


成田良悟

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パッカーン!
1705
BACCANO!

The Ironic Light Orchestra

 電撃文庫

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Q. "What do you think of Huey Laforet?"

"Huey? He's a sweet boy. I'm very proud of him. Though I worry that he might be a little too innocent sometimes.

... I had hoped that he could retain that innocence forever, but..."

-His mother, 1700

"I don't really care. Doesn't mean I hate him, though."

-A classmate, 1704

"Hu-Huey?! He-he's a really cool person!"

-A female classmate, 1705

"All his smiles are completely fake. I want to make him smile for real within 2 weeks, 20 hours, 32 minutes, and 14 seconds."

-Elmer, 1705

"Don't even talk about him."

-Victor, 1934

"From his name, I deduce that he is a professional boxer."

"A flyweight!"

-A couple I ran into by coincidence in California, 1931

"He's a very smart boy. He keeps up with his studies without me needing to teach him!"

-Renee, 1705

"I don't know him that well."

-Czes, 2001

"I say this: he is an impulsive hedonist."

-Nile, 1960

"He is what one would call 'sly'."

-Denkuro, 1720

"I don't really know what he might be thinking, but he doesn't seem to be too bad of a person, considering his long friendship with Elmer."

-Maiza, 1711

"...!"

"She says that he's her beloved father."

-Chane+Anonymous, 1935

"He is pure in every sense of the word. Because of his mental purity, he also holds a great deal of wild passion within him. Of course, he himself would deny this."

-Headmaster Dalton, 1703

"He's a friend. My best friend."

-Elmer, 2002



Q. "What do you think of Elmer C. Albatross?"

"I don't understand this guy! I don't like how he can be so straightforward without any bad intentions!

...but I don't hate him."

-Czes, 2002

"He and Master Huey are birds of a feather."

-Denkuro, 1720

"He is a frivolous yet calculating man."

-Zank, 1711

"I'm being worked to death because that idiot doesn't keep Huey in check!"

-Victor, 1934

"The Child of Calamity and Light, born to bring salvation to the world."

-A member of a certain religious group, 1700

"He's an idiot, but I can't bring myself to hate him."

-Sylvie, 2002

"He's a really fun guy! Even boring lectures get interesting when he's around."

-A classmate, 1705

"He's annoying. That meddlesome personality of his will eventually be the death of him--and I'm looking forward to that."

-Huey, 1705

"He is a good person, but he is nonetheless a man. Therefore he is out of my interests."

-Count Boronial, 1703

"...He's a weird guy."

-Local girl, 1705

"I have never seen anyone so mad as he. The strangest thing is that he truly wants to bring happiness to the world. It might be normal to 'wish' for happiness, but he doesn't--he takes action. That's exactly what's so terrifying about him."

-Headmaster Dalton, 1711

"... Actually, he scares me a bit."

-Gretto Avaro, 1711

"That boy always used to tease me! He was so inconsiderate!"

-Renee, 1935

"I say this: He is a mad hedonist."

-Nile, 2001

"He is... a friend. Simply a friend; no more, no less. Of course, I'd be too embarrassed to say it to his face."

-Huey, 2002



Q. "What do you think of Esperanza C. Boronial?"

"The Count? He's an amazing person."

"Does he really think that star-shaped makeup makes him look cool?"

"No way. Does he?"

"Maybe he thinks he'll look cool if he purposely puts on garish makeup."

"The Count's a bit childish like that, isn't he?"

"And he's such a womanizer, too!"

"He said that he loves us."

"It's kind of embarrassing to listen to."

"But still, he never lays a hand on anyone."

"But he's not making light of us or looking down on us, either."

"He's cute." "Yeah, definitely."

"I bet he doesn't even realize that we're calling him 'cute'."

"He says he loves women more than anything, but he's so dense when it comes to women's feelings."

"That's why he's not popular." "True..."

"But that's what makes him so cute~" "Right~?"

(The rest is omitted)



Q. "What do you think of the alchemy professors?"

"Headmaster Dalton is a respectable and knowledgeable man. Also, Professor Renee has a sexy figure."

-Student A

"Headmaster Dalton is an amazing man. I don't know about Professor Renee, but she seems to be quite out of it. I'm a little jealous of her figure, though. If only I looked like that, Huey might... Ahhh..."

-Student B

"Headmaster Dalton is a terrifying man. It's like he can see right through me. Professor Renee? Yeah, I wish I could see right through her clothes."

-Student C

"Why are the students choosing to remain anonymous? But I must agree with their opinions on Renee's figure."

-A fellow professor at the alchemy school.

"I don't care whether it's Headmaster Dalton, Professor Renee, or Professor Archangelo. They're all just nothing more than teachers."

-Huey

"I'm going to call Headmaster Dalton 'Dalt', and Professor Renee 'Nerenerenere'."

-Elmer

"What's that even supposed to mean?"

-Huey

"Ah, thanks for playing the straight man for me every time, Huey."

"Shut up. Do you know how much you illogical actions annoy..."

(The rest is omitted.)



Q. "What do you think of Samurai?"

"Hm? Are you speaking to us?"

"Hm... you are quite the audacious one, asking samurai to speak of samurai.

A samurai--that is, in a word, a way of life. One must endure and live through splitting open his own belly and survive this in order to give his life for his master on the battlefield. This is the true way of *bushido*."

"Master Zank... it seems that you may have some of the facts confounded... yet I must admit that *samurai* is not something so easily explained in words."

"There you go again, Denkuro. Impudent as always."

"Master Zank. I humbly suggest that you go take a look around the ship."

"If you wish to know what samurai are, I suggest that rather than asking us, it would be better for you to make your way to Japan--the land will speak for itself. No matter what change of heart that may come our way, we do little but take to heart the words of the land.

...speaking of which, I would ask you to keep to *your* heart alone your true nature. If not for us, then for yourself--and your ward Czes."

Q. "I don't know what you're talking about, Denkuro."

"Do not underestimate a samurai. If nothing else, my eyes have been honed to read the heart of my master."

Q. "..."

"It is the fate of all men to fight their own true natures. I pray that you will not forget this... Master Fermet."

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1705

The Ironic Light Orchestra

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"The demon is coming, lantern in hand.
The demon is coming, wearing a mask.
It's coming to mask your face.
It's coming to mask everyone's faces."

The laughing children singing these songs were unquestionably demons--

--and also sinners.

Prologue:



The Corpse's Death

Prologue - The Corpse's Death

The witness girl would go on to say--

The masked man was merely present, nothing more.

And that was exactly what made him so terrifying yet beautiful.

<=>

1705, the Italian peninsula.

The city of Lotto Valentino, under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Naples and the Spanish Empire.

It was the beginning of the 18th century--a time when the kingdoms of western Europe were in something of a preparatory phase for the changes that would soon greatly reshape the world.

The War of the Spanish Succession had drawn much of Europe into battle. The 18th century started with a flourish and a bang, silently raising tensions between the European superpowers.

Culturally, it was a turning point of sorts.

Despite the bloody wars that were being fought over the Spanish throne--or perhaps *because* of it, culture and the arts began to undergo a varied transformation.

In the midst of all this, a certain incident occurred at a certain location.

The one who had first discovered the 'scene' would describe it thus: It was almost like a piece of art.

The arrival of the Rococo style was just around the corner, and Baroque was just making a comeback.

In contrast to the colourful and soft images of Rococo, Baroque was a more solemn display of decadence.

Its calculated splendour had yet to bow its head to the newer form of art--even in this large room the majesty of Baroque still reigned supreme.

This particular 'art piece', however, was completely removed from the unified style of the room. Its conspicuous presence made itself and the surroundings that much more eye-catching.

This was the account of the witness, but he would go on to be called a sick madman for saying this.

This was because the 'artwork' he spoke of was--

The bloody corpse of a girl lying spread-eagle on the floor, looking up at the chandelier.

<=>

The next morning.

Lotto Valentino, a port city on the outskirts of Naples.

The tragedy that struck this small city of 50,000 had affected the citizens--surprisingly little.

It was approximately 3 years ago that England first began publishing dailies, but this particular city sent out newsletters only if something noteworthy had happened.

One would normally assume that the details of this gruesome murder would be published in the newsletter and recorded in the pages of history, but--

Over half of the newsletter was dedicated to an inquiry on the rampant corruption of the City Police. The news of the girl's death was tucked away quietly in a corner.

Because of the lack of details, even those who bought a copy of the newsletter skimmed over it apathetically.

The corpse with the hole in its heart peacefully looked up at the ceiling, lying in a pool of blood--as if it never even had a chance to resist.

The only evidence left at the scene was a mask. It was a white mask, the kind that would be used in a masquerade ball or a Venetian festival.

It was over the face of the expressionless corpse that this even more expressionless mask was placed. The witness would call this--

A work of art.

There was something even more perplexing about this incident--

A mysterious masked man. It was a person in a white mask who was often spotted near the scene of the crime--no one knew if this was even a man or a woman--this person who appeared from the shadows, wearing the same face as those of the victims.

Lotto Valentino's City Police, true to their duty of keeping the peace in the city, declared the masked man a suspect and continue to search for him.

These were the basic facts laid out in the newsletter.

For some reason, Lotto Valentino had a unique system of peacekeeping that set it apart from neighbours like Naples--it was the 'City Police' that maintained order, and not the Spanish military police.

It was not known what kind of deals the citizens made with the aristocracy to achieve this, but this system had been in place for several decades. These incidents were the first of its kind since the founding of the City Police, so the citizens had considered it a matter of dignity for them to capture the masked man.

The strange murders.

The strange evidence.

The challenge against the City Police.

The mysterious masked man.

Despite these newsworthy topics that would normally have been the talk of the town, the newsletter was mainly dedicated to the corruption case.

This was because the public had begun to grow tired of this incident.

There was still some lingering fear, but no one was interested in anything but the capture and arrest of the killer. This was because--

This girl was the 27th victim claimed by the masked man. In the half year since the serial killings first began, people had begun to desensitize themselves to the murders. This was why this incident was not particularly big news.

Normally this kind of serial killing would be labelled as the work of a madman and recorded in history forever, but no such thing seemed to be happening in this city.

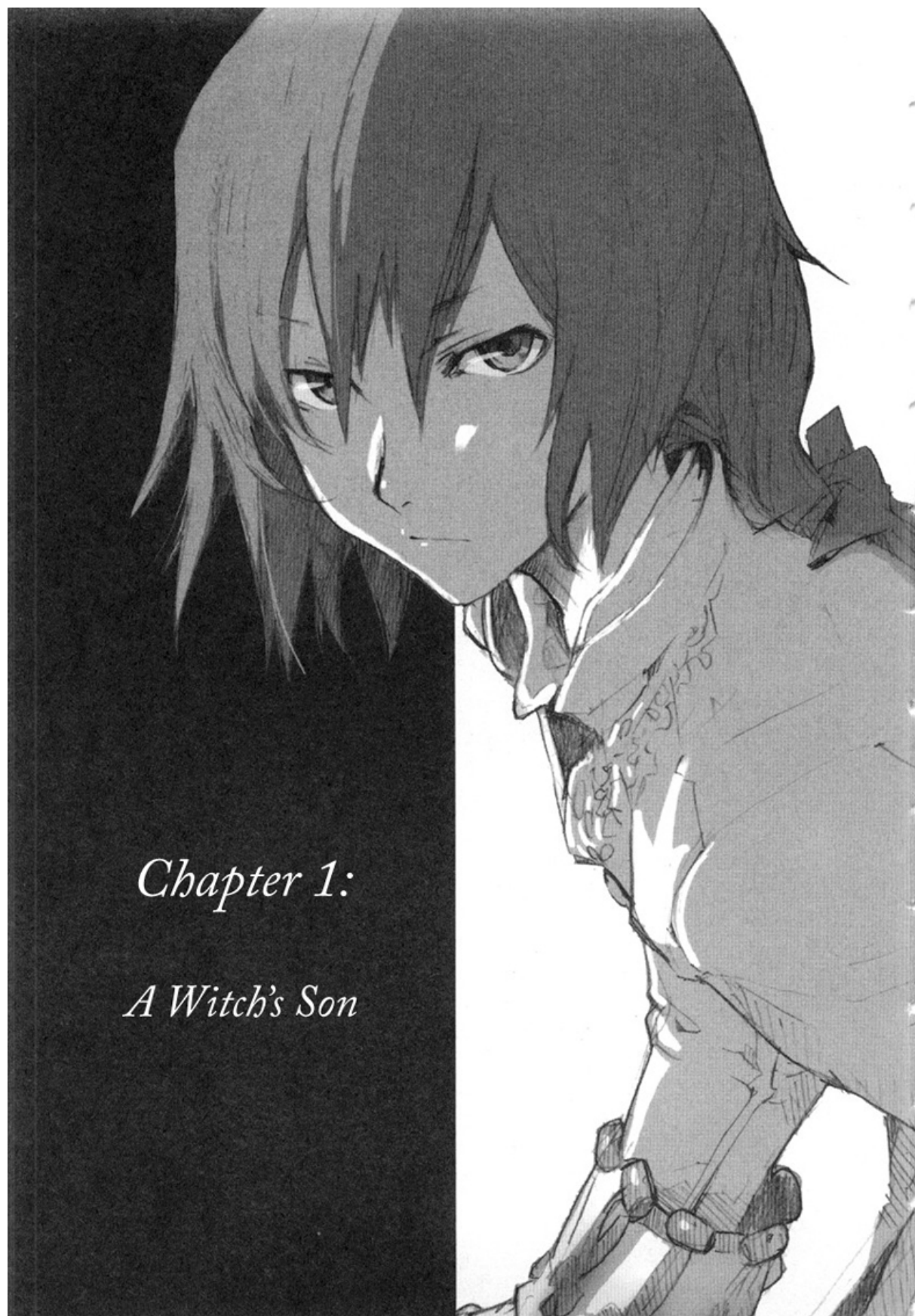
Strangely enough, this incident was discussed only throughout Lotto Valentino. It was dismissed without fuss even in Naples, never mind the rest of the world. It merely drew a shadow of fear and madness over this one city.

As the nameless newsletter continued to deliver the cold hard facts, the truth became rumours, and the rumours became the fear that took root within the people's lives.

As if encroaching at a crawl--

The dead would continue to die even after death.

As if they wanted to spread their deaths into the entire city.



1705, summer. Lotto Valentino.

Naples, one of Italy's most prominent cities.

At this point in time, however, "Italy" was merely the name of the peninsula. Southern Italy, including Naples, had become the Kingdom of Naples, and after being conquered by the Kingdom of Aragon, it passed through multiple jurisdictions before finally falling under Spanish rule. It was currently ruled by the governor of Naples, who had been dispatched from Spain.

This city was on the outskirts of Naples, located along the coast--it was in the northeastern area of the jurisdiction of Naples.

Lotto Valentino, a city with a population of 50,000.

This city of steep cliff faces and sea-facing stone buildings was not quite as grand or majestic as others--it merely gave the impression of a quiet existence.

This small city, a port town along Naples' trade routes, had a relatively fair climate thanks to the Mediterranean Sea. There were even fruit orchards on the outskirts of the city.

The Tyrrhenian Sea, a part of the Mediterranean, sparkled as brightly as usual, and the warm breeze that blew in from this sea found its way through the little streets.

The streets looked almost like those of Naples in miniature, but there was no particular draw to this city. Very few people came and went, with the exception of travelling merchants.

The other exception was the people who frequented the "Library".

There were several libraries in Lotto Valentino.

Despite the fact that this was a small port city with a population less than 10 percent of that of Naples, it had the greatest number of libraries in all of the Spanish Empire. Aristocrats had been competitively building these libraries in the two hundred years since the area had come under Spanish rule, but most people did not care for the history, only the existence of the libraries

The large number of libraries, however, didn't necessarily equate to a great enthusiasm for education. They tended to be quiet and deserted places.

One particular library among them had a larger archive than others.

This building, simply called the "Third Library", was said to have been built by the ancestors of an aristocrat who lived on a distant island in northern Prussia. That family had continued to provide financial support for this library even after Prussia first came into being several years ago.

Most citizens didn't know about these fine details, but there were certain people who made use of these overly large and empty libraries.

There was a certain archive that could only be reached through a courtyard because it was surrounded by buildings on all sides.

This seemingly inaccessible space was frequented by many people, but no one outside the library would know.

They were all dressed differently, but tended to be on the younger side--boys and girls.

And on the second floor of the archives, where they all gathered--

'He' was in one of the many rooms of the archives.

Just as the word "archives" implied, this place was filled with books.

The walls were lined with packed bookcases--there were bookcases everywhere but in front of the doors and windows.

There was, however, an open space in the centre of the room, where multiple people were silently going through their books.

Seven boys and three girls sat around the three large desks set up in the room.

They were all about fifteen years of age. Everyone was reading their own books at the desks, but there was an obvious division of seating.

There were four students to a desk at the larger tables at the centre and near the door, but there were only a boy and a girl sitting at the desk by the window. Of the two, the girl was sitting relatively closer to the others, but the boy was sitting next to the window, as if he was actively trying to distance himself from the others.

The boy and the girl, sitting apart at the same desk.

The girl, who had long blond hair, would occasionally glance at the boy, but her expression didn't say much about the intent of her glances. The boy stoically went through his book, as if he didn't even notice.

The black-haired boy continued to flip through the book, his golden eyes constantly moving over the pages.

The boy went through a page per second. It looked less like he was reading and more like he was trying to check for paper quality. Everyone in the room knew, however, that the boy was reading each and every sentence in the book. No one praised him for his incredible act of speed-reading, though, and the boy didn't want any praise for it.

The boy did not join the occasional conversations that came up in the room. As a detached figure, he continued to focus on gathering knowledge from the books.

After some times had passed, around the time the sun had risen fully over the sky, the sunlight finally began shining through the window that the boy sat beside.

"..."

As if sheltering himself from the sunlight, the boy closed the wooden window.

Over half of the room went dark when the window closed, but only the area near the boy had become noticeably dark--the others' reading environments were almost unaffected.

The melancholy-looking boy, trapped in the shade, did not budge from his spot and continued to go through his book in the dark as if he was completely unaffected.

The door squeaked open as if in agreement with the boy's actions, and an adult appeared at the doorway.

"Good morning, everyone... kyaaaaa?!"

The glamorous, bespectacled woman loudly fell to the library floor after a show of what seemed to be either an amazing feat of acrobatics or an astounding display of clumsiness.

"Are you okay, Professor Renee?" asked a boy near the entrance, but he didn't sound too worried.

No one else showed any particular concern or worry for this woman named Renee, either.

The boy at the window, for one, did not even look up from his book and continued to move his fingers and eyes at incredible speeds.

"Oh, ouch... well, this was quite interesting! To think it was possible to trip over one's own feet... not even Parcelus or Faust might have known that!"

The bespectacled woman quickly mumbled all this as if to hide her embarrassment, and walked into the room proper as if nothing had ever happened.

She then said in a cheerful, carefree voice with an innocent smile--

"Well then, it's time for class to start!"

This library was something like a "Private Academy".

Despite the public's generally apathetic stance on education, even the children of commoners could get an education in the city schools.

The children in these archives, however, could not go to normal schools for the education they pursued, for their own reasons.

However, they were united in one goal--a great desire for "learning".

The instructors at the archives were not particularly strong advocates for education, but this place was prepared specifically for those who wanted knowledge, wisdom, and skill but could not officially attend school.

There were two reasons why these classes were held in secrecy.

In many cases, these children could not properly receive education was because to do so would pose challenges for their continued lives in this city. One of the boys, for example, would be exiled from the city if his identity were to be revealed. Other reasons, among others, included someone who was visibly foreign, or someone who had committed a terrible crime despite their young age.

The second reason, then.

The biggest reason these classes were held out of the view of the public eye--

As if using these boys and girls, this "Private Academy" taught a certain discipline that was not offered in other schools.

Alchemy.

An ancient study.
A relic of the times.
A possibility for evolution.
An extravagant fabrication.
A transient dream.
A tempting lie.
A scientific possibility.
A dreamlike fraud.
A religion.
A blasphemy.
A fruit of desire.
A devil's magic.

These would be the normal attitudes towards alchemy.

--Alchemy.

An existence that is said to have originated in Egypt, known simultaneously as scholarship, a trade, and a culture.

In legends, those called alchemists played many different parts.

Some searched for a method to create gold from base metals, others tried to defy God and create life, and still others sought eternal life.

There was no end to their pursuit of knowledge, however. Their research to achieve the impossible would be rendered moot should they actually achieve it--the impossible would have been rendered possible.

Then the alchemist would abandon the "possibility" and seek out a new impossibility. Of course, even getting to achieve the first impossibility would be questionable.

Alchemists would thus spend their entire lives seeking out their dreams, goals, and desires of making the impossible possible.

The alchemists of this particular era sought out all kinds of truths under eyes both cautious and generous, and despite the occasional setback, their actions were not for naught.

Alchemists had contributed a great deal to the sciences of the era, one of the which was Newton's discovery of the law of universal gravitation. The art of alchemy was not a fraud that deceived and tempted the common man.

Although several religions had renounced and on occasion persecuted practitioners of alchemy, the "techniques" borne of alchemy spread throughout the world.

Among them, however, were some who would cross the line between science and magic, the latter of which was the main cause of religious oppression.

It was common for alchemy to be confused with magic, but in reality, they were different studies altogether.

Some alchemists looked down upon this pursuit of magic and sorcery as "unscientific" and "pandering to a higher power", but there were some who approached the subject with optimism. After all, even magic and demons, if their existence was proven, would then become a "possibility" and a tool to use to forge ahead to the next impossibility.

On these subjects, this private school taught a wide range of topics, from classical alchemy to modern theories. It devoted most of its class time, however, to things that would be taught in normal schools, and it even brought in specialized art teachers for some of these classes.

However, Spain was still a Catholic nation. The act of teaching alchemy to students, even in small amounts, was unwelcome.

That was why a group of alchemists contacted one another in order to gather children with "certain pasts" and raise them as successors to the ancient art, and built this school.

It seemed that the Prussian aristocrat had a favourable view towards alchemy. He continued funding the school despite knowing of its true purpose.

One of the students even lived in the library itself, and it was not unusual to see the student do odd jobs around the library to earn a living.

Renee, one of the professors at this school, seemed to specialize in alchemy and history, and taught the students every day.

"Um... Well then, today's lesson will cover the new theories brought about by the invention of Aqua Regia... Did I talk about Jabir Ibn Hayyan yesterday?" the clumsy woman asked with a tone of authority, but--

The boys frowned and looked around at each other.

"Professor, we covered all that yesterday."

"Huuuuh?!"

"You said you were going to teach us about the uses of amalgamated gold and silver today..."

"O-oh my! Come to think of it, I... guess I did... maybe?"

The students burst into dumbfounded laughter at their teacher's clumsy attempts to recount yesterday's lesson.

She appeared to be a bit unreliable to be called a teacher, but the students had a rather favourable opinion of her. Or rather, her striking figure made her the most popular instructor among the male students.

That is, with the exception of the one boy with his nose buried in his book, looking completely disinterested in the world around him.

Renee took a seat on the edge of the desk in the centre and looked around, then spoke to the boy sitting at the window.

"Huey? Maybe you could read your book another time?"

The boy called Huey spoke quietly in reply.

His gaze and movements did not shift at all, however. He continued to flip through the pages.

"It's fine. I'm listening to the lesson, too, professor."

"That's fine, then!"

Renee clapped her hands and began the lesson. The boy quietly clicked his tongue and dove back into the book.

Huey Laforet.

This boy, who would be turning fifteen tomorrow, was a particularly isolated student, even among the socially outcast students. It was not that he had unusual habits or posed a danger to others, but he had a tendency to put up walls between himself and others.

He would smile and answer when spoken to, but he would never take the initiative to speak to others.

As he gave off an aura of solitude, people found very little reason to want to approach him at all.

With the exception of reading a book during class, Huey looked like quite the model student, and combined with his languid atmosphere and good looks, he was quite popular with the girls.

The one other person sitting at his table seemed to be one such girl, as she constantly glanced over at Huey, who was still absorbed in his book.

And the self-isolated boy concentrated as little as possible on the lesson, just enough to know that he had already possessed the knowledge that was being taught.

"In other words, Guericke's discovery of repulsive forces led to the discovery that the exciting secret energy created by amber contains both repulsion and gravitation. Isn't it exciting? Harnessing this energy to use it freely could bring great changes to the world~. Aren't you curious to see which will take over the world first? This, or the steam-utilizing Savery engine?

'Weren't we supposed to be talking about amalgamation today?'

Despite realizing that the lesson was going far off track today, Huey did nothing to point this out.

'Doesn't matter. I already know all this.'

It seemed that all the other students were too busy listening to Renee's lecture to notice the tangent, but Huey ignored this and focused on taking in the information contained in the book he was reading. No one would notice, but it wasn't that he was reading out of interest, but rather out of forced necessity.

He thought that the school day would pass by like any other, but--

Right after the lecture, Renee screamed in realization.

"Oh my! It completely slipped my mind!"

The sudden noise instantly focused the students' attention. Even Huey took his eyes off the book for a moment and turned to the flustered teacher.

"A friend! That's right! A new friend will be joining us tomorrow!"

The students stirred, surprised at Renee's carefree words.

With the way this school was run, it was very rare for new students to join the classes. The fact that the total number of students in this school was only about thirty meant that this new person would become a new connection through his presence alone.

Whether they liked it or not.

"Yes, that's right! We're getting a new friend in class starting tomorrow, so be nice, okay~?"

'Oh. So that's what this is all about?'

Huey quickly lost interest and turned back to his book.

As Huey had always built walls between himself and others, the presence of a new classmate meant nothing to him.

If the new student talked to him, he would put up a fake smile as usual and give a generic answer. Huey would just never approach him personally.

So Huey had decided to ignore this train of thought, but--

"I'm counting on you, Huey~."

Huey stopped turning the pages when he realized that Renee's voice and gaze were directed at him.

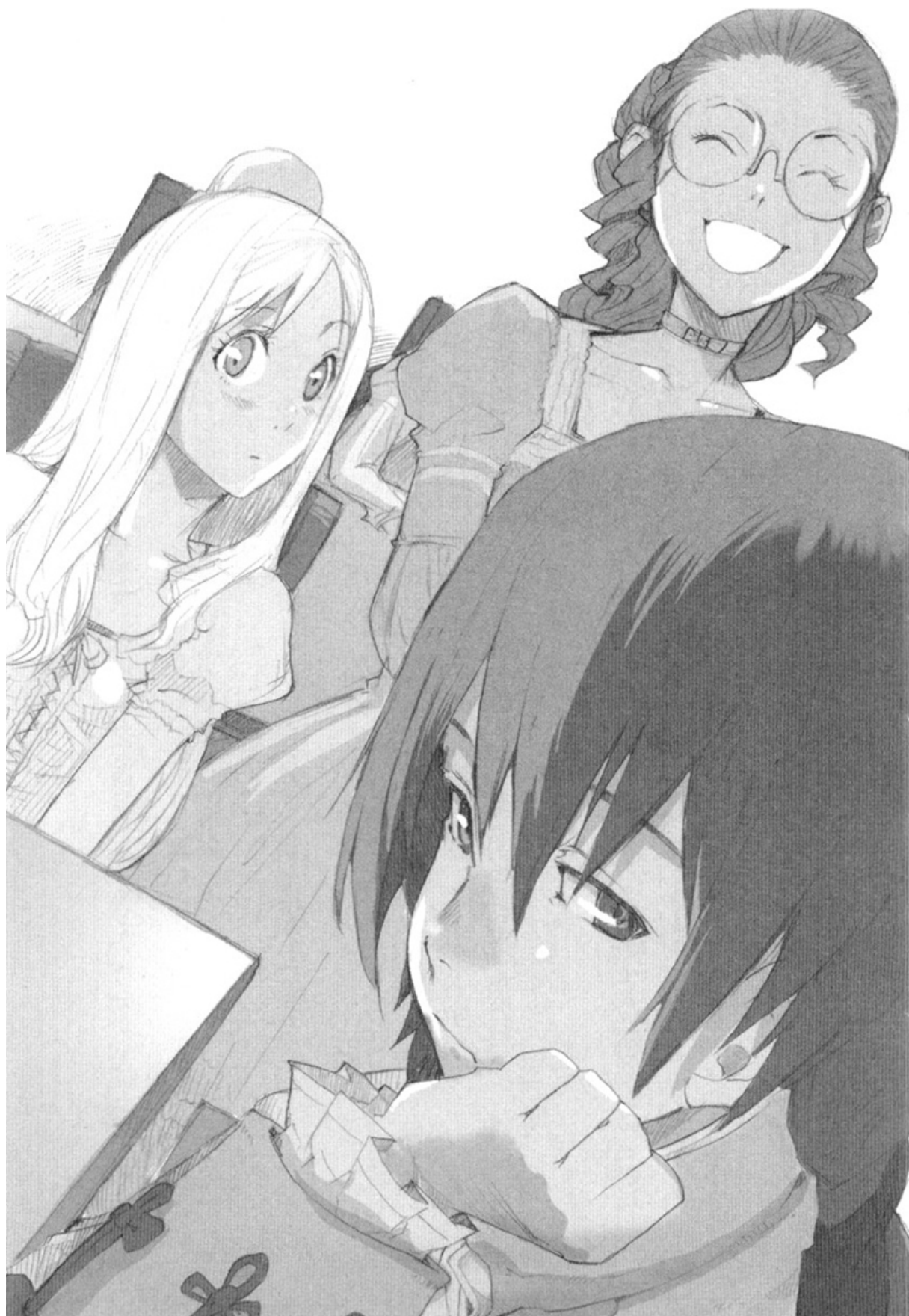
"...Why me?" He asked, keeping up as calm an appearance as he could.

