hands on the hips of his leather pants, Nathan's eyes appraised his surroundings.

"If the Smithsonian were a little less uptight, they could do something like this."

"Instead of being a producer at the opera house, what if you were to become a museum curator?"

Nathan had built himself quite a reputation as a powerhouse in the American opera scene.

His outlandish ways sometimes got him in trouble, but he was a spirited and energetic producer with many fans as far as Europe and Asia.

"Hmm . . . I'll think about it in a hundred years or so. Right now my head is too preoccupied with thoughts of the next performance."

Nathan's eyes wandered as he held a finger to his cheek, and then, as if he suddenly remembered something, he clasped his hands together.

"That's right! That's right! About the next performance—I volunteered Cinq Flèche as the main sponsor, just to let you know."

"Again? It's fine, but next time let me know in advance. As head administrator, that would be very helpful."

Solomon was used to Nathan's one-sided favors, but he was the one who had to listen to the grumblings of the other members at the executive board meetings when forced to bring this topic up.

Because the company was originally from France, it wasn't hard to justify its support of the arts. Besides, with Nathan's high reputation, the placement of Cinq Flèche as the top sponsor in the program served as some well-placed publicity. There were actually more positives than negatives from the commitment.

"I am so very, very, very sorry. I'll be more careful . . . next time."

Nathan gave Solomon a quick wink before drawing closer to James's chest.

"Yes! A visit to an American aircraft carrier would be quite a delight. Imagine a performance on the deck of the Ronald Reagan. Surely that would be the top story from the BBC to CNN, don't you think?"

"There is no time for such amusements during war."

Nathan's smile faded at James's unencouraging reply.

"But war itself is an amusement of man, is it not?"

For James, war was his job.

On the other hand, Nathan's job was amusement. It might be fair to say his entire life revolved around amusement.

His suggestive eyes met James's cold glare, and a dissonant tone filled the air momentarily.

This was exactly how things went whenever these two got together.

To Nathan, James reacted to everything with a stiff, cool distance—and to James, Nathan was like an unreliable party boy.

The connection between these complete opposites was they were brothers bonded by their link to Diva.

Nathan took Solomon's disapproving sigh as an excuse to avert his gaze from his older brother.

"Not to change the subject, but I hope our princess is doing well?"

Both Solomon and James followed his eyes to the rear of the garden. A slender figure was lying on the far end of the terrace.

Flush with the natural stone of the garden, her shoulders and hips rose from the floor like an elegant marble statue. Her long black hair spread over her antique-looking white dress, unmoving as if frozen in a fossilized ocean.

In a deep sleep, her body was limp, and didn't stir or turn over.

"She's been like that the whole time."

"Oh, my dear. And she finally made it out of that tiny container. I'd be in a sour mood, too."

Her neck was askew like a stuffed bunny tossed on the floor with its glass eyeballs torn off. Nathan's shoulders shivered dramatically, but not because he was cold.

"So she hasn't been able to drink her wake-up blood?"

"Correct. Until Anshel-niisan returns, she will be in this condition, I am afraid."

"That reminds me, Solomon . . ."

Nathan sat down in a chair in the garden terrace, crossed his legs, and leaned back.

". . . The word I hear is that you crossed paths with Saya's Chevalier. Tell me, what was he like?"

His manicured fingers played with a wine glass he had taken from the tabletop.

Solomon walked toward the table and pulled a bottle of wine from the wine bucket on the table.

"Yes, we met in Vietnam. Hagi was his name, I believe."

He had only seen him for a moment in the rear garden of the research farm in Vietnam, so he really couldn't speak on the content of his character.

What he did sense was a deep dedication to Saya. Though they had different masters, as a fellow Chevalier he could understand Hagi's undying commitment.

"I can't get him out of my head. Tell me, was he good looking?"

"Hmm . . . I don't think you could argue that he wasn't."

"Oh! That makes me so happy. Right, James?"

James slowly turned and looked at Nathan. His eyebrows remained perfectly still.

"I couldn't care less. I am only concerned about getting her paired up with the intended target."

"You aren't interested in Saya, either? Hm?"

Nathan's finger ran across the rim of his now-full wineglass.

"You realize that she will become our bride. Isn't that right, Solomon?"

"It is."

After the bottle had traveled over the open mouths of the five wineglasses, he corked the bottle and returned it to the water in the wine bucket.

Saya—Diva's older sister.

The first time he had met her was at the Lycee du Cinq Flèche formal ball.

It was during a break when he visited the ballroom. Among all the people nibbling hors d'oeuvres and showing off, he

suddenly laid eyes on her as she stood quietly, looking out of place, all by herself.

Solomon was aware of how his looks had an effect on human females. Sometimes that had advantages, and sometimes it was a hindrance. That night at Lycee it was the latter.

To the unsuspecting Saya, Solomon must have looked like an alley cat attacking a baby chick in front of the hordes of girls watching him.

It was her slightly unusual disposition that made him notice her, and he quickly asked her to dance as a sort of insect repellant for the closing girls. Truly, that had been his only intention.

However, getting a close look at her face, he saw a flower just blooming in the sunlight, and Solomon felt exhilarated. He had felt a little light headed as he saw the color rise in her cheeks, and every time he looked into those two glistening black pearls for eyes he discovered something new, causing the excitement to rise in his chest.

Thinking about it now, he knew it was his Chevalier instinct responding to her "blood." However, Solomon could barely believe that was the same girl who had fought Karl soon afterward, telling him that something wasn't right about her. It wasn't because they were the same race, but the feelings that can happen between a man and a woman . . . at least that's what Solomon wanted to chalk it up to.

"That Saya. I can't help but wonder what our future with her will be like."

"But, at the same time, she is a threat."

James's blunt words came out as heartless, as if they intended to smash the dream of a little girl making a wish upon a star.

"Her blood is deadly to us."

"We understand that."

Solomon quickly responded in order to diffuse any unnecessary tension.

"But to be clear, both she and we come from the same bloodline. But by no means am I saying we don't have a reason to be at odds with her. We got pulled into that situation by—"

"—Red Shield."

The voice of the master resonated clearly.

The wine was poured into the glass in anticipation of her arrival.

The young woman stroking Diva's hair below the fossilized Cretaceous works of art stood and walked toward them.

Her blond hair was cut in a bob, and her shapely facial features implied Russian descent. It was not a woman any of them knew. However, her—or rather, his—true identity was no mystery to Solomon, Nathan, or James.

"I kept you waiting."

Anshel Goldsmith.

With a rank in title in the British royal family, Anshel was a high roller in the European financial markets, and as he strolled under the arch to the table where they were located, his gait grew longer.

"Communications were severed for two full weeks. Where were you?"

"Russia."

The military cross-examination from James seemed disrespectful to their eldest brother, but Anshel paid no mind as he made his way across the terrace.

As he passed under the dense shadow of shrubbery, his appearance completed the transformation back to his natural state.

The lively knit top and feminine low-rise denim jeans disappeared, replaced by an ink-black three-piece suit. It was from the same tailor shop in Seville that he had been going to for the last century.

He looked to be in his fifties, but he might have looked older than his actual age thanks to the beard he maintained around his chin. It was likely there were few that knew his actual age. All

Solomon knew for sure was his older brother had lived longer than he.

"What were you doing all the way in Russia?"

"I met with Saya."

As their older brother's tall and burly figure stepped off the pathway onto the terrace, Solomon froze at his words. He could hear the breathing of his two younger brothers stop short, as well.

A thick silence fell over the manmade garden.

Even Nathan, whose mouth never seemed to stop moving, clammed up for several seconds before he had to say something.

". . . To boldly approach her all on your own. Wow! That is your style."

"I wanted to see her with my own eyes. Especially this generation Saya."

Seeing the smile on the face of his difficult-to-read brother, Solomon entered the conversation.

"So, what was she like?"

"During the time I was with her, Saya seemed more like a human. In fact, it wouldn't be exaggerating to say she seemed exactly like a human . . ."

Anshel brought his glass of wine to his face and let the wine rotate in the glass at eye level.

The rich red liquid turned through the glass, the bright sun penetrating the tips of the waves, painting Anshel's face with the color of sunset.

". . . but her blood can still kill us."

Solomon had turned to his brother, who was still examining his wine, to present his question.

"Were you able to see Hagi, as well?"

"Wherever Saya goes, Hagi is there. He's like a puppy."

"So why didn't you try and capture her?"

Anshel chuckled slightly at the thinly veiled accusation of his inefficiency as he set his wineglass back onto the table.

"There is a certain order to things. On top of that, I did not want to have to shed any blood."

"Blood?"

"Yes. If we don't try to understand those of the same race as us, and only measure our accomplishments by how much blood is spilled, doesn't that make us no better than humans?"

Solomon was relieved at his sometimes-empathetic older brother's response. He, too, did not enjoy dramatic arguments.

"So how shall we proceed from now?"

Diva had awakened and her soon-to-be bridegroom, Hagi, had been found. Not only that, these four Chevalier, only missing Karl, were assembled together here.

In dealing with Saya, the less bloodshed the better. A meeting of the sisters was likely on the agenda, as well.

"Which brings me to my next point. I invited Saya to the Zoo."

The conversation suddenly took an unexpected turn.

The Zoo was a very special place for Solomon and his brothers.

"If I remember correctly, Niisan called it the place where things began."

To the Chevalier, the place where Diva was born was the place where things began. Where Saya was born, as well.

"Yes. It is where everything began, and where everything will end."

Anshel intended to settle their destiny at the Zoo.

Nathan stroked his own cheek affectionately with his hand. "What a fine performance . . . I'm almost ready to invite you to the Metropolitan."

This was meant to be quite an award from the stage master of the Metropolitan Opera House. Even as a joke, Anshel should have enjoyed it, but his expression didn't change.

Without missing a beat, his uniformed younger brother cut in to confirm his older brother's intentions.

"So that is where we will capture Hagi?"

"That is my plan. But before that—"

Anshel took a breath and traded glances with each of his brothers around the table.

"—we need to take care of the meddling Saya."

From Nathan's lips came an ominous whistle.

James maintained his metallic composure.

He wasn't trying to protest his older brother's idea, but show that it was no surprise to him.

"Niisan, do you mean . . ."

Solomon found difficulty forcing the words out of his throat.

". . . do you mean kill her?"

Anshel responded to the question finished by James with silence.

The thought of such a troublesome task made Nathan raise his eyes to his eldest brother.

"Are you serious? Don't you know that Saya is supposed to be our bride?"

"We exist for the sake of Diva."

Anshel responded in the same tone as when he had talked about not fighting within the same race.

Solomon felt agitated.

It wasn't clear to him what Anshel's true feelings were. What was his brother saying?

His two younger brothers' quick responses indicated they didn't fret as he did.

"I will abide by Anshel's word."

"I have no reason to object. After all, we are the stage crew there to help make Diva shine."

Their replies sounded too much like lines from a script for Chevalier assigned to protect Diva.

Receiving those responses, Anshel turned to Solomon. He let out a deep sigh before giving his answer to his older brother.

"Anshel-niisan . . . until now I have believed every word you have said, and have done everything I can for you and Diva, without question."

In the past, Solomon had received orders from his beloved brother that were so repulsive it was enough to make him vomit.

When all of Europe was at war, Solomon had followed his elder brother's commands, and ended up with his hands stained with blood.

A cool breeze chilled Solomon's soul as he remembered the photos of his deceased brothers in Third Reich Nazi uniforms. He had no regrets, but there were traces of sadness still there.

Still, Anshel's words applied to Diva exactly. The reason was Solomon owed his very body and life to Anshel.

"Do you think this time you could leave the matter of Saya to me?"

". . . But you've seen Saya this time around."

"That's exactly why."

Solomon wasn't conscious of the fact that his voice had gotten stronger.

"Saya is too close to people right now. The ones training her how to engage in battle are surely the ones that call themselves 'Red Shield.'"

In other words, she was being undermined by human values.

If that happened, the focus on what haunted her inside would be lost, and her bond to them—the name Chiropteran was so meaningless—would never happen.

"It goes without saying that our desire is to exist together. If we could communicate that to her, she may walk the same path as us."

There was no look of unpleasantness on Anshel's face.

He simply stared hard into Solomon's bright blue eyes.

". . . She will arrive at the Zoo. From then it will take her twenty-four hours to figure out what you really are. During that one day you may do what you will."

One day—
Saya's fate would be decided within the span of one day.

Upon exiting the Cinq Flèche headquarters building at this time of day, one's body was immediately sunk in the aquamarine of the city of Paris. The last remains of the sunset in the western sky bounced off the waves of the Seine River, coloring them a dark red.

The riverside esplanade was empty of people.

Alone with an elbow on the guardrail, Solomon looked across to the opposite shore and let out a deep breath.

He left his three brothers behind in the garden. Diva was still sleeping. She was not completely free of her hibernating state.

Solomon wondered what she thought of her older sister. He saw her fluctuate back and forth over the fine line between love and hate, yet he wouldn't dare pretend to understand her true feelings. As Anshel would advise, he wished she could make up her mind.

Diva looked upon Anshel as a father figure.

But that wasn't all. Her personality matched with Karl's, and she saw James as a selfish child. Nathan was a free-spirited and chatty . . . big sister?

Diva may have been like Saya in that they both wanted to make a family. Neither knew the true love of parents and siblings.

However, allowing Saya to join a family of simple humans was unacceptable. Her family should include Diva and Solomon and the like.

But will Saya understand this . . . ?

This was not the only thing weighing on Solomon's mind.

Although invitations hadn't been made, some extra guests had arrived.

His ears buzzed with their presence.

Solomon leapt backward only to see the space his head had just exited filled with two iron blades.

The copper guardrail Solomon stood before snapped as if it were made of candy and rolled across the stone path.

"What do you want from me?"

The two figures turned to see Solomon standing on the stairs behind them.

They wore long robes like monks, but each carried a large, bladed weapon. One carried what looked like a large-sized machete and the other had an Asian bladed polearm called a glaive in the West.

"You are a Chevalier."

The voice told Solomon the speaker was a girl.

"And what might you be?"

If they knew that word, these two couldn't have been simple muggers.

The way they moved meant they weren't simply human, either.

"Schiff."

From under her hood, the girl's face looked like a cat's. More than her precisely groomed short hair, her eyes looked especially feline. She looked like a young boy from medieval times.

Solomon could see that her partner's facial features were almost the same as hers. He was taller, though, and his body looked heavier than hers. Perhaps he was just a boy. Fraternal twins that looked this similar were rare among humans.

"Schiff . . . ?"

It was a word Solomon hadn't heard before. Yet, he did have an inkling.

"I heard about you from Van."

These were the same beings that had invaded Section D2 of the research facility and taken a bite out of a "mouse." They didn't appear to be the exact same two that appeared in the

security-camera videos, but their clothes and abilities indicated they were at least from the same group.

"We will take your blood for our brothers!"

The pair moved in a hazy flicker. A human's eyes wouldn't have been able to follow the speed of their motion.

A moment later, the girl hung above Solomon's head and he turned and avoided her blade while at the same time dodging the thrust of the boy, who was suddenly behind him.

It was clear now why the "mice" hadn't been able to fight back.

As his mind engaged this thought, Solomon put distance between himself and his attackers, but his paltry estimations of their abilities became clear not a moment later.

His surroundings swirled around him.

Again, two blades swung down at him from different directions, this time even faster than before.

They were trying to cloud his judgment on purpose. Still, this wasn't an attack he couldn't escape—if it weren't for the third assailant.

As Solomon spun between the blades of the machete and glaive which clipped the fabric of his suit, he didn't anticipate the appearance of the third figure.

As gurgles of blood streamed from his shoulder, the white sleeve of his suit soared through the air.

Solomon hurled his body backward as he watched his right arm roll across the esplanade and his white suit turn red with blood. He gave a disapproving scowl.

". . . I can't believe you. I liked this suit, too."

The pain from his wound raised an anger in him these two wouldn't soon forget. Solomon felt a blackness grow in his chest and ooze from his lungs.

"I guess I don't need to go easy on you any longer."

Solomon's eyes were tinged crimson as a tall boy stood before him.

He must have been with the other two. His right hand gripped bladed brass knuckles, called cestus, the classical weapons that had separated his arm from his body only moments earlier.

The night breeze played with his long white hair, and the boy pushed it away from his beautiful face.

The smile on his lips showed a separation from this sad world, and if an outsider were to look at the two of them at that moment, he might think they shared a similar look. It was the look of someone whose life in this world was fleeting.

"Ghee, hurry! His blood!"

"Please."

With her battle-ax at the ready, the girl nabbed Solomon's separated arm and flung it into the air.

The white-haired boy caught it with his left hand and brought the cross section, dripping red, to his awaiting tongue. He welcomed the flowing blood, as indicated by the bobbing of his Adam's apple. For such a refined-looking boy, this was a very savage way to act.

Ghee wiped the blood dripping down his chin on his sleeve. "This is certainly the blood of a Chevalier." The area around his mouth was stained a scarlet color, and in addition he showed no indication of joy or victory. Blood dripped from his chin and onto the collar of the military uniform he wore under his robe.

"... What are you?" Solomon gently asked his question to the individual who had just finished inhaling his blood.

He wasn't happy about the situation, but he had to know. First the "mouse" at the research center, and now a Chevalier. These people were seeking their blood. What could they possibly be trying to achieve?

"In order to purify our cursed blood, we need yours. Nothing more."

No longer of any use to him, Ghee tossed Solomon's arm to the ground.

"Your blood . . . cursed?"

Just as he thought, there was something special about them.

First of all, he had never seen a Chiropteran like this. The first indications made Solomon think they were similar to Chevalier, but something wasn't quite the same. In addition, it was very difficult to imagine there were other queens besides Diva and Saya.

"Dismas, Gestas, let's go back."

"But . . ."

The boy carrying the glaive showed disapproval of Ghee's frank suggestion.

"We got what we came for. No point in overstaying our visit."

"And the Chevalier will let us go?"

"We didn't come here to kill him. Right, Gestas?"

If one were comparing twins, then Ghee would have been the calmer, less-emotional one.

For whatever reason, the boy named Gestas wasn't prepared to give his consent.

"They were the ones who made Kilbed. I can't overlook that."

Solomon felt an incredible resentment from Gestas's eyes.

His body had no memory, and that word had never passed by Solomon's ears before, but there was no question that they held a resentment and hatred toward the Chevalier. It would be necessary to question them further. Solomon couldn't allow them to escape.

"You can't see past it? Coincidentally, we share the same opinion."

Solomon took a step forward.

He was feeling a little low about the Saya situation. In times like these, it was not a bad idea to get one's body in motion.

As if shocked by static electricity, the bodies of Gestas and Dismas flew straight backward as they put their guards up.

Only Ghee kept his weapon lowered, and he let out a melancholy sigh.

"You two pull yourselves together. How easy an opponent do you think he is?"

"... We win by our numbers." Dismas was slow in responding. She was no fool.

"I am going to hold back. I don't have time to fight unnecessary battles."

"Suit yourself!" Dismas's tiny body jumped up like an arrow.

She swung her machete from her chest, but Solomon brushed it away easily with his left hand. At the same time, he planted his knee in her abdomen, and kicked her straight up into the air.

"Damn you!"

Off by a hair's breadth, the strike by Gestas was done out of anger, most likely.

Solomon stepped into Gestas and spun around to his backside, brushing him with his left hand.

The five fingers of Solomon's left hand had turned into one sharp blade which sliced through the robe and into his flesh, taking Gestas by surprise.

Solomon took no notice of the body slumping into a puddle of its own blood as he took off into the air.

He caught up with Dismas as she still soared into the night sky from his kick to her midsection moments earlier, and pressed his bladed hand into her back.

"Ga—"

The blade extending from his fingers found her heart, and an anguished scream mixed with blood fell from her mouth into the night breeze.

With a shake of his hand, her body dropped onto the railing at the edge of the river. The copper pipe bent as it broke her fall.

Solomon kicked off the top of a streetlamp to change direction and accelerate toward the third target of the evening.

Solomon's transformed hand crashed into Ghee's metal blade.

As dazzling sparks illuminated the boy's naturally beautiful face, Solomon noticed a curious scar on his cheek.

Until now, it had been hidden behind his long hair, which was why Solomon hadn't noticed it. The skin on Ghee's left cheek was cracked in a pattern like a spider's web, and the color of blood peeked through the narrow fissures.

"That is . . . ?"

"The mark of the cursed."

He answered matter-of-factly, as if he wasn't speaking about himself, but then immediately made a hasty retreat.

As their bodies separated, the heavy blade of the glaive came down from above and barely scraped Solomon's nose before cracking the stone pathway below.

"Ghee, go on ahead."

It was Gestas. From the hem of his blood-soaked robe dripped scarlet drops onto the stone esplanade.

The cut Solomon had delivered hadn't healed.

". . . I figured you would need me to give you a hand."

"You don't have time. You have information you need to give to Moses!"

It was Dismas who was yelling at Ghee.

As Solomon dealt with the girl swinging her blade from his rear, he turned to see Ghee grinning. For a smile, it appeared very sad.

"Good luck to you," said Ghee. For a moment, an afterimage of Ghee's body remained, and then it faded into the night.

Solomon made no attempt to follow him. There was no need to secure all three of them. Two of them conveniently stayed behind.

One would be killed, and one would be kept alive.

Arms and legs just got in the way. All that was needed was a working mouth.

Solomon slashed downward, diagonally at Dismas's chest, and as she cowered back he put space between them. His left hand

returned to its human form and he put it into his suit pocket and pulled out a cell phone. He fumbled as he pushed the buttons; he wasn't used to using the phone with his left hand.

"Van? It's me. Sorry to call suddenly. I have a favor to ask you."

Solomon left the dumbfounded bodies of Dismas and Gestas where they were as he continued the conversation with his subordinate.

"Do you think you could get a recovery vehicle to the bank of the Seine near headquarters?"

Gestas's face was distorted with rage. "God damn you . . ."

As Solomon watched him from the corner of his eye, he traded words with Van in a calm and gentle voice.

"The package? I will get it ready as soon as I hang up with you. Bye, then. Thank you for your assistance."

The moment he cut the line with Van, Gestas let out a roar.

"It's time to kill, Dismas!"

"Aa!"

The twin Schiff sprung forward together as if synchronized.

Without showing his wariness, Solomon returned the cell phone to his pocket.

"I guess this is a suitable time."

The moon had risen high in the sky. Not good for nighttime amusements.

The air around Solomon suddenly swirled with commotion.

Like a boulder pulverized into rubble, the shredded arms and legs of the two attackers sprayed blood in all directions as their dismembered limbs spun through the air.

The full moon shone blue on the crumbling spire.

Well past midnight, daybreak was not far off.

The size of the city called Paris wasn't proportional to the depth of its history. Crossing Justinian the Great's castle walls,

one would have found streets lined with refined residences and merchants surrounded by abundant fields and rich forests.

It was that sort of place, so perhaps that was why Parisians took little notice of a decaying church. It was in no condition to be restored, and the lack of a name indicated the ruins were not considered historic. After the battle he had just fought, this was the place Ghee returned to.

The reason it took so long to return was his legs wouldn't move at the speed he expected.

"You're late."

Ghee looked up at the voice calling down to him.