Renee, oblivious to Huey's feelings, answered nonchalantly.

"Well, it's because you two are quite similar, Huey! I'm sure you'll get along!"

Listening to Renee's childlike laughter, Huey momentarily fell into thought.

'We're similar? How? In appearance? Personality?'



As Huey remained lost in thought, the blonde girl who had been looking at Huey also seemed to have thought of something. Her eyes widened and stared at Huey silently.

As if taking Huey's silence as a positive response, and not even noticing the girl, Renee rolled up the piece of parchment in her hands.

"Well, I hope you're looking forward to tomorrow!"

She left the room, looking like the happiest person in the room.

"Oh..."

Huey was about to ask her something, but Renee had already disappeared from sight.

He wondered if he should go after her and ask for details, but he decided to go back to his book and ignore what he had just heard.

*'That's right. The fact that we're similar doesn't mean I have to care.
Besides, even if this person is like me... **There's nothing I can do about it.**'*

<=>

Evening, town marketplace.

Once classes had concluded, Huey left school, holding under his arm several books he had not yet managed to finish reading.

A cool breeze blew through the streets, and the endlessly clear blue sky peeked out from between the white stone buildings.

Huey lived in a storehouse owned by a merchant affiliated with the library. However, he was not related to the merchant by blood, nor was he an adopted child. Because the merchant sailed around the world and came home for only three to four days every year, Huey barely even remembered his face.

He was given living expenses in exchange for 'looking after the storehouse', but he knew that this agreement existed thanks to the library alchemists, and not because he wanted it. Besides,

there was nothing to take care of in the storehouse beside his own belongings. Huey initially didn't like the agreement because he felt like he was being pitied, but eventually it didn't matter to him. Huey eventually came to the conclusion that it would be foolish to get angry over an official agreement.

So he accepted everything without a fuss.

'The world is insignificant.'

That was Huey's conclusion.

It was a line of thought that a good number of teenagers probably considered, but Huey took this one step further and drew his own twisted conclusions.

'The world is insignificant, and there's no place for me anywhere within it.'

The boy despised the world.

He despised everything within the world--even himself.

'It's not just me, either. There's no place for anyone.'

This hatred wasn't emotional--the boy hated the world and his own self, coldly and calculatingly.

If the world was a dream he was dreaming, and if he were certain that his own death would end this dream, he would probably commit suicide without hesitation.

'The world is kind to no one.'

This one warped conclusion led to another, and it eventually became a dark belief that ate away at the boy's heart.

'It's so insignificant, but... why... do I hate it so much?'

The more he thought about it, the less pleasant the conclusion became.

He had once considered death to be the solution, but the thought that the world would go on even after his death erased the idea from his mind.

Huey hadn't despaired at the world; he merely hated it.

However, Huey didn't believe that he could do anything to the world with just his own power.

'I'm powerless.'

However, he always added a single phrase to the end of this conclusion.

'--for now.'

For now, I still need more.

More knowledge, wisdom, experience, power, money, authority...

I still need so much more.

And once I have everything...

I'll destroy everythingeverythingeverythingequally, even myself.

I'll make them all know pain and despair-'

"Here's your change."

"Oh... thank you."

The old woman spoke to him while he was lost in thought, but Huey answered promptly with a smile.

As his mind went through these childish but dangerous thoughts, he had been accomplishing another one of his goals as if he had a separate brain for the task--shopping for groceries.

Because his face didn't show an inkling of what was going through his mind, the old woman merely thought him a very polite young man and added quietly an extra fruit to his bag.

Huey pretended not to notice and left the store. It wouldn't be good for him to thank the old woman and make himself recognizable to her.

He returned to his dangerous daydream and walked to the next store, pushing through the crowds.

Because he was living in a storehouse without even having to pay, Huey, who had no family, had to take care of the place himself.

Of course, he had to cook for himself as well. Shopping for groceries after school was part of his everyday routine.

Lotto Valentino was a small city, but as a trading town, the marketplace was the most lively part of the city, filled with curiosities from all kinds of places.

One could tell just by looking at skin tones and hair colours, but there were people of a multitude of races passing through the market place. However, there were no clearly visible minorities such as Asians or Africans.

Because Italy was an area frequented by many different peoples, such as Romans, Celts, Greeks, Arabs, Germans, and Phoenicians, there was a large mix of different races. However, they were not at all socially equal, and a strict feudal system had been put in place by Spain in the past two centuries.

However, the energy in the marketplace was enough to let people forget these barriers, if only for a short time.

The streets were filled with horses and cows drawing wagons of goods, and a veritable mountain of trade goods came and went.

Looking at these people, Huey again fell into his dark thoughts.

'That's right. all humans are equal.

It doesn't matter whether they're white or black. They're all still human.

At their core, they're all equal. Even those Spanish aristocrats who strut around like they own this place.

Any differences are just superficial, like a thin shell over their faces.

That's why it's insignificant.

Myself, the people in the streets, people in faraway countries, and even that person following me--

They're all the same. They're like garbage that gets blown away by the wind.

If only I had the power... I'd blow away this world right now!'

Huey clicked his tongue, in some ways thinking extremely normal thoughts for a fourteen-year old.

He walked up the back alley incline, made sure there was no one around, and turned around slowly. He then spoke.

"...What do you want, Monica?"

Standing behind Huey was a girl whose long blonde hair fluttered in the wind.

"O-oh! How did you know I was here?"

"Your hair's hard *not* to notice when I keep seeing it out of the corner of my eye."

Instead of wearing a face of indifference, like when he spoke to Renee, Huey had a gentle smile on his face.

Monica Campanella.

She was the girl who had been stealing glances at Huey in the classroom, and one of the few people whom Huey had allowed to get closer to him than most.

The reason for that was--

"About before... could you give me more time to think about it?"

"Huh? Oh, yes! Um... uh... I-I can wait as long as it takes, so don't worry about it! Really! I don't really mind, s-s-s-s-so I'm a-a-a-all right--"

The girl began trembling, face flushed. Huey responded with an unchanging expression.

"Sorry. It's just that I've never been confessed to before."

Hearing this unexpected answer, the girl let out a soft scream.

"P-p-p-please! Wh-what if someone hears us?"

The girl had already gone past rosy-faced. Her cheeks were beet red. Huey answered calmly.

"It's all right. There's no one else here."

"Y-yes, but..."

Monica was momentarily at a loss, but she pulled herself together and looked around.

"Oh, that's right! Anyway, it's dangerous to be in the back alleys! You know, with the 'Mask Maker' and the 'Rotten Eggs' running around...!"

"Oh... right."

Huey nodded and headed back to the marketplace.

The "Mask Maker" was the name of the serial killer who had been the talk of the town in recent days.

Of course, Huey had no way of knowing if the masked man was truly behind the incidents. He had considered most of the witness accounts to be too vague to be conclusive.

According to the newsletters, the incidents usually took place in locked rooms. If the murderer could get away without leaving behind any other evidence, he had no reason to be hiding behind a mask. Something like a black piece of cloth might be better suited to hiding his identity.

Huey mused that perhaps the murderer might be getting some sort of sick pleasure out of the murders themselves, and sighed.

The "Rotten Eggs" was a term that described a group of delinquent youths that appeared in less policed areas.

No matter the time and place, there would always be unemployed young men. However, such men these days had found work in the military, so the only ones left were delinquents who were closer to youths than adults. They had been forming groups now for several years, and one particular group, the "Rotten Eggs", happened to be the worst of the lot. There were rumours that, in addition to thievery and extortion, they even committed acts of piracy on merchant ships at night.

They did not have much favour from the people, but because they never caused too much damage, the police only ended up arresting individuals involved with individual events.

'In any case, "Rotten Eggs" is a pretty self-deprecating name,' Huey thought, and set these thoughts aside. None of this had anything to do with him.

In any case, the back alley was not a very pleasant place to be for normal people.

Huey went back to the marketplace as Monica suggested.

Monica lived at a patisserie, where she helped out with odd jobs. She would come to school every day after purchasing ingredients for the morning.

It must have been quite a difficult job for a fourteen-year old girl, but she had once baked sfogliatelle (a shell-shaped pastry; Naples' specialty) and brought them to share with the whole class. The other classmates worried that Monica might have had to steal these from the shop, but they were all relieved the next day to see that she was uninjured. Of course, with the exception of Huey.

It had only been five days since she suddenly confessed to Huey out of the blue.

"U-um... A-a-a-a-are you dating anyone, I-I-I-I like you, so is it okay?"

Huey didn't really understand what Monica was saying because she was so nervous, but he could tell from her expression that she was confessing to him. After hearing this dubious confession of love, Huey momentarily put on a face of surprise, and tersely answered, "Let me think about it".

For the next few seconds, he wondered, *'What about me does she like so much?'*, but decided that it didn't really matter and returned to his book as usual.

Having labelled her as "eccentric", Huey's perception of Monica went up to levels similar to Professor Renee and Headmaster Dalton.

Of course, they were all equal to him in that they were part of this world he despised.

Even now, as they walked side-by-side, Huey didn't spare her a thought as he wondered if the Mask Maker had some sort of hitherto-unknown technology at his disposal.

The boy named Huey undeniably despised the world.

However, people like that were everywhere, no matter the time and place.

And among these people who were dissatisfied with the world, Huey at looked like he was living a relatively happy life.

If he wanted to, he could fall in love with Monica and live a normal but satisfying life.

Huey himself knew this.

But he would not take this path.

Knowing all this, Huey chose to deny that path with all his might.

That was how the boy named Huey Laforet lived.

Huey walked the familiar streets, evading Monica's confession with a fake smile.

Soon things would go back to normal--back to his unchanging everyday life.

Until a certain day would come.

'Things should stay the way they are. They should live without knowing too much about me.', Huey thought as he quietly walked back home, but--

An 'unusual' sight, reminiscent of Renee's announcement of the new student, greeted him.

His half-aware walk through the crowded streets had been interrupted by a loud noise.

The first thing he saw was a girl being loudly tossed into the middle of the street.

She seemed to be around the same age as Huey and Monica, or maybe a bit older.

This brown-haired girl was unable to even lay collapsed on the ground as she was hoisted up by her neck.

"Hey, get up."

The young men, who appeared to be delinquents, forced the girl to her feet and tried to drag her away.

Passerbys frowned at this sight, but no one stepped in to try and help the girl.

Whether these young men were members of the "Rotten Eggs" or just plain delinquents, the people turned a blind eye towards them, preferring to let sleeping lions lie.

Huey was no different.

"...Let's go."

"Huh?"

Monica raised her voice without thinking when she heard Huey mutter emotionlessly.

For a moment, she didn't know if he meant "Let's go help her", or "Let's get away from here". Of course, she was pointed in the right direction by Huey turning away from the commotion.

Huey was not leaving out of fear of these delinquents, but purely out of disinterest. He thought it a waste of time and effort to get himself involved in something like this.

He had also calculated that just walking away from this incident might disillusion Monica and make sure she would never speak to him again.

Having finished his self-deprecating plan on the spot, he began walking away from the scene. However--

"Hold it, kid."

Trouble forced its way towards Huey and threw him back into reality.

"You're a pretty cold guy, aren't ya? Walking away when a girl's getting hurt right in front of you."

"But that's a pretty cute girl you've got there."

'Oh. I get it.'

Huey's confusion at being singled out was cleared up when he noticed that the young men had been stealing glances at Monica.

'It's just as I thought. Nothing good ever comes of getting involved with other people.'

He sighed and contemplated running, leaving Monica behind, but this might unnecessarily degrade his reputation at the school. Disinterest he was fine with, but hostility would be difficult to deal with.

Not only that, if the thugs were to figure out who Monica really was, and if her situation was something unfavourable (which was likely the case, seeing as she was a student at their

school), the existence of the school itself could be threatened. Huey didn't really care for the well-being of the other students, but right now he had to avoid the destruction of his source of knowledge.

He had thought of taking Monica's hand and escaping, but one of the delinquents was already approaching them. Putting this idea to action would just result in capture.

Huey turned to face the delinquents, frowning slightly.

'Damn... just as I thought, this really is an unkind world.'

"You pickin' a fight?"

'It's unkind to me...'

The passerbys continued to go about their business in willful ignorance, and Monica just stood there nervously, showing no sign of being prepared to run.

'It's unkind to that brown-haired girl...'

The brunette was being grasped by her hair, able to neither resist nor run.

"Don't look at me like that, you little punk!"

Huey sighed as the delinquent taunted him.

'And to these guys.'

He made his move.

"Huh?"

The young man was taken aback by Huey's sudden movement.

He then felt a sharp pain in his eyes.

Huey had stoically jabbed his thumb and index finger into the thug's eyes.

"Gaaaaaahhhh!"

Huey wasn't strong enough to outright gouge out his eyes, but it was enough to rob the young man of his sight momentarily. As the thug was leaning backwards, Huey took the opportunity to kick him between the legs with all his strength.

"-----!"

The delinquent collapsed forward in extreme pain, and Huey grabbed him by the throat with an icy expression.

Slowly and precisely, he tightened his grasp to crush his opponent's Adam's apple.

"...! ...!"

Unable to even make a sound, the delinquent's breathing was on the verge of cutting off from the pain.

All this took place in one smooth series of overwhelmingly powerful motions.

Monica could not turn her eyes away as Huey violently took down the delinquent.

However, the world was, as Huey had always thought, so very unkind.

Huey only had the element of surprise on that one occasion. The other two delinquents ran over and pulled Huey away from the third member.

"You bastard! Die!"

"Ugh...!"

As the delinquents belted out shallow insults, Huey was kicked to the ground without dignity.

Huey wasn't a skilled fighter, but merely someone with little mercy or hesitation. He didn't have the kind of raw strength to turn around a situation like this.

That was why he decided to apply his merciless personality in another direction.

The people passing by were still ignoring them.

Everyone averted their eyes, feeling that it was best to pretend they hadn't seen anything, despite the sheer number of fellow witnesses.

It was a very eerie sight, but Huey did not call them out for it because he knew exactly how they felt. And instead of asking for their involvement--

He forced them into the situation.

As he fell, the boy had looked around for something he could possibly use, and found a flowerpot within arm's reach.

He quickly took hold of it, and, getting to his feet despite the pain, threw it as hard as he could.

"Oh, that was close~!"

"Who'd get hit by something that obvious, you idiot?"

The delinquents laughed creepily and approached Huey, believing this action to have been his last stand.

A powerful cry bellowed out from behind them.

"Huh?"

"What?"

The delinquents, minus the one still moaning on the ground in pain, stopped and looked behind them.

And there--

There was an ox, covered in dirt from the flowerpot, rampaging in their direction with the fury of a thunderstorm, searching for the culprit behind the attack.

And pulling behind it, of course, a cart full of luggage.

The marketplace then fell into a panicked frenzy.

The mad, rampaging ox had sent people scattering.

Perhaps the ox alone might have been easier to deal with, but precariously-stacked piles of goods began swaying. Getting hit on the head by one of those would not end in something so merciful as a mere head injury.

And as if in loud agreement with the first ox, other cattle and horses joined the fray--the people could no longer feign ignorance.

Everyone was running through the marketplace, yelling and being pushed and shoved.

The delinquents were also caught in the stampede, and in their confusion, were thrown to the ground after being hit by one of the carts.

Huey ignored the pain and got to his feet, coldly took in the situation, and dodged the crowds to find Monica.

He then spotted a conspicuous head of blond hair running away from the scene, leading away the brown-haired girl by the hand. Huey followed them.

The delinquents did not seem to be in pursuit, likely having been caught up in the frenzy. It was probably work enough for them right now to escape the stampeding horde of people and cattle.

Huey cautiously left the large roads and jumped into the alley into which the girls had disappeared.

"O...ohh, Huey! Are you all right? You're not hurt?!" Monica noticed him and rushed to his side.

Meanwhile, the brown-haired girl whom they had ended up rescuing merely looked at the ground with a darkened expression.

"I'm fine. They kicked me pretty hard, but I don't think anything's broken. ...What about you?"

He asked the brunette, but the girl merely shook her head and averted their eyes.

"I'm... all right. ...Sorry."

"Really? That's a relief... Oh, what in the world were those people doing?!" Monica spat angrily.

But the brown-haired girl, eyes still lowered, replied in a quiet voice.

"Thank you... but you shouldn't get involved with me anymore."

"What do you mean?" Monica asked, bewildered. The girl's reply was stoic and quiet.

"Because... I'm going to be killed soon."

"?!"

"If you get involved... you'll end up getting killed, too."

"You mean by those delinquents?"

Huey continued, seemingly engaged by the unseemly content of the conversation.

"I'll die when the Mask Maker steals my face."

'The Mask Maker?'

Why would she mention the name of a potential serial killer?

This didn't seem to have anything to do with the delinquents from earlier. Huey and Monica had no idea what she was trying to say.

The girl ignored their confusion and continued in a monotone.

"I'm going to die soon. I'll be killed."

Her breath came to a sudden stop, and the girl trembled--

"It's because I ended up seeing that mask..."

"What...?"

Just as Monica was about to ask something, a violent scream echoed through the alley.

"Niki! So this is where you were!"

When Huey and Monica turned around, they saw a portly, bald man, and behind him, a group of men wearing distinctive uniforms.

"...The City Police?" Monica mumbled in disbelief.

The City Police was a Town Watch of sorts that operated within this small city. Unlike the Military Police, which was backed by the Royal Family of Spain, it was an organization built by the citizens of Lotto Valentino.

This was the biggest difference between Lotto Valentino and most other cities, and a hidden symbol of the city, but to the common people there was little distinction between City Police, Military Police, or a Town Watch.

The bald man did not seem to be affiliated with the City Police. He pointed towards Huey and Monica, and told the officers in a flattering tone--

"It's them! Those two are the ones who tried to kidnap one of my workshop employees!"

"Huh?"

"..."

Monica was taken aback by the outrageous claim, and Huey remained silent.

As the officers approached them, the girl called Niki raised her voice.

"Please, wait a moment! These two--"

"Shut up!"

The girl could not finish defending the duo.

The bald man's tightly clenched fist struck her cheek with all his might.

The girl was tossed into the air by the force, and she fell against the alley wall.

"Kyaaaaa!" Monica screamed, but the officers did not react.

"Stay silent."

The officers did not even spare a glance as they bound the two.

All the while, the bald man kicked the fallen Niki as hard as he could.

"You little bitch! I was paid for three people today, and you couldn't even get that done without running off?! Do you know what you've done to my reputation?! You're going to pay for this!"

"..."

The girl called Niki did not even try to defend herself as the man continued kicking her.

Huey did not resist as he listened to the officers.

"Boy... do you know who it was you've just harmed?"

"..."

The officer mercilessly hit the unresisting Huey in the back of the head.

Huey was never able to hear who those delinquents were, but he could make a very good guess.

They were likely Spanish aristocrats.

He put this together with the words he'd heard from the bald man who was likely the brunette's master, and reached a certain conclusion.

As he was taken away by the officers, he mumbled to himself quietly so that no one else could hear.

Intensifying the heat, like a flickering candlelight--

"This world's in sickeningly top-notch condition as usual."

<=>

The northeast area of the city.

Lotto Valentino's elevation rose dramatically at a certain distance from the seaside.

At a location that was high enough to be a mountain when seen from sea-level, was a high-class residential area for Spanish aristocrats. This manor in particular was built at the highest point as if in a display of grandeur.

When seen from a lower part of the city, it was almost overwhelming in its majesty--someone who didn't know much about the area could very easily mistake it for a palace.

Southern Italy, under Spanish rule, was not financially well off. As if testing the limits of feudalism, places like Naples had already gone through several incidents of rioting.

However, such an atmosphere was completely absent from this particular area.

And this particular manor, among others, majestically embraced the city with a single colour.

This manor, mainly white in colour, had a beautifully landscaped garden in what little land was usable in this hilly area. The garden was enough to twice overwhelm any visitor who would set foot in this estate.

A white fortress in a garden full of flowers and grass.

Employees scurried about the manor like hardworking ants. Their every movement blended into the manor's decorative atmosphere and gave it a very pleasant feel.

And on the second floor of this manor--

A shadow cast at the balcony entrance spoke to a man who carried himself in an extremely odd fashion.

"Um... uh... my lord."

"..."

When the man in City Police uniform addressed him, the Count on the balcony responded by mumbling to himself, on his knees and observing a potted plant.

"My lord?"

The Count, having seemed to notice the second call, slowly got to his feet.

"Hm? Oh, you're here. Welcome. Yes. Welcome. Thank you for coming."

The man certainly *did* wear clothing becoming of a Count.

He was probably in his mid-twenties, and dressed in a light habit à la française. His top was decorated with tasteful jewelled ornamentation, and on the back was something that looked like a large foreign symbol.

Those who could might recognize the symbol as the character '火'¹, but it was merely a shape to most people.

Unusually for an aristocrat, he wasn't wearing a wig, nor was he sporting a fake beauty mark that was popular among European nobility at the time. Perhaps as if to make up for this, he wore an extremely gaudy tricorne, and instead of a beauty mark, he decorated his wide, owl-like eyes, with little stars below them.

His glaring eyes had bags under them, and it was difficult to tell if this was because of sleep deprivation or just a fashion statement. An indescribable smile was fixed upon his face, and in combination with his almost childish features, the Count almost resembled a wooden puppet.

If he'd just remove his makeup, he'd look like a fairly ordinary man, yet why would he do this?

As the man in the black uniform--the Chief of the City Police--thought these things, the so-called Count laughed heartily, cracking his neck.

¹ '火' is the Chinese character for 'fire'.

"There's no need to be so formal and call me 'Count'. It would be easier to call me something like Espe or Boro or whatever you might feel like. After all... you and I once fought over the same woman."

The anxious Police Chief replied to the beaming Count.

"My apologies, my lord, but... I believe this would be our first meeting."

The Count's eyes widened even more as he stared at the Chief's face.

"Hm? Oh, is that so? Oh, yes. You are not a familiar face... so you've deceived me?"

"W-what are you saying, my lord?! Absolutely not, sire!"

"I jest, I jest. Jests are great. They relieve stress. Of course, the only thing that separates a harmless joke from an insult is the presence of ill will. Retaliation to insult, and a smile to a joke. Yes. It's very easy to understand. Is it not wonderful? There could be more jesting in the world. Though I suppose it wouldn't be too bad for me to be the only one living honestly."

The so-called Count mumbled incomprehensibly as he walked about the potted plants.

"Um... my lord, what might you be doing?"

"Ladybugs."

"L-ladybugs, my lord?"

"Yes. I feel that once a ladybug has landed upon this leaf, the entire plant will have become beautifully complete. However, I am finding it very difficult to realize. It seems I still have a long way to go before I can communicate with insects."

The man continued rambling unintelligibly and observed a ladybug.

He gazed wistfully as the ladybug flew away, and then cloaked himself in an atmosphere completely contrary to what he had just shown.

"So, what manner of man are you?"

"M-my lord! My apologies for being so late to introduce myself. I am LaRolf Hancletia*, the new Chief of the City Police. It is my honour to serve you, lord."

LaRolf bowed politely on bended knee. The Count cleared his throat and replied gravely.

"Yes... I see. So your predecessor resigned due to the corruption scandal... I will leave these matters to you, though it is difficult for me to believe he'd sold himself out for money. Also, you don't need to be so formal with me. I am Governor in name only. I have no capacity for ruling, nor do I have any skill as a warrior. As you are the ones who have asked to serve me, I will be glad so long as you men do your duty."

The Chief again bowed deeply to this man with the self-ridiculing smile, but he was quite shaken internally.

'He's behaving with a surprising degree of sanity...'

From appearances, he had suspected that the Count would be just another eccentric aristocrat.

And yet he spoke with startling clarity.

This was what terrified him most.

Esperanza Boronial.*

An aristocrat from Spain, the kingdom that controlled Naples, upon whom was bestowed the title of 'Count'.

He was the young nobleman who governed this small city, and the laughingstock who was known as "The Clown Count" for his unusual manner of dress. This city was theoretically under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Naples, but the Count was put in charge of the area due to some special circumstances. Rumour was that the entire clan had become an inconvenience back in Spain, and that he was sent here almost as if being kicked out.

At least, that's how LaRolf knew it.

He had underestimated the Count, thinking he was just a spoiled, attention-seeking noble, but found himself lost in the thought that in reality, the Count was everything that an aristocrat needed to be, wrapped up in an eccentric shell.

He even began to wonder if this freakishness was all just an act, a ruse to lower his guard and figure out his secrets.

All the while, the Count's wide eyes remained completely still, and the only change of expression could be found in the twitching corners of his mouth.

It wouldn't be surprising if this aristocrat were to draw a blade in the middle of a pleasant conversation.

"Come to think of it..."

As if noticing the Chief's anxiety, the Count slowly shook his head.

"Have you yet to capture that masked man?"

"N-no, my lord. We have been following all kinds of leads based on eyewitness accounts, but..."

"Hm... I see. I suppose it can't be helped if you're doing all you can."

The Chief did not notice because his head was bowed, but the Count's widened eyes narrowed for a single moment.

"A girl. A young girl was killed."

"Oh. Yes, my lord."

"As this is our first meeting, allow me to make this clear to you."

The Count clopped along towards the potted flowers with his buckled shoes, emblazoned with the image of a sickle.

"You see, I love women."

"Sire... M-my lord?"

"Yes. It might sound strange, coming from an aristocrat, but there is nothing more important to me in this world than women. Yes, they are more valuable to me than my own life. I love everything about women."

Clop. The Count took a step and continued.

"Do you know the softness of their limbs that bring to mind the gentle horizons?"

Clop.

"The very act of listening to their songbird voices cleanses everything."

Clop.

"I wonder, could you understand the fact that a woman can be forgiven for anything by her existence alone?"

Clop.

"Hm... yes. It is a bit embarrassing to say, but I love everything about women. From their hearts, bodies, voices, pasts, futures, loves, affections, to their angelic graces and their impish smiles, everything!"

Clop.

"Sometimes, I think that I wouldn't care even if I leave something to a woman and lose all my worldly possessions and get killed."

Clop.

"That is how much I love them."

Clop.

"I love them infinitely!"

Clop...

"Let me say this again! I love women! A third time! I love them from the depths of my heart!"

The Count shouted as he stood with his feet together and arms wide apart. Standing in front of him, the Chief broke out in a cold sweat.

Maybe he is just an ordinary madman.

The Chief was chilled by a different kind of fear than before by this most confident of declarations.

"Hey, Chief. You new Police Chief."

'?!'

Before he knew it, the Count had crouched down and was speaking right into his ear, eyes still wide.

"That's why I find this unforgivable."

"...!"

"I don't care if he's some weirdo or a lunatic. I will never forgive this bastard who goes around killing women--little girls--who haven't even had a chance to live out half their years. And if

this guy keeps going around killing women as he pleases, I--I will extend my hatred to everything else."

Realizing that 'everything else' included themselves, should they fail to capture the culprit, the Chief again was filled with terror, chilled to the bone.

The Count continued to compress this atmosphere of hatred, rage, and sadness to pressure the poor Police Chief.

The Chief never realized this, but the Count's last sentence was not a threat, but a sincere plea.

"Please."

"Protect... Everyone."

<=>

The City Police Chief had left the balcony as if being pursued.

As if to fill the gap in presence, a shadow approached the Count from behind.

Eyes fixed on the flowers, the Count spoke in a musing tone to this shadow, who was cloaked in black and in some ways more eccentric than the Count himself.

"Hey. Do you think I'm being too weak? Am I being a yellow-bellied coward of a Governor?"

"I'm not so sure. I can't really say, as I have no way of knowing how an aristocrat would feel."

"You say some really unpleasant things sometimes. Yeah. You *are* an unpleasant person. You're also aristocracy by birth, but you think you've managed to throw that away completely."

"I'd love to pick up what I'd thrown away, if only I was permitted."

The hooded figure laughed as if playing dumb. The Count continued, laughing self-deprecatingly.

"You know, I have no idea how to treat women. That's why I remain chaste in body and soul, even at my age. Perhaps I just want, at heart, to become like a hero in a play."

The Count shook his head in embarrassment. The hooded figure said nothing.

"Sometimes we must act as heroes. Yes, like Charles de Batz-Castelmore², a hero who can maneuver through any situation--Of course, we have to overcome all obstacles in reality."

The Count made an example of D'Artagnan, who would later go on to be immortalized in the novel *'The Three Musketeers'* by Alexandre Dumas. He quietly continued.