Carmen sat atop a stone wall in one of the many places where the ceiling had already collapsed.

Next to him sat his ever-present younger sister, Aurélien, and beside him, Ghee could make out the forms of Moses, Lulu, Dars, Gudrif, and Yan, all together.

"It took more time than I expected. I should have known the Chevalier would be no pushover."

Saying as much, Ghee kicked off the weed-covered ground.

He landed on one of the remaining crossbeams that at some point had held up part of the ceiling. It was only a five- or six-meter leap, but this time he wasn't sure that he would make it or not. The tendons of his muscles felt like they had been nearly drained of energy.

However, Ghee wouldn't let one inch of his face reveal his concern as he greeted his brethren atop the church.

"What happened to Gestas and Dismas?"

". . . They won't be coming back." Conscious of the question from Moses, Ghee's answer was short, but not cold.

They wouldn't be coming back.

It took a second or two of silence for everyone in the group to fully understand what that meant.

"You mean . . . they're dead?"

He didn't want to ask, but he had to know for sure. The question came from Gudrif.

Ghee could only silently bow his head.

"It can't be . . . After all we did to get out of Kilbed . . ."

The face of the youngest of all, Lulu, was distorted in a childish expression.

Dars had a craggy grimace on his face, and Yan bit his lower lip.

"You! You abandoned them there?!"

"I guess that's one way of putting it."

"You piece of . . ."

The jeer was accompanied by Carmen's fist against Ghee's cheek.

It was an expected response. Ghee was well aware of his hotheaded disposition. He could have moved out of the way with ease, but he could understand Carmen's anger. Ghee had no intentions of making up excuses regarding the sacrifice of two of their members.

"Stop this. Will fighting amongst ourselves help bring them back?"

Moses used his typical brand of reasoning to reel Carmen in.

Ghee had a high opinion of his logic and judgment. The other members of the circle seemed to feel the same way. If Moses hadn't assembled everyone's opinions and devised a plan, escape from Kilbed would have been much more difficult. The hot-blooded Carmen and Lars looked up to Moses.

"What we have left is the eight of us."

The thoughtful comment by Moses elicited a piercing glance from Carmen.

"How can you speak so calmly?"

"We all agreed to the plan that was executed. What's important is what happens from here on out."

"How your mouth can form those words . . ."

Carmen's teeth ground together as Aurélien stroked his arm.

"Carmen," she said softly. Her face turned toward her older brother's and she comforted his soul.

" . . . Dammit!"

His eyes turned down with a look of regret, and he kicked the stone floor. Ghee and Moses understood. He had a closer relationship to them. His anger at Ghee was to prove his love for Dismas and Gestas.

"Ghee. The Chevalier's blood?"

"Yes, well, somehow we were able to."

Ghee wiped the blood from his cut lip with the back of his hand and stood up straight. By nature, he was able to anticipate the pain before he felt it, but, judging from the tissue that had come off on the backs of his fingers, his healing power was in decay.

Clearly, it didn't work.

His lips curled into a transparent smile.

". . . How about you guys?"

"We were able to ignore the smell long enough to eat one of their 'mice,' but it didn't do any good."

Dars sounded bored by his own response. It was he and Lulu who had entered the Cinq Flèche facility.

"What about the report from Moses and the others who had gone to Russia to sniff out Saya's blood?"

Moses shook his head.

"We were that close, but were unable to get our hands on Saya's blood."

"I see. Still, we haven't lost hope."

"What do you mean? What about the Chevalier's blood . . . ?"

Before he said the words, Moses had likely already figured out the answer.

His long hair could no longer cover the red fissures creeping across his face.

"Ghee, you . . ."

Carmen's trembling words coupled with his blank stare made Ghee laugh.

Around his feet was a sound like pottery cracking.

The crystallization process had begun.

His right arm detached itself from his shoulder.

"This is the answer."

The time had come. The "Thorn" had advanced so far he could no longer keep his body together.

Aurélien covered her mouth with both hands.

"Ghee . . ."

"Why did you hide it?!"

"What can I possibly say? I am sorry I got in the way of helping the sick . . ."

As Carmen laid a hand on his shoulder, Ghee smiled blankly, as if he were looking him straight in the eyes, although that didn't seem to be possible now. His optic nerve had apparently turned to stone.

The canals of his ears were experiencing the same phenomenon. He lost his equilibrium, and Carmen held him in his arms.

"You god damn son of a . . ."

"What's that sniveling face? That isn't like you."

The truth was Ghee could no longer see anything.

On the other hand, the way Carmen's body quivered told him more than he needed to know. He cared deeply for the circle, and there was nothing in this world that would break that love.

"Ghee. We . . . can't help you."

The voice of Moses felt like a stone pressed against his soul.

Moses felt that he was the one most responsible. Moses hated the idea of watching one of his own die in front of his eyes and not being able to do anything to stop it. Ghee was sure he was wringing his hands in anger and disgust.

"You are going to die too, Ghee? No! I don't like this . . ."

The one sobbing and protesting at the same time was Lulu.

Despite having no feeling in his left hand, he was somehow able to lift it a little, and pet the head of the girl who was now clinging to his side.

"Please, don't be sad. We have known for a long time this day would come. This body cannot be healed by the Chevalier's blood. Just learning that much has made it worth it."

It was better than no legacy––

"I just wish one thing. I wish I could have walked in the sun's beams . . . just once."

The eastern horizon was beginning to reflect a golden tinge.

The blinded Ghee was able to sense the sunlight.

For the first time in his life, Ghee was able to experience the light that would normally burn the body of a Schiff.

With a mysterious sense of calm, all life left Ghee's body.

Moses, Carmen, Aurélien, Lulu, Yan, Gudrif, Dars . . . all my beloved siblings.

Good luck to you.

Someday we will walk in the glorious sunlight together . . .



BOOK FOUR: THE ZOO

01

MANY JAPANESE ARE under the impression that France is a country of refinement and elegance.

Gourmet cuisine and fine wines, Parisian fashion designers, the Palace of Versailles, the Louvre . . . these are the images that come to most people's minds. There is little doubt students of literature will recall names like Saussure and Barthes, Zola and Molière.

For someone to associate France with automobile repair would be very unlikely. Even though it is the home of the Renault family name.

"Heeey, how iiis it?"

The clearly enunciated voice came from under an elm tree at the side of the gravel road.

"It's no use. It's overheated."

Akihiro Okamura lifted his head from under the hood of the car, wiped the sweat from his chin and threw his hands in the air, defeated.

The tall and slender girl standing in the shade of the tree with a hand on her hip looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Why is it no use?"

"Why . . . ? Because you chose this broke-down piece of crap of a car. You have five million yen. You could have spent a little more on the car you picked."

"I couldn't resist. It's so cute."

Mao Jahana's unneeded last statement caused Okamura to look at her face and let out a weak sigh.

Of course, the first thing you notice about anything is how it looks, but this reasoning was that of a child.

The Renault Quatre's round shape and small size were attractive, and it was a well-loved model by aficionados, but one wouldn't expect to see a model this old on the road today. It wasn't restored or even well kept, and for the price equivalent to a case of champagne, the Quatre made it just fine from the junk car lot where they bought it to this exact spot.

"Oooh! You are sooo right! It is sooo cute!"

To say they were stranded under the blazing sun would have been an exaggeration, but the sun's rays during this time of year in Bordeaux were still pretty strong. That was why the radiator overheated and was making him sweat like a pig. Okamura reached in his vest pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes.

Before he knew what happened, Mao had reached out her hand and grabbed it.

"What're you doing?!"

"Did you already forget our deal?"

Mao pressed her face near his, and opened up her balled right hand to reveal the crushed box of Peace brand cigarettes before dropping it to the ground. Her eyes didn't move as she crushed it with the heel of her boot, and Okamura was reminded that this was the only daughter of the wealthiest family in Koza, not to mention the Jahana Syndicate.

"No smoking around me. Remember?"

". . . I remember."

Before departing from Okinawa, this point was very high on her list of demands. Her rugged but charming face and showy appearance hinted that she may already have been experienced in the habits of smoking and drinking, but actually was well aware of the dangers of nicotine and tar.

Okamura, who couldn't research or write a story without a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, looked at her as if she were his natural enemy.

Unfortunately, she was also his sponsor.

The monster that he encountered at Lycee du Cinq Flèche in Vietnam, and the girl that fought against it with equal strength—the memory came back to Okamura in a déjà vu. Seeing the same scene as a photo his deceased father took during the Vietnam War made Okamura question his own sanity.

The name of the girl in the photo was Saya Otonashi, and the person who informed him of this was Mao.

Having run into Mao when he was researching a story at Koza Commercial High School was an incredibly lucky break, but it also came with a downside.

The good part, obviously, was that she was sponsoring their travel costs and all other expenses, and she had more than enough cash to do it. On the other side, the negative part was in order to access the funds he had to agree to keep her as a traveling partner, and he wasn't allowed to smoke when she was around. Considering that she had taken the cash from her father without telling him made those problems relatively small.

It didn't help that her father was *that* Jahana—the head of the Jahana Syndicate and the president of Jahana Industries.

The thought of what might happen when they returned to Okinawa sent a shiver down Okamura's neck.

Of course, if his investigation didn't unearth anything, there would be no point in returning home.

"Ooonh! When am I going to be able to see Kai again . . . ?"

With both arms behind her head, Mao complained to the blue sky and Okamura felt a tinge of sympathy.

Most girls in love wouldn't follow their man across the ocean to another continent in order to catch him.

Kai Miyagusuku was the non-blood-related older brother of Saya Otonashi, and from what they understood, the two were together at this time. Mao's desire to meet with Kai again likely matched Okamura's desire to solve the many puzzles surrounding the enigmatic Saya.

"And I was this close to getting to her at Cinq Flèche. Right now our only lead is Chateau Duel. Hmph. Might as well take our time heading that way."

The real location of the winery depicted on the wine bottles in the underground warehouse at Lycee was the Chateau Duel vineyards located in the Bordeaux region of France.

Happily, they wouldn't have much trouble reaching their destination. The car breaking down was an unexpected hiccup, but for being in a completely foreign country, Okamura had a good idea of where the winery was from there.

"I do not want to 'take our time'!"

"Hey, watch it!"

Okamura lifted a bucket he had found off the ground as Mao was swinging her handbag to emphasize her point.

"For now, I need to find some water. Keep an eye on the car."

He pulled a fresh pack of cigarettes from a different pocket in his vest and turned his back on his hot-tempered sponsor. If he followed the road, Okamura assumed he would hit a house eventually.

The high-pitched exhaust sound came after he had gone several steps.

Okamura turned to see a white Jaguar racing down this Bordeaux country road. It kicked up gravel and came to a stop, as their broken-down Renault was blocking its way. Honking the horn wasn't going to make the car move, either.

"I'm sorry. Our car seems to have broken down."

Okamura was more than a little shocked to hear Mao's apology in fluent French. He never would have guessed she was such a

dedicated student, but looks could be deceiving. Since his trip to French-speaking Vietnam, Okamura had thought about learning basic conversational French, but he now saw that Mao's beautiful pronunciation could be used to their advantage.

"I see . . ."

The young Caucasian man in the driver's seat raised his eyebrows slightly.

Because the convertible sports car was low to the ground, Okamura had no trouble getting a good look at the driver from where he stood. In his amateur opinion, he appeared to be a stunningly handsome young man. Locks of wavy, light-blond hair hung in front of the bridge of his nose. His cool eyes looked over the top of his sunglasses. He probably wore them to keep the dust out of his eyes as he drove.

"Give me just a minute. I'll move it out of your way."

Just as Okamura spoke those words an idea crossed his mind.

If he could push the car off the road, why waste time going to get water, when he could just push the car from the back while Mao steered? With a car this small, it shouldn't be that big a deal. But Okamura didn't offer up his idea.

The obviously younger, handsome man was in the newest model of a very classy automobile. His lily-white suit looked to be Armani, or some other high-quality, tailor-fit brand.

Money was obviously not a problem, yet his face had "big hearted" and "generous" written all over it.

Exactly the kind of guy Okamura despised.

He would have fit in well with the bigwigs and society types at the yearly ball held at Lycee du Cinq Flèche in Vietnam. Okamura didn't like to talk about the fact that when he tried to enter he was turned away at the gate. He still had some pent-up resentment over the situation.

"No, it's fine. I'm in a hurry."

He turned down the offer with a gentle tone, but there was nothing gentle about what he did next.

He put the car in reverse and turned the wheel hard.

When he got the Jaguar pointed in the right direction, he gunned forward, carrying the car up the embankment on the side of the road.

"Waa . . ."

Surprised, Mao took a step back.

As his bumper slid across the dirt, the Jaguar made an arch around their car up and down the embankment. Completing the detour, the back wheels of the car spun, kicking up gravel and dust, and before they knew it, the car was far down the country road.

"What a show-off!"

You could buy a second house in Japan for the price of that car, but that spoiled brat treated it as if it was a toy to play with in the dirt. Okamura lit his cigarette, and inhaled.

Still, there was something he couldn't shake.

"I've seen that guy somewhere before . . ."

"He's the president of Cinq Flèche, isn't he?" Mao said it as if it were as obvious as the sun in the sky.

Okamura responded to her condescending identification by exhaling a lungful of cigarette smoke.

"Cinq Flèche? But how do you . . ."

"Look here!"

Mao's upper half disappeared into the back of the Renault Quatre and returned with some documents regarding Cinq Flèche Corporation. She flipped to a certain page and showed it to him.

The page described the CEO of the gigantic multinational pharmaceutical company and was accompanied by a photograph. The face in the picture was the spitting image of the young man who had just driven away in his Jaguar.

"If you realized that, why didn't you say anything?"

"I just realized it."

With her hand on him, Mao's lips bent in a discouraged slant.

"But if that guy was Solomon so-and-so, what were you going to do?"

"Don't be stupid. He's not someone you can just call up and get an interview with. And he might know something about D67, too . . ."

"Do you think he knows where Kai is?"

"Hmm . . . That I don't know."

"Then forget it."

". . ."

Without saying another word Okamura popped another cigarette between his lips.

His sponsor appeared to have absolutely no interest in all the work this reporter had done and the bridges he had burned in getting them here.

Chateau Duel was a small plantation of a winery located in the world-famous Bordeaux region. They grew the grapes on site in the vineyard, and distilled the wine.

The many wineries that dot the Bordeaux region were ranked on a scale from one to five but, naturally, Chateau Duel wasn't large enough to appear in those rankings. It wouldn't even pass the famous Cru Bourgeois, which was in the low end of the fives.

Therefore, it was not well known in Japan.

That was probably why the middle-aged man running the winery was so enthusiastic to meet this pair wanting to learn about the place.

"This is our latest vintage."

He filled two glasses with a reddish liquid.

The long history and richness of the winery came through in the fragrant scent that drifted from the glasses.

"Cheers."

Licking her lips, the wine glass Mao reached out for suddenly disappeared from her field of vision.

Okamura drained the contents of the glass intended for Mao in one gulp.

"What'd you do that for?"

"You aren't old enough to drink, I assume."

With a self-satisfied look, Okamura picked the other wine glass up from the table.

He spoke down to her like a teacher, and acted like he was more of a socialite than could possibly be true.

"Relax, you old geezer."

"That was for the cigarettes earlier."

He rotated the second glass between his fingers and smiled as he sniffed its contents. Mao clacked her tongue as she glared at him.

"The polyphenols of red wine are good for health and beauty. It's like medicine."

They had come all the way to a winery in France, and it was her one chance to taste their precious commodity.

Placing the cork back in the bottle, and the bottle back on the table, their host looked at the two of them with humbly curious eyes.

"That may be true, but you two are quite a curious pair. You came all the way from Japan to visit this little country vineyard?"

"The truth is we are interested in the wine you make here. Specifically, Chateau Duel's 1967 vintage."

Okamura's cover was that he was a writer for a new women's travel magazine. Mao was supposed to be his intern and assistant.

"Nineteen sixty-seven? Oh! I remember that year well."

"What do you mean?"

"We had too much rain, which spoiled the grapes. It was a real mess, but there was a company that bought it all up. They really saved us."

Neither Okamura nor the old man noticed the wine glass and bottle had disappeared from the table and that Mao had slipped to the terrace.

Under the wisteria arbor Mao filled the glass to the rim and carried it to her mouth.

"Mmm . . . This is the life."

Compared with the very expensive bottles of Chateau Haut Brion and Chateau Margaux stored in her father's wine cellar, this was a lighter and more simple wine, yet its balance between acidic and sweet was not bad at all.

This area for high-end wine wasn't far from the Medoc region, thought Mao, as she painted a map of the area in her head.

"So as a Bordeaux wine, it's a bit like . . . Chateau Latour meets Chateau Lafite-Rothschild?"

A refined palate like hers was surely limited to the rich and famous daughters of fathers who ran companies like Jahana Industries.

And speaking of celebrity, what about that handsome cutie from earlier—

"The company that purchased your wine . . . That wouldn't have been Cinq Flèche, would it?"

—Right, right. Goldsmith from Cinq Flèche. He was a very kind gentleman, but didn't come across as really dependable. The son of a rich family, he didn't seem to have much direction, a little like Kai.

Mao nodded in agreement just as the old man spoke in a disappointed tone.

"You already knew that? You know, back then they were still just a little food-processing company."

Now it was a worldwide conglomerate. Their host's statement carried a proud tone, implying the winery had some effect on Cinq Flèche's growth.

Okamura paused, seemingly contemplating his thoughts before responding.

"So it all really comes back to Cinq Flèche . . ."
He must have recalled their encounter with Solomon Goldsmith.
However, Mao had discovered a different anomaly.
". . . Say, isn't this wrong?"
"What?"
"This label. The buildings are different."
Mao stepped out from the shade of the arbor into the garden and held up the wine bottle.

Looking at the picture imprinted on the label of the dark green bottle, Mao saw an ancient stronghold of a building, which looked very different from the newer building she understood as the winery now.

Even having never studied European architecture, it was clear that the ancient-looking keep on the bottle and the fancy wood structure before her were not the same.

"Hey! Whe-when did you . . ."

The old man stepped out onto the terrace to address the briefly ignored bottle-carrying intern, leaving the stuttering Okamura inside.

"You have a good eye, Miss. That label isn't this winery."

"What do you mean?"

"My son built this new distillery with updated equipment. Look over there."

The host pointed toward a hill between two fields teeming with grape vines.

"He used to live on the other side of that ridge."

All that could be seen on the large hill was a grove of trees.

"The castle on the label belonged to a very rich individual by the name of Joel Goldschmidt."

"Joel Goldschmidt?"

It was Okamura who asked, as he finally stepped outside and stood in line with Mao and the winery man looking at the horizon.

Unfortunately, they were not able to see the castle from where they stood.

"Yes. But there was a huge fire, and everyone inside was killed. They tried to sell the land, but no one would buy it, thinking it was cursed. It still stands as it was to this day."

"When did that fire happen?"

"It was more than one hundred years ago. It was already in ruins when I was born. My grandfather bought the vineyards, and it became Chateau Duel."

"I see."

Okamura scratched his head as if he weren't quite satisfied.

Mao noticed little flakes of dandruff fall from his roughly cut hair and she took a step sideways in disgust. The rules regarding smoking had been established. Now it seemed some rules about personal hygiene would have to be made, too.

"A rich man's castle, right? They must have had all kinds of staff and servants. Would a fire really kill every one of them?"

In response to Okamura's doubtful tone, the old man let out an unexpected chuckle.

"You think so too, hm? There's another rumor that went around about that incident."

He lowered his voice like a storyteller about to tell a ghost tale.

With the wine bottle still in her hand, Mao leaned in closer. "What is it? What? This sounds interesting!"

An unrevealed truth about the old place . . . a real European historical mystery.

"It has been said that everyone inside was dead before the fire started."

"You mean murdered?"

"Yes. And that their blood had been sucked from their bodies."

The man nodded solemnly and Okamura's eyebrows drew together.

Having been suckered into the introduction, Mao laughed sarcastically.

"That's it? Are you seriously saying there was a vampire there?"

"I don't know for sure. But my great-great-grandfather claimed to have seen it."

"Seen what?"

This old man was old enough to have grandchildren, and he expected them to believe a story passed down by the grandfather of his grandfather?

It was like the urban legends her friends passed around at school—a man with an ax hiding under a girl's bed or someone finding a human finger in a frozen croquette—and whenever they came from "a friend of a friend," Mao lost all interest.

"After the fire he heard someone singing there. He and one of the neighborhood punks snuck over at night to check it out. Naturally, their parents wouldn't have let them, but it was a children's dare game."

Kids were always curious about scenes of disasters and abandoned houses, no matter what part of the world they were in.

"And she was there . . . a young woman holding a blue rose in her hand."

"Huh? What's so scary about that?"

Under the moonlight, in the ruins, they found a beautiful girl singing a song complimented by her fragrant rose. C'mon! Make it a ghost or a vampire or something that paints a scarier picture. At the very least it should be something that had the strength to annihilate a whole castle full of people.

As their host told his story about the past the sun was also beginning to set in the present.

"It's getting late, and your car isn't working. Why don't you spend the night here?"

"Really? Are you sure?"

While around the vineyard there were wineries that doubled as bed-and-breakfasts, Chateau Duel was not one of them. The winery man's kindness couldn't have come at a better time.

"Would you like to take a look at the Goldschmidt ruins tomorrow?"

Okamura looked across at the hill growing dimmer, and then suddenly turned his head and extended his arm. Just as Mao was going to walk back inside, he snatched the bottle from her hand.

"Hey!"

"Underage drinking is a serious offense."

"But we're in France!"

Mao knew that the drinking age in this country was sixteen years old.

"But you are a Japanese citizen."

"..."

As Okamura shook the bottle and walked back inside, Mao shot daggers at his back with her steely gaze.

This guy was going to get some serious payback when they got back to Okinawa. Jahana Syndicate style.

02

COLLINS WAS AN arrogant individual, but he did keep his promise.

The time it took to process and get results from the DNA tests on Kai and the others was exactly as he said, seventy-two hours.

"We all tested negative."

"Whew. It looks like the tests saved us."

Louis reacted to the chart-carrying Julia's news by dramatically wiping the nonexistent sweat from his brow. Negative must have meant that the Chiropteran tendencies in their blood were not found.

"What a relief!"

Riku's face lit up, but Kai wasn't ready to celebrate quite yet.

No one knew that Kai wasn't a monster fronting as a human more than Kai did himself.

Red Shield's strict rules against Chiropteran infection were understandable, but at the same time, they had just lost three days because of them.

It was confirmed that Liza was killed in Yekaterinburg and they had been traveling with a Chevalier, so Kai was anxious to proceed to the next step of finding Saya.

It was difficult, but they had no choice but to trust Hagi.

"So now we can start looking for Saya?"

"Yes."

David nodded and turned the conversation to Julia.

"What's the status on the search for Saya?"

"The search team talked to eyewitnesses and has concluded that she is on her way to 'Point Origin.'"

For Julia to know all that meant she had been working closely with Collins, and that he trusted her. He had concluded early on that she was clear, and had given her the freedom to move between the ship's hold and her quarters above.

From Kai's perspective, that was reassuring.

"What is that 'Origin' you said?"

Kai saw both Louis and David's faces stiffen at his question, which meant that word had some special meaning.

The bag of chips Louis was holding crackled as his grip tightened.

"... You read Joel's diary. That's the Zoo."

"A zoo?"

Riku had a confused look on his face as he opened his mouth, before Kai realized that this wasn't knowledge shared by all.

Joel Goldschmidt's Zoo.

The place where Saya was born.

What could she accomplish by going there? Having read Joel's diary, Kai knew there were no happy memories associated with that place.

If his younger sister truly hadn't recalled all of her past memories, it would be better to warn her before she got there. If she was going to be hurt by something that he knew and she didn't, then Kai wanted to stop her.

"Is it far from here?"

"Bordeaux. If we start moving we can be there by tomorrow, middle of the day."

As David answered Kai's question, he checked his holster and started walking toward the door.

Kai picked his father's gun off the table and followed him.

+

Even the sunbeams, though mostly blocked by the leaves, hurt her eyes.

Her body felt very heavy, and with every step it felt like the ground was pushing back against the soles of her feet.

"Saya . . ."

She was surprised to feel Hagi's arm support her as her legs felt like they were twisted in knots.

"I'm OK."

She quickly brushed him off and continued walking.

She couldn't allow him to help her. Up until now, she had believed the countless rescues and his constant watching over her were based on good and pure intentions. However, the words of the Chevalier they battled in Yekaterinburg acted like a chisel putting cracks in her trust.

Hagi had hidden things from her from the beginning.

He said I had to remember on my own . . . That simple rule might have been an easy way to keep her in the dark. From now on, she couldn't obediently believe every word that came out of his mouth.

"You haven't 'eaten' in a full week."

"I'm fine."

She didn't need Hagi to tell her why her body was growing weaker. She already knew.

Even with the blood transfusions from her Chevalier, Saya had an appetite double that of a normal person, but since they had left Yekaterinburg, not a morsel of real food had passed between her lips.

Especially the "food" that Hagi was talking about.

The immortal Hagi cut into his own flesh with the intention of her drinking his blood. Since she wasn't able to receive a transfusion, Saya had a slight suspicion that this might be necessary.

But she couldn't go through with it.

If she did that, she would be resigning to the fact that she was in that family of bloodsucking monsters.

They exited the forest to a road which led to a stone gate.

It was at least four times taller than Saya, and very wide. It was possible it was designed to allow large horse-drawn coaches through. That told whoever stood at the gate the owner of this place had financial resources to own such a coach.

The ornamental engravings on the deteriorating gateposts were exquisite. Saya looked up at the carved lion's head. Its fierce fangs were covered with moss.

"This is . . ."

"The Zoo."

Saya ignored Hagi's response and tugged on the block-shaped door.

It was not locked. The rusty iron latch felt like it hadn't been moved in decades.

On the other side of the gate, the grounds looked like farmland she had seen in Japan, yet this area was covered with long lines of grapevines. Saya noticed a tractor and a tin-roofed shed with tools resting against it. So someone was growing these grapes, even now.

After ten minutes or so of continuing up the road, the grapevines suddenly ended.

Saya stopped and viewed the scene.

Clearly there had been a magnificent park here at one time.

Saya stepped onto the cracked steps of the stone path.

Through the mist of the morning fog, it was clear that the ancient relics from this abandoned park were mostly gone. The manicured shrubs had grown wild, back into their natural forms, and even the marble statues had tried to return to their original forms by falling back into the earth.

Looking beyond the entrance to the garden, Saya saw the dilapidated remains of a very large building.

It was a little hard to tell from a distance, but it would have been fair to say the structure was more accurately defined as a palace, rather than a mansion.

But all that remained now were some walls and beams. They were, it appeared, the remnants of a fire.

Almost hidden between the overgrown weeds, Saya noticed a fountain.

As could be expected, the fountain was dry, and full of nothing but dirt and dead leaves.

"..."

Without hesitation, Saya put her hand in the fountain and her fingertips hit water.

Saya breathed in the cool air from the water in her hand.

The dilapidated pool of the fountain was suddenly full of fresh water. She was remembering.

Saya was surprised and suspicious of the sudden change of scenery around her.

The overgrown and weathered garden she had walked into was now completely different.

It was almost as if the garden knew that guests had arrived, and it had returned to its original, beautiful past state.

Saya politely brushed her hand across a section of shrubbery which was now cut into a labyrinth pattern common to French gardens. The silky white stone path invited her like an escort beckoning a guest.

Sunshine bounced off the plaster walls of the magnificent mansion, making it look like an ivory castle.

Saya backed away in a daze. Feeling something touch her back, she did a quick about-face.

Standing in front of the glittering fountain was a young boy.

His pale cheeks brought attention to his surly black eyes.

Saya could tell he had eastern European roots in an instant, yet her eyes lingered over his graceful features. His long wavy

hair was held back in a ponytail, and might have been a custom from home, but the formal clothes he wore looked more appropriate for appearing before the French royal court.

Joel must have chosen what he was wearing.

Regardless, his eyes were full of conceit.

He was clearly younger than Saya, so where could this attitude have come from?

"Joel, who is this boy?"

"Hagi."

Joel placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled.

Only ten years ago Joel had had more energy, but now she could see his hair had turned completely gray. The wrinkles in his face were more noticeable and made his skin look dried out. Saya found it strange that a human's appearance could change so dramatically.

At some point, Saya had noticed she had stopped growing, and she really never thought about it again.

"Saya, this lad is your friend."

"My friend?"

He meant that they should spend time together and build an amicable relationship.

"Starting today he will be living here. Please show him the ropes. This will help you get to know each other."

". . . All right."

It sounded like a real headache, but Joel's requests couldn't be turned down.

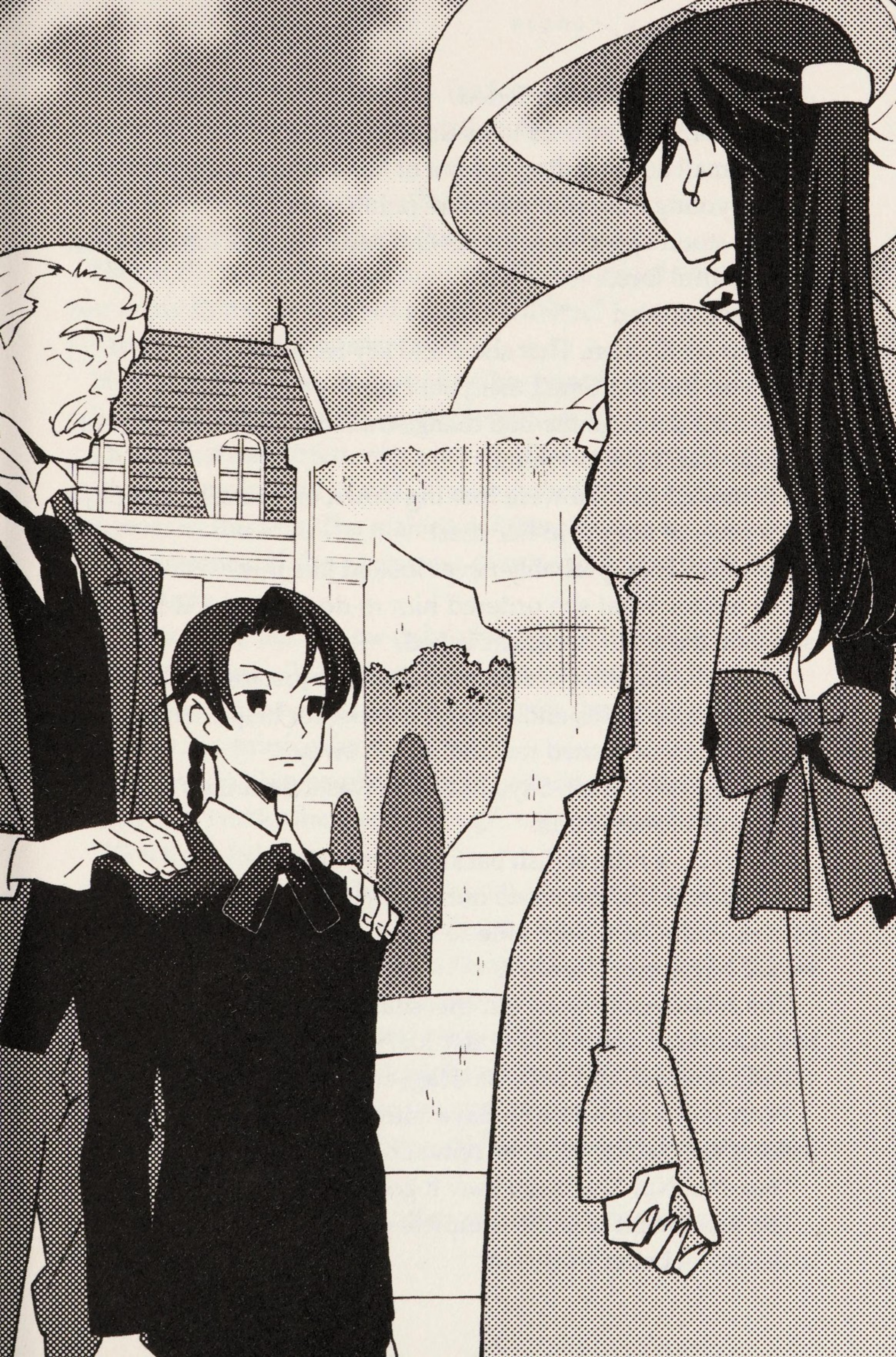
Well, he was well kept, at least, so he might not be too much of a hassle.

"Now listen to what she tells you."

With a push from Joel, Hagi bowed his head, but he still hadn't said a word.

In silent defiance he turned away from Saya.

Saya quickly started to resent this little boy.



—The sound of water faded.

The fountain returned to its dried-up state.

The small boy standing in front of her a moment ago was now the tall young man she was more familiar with.

Saya stood speechless for several seconds, and looked upon his beautiful face.

"I remembered . . ."

It was no illusion. That she could say for sure.

"It was the first time I met you, Hagi."

Saya felt the air of the Zoo change from the past to the present.

Hagi didn't say anything.

He looked as if he were looking down on himself, and Saya felt a pang of fatigue in her chest.

As a boy, Hagi probably never looked like this.

No matter what she ordered him to do, he ignored her. Not one time did he do what she asked.

When she told him to shine her shoes, he just tossed the brush and shoeshine aside, and when she asked for help changing her clothes, his face turned red and he ran away.

Back in the present, Saya felt there was a mountain of events worthy of introspection.

"I was . . . a little selfish back then, wasn't I?"

Whether it had been one hundred years earlier or fifty years earlier, if she had been able to apologize sooner, maybe they would have been closer . . .

The relationship between this selfish lass and this stubborn boy continued at the Zoo under Joel's watchful eye.

Only one time did Saya see Hagi cry.

With Joel's permission, Saya taught Hagi how to play the cello. It was at that time she remembered—

"No. No. No! That's not how it goes! Give me the bow!"

His movement was the complete opposite of someone trying to become a better musician.

If the student wasn't worthy, the lesson was a waste of time. After a full day of acting like a teacher, Saya had reached the end of her rope.

Children were sensitive to those feelings.

Hagi tossed the bow to the floor.

"What do you think you are doing?! Joel asked me to teach you many things, and here I spend all this—"

"You're just wasting your time."

Hagi spat the words out wearing his typical resentful face.

Saya had difficulty curbing her irritation.

There must have been over a hundred servants working in the castle, and never had one shown anywhere near such pretentiousness as this one. The majority of them had never spoken in Saya's presence. If she came near they usually just bowed and left the room.

Besides Joel, Hagi was the only other person that Saya had met.

She was doing all she knew how to accommodate him.

"If you want to be friends with me, you should at least know how to play a musical instrument."

"I've already been taught plenty how to sing and dance."

Saya didn't notice the shame in Hagi's expression as he answered.

"Well then, let's see you dance."

Maybe he wasn't worthless, after all. Saya took the cello from his hand and pointed to the floor in front of the bow.

"Stand right there. I'll provide the music. Anything you like is fine. I'll match with whatever style you are good at."

However, Hagi didn't stand up from his chair.

"Can't you do it? If you don't listen to what I say then get out of here and go back to where you came from."

The terror that thought mustered was more than Saya could imagine.

All she saw was his jaw stiffen and his face turn to stone.

"All right . . ."

Hagi slowly stood up from his seat.

He was prepared to do whatever he could not to be sent home, and Saya's bluff was truly deplorable.

"I'll do whatever you ask. I'll dance for you or keep you company through the night . . . After all, I am just a toy you people bought!"

Clear drops of water formed in Hagi's eyes.

The moment Saya saw this, she felt the error in her ways weigh heavy in her chest.

One of Joel's assistants had purchased Hagi. Wherever he came from it must have been horrid. Firstly, Saya had little understanding of the concept of purchasing people. Could it be that in the outside world people were bought and sold like bottles of wine?

All she knew at the moment was that Hagi was standing in front of her in real pain.

"Don't you look at me like that!"

Hagi's tear-stained face was both embarrassed and resentful at the same time.

At this point, Saya still hadn't fully grasped the concepts of sympathy and compassion. This was why she didn't comprehend that her words were hurtful to him.

And she was also unable to just let him be.

"I don't know . . . What am I supposed to do at a time like this?"

"..."

Without an answer from the boy, she put her arms around his and held him.

She sensed his surprise by the way the muscles in his spine tightened.

Saya embraced his slender body in an awkward, but completely and purely earnest, way.

"When I cried, Joel would hug me and tell me everything would be all right."

She wanted to tell him how she had felt.

"—I'm all right."

Saya felt the resistance drain from his body, and saw his face relax.

This was the first time, and probably the last time, Saya would see Hagi cry.

Over the next few years he grew tall, well past Saya's height.

It also didn't take Hagi long to pass Saya in skill in playing the cello.

It was at that time that Hagi was taught the ways of high society, among other things, and fencing from the same master as Saya. The way the chambermaids looked at Hagi sometimes stirred resentment in Saya's belly.

He was the only friend Saya had.

A bitter smile curled Saya's lips as she realized her past self was experiencing jealously.

"The first time we met you were just a child, Hagi."

He had grown into a twenty-one-year-old man.

But why was the Hagi of today unchanged from the young man of the past?

Chevalier—like her, a person with endless time in this world. So how did Hagi's body become this way?

"What happened . . . ?"

Saya asked the question to Hagi's back as his eyes surveyed the scenery.

About a kilometer or so away was a plateau shaped like a tree stump rising out of the ground. Atop the cliff rising straight up from the ground was a flat grassy field. It was there that it had happened.

"That cliff . . ."

Saya remembered what happened that day clearly.

It was Joel's seventy-second birthday.

Saya and Hagi had gone to the top of the plateau. Saya knew that the red lilies Joel loved grew wild there.

Naive about the outside world, Saya wanted to pick one of these lilies to give to Joel for his birthday, but she couldn't do it by herself.

A beautiful specimen was in bloom on the side of the cliff.

With no hesitation, Saya attempted to retrieve the lily, but, worried about her safety, Hagi began to climb down the side of the cliff in her place.

—No, that wasn't right.

Saya asked him. She said she wanted him to go and get it for her.

She knew Hagi would never deny one of her wishes. Taking advantage of his affection for her, Saya was able to make him attempt her dangerous request.

Saya recalled how long it took for his body to hit the ground after slipping on a loose rock on the cliff's face.

His face was frozen in a look of shock, and his head leaned back, staring up blankly at the blue sky.

Saya shivered in fear after she made it to the base of the cliff. As he lay on the red-stained ground, she realized he wasn't breathing.

His heartbeat was getting weaker, and she had to think of something to save him.

It was then that Saya remembered the transfusions she received from Joel, and that whenever she hurt herself, the wound healed with incredible speed.

If she gave her blood to him . . .

Maybe his wounds would heal, too.

There was no evidence or reason behind her thinking. It was just a hunch. But if it could possibly save Hagi's life, then anything was worth trying. With that thought at the front of her mind, Saya cut the palm of her hand with a knife and let the blood trickle from her hand to the wound on his head.

". . . Me?"

The question shook from her mouth like a draft of wind.

"Was I the one to stop time for you, Hagi?"

Hagi didn't answer.

Saya discerned from the sad look in his eyes that he wasn't able to think about their past.

He was hurt by the fact that the mistress he served was feeling guilt from the events of long ago.

Her slow recollections of the past caused him to be fearful, and surely pained his heart. He wasn't concerned about himself, but about Saya . . . this was Hagi's way.

Saya looked to the ground in an attempt to stifle her tears.

Yet, the tears dripped down her cheeks and fell to the ground.

"Hagi . . . I'm sorry . . ."

To take the words of that Chevalier in Russia over Hagi's feelings was nonsense.

Hagi had never betrayed her. Absolutely never.

For her sake, for her protection and happiness, there were things he couldn't say.

"You spilled your own blood for me . . . and that is why I can always be by your side."

The magnificently phrased words flowed from Hagi's lips with pride.

"You and I have been together a very long time."

"Yeah . . ." Saya nodded, feeling miserable about being tricked by Diva's manservant.

We have been together a long time. That's what he had said.

The "Saya" he'd endeared himself to and served was a much better person than the selfish and domineering girl that stood before him now. Hagi must have felt this way.

She wanted to become the "Saya" that Hagi had known.

Saya didn't intend to toss away her present self, the sister of Kai and Riku, but once she remembered everything, she wanted to become Hagi's perfect partner in battle.

Saya began to walk.

+

Returning from the path, through the garden in front of the burned-down mansion, and across the brook, the trail sloped up in a gradual incline. Atop the hill were the ruins of a medieval stronghold.

Saya remembered that scene.

There was a tower among the ruins with walls that were covered in ivy.

From that tower she could always hear the sound of someone singing.

That song—

With a sound so sweet, it was hard to imagine it was actually someone's voice. Saya often visited that tower because she was captivated and curious about that song.

When did the blue rose fall from the tower? She didn't know who it was that had tossed the flower down. She was, however, happy that the singer took notice of her single audience member.

"That song . . . that was Diva . . ."

A cold chill ran down her spine.

In front of the mansion engulfed in flames stood that girl. She was smiling.

The same lips that were humming a beautiful tune were smeared with Joel's blood.

She grinned at Saya, standing before her.

It was as if Saya was looking into a mirror. She and Saya had the same face.

—My beloved sister.

The voice called to her in a song.

Sparks from the fire danced in her long black hair and the fire in her eyes burned like two blue flames, the same color as the rose.

"That girl is my . . . younger sister?"

"Yes."

The clear and direct answer caused Saya to turn around.

From the moss-covered cloister appeared a figure of pure white.

"You and Diva are family by blood. She is our mother, as well as our lover."

His blond hair shone brightly, and moved like a field of wheat in the gentle wind.

Hagi stood and faced him straight on, and Saya felt her own body stiffen.

"You are . . ."

"Do you remember, Saya?" The transparent smile on the beautiful face of the young gentleman hadn't changed since the last time she had seen him, in the ballroom in Vietnam.

"Saya," said Hagi; he was trying to warn her, and she acknowledged him with a slight nod of her head.

She did not forget seeing this young man, Solomon, at the Vietnamese Cinq Flèche facility where they so cruelly experimented on children. Any brethren of those that killed George were enemies.

However, showing no signs of hostility, Solomon began to walk toward them.

"You and Diva were born and raised here. You're true family."

Without a word, Hagi suddenly took off toward him.

The sounds of flesh being torn and bones being broken echoed through the darkness of the cloister, surely surprising any residents inside.

The shadows of bats escaping into the sky fell across Solomon's back. Hagi's Chiropteran-like claws and entire right arm had gone through his solar plexus and pierced the back of Solomon's white suit.

Saya held her breath for a moment, but Solomon seemed unperturbed.

"Gyuu . . ."

He grabbed Hagi's arm, and with incredible strength, pulled it out of his chest.

With unsure steps, he stumbled backward, blood pouring over the stone path and weeds as he retreated.

"No matter how large the wound inflicted on me, this body heals." Solomon stood up straight, and Saya witnessed the flesh surrounding the gaping hole in his chest close in. "Whether I want it to or not." He sneered in self-derision.

Saya now understood exactly what Solomon was.

"You are a . . ."

"Correct. Protector and follower of Diva—"

—A Chevalier.

Saya's right hand instinctively moved, searching for something. But she didn't have her katana now.

To protect her, Hagi took one step in front of Saya.

Solomon appeared to have completely forgotten the injury Hagi gave him; he completely ignored Hagi as he came toward Saya.

"Can we talk for a bit?"

Saya was puzzled as to what his real intentions were.

This man was a Chiropteran. He was an enemy that should be destroyed. However, here he was, walking toward her and looking into her eyes with sincerity. These weren't the eyes of someone who could perform such cruel experiments in Vietnam.

"I didn't come here to fight with you."

The voice was coming from behind them.

As she spun around, Hagi's right fist was held off in the palm of Solomon's hand. Suddenly, he had appeared right behind Saya.

Saya reeled back at the sound, similar to a clap of thunder.

As Solomon blocked Hagi's punch, his quiet eyes gazed into Saya's, calming her soul. Even if he was the enemy, he didn't intend to fight. Saya felt, just this once, she could believe him.

"Hagi, please let us speak alone."

"Saya."

There was a rare inflection of disapproval in his voice.

He never allowed himself to put his guard down. That was his nature. However, Saya nodded in respect of his fears.

"It will be all right."

". . . If that is what you wish."

The arm-wrestling match between Hagi and Solomon ended as they pulled their hands away at the same time.

After backing away and opening a pathway, Solomon extended his arm like a host showing a guest the way.

Saya accepted his gesture and walked past him toward the entryway of the ruins on her own.

Saya felt Hagi's gaze on her back as she entered the dark and damp cloister. There she anticipated the confrontation with Solomon.

The morning light streamed in through the arch-shaped windows and bounced off the vines and leaves of the wild roses scaling the walls, painting a unique shade onto Solomon's pale skin.

"It has been more than one hundred years since you began your battle with Diva. If we were humans with short lives, I doubt we would have wanted things to go on so long."

"One hundred years . . ."

When dealing with units of time so large, this was not an individual issue, but a conflict of historical proportions. The concept of battling for a century was difficult for Saya to wrap her head around.

"I came here to put an end to this useless one-hundred-year war."

"Useless?"

He probably meant that all that had been accomplished in their battle was that humans had been hurt and sadness had been spread.

Solomon nodded his head without hesitation.

"The rift between you and Diva brings no benefit to me or my brethren. The only ones to benefit are humans."

". . ."

Words wouldn't immediately come.

The "brethren" he spoke of were Chiropterans. She was sure she, herself, was also included. It was another way of saying that she wasn't human.

She didn't want to admit it.

"Do you know why this place is called the Zoo?"

It seemed the young man sensed Saya's agitation, and then proceeded to change the subject.

He reached out to a rose vine growing in the stone window and stroked a leaf with his fingers.

"According to what Niisan told me, rare living specimens were collected from all over the world and brought here, to this research center, to create new species. This is how you and Diva came to be."

"That's a lie . . ."

A nearly immortal animal that fed on human blood—that would be quite a rare species.