"Ever since I was a child, that's the kind of person I'd wanted to become."

"You want to escape reality that much?"

"No. In fact, it's the opposite. I love this world. I love all its purities and impurities. Women go without saying. That's why... yes. I want to become a hero in order to truly enjoy this beloved world of mine, as it is. At heart, I wish I could take charge myself, not leave it to some Police Chief, to run out there and challenge that masked man to a duel."

He sighed deeply, and shook his head as he asked a question of the hooded figure.

"Is that it? Do you think it improper for a Governor, even a figurehead, to think such things? But I don't think a Governor should just let things slide when already, a full twenty-seven citizens have been murdered... what do you think?"

He finally turned around, but there was nothing there but a single ladybug, flying through the air.

"... So you ran away. You dared to leave while I was still complaining. Damn. This is unforgivable. But I guess I'll forgive you."

² Charles de Batz-Castelmore is the full name of D'Artagnan from the *Three Musketeers*.

The hooded figure quietly slipped out of the manor, ignoring the complaining Count.

'Twenty-seven people...'

He walked towards the darkness, producing a certain object and pulling it under the hood.

'To think things have already gotten so big.'

He then put the white mask in his hand to his face--and quietly laughed.

All he did was laugh.

'Hehehehehe...'

<=>

Evening, in front of the jailhouse.

The stone jailhouse was an annex of the City Police Office.

After being taken there, Huey was kept under arrest for some time, and he was released at the same time as Monica, who was taken in simultaneously but sequestered in a different area.

The boy and the girl, having run into each other at the building exit, quietly made their way back in awkward silence.

The streets were still filled with the warm ocean air, and the night sky was full of stars. The streets were lined with nothing but walls. Very few houses had windows facing the jailhouse.

Normally, the sight of a young man and woman of a certain age group walking together at night would be quite romantic, but Huey didn't seem to particularly care for the girl at his side.

When he glanced at Monica, she was walking with her head down, cheeks a bright pink.

"U-u-um...! Uh, what I'm trying to say is...! Th-thank goodness we were released so quickly...!"

It seemed that she was embarrassed to be walking side-by-side with Huey.

'I don't get her at all.'

Monica's behaviour was nothing but curious, but Huey put on a fake smile as usual in reply.

"Yeah. I'm fine, but you got dragged into it. It must have been rough on you."

"N-not at all! A-anyway, why do you suppose they let us out so quickly?"

It was only normal to wonder about this, but Huey's reply was nonchalant about the issue at hand.

"Professor Renee, Headmaster Dalton, or Professor Archangelo probably did something behind the scenes. They're pretty well-connected."

"Oh, I-I see... But... I wonder if we'll get in trouble."

"If we do, we'll just explain everything properly. But if no one says anything, let's just keep what happened between us. It wasn't exactly a pleasant experience."

"Oh, y-yeah!"

Huey frowned as Monica nodded earnestly.

"...You look happy."

Monica smiled radiantly as she replied.

"Of course! Now I have a shared memory with you!"



"..."

'What a disgustingly optimistic outlook.'

He was astounded, but Huey did not remove his smile.

And the girl lowered her voice slightly to ask Huey a question.

"Hey, Huey."

"What is it?"

"Before, you tried to pretend you hadn't seen that girl, right?"

"... Yeah, that's right."

Huey replied to Monica's serious question, as if he had been waiting.

"You were disgusted, right?"

But the girl's eyes widened.

"Why would I be?"

"..."

"I was sure you'd leave her. And I thought it right, too. But I didn't have the confidence... I'm so wishy-washy, huh?"

"Not at all."

The boy replied with a fake smile, and words befitting his intent.

He responded tho the girl's words mechanically, emotionless at heart.

And whether or not she knew what Huey was thinking, after a few seconds of silence, the girl began desperately grasping for topics of conversation.

"Come to think of it, we're getting a new classmate tomorrow, right? If he's in our class, I guess he'll be around the same age as us."

Schools of this era did not normally divide classes by age, but the alchemy school divided classes into age groups of about five years in order to unify the topics of education. Huey's class was still at a very basic level of study, but as there were very few people who started alchemy in adulthood, the school was mostly directed towards young people.

"You know, we were all talking about it! The others were really disappointed!"

"About what?"

"They said that if it's someone like you, Huey, then he wouldn't really talk to us."

"Probably."

Huey's expression did not change, despite the somewhat insulting revelation.

Maybe it was because of his lack of reaction that Monica looked almost tearful.

"...s-sorry. Are you mad?"

"Why would I be?"

He coincidentally spat out in a retaliatory tone, but Huey himself didn't realize it.

It was because he knew very well the image he projected, and was keeping it up on purpose.

However, Monica hung her head in disappointment.

"So... you won't even get angry."

"..."

"I knew it... you hate people. Everyone, including me."

"..."

Huey was silent. His fake smile faltered for a moment, assaulted by this unexpected question.

And as if taking his silence for an answer, Monica continued with a sad look.

"Oh! Um... uh... Don't worry about it. I knew all this when I said that I liked you."

"..."

Huey remained silent.

He then sighed and completely erased his fake smile.

"Yeah, you're right."

"Huh?"

"I hate everything, including you. Satisfied now?"

"..."

Now it was Monica's turn to be silent.

It was a very direct answer. Monica hung her head, knowing that she had brought this upon herself.

This conversation didn't even seem cordial, let alone romantic.

The emotional tension did not fluctuate. The relationship between them was the only thing that quietly began changing.

"You know about my past, too, right?"

Huey said stoically, as if not caring for Monica's opinion of him, without even changing his walking pace.

"I know what people say about me behind my back. And I have no intention of being friends with any one of you."

'Looks like things are only going to get worse between me and the rest of the class.'

Huey coldly calculated classroom matters in his head as he put on a somewhat self-deprecating smile.

Monica seemed to have been slightly scared by this, but she clenched her fist and continued.

"Then... maybe you'll get along with the new student."

"..."

Huey was caught off guard by Monica's sudden switch of topic to, but he decided to listen to what she had to say.

The girl hesitated for a moment before she stopped in place.

She spoke slowly, yet with conviction.

"Because I... I asked the professor after class. I wanted to know how this person was similar to you! So... I asked. I asked, okay?!"

Monica raised her voice and looked straight at Huey.

She caught sight of Huey's face illuminated by a light, and looked away, blushing. She continued immediately afterwards, sheepishly averting her eyes.

"He's... just like you..."

"Professor Renee told me that he's a witch's son, just like you..."

Interlude 1: The First Murder

The serial killings had so far claimed twenty-seven victims.

Its beginnings were very humble--the first incident was neither reported in the newsletters nor closely examined by the City Police.

The victim was a boy who worked at the port market.

No one mourned the boy when the incident occurred. After all, no one had even realized that he had died.

He died a lonely death inside a storehouse at the harbour, with a mask over his face and a blade through his heart.

It was not known if it was a sealed room, as no investigation was conducted.

This was because no one had known that a murder had even taken place.

This was why the man who was master to this boy did not report this incident to the City Police or the Military Police.

The boy had no family to mourn him, and his master, the owner of a key store, only grumbled about the loss of workforce. He had assumed that the boy was killed by angry drunkards.

There was a reason that the master reported this incident to the police at a later time.

The second murder took place several days later.

This incident, which took place at a nobleman's manor, shocked both the City Police and the aristocrats. Strangely enough, while the identity of the victim was once again a question mark, the mask and the stab through the heart were identical.

The fact that a murder took place in an aristocrat's manor was enough for it to become the talk of the town.

The rumours spread through the streets like wildfire, and the very word 'Mask' would send a chill through the bones of anyone who heard it.

And if this incident had anything to do with the boy, the master could be accused of hiding the first murder.

This was the only reason he reported the crime.

In other words, the first victim was worth that little to the world.

A boy no one mourned, who would most likely have no enemies to speak of. This lack of motive was why the investigation had gotten off to a difficult start.

And as the people began whispering of the possibility of a serial killer--

A girl came forward, claiming to have seen a suspicious figure near the storehouse on the night of the first murder.

The girl was the first to speak of the 'Mysterious Masked Figure', but this testimony had only been revealed to the City Police.

Initially, none of them believed in the existence of such a being, but things would soon change.

This was because, several days later--

The witness girl had become the third victim.

This time, another boy came forward to testify about the corpse found in the church at the city outskirts.

He claimed he had seen a masked figure lurking about the church.

The existence of the Masked Figure had been withheld from the public. There was no way that a boy on the street could have known about it.

This was where the City Police was forced to acknowledge the credibility of the boy's testimony.

Unfortunately, this came much too late.

Because that boy, as well--

He had been discovered two weeks later as the seventh victim.



Chapter 2:
The Miracle Boy

That same day, around sunset.

It was six hours ago, just around the time when Huey was put under arrest.

A lone boy was walking through the marketplace.

"Huh... Hmm? I think it's this way..."

The boy directly voiced his honest thoughts as he walked through the chaotic marketplace with a scrap of parchment in hand.

He was perhaps around fifteen years of age.

The boy's blond hair and blue eyes gave him an overall Northern European look. He looked at the paper and looked around the marketplace.

He had a very normal face, neither particularly handsome or ugly, but suited to childlike smiling. As his wasn't the kind of appearance that would attract attention, he blended into the crowd completely.

"Setting that aside, what happened here?"

The marketplace was crowded, but goods were rolling all over the ground.

A good number of people were fixing and cleaning up the scattered goods and ripped tents --it looked like a violent storm had just passed through.

Huey's quick thinking had caused horses and cattle to stampede through the streets, making it the way mess it was now, but this boy had no way of knowing that.

He had no way of knowing of the boy named Huey, nor did he have any way of knowing of the girl who was the cause of all this.

At least, not yet.

"Was there a twister? I hope no one was hurt." The boy mumbled his thoughts out loud as he made his way through the marketplace.

And he soon reached a part of the market that was in an especially disorderly state.

It looked almost like an ox cart had run over the place, with a carriage lying collapsed in the corner. People were moving to and fro, trying to clean up the mess.

'Maybe I should help.'

The boy looked around, wondering if there was anything he could do.

And his eyes found a certain girl.

In front of a storehouse in the corner of the marketplace was a brown-haired girl, sitting on a crate and looking towards the sea.

Her profile had a weary look to it, and the dark bruise on the side of her pretty face showed that she had either lost a fight or was beaten by someone.

The boy curiously cocked his head, looked around, and walked towards the girl without a second thought.

The boy walked into the injured girl's world with neither hesitation nor pity.

He had no way of knowing of the eventual outcome of this encounter.

However, he knew exactly what he wanted the outcome to be.

'I hope she'll be able to smile.'

And with this odd wish, ambiguous in morality--

<=>

The girl who was staring at the ocean--Niki, noticed the person approaching her and looked at him warily.

But the boy, who looked to be around her age, merely approached her with a peaceful smile, oblivious to the distrust in her eyes.

"Hey."

"...?"

She frowned as she observed this boy who spoke to her.

Could he be another 'customer' that her master found? But he looked much too young for something like that.

As the girl continued to wonder, the boy cocked his head and spoke again.

"You look like you're hurt. Are you okay?"

"Oh."

It had been a very long time since anyone had approached her and said something like this.

Setting aside the boy and the girl from earlier, who were forcibly dragged into her affairs, there was no one in the area who would not know what kind of an existence she was. This meant that this boy had to be from out of town.

Niki's analysis took place behind a silent, emotionless expression, but the boy just continued talking to her, looking around.

"Well... you just had the look of someone who was about to die. I don't know if you got into a fight with someone, or if you've been abused, but a cute girl like you should smile. Though, I can't help you with that bruise since I'm not a doctor."

"Who are you?"

Niki asked the boy who thoughtlessly invaded her world, not even bothering to hide her venom.

"Oh! Sorry, sorry. I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. Well, I guess my name doesn't really matter."

For a moment, she wondered if this boy had approached her with something inappropriate in mind, but his tone and expression looked very sincere.

And that was what made her so uneasy.

"... I didn't ask for your pity."

She rejected him outright, with no room for misinterpretation.

Most people would, at this point, get upset and leave or argue with her. The girl had reacted the same way several times before when something similar had happened, but--

"Huh. That's a tough one."

The boy in front of her was unusual.

"Well... I could make a guess and say that you might ask for pity in a month's time or so. So... why don't we just say that your words came to me from across time?"

"..."

'What did this guy just say?'

The girl furrowed her brow, confused by the boy's unnatural line of thought.

"And I think I should add--not many people ever say 'pity me', right? Well, I've only just arrived here, so maybe that's part of this area's culture. I'll apologize if I've offended you. I'm sorry. It's all good, right?"

"Okay... all right. Leave me alone. I don't know what you're thinking, but nothing good will come of being around me."

The girl tried to ignore him. The boy called Elmer crossed his arms and fell into thought.

"Nothing good will come to... you? Or me?"

"...either way, doesn't look like you'll end up too well off."

"That so? That's fine. Of course, I'd be happy to leave you alone if you're going to get into a lot of trouble because of me." Elmer said nonchalantly. The girl frowned.

"Anyway, you're so nice, worrying about someone you just met."

Hearing this, Niki wondered if the boy was either an idiot among idiots or the world's most cunning swindler.

Either way, nothing good could come of telling him anything.

"Go away."

Niki was contemplating leaving if the boy continued to pester her like this, but--

"I guess you're right. Me talking to you's just annoying you. It's not making you any happier." Elmer declared.

"Oh..."

"But one last thing. I need to ask you something, as someone who's ended up intruding into your life for even a tiny moment--"

Smiling, the boy asked her something completely ordinary with the same tone of voice he used when he first spoke to her.

"I need directions. The house should be around here somewhere..."

That was about as far as Elmer got before he was grabbed by the collar and shoved aside.

"Huh?!"

Elmer's eyes were greeted by the sight of five young men closing in on the girl.

"Hey. Niki. What happened to those brats back there?"

"You're..."

They were the same men who had been hurting Niki earlier, but now they had an increased headcount.

Elmer, seemingly not caring that he was shoved aside, watched the girl and the youths, completely oblivious to the situation.

"...They got arrested by the City Police." Niki replied stoically. The young men looked disappointed.

"Tch. And I was going to give them a beating, too. Now I have to wait until they get out."

The man with the swollen eyes laughed uncouthly and grabbed her by the collar.

"And now it's all you, Niki."

"...Let me go." she protested in a mumble, but the delinquent ignored her and strengthened his hold.

"It's *your* job to sell **it**, you bitch! Well?!"

"Ugh..."

The girl was silenced by he collar squeezing at her throat.

The delinquent continued to threaten her, and tightened his grip.

"You know? 'Refusal' is something someone with *value* does to protect that value. A worthless bitch like you doesn't need value--you don't even have the right."

"Ah...gak..."

"Well? Say something, you piece of trash! You go so far, and now you're shutting up?! That's why you're nothing more than garbage."

"..."

The delinquent laughed gleefully, knowing that she could barely speak, let alone breathe. His four companions also broke into laughter.

And just like before, the lively marketplace completely ignored the girl and the young delinquents.

And as for the foreign boy--Elmer C. Albatross--

He merely stepped towards the delinquents.

Step by step. Elmer made his way between the delinquent and the girl step by step, as if in a living representation of the phrase.

He then tapped the hand of the delinquent holding the girl's throat, and asked in a laid-back voice that was completely unsuited to the tense situation.

"Hey. Can I talk to you for a bit?"

"What do you want?"

"Well... I'm wondering. Maybe she can't say anything because you're holding her throat and she can't breathe?"

"..."

The delinquent frowned, just as Niki had done a short while ago.

He let go without even realizing it. The girl fell to her knees immediately.

Elmer smiled as Niki coughed and gasped.

"See? There you go! Did you know? When you choke a person, they can't make a sound. And when a person can't breathe, they die. It'll be helpful to remember that. After all, if you accidentally end up killing someone, both of you will be unhappy. Knowing this stuff comes in pretty handy, you know?"

"...!"

"Oh right! You don't know what she'll have to say once she catches her breath, so could you not call her 'trash' or 'bitch' until then? Oh, but I won't stop you if she says she wants to be called that."

"Wha...?"

The confused delinquent looked back at his four friends, wondering if this was something to even get angry at.

"Your brain infested with maggots or something?"

"I don't know. I've never actually tried to see before. But I'd die as soon as I try, so I don't really want to. And who knows? Maybe it's a kind of maggot that's good for you." the boy answered with a smile.

The delinquents, assuming that the boy was picking a fight, narrowed their eyes and surrounded him.

The boy didn't seem too intimidated, however, and looked straight into the face of the first delinquent.

"...Something on my face, you piece of trash?"

"You okay?"

"What?"

"Your eyes. They're both completely red. You should try to avoid the sea breeze--you might lose your eyesight at this rate. Go home and wash it out with fresh wa--"

Elmer was struck before he could finish his sentence.

He was knocked into the pile of empty crates in front of the storehouse, making even more of a mess in a place still recovering from the chaos earlier.

"Ouch. That wasn't too nice of you."

"Shut up! What the hell? You got something against us? Huh?!"

"I guess it'd be a lie to say I don't."

"What, so you're some kind of knight in shining armour? Say something, why don'tcha?!"

The swollen-eyes delinquent looked down at Elmer, confident the he could not be surprised like earlier and in their superior numbers.

The boy, however, smiled quietly and spoke in the exact same tone as before, as if he was neither angry nor scared.

"You should smile more when you hit someone."

"...What?"

"People aren't normally happy to get hit, so at least the person doing the hitting should laugh, right? I think that might at least strike a balance. In your case, you like beating people, right?"

My teacher told me... looking down on other people is a generally a source of pleasure, so it's understandable. I don't really get it myself, though. Anyway, I want you to smile when you hit someone, just so I won't have any trouble knowing that you're having fun."

The delinquents, sensing something eerie about this rambling boy, looked at one another and encircled him, planning to beat him halfway to death.

"... Whaddya say we air out this kid's brain some?"

"Stop!"

Niki began to make her way to try and stop the delinquents, but a thick hand suddenly grasped her arm.

"Ouch..."

When she turned to look, she found the bald man, fist clenched.

Niki was instantly reminded of the pain in her cheek from earlier as she looked at the man, shaking in outrage.

"You little bitch...! You're bothering the customers *again*?!"

"Ugh..."

Niki braced herself reflexively, remembering the pain from the punch she had received earlier.

The bald man, who seemed to be the girl's master, snorted loudly as she cowered, and raised his fist.

"Know your place--"

He never managed to finish his sentence.

The bald man was kicked in the side of the head, almost as though someone had mistaken it for a ball.

"!"

He was sent flying, unable to make a sound.

His head reflected the sun, setting against the Mediterranean Sea, and created, for a fleeting instant, a brilliant lightshow.

At the moment of the kick, the bald man was neither dozing off nor crouching on the ground.

Someone had broken into a run, stepped off one of the crates, and kicked the bald man with all his strength.

The bald man landed on and broke a stack of crates, just like Elmer had earlier.

As he tried to turn his aching neck, confused and groaning in pain--

He saw a strange pair of people.

The two men, atypical for locals, both had jet-black hair and peculiar features.

One of them had dark skin, and the other was lighter-skinned but certainly not white. They seemed to be like the Southeast Asian or East Asian merchants who would visit occasionally, but their manner of dress was completely different.

The dark-skinned one was dressed in a style completely unfamiliar to the bald man.

He was wearing large baggy pants of indigo, and the sleeves were wrapped in what seemed to be bandages that spiralled all the way down to his shoes. Over his chest he wore nothing but a sleeveless vest with unfamiliar markings.

His hair, tied up in a tight topknot, somewhat resembled a slanted palm tree.

Someone who knew of Japan would recognize this manner of dress as that of a samurai...or rather, a mere bandit, but it was just an unusual style to the people here, who knew nothing of the country.

The East Asian, meanwhile, wore something that looked like a Spanish army uniform with all the decorations removed, but considering his ethnicity, it offered not a single clue as to his identity.

One thing the two men had in common, however, was the strange swords they had at their sides.

Only the City Police and guards working for aristocrats ever carried around swords. This was because, as it was in most cities, the City Police enforced weapon possession laws.

They carried their weapons in blatant violation of regulations.

Rather than getting angry at the attack, the bald man found himself more alarmed by the unknown identities of the duo.

Lotto Valentino was an area frequented by all kinds of people, but he wasn't sure that these men would even understand a word he said.

Niki and the delinquents had also stopped in their tracks when the mysterious men intruded. Elmer was still lying on the ground, recovering from the kickings.

Even the passersby who had been pretending not to notice could not help but pause at the outlandish appearance of the foreigners.

Tensions still ran high as the dark-skinned man put a finger to his chin and spoke.

"Worry not. It was only a *mineuchi*³. You may die in contentment."

The foreigner's fluent Italian turned heads.

As they had no idea what the word *mineuchi* meant, all they could think about was his death threat.

³ *Mineuchi* means to hit with the blunt side of a blade so as to avoid death.

The dark-skinned man continued, undeterred by the frenetic atmosphere.

"I know not of the situation at hand, yet it is clear to me that on one hand, these infidels here use numbers to overpower one person. On the other hand, here is a man who would bring harm to a helpless woman... thus, I was compelled to stop here before you."

While the facts of the matter were true, the phrasing was a complete admonition to the bald man.

Looking around in anticipation of the arrival of the City Police, the bald man responded, tasting blood in his mouth.

"D-don't make me laugh! I'm her master, and it's only right that I teach her some manners!"

The dark-skinned man cracked his neck and retorted to the bald man's fear-stained words.

"Well... it seems that in this city, pigs are the ones that herd the men."

"Wh-what?!"

The East Asian man sighed wearily, still standing beside the resolute dark-skinned man.

However, the words he spoke were completely foreign. No one in the marketplace knew what he was saying.

[Master Zank. If you would leave things at that.]

[What, you are willing to just pass this injustice by, Denkuro?]

[Would these people not have their own circumstances? I must agree that this was much too violent for a mere disciplinary measure... but there is no need to start a fight.]

[Soft as always, Denkuro. If only these foreigners would understand.]

The delinquents were initially standing in silence at the incomprehensible language the foreigners spoke. However, things soon changed.

"Wh-what are these bastards...? They said something to us just now, right?"

"Probably just a couple of bilge rats." "Just get rid of them."

Two of the five delinquents approached to scare them away, but--

In the blink of an eye, the calm East Asian slipped over to them without so much as raising an eyebrow, and jumped.

It was only a single step.

Yet the sound of his foot kicking off the air shook the air.

Instead of drawing his blade, he leapt off one foot, put his weight into his shoulder, and released it.

It seemed the man was tackling the delinquent's chest with his shoulder. The onlookers were then greeted by a terrifying sight.

The delinquent was thrown into the air, and tossed backwards by the force of the East Asian's attack.

"Wha-?"

The delinquent went down into the stack of crates, taking one of the others surrounding Elmer with him.

[Denkuro... was your statement of pacifism a lie?]

[I had no choice, as I sensed aggression from them.]

The delinquents could not hide their fear as the foreigners continued speaking in their indecipherable tongues.

The remaining three then tried to encircle them.

However, at that very moment, the dark-skinned man kicked one of the delinquents off his feet. The other two were taken down immediately afterwards while they gaped in shock.

It was almost like watching a group dance.

The onlookers held their breaths. The bald man was holding his bruised head, desperately waiting for the City Police.

The swollen-eyed delinquent sat up, yelling with a voice full of loathing.

"You... you bastards... you bastards! Who-who do you think we are?!"

"You weaklings cannot even fight without introducing yourselves?"

"Shut up! You're finished! You think you can get away with--"

"Never mind. We realize that you're from some affluent background."

The dark-skinned man nonchalantly ignored their threats. He sighed wearily.

Then, a shadow passed over his eye as he stated thus:

"In other words... It seems I may have no choice but to silence you."

"...!"

Even the observers froze at this shocking statement. The words alone were powerful enough to make them believe that the man could kill every last witness who stood here.

The delinquent who received the brunt of this shock trembled, sharply drew breath, and pulled out a small knife.

"Y-you bastard-- I'll... kill... kill... ugh!"

Just as he drew the blade from a sheath of gold and silver, he realized that he had made a fatal mistake.

"...so you've drawn." the dark-skinned man muttered. He put his fingers over the hilt of the blade at his side and pushed out the handguard with his thumb.

The delinquent with the knife, seeing the glint of silver, looked around in panic. Realizing that his fellow delinquents, still moaning on the ground, would be of no help, he could do nothing but quake in fear.

As his teeth rattled, the delinquent broke out into cold sweat, keeping an eye on his opponent's side.

The moment his opponent drew, he would find himself besieged by a weapon countless times far-reaching than his knife.

The delinquent, having realized from his opponent's movement that he could not hope to dodge an attack from such a blade, found himself cornered.

He was so terrified that he could neither fight nor flee. That was the kind of pressure exerted by this opponent's blade.

"Prepare yourself." said the man called Zank, but in reality he had yet to decide what to do.

He had no qualms about the act of cutting, but this opponent of his was a boy much younger than himself.

He was not particularly predisposed towards spilling blood before he had seen the city proper.

'I'll let him off easy. Just the wrist, perhaps.'

Zank, having made his decision, furtively lowered his centre of gravity.

He then noticed a man walking in their direction from amidst the crowds, and turned his attention to him.

The man was dressed similarly to the other delinquents, but he seemed to be perhaps five or six years older than them. He looked to be about the same age as himself.

The man, a full head taller than all the other onlookers, had sharper eyes than the delinquents- some of the onlookers quickly averted their eyes upon catching sight of him.

'So he's one of them.'

From his bearing and stature, the man seemed to be of a higher status than the delinquents. Judging from his age, he was likely their leader.

Zank warily kept his eyes on the newcomer, but the tall man calmly walked straight into this unwelcoming scene, step by step, in a similar yet decidedly different fashion from Elmer.

The swollen-eyed delinquent, only just having noticed the tall man, yelled out his name.

"M-Mister Aile⁴!"

The man called Aile did nothing but survey the situation with his sharp eyes.

The fallen delinquents noticed his presence and turned to him, eyes filled with relief and terror both.

"Th-thank god you're here... those guys were tough..." one of them spoke, knife still in hand. His voice was trembling.

Aile looked around at the delinquents and asked, "What were you doing here?"

"Uh, well... that's...you see..."

⁴ Aile is pronounced like the word "Aisle". Now taking suggestions for a better spelling.

"Spit it out. Cat got your tongue?" He growled, and looked over at Elmer, who was just getting up ("Ouch..."), Niki, who was standing in stunned silence, and the bald man, who was nursing his head.

"Don't tell me... were you here buying 'that'?"

"N-no... well..."

"Let's set that aside for now. Don't we have something to do?"

"Oh... right!"

Aile didn't seem to be in the best of moods, but he looked to be willing to help. The delinquent yelled at the foreigners, his confidence restored.

"It's over now! Mister Aile is going to finish you off!"

"Yes. It's over." said Aile, who was standing beside the delinquent.

He had barely finished his sentence when he grabbed the delinquent's knife-hand and twisted it upwards.

"Gah... ugh...?"

Aile easily took away the knife from the grimacing delinquent, and stabbed it into the young man's palm.

"Gaaaaaaaahhh! Ahhhhh! Aaaaaahhhhh!"

The delinquent fell to the ground in a roll, screaming and spilling blood everywhere.

Aile slowly raised his foot--and stepped on the delinquent's neck.

"...ugh... uuuuhhhhh...!"



It wasn't strong enough to crush his spine, but the young man experienced pain several magnitudes higher than what Niki must have experienced earlier--and lost consciousness.

"What an idiot."

"...You claim no need for foolish subordinates?" the East Asian asked, frowning, in clear Italian. Aile shook his head, maintaining his expression.

"I understand that *he* was first to draw... but I ask you to consider leaving it at this."

"Oh...?"

The foreign men looked at one another, taken aback at this suggestion.

"I understand. We will drop this matter." the dark-skinned man let go of the sword he was on the verge of drawing.

"We may be the ones who are retreating this time, but I suggest you not linger too long on these streets."

"Is that a threat?"

"No... it's a piece of advice."

Aile shook his head and narrowed his eyes as he mumbled.

"Outsiders should not interfere with the matters of this city. There is nothing for you here but misfortune."

"...?"

The foreign men were about to inquire further, but the streets once again became chaotic as the City Police finally made their way over.

<=>

"Uh... so what just happened?"

Elmer noticed the sudden commotion and managed to get on his feet with a great deal of effort. He looked around, eyes wide, and found the girl, face telling of the dilemma she was faced with.

Unusual for someone who was just kicked to the ground, Elmer spoke to her with the same, cheerful expression as when he first approached her.

"...You'd better get away, or they're going to catch you."

The girl was watching the foreigners evade the officers with ease.

There were only four officers right now, all busy chasing the foreign men--but they would have enough manpower left to hunt down Elmer once reinforcements arrived.

"Huh? That so?"

"Yeah. Those delinquents aren't getting arrested, either."

"Why not?"

Elmer asked, relaxed as ever. The girl looked down and replied disdainfully.

"They might look like that, but... they're called the 'Rotten Eggs'..."