"Both of you were experimental subjects. You were made to satisfy the curiosity of a man who had as much time on his hands as he had money . . . Joel Goldschmidt."

"But . . . Joel was so kind to me . . . He listened to anything I had to say."

To the Saya of the past, Joel had been just like a father.

He had never done anything to hurt her, and never denied her whatever she wanted. When she was sad, he held her to make her feel better, and when she was happy they laughed together.

When Hagi first came and she had trouble with the cheeky young boy, she always ran straight to Joel's study.

Do it your way, Saya.

When Saya came to Joel's study complaining, this was what he would tell her as he stroked her head.

His smiling face always had the power to make her feel better.

"It never occurred to you that it could have all been part of a plan?"

Solomon was completely serious. It didn't sound like he was purposely trying to cause her pain like the Chevalier she encountered in Russia. Yet the pain that her memory could be tainted resounded even louder inside her.

"But, I want to believe . . ."

". . . It appears you have lived a bit too long with humans."

Solomon's handsome face shifted, looking a little like someone who was concerned for a sick person.

The thought that he might think Saya was ill surprised her.

"What can you possibly know about me?!"

Her anger exceeded her level of control.

He certainly may have known about her past. However, if he hadn't met the Saya of today, he would know nothing of her year in Okinawa.

She wasn't about to value the opinions of a stranger over her own memories.

"We've only met once or twice and have never really spoken before right now. So why do you think you know me so well?!"

"I do know you."

"You know nothing!"

Solomon responded to Saya's escalating voice with calmness and composure.

"I do know. It's because we are connected by blood, in the same family."

Solomon came close to her and grasped her hand tightly.

It wasn't the tone of his voice, but the heat from the strong grip of his hand that confused her.

If the blood that was running through the palm of his hand was the same as hers, then—

"That's what you came here to find out, isn't it? The truth about your real family in order to break ties with your fake family."

"They aren't my fake family."

Saya pulled her hand away as if she were swinging her katana.

"Kai and Riku have accepted me! They call me their family! Even if our blood is different, we are truly a family! I am my father's daughter!"

"Do they know that your body hasn't changed in decades?"

"But . . ."

Saya was speechless.

Saya knew nothing about herself. How could Kai and Riku have known anything more? Both Kai and Riku knew that Saya's blood was deadly to Chiropterans, and that she wasn't a normal human being, so it wasn't likely there was anything more that could happen that would make them decide that she was no longer family.

Solomon continued indifferently.

"Do they know you can't survive without the blood of others? If they did, would they still call you family? Can these humans watch over you for decades while you sleep?"

Saya felt Solomon's words hang heavy in her chest, and she was only able to muster a mumble of a response.

". . . What are you saying?"

"I see you still haven't remembered everything."

Solomon paused, as if asking a question of an innocent child.

"After a few years of life, you and Diva will sleep again for approximately thirty years. Inside a cocoon."

"Cocoon . . ."

The word struck her.

Inside the Miyagusuku family tomb in Okinawa, Saya had seen the huge mass of tangled spider web like thread. That was a cocoon.

The girl raised as the daughter of George Miyagusuku slept inside that cocoon.

"I am . . ."

"Yes. You are a Chiropteran, just like us. Carrying the blood of our queen. You are our mother, and also our lover."

With a voice as pleasant as a clear stream, Solomon told her the truth, leaving nothing out.

Saya was hypnotized by his lips, unable to move.

It was true. She wasn't human.

She had known this for a long time. Yet, it had never been clear before.

She wasn't able to make the distinction that her normal and happy, everyday life with Kai and Riku and Kaori was a dream. Even though she was separated from them now, the memory of that year together shined in her heart like a glittering star. She might never be allowed to return to a life with days like that. Thinking about all she might lose, the memories sparkled even brighter.

"I am sorry. It wasn't my intention to shock you."

Solomon took the dazed Saya's hand and helped her sit down on the floor near the window. She put up no resistance and her body felt as heavy as the truth that had just been realized.

The young man's eyebrows were raised in pity, and he spoke softly.

"At the night of the ball at Lycee, did you notice?"

"Hn?"

"Did you know that I was Diva's Chevalier?"

Saya lifted her head.

That night in the ballroom he carried an arrogance about him, but his eyes and smile were those of an innocent, if pushy, young boy.

She hadn't the slightest idea he might have been a Chiropteran.

"I didn't sense at all that you were 'Saya' . . . the same enemy Niisan always talked about . . ."

It sounded like he was looking for sympathy as he sighed.

He looked at Saya intently, his eyes almost seemed accusing.

"You surely felt the same as I did. You didn't sense me as your enemy. Am I wrong?"

He was not. On that night he appeared before her as nothing but a nice and charming young man.

Even if she had known he was a Chiropteran, she probably still would have sensed his gracefulness.

Saya looked down at her feet.

"We weren't meant to hurt each other. The tragedy started when you were forced to grow up with humans here at the Zoo."

His tone didn't change when he said the word "humans," but she was sure she heard a hint of disgust.

"This is the reason you are always trying to find love within a fake family . . ."

Fake?

That word caused Saya to rise up suddenly.

"They are not fake!"

Solomon was no longer standing before her, as she expected.

"Maybe that is true."

Only his voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling.

"But if living with humans is so wonderful, why did they remove you from your normal, happy life and force you to fight? Moreover, you are forced to fight those with the same blood as you. You are forced to fight us."

Saya dashed about, trying to follow his voice.

Or was it that she was trying to escape? Not from him, but the many truths he told.

"They are not fake! They are not fake . . . !"

Saya lost herself in her screams as she ran down the corridor. It went from light to dark, light to dark as her legs carried her. She screamed so that he would hear her, and so that she could purge his penetrating words from her senses.

Her family, Kai and Riku and George, was irreplaceable.

Even if Saya weren't human, the time they spent together was not fake. It may have been only a year, but they were truly a family.

That was Saya's truth.

It was when her vision was warped like she was peering through a glass orb that she realized she was crying.

"They only used you."

Even if her vision was askew, Solomon's voice came through clearly.

"It was a big mistake. You shouldn't have been forced to live with the humans, who taught you to fear and hate Chiropterans . . ."

"No! That's not true! That's not true . . . That's not true!"

Saya took deep breaths between the shouts that were nearly screams as she ran.

Finally the corridor ended and she found herself in the central courtyard. The shadow of the tower fell across her head.

"Even if I am wrong . . . that's what I believe. How can I not—?"

She fell to her knees onto the ground and paddled the stone path with her fists. Saya swallowed her breath.

—There was nothing else to believe.

"Saya . . ."

Leather shoes stepped across the stone walkway.

Saya raised her head slowly.

She saw his right hand reach down and felt it wipe the tears from her face.

"Come with me."

Saya's surprise was clear, even through her tear-soaked eyes.

Solomon's eyes dropped, heavy with intense conflict.

"Niisan is trying to kill you. My other brothers are as well . . . but I don't want to let you die."

It was then that he flashed a reassuring smile.

"If it were your desire to join us, my brothers would surely accept you. You would no longer have anything to worry about."

He extended his right hand to her.

It was the same gesture he did at the formal ball.

"That's why I am asking you to come with me . . ."

Saya looked from his soft, pale palm up to his eyes.

His graceful features reminded her so much of what he was like at the ball, especially his inviting smile. But his eyes were different. Much more serious. Like someone who was putting his life on the line.

Saya felt like these eyes were trustworthy.

After a few moments of hesitation, Saya placed her hand in his.

Yet her arm felt heavy.

As she lifted it up she felt important pieces falling from it, one at a time. Kai and Riku, George, Kaori, her classmates, her friends on the track team, Min and the other girls in the dorm at Lycee, David and Louis and Julia . . . why were memories of all the people she had met rushing back to her right now?

They were all human.

Who I must trust is—

"Saya."

The voice caused her to freeze her hand in the empty air.

At the entrance to the corridor stood Hagi.

"Don't go."

His words were low and slightly muffled, but were as violently charged as a raging fire.

His exterior was always as calm as the surface of water, but Saya thought it might have been the first time such emotion had passed between his lips. For a moment the image of the competitive and spirited man as a youth overlapped with the Hagi of the present.

Hagi ran to her and grabbed Saya's hand hanging in the air, pulling her toward him with all his might.

Saya found herself pressed against the young man's chest and looked up at his face in surprise.

"Hagi . . ."

Until now she had never seen him like this.

This young man, who had done everything to give Saya what she wanted, blocked her wish for the very first time. He told her not to go.

Saya looked at the anger burning in Solomon's glare at Hagi, and realized his eyes were no longer kind and inviting as they were a few moments earlier.

Thinking there was no one she could believe was a mistake.

For her there was Hagi.

In this world the only person she could really trust was her knight. Her Chevalier.

Solomon rose from his knees and his face contorted from his irritated laugh.

"Even though we are both Chevalier, we have trouble seeing eye to eye."

"On that day, I made a vow," Hagi said, his voice painted with emotion, vivacious and firm. "A vow to make Saya's wishes reality."

"My . . . wishes?" Saya remembered the dream in Russia—in her memory from the past, she and Hagi had made a promise to each other.

What that promise was, she wasn't able to remember. But she was pretty sure it was important, and involved only the two of them. Saya had no doubt that Hagi hadn't forgotten that exact moment in time.

"I will not hand Saya over."

With the force of a kick, Hagi drew his arm around Saya and pressed her behind him.

"I am sorry to hear that."

Solomon moved the hair out of his eyes and let out a deep sigh before he disappeared.

As soon as she saw the tiny blast of dirt stir up, Hagi was on the move.

A gold-colored blade sparked blue flame off the lid of Hagi's cello case.

In the moment before, Solomon's right hand had transformed into a sharp blade and had targeted Hagi's left flank.

Probably out of concern for Saya, Hagi leapt, putting distance between them.

"He and I will have a chat. This will be a brief separation."

Saying that, Solomon jumped to follow him.

Standing on what was formerly the roof of a second-story building, Hagi flung the cello case at his approaching enemy. Solomon deflected the attack with a turn of his body and a swing of his left hand, and continued to close in on Hagi's midsection.

His right arm and Hagi's right leg flew up at the same time.

Solomon's blade made a shallow cut into Hagi's chest, and Hagi's foot grazed Solomon's jaw.

Both men were thrown backward, and landed upon the rotting roof held up by a crumbling stone wall. They paused, but for less than half a second.

After their eyes met, both men leapt into the air straight at each other.

Blades sliced into the wall like it was made of cheese, and a blunt weapon attack left a deep dent in the stone walkway.

Unable to follow the speed of the Chevalier battle with her eyes, Saya had no choice but to vent her frustration verbally.

"Please, stop! Both of you—!"

Each combatant was only concerned about Saya's happiness. The two of them couldn't help but cross swords with each other.

This time, however, Saya's request fell on deaf ears.

The crashing of walls and posts continued and the constant sound of metal striking metal went unabated, until the noise of the battle suddenly became distant. From the forest surrounding the ruins she could hear the slashing of brush and the sounds of trees falling.

With the distinct sound of wood cracking and branches crashing to the ground, the loss of their resting places caused birds to fly panicked into the sky.

Saya stood alone in front of the passageway's entrance and with a helpless sense of panic stared toward the tree line with both hands gripped before her chest.

The smell of the meadow carried in the wind was accompanied by the melody of a beautiful tune. Saya noticed it after what must have been a long time.

"This song . . . ?!"

They had arrived at the Zoo long before the clock in the car dashboard told them it was noon. David's promise of arrival by lunchtime the following day was off, in a good way.

Unable to wait a second longer, the rear door of the stopped car flew open and Kai's feet hit the earth, followed soon by Riku's.

Red Shield's ocean-liner headquarters was now docked at the Mediterranean port of Marseille. From there they intended to head to the Bay of Biscay and then cut longitudinally into French territory toward Bordeaux, even though the air time between Marseille and Bordeaux was significantly shorter.

"What's the latest?"

Louis responded to David's question by handing him a fresh printout of a photo received on the car's onboard computer.

"This is the most recent photo, from four hours ago. With this photo and eyewitness reports, we can conclude that they are here."

Saya was inside this place.

Riku looked up at the giant gate that had grown heavy over the years.

The stone arch that was several times taller than a grown adult looked like the gaping maw of a monster.

Seeing that the steel-barred gate was open, it wasn't hard to guess that someone had entered very recently.

"Our only choice is to split up and look for them."

Louis responded to David's words.

"Split up? You mean . . . these guys, as well?"

"It's OK. We can look for Saya-neechan, too."

Louis cast a bewildered look Riku's way, and Riku nodded enthusiastically to reassure him. Riku understood that Louis was only concerned about their safety, but David's decision would be the best path to follow.

According to the young director Joel, the Red Shield organization was composed of only about one hundred elite members. Riku's extraordinary powers of deduction brought him to the conclusion that the reason for this was that, even more important than destroying the Chiropteran race, large armies with massive weapons were not kept in order to avoid attracting the world's attention.

Red Shield was made up of people who shared the secret knowledge of the Chiropteran existence. With such a small number of agents spread throughout the world hunting Chiropterans, the number of people available to search for Saya was also relatively small.

Given the circumstances, David wanted all the help he could find. Riku wasn't completely helpless in a situation like this.

But above all that, Saya was Riku's sister.

Even if they tried to stop him, he was going to look for her.

Riku was sure that Kai felt the same way.

". . . Understood. Hey, take this with you." Louis held out cell phones and two things that looked like small, pin-sized badges. "As long as you stay within two kilometers of us, we can see Kai's and your location. If you sense trouble, just hide and wait."

"Thank you." Riku dropped one transmitter into his pocket and handed the other one to his brother. "Niichan, let's go."

"Yeah . . ." Kai answered halfheartedly as he received the transmitter. Riku noticed he had been staring at the front gate.

It wasn't like Kai to do such a thing, and Riku wondered what was bothering him.

"Niichan . . ."

"Let's go. Now."

As Kai suddenly began walking David called out to him.

"Are you afraid of finding the Saya of the past you know from the 'diary'?"

Riku saw his brother's legs go stiff, his shadow frozen on the ground as if it were cut from a giant piece of black paper.

Saya's past . . . What was David talking about?

Riku looked to see Kai biting his upper lip, and gave up on waiting for his big brother to answer.

". . . Saya is still one of us . . . right?"

Kai hesitated and responded in an indecisive tone as he gripped George's pistol in one hand.

"I don't know . . . I don't know if being with us makes her happy . . ."

Riku couldn't believe his ears.

These couldn't be Kai's words. He didn't want to believe Kai had said them.

Riku stared at his brother distrustfully and David entered the conversation for Kai's benefit.

"We better start looking while we still can. Don't confront Saya. That is for your sake and for her sake."

". . ."

David didn't wait for an answer from the speechless Kai and walked through the gate. "George knew everything about Saya when he accepted her."

Kai's shoulders quivered. He focused all his energy on his tightening grip around his father's pistol, but Riku noticed.

"Kai-niichan . . ."

Kai stood in that spot without moving almost a full minute after David and Louis had left.

Julia had stayed in the car to prepare blood-transfusion equipment, probably for Saya. She looked at Kai coolly as she adjusted her glasses.

"Are you going to go home? Sorry, but we can't give you a ride to the airport."

"That's not what I'm doin'."

Antagonized by her words, Kai glared at Julia.

"C'mon, Riku. We're leaving!"

"Oh . . . um, yeah! Excuse us, Julia-san."

As his big brother strode through the gate into the vineyards, Riku took the chance to bow deeply to Julia.

Julia's comment had the desired result.

"It's all right."

Riku got a look at Julia's brilliant smile, and then turned to catch up with Kai.

"He looks a lot like him, your brother."

"Like who?"

"David."

Now that he thought about it, Kai's sullen face and David's stern face were indeed similar.

Giggling so as not to be heard, Riku walked through the gate with Julia.

Back in the ship's laboratory anyone would guess that Julia was all business. She never showed her sense of humor in public. This was the Julia that Riku really liked.

The long road that split the vineyard branched off in several directions.

Kai took the path toward a large mansion and Julia went the opposite way toward a fountain. Riku continued straight ahead over a stream.

There the path split again, and Riku chose to go left.

Even Riku couldn't explain why. It was intuition.

He was surrounded by a forest and the moderately dense shadows from the greenery lent to a cooler breeze.

The humid air accompanied the sound of a rushing brook filling his ears, blocking out any other noise.

Black and white.

There were shadows jumping between the trees that appeared to be injured beasts.

Riku's eyes weren't fast enough to follow their movements.

They jumped between trees and off rock crags; each time they crossed paths, sparks would flash and there was the sound of thunder clapping.

If it were Japan they might be *oni* or *tengu*. But since this was France, one might be called a *diable*.

In the next moment, Riku saw who the combatants were.

Attempting to follow the black shadow after a fantastic leap into the air, the white shadow slipped on the ground. His right arm had been transformed into a shining, metallic blade, and in a flash cut through a series of oak trees.

The black shadow, who had intended to land in those trees, spun in the air to see his enemy right behind him. The white shadow's blade swung downward diagonally from overhead and crashed into a giant shield.

A casket-shaped box—a cello case!

The black shadow had thwarted the attempt at beheading with a cello case.

The young black shadow took a kick in the back which sent him plummeting back to the earth.

Riku closed his eyes for a moment.

The sound of the impact was accompanied with the cracking of a large stone near where Riku stood.

"Gu-haa . . . !"

Bright red blood flew from the mouth of the young man who landed on the huge, moss-covered crag.

"Hagi!"

Riku called his name as he put up a hand to protect his face from flying pieces of rock.

Hagi glanced his way from the corner of his eye and Riku saw the tip of a blade sticking out of his chest. The blow could have easily penetrated his heart, but it only got to his ribs thanks to Hagi's block with his right hand.

"..."

His right hand was still in its Chiropteran form as he used it to slowly pull out the blade.

The red-slicked piece of metal slid smoothly from his chest.

Suddenly the owner of that sword flew overhead and landed in a rocky area a little ways behind them.

He looked like a white bird.

His snow-white suit had gotten dirty in the battle, but his strikingly handsome face showed not a single scratch.

"A friend of yours?"

Riku wasn't sure if the question was directed at him; all he knew was that this was a very dangerous enemy.

His sword extended straight from his arm. Riku had seen this same phenomenon on a monster in Vietnam named Karl.

However, Riku had had to avert his eyes from that one.

"If he is a friend of yours, then you must know Saya. I don't want to hurt you. Please leave."

The calm and polite way he said those words was not out of kindness or consideration. That was simply how he normally spoke.

Riku felt like a tiny ant who has been spotted, and then blown far away by a mouthful of air.

"Hagi . . ." Wanting to make sure Hagi was all right, Riku turned to him, and he responded by nodding his head reassuringly.

Don't worry. That was the message he was sending.

But was he really OK? Riku was aware of Hagi's strength, but he wasn't fighting an ordinary Chiropteran. He might have been bluffing. Regardless, Riku chose to believe him.

"I'll hurry and bring Saya-neechan back here."

He wasn't sure if Hagi would find that reassuring, but after telling him, Riku spun the other way.

Riku gasped as he ran through the forest, and he kept tripping on rocks and roots sticking out of the ground, but kept going up a steady incline.

As he ran to the top of the hill the unaware Riku didn't immediately realize that his feet had stopped moving, but the reason why was clear.

"This song . . ."

The scent of green sweetened the air.

The song guided Riku's body.

He had heard this tune before somewhere . . . that's right! It was in Vietnam after he was isolated in that cell. It sounded a lot like the music that penetrated his head when he, Kai, and Mui were escaping.

However, this time the voice was much clearer, and it wasn't confusing and uncomfortable like it was before.

Riku looked up as he followed the song, and nearby he saw an ivy-covered manmade structure. It opened to a dark entryway.

At some point Riku had gone off the path, but from here he decided to calm his rough and uneven breathing by walking in the direction of the building through the cool forest.

The woods opened up to a grassy plateau. He saw several ruins that looked like they may have been part of an ancient castle or church.

What he saw at first was the tallest structure still standing.

It was a rectangular tower.

The singing voice sounded as if it were coming from the top of that tower.

There was no other sign of life anywhere near these ruins. Even though it was midday, a fog hung in the air through the ruins.

It was when he got close to the entrance to the tower that Riku noticed it.

The voice sounded an awful lot like Saya's.

"... Saya-neechan?"

Riku's voice echoed off of the dreary stairs.

The interior was pitch black. From a window above, Riku noticed a weak light that he sensed was somehow important.

"..."

He waited for a response, but none came. The sound of singing continued to flow down like flower petals from above.

Despite his fears, Riku began to climb the stairs.

At first he was nervous that the floor might collapse beneath him, but at the first turn of the stairs his worry subsided. From the inside, this appeared to be a solidly structured building.

Riku hoped it was Saya on the top floor, but wasn't confident it was.

For whatever reason, he needed to see the true face of this singer. That desire drove his legs up the flights of stairs.

There were many doors in the passageway of the top floor.

The doors were all made of wood, but were reinforced with heavy-looking iron bindings. The iron bars in the windows removed any peaceful image of how this place might have been used. However, the rose vines that extended through the windows and in the cracks in the walls and over the doors gave a splendid appearance and fragrance that masked any of the negativity and gloom of this tower's past.

It wasn't hard for Riku to figure out where the singing was coming from.

The door at the end of the hall was cracked open.

Riku pushed the door open and looked in only to realize he had nothing to be afraid of.

A part of the ceiling had collapsed, letting in beams of white light from outside. Riku saw the backside of a girl sitting on the floor. She was surrounded by a carpet of thorny vines with blue flowers sprouting from them.

"Saya-neechan!"

With a big smile on his face, Riku rushed to his sister's side.

As he stood on top of the leaves of the rose vines, he took Saya's hand.

"We were so worried about you. You disappeared without saying anything . . . Kai's been so grumpy since you left. It's just been awful."

Complaints came from Riku's mouth, but he couldn't maintain a scornful demeanor for more than a few moments. After all, they had safely reunited. It was a time to be happy.

And he had to tell her about Hagi.

She needed to hurry and help him.

"Neechan, Hagi is—"

That's as far as Riku got before Saya, who was fixated on Riku's face, suddenly burst out a love-filled laugh.

"I am sorry I worried you."

Her apology didn't sound very sincere, causing Riku to become suddenly surprised at his own lack of awareness.

She was wearing a long dress like a costume someone would wear at the school arts festival. This was very odd.

And something was different about her voice. And her hair was . . .

Saya moved her body, breaking Riku's bewilderment.

She suddenly took him in her arms.

"T-too tight! It hurts, Neechan."

He was happy to see her again, but it was painful if she couldn't gauge her own strength. He remembered how clumsy she had been when she first moved into the Miyagusuku home.

"What? Humans feel pain even at this level?"

She loosened her grip and laughed once again.

"But it makes me happy you were worried about me. So scrumptious looking."

"Huh?"

Held by his shoulders, Riku looked up at Saya. His tongue went dead and cold.

Her eyes were—the same color blue as the roses.

Saya . . . neechan?

Her red tongue slid across her peach-colored lips, contrasting with her pearly white teeth.

Riku stared at the strangely long and pointed canine teeth that were coming closer.

He felt a pain around his neck, but it soon subsided.