Niki trailed off, but unfocused her eyes from her surroundings and revealed a certain fact.

"They're all aristocrats."

As soon as the girl had finished, a hostile male voice reached their ears.

"Niki... you little bitch...! You think you're going to get away with this...?!"

The bald man had gotten to his feet as the officers left on their chase for the foreigners.

He was staggering, but he didn't seem to be too impaired.

"See...? You have to get away now." the girl muttered stoically.

Elmer cracked his neck and replied.

"Before I go... let me just confirm one thing."

"What?"

"Are you happy when that guy hits you?"

"Of course not."

'What is this guy thinking?' Niki wondered. She could not read this boy, no matter how much she tried.

Suddenly, he grabbed her by the hand.

"Huh?"

"Then let's go."

The boy who introduced himself as Elmer pulled her away by hand.

Niki quickened her pace, as if being dragged by his surprisingly strong grip.

Elmer ran and ran with her, skillfully navigating through the crowds. He talked cheerfully to the wide-eyed Niki.

"Wait... stop. Just leave me. I'm okay with--"

"You might be okay with it, but I'm not."

"...Why? You're interested in me?"

"Huh... I guess it's less interest in you, and more... self-satisfaction?" Elmer laughed mischievously.

"The buildings here all look the same..."

"So I need you to guide me somewhere."

<=>

Several minutes later.

The duo managed to lose their pursuers and took a moment to catch their breath in a quiet alleyway.

It had already begun to get dark. It seemed that there was less than an hour of sunlight left.

"I don't think that bald guy's going to come chasing us now."

"..."

The girl nervously scanned the area, and sighed tiredly.

"What's with everyone today...?"

"What do you mean?"

"...Do you know what you just did?"

"I ran off with you?" Elmer answered simply.

Niki's response was anxious.

"Didn't you think about the fact that when I get back, I'm going to get beaten even more?"

"Huh. I don't know much about your situation, but do you *want* to go back?"

"Of course I don't!" the girl adamantly refused. She sighed quietly and locked her emotions away at the back of her heart.

"But still... he's the only one I have. There's... nowhere else for me to go."

"Sounds pretty complicated." Elmer mumbled, as if it was somebody else's business.

Niki didn't even have the strength to get angry--she spoke to him flatly.

"But it's finished now."

"What do you mean?"

"Because... I'm going to die soon."

Niki spoke these unbelievable words with surprising nonchalance. She looked into the distance, recalling that she had said the same thing earlier. She then put on a brave face and made her position clear.

"So don't get any more involved with this than you already are. Maybe you just don't know because you're an outsider, but... this city is dangerous."

"That sounds scary. Why, though?"

"Soon... I'll be killed by the Mask Maker."

"?"

Elmer cocked his head, not understanding what Niki said, but she continued despite his confusion.

"It's not very well-known, even in these parts, but... anyone who sees the Mask Maker will soon be killed by him."

"What's the Mask Maker?"

"...You don't know? He's a serial killer who's already killed twenty-seven people." Niki was surprised. Elmer wracked his brains, but shook his head, unable to procure information that didn't exist there to begin with.

"Well, I came here via Naples, but I've never heard of anything like this. The people at the church never said anything about it, either..."

Niki's face fell as she concluded that Elmer was telling the truth.

"...Yeah. I knew it... they're not spreading this information outside the city."

"?"

"In any case, if you stick with me, you'll end up seeing the Mask Maker when I die. Then you'll get killed, too--"

Elmer interrupted her, shaking his head.

"I don't really care if I die."

"...You think I'm joking?"

Niki shook her head dejectedly, thinking Elmer didn't believe her. Elmer, however, smiled and shook his head in turn.

"Well, setting my death aside... would *you* be satisfied this way?"

"What?"

Niki looked up to find a serious-faced Elmer.

It was a strange feeling. Would someone who'd only just learned about the Mask Maker accept these implausible claims so easily?

Elmer continued under the assumption that all of Niki's claims were true, setting her confusion aside.

"I don't know anything about you or this Mask Maker. So let me just ask... let me ask about the outcome. Aren't you afraid of death?"

"...No. I'm not really scared of dying. I'd prefer death to living like this."

"Don't you have anyone who'd be sad if you die?"

"If I had someone like that, I'd go to *them*, not the bald guy."

'I bet he'll just say something like having to figure out a way to survive. Come to think of it, he mentioned a church a little while ago...'

Perhaps the boy in front of her was a deeply faithful churchgoer who was trying to save someone like her.

That was her assumption, but Niki held one firm belief.

She didn't know if there was a God in this world, but she knew that no God watched over her.

So she planned to counter with sarcasm when the boy replied, but--

"Then I'm glad," the boy stated. "Then you'll be able to die happy. You can escape from all your troubles."

"...?"

"Don't make that face, now! You should smile!"

For a moment, the girl noticed something about this boy.

There was something within this boy--

Something infinitely more terrifying than the delinquents, the foreign swordsmen, or the bald man who beat her.

On the other hand, she could also tell that he had no ill intent. That was why she could not understand him, and that was why she just kept playing into his words.

"If you've forgotten how to laugh, I'll teach you. Though all I can do is make the face."

"...No thanks. It's true I'll be able to get away from this life, but it won't necessarily make me happier than other people..."

Disappointed, Elmer bowed his head ("I see..."), but was back to his cheerful self within three seconds. He began walking.

"In that case, you should spend the night at my friend's house today instead of going back to the bald guy."

"What?"

"It's all right. There's a lot of girls there too, and he wouldn't ever turn down a request from a girl."

"...But..."

As if trying to cheer up the confused girl, Elmer took out a scrap of parchment and unfolded it to show her.

"That's right! That's what I was having trouble with. I couldn't read this map, so I thought maybe a local could help me out. I think he's a pretty famous guy around here."

"Pretty famous" was an understatement.

Niki easily recognized the location indicated on the map.

That was why it was so unbelievable. The address indicated--

"It's the house that belongs to a Mr. Esperanza Boronial..."

<=>

Boronial Family Manor, Dining Hall.

The Boronial Manor was more archaic in fashion than some of its more modern neighbours.

The manor interior was like a small-scale palace, with chambers lined up side-by-side. Some of the longer hallways looked like a hall of mirrors from the way the rooms were placed.

Among these rooms was a large dining hall, bordering the manor's north hall, the entrance, and the kitchens.

The main dish atop the gigantic table was a large roast. The smell of spices like nutmeg, black pepper, the flavourings of onion and scallion, and the scent of the roast itself wafted through the room in a mouthwatering mixture that whet the appetites of all those who set foot in this room. The light pink of the cross-section of the roast perfectly complemented the colours of the vegetables, making this dish also a *visual* work of art.

Esperanza entered the dining hall precisely at dinnertime, but the first thing he looked at was not the food, but the women who worked there.

"Ah... this is wonderful."

Esperanza stopped in place euphorically, as if all his fatigue from the day had evaporated.

Unusually for an aristocrat's meal, food for the servants had also been prepared at the table.

Of course, this might not be too strange when considering the fact that ninety percent of the servants were female, and the fact that Count Boronial was famous for his love of women.

He wasn't much of a skirtchaser--the Count loved everything about women, both body and soul, and was satisfied by their mere presence. The very sight of women--nay, the very existence of women in the world was enough to satiate this man.

Because of his strange tastes, the Count never even thought of singling out one individual woman for love. Women in general thought of him fondly as an eccentric individual, but none had considered him for romantic prospects.

This was why he was an oddball among aristocrats, for being unmarried at his age and taking solace in the presence of female servants.

No one knew how he would find himself an heir, but the Count himself didn't seem to care as long as he had women around him.

At least, that's what the other aristocrats thought of him.

"Curious... yes. How very curious."

Esperanza mumbled to himself as he sat at the table.

"What is it, my lord? Are you thinking of a lady again?" a waitress asked jokingly. Her fellow waitresses giggled.

This was an unthinkable interaction between normal aristocrats and servants, but Esperanza would always make an exception for women. Even when other aristocrats were visiting his manor, he would ask them to "Consider all of the women's words as my own while you are here".

Of course, the servants were all sharp enough to avoid being rude to other aristocrats. Esperanza, lost in thought, paused mid-dinner.

"It is a curious matter indeed. There are thousands, millions, billions, trillions of women in this world, yet why is there only one of myself? I could love them in equal proportions if only we were evenly matched... Well, this is par for the course for a dinnertime musing, so let us set that aside. I find it curious that my guest has yet to arrive."

Esperanza looked to an empty seat for which a meal had been prepared and cutlery set.

"The letter said that he would arrive today. Of course, I wonder what I am doing, worrying over a man." he mumbled, and one of the few male servants entered and whispered to him.

"The guest has arrived, my lord."

"Oh, he's just arrived! Just in time. Perfect. Is this not a divine miracle? Then does this mean that I wasted a miracle on a matter so trivial? If I had to, I would have preferred to use up a miracle for a woman... Well, no matter. I will accomplish miracles for women myself. Call him in."

Esperanza mumbled with zero aristocratic bearing. The male servant bowed and spoke.

"It seems he has brought a guest along, my lord."

"What? And he said he was coming alone... all we have now are leftovers."

"The guest is a young lady."

"Then let my portion be hers. I will greet her personally at the entrance."

As soon as he finished speaking, Esperanza got off his seat and began walking with composure. It was almost as if his earlier, languid movements were all trickery.

"I must take care not to offend a woman I meet for the first time. How is my appearance?"

"...Very good, my lord."

Most aristocrats would claim his appearance problematic, but the servants merely bowed after checking his clothing.

The Count, sent off with adoration, walked over to the entrance and found a certain girl.

"It is an honour, my lady. My name is Esperanza Boronial! You may call me Essa, if you so wish!"

Esperanza's tone had done an 180 from when he was speaking with the Police Chief. Everything, starting from his voice, seemed like that of a different person, with the exception of his outlandish appearance.

He had no hesitation in treating this girl much younger than himself as a lady worthy of respect.

However, a small male voice chuckled from just outside his line of sight.

"You haven't changed a bit, Essa."

"What? That you, Elmer? I'll talk to you later. This way please, my lady. Dinner has been prepared for you. If you would follow me..."

The aristocrat smiled pleasantly.

The wide-eyed commoner girl was frozen in place.

The sight beyond the door was completely different from her usual quarters.

This space's immaculate majesty almost made it seem like a different world altogether.

But that wasn't what surprised Niki. After all, she had seen spaces like these countless times before.

What shocked Niki was the fact that the man she assumed to be an aristocrat greeted her courteously at the entrance.

"P-please, wait a moment! I'm... just... a commoner..."

Niki unconsciously stepped back and looked down. Esperanza cocked his head.

"Does that matter, good Miss?"

Elmer laughed loudly at Esperanza's sincere confusion.

Niki had no idea what was going on.

'I guess an oddball's friend can't be anything but an oddball himself.'

The girl, caught up wondering how to take this situation, ended up forgetting, if only for a brief moment.

She ended up forgetting that she was a witness.

And the fact that she was marked for certain death.

<=>

The female servants, watching the scene unfold from inside the doors, whispered to each other.

"That boy's the Count's guest?"

"But he's a boy!"

"It's pretty unusual for the Count to have a male guest."

"Apparently he's going to be staying here for a while."

"He's pretty cute."

"But he's a friend of the Count, right?"

"I bet he's a weirdo."

"Yeah."

"Definitely."

As the women chatted among themselves, the lone male servant, who appeared to be the steward, silently recalled a conversation from several weeks ago.

<=>

3 Weeks ago

"Should I call it an annoyance, or an honour...? Looks like I'll be taking care of some oddball again."

"What might be the matter, my lord?"

"They're sending over a houseguest from the motherland."

"By 'annoying', do you mean that the guest is a man, my lord?"

"Correct. Well, I've seen him a couple of times in Spain. We're acquainted."

"Is that such a bad thing, my lord? ...Or is he someone you are unfond of?"

"No, he's a good kid. Yes, a good kid. He's almost *too* good of a kid, but it is true. It's just that his circumstances are a bit unusual and annoying and dangerous. Yes."

"What might you be saying, my lord?"

"Well... do you know of the incident with the heretics a few years ago? It was in a certain country..."

"...Please forgive my lack of learning, my lord."

"No need to apologize. After all, it was a relatively quiet incident. Perhaps... five years ago? There was an absolutely enormous heretical group. Witch hunts have gone out of fashion in

the past few decades, but it seemed there was so much trouble with them that the church sent in a group of inquisitors to take punitive measures. Yes. They even sent in a military order."

"How terrifying."

"Yes. And the church managed to rescue a boy. The rescued the boy whose fate was to have his lower body boiled, his upper body burned, and his neck twisted, all as a living sacrifice."

"..."

"In other words, this boy is the guest. To put it plainly, he was blessed by the church after he was rescued. He was called a miracle boy, rescued by the grace of God."

"I understand, my lord. Then you mean to say that we cannot allow harm to befall this boy?"

"I wish that were the case. I only found this out later, but this boy..."

He is both a miracle boy *and* the son of a witch."

Interlude 2: The Mask Maker

Tales of the masked figure, known as the "Mask Maker", began to circulate among the citizens by the time of the tenth murder.

At first, the City Police was reluctant to release information about the dubious eyewitness accounts, claiming that they would 'cause chaos and confusion'.

However, as the murders continued, the aristocrats--especially Esperanza, from the first female death--ordered for an extensive investigation to arrest the criminal. The City Police, fearing that the Military Police or the aristocrats' private armies would mobilize first, slowly began to reveal the relevant information.

The victim's face was covered with a mask. The figure was called the "Mask Maker" because he wore the same mask as his victims.

According to the newsletter and the City Police, the victims had nothing in common but the masks over their faces.

The white masks, reminiscent of the Carnival of Venice, shone in bright harmony with the blood spilled over the floor.

This eerie image permeated the minds of the citizens, engraving into their memories the name of the Mask Maker.

To the outside world, as nothing more than a topic of gossip--an urban legend.

To those on the streets of this city, as a pestilent terror.

The witnesses were all different, but their identical accounts led the City Police to pursue the individual known as the Mask Maker.

It was said that he held a silver stiletto in hand, the blade dripping with blood.

It was said that when he was discovered, he would give a laugh at the witness and bolt.

It was said that his laughter and build both appeared to belong to a young man, but his specific age was unknown.

It was said that he could nimbly take flight over walls in the blink of an eye.

It was said that the sight of him disappearing into the night was akin to that of a ghost or a demon.

The City Police feared that, once information about the Mask Maker was released, through word-of-mouth and the newsletters, people would start reporting fake sightings. And initially, there *were* pranks and falsified accounts.

Eventually, however, the true testimonies would be clearly separated from the false.

That was to say, anyone who witnessed the Mask Maker would be killed by him in a few days' time.

The City Police and the information brokers in the streets were the only ones who had this key piece of information--

That of the twenty-seven victims, a full twenty-one of them had glimpsed the Mask Maker.

And that there were very few credible witnesses still alive to tell the tale.

However, these rumours soon began spilling out into the streets, into the ears of the people.

'You must not see the Mask Maker.

And even if you see him, you must forget everything.'

Yet still, the number of witnesses increased and 'decreased' at the same rate.

Every last witness. There was no exception.

It was almost as if the Mask Maker was searching for his next prey.

Chapter 3:

*Their Chance
Encounter*



Five years ago. A rural village in a certain country.

Huey Laforet was sure that when he last saw his mother, she was definitely smiling.

Her smile might have been the product of his childlike hopes, but Huey believed in this memory.

And with that all-forgiving smile--

His mother disappeared into the water, never to resurface.

The Witch Hunts.

A very famous, very cruel, and very widespread "hunt".

The phrase should rightly have been a holy one that represented the hunting of evil demons. Over time, however, its meaning became twisted into that of a corrupt practise.

It was said that the practise of Witch Hunting began sometime around the twelfth century.

People commonly believe that the Witch Hunts were started by the church, but in reality, the practise originated with the common people. It spread throughout Europe with no actual connection to any large organized faith. And in the span of a century, the practise of Witch Hunting slowly seeped into the politics, cultures, and religions of the kingdoms of Europe.

The Witch Hunts were, in the very sense of the phrase, the judgements of the people, by the people, and for the people.

As if foretelling the fact that the greatest enemy of the people were people themselves, they used the indulgence of "Witch Hunting", and--mostly against women--revealed a certain "something" full of fear and anger.

The church's Inquisition was originally deployed against heretics. In other words, the Inquisition had no interest in unearthly things like "magic" or "witches". However, this

movement of the people that spread all across Europe eventually made its way into the church.

Those who had been accused of witchcraft were brutally tortured during their interrogation, and many of them died before they could even begin waiting for the stake.

It is said that approximately thirty thousand were hunted as witches, but some would claim the number closer to nine million--this was how closely the phrase "Witch Hunt" was connected with the idea of a massacre.

There are many theories as to why the practise died out, but the number of witch trials decreased rapidly from the 1670s on. By 1700, very few people were being charged for this crime.

It was 1700, a time when the phrase "Witch Hunt" had begun to fade from recent memory and become a thing of the past in many parts of Europe.

However, despite the fact that the Witch Hunts ended thirty years ago in this village, the practise retained its roots deep in the villagers' hearts. It might be right to say that they were hiding it somewhere, deep inside themselves.

It was a mountainous area, far from any city. Information from the larger settlements almost never reached this place, and this little old village was nowhere near any points of military importance, either.

Huey Laforet was a very normal boy who was born and raised in this village.

He lived alone with his mother, having lost his father at a young age.

Daily life wasn't easy by any means, but Huey grew up an energetic child under the stern but kind care of his mother.

His hometown was a tiny village of three hundred, but it was a big enough world for young Huey. It was also his entire reason for living.

He never wondered about why he was living--he lived because his world existed right there.

His mother, who was always smiling, would often ask her son:

"Do you love this village, Huey?"

The boy, who adored his mother's gentle smile, would grin delightedly and answer.

"Yeah, I love this place!"

It was almost in an instinctive way that the boy loved his mother, the village, and the kindness the village showed their little family.

He didn't know the meaning of the word "love", but his heart was still full of love for his world.

The boy had no idea.

He had no idea how expertly adults could hide their malice.

Not until his tenth birthday--the day of fate.

It was Huey's tenth birthday.

It was on that very day that his mother was taken away in front of his eyes, as an evil witch who spread heresy to the village.

When the people called the "Inquisitors" arrived at the village, Huey didn't really understand who they were. Despite his ignorance, however, he was chilled to the bone by their presence.

And that chill, in human form, reached out a hand towards him and took his mother's arm as he watched.

There were about twenty armed men and ten men in robes.

Huey had never seen anyone like them. The closest he could think of were the priests at the church, who dressed somewhat similarly.

But Huey could not connect this group of men to the kind people at the church, and lunged at the men to get his mother back.

He was kicked away effortlessly. He didn't remember how many times he got back up, but all he knew was that at the end of the day, he was never able to save his mother.

Days passed, and still she did not return.

The boy was only ten, and needed some time to understand the situation.

About what a "Witch" was, and about what would happen to a "Witch".

He began to figure it out about five days after his mother was taken. He had pieced things together from the words of the villagers who came to him out of worry.

The facts were too cruel and difficult to accept for a ten-year old boy.

Why must his mother be put on trial for witchcraft?

Who was the one who accused her?

Why won't anyone help his mother?

Why doesn't he have the power to help?

The boy howled and stamped like an animal, asking these questions all the while.

However, the villagers patiently calmed him, comforted him, and looked after him.

And faced with the villagers' kindness, the boy regained his calm.

"Don't worry, Huey. We believe in your mother." said the young woman who lived next door. She was about ten years older than he was, but Huey considered her like a sister to him and was deeply comforted by her words.

This was because her smile--and the smiles of the villagers who were kind to him--looked just like the gentle smile he always saw on his mother's face.

*'Mom's going to come back. I know it.
What was I thinking, thinking badly of the other people in the village?
Maybe it was my fault mom was taken away.
I'll apologize. Please forgive me.
Please forgive me. Please forgive me. Please forgive me. Please forgive me.
Please forgive me please forgive me.
Please forgive me please forgive me please forgive me.
Please forgive me please forgive me please forgive me.
Please forgive me please forgive me
Forgive me forgive me forgive me
Forgive me forgive me
Forgive me forgive me
Forgive me
Forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me...'*

He would spend his nights, face buried in a hay-stuffed pillow, reciting these words like a magic spell.

He kept asking for forgiveness, not even knowing who he was asking.

His mother was wrongfully arrested. She would come back safely after the trial.

The boy continued to believe in this and continued to mumble for forgiveness.

He believed, not in a god, but his beloved village. He believed in his world.

The boy innocently believed.

Naively and unconditionally.

That is, until he finally saw his mother again a week later.

Huey's mother was dragged out naked in front of the village.

The skin between what little scraps of cloth she wore told of the violence inflicted on her.

There were no scars or marks--everything was still a live wound that drowned her in pain.

Blood dripped from her fingertips. Metal spikes were sticking out of each digit. The skin on her fingers had been peeled off, along with her nails, and these wounds went all the way up to her wrists.

That was only the beginning.

However, Huey didn't remember the rest very well.

This was because he had looked away.

The injuries on her body were not kind to the eyes--Huey would not be able to believe that this woman was his mother until he saw her face.

Her face was relatively lacking in wounds--there were bruises from having been struck, but it was still whole enough for Huey recognize his own mother.

Huey was later told by another one of the alchemists--the accused's teeth would be left intact because they needed them to pronounce clearly for their testimony at the trial. There was a second reason--something that had to do with his mother's renowned beauty, but it was so horrific that Huey pretended he had never heard it.

The trial would soon begin.

He didn't know what they would be doing specifically, but Huey knew from the moment he saw the flames licking at the altar.

'Mom... is going to die.'

The moment the boy opened his mouth to scream in despair, his mother caught sight of him.

And despite the overwhelming pain and suffering, she quietly smiled at her son.

Huey had never seen such a smile before.

It was completely different from the gentle, all-loving smile his mother always wore. It didn't, however, speak of hatred or something malicious, either. Huey would later mumble, "Strength. That's right... it was a smile of strength...". That was exactly the kind of smile she had.

Huey shut his mouth without thinking, and his mother--

She quietly began her testimony.

Before the man who looked to be the leader of the Inquisition could even ask, Huey's mother returned to her usual "gentle smile".

She testified in a clear voice.

"I have one thing... just one thing to confess to the Inquisition."

The aftermath of her testimony would be engraved into Huey's memories forever.

<=>

Lotto Valentino, 1705.

Second floor of the third library.

'...'

"This is a matter of our methodology. We have always followed the causes of effects. For gold to become gold, there must be a cause. Magnetism and gravitation also have causes--and we strive to solve everything by figuring out what it is."

Huey heard a familiar woman's voice as he slowly made his way back into reality.

When he looked around, he found himself in the middle of a lecture. Renee was gesturing wildly, flaunting her knowledge at the desk in the middle of the room. In his right hand was his book, slightly damp where he held it.

Realizing that his hand was covered in sweat, Huey thought, *'So it was a dream...'*

But before he concluded thus, he mentally shook his head.

'No, it wasn't a dream... maybe from partway through... but I was recalling that incident in the middle of class.'

Huey began his self-analysis as he flipped over the page.

Renee, oblivious to his thoughts, merrily continued her lecture.

"But Mr. Isaac Newton in England is a bit of an odd person. Well, I think you probably know this, but, well, Mr. Newton claims that, in the Theory of Universal Gravitation, um... to put it really simply, that we can ignore the cause of gravitation. Of course, this is, in some way, a religious line of thinking, believing that humans have no way of understanding the works of God."

Huey paid attention to perhaps ten percent of her lecture, lost in his own thoughts.

*'I couldn't stop thinking back, since last night.
So it's been exactly five years now.'*

Today was both Huey's birthday and the day his mother was taken by the Inquisitors.

Now that he thought about it, he had a lot of questions about the proceedings. Were they really Inquisitors from the church? Perhaps they were swindlers or bandits in disguise.

There was, of course, no way to confirm any of this at this point.

Everything had long since finished, leaving nothing but the hatred in his heart.

This reality could not be changed.

Even the girl who had claimed to love him was a part of the world he despised. And knowing that he himself was the worst of the lot for even thinking this way, Huey Laforet hated the entire world, including himself.

"But this is something amazing. Applying only empirical knowledge is both a revolution and a hope for both alchemy and science! Of course, when it comes to medicine, we're already using anaesthesia without knowing its workings."

As Huey remained lost in thought, Renee cheerfully spoke about her hopes for the future.

To Huey, the future was something that should be equally destroyed--he didn't want to hear this drivel about hope.

And as he watched Renee conduct classes as usual, Huey remembered something.

'What about the new student?'

He had been thinking back to his past partly because of what Monica had told him yesterday.

That the newbie who would be joining their class was a "witch's son", just like himself--Huey didn't really care, but it would be a lie to say that he was completely uninterested.

"In any case, great changes might be on their way if Mr. Newton's theories become part of the mainstream! Isn't he amazing? Come to think of it, I hear he's being knighted this year! Oh?

Or was he already knighted...? In any case, he's a busy man, being Master of the Mint and President of the Royal Society. Of course, someone like me has much more time to do as I please..."

Renee's lecture began straying further and further from the topic of the lesson.

Huey determined that there was nothing left worth listening to, shut his book, and stood up.

"Oh? What's the matter, Huey?" Renee cocked her head.

Huey cast down his eyes and replied coolly.

"I'm not feeling very well today. I'd like to go home and rest."

His stoic face certainly didn't look very ill, but Renee blinked as she asked him if he needed to see a doctor.

Huey politely declined.

"Please excuse me."

He left the classroom alone.

He stepped away from the gathering place of knowledge and into the outside world, a place for which he had neither expectations or hopes.

And he met a certain boy.

<=>

"Hey there."

The moment he stepped out into the hall, Huey heard someone.

"What's wrong? You're still in the middle of class, right? Are you feeling sick?"

It was an unfamiliar voice, but the tone sounded like that of someone speaking to an old friend.

"...?"

Huey turned to the direction of the voice, but the hallways was deserted.

"Over here."

Huey searched again for the source of the voice and found--

A boy outside the window, standing upside-down.

The smiling boy was hanging upside-down from the tree inside the courtyard that grew right next to the window.

"...Who are you?"

The order of the conversation seemed to be a little off, but Huey decided to keep up his guard and see how this boy would react.

The boy who hung from the tree by his legs like a pice of laundry shook in the wind, and answered Huey's question.

"Come to think of it, I guess I've never met you before! I'll introduce myself. I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. You can call me whatever you like. It's nice to meet you. What's your name?"

"...Huey. Huey Laforet."



After unknowingly blurting out his full name, Huey looked at Elmer with suspicion. Of course, it was strange enough looking into the face of a boy hanging upside-down in a tree outside the window, so Huey looked away and walked up to the window.

"Are you the new student Professor Renee was talking about?"

This question also seemed to be out of order, but Huey decided to wait for Elmer's response.

"I guess so." Elmer smiled, still upside-down. Huey was silent for a moment.

He then voiced the obvious question that should have come first.

"What are you doing over there?"

"Haha, thanks for asking! I've been waiting for you to ask. Well, Professor Renee left me here out in the hall and told me to come in when she called my name. But then she just forgot about me and started the lesson. So I looked out the window, and what do you think I saw?"

"Who knows?"

Clack.

Huey gave a halfhearted response, shut the window, and bolted it.

Outside, Elmer was waving his arms, still upside-down and wondering what was going on.

Huey ignored the newbie and quickly walked away, somewhat unnerved by the grin of the boy he just saw.

<=>

'That wasn't like me.'

Walking down the stairs, Huey began to wonder why he did such a thing.

Normally he wouldn't have done anything of the sort. He would put on a smile, say something convenient in response, and leave.

But there was something about that boy that disturbed Huey.

'Elmer... was his name.

A son of a witch.'

Perhaps it was a subconscious reaction against someone of similar circumstance, stemming from the information he had received earlier.

But Elmer seemed to be a completely different type of person from himself.

In any case, it was impossible to determine what kind of person he was from the few words they had just exchanged. Their first meeting had gone as badly as it could have. In some ways, that was a relief.

'And now he'll never have an excuse to talk to me.'

Huey considered the possibility that Elmer might get angry, but all he had to do then was respond appropriately. He'd let himself be punched if that was what it came down to.

And as long as Huey ignored him, Elmer would have no reason to approach.

'No, that's not it.

This isn't how I usually work.'

Huey normally remained neutral. He would keep a distance from people, but make sure there was no malice or enmity between them. And yet he had chosen to brush off Elmer outright.

'What was it about him that made me do something like that?'

Huey continued walking in self-analysis, when someone else spoke to him.

"You. Boy."

He turned around at the sound of extremely rigid Italian, and found two men standing there.

'Foreigners?'

One of them was a dark-skinned man in outlandish clothing. The other was dressed quite normally, but like his friend, he had a sword at his side.

They were obviously foreign to this land, but there was something else about them that gave off an unusual impression.

The dark-skinned man, eyes glinting, asked with a polite tone of voice that did not match his manner of dress.

"We're looking to speak to an elder called Dalton..."

The name was all too familiar to Huey.

"Oh... Professor Dalton's probably at the main archives at the moment."

"Hm... Apologies, but we are unused to buildings like this. We would be grateful if you could show us to him."

"Of course. ...This way."

'Today's an unusual day.' Huey thought, as he put on a fake smile and led the duo through the library.

'No... I guess yesterday was when it first got weird.' When he also considered the matter with the strange girl, it seemed that the past little while had been nothing but a series of unusual events. In some ways, it felt as if things had all started getting twisted from the moment he heard Monica's confession yesterday.

'But... I feel like I could treat these guests the way I normally treat other people. Then why couldn't I act this way towards that Elmer guy?'

Huey silently led the foreigners, lost in thought.

To Dalton Strauss.

He was the man who brought Huey into the world of alchemy--

The man who brought Huey from that village to this city--

And the man who was the Headmaster of this academy.

<=>

The third library, special archives.

For starters, the room was an archive.

Things like fossils, ancient stone tools, rare original copies of writings, seeds of plants from outside Italy, and objects that defied recognition lined the shelves, creating an undefinable atmosphere.

Strangely enough for an archive, there were large spaces from the corners to the middle of the room. From the point of view of the chairs at the centre, it could almost be mistaken for a living room designed to show off its owner's possessions to the guests.

And on one side of the guest chairs sat the two "samurai"--Zank Rowan and Togo Denkuro.

Zank the Polynesian and Denkuro the Japanese.

They were not everyday sights in Spain-ruled Italy, but the man sitting opposite them didn't seem to consider their appearances particularly unusual.

"Welcome, both of you."

The one who spoke with the hoarse voice was a white-haired man around sixty years of age.

He had grown out a long beard and moustache, and wore a wide-brimmed hat. His bandaged right hand appeared to be a wooden replacement. Replace the wooden hand with a hook, and he would have no trouble passing as a pirate.

He looked less like an alchemy professor and more like an old, wizened merchant--he would fit right in among the greats of the golden age of sailing.

"And let me add... that was quite the stunt you pulled."

The voice, though hoarse in tone, was overwhelmingly commanding.

The man--Dalton Strauss-- leaned back into his seat. His chair squeaked loudly.

"Hahaha! You flatter me."

"That was not a compliment, Master Zank."

Zank smiled sheepishly as Denkuro looked at him in astonishment.

Though Denkuro appeared to be apologetic, Zank didn't seem to care very much.

Dalton quietly observed these differences as he purposely raised his voice.

"You get into a fight out of some thirst for justice the moment you set foot on this land? You were just *asking* to be noticed! I wasted two minutes and thirty-six seconds calming the City Police. It was a great loss of time indeed."

"There was none of this so-called 'thirst for justice'. I merely acted of my own will."

"And you are free to do as you will, but... of all the people to pick a fight with, you chose the aristocrats."

Dalton spoke words of irritation, but he didn't sound angry. As he spoke nonchalantly, Zank raised his voice.

"Yes, exactly! The fact that they were aristocrats makes it all the more unforgivable! It is the role of a nobleman to lead the common people with a heart of virtue and integrity! The brats I dealt with were those who had neither the right to stand above others, nor the power to look down upon their fellows! Perhaps the only one who had these qualities was the man called Aile, who arrived near the end."

Dalton frowned as he listened to Zank's impassioned speech.

"Aile? ... I am not familiar with that name. I thought I knew most of the aristocratic bloodlines... So a new group has arrived on these streets...?"

Denkuro spoke as the old man mumbled to himself.

"Setting that aside, I feel that there is something strange about this city."

"Is that so?"

"Compared to other European nations... Even compared to other places under Spanish rule, those of noble blood are everywhere."

"Yes... well, this is an unusual city, in some ways." Dalton said. His chair creaked.

"This city is like a vacation spot for many aristocrats... but the only one who gather here are those who could not secure important positions back in Spain--those who can lay claim to little but their own names."

"Hm..."

"Even still, in this city, the aristocrats have little power in comparison to the common people."

"...?"

Something about the strange claim Dalton had just made bothered Denkuro, but he set this aside and returned to the heart of the matter.

"Let us speak of this matter at a later time. These are the reason Master Zank and I set foot upon these lands..."

Denkuro took out a package.

From that package he took out a golden hair ornament, and a smaller package made of paper.

"Hoh..."

"It seems you are familiar with this matter."

"I had read about it in the letter, after all..."

Dalton seemed to be more interested in the paper package than the ornament. He carefully opened it with his left hand. Inside the package was some sort of white powder.

"Our master discovered it at the waterside and managed to prevent its spread."

Dalton was silent for a moment, but he looked down at the powder with eyes seething with hatred. He sighed and mumbled.

"It is similar to opium, but not even close to it in strength."

"Counterfeit currency and hallucinogenic drugs. There are some who claim that these both originate from this city."

"Nile was angry enough to set this entire city on fire. That is why we had excluded him from this trip." Denkuro said with a serious expression. Zank laughed and shook his head, as if in continuation.

"If these were to be released into the world, our reputations as alchemists will be destroyed irreparably. Our master had asked that we work in harmony in order to prevent such a disaster. We understand your position, Master Dalton--but we ask that you refrain from being a mere observer."

"Hm... I understand. After all, we are in quite a difficult situation ourselves."

Zank's words sounded somewhat like a threat, but Dalton wasn't even fazed. He merely stared at the powder and the ornament wearily.

Soon, however, Dalton raised his head and laughed self-deprecatingly, his wooden hand creaking.

"If we just stand here and do nothing, this will eventually become too much for both me and Lord Esperanza to handle."

Denkuro sighed in relief and took out several letters.

"We have written instructions from our master. As Zank and myself had only come to this land in order to observe the workings of the city and report back, we plan to leave port within the day."

"Keen on leaving, I take it?"

Dalton chuckled as he cracked his neck and asked a question of Zank, who was sitting on his chair with a bored look on his face.

"... Just for reference, I'd like honest opinions about this city from you outlanders who have spent only a day here."

Zank looked up at the ceiling in thought, and answered declaratively.

"I have nothing to say in terms of specifics! However, there is one thing I can be sure of!"

"And?"

"This city... is strange. In many ways.

It's almost as if the streets are overrun with writhing serpents."

<=>

"Drugs...?"

Huey frowned, leaning against the wall beside the window.

After he had brought the foreigners here, he had acquiesced to his own curiosity and listed in on their conversation.

However, other than empty banter, they spoke only the bare minimum of necessary information. The conversation also enlightened the boy to a strange piece of information.

"What are they talking about...?" Huey muttered unconsciously, listening to them through the wall--

"Maybe it's a secret organization?" Someone replied in a clear voice from right beside him.

"?!"

When Huey turned around, he saw a familiar smile.

Of course, it was right-side up this time.

"Hey there."

"You..."

Elmer, who had gotten beside him without notice, was now putting his ear against the wall in a way that made it obvious that he was eavesdropping.

Huey, forgetting the fact that he had locked him out earlier, blinked and yelled quietly.

"What about class...? What are you doing here?!"

"Well, it's pretty obvious she's not going to remember to call me in. And since the window was locked, I had to get down the hard way. Then I saw you guiding a couple of familiar people, so I followed you. Then you started listening in, so I thought it might be something interesting."

"..."

Ignoring the silent Huey, Elmer stealthily scanned the room through the window and spoke in a hushed tone.

"This is getting interesting! The powder's probably a drug, but what do you think about the ornament?"

"...Who knows?"

"All right then, let's go ask."

"What?"

Elmer immediately reached for the archive door.

"Excuse--"

"...!"

Huey hurriedly covered Elmer's mouth and pulled him to a corner of the hall.

'What am I doing?'

Just as Huey hid around the corner of the hall with Elmer, Dalton poked his head out the archive door.

"Hm? I thought I'd heard someone..."

Dalton looked around, cocked his head, and went back inside.

Confirming that Dalton was back in the archive, Huey sighed in relief and glared at Elmer.

"...Are you an idiot?!"

"Don't worry, don't worry. I choose my battles--I wouldn't have gone in there if getting found out was something that'd get me murdered. After all, you can get through a surprisingly large number of things as long as you're alive."

"Stop making excuses!"

"Then call it a bit of revenge for locking the window on me earlier." Elmer said nonchalantly. He chuckled and continued.

"In any case, that drug and the ornament are bothering you, right?"

"..."

"According to my hypothesis, there's probably a large-scale organization behind them. I've heard that you need a lot of people to create drugs like that. But I don't know if those drugs would make people happy or unhappy. What do you think?"

"...Why did you suddenly change the topic to happiness?"

Very few countries had outlawed opium at this time.

As seen from the Opium Wars later in history, drugs were considered just another commodity.

However, even if regulations existed, they could not possibly apply to drugs that were newly created.

"But from what they're saying, doesn't it sound bad for the drugs to get too popular? I don't think it'll hurt to get more information on it."

"Then don't get me involved."

Huey calmed himself and wondered about Elmer.

'What is with this guy?'

Everything he said was baffling. It might really be best to keep him at a distance but remain personable.

So Huey put on his usual smile and apologized nicely.

"...Anyway, sorry for locking the window on you earlier. I hope we can get along."

"Yeah. And I'll be happy if you can start smiling. Once you come to trust me first, that is."

"...?"

For a moment, Huey did not understand what Elmer was talking about. Elmer spoke nonchalantly as if to offset the silence.

"That's a fake smile, isn't it?"

"...!"

Huey paused mid-handshake and stared at Elmer, wide-eyed.

'Oh. Oh... I see.'

Looking at Elmer, Huey finally realized why he was so unnerved by him.

'This guy's smile...'

The memories of the nostalgic yet cursed day of the witch hunt crossed his mind.

'He's got the same smile as mom and the villagers...'

Interlude 3: The Girl's Burdens

Boronial Manor, dining room.

"How are you feeling, Miss Niki?"

"P-pardon? Um, I..."

Niki was sitting alone in the dining room when Esperanza appeared out of nowhere and spoke to her cheerily.

She was fine with having been invited to the dining room for lunch, but as the employees were still working, Niki was the first to arrive.

The soup that was served as appetizer contained veal shank boiled in chicken broth with spices like saffron and nutmeg. The very smell of this light soup was mouthwatering.

"Oh! Please, make yourself comfortable! You must be very hungry. After all, you retired without dinner last night, saying you had no appetite. I'd be happy if you could whet your appetite with a sip, Miss Niki."

Esperanza's eyes sparkled as he offered Niki the soup.

"Oh... Um, thank you..."

Niki mumbled timidly, and gingerly dipped her spoon into the bowl of soup.

She took a single sip. The taste of the spices prickled at her tastebuds, but the light, perfectly warm chicken-flavoured broth rolled over her tongue in a wave of tenderness.

Niki's eyes widened at this unprecedented taste, and before she knew it, she was already on her second spoonful.

She only found words to break her silence after two or three repetitions--and as soon as she swallowed the soup, she spoke to Esperanza.

"It-It's delicious!"

"I am glad to hear that!"

Esperanza laughed like a child, practically forgetting his actual age.

Watching him laugh made Niki naturally relax her guard. She was not fond of aristocrats, and this man was perhaps the strangest of them all, but he didn't seem like a bad person.

With these thoughts in mind, Niki took another sip.

"Yes. Elmer ran out the window after seeing that."

"I see... Elmer did something like that..."

It was after lunchtime.

As they both had nothing to do, Niki spoke with Esperanza. The conversation was very much a casual chat.

Suddenly, Niki felt a surge of pain and touched her bruised face.

"! Are you all right, my lady?!"

"Oh-- yes. It's just a bruise from yesterday..."

Esperanza narrowed his eyes, and despite knowing that he was being impudent, asked about the injury.

"That injury... were you struck by someone?"

"Oh..."

"It seems I was correct."

The Count's kind smile from earlier had been wiped off his face. His round, owl-like eyes were now shaped like half-moons. His tone of voice also sharply dropped.

Niki, surprised by this sudden change in attitude, unintentionally blurted out the truth.

"Um... I made a mistake while I was working, and... my master..."

"What is his name?"

"Pardon?"

"I shall challenge him to a duel."

Esperanza immediately took to his feet. Niki quickly waved her arms about.

"P-please, don't!"

"I find it unforgivable... no matter the excuse, I will not allow anyone to strike a woman. The only exception is when a parent disciplines their child."

"Uh..."

"Miss Niki, your bruise could only have been created by a fist. And as you have told me, the fist did not belong to a parent of yours. Then I have no reason to let this matter slide!"

Esperanza looked just about ready to run to the marketplace with a sabre in hand. Niki desperately came up with a feeble lie.



"He-he's like a father to me! I don't have any parents... so I think very well of my master
"..."

Esperanza lost steam like a deflated balloon and calmly returned to his seat.

"I apologize for my unsightly rudeness."

"N-no..."

"But I would be thankful if you would be able to confide your troubles with me." Esperanza laughed loudly. His wide eyes were still somewhat scary, but the smile almost made him look charming.

'It feels like... everything since yesterday's been nothing but a long dream.'

Niki quietly bowed her head and opened her mouth to speak.

She wanted to talk--about a lot of things, with this aristocrat, with Elmer, and with the boy and the girl who helped her out yesterday.

But this hope of hers was cruelly shattered as a guest arrived at the dining room.

"Lord Esperanza! I've been looking for you, sire!"

"What impudence, Chief Hancletia."

Esperanza's mood soured the moment the deep voice reached his ears.

The man who entered the manor without so much as a greeting was LaRolf, the Chief of the City Police who had introduced himself to Esperanza yesterday.

Meanwhile, Niki froze on the spot upon seeing the man in uniform.

"You have urgent news? If it isn't a dire matter, remain silent and leave."

LaRolf shook his head at the Governor who mumbled in a tone completely different from when he spoke to women.

"We've found another victim of the Mask Maker."

"!"

Niki froze yet again at the Police Chief's words.

Oblivious to the state of the girl beside them, The Chief and the Governor continued to discuss the matter.

"...Another one."

"P-please don't worry, my lord. The victim this time is a boy...--gak--"

Esperanza grabbed the Chief by the chin before he could finish his sentence.

"Hey. Chief. Are you confounded? You seem to be under the wrong impression."

"Ughhh..."

"Have you not considered the possibility that somewhere out there, a woman is weeping in despair for the murdered boy? How could I not be worried when there may be a woman, somewhere out of my sight, who is drowning in sorrow? And setting my personal feelings aside, how could a Governor not be worried when yet another victim has been claimed?"

"O-o-o-o-o-o-of course, my lord! You are absolutely correct...!"

The Police Chief nodded desperately, still stuck in Esperanza's iron grip.

Noticing Niki's trembling form behind the Police Chief, Esperanza released his hold.

"...! How shameful of me to act so disgracefully in the presence of a lady..."

"Gak... I'm saved-- hm?"

The Police Chief glanced at the girl who saved him and frowned.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

Esperanza reacted to the Chief's question with curiosity.

"Hm? You know each other, Chief?"

"Uh, well. Yes..."

The Chief trailed off. Niki gaped, lips trembling, but she soon got off her seat and ran out of the dining room as if in escape.

The Governor, who was watching with his mouth open, ground his teeth and grabbed the Chief by the collar.

"You bastard... did you do something to that lady?"

"N-no, my lord! It's a misunderstanding! That girl-"

"What about her?"

"She's just... a witness of the Mask Maker incident..."

Esperanza was at a loss for words.

"And... I'm only saying this because she's gone, but..."

The boy who was murdered... was the previous witness who saw the Mask Maker."

<=>

"...Yeah."

Niki, having returned to the room she had been given to use as her quarters last night, mumbled to herself.

"It's just like I thought. I can't escape..."

And she went over the meaning of the fate that would befall her.

The fate that awaited any who witnessed the Mask Maker.

She wasn't afraid of death.

In fact, Niki would gladly accept it if it meant she would be able to escape her painful reality.

However, a whole new world unfolded before her eyes in the past two days.

After leaving the dining room, why did she return to this room that housed her for at most half a day, instead of running from the manor and onto the familiar streets?

The answer was painfully simple. She hated the outside world--the world in which she had grown up.

But she had been living in a dreamlike reality since yesterday.

She had opened her eyes to this wonderful world.

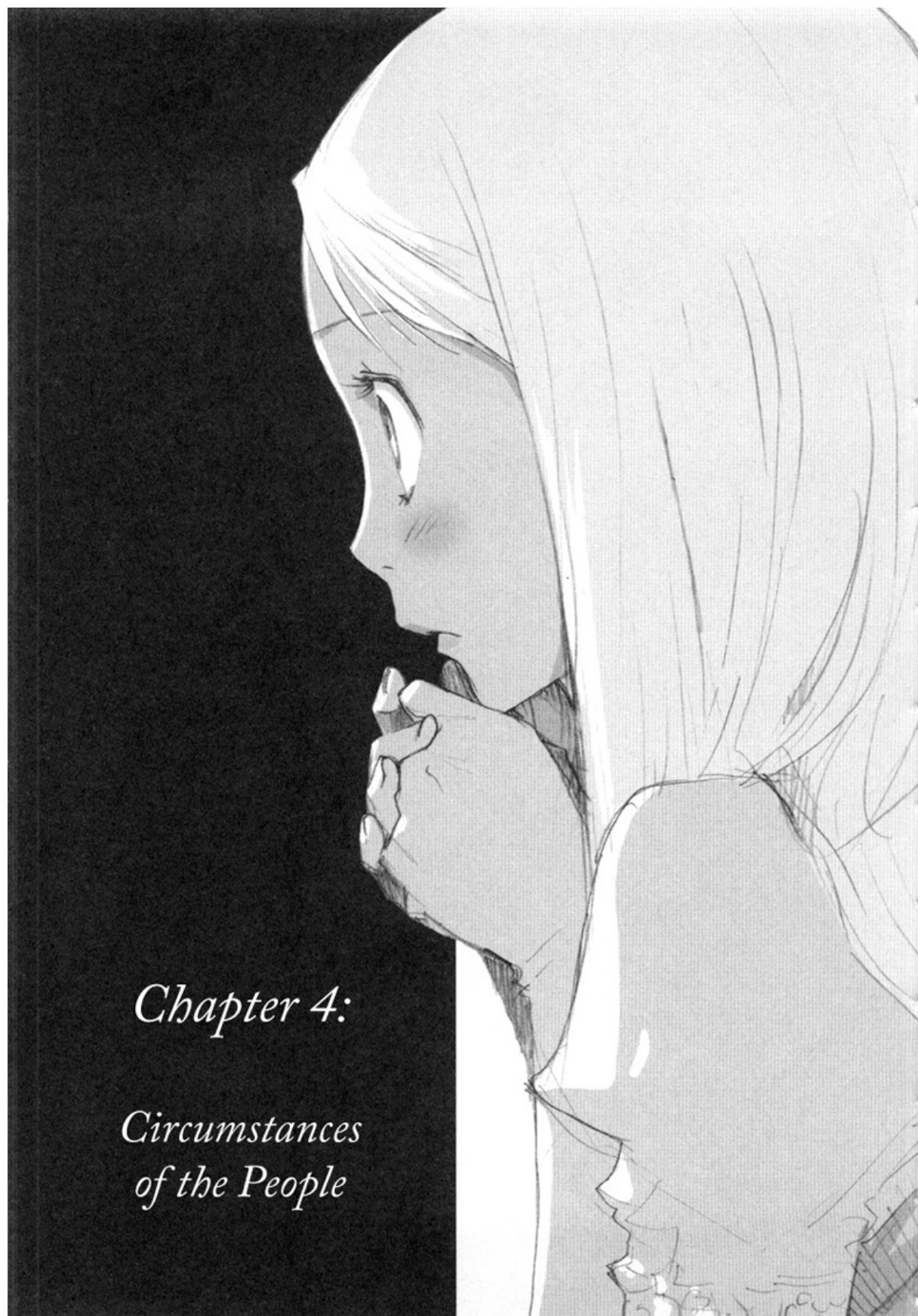
"God... why do you have to be so cruel...?"

Niki knew that this was mere chance, a product of coincidence, but she had realized a possibility. She realized that even someone like *her* could perhaps have a happy life, even if it was only a faint sliver of hope.

"Why... why did you make me want to go on living... just when I decided... I could finally die...?"

A mask slowly but surely crept over the heart of the crying girl.

An expressionless mask that seemed to eclipse her dream, her smile, and her future.



Chapter 4:
Circumstances
of the People

Sunset, Lotto Valentino marketplace.

*'How annoying.
This entire world is annoying.'*

Huey, having left the library as if fleeing from Elmer, lazed around in his storehouse for some time.

Then he realized that he hadn't gone shopping for groceries and reluctantly headed to the marketplace.

The streets were as lively as usual, yesterday's chaos completely forgotten.

Huey considered that someone might recognize his face, but he'd think about the matter only if it ever came up. He was quite unlike himself today as he walked through the market.

*'Elmer C. Albatross... huh.
What an annoying guy.'*

This was Huey's conclusion about the boy he had just met.

Elmer forced his views upon others with a strangely empty smile. He was a meddlesome person who was all talk.

This was Huey's first impression of Elmer.

What annoyed Huey the most, however, was how much he was bothered by him.

Huey could put on a face of agreeability when faced with people of a less pleasant disposition, but he found himself unable to do so with Elmer.

And as he walked the marketplace, lost in thought--

He happened to run across someone who remembered his face all too well.

"Aaahhh..."

'Aaahhh'?

Huey slowly turned around in search of the source of the trailing voice.

"Boooo...!? Oh!"

Huey had completely turned around just as Monica pushed at his chest with her hands.

"...What are you doing?"

"Huh?! Oh, um, well, I just saw you walking by, so I thought I might give you a scare! But y-you turned around so suddenly, a-and ended up scaring *me* instead! Th-that was mean!"

Monica talked like she was angry at him, but her teary eyes and tomato-red face made it difficult to tell how she actually felt about the matter.

'Speak of the devil. I forgot about this annoyance, too.'

Huey sighed quietly as the girl violated his sense of personal space.

Monica treated him the same way she always had, despite the fact that he had made his opinion clear.

'Well, I guess it doesn't really matter.'

Huey had little trouble going about his business because he could just ignore her with a 'doesn't really matter'.

Having come to this conclusion, he quietly walked through the marketplace with Monica in tow.

Monica followed in silence for some time.

But when they reached the square at the centre of the marketplace, she decided to take action.

Though anxious, Monica decided to start a conversation and picked a topic to discuss.

"Um... um... Huey? Was there something on your mind today?"

"What?"

"During class... you stopped turning the pages in your book for a bit."

"..."

'She was watching that closely? She's kind of abnormal.'

Huey's conclusion was cold, but not malicious.

Of course, he didn't particularly feel kindly towards her, either.

So Huey responded with his usual smile.

"No. I was just wondering why the new student wouldn't show up."

"Oh! Elmer? You met him outside the classroom, right?"

"..."

"He came in for afternoon classes. Elmer's a really funny guy, right? He made friends with everyone so quickly. The class after that, he was practically competing with Professor Renee with jokes! It was really fun."

Monica laughed as if enjoying her recollection. This, however, did not interest Huey.

"Shouldn't you have been studying instead of joking around like that?"

"N-no, it's fine. Elmer always did it to get Professor Renee back on topic. You know how she always goes off on tangents. They're pretty fun to listen to, but I always did think someone should get her back on track."

"So you're taking his side?"

"Huh?"

Monica was surprised by Huey's unusually angry tone.

"Wh-what is it, Huey? Did you fight with Elmer?"

"...No. I didn't."

'What in the world am I saying?'

Huey quickly shook his head. Suddenly, a voice called out from behind him.

"Oh, I get it~! You're jealous, aren't you?"

"... ...?!"

"E-Elmer?!"

When Huey and Monica turned around, they saw Elmer and his ever-present smile.

"So let me get this straight. You secretly like Monimoni, but Monimoni herself is busy talking all about me... and that's what's bothering you so much!"

"How long have you been standing there?! And who's 'Monimoni' supposed to be?"

Monica's eyes widened as Huey lashed out uncharacteristically.

Elmer, meanwhile, smiled off the anger directed at him and answered nonchalantly.

"For quite a bit now. And 'Monimoni' is short for 'Monica'."

"That doesn't even make sense. The letter count's even higher."

"Wow, I've never had anyone pick me apart so meticulously before!"

Elmer, appearing to have been completely moved, took Huey's hands.

"I'm so glad I came to this city! I think you and I will make a great team!"

"I refuse!"

Huey narrowed his eyes, pulling his hands away from Elmer.

Behind him was Monica, beet red and mumbling, "Jealous... jealous... Huey's jealous over me...". Surprised by Huey's sudden outburst, however, she blanched and started gesturing wildly.

Elmer, meanwhile, ended up dropping the book he was holding at his side because of the impact.

The title on the cover read, "De l'Infinito Universo et Mondì". Huey's eyes widened as he remembered the name of the author.

"That's by Giordano Bruno... where'd you get that book?"

"Professor Renee had a bunch of them."

"Do you even know what that book is?"

"Yeah. It's a great book that says that there might be other lifeforms living in space."

Hurriedly looking around, Huey snatched the book from Elmer, who was smiling obliviously.

"...This book was banned by the clergy. If anyone from the church sees you reading this..."

"Don't worry. I can just say that I picked up a banned text and was on my way to burn it. If you think about it, you can't really excuse yourself if you're reading it indoors. But you can just use that loophole and carry it around the streets."

"That's not the problem here!" Huey spat anxiously, but Elmer quietly shook his head.

"There's no need to worry."

"What do you mean--"

"There's almost no churches here."

"..."

Huey was at a loss for words at Elmer's unpredictable remark.

And this remark was completely accurate.

There was a single church in Lotto Valentino. It was a building on the city outskirts that had been there for a very long time. No churches had been built in this city in recent memory, almost surprisingly so when considering the relative size of Lotto Valentino.

Elmer ignored Huey, who was lost in thought, and looked around the square.

"I researched this much because I thought I should learn more about this place as quickly as I could... there's something strange about this city, isn't there?"

"What are you getting at?"

"There's the fact that the church has very little power here, and... for example, aristocrats have much more power in other cities, and commoners tend to be impoverished more often than not... Well, I've only seen a few other cities for comparison, though."

"..."

"I don't think you could call this city's people 'commoners'... but in any case, the citizens are all full of energy, and they don't look like they're going hungry at all. There's a succession crisis back in Spain, but this place acts like it doesn't know anything. How do I put this... it's like this place is a little garden in a box, isolated from the outside world."

Elmer's words seemed groundless at first, but Huey found himself in agreement with many of his points. He also had a very small inkling of an idea about the reasons behind the phenomena Elmer listed.

Huey could, in theory, agree with Elmer and continue the conversation in that direction, but he chose to reply coldly.

"What does a newcomer like you know, anyway?"

"Hu-Huey?"

Huey did not even bother to hide his hatred. Even Monica unconsciously took a step back.

Elmer, meanwhile, answered with nonchalance despite Huey's obvious display of anger.

"It's pretty obvious that a newcomer like me would think this stuff, because these are my first impressions as a newcomer."

Elmer then looked into the sky with a somewhat lonely smile.

"Sure, these streets are lively... but there aren't a lot of smiles. It feels like everyone's trying too hard."

Was Elmer talking to himself, or to Huey?

"I just want to know why."

His voice scattered through the air and filtered into Huey and Monica's hearts.

<=>

Once Elmer had disappeared after slipping in like that, Huey took a seat on a wooden crate at the edge of the square.

"Sorry. I'm just a bit tired."

"Y-yeah..."

Monica lowered her eyes beneath her curtained bangs and silently took a seat beside Huey.

"Um... are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Um! Uh, well, you just seem a bit different today."

"Oh. Sorry. I just... got annoyed by that guy."

The usual smile had appeared on Huey's face again as soon as Elmer had left. Of course, this wasn't much for Monica to be happy about, as she already knew that Huey was wearing a fake smile.

"What do you think about what Elmer said?"

As Monica asked meaningless questions, Huey looked away and mumbled.

"Doesn't matter. He's just some worthless hypocrite."

"I guess you don't like Elmer at all, huh?"

"Well... he's annoying."

Huey answered honestly.

Hearing this, Monica straightened her back and looked up at the sky as she spoke her honest feelings as well.

"I think I'm a bit jealous of Elmer."

"...Why?"

"Because you're treating him honestly."

"..."

Huey quietly looked at the ground.

*'I don't understand this girl, either.
Doesn't she know that it's best not to know what people are really thinking?'*

There was a moment of silence.

Feeling uncomfortable about the quiet she brought upon, Monica decided to change the topic back to Elmer.

"W-well, it *is* true that there's something strange about this city. I've been thinking, too, that this city... is a bit different from the stories of other cities that Headmaster Dalton talks about... And... the streets are full of people, but they don't seem really happy..."

Huey looked around the marketplace as Monica spoke.

The streets *were* crowded. There was no sign that a war was on their doorsteps, and he could see almost no soldiers or clergymen.

The delinquents of the streets, the Rotten Eggs, were aristocrats as opposed to commoners. It was quite clear that the true rulers of this city were not aristocrats, soldiers, or the clergy, but the people themselves.