The energy drained from his arms and legs and he suddenly felt very drowsy. He lost all sense of balance and as everything went dark, Riku felt like the last thing he heard was his sister's voice.

"—Riku!"

That was Saya's true voice.

Saya rushed through the door and into the room. The scene she saw caused her limbs to stiffen.

The room was empty of any furniture, and massive rose vines had come in through the windows, covering the floor and walls. The brilliant blue flowers illuminated by the light of her lamp stirred no sentimentality in Saya now.

"—Riku!"

A girl in a white dress held Riku in her arms.

Riku's eyes were closed and his arms and legs sprawled downward, lifeless. The collar of his polo shirt was stained dark red. The color of blood.

The girl looked toward the entrance to the room, and, not wanting to waste a drop, licked the blood around her lips.

She let Riku's body go and he fell to the floor like a doll, making no movements on his own.

"No . . . NOOO!"

Saya's trembling arms were crossed and her fingernails tore into her sleeves as she screamed.

It happened again.

It was her fault that a beloved member of her family was hurt, again.

After they split up in Russia, Riku must have been worried and followed her here. Her little brother who had a high fever and was completely wiped out and that Saya abandoned . . . he had come to find her.

"Welcome, my sister."

Saya looked at the face revealed behind the shadow of long hair and lost her ability to speak.

It was as if a mirror had been placed in the center of the room.

Saya remembered clearly now.

The night the Zoo was destroyed.

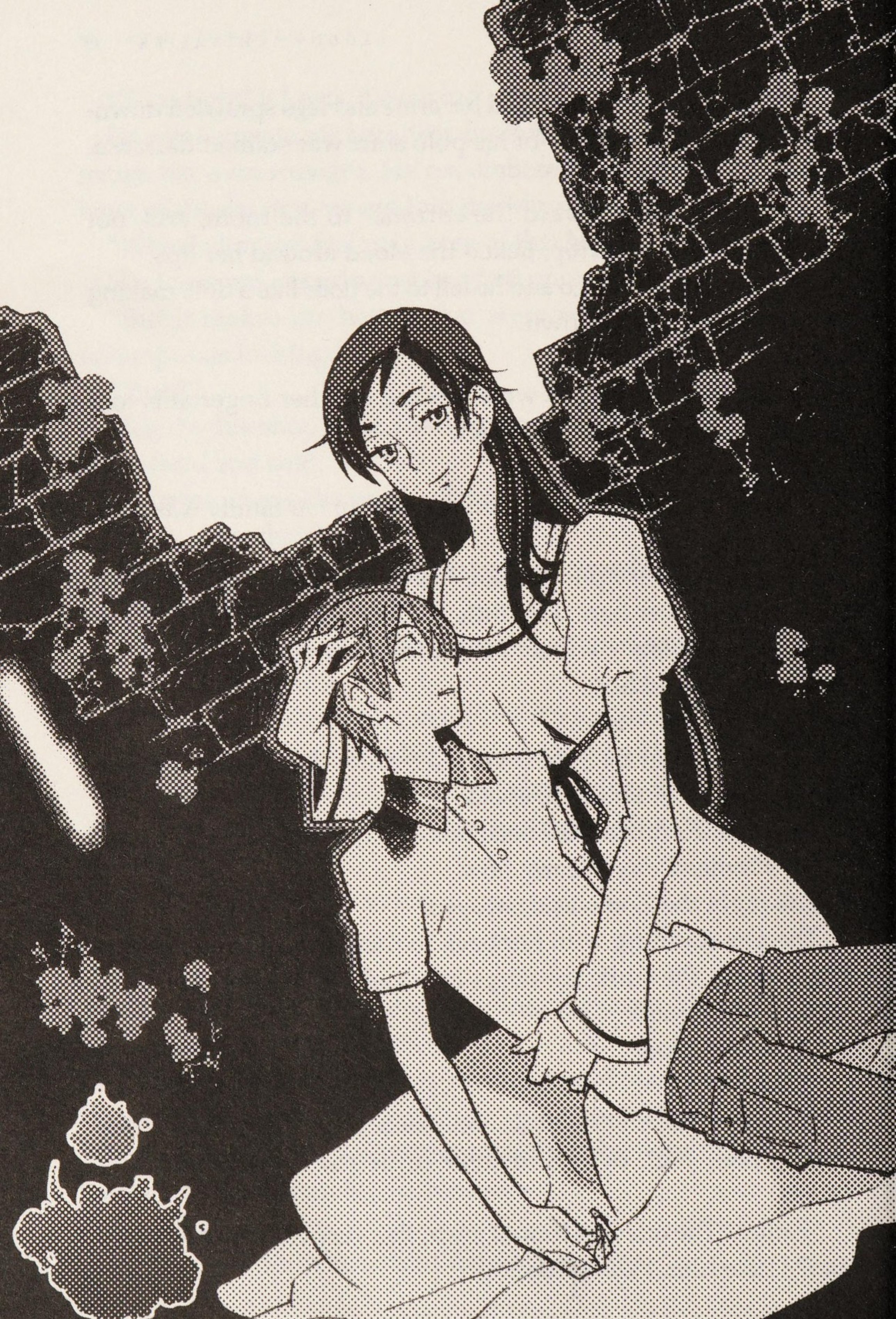
The girl standing with her back to the burning Goldschmidt mansion as she sunk her fangs into Joel's neck. And her mysterious blue eyes.

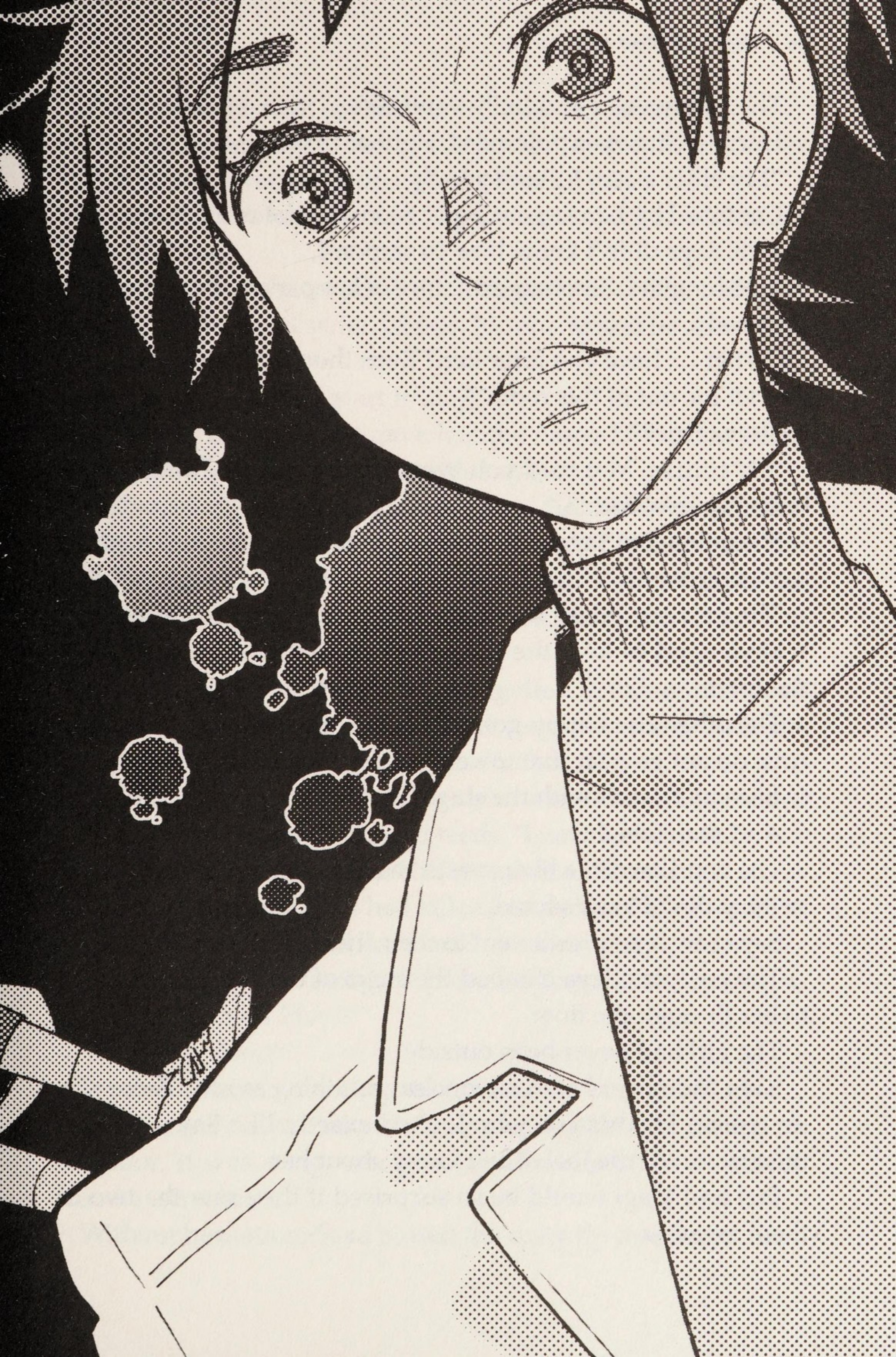
"You killed Joel . . ."

"Joel?"

The girl tilted her head in confusion and began singing his name, Joel, Joel, over and over until she slowly began to laugh.

"Father? The one that locked me in this very cell so many years ago? I hate him. I killed him!"





The lovely voice suddenly vanished.

Her piercing eyes pointed straight at Saya's.

"My elder sister, I thank you."

Confused by her earnest expression and the conviction in her words, Saya didn't know how to respond.

Matching the discouraged nature of her partner, her shoulders dropped.

"What . . . have you forgotten? Even though you were the one that let me out of this room."

"It was me?"

"Of course. You said you wanted to surprise Father at his birthday celebration."

She pointed to Saya with a teasing index finger as she hummed a chiding tune.

The tune stirred up the waves in the ocean of her memory.

Saya used to love the songs she would hear coming from the tower.

The otherwise happy-go-lucky Joel only had one unbendable rule: do not go near that tower. But Saya couldn't help wanting to become friends with the singer inside.

And then one day . . .

The wind carried a blue rose from a window in the tower right to the palm of Saya's hand.

Saya saw it as a testament to their friendship.

The next day Saya climbed the stairs of the tower and talked to her through the door.

The girl had never been outside.

Saya had never heard anyone say anything so sad. There was no reason for this girl who looked exactly like Saya to be so miserable. Maybe Joel didn't know about her.

Joel and Hagi would be so surprised if they saw the two of them together.

The lock to the door opened up with the key Saya snuck away with. She unlatched it out of a sense of justice, love for her friend, and appreciation of a good practical joke.

It was right before she and Hagi went to pick the lilies for Joel's birthday.

The plan was to meet just before the party so the two of them could wear the exact same dresses. No one would be able to tell which one was Saya.

And then she would start to sing.

Saya was the one who gave her the name Diva. It seemed appropriate because of her beautiful voice.

Unfortunately, the image the name gave didn't live up to reality.

When Hagi was on the brink of death after falling from the cliff, Saya gave him some of her own blood. Seeing him writhe in agony was more than Saya could bear, and she ran back to the mansion for help.

What she saw was the mansion engulfed in flames and dead bodies everywhere. Then she saw her sister sucking on Joel's throat—her sister with the same face as her.

"I remember it now . . ." Saya's jaw was tight and her voice squeezed between her clenched teeth. "I need to kill you."

This was not because of Red Shield's mission. This was a decision she made for herself. Diva had killed Joel and hurt Riku, and the person who had released her from her cell was Saya.

Diva stopped her arrogant humming and looked at Saya, amused. "Kill me? How?"

"With my blood!"

Saya was already running at her when she screamed.

She ducked down and picked up a spike that was resting on the floor. It was a big, wedge-shaped nail seen in medieval wooden structures.

Without hesitation, Saya buried the rusty tip into her arm.

She then turned the blood-soaked spike toward her target and launched herself at Diva.

Before she could strike, the white dress moved in a flash.

Saya was spun around and tossed back first into a vine-covered wall. Saya blinked for a moment, realizing Diva had grabbed her right wrist and tossed her with ease.

"Such a tiny fang to bite with, my sister."

"Uuf . . ."

Her wispy arm revealed great strength as she pulled Saya from the wall and glared into her nearly perfectly resembled face. The tips of their noses almost touched, and Diva began to laugh once again.

"That was a scary face!"

Saya let out a deep sigh.

Like taking candy from a baby, before Saya knew what happened Diva had squeezed Saya's wrist, forcing the iron spike to fall to the floor.

Like a toy she had grown bored of, Diva shook Saya by the wrist and flung her back first into the wall.

She slid down the wall. Coughing violently, Saya fell to her knees. Looking forward through tear-drenched eyes, Saya saw Diva staring down at her wistfully.

"You never change. You have been the same elder sister since the old days. Honest and direct. That's what I love about you—"

Her sugar-coated recollection reflected accordingly on Diva's face.

"—and what I hate!"

Her childlike affection faded quickly into a cold expression of adult disdain.

Her eyes burned with hatred and jealousy, sparkling a shivery shade of blue.

Diva took a step forward, then quickly turned her head to the side.

"What's this?"

Diva muttered to herself as something caught her eye, followed immediately by a thunderous roar and a small hole suddenly boring through Diva's chest.

Her body bent over backward as an abstract splattering of blood and flesh painted the wall behind her. It continued to rain down on the roses covering the floor.

Shocked by the sudden series of gunshots, Saya turned to see David standing inside the doorway.

Smoke rose from the muzzle of the large-size revolver he held with both hands.

"David-san . . ."

"Don't forget your purpose, Saya!"

David's warning was more intense than usual.

Saya looked where he was looking only to see the holes in Diva's chest close up right before her eyes.

This queen of the Chiropterans slowly rose back up to her previous position.

"Oh, ho ho . . . Now it's torn."

Her fingers poked through one of the holes left in the front of her dress. The skin underneath had already healed, and was as smooth as wax.

"That didn't do it . . . !"

David quickly raised his aim to the beast's head, and then swallowed his breath.

He expected to see the girl in his gun's sight, but somehow she had appeared right next to him, looking straight into his face.

"You don't look like you'd taste very good."

Before David could register what was happening, Diva slammed her palm into David's chest. It didn't seem like she hit him that hard, but his body flew with tremendous force and disappeared out the doorway, allowing Saya to only hear the loud crunch when he hit the wall.

"David-san!"

"Don't avert your eyes. Isn't that what he told you?"

Saya felt herself being lifted up around her chest.

Diva poked her index finger into Saya's forehead, pushing it back teasingly.

Her brain rattled from the impact.

Saya lost her consciousness only for a second, but when she woke up she found herself floating in the blue sky.

Once Saya realized she had been pushed through the brittle tower wall and was falling, she reached out her right hand to grab the rose vines winding up.

As leaves and flowers snapped off in bundles, the thorns of the rose vines made their retribution. Saya was able to slow her fall, but when she hit the ground her hand was nothing but a bloody mess.

"My darling sister."

Saya heard a cheery voice from above and looked up.

Saya saw a dress outstretched like an umbrella with two legs sticking out of a pair of knee-length bloomers falling toward her. The heels of those legs locked in place, wrapped around her abdomen.

As Saya still held the vines, her body was slammed into the ground. All of Diva's power was concentrated on Saya's midsection, and she could feel her ribs snap.

"Blarff."

Blood poured into her torn lungs and spurted out Saya's mouth, spraying the air with deep red droplets.

As if on cue, the earth opened up.

There was an open cavity below them. The heavy stones of the pathway fell into the opening.

As Saya fell with the rocks and dirt into the darkness, from above her she could hear a piercing cackle.

"This is fuuun!"

+

It wasn't a sewer or water main, but probably the basement to the tower.

From the sunlight coming in through the hole in the ground above, Saya was able to get a look at her surroundings.

It appeared to be a very large warehouse. Tools not usually seen in everyday life were arranged in places about the room, mostly hidden under dust and cobwebs. On one side were dirty metal chairs and suits of armor, as well as large-sized brass musical instruments. There was also glass distilling equipment and western-type weapons like axes and spears.

"Are we playing hide-and-seek, my sister?"

Saya wasn't sure where the half-laughing voice had echoed from.

Saya held her breath as she stepped into the shadows of pillars and large equipment in order to meet her goal. She appropriately chose a long sword and lifted it into her hand. The handle reached almost to Saya's ear, and the blade was surprisingly thick. This weapon wasn't intended for cutting through flesh, but for smashing armor-clad enemies to death. It was at least three times as heavy as the katana she was more accustomed to carrying.

Saya cut her palm on the chipped and dull blade and wiped her blood across its surface. Her flesh was torn as if cut by a rusty saw. Her eyebrows winced in pain until she heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are. Let's play together, sister."

Saya allowed that voice to fuel the fire of her determination as she stooped low and ran parallel to the wall.

In the thin darkness she could make out the shape of the white dress spinning around.

Saya kicked the copperplate ancient surgical table she was hiding behind and made a fantastic leap into the air.

"I fouuund you!"

Making no attempt to avoid her blade, Diva's face burst into a smile as she faced Saya straight on.

With unfettered determination, Saya aimed the blade straight at Diva's head.

KLANG! An orange flame rose up.

Saya hit the ground and looked up as her blade crossed the blade of another.

"Solomon . . ."

The white-suited young man had blocked Saya's attack with a blade that was made up of his right arm.

This protector, Diva's Chevalier, had been fighting Hagi, but must have come here by instinct.

". . . What about Hagi?"

"He won't be coming here."

The understated meaning of those words was clear to Saya.

It was hard for her to imagine him killing Hagi so easily, but at the same time, Chiropteran immortality was not a guarantee. Severe wounds took more time to heal. As Saya felt anxious about her Chevalier, she glared with hate at her younger sister's Chevalier.

"Out of the way."

"I am afraid I cannot do that."

Solomon replied with no hesitation, and his blade didn't waver.

Saya was irritated by his stubbornness.

"I must get to Diva—!"

"Why? To kill her? Your only blood sister in the entire world?"

Saya responded to the words that sounded like those of a self-important child by squeezing the grip of her sword and pushing his blade away.

"She only brings sadness to everyone!"

"Just like you, my sister!"

Solomon grabbed the jubilantly squealing Diva with his left arm and jumped, pulling them both away from Saya's swinging blade.

Diva may have spread sadness wherever she went, but Saya had the habit of putting the people around her in danger when dealing with Chiropterans. Saya was unable to deny her words, and was unable to follow the fast-moving Solomon.

All she could think about was the blue-faced Riku with blood streaming from his neck lying in the tower above.

As if she were made from delicate glass, Solomon set Diva back on the floor with care.

"It appears you wanted me here."

"Solomon, do you want to play, too?"

"No. But I am wondering, who brought you here?"

"Anshel."

Hearing that name, the young man let out a bitter sigh.

"... I should have known. Niisan."

Saya heard a mix of respect and frustration for his older brother. She had just heard from Solomon that his brother was out to kill her.

But he wanted to help her. Or so he said.

Saya was unable to estimate what sort of relationship these blood brothers of Diva truly had. Compared to Anshel and Karl, Solomon seemed much more relaxed—not as a human, but what she understood as one of the same race—and what he said might not have been completely unthinkable.

"Can't we bring an end to this unnecessary fighting?" he requested in a calm and melancholy voice. "No matter how hard you try to act human, the one that gets hurt is you. I don't want to see that happen. After all, we aren't humans."

He was right. They weren't humans.

However, understanding that now, would she be able to toss away the family that was hers until yesterday? Was it from this noble bloodline she received her irreversible powers?

Saya didn't think so. It might be she didn't have the courage to let go of the memories she had. To Solomon she surely looked idiotic.

"I have a family, and I have friends. We are connected by our feelings. By our hearts. These people are important to me . . . I want to believe what you are saying, but I don't want to see them sad or hurt anymore. That's why I chose to kill Chiropterans."

All of Saya's anger and hatred was focused into her blade.

"I will kill the Chiropterans and protect everyone else!"

Solomon eyed the edge of the large sword.

". . . That is too bad. Now I will have to kill you."

"Tee hee hee! Solomon got rejected!"

Ignoring Diva's glee-filled laughter, Solomon ran forward.

Saya raised her long sword to shoulder level and also moved forward to attack.

Saya's sword made impact, but was knocked upward with a flash.

"Oof!"

The tip of the long sword hit the ceiling, bending Saya's upper body backward.

Solomon saw his chance and closed in with his right-arm blade swinging diagonally downward.

Even though she was aware of what was happening, Saya was still only fast enough to block the strike at the top of her sword's hilt.

Thankfully, the entire body of her German mercenary-style double-handed long sword, including the extra-long hilt, was made of steel. Still, thrown off balance, Saya crashed shoulder first into a pillar while her sword spun in the air and hit the stone floor.

A crack ran through the thick stone pillar, then spread like a breaking mirror. The inside of the pillar exposed itself before the entire column began to crumble.

Saya rolled through the rising dust cloud and over the long sword.

The blade of the sword swung around in search of Solomon's legs, but instead cut deep through a wooden shelf. Solomon made

a shallow jump into the air and the soles of his shoes came down on the sword's blade.

The thick steel blade of the long sword snapped as if it were a child's toy.

"Oh!" Saya said, startled. Taking the remaining one-third of the blade in her hand, she jumped into the air, leaving the other two-thirds sticking out of the shelf. As she landed, her legs buckled, the stone floor feeling like it was made of cotton candy.

"Wha-what is—?"

Saya fell to her knees and stared in bewilderment as her sword fell from her hand, spun around and shot off far away from her. Her vision grew hazy, and she felt like she might collapse.

Diva began to laugh insanely.

"You are low on blood, my sister. Even though there is so much around you . . ."

"I am not like you!"

Those that feed their hunger by biting into the necks of people were the same as beasts. Maybe that was natural for Chiropterans. However, it was the Saya that believed she was human that was fighting.

Diva took no notice of Saya's rejection.

With a smile on her face, she watched her Chevalier follow Saya and stayed near his side. Finally noticing the electric tension between Saya and Solomon, Diva leaned down and pulled the top section of Saya's sword out of the wood shelf with her bare hands.

Solomon's forehead wrinkled.

"Diva?"

Her white fingers wrapped around the blade and squeezed, soaking the steel with her blood which then dripped onto the dust-covered floor.

It may have been the pain that made Diva's face turn serious and wiped the smile from her lips—or was she in a trance as she pulled the broken blade from her hand?

"I will kill my beloved sister. I will kill her for you."

"You don't . . ."

"I have already decided."

These words silenced Solomon's attempt to protest.

Chevalier never second-guessed their masters.

From her position on the ground, Saya looked up at Diva's blue eyes as she carried the bloody blade closer. This queen of the Chiropterans looked at her with the love of a younger sibling gazing on her older sister.

"My elder sister's blood is poison to me. My blood is poison to my elder sister . . . right?"

"Yes."

Her face lit up with Solomon's response, and she lifted the blade into the air.

Saya watched the blood drip down from the tip of the blade.

When a Chiropteran came in contact with Saya's blood, its body turned to stone, bringing instant death. Was it possible Diva's blood could have the same effect on her?

"Bye-bye, my sister."

The steel blade began to fall when it happened.

Solomon looked up as if sensing something and grabbed Diva by the waist.