And as Huey went over these facts in his head, he recalled Elmer's words.

'Sure, these streets are lively... but there aren't a lot of smiles.'

"Then... I know what to do."

"What is it...?"

Huey heard Monica's voice, but he continued to mumble and revealed to her an honest truth.

"This world... doesn't need any smiles."

<=>

Evening, the Boronial Manor dining room.

As the night grew late, two men spoke in the candlelight-filled dining room.

Of course, there were about a dozen female servants in the room. Esperanza was talking with Elmer as he was a guest who had only just arrived.

"Hey, Essa."

"Call me Esperanza. Only women and close friends are allowed to call me by a pet name."

Of course, Esperanza would much prefer to speak with Niki or another lady, but he resisted the urge and listened to Elmer's rambling.

"Then I'll just take the middle and call you 'Speran'. Speran, you won't ever hit a girl? Ever?"

"Of course not. Not only girls, but noblewomen, young ladies, hags, the pregnant, toddlers, beauties, or even ugly women."

Esperanza's reply was calm and cool. The servants around him whispered, "So he's all right with being called 'Speran'..."

Elmer delved even deeper with a look of curiosity.

"Really?"

"Should I ever lose myself to rage and strike a woman, I will be perfectly prepared to immediately hand her a loaded pistol."

Though Elmer was a guest of his, Esperanza answered his question coldly, unhappy to waste time talking to a man.

However, he was dead serious because women were the topic of conversation.

Niki had holed up in her room, claiming lack of appetite. Around her room were stationed more guards than even Elmer's room. All as if to protect this commoner, not to keep her under watch.

Instead of asking why, Elmer decided to take this conversation in a more casual direction.

"So let's talk 'what if's."

"Yes?"

"For example, what if there was a woman, but she was a witch? Or someone who was really really bad? How would you stop her without hitting her? Of course, it would be best if you could talk her out of it. But what if she's already waving around a knife? You might not care about getting hurt yourself, Speran, but another girl might get killed. What would you do then?"

This could be heard as an insult to Esperanza's vow to never hit a woman, but Elmer's question seemed to have come out of pure curiosity, without a drop of malice.

So Esperanza responded seriously in turn.

"...I would avoid her blade and stop her with a gentle embrace."

"What if she tries to bite you?"

"Then I shall cover her lips with mine."

The servants looked around at each other and desperately held back their laughter at this completely serious statement.

Elmer, meanwhile, looked at him with a look of honest admiration. He thought for a moment and cocked his head.

"If you think about it... isn't that, in some sense, worse than hitting her?"

"Yes. Perhaps so.

That is why it would be best that the man she loves be the one to stop her."

"What if the man she loves doesn't like her back?"

It was a very obvious line of questioning.

"Why do *I* have to concern myself with a man's preferences?"

"Thanks for answering so clearly. Also, I have something I wanted to ask you about this city..."

Elmer grinned and changed the subject.

"What?"

"What do you think about the alchemists' gold ornaments?"

"...What do you mean?"

Esperanza narrowed his eyes at the unexpected topic of conversation.

Smiling, Elmer got to the specifics.

He told the Count *everything* he had heard at the archive, but omitted Huey's involvement completely.

"...So you were eavesdropping. What impudence." said Esperanza after Elmer had finished talking.

"Agreed."

"Hm... Dalton has already reported to me about this issue. As you guessed, the powder is a type of drug."

Just like Elmer, Esperanza spoke this confidential information without hesitation.

Realizing that this was not a conversation for their ears, the servants left the dining room. Of course, Esperanza would have continued blabbing on as long as he was in the presence of women.

"And what about the ornaments?"

Esperanza looked at the floor, eyes seething in rage.

"The ornaments... are at once this city's foundation and disgrace. No matter how many regulations we create, the other aristocrats lead the black market trades."

"What do you mean?"

"That... is not gold. This material being traded through our streets is an alloy--very similar to gold, but nothing more than an imitation.

And some of the people here... threw all they had into buying this 'city' from the aristocrats with these."

<=>

The next day.

The library archive was completely cut off from the world, no matter what went on outside its doors.

After class had ended, Monica absentmindedly stared at the desk in front of her.

Normally Huey would be languidly reading a book at that desk, but he was absent today. When she noticed that he was away, Professor Renee only said, "Maybe he's caught a cold~". Monica couldn't find out anything.

'Oh... how could I have said something like that yesterday...?'

She recounted what she had spoken the day before.

'Getting jealous of Elmer... getting jealous of a guy... am I losing it?'

Monica had been told by another girl in the class, "You're pretty weird.". And despite the fact that her confession had not been given a concrete reply, her heart was still filled with thoughts of Huey.

Huey telling her that he hated the world, including herself, seemed like something so long ago.

This was probably enough for Monica to assume that her confession was rejected. Huey's words were a clear expression of refusal.

Monica, however, could not give up.

From the moment she tried to forget Huey, an emptiness crept into her heart and she began to feel like a piece of her world had disappeared.

And it was as if to stir up her emotions even more that Elmer spoke to her.

"Hey, Moni~! You don't look so well."

"..."

Monica glared at Elmer, who was calling her by a different nickname from yesterday.

"What is it?"

"I want you to say my name properly."

"Okay, Monica."

Elmer's response was completely carefree despite Monica's upset tone.

"...Don't act so friendly with me." Monica told him, somewhat hypocritically, as she looked away. However, guilt was welling up inside of her.

I'm the worst...

I'm just taking my anger out on him. Elmer hasn't done anything wrong.'

Elmer, meanwhile, grinned obliviously and raised his index finger.

"Oh... I get it! I bet you're jealous because you think I'm going to steal Huey away, right?"

"...?!?!?!?!?"

"I see... that's kind of understandable, since all his smiles are fake. He almost never shows his real emotions like he did yesterday, does he? And you're envious of that..."

Elmer's conclusion was both entirely accurate and entirely tactless.

"W-what are you... don't be stupid... no...!"

Monica, cheeks flushed and eyes welling up, began hitting Elmer's back furiously with her fists.

Elmer just laughed as he was being beaten upon.

"Don't worry. Huey hates me anyways, and I only make friends with other guys, not lovers."

"..."

Elmer's unexpected answer silenced Monica. He continued without pause.

"I think you and Huey make a really great couple. I can declare it with confidence."

"What...?"

Monica looked up, heart pounding.

The classroom was empty except for herself and Elmer, and his voice echoed through Monica's heart in powerful waves.

The boy's cheerful words sounded like almost like a blessing.

"By the way, I don't say this kind of stuff to just anyone. I've learned in the past five years that just pushing two people together doesn't make anyone happy. So I took that into consideration and thought... You and Huey would make a wonderful pair.

So I'll be cheering you on."

But the words that permeated the girl's heart were also a curse.



<=>

Thirty minutes later, the marketplace.

It was the area of the marketplace where Huey, Elmer, and Monica met the day before.

Elmer and Monica quietly walked through the crowds.

"While we're at it, why don't we go visit Huey?"

Elmer, having unquestioningly accepted Renee's hypothesis of Huey having a cold, had decided to take Monica and visit Huey. Monica was hesitant at first, but Elmer's unrelenting persuasion and her affections for Huey managed to convince her to go.

'What if he ends up hating me even more...?'

Monica would be anxious enough going by herself, but there was no telling how badly Huey would think of her if she showed up with Elmer, whom he despised.

But Monica was defeated by one sentiment--her desire to see Huey--and convinced to go by Elmer.

However, she realized a big problem when they had reached the marketplace square, and hurriedly pulled at Elmer's sleeve.

"E-Elmer... W-well, I ... I don't actually know Huey's address..."

"Don't worry. I know where he lives. It's a storehouse at the harbour."

"...H-how do you know?"

"I asked Headmaster Dalton."

Elmer replied nonchalantly. Monica's eyes widened.

'Isn't that a bit weird? How did he look into Huey's address?

E-Elmer can't be actually interested in Huey...?'

Monica blushed as her mind raced through some very impossible scenarios. Elmer's next line, however, turned her blush into pallor.

"Your house is that patisserie over at that street, right?"

"...?!"

"It's not just you and Huey. I know where everyone in our class lives."

"H-how?"

Monica was unnerved by this statement.

Elmer continued, oblivious to Monica's suspicion.

"How? I just asked Headmaster Dalton and Professor Renee... and I got up early to check out the places I was having trouble finding."

"And... why are you looking into this?"

"Just because. I thought it might be helpful. If something urgent comes up, it'd be best if I know where everyone lives."

Monica's questions were tinged with anxiety. And as if shaking off that unease, Elmer continued with a grin.

Monica, however, tensed.

"? What's wrong?"

"...How much... did Headmaster Dalton tell you about me?"

Monica's suspicion had turned into fear.

And Elmer changed his smile into an impish one.

"How much do you think Headmaster Dalton said?"

"..."

"Don't worry. Well, I don't think he told me anything that you should be scared about... but in any case, I won't tell a soul."

"Yeah... that's fine, but... but... a lot of the kids in our class don't like to talk about their pasts. You shouldn't pry too much."

Monica strengthened her left hand's grip on her right arm. And as if guilty, she looked away and spoke.

"You... don't like it when people pry, either, right?"

"About what?"

"That... you're a witch's son."

"Yeah. I guess,"

Elmer's answer was indifferent.

Monica, who was prepared to upset Elmer with that question, felt slightly defeated.

"Setting me aside, I know that other people won't like it if I start talking about their pasts. So I promise. Even if I figure out something about you, Huey, or people in the class, I won't go around blabbing about it."

"...?"

"Setting me aside"?'

Something bothered Monica about Elmer's phrasing, but before she could gather her thoughts, a song reached her ears.

"The demon is coming, lantern in hand,

The demon is coming, wearing a mask.

It's coming to mask your face.

It's coming to mask everyone's faces."

It was the voice of children who were hanging around the square.

The little children, not even ten years old, ran around the square singing this song at the top of their lungs. Perhaps they were playing a game of tag.

Elmer watched this heartwarming sight and spoke to Monica.

"Looks like that song's pretty popular around here."

"Do you know about the 'Mask Maker'?"

"I've heard a few things here and there." Elmer responded coolly, watching the children running around. He did not say anything about Niki, but calmly spoke of the 'rumours' he had heard.

"Apparently, if you see him, you'll die."

They moved on from the square into the marketplace proper, chatting amicably while looking around at the shops.

On either side of the wide alley were shops in stone buildings and tent-style stalls. People were moving to and fro energetically.

All the stores were in large buildings, and places like bakeries and opticians were connected with corresponding workshops.

In the little gaps between the buildings were craftsmen weaving baskets or blowing glass, and larger spaces were occupied by carpenters putting together carriage wheels.

In the distance, stonemasons were busy carving out a gatepost commissioned by an aristocrat. The sounds of stone being chiseled rhythmically blended into the movements of the people on the streets.

The marketplace on its own looked like one that could be found in Naples, or a large city in France or Portugal. Elmer watched this marketplace, much too lively for a city this small, with keen interest.

"What do you think?"

"Huh?" Monica froze at the sudden question.

Perhaps it was because of Elmer's earlier statement that he'd looked into everyone's locations--Monica decided to be cautious around him.

"Wh-what about?"

"About the Mask Maker. Like I said... over half the victims were witnesses, and the rest were adults who weren't witnesses. Apparently most of the witnesses were kids our age."

"You looked into that, too?"

"I guess you could say that. Wouldn't you be scared if something like this was happening in the city you're going to be living in?"

'That's true, but...'

Just as Monica was about to reply, however, a huge shadow stepped in front of them.

"Found you, you little brat!"

"Oh!"

"Ohhh!"

Elmer and Monica simultaneously raised their voices upon seeing the bald man standing before them.

Upon seeing this man--Niki's master--whom both of them remembered, Monica stepped back with a gasp, and Elmer greeted him nonchalantly.

"Hello there. How's your injury healing up?"

"Shut up, you rotten miscreant! Where's Niki?! What have you done with my tool?!"

"Huh? Huh?"

In contrast with Monica, who was looking around in confusion, Elmer laughed without a single hint of anxiety. He held up his hands and tried to calm the bald man.

"Now, now. Calm down."

"'Calm down'? 'Calm down'?! You cheeky little bastard! I don't know what you are, but that conceited, grinning little face of yours is getting on my nerves! You think you can just get away with turning me into an enemy? Do you?!"

"Your logic's weird, Mister."

"What?!"

"You were lording it over Niki before, but you weren't smiling at all." Elmer talked back with a grin.

Elmer himself, of course, did not mean it this way--however, it sounded like the very epitome of insults to anyone else who'd heard it. Monica took another step back as the bald man's face reddened with rage.

"Shut up!"

"Oh, so you don't care if I don't tell you where Niki is?"

"..."

The bald man clenched his fist and raised it into the air, intending to strike.

However, his eyes suddenly widened. His fist flew through thin air, and using this momentum, the bald man ran as fast as his feet could carry him.

"?"

Elmer watched in confusion, but realized why the bald man had run when he turned around, noticing someone walking up to him from behind.

Standing there was a tall man with sharp eyes. He was the man who had appeared before the fallen Elmer two days ago.

Elmer had never actually spoken to him, and he had only seen him for a fleeting moment--but the man's height and eyes made a big impression on Elmer.

"Hey."

"Hello."

"H-hello. Uh... w-who are you...?"

As Elmer spoke as nonchalantly as ever, Monica hesitantly greeted the man, unnerved by his sharp eyes.

However--

"So, you're Aile, right? The leader of the Rotten Eggs?"

Monica froze instantly upon hearing Elmer's affable question.

Aile, meanwhile, widened his eyes, surprised that Elmer knew his name.

"Did the girl you ran off with tell you that?"

"Yeah. Oh! Thanks for earlier. I almost got hit again."

"...I didn't do anything. He just ran off on his own..."

Aile looked away, seemingly unused to being thanked.

"Don't wander around too much, or you'll get in trouble again."

In contrast with his eyes, Aile's advice was surprisingly kind.

"Huh... so... what brought you here? Don't tell me you just happened to be passing by."
Elmer asked naively.

"Well... yes. I was."

Aile, unable to figure out what kind of a person this boy was, decided to give him a warning.

"I hear... you've been looking into the Mask Maker and the drugs."

"Yeah. And?" Elmer's response was calm. This time, Monica spoke up.

"Drugs'? W-what are you talking about...?"

Aile glanced at the girl, not answering her question. He then spoke to Elmer.

"What, so the girl doesn't have anything to do with this?"

"No. We were just on our way to visit a sick friend."

"I see... Then this is all I have to say."

Aile sighed, and narrowing his eyes, he advised them.

"...Don't pry too much if you want to live a normal life."

His eyes were terrifyingly sharp. Just making eye contact felt like one's soul would be ripped out.

Monica refused to look at him altogether, and a passing cart horse whinnied as if screaming and threw off its rider.

Despite a feeling almost like being stabbed incessantly by ice-cold blades, Elmer just smiled.

"Don't pry...? Into what?"

"This city."

It was a vague answer.

Elmer cocked his head in thought, then nodded in understanding. He responded jokingly.

"In that case, I'll decide whether or not I'll delve into things *after* I've learned about what this city actually is."

"... If the City Police will give you the time to think, that is."

Elmer cocked his head at the sudden mention of the City Police. Monica asked a hesitant question as if in his place.

"Um... Does that mean... the City Police is on the aristocrats' side...?"

"The aristocrats? Ha! Miss, that's all just a facade."

Aile smiled bitterly and corrected Monica.

"The City Police here side with the common people. Normally they bow to the aristocrats--but behind the scenes, they're the trusted dogs of the commoners."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"...Yes. You're right. It is a good thing. It couldn't be more troublesome for us aristocrats, though..."

The man looked down, feeling that he'd spoken too much. He turned away from them and added threateningly.

"...Let me warn you again. If you want to live, go home and study. Don't concern yourself with the matters of this city."

His voice was cold enough to freeze air. Monica was still trembling, but Elmer had righted his cocked head like a puppet and smiled.

"You're a nice person."

"What?"

"You're giving us advice because you're worried about us, right? If you were planning to hurt us, you would have done so already."

"..."

Aile frowned for a moment, but—

"You're a strange kid."

He disappeared into the crowds with these words.

"Remember, I warned you."

Aile's parting words still exuded danger, as if he was duty-bound to threaten them.

<=>

Storehouse district

"Huh. It should be around here somewhere. Which storehouse was it again...?"

Elmer and Monica had left the marketplace and arrived at the storehouse district at the harbour.

The lines of identical brick storehouses had a somewhat desolate look to them.

The harbour was currently devoid of vessels. The large ships moored at the pier on the opposite end almost looked like they were in another country altogether.

"Wonder if that big ship over there is a galleon? Or maybe a galeas? Wonder how long it's been there." Elmer asked, eyes glinting like a tourist.

Monica, meanwhile, glared at Elmer and looked around.

And once she had made sure no one was around--

She suddenly raised her voice.

"E-Elmer!"

"Wh-what is it?"

Elmer was shocked by Monica's sudden outburst.

"That man just now! He said that you were digging up information about the Mask Maker... what were you thinking?"

"W-well, I did go around asking around randomly at the marketplace this morning..."

"...!"

Monica gaped in stunned silence.

"Are you okay?"

She came to her senses at Elmer's words. Monica then grabbed him by the collar and shook him mercilessly.

"You... you idiot! Are you stupid?! Why would you do that?!"

"Ack! Wait, I'm getting motion sickness! I'll admit I was being stupid, so just le-le-let me gooooo!"

Unusually enough for him, Elmer could not hide his anxiety. Monica pulled Elmer's face right up close to hers.

"Why... why do you have to butt into a nuisance like that?"

"I don't know if it's a nuisance or not yet, right? So I just... wanted to find out."

"And if you found out... what then?"

"That's when I'd decide."

It was a stupid answer, but Monica was dead serious.

"...What kind of an answer is that? Why do you want to know so much, anyway?"

Elmer seemed to hesitate before giving his answer this time.

However, his reply sounded like a complete joke.

"Because I just want to see people smile."

"What?"

"For example... if you're dying of hunger and you catch a poisonous fish, you won't die of hunger *or* poisoning if you know what part of the fish is poisonous, right?"

"...Yeah, I guess..."

"Of course, there's plenty of tragedies in this world that can't be solved by knowledge alone. Finding bad things that can be averted by knowledge might be as hard as finding a needle in a haystack."

Elmer was smiling.

He was smiling, but his words were perfectly serious.

"Ignorance isn't a crime. But I don't want to make anyone sad because of my own ignorance."

"..."

"But when you got nervous when I said I looked into everyone's addresses, I realized you were probably right. So I'll be careful from now on. Sorry."

"What?"

"I've always been pretty dense when it comes to things like this. Speran won't shut up about it, either."

"Speran'?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm talking about a friend of mine."

Monica lowered her guard as Elmer apologized sincerely.

However, this did not mean that she had accepted everything about him.

For a moment, Monica was silent before this boy who spoke of people's happiness like a swindler or a saint. She then lowered her voice and asked him something.

"Sometimes... ignorance is bliss... you know?"

Monica's eyes were completely serious, as if she had first-hand experience in the matter. Her voice had a hint of loneliness to it.

"You never know if the truth you learn to save the few might end up making even more people unhappy."

"That so? Let's set aside secrets I'm not supposed to know in the first place. At least with tragedies that happen because I have knowledge, I can take on the guilt by myself."

"..."

"Well, if there was some kind of curse that would make you explode the moment you heard it, my keeping mum won't be much help, right? Huh... I guess it really might be best not to know in that case... Thanks, Monica. You just might have helped me prevent a possible future tragedy!"

Elmer gave his thanks, still held by the collar. Monica realized that there was nothing she could do about this boy and sighed.

And out of the blue, someone spoke to them.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh."

"Hey there."

Monica and Elmer turned to find a boy who seemed to have come out of one of the storehouses.

"Hu-Huey!"

Monica had come to visit him, but her sudden encounter with the boy she liked swept her into a panic. Before she knew it, she was pulling Elmer in front of her face.

"N-no! No! This isn't right!"

Red as a tomato, Monica pushed Elmer forward with all her might.

"Oh!"

"Whoa!"

The boys raised their voices in unison. Monica looked up.

"Huh?"

Upon being pushed, Elmer lost his balance, staggered for a bit, and rolled off the harbour's edge.

A loud splash echoed through the storehouse area.

<=>

Inside the storehouse.

"Uaatchoo!"

Elmer sneezed with an unusual sound, shivering. Beside him was Monica, who had been apologizing to him profusely all this time.

Elmer had said, "It's okay", but Monica didn't seem to feel one apology was enough. She was on her sixtieth "Sorry" in ten minutes.

'Doesn't that Elmer guy ever get annoyed?'

Elmer accepted the repeated apologies with a smile. Huey just could not bring himself to feel any sort of kindness towards him.

Huey had wanted to kick them out and lock his doors, but he feared that Elmer would resort to climbing up to the windows if he did so. So Huey decided to let them in and find out what was going on.

The storehouse was much emptier than Elmer or Monica could have imagined. It seemed that the second floor loft was Huey's living space.

The first floor was empty. There were some old crates and knickknacks in the corner, an empty wine cask, and some old chairs that were likely used by seamen in the past.

Huey only let his guests into the first floor area. Judging from the way he sat there with his eyes fixed on a book, he was telling them to leave.

"...I've been feeling under the weather all morning. I'll be going to class tomorrow, so stop worrying." Huey said stoically to his two classmates, and handed a piece of cloth to Elmer, who had just climbed out of the water.

That was the extent of their conversation. It was followed up by Monica's endless apologies.

"Uaatchoo!"

After hearing Elmer sneeze again, Huey decided to take a stand and take the first step in driving these two out of his storehouse.

"Why don't you at least wring out your shirt?"

"Oh, right."

Elmer immediately stepped away from Monica and began stripping off his shirt.

Huey returned to his book with a look of contempt--

And only realized that something was wrong with Monica when he heard the sound of water being squeezed out of fabric.

Strangely enough, Monica's attention was turned completely away from himself.

That in itself was no problem for Huey, but she seemed to be staring at Elmer, who was drying out his shirt.

'What? Don't tell me he's taking off his pants, too?'

But Monica's expression spoke of something else.

So Huey turned towards Elmer without a serious thought.

And his time came to a brief standstill.

Elmer's back was exposed as he wrung out his shirt.

And upon that back were scars.

There were countless scars, not just upon his back, but stretching out all over his body, normally hidden by his clothing.

Normally, it would be considered incredibly rude to stare at such a sight, but Huey did not look away.

Huey *could not* look away.

He remembered his last memory of his mother.

In some ways, this was a contrary sight to his mother's wound-covered body.

Elmer's injuries had healed into scars, but Huey could not imagine how much blood must have been shed back when these scars were still fresh wounds.

That was how much Elmer's body was covered in marks.

It just might have been worse than Huey's memory of his mother.

They weren't just knife wounds, either--there were marks of skin having been picked open. There was a gigantic burn over his upper back that looked like it covered over countless more injuries.

"Elmer... you..."

"Huh? What is it?"

Elmer, who had been squeezing out his shirt while humming, heard Huey's voice. Realizing the implications, he stopped in place.

"Oh, sorry. Sorry. I'll put on my shirt now. Sorry you had to see something like that."

Elmer turned away and quickly covered himself.

"It's worse in the front, so just wait until I finish putting on my shirt."

Elmer spoke these words with complete nonchalance, continuing to hum.

He would probably answer with a smile if asked about his past.

But Huey and Monica could not bring themselves to do so.

Huey had no way of knowing just what the humming boy had burdened himself with.

At least, he now knew that the "happiness" that Elmer spoke of had its origins in something beyond mere pacifism.

Of course, this realization didn't bring any change to Huey's world.

At least, not yet.

<=>

Evening, Boronial Manor.

By the time Elmer returned, sneezing, everyone was already in the middle of dinner.

"Oh. You guys are eating already?"

"I have no obligation to wait for a man."

Esperanza replied to Elmer's calm complaint as he brought food to his own mouth. As it was dinnertime, he wasn't wearing his pirate-like hat. But his owl-like eyes still didn't make him look very aristocratic.

"...Welcome back."

Niki greeted him from a seat slightly further away. She was as unreadably expressionless as usual. Niki and Elmer hadn't spoken much since they first met, but it seemed she had been talking with Esperanza quite a bit.

She had spent last night cooped up by herself, but thankfully Niki had decided to come out today.

Elmer didn't ask her what had happened. He had dinner and made small talk, and returned to his guest room as if nothing had happened.

Watching Elmer walk away, Niki put down her cutlery and bowed her head.

"Thank you for the meal. ...It was delicious."

"That is great to hear! Oh, please remember to lock up again when you retire for the night. While I would like to declare that hoodlums cannot take a single step into this manor, we must be prepared for all possibilities."

The girl, who had witnessed the Mask Maker, was extremely likely to become the next target.

Esperanza had fortified security at his estate, but no security could be enough, considering the Mask Maker's track record.

"I promise you, we will apprehend the criminal very soon. So please... please don't worry."

Esperanza declared, despite not even being a police officer.

He was the kind of man, after all, who would personally give chase with a gun if faced with the criminal.

And though Niki had known him for very few days, she knew what kind of a man he was--so she bowed and thanked him.

"Thank you... for everything."

'For everything?'

Something about Niki's words bothered Esperanza, but before he could ask, she got off her seat and returned to her room.

Niki had a strangely resolute look on her face, and there was a faint shadow of a smile gracing her lips.

If Elmer was there to see, he would have realized instantly--

That Niki's smile was a fake.

<=>

City square

The sun had already set, and mothers were busy calling in their children from play.

Although on the surface, the shadow of the Mask Maker seemed to have been forgotten, parents were still wary of the killer.

And oblivious to their parents' fears, the children used the serial killer as both a symbol of fear and play.

That was why the children sang as they returned home--

To fan the flames of fear--

And to shake off the shadow of terror.

"The demon is coming, lantern in hand,

The demon is coming, wearing a mask.

It's coming to mask your face.

It's coming to mask everyone's faces."

And as if drawn by the children's song--

The Mask Maker stirred this night.

To bring fear and despair to this city.

<=>

Boronial Manor.

Elmer, having returned to his room, sat on his guest bed and slowly stretched.

'Well... what should I start on tomorrow?'

Elmer had been given a room in the estate's guesthouse, while Niki was allowed to stay in a luxurious chamber in the main manor.

Elmer's room was likely usually given to servants of guests, but it was still very upscale in comparison to the home of a commoner.

*'So now I have to look into those drugs...
I can make a **pretty good guess as to where...**
I guess I'll talk to Speran about it tomorrow.'*

And as Elmer dozed off, lost in thought--

Creeeeeeeak creak creeeak
Something in the room began creaking.

It wasn't Elmer's bed, nor was it sound from another room coming in through the ceiling.

"?"

As Elmer opened his heavy eyelids and began to look up--

A pice of paper fell over his face.

"Whoa."

Elmer took it off his face and looked around, but found nothing unusual.

He then realized that there was something written in red on the paper, and held it against the dim lantern to give it a read.

On the paper was written:

[Do not delve any further into the matters of this city.]

Elmer suddenly recalled Aile's words to him from that afternoon.

However, the next line brought on nothing but confusion.

[This pain is a warning.]

"Pain?"

Elmer lay back, wondering what this could mean--

Then he heard another creak, and moved the paper in front of his face.

And from behind the piece of paper came--

A beautiful, strange white mask, reminiscent of a Venetian carnival.

"Huh...?"

Just as Elmer began to wonder what was going on, the masked man silently leapt up and landed on the bed, pinning Elmer down.

"Oh..."

Elmer was confused for a moment, but realized what was happening when he saw what the masked man was holding.

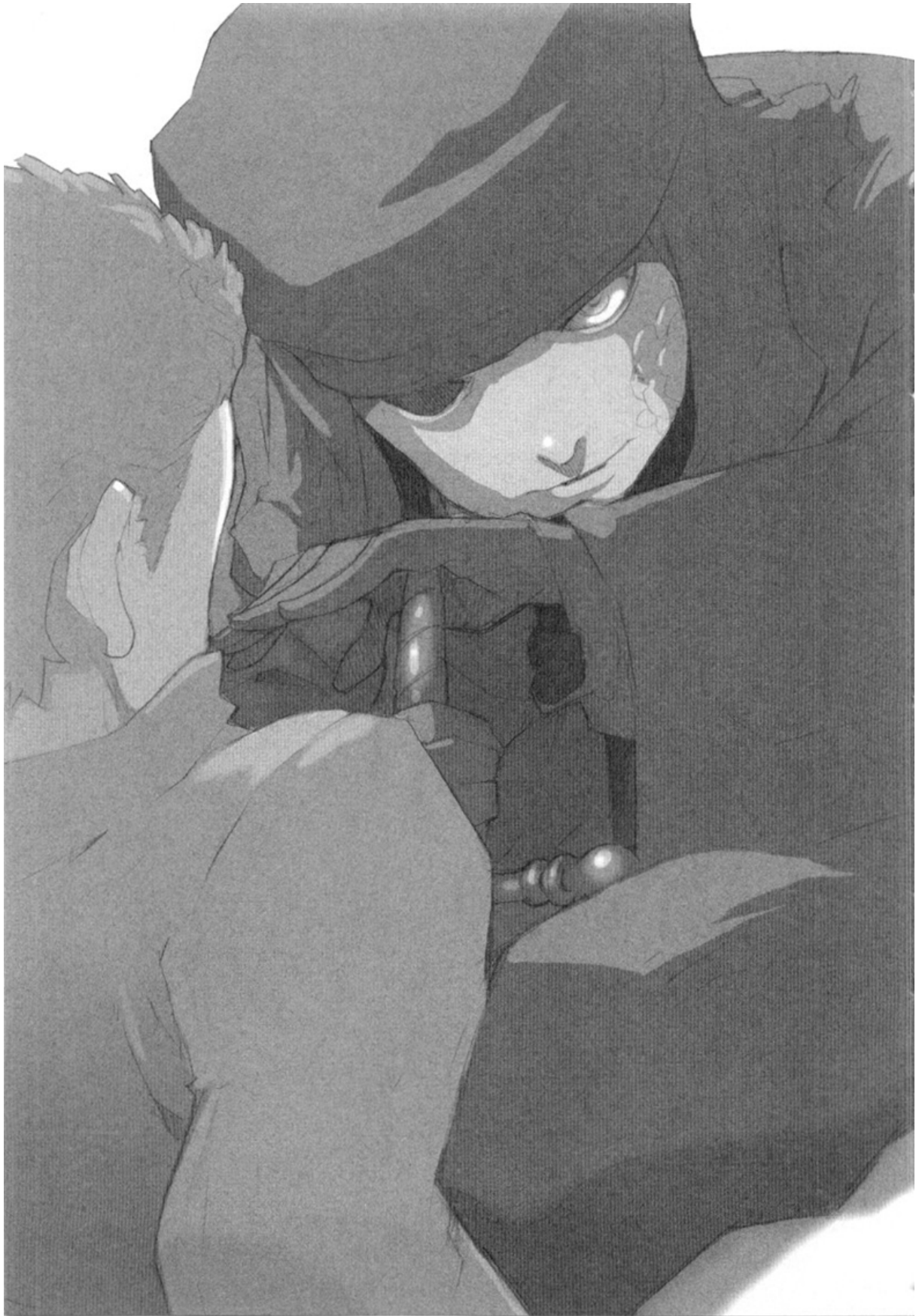
A stiletto, glinting silver in the lamplight.

It was a knife, twenty centimetres in length, that was usually used for assassination in Europe at the time.

Unlike normal knives, stilettos were specially designed to harm humans. Possession of a stiletto was forbidden to civilians in many parts of Europe.

The cross-section of the long, thin blade was triangular, with one side longer than the others. This was a blade designed for the sole purpose of piercing.

Its power was great enough for a skilled wielder to stab through leather shields with ease.



This weapon, possessed of killing potential far greater than its small, unassuming appearance--this weapon that could silently pierce through a victim's skull--could perhaps be said to be the greatest of all assassination weapons this city could offer.

And as if to fulfill its purpose of creation--

The stiletto carried its goal in its silver glint, advancing forward without hesitation.

"Huh? wait--"

It pierced through Elmer's calm protests, and made its way deep into his flesh.

"...!"

It at first created a piercing cold sensation, followed by a sharp, burning pain that spread through Elmer's body.

It sunk deep, deeper, and deeper.

The silver blade was stained red.

The Mask Maker's blade glinted under the lantern lights.

Brightly and brilliantly--

<=>

Several hours later, inside the patisserie workshop at the eastern part of the marketplace.

"I'm finished preparing tomorrow's ingredients." Monica said, tidying the utensils in front of her in this sweet-smelling workshop.

The plump woman who ran the patisserie put on a thick apron and responded.

"Thanks for working so late, Monica. You can stop working on stuff for tomorrow... I'll finish up cleaning the shelves, so go home and get some rest."

"It's fine. It's my fault I came to work late, anyway."

"What can you do? Your friend was sick. You're still young. You shouldn't let working get in the way of studying."

"...Okay! Thank you, ma'am!"

As the patisserie owner let her go, Monica responded innocently and took off her work apron.

The owner smiled mischievously.

"So this friend of yours... is it a boy?"

"Oh! I-it's a secret! I'm not telling!"

Monica blushed and left for her residence beside the patisserie. She quickly ran up the stairs.

Monica lived alone at the patisserie with the owner, staying on the second floor. Perhaps it was because of Headmaster Dalton, but Monica received treatment unheard of for other boys and girls her age.

Her room was filled with all kinds of books, instruments, and maps. Several of them were unavailable to most people--and in this sense, Monica's circumstances were practically as good as--if not better than--an aristocrat's.

It was in this sense that the lives of the students of the private academy were removed from those of both aristocrats and commoners.

Monica thought of tomorrow as she fell into her own thoughts.

I wonder if Huey's coming to school tomorrow.

*What do I do? What should I talk to him about?
What if... what if we end up getting closer?'*

As Monica opened the windows, lost even deeper in her fantasies than most girls her age--

She heard a creak.

The sound snapped her out of her daydream.

Monica immediately looked towards the source of the noise.

It had come from behind the desk at the window, which was covered by a mountain of books.

And blocking out the moonlight that should have flooded the room was the source of the sound.

And Monica became a witness.

She saw a masked man, looking at her from outside her window.

Interlude 4: The People's Police

The next day, Boronial Manor.

"..."

The manor was situated on high ground, a location which was engulfed in the bright red light of the setting sun.

Esperanza was busy as usual, tending flowers under the light of dusk.

On the surface, the Count didn't seem to ever do any work--but he actually took care of all of his duties overnight, spending his free time during the day watching the maids from afar.

This was the kind of behaviour that would get him fingered as a pervert, but he never actually watched women in compromising situations, nor did he ever even lay a hand on them. This was why no one could reprimand him for his unusual hobby.

Of course, a man of his position could easily get away with *more* than laying a hand on a servant, but the servants knew that Esperanza was simply not that kind of man. This was why some called him 'a coward who can't even touch a woman', but none of that mattered to the Count as long as women were involved.

There was nothing normal about this man.

One thing, however, was definite--he truly wished for the happiness of women.

Once, he had visited a church in the Spanish mainland, and was asked by a boy there: "What can we do to make everyone in the world happy?". The Count replied, "It is an impossible task. As long as there is no absolute standard of justice in the world, one person's happiness will lead to the misfortune of another".

He then followed up his own words by wondering, "Hm... perhaps, then, if we channel all the misfortune to men, all the women could gain happiness?". He then discussed the matter with

the boy until the break of dawn. This boy was Elmer C. Albatross, and this chance meeting led to their continued friendship.

Esperanza quietly shook his head, remembering their conversations that day.

'Dammit. Of all the places, why did he have to come here?

Just because I told him about the alchemists here... why did they have to saddle me with him just because we know each other?

Come to think of it... why did he suddenly ask to learn alchemy and lose his favour with the church?'

The church, obviously, did not look kindly upon alchemy. When techniques developed by alchemists began joining the mainstream, the church designated those like Dalton 'scientists', and gave them free rein. However, this did not mean that alchemists had their blessings.

'Don't tell me that idiot thinks he can create gold to end poverty in the world...

I bet that's probably it.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen him since last night...'

Esperanza was rescued from his melancholy by the sight of a female servant working in the gardens. He smiled in relief.

'Oh well. He's a man. I'm sure he'll take care of himself.'

Ignoring matters of faith, Esperanza smiled at the sky, thanking some Greek Goddess for his personal heaven, filled with women.

'I look forward to seeing Miss Niki's smile once we've captured the Mask Maker.'

Niki quietly watched from between the windows as Esperanza looked up into the sky.

It had been three days now since she was dragged here by Elmer.

She had made her decision last night.

'I'm destined to be killed.'

That itself was a vow she'd made much earlier. In fact, Niki would have been quite glad to face her own death.

However, her entire world had been turned upside-down in the past three days.

There existed a 'world' she had never known before.

And she ended up realizing the possibility that she could become a part of that world.

*'But... I can't turn back now.
I've... already witnessed the Mask Maker.'*

This was why she had again resolved to die, but--

'But I... I can't die here.'

Niki knew all too well.

She knew that many of the victims had been found in the manors of aristocrats.

Niki knew all too well.

She knew exactly why these victims were killed where they were.

*'If I die here... I'll end up causing trouble for Elmer and the Count...
That's why I have to die somewhere else.'*

Niki had no way of knowing.

She didn't know that the Mask Maker had already set foot in the manor last night.

Niki had no way of knowing.

She didn't know that Elmer had already been attacked by the Mask Maker. She had no way of knowing how he would be now, having been stabbed by the masked man.

And it was because she didn't know, that Niki shut her eyes and put away her three days in the manor at the back of her heart.

Niki locked it away as a happy memory, and a dream she would never return to again.

She held her breath. She stilled her heart.

And she slowly opened her eyes.

The girl who had just awakened from the happiest dream of her life returned to her stoic expression from before arriving at this manor.

She then made her way out of the estate as if in flight.

<=>

After evading the servants and leaving through the back door, Niki just kept running and running and running.

If she wanted to, Niki would have no trouble going to the edge of town.

She could go in the opposite direction of the sea, hide aboard a transport cart of some sort, and make her way to Naples within days.

But Niki chose not to do so.

If she could have started a new life so easily, Niki would have run straight back to the manor and asked the Count to let her work there for as long as she lived.

Esperanza would likely allow her to do so.

In fact, he would welcome her with open arms. He would take her in even at his own expense. This wasn't self-admiration--Esperanza would do this for any woman.

Niki had realized something after three days. While Esperanza was perfectly willing to take in any woman, the servants limited his contact with women other than family members--whether it was out of worry for him or themselves. Of course, the Boronial Family would have been swarmed by gold-diggers and have gone bankrupt years ago had it not been for the servants' actions.

However, Niki was inside their boundaries.

Elmer's presence was one large factor, but Niki had gone to the point where she could even chat ordinarily with the maids.

This was why Niki knew that she would be given a chance to live in that manor, or be given funds to support herself elsewhere, if she just swallowed her pride.

Niki knew all of this.

But this was exactly why she could not go back.

She had a very good reason, but she just ran and ran and ran, unable to tell anyone, not even knowing where to go.

As she ran straight along the road from the aristocrats' manors to the harbour--

She tripped over her feet and rolled onto the ground.

The path was downhill, but Niki managed to keep from sliding all the way down. She got to her feet, checking for injuries, and stopped in place.

'Where do I go from here?'

She was now just looking up at the sky absentmindedly, not knowing what to do.

She didn't feel like smiling, the way she had seen Esperanza smile earlier. The skies were darkening, and stars were emerging in the east.

If she couldn't decide on a place to stay, Niki would have to end up sleeping on the streets.

She had just resigned herself to a night under the stars, but suddenly--

Someone grabbed her by the arm.

"Where are you going, Miss?"

"...?!"

Niki found herself looking into a somewhat familiar face.

"...City Police..."

"LaRolf Hancletia. How many times have we met now? The testimony, and at the Governor's manor... and now this would be the third time? In any case, what impeccable timing."

The man in the City Police uniform spoke flatly, maintaining a tight hold on Niki's arm.

The street was practically deserted, and a lone carriage waited by the road.

"We were on our way to pick you up by carriage when we happened to spot you running our way."

"...To pick me up...?"

"We even had an excuse prepared--we would have told the Count that we needed you to testify again... but it seems we have no need for that, now."

"...!"

Niki was gripped by anxiety the moment she heard the Chief's words.

By 'excuse', the Chief likely meant that the matter was something that they could not reveal to Esperanza.

Niki didn't know what it could be about, but she didn't even get a chance to ask.

"...mph..."

She was dragged into the carriage by a pair of officers before she could even try to resist.

<=>

"My word... do you know how shocked I was when I saw you at the Boronial manor? I was quite bothered, you see. So I looked into things and found out something that some of the victims had in common."

Chief LaRolf mumbled inside the carriage, cracking his neck.

Niki was seated in front of him, between a pair of officers. Her arms were bound and she had been gagged. She didn't resist, as if she had already given up.

The Chief quietly spoke his mind.

"Were you trying to make your existences known to the world? Or did you approach Boronial with some other motive in mind?"

The Chief referred to Esperanza uncouthly as he continued speaking.

"You thought... that someone like you, who isn't supposed to exist, could get a new life by getting into an aristocrat's good graces? You thought you could start over? Not a chance. It's over for you now."

"..."

"...Were you trying to petition for help from nobility? You thought that Esperanza might be different? You thought he'd be strong enough to pressure us?"

The Chief continued growling, making assumptions about Niki's motivations. And as if to match the rhythm of the moving carriage, he began intensifying his tone.

"We exist for the common people! How are we to protect the peace and well-being of the commoners if we fear the power of the aristocrats?!"

"..."

"But you... no, *all of you* are not even commoners. Asking the aristocrats for help won't get you very far in this city."

"...!"

"...Of course, that Esperanza bastard would be irritating, even if he wasn't an aristocrat."

The Chief sighed, and moved over to whisper to the girl.

"And the common people whom we protect desire your death. Before you can blab everything to Esperanza. ...I thought we might be too late, but judging from the fact that you were running through the street in tears probably means that you either didn't talk, or were rejected--either way, it doesn't matter."

"..."

Tears welled up in Niki's eyes, but no one could tell what this meant.

The officers on either side of her did nothing but stoically observe her movements. It was hard to tell if they were even listening to the one-sided conversation.

"You poor wretch. But I suppose it can't be helped."

The chief shook his head dramatically, and glared straight into the girl's eyes--

and muttered in a heavy, threatening tone.

For the sole purpose of throwing her into the depths of despair.

"I'll be handing you over to where you belong. ...And there, you'll tell us... the identity of the Mask Maker."

"..."

"We won't have to worry about leaving marks with torture. Of course, whether or not your corpse is discovered depends on the will of the people, but..."

The man on the 'side of the people' laughed self-deprecatingly, and spoke in accordance with his allegiance to the people.

Viciously and without hesitation.

All for the sake of the common people of the city.

"After all, the crimes of the people... will all be taken on by the Mask Maker."



Chapter 5:

The End of the World

Dusk, the Third Library Archives.

It was a little before Niki's departure.

Huey came to class that morning as he did normally, and was off reading on his own as usual. Monica would occasionally glance at him, just as she did every day.

The absence of Elmer, the new student, only compounded the normalcy of the situation.

"That's it for class today, everyone! We're finishing a bit late today, but it shouldn't be a problem, since we have tomorrow off. ...Oh? Come to think of it, Elmer's not here today. Maybe he has a cold?"

Renee only seemed to have realized Elmer's absence at the very end of her lecture, but she was as carefree as usual about it.

'She'd probably talk like this even if someone died.'

Huey knew his female teacher's inhuman side, but decided to return to his book, deeming Renee's personality irrelevant.

Ten minutes later, the only sound left in the classroom was the sound of Huey turning the pages of his book.

However, he noticed someone walking up behind him.

Huey did not even take his eyes off the page, knowing full well who it was.

"What is it?"

"Elmer's not here today."

Just as he expected, Huey heard Monica's somewhat lonely voice.

Realizing she had been noticed, it seemed Monica was under the impression that Huey considered her someone special.

Normally, she would end up blushing beet red, but her voice was the lowest it had been in the past few days. Huey noticed this and slowly turned to face her.

"... Yeah. Maybe he has a cold. After all, he fell into the water yesterday. Or maybe he ended up catching the cold from me."

"I... I guess..."

There was definitely something strange about the way Monica trailed off.

Noticing an unusual sense of anxiety from Monica, Huey decided to speak to her briefly.

"What is it? You want me to go visit him with you? I told you before, I hate that guy. I'm not interested."

"... You think... it's really just a cold?"

"Huh?"

Monica was behaving very strangely today.

"What are you getting at?"

'Dammit. What's wrong with me today? Why am I concerning myself with other people?'

Huey was getting frustrated at himself for making contact with the rest of the world, but he set that aside and looked at Monica head-on.

As Huey got to his feet and closed his book, Monica stood resolutely--

And she slowly spoke, eyes welling up with tears.

"I... I ended up seeing him..."

"Who?"

"I think... it was the Mask Maker."

<=>

One hour later, at the marketplace.

The western skies were slightly tinged with red, and stars were shining down upon the streets.

Huey and Monica cautiously walked through the nearly deserted marketplace streets. Most of the stores had already closed.

"So you really *did* see him."

"Yeah... So, I... I've heard the rumours, and... I'm scared... I'm so scared...!"

Monica trembled, arms folded in front of herself, as she remembered the events of the previous evening.

Huey recalled the 'rumour' she spoke of.

He hadn't known about it when he met the girl named Niki, but he was bothered by her claim that she would be killed. So he looked into the rumour and pieced together the facts.

That anyone who witnessed the Mask Maker would be murdered by the serial killer not long afterwards.

And it seemed this rumour was actually true.

'How absurd... but absurdity isn't even relevant at this point.'

The story alone was an unbelievable urban legend.

In the distant future, these incidents might be deemed nothing more than myth, but the truth of the matter was that people were being murdered in this very city at this very point in time.

"Anyway, I'll walk you home today."

Normally Huey wouldn't care if Monica were to die, but he seemed to be interested in her claim that she had seen the Mask Maker. For the first time, he went with her to the patisserie she worked at.

Other than Monica's troubles, it was a normal day.

If anything were to happen, it would likely take place another day.

Despite the ungrounded nature of this assumption, Huey was slightly more relaxed today as he walked through the streets.

However, he did not notice something.

The fact that something had already happened to this city.

The City Police's increased presence on the streets.

The absence of the aristocrat delinquents.

And the fact that they could not see any of their alchemy school classmates anywhere on the streets.

"Uh... This is the patisserie I work at!"

"Oh..."

After a short walk through the marketplace, they arrived at a somewhat large stone building.

The sweet smell of pastries wafted out to the streets, attracting the attention of hungry passersby.

"Th-thanks for walking me home! Let me see if I can get you some pastries in return!" Monica said innocently. From her voice, it seemed she was back to her cheerful self.

Was the whole thing about seeing the Mask Maker just an excuse to bring him here?

And just as Huey began to grow suspicious of her--

He encountered the first disturbance.

"I'm back!" Monica greeted brightly as she opened the door.

And a middle-aged woman screamed as if trying to block off Monica's words.

"No! Don't come in!"

"...!"

Monica froze on the spot. Her gaze was fixated on the patisserie owner, who was yelling in fear.

"Monica, you have to get away!"

"Ma'am...?!"

"?"

In the confusion, Huey and Monica spotted men in black uniforms, who were holding back the patisserie owner.

And another shadow approached them from behind--

"Police."

The man said, in a clear voice.

"Monica Campanella... and a fellow student? Will you come with us? We'd like your testimony."

"... What are the charges?"

Unlike Monica, who was still in a daze, Huey maintained his cool and carefully questioned the officer, being careful not to provoke him.

'It must have been because of the incident several days ago.' Huey thought.

He remembered being taken to the holding cell last time and had decided to cooperate this time. However--

The City Police officer, who was closer to a town watchman, made the wrong choice of words to the suspect.

The officer's words would drag Huey and Monica into a hellish night.

"We've received reports that the students at your school were all members of the Mask Maker. Come quietly if you don't want to get hurt."

<=>

The Third Library, inner courtyard.

"You would be Mr. Dalton, correct? I'm afraid you will have to come with us."

It was in front of the large tree in the inner courtyard of the library.

As the old man looked up at the leafy branches, three men in City Police uniforms spoke to him.

"...Orders from LaRolf?" Dalton mumbled, still looking up at the tree. The men behind him approached him wordlessly.

"Hm... Is it the Mask Maker, the drugs, or the counterfeits? I don't know which one it might be, but does he mean to put the blame on us and take away power from the Boronial Family, which supports us? Was this the new Chief's idea? Or is there someone else masterminding this plan?"

"..."

The officers said nothing as Dalton clearly enunciated this information without even a hint of worry.

"Oh, there's no need to answer me. What I really want to know is... whether or not I should trim some of these branches. Look there. Is one of them not broken? ...Did someone climb this tree? What do you men think?"

"..."

"If you cannot answer, I have no business with you. What are your thoughts, Miss Renee?"

"Who knows~?"

"?!"

A languid voice suddenly spoke from behind the officers. The men looked behind them to find a woman with a stunning figure, which was clearly visible despite the fact that she was wearing loose clothing.

"It's such a bother to try and figure it out. Why don't we just uproot the tree altogether?"

"It was foolish of me to even think of asking you."

Dalton turned around with a sigh. He then sharply glared at the officers.

"You're still here?"

"... A-are you making light of us?!"

Despite the fear creeping up in their hearts, the officers moved to try and restrain Dalton, hands trembling.

Suddenly, a flash of silver flew through the air.

There was a sound like something being pierced. A small blade made its way into Renee's neck.

As the dagger popped out of the wound, blood escaped in a crimson spray that covered the officers.

"What?!"

"Wh-what did this woman do?!"

"Aaaaahhhh?!"

The officers fell into confusion. However, they soon froze on the spot.

They realized that the warm red blood that had splattered over them were moving in a completely different direction than the laws of gravity dictated.

"Huh?"

The droplets of blood crawled around like ants, and traveled up the length of Renee's body as if possessed of conscious thought. They disappeared into the wound on her neck.

It was a wondrous yet terrifying sight. The woman reached out to touch her throat and complained, revealing perfectly a healed neck.

"Ouch... Th-that was terrible of you, Headmaster! Why did you have to do that?"

"A... A-a monster...?!"

The officers stepped back, fearfully looking back and forth at their blood-free selves and Renee.

Just as they backed into Dalton, a deep voice rang out from behind them.

"You men never came here. Do you understand?"

"..."

Dalton spoke quietly to the officers, who had been dumbstruck by this display of what they could only imagine was an act of magic. His voice was that of like a deep, majestic preacher.

"Would you condemn this woman as a witch? Witch Trials are a thing of the past now. Not only that, the church has almost no power in this city. Of course, it was the common people who desired them in the first place. ...Now, I will repeat myself once more. This will be your last warning."

His voice also sounded almost like an all-seeing demon.

"You men never came here. ...Do you understand?"

<=>

Harbour area, back alley.
Huey ran and ran and ran.

Perhaps the act of running through the city streets in escape, holding the hand of a girl, was a time-tested story structure.

However, Huey had never wanted to be in such a situation.

He fled.

Never before had Huey so seriously gone over the meaning of this word.

To him, the world was an object of hatred. This was only the second time it had become an object of fear, the first time being the incident when his mother was taken away by the Inquisitors.

'Damn it... what's going on here?'

Huey had realized that something was off from the moment they were surrounded by police officers in front of the patisserie. He had caught wind of something even more sinister and disturbing than when they saved the girl called Niki.

As Monica stood there in a daze, Huey shoved the officers in front of him, took her hand, and fled.

'Damn it... this isn't like me.'

Normally I would have left her behind. Why did I take her hand?

I guess I can use her as bait if I have to.'

Huey rationalized his actions as he ran breathlessly through the dark night.

Ignoring the voices of the officers in pursuit, he just kept running between houses, from one alley to another.

He ran and ran and ran.

Before, the officers pointed out Monica and spoke of 'fellow students'.

'So they're assuming that the Mask Maker is a group of people.'

It was a logical line of thought. From the information collected so far, the method of killing and the small number of eyewitness accounts supported the idea of multiple killers.

'But why did they single out students from our school?'

The fact that the entire school was under suspicion made Huey's previous encounter with the police seem like a harmless rendezvous. This time, he might be taken care of outright instead of being released. The officers just now exuded just that kind of an atmosphere.

'...Is it the "drugs"?''

"Hu-Huey! Where are we going?!"

"How am I supposed to know?!"

Huey answered coldly as Monica ran beside him in tears. The cold sweat running down his entire body both physically and mentally rushed his already racing heartbeat.

'Damn it... How many months--no, years has it been since I sprinted at full speed?'

Not even the moonlight shone in the narrow alleyways, and the cloak of shadow only intensified the feeling of being chased.

However, Huey was not running without a goal in mind.

He had considered the library or the storehouse at the harbour, but the current situation made them less than safe hiding places. He also thought of running through the streets, but there were too many officers outside to do such a thing. Once the other students were captured, the officers would all swarm to find Huey and Monica. They had to disappear completely before that could happen.

But the problem was Monica, who was running slightly behind him.

*'Would it be all right to take this girl **there**?'*

Huey glanced at Monica's face and pondered.

'She's keeping up better than I expected. She might even be fitter than I am.'

As Monica kept up with his sprint, Huey wondered if he was just out of exercise or if she was just in better shape.

'Does working at a patisserie involve a lot of physical labour? No, let's set that aside for now. This girl... for some reason, this girl seems to like me. And blindly, at that.

*Then will she be able to keep **that place** a secret?*

Can I manipulate this girl until the end?

As he ran in thought, Huey realized that they had made their way out of the alleys and into the town square.

'Good. I don't see any officers around.'

Huey calmly scanned the area, relaxing his guard for a moment. He then froze.

Monica, still beside him, gasped in terror as she looked at the square.

"Wh-what's... going on...?"

'So it wasn't just the City Police going off on their own.'

What they saw was--

Not officers or aristocrats, but commoners--eyes glinting, brazenly holding objects that could be used as weapons--like clubs, tools, hoes, spades, and knives.

About one in five held up a torch, lighting up the midnight square much more than it would normally be necessary.

They were all people Huey and Monica knew.

The considerate baker was there.

The elderly lantern craftsman was there.

The lady who owned the mill was there.

The old astrologist, raising a torch--

The young general store owner, holding up a lantern--

The sculptor, wielding a gigantic saw--

The bald man from before, dragging a hammer--

The butcher, light glinting off his meat cleaver--

Shipmen carrying sticks--

The old woman who had given Huey a little extra righted her grip on her pot--

*'Still, none of them are holding guns or swords.
If they did that, the aristocrats would think it was a rebellion and flee to Naples.'*

At this point in history, the oppression and poverty that ran rampant throughout Italy caused many rebellions against the Spanish rulers. However, most of them were put down--and this city, with its small population, would be easy to defeat with the army of the Governor of Naples alone.

The problem was, however, that there was no poverty in this city. In other words, there was no need for a rebellion.

'These bastards... are they looking for alchemists? People connected to us?'

"Oh no... what is this...? What... is all this...?"

Monica stood beside him, trembling.

"...Calm down, Monica."



Huey was desperately trying to figure out this situation.

"Hey! What are you two doing over there? Don't tell me you're with the 'Third Library' people?"

A man with a torch noticed them and walked over.

"Ah-"

Huey stopped Monica before she could scream, and responded quickly.

"What are you talking about? I was just wondering what you commoners were up to so late at night. You brightening up the place just completely killed the mood, you know? After all the trouble I took to buy this girl?"

"...So you're from the Rotten Eggs, young master? We don't have time for you right now... This is for you aristocrats too, so why don't you consider helping us out?" the man asked, and went off in a different direction.

Huey, having escaped by pretending to be a nobleman, wordlessly took Monica's hand again and ran back into an alleyway.

"Hu-Huey, what's going on here...? What is all this?"

As Monica whispered these question, Huey took her even further into the depths of the alley and hid behind a pile of supplies beside some sort of workshop.

*'So the entire city is against us.
What about the aristocrats...? No, I guess they're no different.'*

Huey calmly analyzed the situation despite the obvious disturbance.

Monica looked at him doubtfully, just as he looked towards her and asked in a deadly serious tone.

"Monica, I need to ask you something..."

"Wh-what is it?"

"What if... speaking hypothetically..."

Huey slowly drew breath as he carefully chose his words.

"What would you do... if I were the Mask Maker?"

<=>

Somewhere in the city.

Hand still bound, Niki was dragged into a strange place.

It was a narrow yet spacious area.

She was surrounded on all sides by wooden walls, and the floor and ceiling also had the texture of wood.

A sweet scent faintly wafted through the room, and under the light were desks and lighting equipment.

And around her were multiple adults.

They were all familiar faces, including Police Chief LaRolf.

The bald master wasn't there, but she had seen everyone there before at the marketplace.

Niki would greet them as she passed by every morning. Of course, the greeting was one-sided. They would never speak to her or nod in acknowledgement.

They looked at her like a pebble on the street--or rather, they didn't even spare her a glance. She was less than a tool--an object to be tossed away at one's whims.

Of course, Niki didn't even know the names of anyone there.

And she did her best to forget the name of the bald man.

The only names she decided to remember were people like Elmer, Esperanza, and Aile--all people who had treated her as a human being.

Any other name was a part of the world that rejected her, and they were the very world that she wanted to reject.

And these nameless adults looked down upon her with contempt, speaking in tones full of rage and anxiety.

"How much did you tell that sick aristocrat? Well?"

The girl yelled nothing, despite the fact that she was no longer gagged.

After all, Niki knew that none of these people would care that she shouted for help--she also knew that there was no one outside who would come to her rescue even if her voice reached that far.