At the same moment, a cloud of dust and rubble crashed through the ceiling right where Diva and Solomon had been standing moments earlier.

As Saya breathed in the dust-filled air, her eyes looked to the stone floor for the source of the sudden burst from above.

It was Hagi's cello case.

She saw the form of its owner right next to it.

She wanted to be relieved at Hagi's arrival, but the shock of seeing his back brought a hand to Saya's mouth.

The light from the hole in the ceiling clearly revealed the blood dripping from the tears in his black coat and the cuffs of his pants.

"Hagi . . ."

"It's all right."

The voice of the young man was as firm and unemotional as usual.

How many times had he sacrificed his own flesh and blood to protect Saya?

". . . You are quite incredible," Solomon said softly, Diva still in his arms. Clearly the praise in his statement was heartfelt.

With her arms still around Solomon's neck, Diva couldn't suppress her laughter.

"A rude Chevalier. But I don't hate him for it."

Hagi glanced at her from the narrowing corners of his eyes, a bit like a cat.

From the area next to Solomon's feet rang a strange clang.

The piece of sword in Diva's hand bounced off the stone floor.

"I'm ready to go home."

Her face looked like that of a tired little girl looking up at her father after a day at the amusement park.

"I want to put on a new dress." Diva examined the holes in her dress from David's bullets with her fingers, and then looked up at Solomon.

Just as they were prepared to kill her, Saya was shocked to see her enemies' sudden mutual shift in priority.

"If that is what you wish."

Respecting her request as earnestly as possible, with Diva still in his arms, the Chevalier turned his back to Saya and Hagi.

At the last moment, Saya anticipated his final glance, causing her eyelids to tremble.

However, he didn't turn around. He and Diva disappeared into the darkness of the rear of the storeroom.

Saya made no attempt to try to stop them.

The yell of her younger brother's name resonated through the air.

"—Riku!"

It was Kai's voice.

+

Saya hung onto Hagi's shoulder to get up the stairs. Her weak state wasn't only because of a lack of blood.

As they climbed the stairs of the tower Saya could hear Kai's weeping more clearly with every step she took.

They entered the room that had been her younger sister's prison, now occupied by Kai and David, as well as Louis and Julia. No words were spoken.

The only sound she heard was Kai's crying and she saw him holding Riku's hand and felt the roses being crushed beneath her feet.

Julia, who was treating him, looked up.

"He's lost too much blood. I gave him some blood from your transfusions, but he is barely hanging on."

Her face sent a clear message of hopelessness.

"Dammit. Where is the rescue team?!"

The usually jovial Louis clenched his fists and showed a rare outburst of emotion.

Kai's shoulders sagged low and he didn't say a word. He must have been tired from shouting. From the bottom of the stairs until the moment she entered the room, she didn't hear him pause as he screamed Riku's name over and over again.

When George had died, Kai had bit his lip and held back the tears as best he could. Now he looked powerless as his head hung low. From the back, Saya thought her brother looked very small.

"Kai . . ."

He must have heard her. ". . . Saya," he answered, lifting his head. "It's Riku . . ."

His face was stained with his tears, and his nose was running. This wasn't the older brother that wanted to kill Chiropterans to protect his family, but just a regular seventeen-year-old boy.

"Riku is getting colder and colder . . . I don't know what I should do . . . I don't want to let Riku die."

If Julia, a doctor, couldn't help him, there was even less that Kai could do. Surely that pained Kai greatly. He couldn't give up on trying to help his little brother.

Saya felt the exact same way.

It was her fault that Riku was pulled into her battles, and it was her responsibility to help him. But there was nothing she could do.

Blood was what he needed. If only she could give him the blood flowing in her own body . . .

Saya grit her teeth and then, suddenly, her heart started racing.

—Blood.

A memory from a hundred years ago resurfaced.

When Hagi fell from the cliff and was on Death's door, it was Saya's blood that had brought him back.

"My blood . . . might be able to help Riku?"

Saya looked at Hagi's face and asked him hopefully.

Understanding the implications of that question, the faces of the Red Shield members in the room stiffened.

Hagi silently nodded in confirmation.

"If that is what you wish."

Kai looked around at Hagi and the others, confused, and then turned to Saya with anticipation.

"What do you mean 'your blood' . . . you mean you can save Riku?"

"If I give Riku my blood, it might help him. But . . ."

She had to take into consideration that his soul would never leave this world.

"Riku would stay just as he is . . . forever . . ."

Just like Hagi and Solomon.

Like the Chevalier, his flesh would become immortal. He would never sleep, and never grow into an adult. This had to be factored in. His ability to live a normal human life would be gone. Which loss would be greater was difficult for Saya to decide.

"That's fine!" To Kai the answer was obvious, and there was no hesitation or question.

Kai stood up and got very close to Saya.

He grasped Saya's shoulders with both hands. Saya was surprised by how firmly he gripped her, almost hard enough to break the skin.

"Riku is my only brother! If he dies I really will be all alone . . . I can't allow that!"

Kai's eyes swelled with tears and he quickly shifted his gaze to the floor.

It was possible that Kai didn't fully understand the implications of what Saya was saying. Riku would no longer be a person, but would become a Chevalier. That burden might not have been clear to Kai.

Despite his present state, Kai made it clear that his love for his brother was incredibly great.

His only brother. That's the way Kai said it.

Without him, Kai would be *all alone*.

Saya intended to speak in her normal tone, but her voice began to crack. "I see . . ."

She wouldn't force Kai to live life alone. That's what she wanted to say, but couldn't.

Her fake family—Solomon's voice still rang in her ears.

"Hey . . ."

Not being careful of the words that came out of her mouth caused Kai to take notice.

Before he could continue, Saya forced a smile and nodded her head.

"It's all right. I will try to help Riku."

Her heart was in her words. Even if—even if they didn't accept her as a part of the family any longer, her love for Kai and Riku would never fade away.

Hagi switched places with Julia and knelt down next to Riku. He lifted him up by the shoulders. Saya came in close, sandwiching

him, and wiped the sweat from her brow as she gazed at her blue-toned younger brother.

"Riku . . . forgive me."

It was difficult to look at him knowing that for him "time" would now stop. It was a lose-lose situation.

Saya sliced open her palm with a dagger from Hagi and brought her hand to Riku's mouth.

Come back to us, Riku.

Saya rose up once she was sure he was swallowing her blood. The cut on her palm had already healed.

As Saya wiped away any remaining blood from his lips with her finger, his eyes opened suddenly.

"Ahh . . . Gwaaahh . . . !"

Hagi held his shoulders down as pain clearly pulsated in waves through Riku's body.

Unable to hide his anxiety as he watched his brother closely, Kai yelled out.

"Riku!"

Drained of all his energy, Riku's eyes shut once again as he fell back into Hagi's chest. It wasn't clear if he was sleeping or dead.

"Is he really OK?"

Hagi answered Kai's question with a silent nod.

Like Hagi, Saya wasn't shaking. After Saya had given her blood to Hagi he had a similar response, and she remembered he also fell into a lethargic state.

"Kai, hold his hand."

"Riku . . . you're going to be fine, OK?"

As Kai gripped his brother's palm, Saya stood up.

She looked out at the western sky and noticed that it was beginning to shift to an evening shade.

She wanted to watch the sunset from the beach in Okinawa.

Saya wanted that more than anything.

BLOOD

PART TWO

THE MAIN LIGHTS of the meeting room David brought them to were set on low, creating a dim atmosphere. There was a large oblong table with about fifteen chairs positioned around it, but less than half that number would be needed.

David and Saya were the last to enter, for a grand total of six people in the large space.

Sitting next to Julia, who was tapping keys on her laptop, was a short, gray-haired man. He was a Red Shield lieutenant, so to speak, named Collins. David sat across from him, and Louis across from Julia. Saya took the seat next to Louis.

At the end of the oval table sat a young man.

He looked to be in his mid-to-late-twenties. His burnt-amber-toned hair was parted perfectly and his facial features reflected an air of refinement. Over his clearly expensive button-down shirt, he wore a tweed vest and a silk necktie clipped with a gold tiepin. The gold chain of a pocket watch flowed from his breast pocket. One would expect a certain level of haughtiness from someone who dressed in such luxurious clothes and accessories, but his nature could be seen in the honesty and strength that radiated from his eyes.

His name was Joel Goldschmidt.

The idea that the top of the internationally networked Red Shield could be this young, and have such delicate features, was

incredibly surprising to Saya. However, the organization was funded completely from his own capital, meaning the luxurious passenger ship they were traveling on also belonged to him personally.

"..."

His delicate hands were crossed in front of his chest and they looked like those of a woman who had never participated in manual labor. It was at that moment Saya realized he had been staring at her the whole time. Because of that, Saya had a hard time focusing on the information Collins was relaying to the table.

"On the subject of Saya's 'blood separation,'" Collins continued, "yes, Riku has been kept alive for twenty-four hours, but we still cannot know if he will make it or not. We cannot tell if he will become a Chevalier yet."

The medical facilities on this ship were as advanced as a small hospital in any developed nation. It was there that Riku was being treated. He still hadn't awoken from his comalike state.

"What are the chances of him getting out of control?" Joel asked. It was a natural question for the leader of an organization to pose, but it still made Saya nervous. If, for some reason, they believed Riku was a danger to them, they might have taken drastic measures to remedy the situation.

"I can't say it's not possible," Collins responded. His reply couldn't reassure Saya that Riku was going to be all right.

"I see." Joel seemed to be collecting his thoughts as his eyes scanned the table. In an attempt to stay in his good favor, Collins continued quickly.

"This boy is a valuable sample to us."

What felt like a small electric shock caused Saya's shoulders to shudder.

Sample. Like a laboratory mouse or a malignant tumor placed in a petri dish for observation. Saya took great offense to his choice of words. Solomon's subordinate had referred to the victims of

repeated D67 experiments in Okinawa and Vietnam as "mice," as well.

Red Shield was supposed to be their hated enemy, but they seemed to see Riku in the exact same way.

And surely not only Riku, but Saya, too—

"If we can closely observe the transformation process from human to Chiropteran, we might find information to assist in combating them."

"Collins, he is not a 'sample.'"

David had opened his mouth, but the words came first from Joel's lips.

"The boy is a person, just like you and me."

"You are right. I will be more careful."

The old researcher raised his eyebrows and looked legitimately embarrassed for his choice of words.

As his fingers tickled the pocket-watch chain, Joel turned to face David.

"How about the search for Diva?"

"It continues with a focus on Bordeaux."

"What about the Chevalier?"

"There is the one that pretended to be Elizaveta; Cinq Flèche CEO Solomon Goldsmith; and the one unaccounted for in Vietnam, Karl Fei-Ong . . . these are the three Chevalier we have been able to confirm, but any other information has been hard to find."

Saya looked at the screen on the wall to see the images of Elizaveta, Karl, and then Solomon pop up in succession.

Collins peeked at the screen from the corner of his eye, and his brow wrinkled doubtfully. The question he asked was directed at David.

"Once you realized Solomon Goldsmith was a Chevalier, why didn't you deal with him? We have a very capable weapon, Saya, to handle these situations, do we not?"

Weapon . . . Saya remembered hearing David refer to her the same way a while back in Okinawa. She would never amount to anything more than a Chiropteran-hunting weapon. That must be how the members of Red Shield pictured her.

Saya was close to accepting that as a given. Ever since leaving Okinawa with David, she saw herself as a weapon in the fight to save humanity.

"Dr. Collins! She is—"

"Do you, personally, see her as a human?"

Collins laughed sarcastically, interrupting David's sentence.

In an effort to endure his cynical glare, Saya squeezed both fists under the table.

It didn't matter if it was Solomon or Red Shield; no one saw her as human. Yet, Saya was a little surprised to see David assert a different opinion than Collins.

She didn't know what he had been going to say, but it was clear from his tone that David took aversion to his referring to Saya in this way.

She quickly looked over at him, but his unchanged steel profile didn't reveal what he was thinking. Still, she maintained her trust in him.

"Collins, I told you, using our hard-line tactics on the Chevalier to get to Diva will only lead to her escape, and nothing resolved."

Joel looked at his aide as he reprimanded him, and then turned to David.

"David, I would like you to continue your investigation of Cinq Flèche."

"Understood."

David's tone told Saya he had faith in their young leader.

Joel's next target was Louis.

"Do you have information on any other Chiropteran sightings?"

Louis responded by clicking some keys on his keyboard, then turning the monitor of his laptop so the others could see.

It displayed a Mercator-style map of the world.

The blinking circles on the continents must have been places where Chiropterans had been spotted. Okinawa, Vietnam, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and, Saya noticed, a concentration of circles in the Middle East.

Chiropterans seemed to appear in troubled areas. She had heard David say something about that before, but it would have been easier to understand if she had seen this map.

"Other divisions have not confirmed that our last encounter in Russia was truly a Chiropteran. We still haven't been able to learn anything beyond the intelligence on D67 we got from Ted A. Adams."

"We did find that D67 comes from Diva's blood, correct?"

Hearing Joel's response, Collins leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

"The contents we recovered from Chateau Duel reacted with Saya's blood."

What caused Saya's blood to be deadly to Chiropterans was that when her blood came into contact with Diva's blood, it immediately solidified.

If Saya's blood was poison to Diva and Solomon, then Diva's blood was poison to Saya and Hagi.

"This matches the results with our research on the samples brought back from Vietnam. In the proteins collected from Delta 67 we have identified twenty-two pairs of homologous chromosomes and one pair of sex chromosomes."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's the same as humans," Julia said in response to Joel's question. "The same number of chromosomes as *Homo sapiens,* and we could find no outstanding differences. It is conceivable that the key to making them Chiropteran is hidden in the base chemical."

"I see. Hurry and begin your research. If the D67 infiltrates the American army, we might have another Okinawa situation.

Repeated Chiropteran appearances will eventually be known to the general public."

Joel's fears were probably shared among all of the Red Shield members. Diva and her family were a threat to humans, but it wasn't much different than the danger of encountering a hungry lion in the savannah. Indeed, Chiropterans were immortal beasts that could not be destroyed by tanks or missiles, but the number of people actually killed by them was tens of thousands of times less than those killed by traffic accidents or terrorist attacks.

Yet, the fear was one would turn into a hundred, which would turn into a thousand. Even a dragon could appear to be a snake.

If the existence of Chiropterans were to become public knowledge, the very foundation of society would be at risk all around the world. It was easy to imagine civil unrest would be additionally fueled by the knowledge that Chiropterans could mimic human beings.

"Saya," Joel said, breaking the long silence in the room. "I understand you had an encounter with a curious strain of Chiropteran in Russia."

"Yes," Saya replied, remembering the attack by a group of young boys and girls pining for her blood.

"And they were not Chevalier?"

"I can't be sure. But, they felt different . . ."

The uncertainty of her words seemed unsatisfactory for Collins.

"It is your duty to fight the Chiropterans and then give us feedback on what you see. Inaccurate information is dangerous for our people in the field."

"I am sorry."

This was the first time she had heard about her "duty" to this organization she knew almost nothing about. This was all so new and confusing to her, the only thing she could think to do was apologize.

As a researcher, perhaps the idea of a new strain of Chiropteran was interesting. Maybe that was why Collins was so frustrated with Saya's imprecise answer.

"Director, just as I expected, it seems Saya should be relieved of David's care, and should be based out of headquarters under our control."

As the old researcher gave his opinion to Joel, he looked at David with clear disdain.

For Joel, antagonism between his organization's manager, Collins, and a field commander, David, was probably a real headache.

"Collins," said Joel, "it is the responsibility of the one with the name 'David' to watch over Saya. She is doing the best that she can. Isn't that right?"

He looked at Saya like a defense lawyer trying to protect his client.

She began to understand why this young leader deferred to the battle-experienced David and Louis a little bit. Regardless, she wasn't able to give him the answer he was looking for.

She had run from the hotel in Yekaterinburg and had caused nothing but trouble for the organization. Saying she had been "doing her best" would have been more than an overstatement.

At one point she had been invited by Solomon to switch to Diva's side, and she was that close to forgetting her human past and taking him up on it. How disappointed would Joel be if he knew about that?

Finding out her past and birthplace were hidden from her, after being told to fight Diva, Saya had felt betrayed by Red Shield. Because of that, she had almost walked the same path as Diva, but now felt she owed Joel her trust.

Saya looked down to the surface of the table in silence. Joel reacted by standing up from his seat.

"If there are no other reports, I shall adjourn today's meeting."

She could hear the sound of chair legs scooting across the floor.

After Julia and Louis went Collins, sneering at her sideways before he walked out of the room. Blocking Collins's view, Joel was suddenly at Saya's side.

"Saya Otonashi."

"Yes?"

"I am sorry I haven't properly introduced myself until now. Joel Goldschmidt."

Saya quickly stood up and grabbed his extended right hand. Unlike pistol-packing David's hands, or former-baseball-player Kai's hands, Joel's skin was very soft.

He looked down at her hand. He didn't let go, which she found confusing.

"Is there something . . ."

". . . No, no. I just noticed your hand is so dainty."

It was the same with Clara and Elizaveta. Red Shield members heard about the Chiropteran hunter, the beast killer "Saya," but when they met the real Saya Otonashi they were surprised.

"I hope you can lend us your strength from here on out."

"Yes."

She still didn't feel like there was much she could do to help.

But if this young man was able to look at her and Riku as human, that gave her more than enough reason to fight at his side.

After the heavy and uncomfortable meeting Saya walked straight to Riku's room in the infirmary.

Because it was such a large ship, the medical facilities were vast and there was little, it seemed, they weren't prepared for. Riku was placed in a room all the way in the back.

The room was completely segregated by a glass wall, and only doctors and researchers, like Julia and Collins, were allowed inside.

Still, Saya worried about her little brother's condition, and her legs couldn't help but bring her as close to him as she could get.

As Saya turned the corner, she stopped, seeing the silhouette of someone sitting with his back against the wall and looking into Riku's room.

Kai.

When Riku was transported to this place the day before, Kai planted himself in that spot to watch over him. Saya guessed he hadn't moved from there the entire time.

He continued to stare straight ahead into Riku's room, and didn't seem to notice her arrival. Saya didn't have the courage to call to him.

It was her fault Riku was in this state. She didn't know what she could say. She was worried that Kai would overextend himself, but there was no way to convince him to separate himself from Riku.

Feeling powerless, Saya turned around and left.

Saya walked out onto the lido deck, and discovered it was nighttime.

Looking up at the twinkling stars, the position of the constellations reminded Saya she wasn't in Okinawa.

They had traveled a very long way.

Both arms crossed over the guardrail, with her chin resting on top, she looked out over the dark sea.

Even from the port in Marseilles, it seemed they were floating on the waves under a completely different Milky Way.

". . . Did I do the right thing?"

Saya spoke her thoughts to the dark ocean.

"Was giving Riku my blood really the right thing to do?"

She wasn't really talking to herself, but to the person facing her from behind.

She didn't need to turn around to know Hagi was watching her from the cabin wall.

"You did what you could to help him."

"But did I really help him? If he does wake up, he will have to live forever with his time stopped . . . just like you."

She looked over her shoulder to see Hagi looking straight at her.

"Riku has become your Chevalier. As long as you are around, he will live forever with you in mind . . . just like I do."

It was true. No matter what, he was always near to her.

In Hagi there was someone she could trust who was constantly by her side. She understood this now more than ever.

"But . . . what will happen to Kai?"

Now Riku was the same as Hagi . . . Saya's *blood relative*, so to speak. It was an eternal union. Adding in her decades of "sleep," they would be spending centuries together.

What about Kai, a human?

To Saya, Kai and Riku were both beloved members of her family. The problem was, compared to Chiropterans, the path that was a human's life was very short.

"So here is where you were."

She heard someone walking closer to her, but only realized it was David when she heard his voice.

She didn't turn around, and let the salty air rub against her cheeks.

For a few moments, the only movement on the ship's deck was from the sea wind.

"I was wrong to have not told you about your past."

David's statement sounded emotionless, and therefore awkward.

"We believed the best way was for you to gain your memory back on your own, so we decided to tell you only the minimum we thought you needed to know."

His voice remained flat and direct. It rattled with the tone of a responsible adult.

Slowly his voice became distorted.

". . . But now Riku is in the situation he is in . . . I feel as if I have disrespected George . . ."

Sensing his voice fade at the end, Saya guessed he might have been crying.

David almost never exposed his inner feelings. She thought he, especially, was a person that would never show his weaknesses.

"My father was a member of Red Shield . . ." David continued, his voice tinged with emotion, ". . . but he died during a mission. Louis and Clara, who died in Vietnam, were partners in the CIA. All the other members of Elizaveta's unit in Afghanistan were killed by Chiropterans. Our leader, Joel, is a direct descendent of the Joel that raised you."

Saya looked up from the dark sea.

Joel Goldschmidt—that indeed was the same name as the millionaire owner of the Zoo.

"All the members of Red Shield are connected through shared fate with Chiropterans. We feel anger and hatred toward the Chiropterans, and pain and grief for our lost friends and comrades. That entire burden has been placed on your back . . . you are all we have."

Saya turned around.

David's tie was gone and the top button of his shirt was undone. She felt like his face had softened. Looking at David now, she understood that his usually steely, hard exterior was due to the fact he was always fighting. In his right hand was a long, pole-shaped object wrapped in cloth.

"I will not run away again."

She looked at him straight in the eye and spoke with no hesitation.

"I will not run away again before I kill Diva."

Her blood was that of the Chiropteran, the enemy of the human race. Diva was her younger sister, and Saya had committed to bringing her death.

It would not be an exaggeration to say it was for the sake of mankind. Yet, she really wanted to protect Kai and Riku and people like Joel and David who had helped her.

To do so, she had to hunt Diva, the one that turned her world upside down. It was the battle she must fight.

David unwrapped the bundle and held out its contents.

It was a sheathed katana for Saya.

"A new blade for you."

Saya grasped it with her left hand, and felt the weight of the sword.

She pulled the blade out just a little, only to see a red glow reflect above the hilt.

David held up his cross-shaped pendant in front of his chest.

"In order to remember our past, we all carry crystals from those close to us who have fallen to the Chiropterans."

Saya remembered when David and Elizaveta showed each other their ornaments at the port in Vladivostok. The Chiropteran crystal was evidence they were Red Shield members and affirmed their connections.

"Your crystal is from George."

"Father's . . ."

Saya gazed at the shiny red crystal.

After Saya had been forced to kill her father in the basement of the nature conservatory in Okinawa, David must have recovered a piece of his body.

The beautiful, gemlike crystal had been cut in a diamond shape and the blood color reminded her of George's determination.

"We will fight at your side. But for now, rest and get your strength up."

Saying that, David turned away. He may have been showing discretion over this reunion, of sorts, between father and daughter. The sound of his footsteps was washed away by the waves.

She slowly pulled the blade from its scabbard.

It glittered bewitchingly in the moonlight.

A blade, built to destroy Chiropterans, had returned to her hands. Along with George's powerful spirit.

This sword was stiffer and stronger than her last one and seemed less likely to break.

"When I kill Diva, it will be over for everyone. It will all be over . . ."

As Saya whispered to herself, her eyes traveled from the brilliant red crystal embedded in the body of the blade up along the edge of the sword.

To bring David and everyone else happiness, Saya, herself, must become a Diva-slaughtering blade.

A blade that cuts through the darkness.

"If that is your desire," Hagi said, stepping beside her, "allow me to serve you until that wish is fulfilled." With that, he dropped to one knee like a knight to his queen, bowing his head deeply.

"Thank you, Hagi."

With Hagi at her side, she vowed to bravely fight.

"What do you see, Doctor?"

As Julia looked over, the light from the screen painted her face bluish-white.

As Collins looked at the screen with Julia, his forehead wrinkled.

"What's this change?"

On the screen was one part of the "blueprint" of a living being. At the very least, it was not one of the base chemicals that was seen in the genetic information in humans or similar vertebrates.

"Yes. We discovered it in the DNA sample we took from Riku's blood."

"Hmm . . . a fifth base?"

Collins made a concentrated effort not to sound too surprised. He brought his hand to his chin to keep it from shaking.

It was a substance that didn't naturally occur in human DNA.

Human DNA was made up of adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine. DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid—was made up of these four base chemicals, phosphoric acid, and sugar, only.

What Julia had showed him wasn't one of the four base chemicals, and certainly wasn't phosphoric acid or sugar. It could be said it looked similar to uracil, which appeared in RNA.

If this was no mistake, it would be a historical discovery.

Julia appeared to be even more excited by it than he was.

"I have never heard of anything like this before. But we may be close to finding the answer."

She was talking about the connection between humans and Chiropterans.

Determining what caused one to turn into the other could be advantageous in Red Shield's ongoing battle.

No, it was even bigger than that. It would shake the biology world to its foundation.

"If this is correct, it is a Nobel Prize–worthy discovery . . . that is, if we were able to make it public."

Equipment that would make a top-notch university researcher jealous filled the room. Even with all the machines, data, chemicals, and staff they had on hand, if there was any doubt or question, the ship would go where they needed without hesitation. Collins was highly trusted and given free reign with Chiropteran remains and information.

As a man studying the creature that surpassed the human race, he couldn't ask for anything more.

He had invited Julia to join him, and her reputation as a talented researcher was certainly deserved, considering the results she produced. As her instructor, it was natural for him to want to take credit for her work.

"Dr. Collins," she said formally. She still spoke to him in the same way she had since he taught her in college. He turned his head and looked at her.

Her eyes sparkled with the researcher's pioneering spirit as well as respect for her teacher, just like they did when she was a student.

"It is a true honor to be working alongside you. There were much more talented research students in the class at college."

"There was no student better than you."

That was a truthful evaluation.

There may have been students who earned higher grades, but none matched Julia's passion for discovering the unknown. Truly talented researchers were measured by the level of their innate desire to fully answer the questions presented to them.

"Thank you very much. I am very happy to be working on this research with you."

Julia's body spun on her stool to face him, and she sat up straight and grinned.

"Happy . . . you say?"

Collins turned away from her beaming, proud smile. Julia was the most talented member of his team. Her talents alone made Red Shield's research center a thing of value. The incredible discovery of a fifth base chemical was also her achievement.

However, no matter how amazing the discovery or talented the research, the findings could not be leaked to the outside.

Considering the subject of their research was Chiropterans, for Red Shield's benefit, the need for secrecy was obvious.

And yet—there were times this saddened Collins.

Being forced to hide such a monumental discovery from history—was this the way it was meant to be? Was it not a betrayal of future researchers?

"When our Chiropteran subject awakens, we may find some unforeseen changes. I'll continue my analysis."

"I'm counting on you."

Collins stood up from his seat. After the meeting earlier in the evening, he was very tired.

Every meeting he had with that warmonger David ended up being a waste of time. Joel held David in high regard, but Collins had a better scope of Saya's fate.

Collins had returned to his cabin and sat down on the sofa when the phone rang.

He picked up the receiver and found it was a call from outside the ship.

"Yes. Put it through."

After a brief moment of silence, the voice of his caller came through the receiver.

"Is this Professor Collins?"

It was a young man's voice. His English was tinged with a French accent.

"And you are?"

"I graduated from the university you used to teach at. My name is Van Argeno."

The name didn't ring any bells, but in the position he was in, he didn't take too much interest in medical students.

"I am now working with a pharmaceutical manufacturer and would like to request your cooperation on something."

"Cooperation? On what?"

"I will give you the details when we meet face to face. I understand you are on vacation right now. When do you plan on returning home?"

The term "pharmaceutical manufacturer" stuck out to him. What a pretentious way to describe one's company. The tone in his voice almost made it sound as if Collins was the one making the request.

"I am sorry, but I do not have time right now."

With that frank dismissal, Collins was about to hang up the phone when his hand stopped at the next words that came out of the receiver.

"I see . . . I thought you were still interested in creatures more advanced than Homo sapiens."

Collins felt his breath catch in his throat.

Creatures more advanced than people. He could only be talking about Chiropterans. It was hard to fathom how this young man

could know of the existence of Chiropterans, but Collins sensed some connection. It was also possible that he sensed the scientist in this man.

"If you participate in this research," the voice on the other end of the phone continued, "the Nobel Prize could be more than just a dream."

Collins remained silent, encouraging the speaker to continue. He didn't want him to think he was so vain as to be moved by promises of something like the Nobel Prize.

"I am now in Iceland, but will return to Paris in a week's time. If we could meet then, it would please me to no end . . ."

It sounded like he had something in his mouth. Something rattled against his teeth as he spoke, probably a piece of candy. What terrible manners during such an important business proposal.

However, it may have been to ease the discomfort of being in Iceland.

"Iceland . . . ?"

He had only discovered a few days before that a genetic research facility in Iceland had been attacked by a group of people.

He hadn't heard any details of what kind of research they were conducting there, but remembered that it was run by a man named Boris. His thesis and research materials were censored from the medical journals, but he seemed to be a highly skilled and ambitious researcher. He got involved in the incident and was killed, according to reports.

The death of a talented scientist was always a tragic loss, but more than that, Collins keyed in on the location being Iceland.

He knew that due to the geographical conditions of Iceland, the citizens were protected from foreign invasion. As a result, they had a pure bloodline. In recent years there had been efforts to genome-map the nation, which received a lot of attention in the media. Boris's research facility probably carried some of the

responsibility of the project. The fact the project was sponsored by a foreign drug company came as quite a surprise to those interested in medicine and economics.

The operating funds of the company came via Goldsmith Holdings. Collins knew this through Red Shield intelligence. Goldsmith also financed Cinq Flèche Pharmaceuticals, which was illicitly manufacturing Delta 67. That company was run by one Solomon Goldsmith, so it wasn't hard to see the connection there.

Goldsmith Holdings, the connection to the Chevalier and Delta Program—each had reached as far as Iceland's genetic research. It was hard to imagine a scenario where these factors together didn't involve Chiropterans.

After a long pause, Collins finally replied, ". . . I will contact you in a week."

Collins heard the man laugh heartily on the other end of the line.

"I wait patiently for your call."

The tone in the other man's voice was clear: he knew Collins's answer even before he called.

"Kai, are you still here?"

It took him a few moments to realize someone had called his name.

Kai turned away from looking through the glass at Riku to see a large black man standing in the hallway.

Worried about Riku, Louis came to check on him every couple hours.

"You haven't eaten anything all day, have you? I prepared some food, so go and eat. I'll keep an eye on Riku."

"You can have it," Kai said. He wanted to thank him for thinking of him, but he couldn't imagine food passing down his throat at that moment.

Big-eater Louis might have thought people got their energy from food. Kai imagined that he offered him his cooking because he thought he looked frail.

"Riku will be worried when he wakes if you are almost passing out from hunger."

Louis was looking into the room at Riku.

Kai stood next to him and looked at his younger brother, too.

He was lying on a bed, and his chest rose up and down with his shallow breaths. His face looked peaceful, and if Kai hadn't known better, he would have guessed that Riku was sleeping soundly.

According to Julia, this matched Hagi's transformation to a Chevalier as it was recorded in Joel's diary, and so far she hadn't noticed any complications. Still, knowing the dramatic changes going on in his tiny body as he slept kept Kai on edge. He couldn't help himself.

Yet, when Riku did finally wake up, seeing his big brother's healthy smiling face might be important.

"... All right."

Taking Louis's advice, Kai started down the corridor.

However, still being unfamiliar with the ship's layout, Kai wasn't sure where he was expected to go. And this was a big ship.

Kai walked out into the night air as he considered which direction to continue.

From the lido deck there were the faintest hints of a sunrise in the eastern sky. The sun hadn't yet broken the horizon, but the air smelled of the darkness of night being pushed back.

It was then he recognized the timbre of the cello.

Looking around, he spotted the back of the young man sitting on the ship's deck holding the instrument.

It might have been this melody that made Kai's feet carry him here.

Hagi must have noticed the sound of his footsteps, and stopped moving the bow across the strings. He turned around to take a look at the single member of his audience.

Both of Kai's hands remained in his pockets as he gazed at Hagi's face.

"That's really cool . . . that you can play like that."

Until now, Kai had always been envious of Hagi's Chevalier abilities; he felt if he had Hagi's skills he might have been able to save George's life and protect Saya and Riku.

And yet, he had never felt jealous of Hagi's musical ability before now.

"If I could play an instrument like that, maybe some things wouldn't have turned out like they did."

When Saya was trying to help Riku at the Zoo, Kai had been worried about his brother, and said some hurtful things to his sister.

Between Saya, Riku, and himself, Kai couldn't say who was the most important.

When Saya left the hotel in Yekaterinburg, she must have had some real questions about her true bloodline and family. As a normal human, it was hard for him to fully sympathize with the pain she must have been going through. Reading Joel's diary gave him more insight as to how deep the pain she felt might have been.

He wanted to protect his sister. That's why he followed her to the Zoo.

And yet, this is how they ended up. His little brother was barely brought back from death's door, and he had hurt Saya, the one trying to save Riku.

He resented the fact that he hadn't been thinking clearly. What if he were more like David? David had lost close colleagues during missions before. He probably had harsh words for his comrades that couldn't control their emotions. Or probably a man like that just hid his pain and remained cold and calm to the outside world.

Or, what if he were more like Hagi? This enigmatic man knew how to communicate with Saya using something other than words. How many times had he healed Saya's wounds via the strings of his cello?

"Would you like me to teach you?"

"... Nah."

Kai turned down Hagi's offer and slowly spun around.

As defeated as Kai felt now, trying to pick up the cello was the last thing he wanted to attempt. It may have been his emotions talking, but Kai felt like he had another way of doing things.

He saw a figure come outside from the corridor facing him.

It was David.

"Riku woke up."

This short phrase caused Kai to almost choke on his own breath, and he felt like breaking into a sprint.

As Kai pushed by David's shoulder to race down the hallway, he heard a loud crash coming from behind him.

Without thinking, his feet stopped and he turned around. He realized the sound was from Hagi standing up so quickly that the folding chair he had been sitting on collapsed.

"What's wrong?" David asked.

"... They're coming," Hagi replied in a low voice as he placed his instrument back in the cello case.

In the next instant, he had jumped the deck's handrail and was running off into the distance at a high speed.

"Coming? ... Does he mean Chiropterans?!"

Kai's question to himself affirmed his dull shock.

From far away, but still on the ship, was the sound of something being destroyed.

An enemy attack.

"Get to Riku!" David barked. "Now!" Pulling his pistol, David raced up the stairs from the corridor.

Kai's instincts were to follow, but he forced his body to return down the passageway.

"Riku ..."

Kai didn't like being ordered around like a child by David, but he wanted to see Riku's waking face more than he wanted to

fight. On top of that, if Chiropterans really had invaded the ship, then he would need to be with Riku to protect him.

Kai's sense of impending danger increased as he ran down the hallway. He could hear the sounds of machine-gun fire and the loud echo of something being smashed close by.

Suddenly a wall appeared just before Kai, forcing him to stop.

"Wha-what the hell?"

It must have been a barrier to protect from enemy invasion. The ship may have looked like a mega-rich pleasure vessel, but it was equipped like a battleship. This ship itself, the Red Shield headquarters, was prepared for battle with Chiropterans.

Now Kai couldn't get to the medical facilities where Riku was.

"Shit!"

He tried to go back the way he had come, but was blocked by an identical-looking thick metal barrier.

Just as Kai was about to give up hope, he noticed a white flash along the side wall.

A cool sound, like ice cracking, accompanied fissures in its surface until a large section of the wall fell forward onto the floor.

The stunned Kai saw figures wearing dark-gray clothing.

Just as he processed what he was seeing, a silver blade flashed before his eyes.

"Don't worry about the humans, Carmen."

"Hmph."

The wild-eyed man in glasses pulled back the three-bladed pike from Kai's throat.

A cold sweat covered Kai's body and he stumbled backward into the opposite wall.

"..."

The one called Carmen, and the in-control young man, wore what looked like long friar robes. Without a sound, more of them came in through the hole, one by one. Seven altogether.

It was a young group, both men and women, and even children. They all carried frightening bladed and blunt weapons, and Kai saw that under their long robes they wore military-like uniforms.

"Got it, Aurélien?" said Carmen.

"Almost."

Carmen's question was answered by a soft-spoken girl with long, flaxen hair.

Both of her eyes were closed and it looked like she was focused on trying to find something that couldn't be seen.

The others were waiting for what she was going to say.

They were all ignoring Kai, and were focused on what Aurélien's next words would be, as if she were a sooth-saying shaman or oracle.

"—I found her."

The girl's eyelashes rose up. Her stunning eyes rose toward the ceiling.

"Saya is all the way on top of the ship."

Kai shuddered in horror.

They were targeting Saya. The bunch of them looked human, but they were high-end Chiropterans—Chevalier.

"Is that Chevalier with her?"

The question was asked by the young man who had saved Kai from Carmen. His bangs crossed over his face diagonally, hiding his right eye, but what Kai could see of his soft features made him look a little feminine.

"Yes."

Hagi had already positioned himself by his mistress's side, it seemed.

The young man nodded in response to Aurélien's answer.

"Let's go."

"Moses, what about this guy?"

A girl with reddish-purple hair who was barely in her teens stared at Kai with big beastly eyes.

"Leave him be. We are only here for Saya's blood."

The sickle-shaped blade the young man held sparkled, and he took off running.

With a casual turn of the blade, the thick metal barrier broke apart as if it were made of gelatin.

As fast as the wind, and as smooth as butterflies, the young man, followed by the others, zoomed through the air. Kai couldn't just watch them go without trying to do something.

"They're after Saya's blood . . ."

He didn't know what their reasons were, but considering their methods, it was hard to imagine they intended to let Saya live.

Kai pulled the pistol from his belt at his back and cocked the hammer, putting one round in the chamber, before following the ship's invaders.

He didn't have to think hard about which direction they had gone.

He just had to follow the trail of holes bashed through the walls and barriers to find them. On the way he came across an injured Red Shield agent in a black suit.

"Where are they?"

"Up. David is with a group going to intercept them."

Kai left the man gripping his bloody shoulder where he was and jumped up the nearest stairwell.

It appeared that David had lured the attackers outside to avoid noncombatant losses as much as possible.

Saya could smell the presence of Chiropterans in the night air.

It was as clear as her waking consciousness, and the feeling spread from inside to the tips of her fingers and toes and to the electrified

tips of each strand of hair on her head. The night buzzed with the energy and until David and the other fighters exited the corridor and their body temperature clouded her vision, she really felt as if she could see the energy, as if it were visible to her naked eyes.

Hagi, who was standing behind her, didn't say a word. She sensed his confidence in her without him needing to speak. This was the very first time she didn't feel like she needed to depend on him, but that he could rely on her.

Saya was aware of a passion to fight surging through her body.

She held her new katana down in her left hand. The red radiance of her father beamed from the blade, giving the sword a weight, lending her a bravery she never had before.

The deck of the heliport suddenly burst apart in an explosion.

Through the raining pieces of steel and cement came silhouettes in monk robes.

She was able to make out the Moses, the young man she had battled in Russia, looking right at her as he flew through the air.

"Saya!"

He sliced through a tatami-mat-sized chunk of concrete with his crescent-shaped blade as he made a dive toward her.

Instantly Saya's sword was raised to the defensive.

Sparks from their clashing blades illuminated both their faces.

Bending backward, Saya planted the sole of her left foot firmly on the ground to keep from sliding.

For a moment it looked like an even match-up. Moses had the advantage in coming down on Saya from above, but in the end, he was the one tossed back.

"... Urgh!"

"We cannot fail!"

"Watch out, Dars!"

Taking the place of the fallen Moses, a bald-headed man rushed at Saya. He was short, but his body was a tight mass of muscle, and his huge maul looked strong enough to fell an elephant.

Saya didn't move.

Dars couldn't pivot out of the way in time to prevent Hagi from slamming him in the side with his cello case. Rebounding from the impact, he rolled on the air like a big ball.

Seeing this, Saya moved back as she raised her katana.

Gudrif appeared at her back, and she deflected the swing of his long sword, planting her blade into the chest of another member of his attack party.

"Uurkk!"

As fresh blood splashed through the air, the stubborn-looking man—Yan was his name—swung his pointed ax downward.

His sharp war hammer stuck into the hard ground of the heliport.

Saya bent her upper torso back to avoid him, and spun around to his back side in one smooth motion, thrusting her katana.

The end of her blade came out through Yan's chest.

"Gwaaa!"

As he reeled back in pain, Saya kicked him in the back of the knees to dislodge her blade and then quickly leapt back.

One beat late, Gudrif's blade only managed to slice through Saya's shadow.

"Hang in there, Yan!" Gudrif shouted.

"You bastard!" Carmen spat as he swung his weapon. Hagi deflected the strike of the three-pronged pike, and Carmen glared at him over his glasses with genuine hatred.

Saya whipped her sword back, scattering Yan's blood, and looked Carmen in the eyes.

"Don't be impatient, Carmen," came a voice from behind Saya.

It was Moses who tried to extinguish his partner's clear need for revenge.

"We were not prepared . . . The Saya of today has no ambivalence."

Yan held a hand to his chest and stood up, his face distorted.

Saya had not applied her Chiropteran-poisoning blood to her katana. The blade that sliced through his heart was unable to bring death to this beast. Surely they were aware of their own immortality. Yet, even for Chiropterans, decapitation meant death. Saya had missed her chance.

Saya saw suspicion in Carmen's rant.

"What are you going to do?" Carmen said, taunting Saya, who answered his question with one of her own.

"Who are you? What do you want from me . . ?" Chiropterans were the enemy. They must be killed. But before that, she wanted to know that single fact.

She didn't know why, but she didn't think they had been sent by Diva.

When they attacked in Russia, she didn't get the feeling they were cooperating with the Chiropteran mimicking Elizaveta, and Chevalier didn't strike in groups like this.

"We are Schiff."

Moses spun his sickle-shaped sword around once and stepped forward.

"In order for my siblings and myself to see tomorrow, we must take your blood!"

At almost the exact same moment, the other six began to move. Clearly they were collectively hostile enemies, and this was no time for conversation.

Saya and Hagi also began to run.

As she bolted, Saya readied her katana at her hip.

Hagi's cello case blocked Moses's sickle, and Saya jumped over them with her sights set on Carmen.

"Grff . . ."

As the young man made his move on Hagi, his face stiffened with rage as his bladed pike was repelled.

"Carmen!"

Messing up her beautiful long hair, the girl jumped to Saya's flank. Her slender arms carried an inappropriately huge broadsword which was pointed at Saya.

Saya bounded backward off the long pike with both feet while the giant iron blade sliced through the air below her. Dodging the sword, Saya landed on the ground, but her nimble enemy was right behind her.

"I have you now!"

The innocent-sounding voice was accompanied by a swinging battle-ax blade, and Saya raised her sword just in time to deflect it.

An orange flame rose as the curved ax blade slid across the body of her sword.

"Bitch!"

She must have anticipated Saya's landing place and swung her ax while Saya was still in the air.

Her purple-red hair was in cute braids, but the ax she swung was so huge, it would have taken at least two men to lift it.

In full battle mode, Saya allowed herself to be pushed back and did one somersault across the ground before popping back up with her sword poised and ready. To protect her, Hagi came and stood with his back against hers.

". . . You are tougher than I had heard."

"Stop whining, Lulu. Compared to Diva's Chevalier, she might even be stronger."

The scolding Carmen quickly swung his pike around.

A loud bang rattled her eardrums as his weapon was struck by a bullet.

Through the door to the ship's upper deck came one machine-gun-wielding agent wearing black after another. As they fired their weapons, the men scattered in every direction, hiding their bodies behind storage tanks and large ventilation ducts. It appeared they had the Schiff surrounded.

"Hnph. Are you really in such a hurry to die?"

Carmen's grumblings were lost in the bursts of gunfire.

The Schiff all began moving quickly.

The black-suit-wearing fighters responded with great skill. They quickly traded places between areas of cover while trying to catch the enemy in the crossfire. They worked in perfect unison, and no agent stayed in one spot for more than thirty seconds. On top of that, when one moved, two or three others would give him covering fire for protection.

They were fighting quick and powerful Chiropterans, so they had to use their numbers and cooperation to their advantage.

"Aah!"

Unable to counterattack, one girl was cornered and let out a little scream as she was forced to use her massive blade as a shield.

Her right shoulder exploded, painting red polka dots all over the ground.

"Aurélien!"

Carmen swelled with anger as he spied Aurélien's anguished expression.

"Goddamned humans!"

First he and Dars, and then Yan, shifted their attention from Saya to the black-clad agents.

The guns really weren't a threat to the serious and focused Schiff. Saya had trouble following their path as they moved at hurricane-wind speeds through the air. It must have been just as difficult for well-trained fighters to try to pinpoint one of them in their gun sights.

Not only that, the three Schiff broke away in different directions, dispersing the agents' gunfire. For Chiropterans, gunfire itself wasn't a deadly threat, and besides protecting their heads, they weren't so concerned about actually getting shot. They tried to avoid the gunfire because bullet wounds were unattractive, as well as somewhat painful.

"Get away!"

No one replied to Saya's cry.

Despite seeing comrades impaled in the chest with the pike or having their heads smashed in by the maul, the black-clad agents were not going to stop fighting.

The deck of the ship that acted as the Red Shield headquarters was a battlefield.

As he blocked Lulu's axe with the cello case, Hagi parried Gudrif's sword and swiped his midsection with the long claws of his right hand.

Saya jumped past Moses's swinging sickle and gravity pulled her back through the night air, led by the point of her long blade.

Moses retreated back only to have a long-robed figure take his place. It was Carmen, who was supposed to be fighting the agents.

That was a diversion.

"Yipe!"

Saya had allowed an unexpected enemy to get in close. She leaned to the side. The blades of the pike luckily only cut a lock of her hair, but she was off balance, and the enemy wouldn't be so forgiving the next time.

"Ready!"

Moses had perfect timing and precision as his sickle flashed though the air toward her, but his head suddenly snapped backward as if punched by an invisible fist.

"Gaa . . . alff."

As blood gushed from his throat, Moses tenaciously continued pursuit of his target.

Looking too calm and determined for someone in his condition, Moses was losing the energy needed to bag his prize.

Saya pushed off the ground with her hands rising up, only to see the crescent-moon-shaped blade pass below her.

However, Carmen's pike came at her unexpectedly.

An unpleasant metallic clang rang out.

The tip of the pike was deflected by the cello case, and stabbed nothing but the dark air.

Saya turned toward the end of the pike, jumping up atop and off of Hagi's shoulders.

"Hyaa!"

She floated above Gudrif's head, who had taken Hagi's position, when she brought down her blade, but as he retreated she only managed to cut his long robe.

From her position on her knees, Saya brought her katana up to her shoulder and checked the positions of Gudrif and Lulu before looking for the sniper who had shot Moses in the throat, saving her life.

David and several other agents were firing at Dars and Yan. As he dumped his empty cartridges to reload, David was looking at Saya.

"Saya, we're here to fight, too!"

Saya could hear his words clearly, despite the sounds of battle around them.

David aimed his pistol at Dars, who was swinging his massive mace at a Red Shield fighter, and fired as Saya bowed in appreciation.

For them to fight the more powerful Chiropterans, or in this case, the even more extraordinary Schiff, meant they literally had to put their lives on the line. This enemy could not be simply killed with guns.

On top of that, they fought without succumbing to fear.

They maintained their nearly meaningless attacks in order to bring the blade known as Saya to the enemy's throat. In other words, their job was to protect Saya as she was the only one with the ability to kill the enemy.

They fought as her "shield."

These men, a "red shield," stained with their own blood as they fell protecting her—

"What're you looking at?" barked Lulu.

Saya answered Lulu's taunt with a cold stare, her eyes shining a deep crimson.

Saya knew she had to reward the shield that gave up their lives to protect hers. Like them, she would fight with courage.

As Lulu ran at her with her battle-ax raised, Saya saw a hesitant stumble in her gait, just for a moment.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Saya lunged straight at Lulu's chest.

"Aa . . . ?!"

Her face showed complete shock as the blade entered her body.

Even as she tried to stop Saya, pushing back with the handle of her ax, Saya felt her sword sink deeper.

Saya swept her lead foot out from under her.

However, even as she fell over, Saya didn't have enough time to strike again. Saya dodged a slash from Gudrif's blade at her back by a hair's breadth.

She could not allow this to become a two-on-one battle.

Saya could balance the odds with the help of her partner.

"Hagi!"

He responded the moment she turned her head and called to him.

Hagi promptly retreated from his fight with Carmen and, without looking, extended his right arm back. At the same time he was dodging Carmen's blade, Saya jumped back and grasped Hagi's extended hand with her left palm.

Hagi kept his right arm parallel to the ground and began to swing around.

They must have looked like a pair of figure skaters. Hagi spun Saya's body in an arc closer to Carmen. Saya's body was like

an extended blade from Hagi's arm, as she was swung through the air.

One moment she couldn't see her enemy, and the next Carmen filled her field of vision. Hagi's fight with Carmen had been to prevent him from attacking Saya from the side.

Hagi's strength and the centrifugal force behind Saya's katana as he spun her through the air were too much even for a Schiff's reaction time. Saya's blade met its mark.

"...!"

Fear crossed Carmen's face as his body stiffened. Saya's blade would have split his torso in two if it hadn't been intercepted by something steel.

"Ohff..."

The violent impact knocked Aurélien back first into Carmen; as she stumbled back, Aurélien jammed the tip of her oversized broadsword into the ground, keeping Saya's katana at bay.

As the sword and the katana pressed against each other in a cross-shaped pattern, Saya glared at her enemy.

"I won't allow you to... kill my brothers," Lulu said, her voice weak. She looked like a delicate flower. Her eyes quivered, revealing none of the qualities of a fierce fighter. She was just a very proud girl doing what she could to protect her siblings from death.

Aurélien's transparent eyes inserted a nursery rhyme into Saya's fighting spirit.

For the sake of tomorrow...

Those words first came from Moses's lips, and stuck in Saya's chest like a thorn. They reminded her of George's words of encouragement back in Okinawa.

So you can meet tomorrow with a smile...

Could it be the Schiff were fighting for the same reason?

"Saya-neechan!"

It was her little brother's call that brought Saya back to reality.

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Saya soon realized that Riku's yell was a warning to tell her Moses was coming at her from behind.

Saya spun around and gripped the handle of her katana with both hands in time to counter the swing of the crescent-curved blade and spin around again to whack Moses in the chin with the butt of her sword.

He flew sideways and slid across the surface of the heliport. Saya ignored him as she looked below for the source of the voice in a panic.

She looked down to see the figure of Riku walking unsure in the strong night wind. Still wearing his white patient's robe, he was easy to spot in the night.

Without realizing it, Saya had dropped her katana and its point stuck into the ground.

"Riku . . . ?"

Where, no . . . why was Riku here now?

He looked as if he had just woken up, and this was not a safe place for someone in his condition to be. He was not one of the fighting agents, and he certainly wasn't carrying a gun, like Kai. To the Schiff, he probably looked like a lost kitten.

"Riku!" Kai shouted, so loudly his chest felt like it might tear in two. "What the hell are you doing?"

He moved from his position behind David to the edge of the heliport, frantically calling to his brother.

"Get over here, you idiot!"

"Get down!" David yelled as he reached out for Kai. But he couldn't be stopped, and shook his arm from David's grip. Seemingly unaware of the bullets whizzing by him, Kai jumped the rail around the heliport and made a straight line down to where Riku was standing.

David clicked his tongue and called out to his fellow agents.

"Everyone! Hold your fire! Don't hit the kids!"

The pause in the gunfire was a blessing to not only Kai and Riku. With the humans no longer in their way, it was possible for the Schiff to close in on their target, Saya, unrestricted.

Saya and Hagi, who were in the center of the heliport, would have to take on all seven Schiff on their own.

As he ran toward her, Yan noticed Riku in his path.

"Outta my way!" Yan shouted. It didn't sound as if he meant to kill him. As he ran, Yan used his pickax to push the staggering boy out of his path. A simple manuever, but that alone was enough to kill an average human.

"Riku!"

Kai ran with all his might to his brother's side, propped him up, and turned Riku to him.

"Riku! Are you OK?!"

"Kai-niichan . . ."

As Kai rocked him in his arms, it wasn't long before Riku's eyes blinked open from unconsciousness. He finally seemed to realize where he was for the first time.

"Kai, get away."

Saya screamed at Kai as she and Hagi fended the rush of the Schiff.

She wondered if her warning reached its mark between the clanging of weapons and sparks from metal striking metal.

Kai looked up to see the Schiff positioning themselves in battle formation, and raised his pistol.

"Damn you!"

His purpose was less to hit them, and more to create fear in the enemy.

Yan didn't appear fazed enough to even turn around. Bullets tore through his robes and his military uniform underneath as he stood there defenseless. Even from that distance, Saya could see the holes close up. The final shot just barely grazed his cheek.

"I guess I am supposed to be shaking in my boots right about now, huh?" Yan said, almost offended at Kai's use of a gun on him.

As Kai continued to pull the trigger despite the lack of cartridges, Yan hoisted his pickax up into the night sky.

"Kai!"

Saya's body singed with uneasiness, but her eyes calmly spied her enemy.

In front of her crashed the mace belonging to Dars, and Saya used it as a stepping stone to leap. Her second step was off his hairless scalp, giving her momentum to fly higher than Gudrif and Lulu, who were coming down at her.

"Sorry," said Dars. "She got past me."

"Think you can get away?!"

Gudrif's regretful tone overlapped with Carmen's elated bellow.

A lightning-quick strike from his bladed spear was too quick for Saya to avoid. Her eyes opened wide when she saw the pike planted in her abdomen.

All three blades had entered her flesh.

"It ends here, Saya!"

Finally capturing their top prize, Carmen was in very high spirits.

Saya bent forward and pulled herself just off the blades of his long weapon.

Carmen's glee lasted only but a moment.

Saya's left arm didn't quiver as she grasped the pole in her armpit and held her body above the knives of the pike.

The one who captured her prize was Saya.

"You . . . ?!"

Despite his state of shock, Saya wasn't able to cut Carmen's throat with her katana. However, he wasn't able to retreat without abandoning his weapon into Saya's hands.

Saya's body gripped the body of the pike with her left hand and promptly threw it forward.

Carmen, Moses, and Aurélien quickly jumped out of its path.

Saya didn't let the break in the Schiff encroachment go to waste. Disregarding them, she bolted across the top of the heliport.

Yan swung his pointed hammer downward.

Kai held Riku protectively, with his back to the killers, as Saya bolted and slid toward them.

The pickax barely scraped the blade of her sword, which left her in a kneeling position, difficult to defend against an attack from above.

"Did you come here to let me kill you?"

The tear in Yan's cheek wrinkled as he let out a sinister laugh and raised one eyebrow.

"Stop it!"

"Wait! Riku!"

It almost looked like Riku peeled Kai off of him and then he ran from Saya's rear to wrap himself around Yan's arm.

"I told you to stay outta my way."

Yan glared coldly at this young boy who appeared to have a death wish.

"Riku, stop it!"

All Saya could do was try and yell to bring him to his senses, as Kai was slow in catching up.

Yan casually picked Riku up with his other arm and effortlessly tossed him to the ground. Saya then immediately kicked Yan in the chest, knocking him over backward.

She quickly stood up to see Yan had let go of his pickax.

Saya looked to see Riku, face down, propping his body up by his elbows, with one end of Yan's beak-shaped pickax sticking out of his chest.

"Riku!"

As Kai cried out, blood gushed from the hole in Riku's tiny body. As he rolled across the ground, blood splashing, he looked more like a toy doll than a person. He finally stopped at the edge of the raised heliport. With a little more momentum, he might have fallen over the edge and into the ocean.

"You're next, Saya." Yan laughed as he yelled out, but in the next moment he turned to look over his shoulder.

His expectations were smashed in with his face, and he was sent reeling to the ground by Hagi's cello case.

"Hagi . . ."

Saya saw the tall young man's back as he stood between Yan and herself. She rose from her knees and turned to where Riku was lying.

Kai was already there trying to help him, and was calling his name repeatedly.

"Hey! Keep it together, Riku . . . Riku . . . Riku!"

Riku had finally opened his eyes from his long sleep, only to have his brother holding his bloodstained body in his arms again. It reminded her of that moment at the Zoo when she had to decide to let her brother die, or stop his time forever.

Riku coughed and blood spurted from his mouth.

Saya grit her teeth at the unbearable memory and looked over Kai's shoulder at Riku's face.

That's when Riku opened his eyes.

"Saya-neechan, are you all right . . . ?"

He seemed much more coherent than she'd expected he'd be, but Saya was still relieved and felt tears well up in her eyes.

"What were you . . . ?"

That was as far as she got. Saya's scolding words drifted quickly out of her mind.

Looking through the hole in his hospital gown, she could see his collarbone and the torn muscles in his shoulders. It looked like he had broken ribs, and more than likely a lung had been punctured.

Suddenly, the gash became buried in muscle fiber and torn blood vessels were restored. The pieces of bones found each other and reformed, covered next by muscle and then fat. Almost instantly, the wound was completely hidden by a new layer of skin.

He had the power to regenerate. A trait humans didn't have.

"—Chevalier, I see."

As Moses spoke, Yan protected him by blocking Hagi.

As the words filled Kai's ears, he glared hatefully at Moses. Saya was sure this was the last thing Kai wanted to hear. He didn't want to know for sure that his only brother in the world was no longer human.

Saya hung her head down.

She squeezed the handle of her katana tightly with her right hand.

Riku was no longer human.

It was her fault that until the end of eternity he would never know the pleasures of a human life. Kai and Riku would no longer live the same life spans . . . thanks to her, there was now a wedge jammed between the two brothers.

Saya stared at her feet, and from the back she must have looked like a powerless little girl.

"Got 'em!" Yan shouted as he raced toward Saya.

"Hold on," Moses said, but Yan seemed not to hear as he leapt into the air.

Hagi did nothing to stop him. He must have known it wasn't necessary.

Saya felt his pickax swing, drawing near her, but she didn't move.

The pickax barreled through the night air on an unstoppable mission to crack her skull open—at least, that's what Yan thought, until Saya turned.

She moved the absolute least necessary to avoid his attack, and not an ounce of energy was wasted.

His weapon striking nothing but air, the last thing the Schiff saw was the burning rage in a pair of crimson eyes.

Without a word, Saya swiped her katana sideways in a flash.

Yan's flying body went rigid in fear, and a silvery light bisected his torso.

Still in flight, his body split into hunks of flesh that were carried over the edge of the heliport, only to be swallowed up by the ocean.

Saya didn't see his body vanish beneath the waves, as she had already turned to face the remaining enemies. Her eyes shone like two red orbs glowing in the night, as Saya looked over the reduced number of Schiff.

". . . You little bitch . . . How could you?"

Carmen pulled his chin close to his chest timidly and leaned on his trident as his knees tightened with energy.

Moses spoke in a low voice: "We're pulling out."

"What?!" Carmen shouted, baring his teeth at Moses. He was more than ready to take on Saya. "But what she did to Yan!"

"It's almost daybreak. And now she has two Chevalier . . . This is not a good situation."

Carmen clacked his tongue in frustration so hard it almost sounded as if he might break a tooth. It was at this point that Moses jumped from the surface of the heliport.

Like a mountain goat in rocky terrain, he hopped from tank to ventilation pipe up and up before disappearing into the night sky. One by one the other Schiff followed suit.

Finally, Carmen narrowed his eyes and shot Saya a steely glare before he vanished.

The sounds of the battlefield faded, but Saya waited a moment to be sure the Schiff were really gone.

The smell of blood and gunpowder carried across the harbor.

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It should have been daybreak, but the sun hadn't risen.

The gray rain clouds looked as if they had been painted thick on the eastern horizon, and they hid the sun from human eyes.

"Riku!" Kai shouted, his voice a mix of relief and anxiety that caused Saya to turn and look at him.

That was it. The battle was over. Now he was worried about his little brother's condition.

Kai kneeled down and hoisted Riku in his arms, yet he just stared blankly into space. Hagi and David were nearby, but remained silent. They both knew that Riku's life wasn't at risk.

Perhaps the two of them were more concerned with his mental state.

As Saya watched him closely, she also didn't know what to say, so she remained silent.

". . . Kai-niichan."

Riku slowly rubbed his chest where the wound was as he softly spoke.

"I am . . . different than I was before, aren't I . . . ?"

"What are you saying?"

Kai tried to laugh away his brother's question.

But he couldn't.

Riku looked at Kai's stiff smile calmly and relaxed, as Kai's face already told him the answer.

"Look, I was injured here just a minute ago, but now . . ."

Riku removed his hand from his chest. There was no scar. It looked like the healthy skin of a newborn baby.

"You are you! My brother!"

Kai squeezed Riku's right hand to emphasize his point. His tone sounded angry.

He might have pretended to be mad to cover his feelings of despair.

Riku looked up at the young man in black.

"I . . . am like Hagi now, isn't that right?"

Kai's body visibly stiffened, and Saya felt her own muscles tense.

Riku had already reached conclusions about the changes in his body. Perhaps it was the Chevalier in him that carried his body into the throngs of battle—he might have felt a need to protect his master . . . Saya.

He would no longer need to sleep like people do, and he would probably lose all interest in food.

Could it be for nourishment all he would want was—

"What's wrong?!"

Kai looked down as Riku's face twisted into a painful grimace.

Riku's breathing was rough, and he pressed one finger to his heart.

"Niichan . . . my chest feels hot . . ."

His right hand reached out across the ship deck as if trying to grasp something.

He was reaching toward a pool of red blood. It came from the dead agent lying next to it.

Riku was longing for human blood.

"Cut it out!"

Kai grabbed Riku's hand.

"I'm . . . thirsty . . ." Riku said, his voice shaking. His other hand reached toward the blood, and Kai forcibly embraced his brother. It was like he was trying to pull the pain from Riku's body into his own.

Saya had never felt so helpless. There wasn't a single thing she could do.

She could only watch these two brothers scorched in pain, sharing their anguish.

". . . Chevalier need a certain amount of human blood to repair injuries," said David, flatly stating the harsh reality of Riku's new existance. It might have been better if Saya had said it first. But she had been afraid to take that responsibility. It was scarier than battle.

David was strong. Saya might have denied to herself how strong he truly was. "Get a hold of Julia and have her prepare a blood transfusion," he said. "Let's get Riku back to the infirmary."

". . . Riku is my brother!"

Kai's expression and tone were adamant. He didn't want to allow anyone to touch his baby brother. Saya was sure Kai regarded everything around the two of them simply as "not Riku" right then.

Kai pulled violently at the T-shirt he wore under his jacket, tearing it from the collar to the upper abdomen of his baseball-training-toned chest.

"Niichan . . ."

Right in front of Riku's gaze was his brother's neck.

It was then that Riku understood the meaning behind Kai's action. In order to quench his thirst, Kai was giving Riku his own blood.

"..."

After hesitating several moments, Riku brought his face closer to Kai's neck.

From behind his feminine pink lips came a pair of white pointed fangs.

His incomprehensible appetite was revealed in the threads of saliva dripping from his teeth.

The tips of his fangs pressed against Kai's soft skin, giving little resistance, until finally beads of red seeped out.

Kai's face grimaced in pain.

Saya didn't want to see this.

These were two brothers who loved each other . . . to see the younger brother drink blood from the neck of the older brother . . .



Did Kai really mean to give his blood to Riku?

Kai noticed the hand softly holding his shoulder and shifted his eyes.

Hagi watched Kai and Riku in silence. As a fellow Chevalier, he wasn't in any position to stop Riku from doing what he needed, Saya guessed.

That's what he had said.

Riku, with his new life as a Chevalier, would need to realize that his time was limitless, his life was never-ending.

But in order to keep going, he would need human blood.

As Kai gave his own blood to feed his brother, from that moment his path and the one of the immortal Riku would branch away from each other. As much as Kai cared about Riku, the fact that they were now different species could not be ignored.

And yet, he wanted to maintain a close bond. Saya thought that desire must have allowed him to sacrifice his own blood to feed his brother.

Saya's eternal blood mixed with Kai's life-giving blood inside Riku's body.

Riku was tied to Saya the Chiropteran and Kai the human.

Family of the same blood—it may have taken an unusual form, but the three of them were a family.

Yet, they could never go back to how they were a family before.

The agony subsided from Kai's face, and he turned his face upward.

Rain began to fall from the rust-toned sky.

The drops hitting the ship's deck quickly increased in intensity, ripping through the atmosphere.

"... Kai-niichan, you are so warm."

Riku spoke frankly after removing his lips from his big brother's neck.

Kai didn't say anything as he held his brother's head.

Saya saw his tears as they were washed away by the rain.

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BLOOD+

Boy Meets Girl

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From his first book, *Everyone's (a) Bounty-hunter,* and subsequent releases, such as *The Calamity of a Zombie Girl,* and *Valkyrie of the Lightning Dragon,* to this four-volume adaptation of the *Blood+* television series, RYO IKEHATA has been gaining an audience for his fiction on both sides of the Pacific. Born in Shizuoka Prefecture, he currently resides in Yokohama, Japan.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A frequent contributor to Kadokawa's *Shonen Ace* magazine in Japan with such manga serials as *Detective Ritual,* CHIZU HASHII was the character designer for the animated *Blood+* television program, overseeing the conceptual design of all characters for the fifty-episode series. His illustrations also appear in the closing credits of many of the episodes of the television series. He lives in Tokyo.

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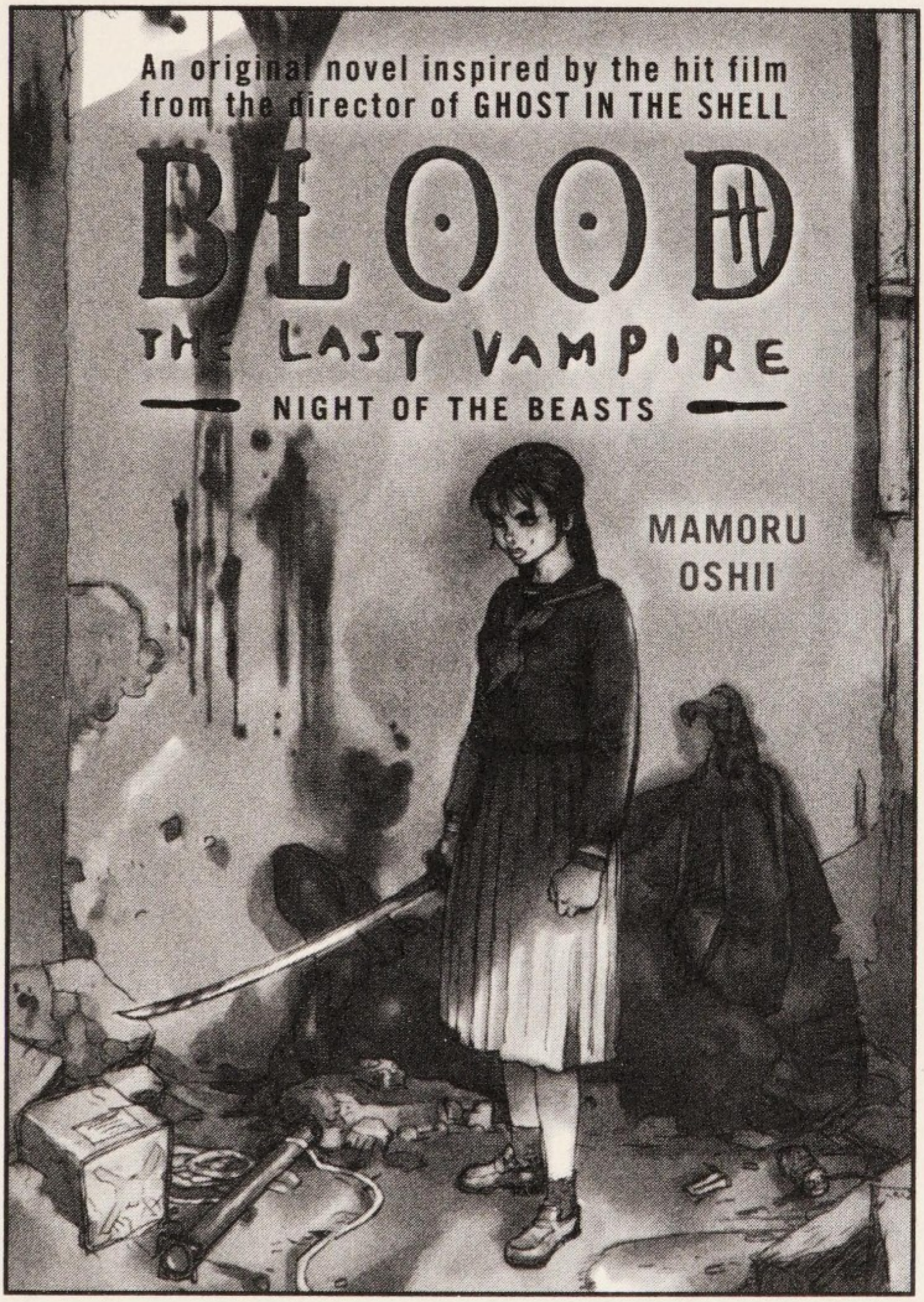
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