"...I didn't... tell him anything."

"That so? Of course, behaving suspiciously is a serious crime in and out of itself."

A man with a moustache, who looked to be the leader, grabbed Niki by her collar.

"Don't act so high-and-mighty, you little bitch. Did you even think for one second that the aristocrat would take you in? You think everything's going to turn out fairytale-perfect just because he decided to treat you like a human being?"

"..."

With his free hand, the man held up a small leather pouch and spat as if talking to livestock.

"Don't ever forget--you're just tools we use to sell *this*."

<=>

The back alley.

"You... the Mask maker...? What are you saying...?"

"It's a hypothetical question. So... what would you do?"

Monica was at a loss for words at this sudden question.

"Wh-what's going on, Huey? Th-then, what if *I'm* the Mask Maker? What would you do?"

"I don't really care. What you are doesn't really matter to me."

"Oh, I see..."

"Hey, don't get the wrong idea. I said I hated you all, but I know right now isn't the time to emphasize that. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Sorry."

Monica could tell from Huey's calm, serious eyes that he was being honest.

"Huey."

"It was just a hypothetical question. I didn't mean to hurt you, whatever you were going to answer. I was just curious... What would you think if I was the Mask Maker...?"

Whether or not she understood Huey was still in doubt, but Monica looked around and fell quiet.

An indescribable silence enveloped the duo. It felt like an eternity would pass, until Monica looked up and squeezed out these words:

"But ...I'd... I'd stil..."

Huey fell into thought, hearing Monica's surprisingly resolute voice.

He then looked at Monica, and mumbled.

He mumbled a small truth that he knew for certain.

"It's true that I'm practically wearing a mask."

Huey's words were not a lie, but his words held some intent to manipulate Monica.

"But... I'm not the Mask Maker. I'm not a serial killer.

I think... the Mask Maker's another individual altogether."

<=>

Niki squinted at the pouch that the moustached man was holding.

*'Oh... it's the drug.
All because of this drug, we...
They said that this drug... would make people feel happy...
So why...? Why were we killed, even by this drug?'*

Niki's distant, empty gaze caught sight of the leather pouch.

Noticing the sickening air of bloodlust getting thicker in the room, Niki swallowed her sigh and thought back to her past.

Her life had neither found nor was given any meaning.

Niki knew that she had been given her name by her birth parents.

That was all she knew about them.

She didn't know where they were and how they were living, or if they were even alive. She had sometimes wanted to know, but there was no longer any way of finding out.

This was because she had been sold into these streets as an 'object'.

In a broader sense, she was a slave. In medieval Europe, Slavs were captured and sold as slaves, creating massive profits for many cities. This practise continued until now, the 18th century, when people from Africa were captured as slaves and sold to the Americas.

However, this city needed a different kind of slave--it needed people that should not exist.

The area was not a very agriculturally developed land, and there was no one around who appeared to be a slave of any sort. However, Lotto Valentino had boys and girls like Niki.

To these children, the common people of the city--the people who raised them--were just those who provided food and shelter.

At first, Niki was satisfied with this.

After all, she had been living in worse conditions before she had been sold into these streets.

It was heavy labour for children, but life where food and shelter were provided was something she was content with.

Their work took place under brilliant, glimmering light.

They would smelt and refine different kinds of metals in a specialized workshop.

Several years ago, after being sold here, this was the work these children had to learn.

It was part of a normal day for someone to suffocate after inhaling some kind of chemical fumes, and there were those who died of terrible burns. However, they quietly continued to work.

The metals they were refining appeared very much like gold, but it was no use to them.

After all, even if they ran off with it, they would have no place to go.

So they did their best, working to at least obtain a place for them to be.

They held fast to the belief that a ray of hope would one day enter their uncertain futures.

However, the 'streets' of Lotto Valentino decided to bring about a new change, in order to blind these 'products'.

One day, Niki and the other children were taken to another workshop, different from the place where they worked with the gold-like metals.

The place created beneath the market grounds was a facility to create a strange sort of 'drug'.

And the items created there slowly began eating away at the children like Niki, even more simply than the burns had. Slowly, but surely.

Remembering her past, Niki quietly began to speak.

"...Everyone... slowly went crazy."

The adults looked at one another, surprised by Niki's sudden words.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"We... we just wanted to live. But we were killed while our hearts still continued to beat."

Eyes empty, Niki began speaking little by little. She slowly turned her despair into rage.

"The black-haired friend kept breathing in the fumes from the drug workshop and went crazy! He said, 'You're it!' and jumped into the sea and never came back up! No one knew what he was talking about! The curly-haired one slowly stopped smiling or getting angry, and all he did was mumble his own name! And then! His heart suddenly gave out and he died! The others eventually lost their minds, too! And they died off! You destroyed those perfectly fine kids!"

What they were creating was undoubtedly some kind of hallucinogenic drug. It was an overly powerful and terrible drug for the era.

The commoners sold these highly addictive drugs to several aristocrats and powerful merchants, and manipulated them to their whims. These drugs were not only addictive, but several times more powerful than other drugs on the market--they were perfect for tying up those with power.

They would pick out aristocrats, merchants, and other people of power. On the surface, they were selling the children. The system worked by having the child enter the manors of the target and handing over the product.

The children were sold to aristocrats and merchants as young prostitutes. Whatever might happen to them at the homes of the targets did not matter to the people. The only thing of importance was the exchange that occurred in the secret chambers of the manors.

And if, by chance, the system was discovered by powerful people who would seek to defeat the city, all the responsibility would be thrust upon the 'children who are not supposed to exist' and the problem uprooted. It was a foolproof system as long as they all worked as one.

Niki had lived this kind of life, watching her friends fall apart--watching other children like herself.

"I bet I've lost my mind, too! I must have been taken by that drug! That's right, I'm not afraid of dying anymore! I'm sick of living! I hate this world even more than when I was being carted around by the slave trader! That's why I must be crazy. We're all crazy, just like those kids who died!"

For a moment, the adults lost their nerve at these words that accused them. However, their faces soon reddened with rage, and the moustached man threw Niki into the wall, still holding her by the collar.

Niki's head and back hit the wall with a thud. She screamed.

And as if to erase Niki's cry, the moustached man--a mere commoner--

"So that's why?"

It was because you went insane that you lot created the serial killer called the Mask Maker?"

<=>

The Third Library.

"Hm... So are the 'drugs', 'counterfeits', and the Mask Maker's serial killing somehow connected?"

Renee asked Headmaster Dalton nonchalantly, swaying because of the stack of books she was carrying.

After the officers had fled, Dalton had decided to temporarily take refuge in a hidden room in the archive basement, saying, "Why don't we change locations before they call in reinforcements?".

Along the way, he turned back, brought over several homing pigeons, and sent them into the skies.

Renee had just spoken to him as he began moving again.

"Hm..."

As if in thought, Dalton scratched his chin with his wooden arm and sighed.

"Of the Mask Maker's victims... it seems half were something like ringleaders of the operation. And the other half were the witnesses. In reality, of course, the latter were children who were sold into these streets."

"? What does that mean?"

"...The Mask Maker is... the mask itself, which had been erased by the 'children who are not supposed to exist'. It is the suicide and murder of those who should not exist, and at the same time--

It is an accusation."

<=>

"So you lot... you began working together behind our backs? Of course, we had no idea at first that all of the witnesses would be one of you... after all, talk of the Mask Maker was taboo among us."

The moustached man threw Niki against the wall again.

LaRolf continued the line of thought in place of the man trembling in rage and anxiety.

"I looked into things after finding you at Esperanza's manor... looks like you had a scuffle with some of our men earlier, too. I heard that you'd received help from students at the 'Library'... so that's when you made a connection with Esperanza? We went through a lot of trouble thanks to you."

"..."

Niki didn't understand what he was talking about. She had met Esperanza through Elmer, not the students.

However, she didn't even get a chance to go over this.

The pressure against her throat slowly suffocated her. Niki tried to kick and struggle out of the man's grasp, but all she ended up doing was fall to the floor with her hands bound.

LaRolf lightly stepped upon the fallen Niki's leg and quietly continued.

"In any case, you lot are finished now."

"Ugh..."

"You lot... some of you killed us, and others became witnesses...! You planned to reveal the secrets of the drugs?! The secrets of the counterfeits?! You planned to reveal your condition to those who don't know about the city's operations?!"

Enraged, the Chief put more weight into his foot. Niki grimaced in pain as his heel dug into her leg.

"Preposterous. Trying to make yourselves known by giving yourselves the temporary value of 'witnesses' and the masks of 'victims'."

In contrast with his weight shifting onto his foot, the Chief regained his calm and interrogated her.

"Talk. Who else other than you is working as a Mask Maker? You don't have to talk if you don't want to... All we have to do then is get rid of all of you slaves. Of course, it's unfortunate that we won't be able to make any drugs or counterfeits until the next slave traders arrive."

"..."

"And we'll make all of the culprits into Mask Makers. Isn't it an honour? As you wished, the name of the Mask Maker will be the talk of the town for some time. Of course, it'll only be limited to this city."

The Chief stepped off Niki and spoke.

"And as long as I'm Chief, even the newsletters will be quiet. Now that I think about it, my predecessor realized what you were doing... and by trying to crack down on the drugs, he forced the common people to falsify a corruption scandal. And thanks to that, I was given this position."

'Ugh...'

"Do you know why I'm telling you all of this? It's a farewell gift. ... I'll be killing you now. As a symbol of what I am willing to do in order to serve the people."

The Chief's words were largely a show put on for the powerful members of the public.

However, something he said resonated within Niki.

*'So someone noticed us...
I don't know who the previous Chief was, but I'm glad.
Someone knew...'*

"What are you smiling for? This thing's bothering me."

The Chief stepped towards Niki as she smiled happily, but--

The girl didn't even heed the Chief as she slowly rose, glaring at the citizens gathered there. Quietly, she just laughed and laughed and laughed.

"I'll tell you... I'll tell you the truth."

Until now, Niki had been afraid.

They had taken countless actions, knowing of the dangers of the actions but feeling nothing for them and doing nothing to stop them.

She was afraid to acknowledge that the actions that had resulted in the deaths of many of their friends would be unremembered and unknown--she was afraid to admit that their lives had been meaningless.

"...We did create fake testimonies. Our friends killed your nameless allies and took their own lives."

This was why she had thought herself prepared in theory, but was denying it in a part of herself.

Until just now, that is.

"I... didn't stop my friend from committing suicide. I thought it was right."

At this moment, the girl cast away her fear and made her confession .

And this time, she quietly laughed, got angry, and squeezed out a voice that contained every emotion imaginable. Directly at the 'things' in front of her that couldn't even be called human,

"But... you're wrong. The Mask Maker exists."

"Wh-what...?"

"You think *we* made it all up? How could we work together towards a singular goal when we aren't even allowed to meet or talk to each other? You would know better than anyone... after all, you were the ones who oppressed us out of fear that we'd rebel against you. It's impossible for us to have caused the Mask Maker incidents without help."

The cowardly citizens had one small hope--to protect their own 'sense of security'. And these citizens, who acted on that fear, were standing in sheer terror.

In front of them stood a 'disturbance'.

A terrifying and resolute woman--no longer a tool, but not someone they could consider human.

Niki revealed her pure yet indignant feelings towards the stunned adults.

With the exception of the scream, this was her first outcry.

"You can all die, too! Witness the Mask Maker, and rot in Hell! Be afraid! Be sorry for what you've done!"

Though she was still a child, the bloodlust emanating from Niki sent the adults breaking out into cold sweat.

And as if in an attempt to erase that bloodlust, LaRolf shook his head and spoke, putting on a forced smile.

"...A Mask, you say? I don't know if what you claim is true or not, but we also know of a man in a mask. Of course, he's not the Mask Maker... we think."

"...?"

"The man who first gave us the alloy--and ordered the production of the counterfeits."

<=>

"So they claim that the Mask Maker is from our school..."

Dalton cheerily stroked his beard as he walked through the archives.

"Well, we *do* have someone similar."

"Oh? Who might that be?"

"Huey Laforet. Your student."

"Oh! Huey *is* a smart boy, after all. Even if I teach him something incorrectly, he remembers it right when I ask later! He's a genius~."

'Then teach him correctly to begin with!'

Dalton held back his complaint, knowing that this might lead to a long-winded lecture. He continued, ignoring Renee's remark.

"Yes. He's most certainly a genius rivalling Lebreau... No, I hesitate to use the term 'genius'. It's too cheap of a term. But... He's still a greenhorn. I suppose a cheap term would be suitable. Then I shall use it without hesitation. The child called Huey is an incurable fool who claims he wants to destroy the world, but--

He is undoubtedly a genius."

<=>

Five years ago, a rural village in a certain country.

The boy was listening to his mother's words.

Listening was all he was permitted to do, so that was all the powerless boy did.

"I have... just one thing. Just one confession."

His mother's gentle smile made Huey anxious.
Something told him that he should not listen to what she had to say.

However, he could not bring himself to do this. A part of him could already tell.

That these would be his mother's final words.

His gentle mother's words. But a foreboding feeling clawed at his heart, telling him to stop listening.

The ominous premonition was only half correct.

"I... witnessed a frightening gathering of those who worship the devil."

This was because, while his mother's words brought confusion and despair upon the boy--

"It was terrifying. I did not see the faces of those who took part in this unholy Sabbath, but it seemed that they thought I had witnessed them. That is why I will make my accusation. I will accuse them right here and now."

It wouldn't have mattered anyway, even if Huey had not listened.

"Should my innocence be proven, it will attest to the veracity of my testimony."

"I will testify, as long as my voice remains in this world, that everyone who testified and accused me of witchcraft was taking part in that sinful Sabbath."

Huey recalled that the atmosphere had changed very suddenly.

At first, he did not understand what his mother was saying.

However, he froze the moment he saw the faces of the villagers.

The villagers had always worn the same gentle smile as his mother, but this time, their eyes were filled with an emotion Huey had never known.

Then, the Inquisitors in charge of the trial smiled.

"We understand. We swear in the name of the Lord that should your innocence be proven, all those who accused you of witchcraft will be questioned and tried as heretics, just as you were."

Huey noticed something the moment this was declared.

He saw the fear-laden faces of the villagers being painted over by despair.

And at the end of the day, there were very few villagers--including Huey--who were able to return home alive.

After a vicious, old-fashioned trial, his mother had been chained and tossed into the lake.

"If she floats, she is a witch. If she sinks, she is innocent."

Death was all that awaited at the end. It was a trial that did not even give the accused a proper execution.

However, Huey's mother accepted this and stepped off the steep cliff with her own feet.

Huey Laforet was sure that when he last saw his mother, she was definitely smiling.

Her smile might have been the product of his childlike hopes, but Huey believed in this memory.

And with that all-forgiving smile--

His mother disappeared into the water, never to resurfa

<=>

Five years later, Lotto Valentino. The basement of an abandoned house.

"The village probably doesn't exist anymore. After dozens of them were taken away, they just kept accusing one another in a big chain... I don't know what happened afterwards. Headmaster Dalton happened to be at the village at the time, and he brought me with him..."

The boy spoke very slowly.

"I don't know why the lady next door, who treated me like her own brother, accused my mom. I never got the chance to ask her, since she just kept screaming as she burned to death."

Monica quietly drew breath as Huey calmly recounted his past.

"Every time I remember their screams, I think about something. That they were an orchestra of irony. And that everyone in the world is a part of that orchestra, including myself."

"Huey..."

"...And the outcome was... my current self, and... this room."

Huey completed his long story and raised his head, looking at the large room with empty eyes.

In a stark contrast to his melancholy story, the room was filled with brilliant lights.

Around them were countless gold pieces, jewels, and statues--objects of obvious value--piled up and lying across the floor.

It looked almost like a miser's grave.

Monica, having been led into this basement room in a deserted house, was practically dizzy from the lights that reflected off the lantern, when Huey had begun telling her about his past.

And once he had finished, the boy who was master of this chamber of riches sighed and began explaining.

"Do you know about the 1677 incident in Paris? A secret operation was discovered and put down."

"Oh... I think... Professor Renee might have said something like that before..."

"While trying to create gold from bronze, the organization succeeded in creating an a metal very similar to silver. It was an alloy, but it was more than enough to fool most people."

At Huey's explanation, Monica's eyes were towards the mountain of gold pieces on the desk.

"Oh, the gold over there's real. But **only the gold on the desk.**"

The boy laughed self-deprecatingly as he took a gold coin from his pocket and tossed it onto the desk.

"And what I just threw... was a fake."

"What...?"

Monica squinted as she looked at the pile of gold, but she could no longer tell which one it was that Huey had thrown.

"That organization might have been caught because they rushed into things. That's why... I took my time spreading this poison into the streets."

Huey then opened the desk drawer and took out an unpleasant-looking mask--one very different from the rumours of the Mask Maker, however--that was crafted out of wood.

"Little by little, I gave money to the people here... I earned their trust... and slowly increased my territory."

His words were a confession of a sort.

He would create and sell counterfeit currency, and use the funds to turn the people of the city into his puppets.

Huey was confessing to Monica the fact that he was the criminal and mastermind behind the counterfeits.

"...But that's as far as my plan got. People here who had power began creating some kind of drug... they began creating it somewhere I don't know about. At this rate, I'll end up just like the organization in Paris and lose everything."

"..."

Monica clenched her fist over her chest. Huey leaned into her face and quietly asked a question of her.

"I haven't changed my mind since I talked to you before. I'm planning to use this money as funding to destroy this world. And that includes you. Would you still be willing to help me?"

This was a gamble. Should Monica refuse, Huey would have to get rid of her in the worst-case scenario. However, if she was still blindly in love with him, Monica would be his greatest asset. He had purposefully urged her to make a decision in order to figure out his options. Though Huey knew that this was an extremely immature and foolish course of action, he was too confused and anxious to think of another way.

But Monica's answer betrayed all his expectations.

"You're... so kind."

"...What?"

"A really evil person would have said something like 'You're special' or 'I love you'. But you never lied to me."

"..."

Standing before Huey was not a blushing, stammering child, but a smiling young woman.

Huey momentarily recalled his mother's final smile and reflexively looked away.

"But you're devious. You really are. You know I won't be able to refuse if you put it that way... But that's fine. I don't dislike that part of you."

"Stop talking like that. Damn it... stop talking like Elmer..."

"Maybe he rubbed off on me yesterday."

Monica joked, despite their situation. Huey opened his mouth to speak, but--

Another disturbance.

A deep, sharp explosion rang out, followed by the sounds of people screaming and shouting. The noise was dulled here, two storeys underground, but it must have taken place very close to this building.

"Sounds like... there's a big fuss going on up there."

Monica's face as she looked up at the ceiling seemed somewhat lonely and melancholy--

And for some reason, her face seemed to be full of silent outrage.

<=>

The Third Library, inside the main archives.

"But why would our students be framed?"

The carefree question-and-answer session continued inside the archives.

"Likely because they are taking action against Esperanza. That Count stubbornly refuses the counterfeits, after all... it seems they believe that he will end up threatening the well-being of this city."

"Oh, it's because you're in frequent contact with Mr. Esperanza, right, Headmaster?"

"...That wouldn't nearly be enough to keep Esperanza connected to this place. After all, I am a man. Of course, things might be different if you asked, Miss Renee."

"? But I thought you said that they were working against him?"

"What I'm saying is that I am not the target. My goodness. Setting wrongful accusations aside, this is a very irritating matter."

Renee cocked her head in confusion, almost far enough for her glasses to slip off her face. Suddenly, Dalton lowered his tone and mumbled to himself, as if answering his own question.

"Well, I guess the existence of those like Huey would mean the accusations aren't quite incorrect."

<=>

Niki had met the Mask Maker only a month ago.

She wasn't particularly thinking of killing herself, but she had sometimes thought that she had wanted to die.

However, suicide wasn't something she could have accepted for herself.

And as her heart wavered between these choices, the Mask Maker appeared before her.

Niki was on her way back from an 'exchange' with an aristocrat--going through the back alleys, as her bald master had instructed. And all of a sudden, the Mask Maker was there as if he had risen out of the darkness itself.

Niki knew of the rumours.

All witnesses will be killed. She knew this simple, clear rule, but she was not afraid. In fact, she felt a sense of relief at this encounter.

After all, even if she had not met the Mask Maker, she would eventually die of insanity like the other children or be killed in some other way. For her, life was nothing but pain. Even if she died, no one would care and no one would know that she had even existed.

Then it might be a better death for her to be killed by a man whose very existence was an unverifiable urban legend.

Niki was not afraid of death--at least at this moment.

And surprisingly, the mysterious man spoke to her in a very fluent tone.

"Did you know? Nothing is impossible for one who is prepared to die."

"..."

"If you have no need for your life, then... why not make a choice for yourself, one last time? Do you wish to save your friends? Suicide is an option. If you agree to wear this mask, I will gladly assist you."

And the Mask Maker began to speak. He spoke to the girl words full of traps to ensnare her.

It was beyond Niki's strength to even take in every word the man spoke.

Her friends, her existence, her happiness, her vengeance--none of these things even existed in her heart until this moment. Before, none of these things even mattered to her.

But one thing moved her.

It was the fact that she was given a 'conscious choice'.

For Niki, having grown up as a tool who could not make her own decisions, the Mask Maker's words were sweet whispers to her ears.

And she accepted his words without hesitation.

Not even knowing what awaited behind his claims--Niki accepted him, glad that the person in front of her acknowledged her existence as a human.

And now--she tried her best to have pride in the choice she had made for herself.

As Niki stood resolutely, the adults in front of her spoke of their own pride.

"...It is true that the man in the wooden mask brought us riches with his counterfeits."

LaRolf dramatically raised his arms and quietly added weight to his words, as if trying to shake off the fact that he had been taken by surprise by Niki.

"But what we wanted wasn't material wealth. It was a sense of security. That was why we needed a safety device against the aristocrats and the merchants... And that was why we needed the drugs. You have no idea, do you? What we lowly commoners want isn't money or power. We don't need gilded thrones and crowns. To us, a 'sense of security' is everything."

"...And you bought us from the slave traders for that 'sense of security'?"

"Of course. If we were to undertake this operation ourselves, we would be finished the moment someone slipped up. After all, some of those damned aristocrats just can't be tempted with money."

If they were caught in the act of the exchange, there would be no escape--however, the actions of people who should not exist could be brushed off very easily.

Of course, they couldn't pull this act in front of the military police. However, in this city, the City Police were not on the side of aristocrats or politicians--they were on the side of 'commoners with financial means'.

"We'd be killing two birds with one stone by linking Esperanza with those irritating alchemists. Oh, also..."

LaRolf took hold of the truncheon at his side and spun it in his hand.

"You are no longer our 'sense of security'--you've become a 'source of uneasiness'."

And just as he pulled the truncheon into the air to smash Niki's face--

"Th-this is bad!"

Niki's bald owner flung open the door as he rushed inside.

"...The drug workshop is on fire! It's burning, damn it!"

<=>

Boronial manor.

"It's terrible, my lord!"

Esperanza widened his eyes as the steward entered his room.

"What is it?! Have you found Miss Niki?!"

He had sent servants to search for Niki, who had disappeared around sunset, but the steward's news was not what he was expected.

"N-no, my lord... The men sent to the city to find her have just rushed back, and..."

The steward trailed off, and pressed Esperanza to look outside the window.

"At the harbour..."

Esperanza looked outside the window before the steward could even finish, and saw it--

He saw the ship that had been moored at the harbour for months, engulfed by flames.

<=>

With the confusion outside, Niki was temporarily left alone in the room with a watchman.

All the other adults had gone to put out the fire, but it seemed they still had enough sense in them to keep someone standing guard.

And as a result, she found herself stuck here alone with the bald man.

Niki was cornered against a wall--

"Niki... you little bitch! How dare you make a fool out of me?!"

The bald man stepped towards Niki, hammer in hand, not even bothering to hide his shallow anger.

The hammer was a tool used to fashion scraps of metal in the process of crafting metallic ornaments. If it were to strike a human head, it would likely end up creating a disturbing ornament of red flesh.

The bald man raised the hammer, not deterred by this outcome--

But just as he had done himself earlier--

His attack was stopped by a sudden intruder.

The door slammed open, and the bald man and Niki both looked towards it reflexively.

It was him.

A man wearing a black cloak with a hood, with a strange mask straight out of a carnival over his face.

"Wh-what are you supposed to be?! What is the meaning of this?!"

The bald man was the most frightened. After all, he had been told that the Mask Maker was a figment of the imaginations of children like Niki.

And yet here he was, staring him down in silence.

Anyone who witnesses the Mask Maker would die.

Though the bald man knew this, the rumour struck at his heart for a single moment.

"I don't know who you are, but... how dare you...?!"

The bald man turned his attention from Niki in order to defeat his new source of unease, and charged at the doorway.

However, his vigour suddenly evaporated as the unease in his heart turned to terror.

In the hand of the masked man was not the rumoured stiletto--

But a strangely-shaped pistol, glinting silver in the light.

"...!"

Niki and the bald men held their breaths, at the mercy of the powerful weapon.

A ghastly sense of dread froze the room in stillness.

Of course--

"Uaaatchoo!"

The strange sneeze that came from behind the mask was completely contrary to this atmosphere.

<=>

"..."

Having concluded that there was a disturbance in the streets, Esperanza opened his bureau drawer in search of his favourite pistol.

But the firearm was nowhere to be found. Lying in the drawer its stead was a messily scribbled note.

[To Speran: I'm borrowing your gun for a bit. From Elmer.]

"That. Little. Bastard."

Just as Esperanza prepared to let out a volley of insults at his guest, he noticed the postscript at the bottom of the letter.

[I'm using it to save a girl.]

"Then you are forgiven."

He calmed himself with great ease, and turned around empty-handed.

He left to find out what was happening to this city--the city that was both his enemy and protectorate.

<=>

Although the specifics are unknown, the 3-shot matchlock gun was said to have been given to the Boronial Family by a member of the Medici Family.

The curved white handle was decorated with beautiful designs, and the hammer was so artistically made that it almost looked like an ornament. This itself was not unusual for a gun, but the biggest curiosity was the three barrels that had been bundled together in a triangle.

'Hey, what's that gun supposed to be? D-don't tell me you can shoot three rounds in a row? Or does it shoot three rounds at the same time?'

Actually, the barrel had to be rotated and the hammer raised again every time the user wanted to fire, but this was practically automatic fire for the era, considering the lack of the need to reload every time.

This pistol was created over a quarter of a century ago, but its unique design would send aflutter the heart of its wielder, and throw its opposition into a whirlwind of anxiety.

The masked boy held up the gun, a weapon that made him feel stronger by virtue of being its wielder, and quietly aimed at the bald man.

"S-stop! A-all right. I'll put the hammer down. I'm putting it down, all right?"

The bald man disarmed himself and looked at the 'Mask Maker' in deference.

"Hey, hey. I'm on your side. So please forgive me, will you?"

The masked man cocked his head at this ridiculously quick change of attitude.

He then nodded and finally spoke.

"I don't really care either way, but--"

"...Huh?"

The bald man was stunned by the surprisingly young voice he heard.

"I don't think the girl behind you is willing to forgive you."

Behind the bald man was Niki, who had cut herself free from the ropes with the edge of the desk.

She slammed a wooden chair down on the bald man's head with all her might.

<=>

Huey and Monica climbed up to the second floor of the abandoned house and carefully observed the situation.

People were running furiously about the streets. At the harbour a little distance away was a ship, burning in a bright red inferno.

"...!"

"It's on fire..."

Huey ignored Monica's statement of the obvious and hurriedly went over the possibilities.

*'What is this? What's going on?!
That ship... I looked into it yesterday... the drug manufacturing workshop?
Why is it on fire...?!
Is this good news or bad...?'*

"Hey."

'Who attacked them? Who could it have been?! The aristocrats?! Or did Dalton do something?!'

"Hey."

'Damn it, what now...?'

"Hey, look over here."

"Shut up, Elmer! Now's not the time--"

Another question popped into Huey's mind as he turned around mid-shout.

"So you finally turned around."

Standing there was Elmer, wearing a black cloak.

In his right hand was a pistol, and in his left hand was a white mask.

And the moment Huey laid eyes upon the brown-haired girl standing behind Elmer, he came to a disturbing conclusion.

That he had never been in so much confusion since the Witch Hunt five years ago.

And as if emphasizing this thought, Elmer stood there with a smile very reminiscent of the smiles of his mother and the villagers.

'...?!? ?!?? ?! ? ! ?!! ! ?'

As his confusion began snowballing, Huey did not even finish going over the possibilities before he grabbed Elmer by the collar and began to interrogate him.

"How did you find this place? Don't even think about telling me it was a coincidence."

"It's not. This is your hideout, right? I thought I might find you here if I came."

"...! ...How? How did you know about this place?"

"It was written on an acacia leaf I got from a passing vampire."

"If you're going to lie, at least try and make it sound convincing!"

"...How... How did you know I was lying?"

Elmer looked honestly curious. With this, Huey feebly leaned against the wall.

"Are you okay?"

Huey slapped away Elmer's outstretched hand and continued to question him.

"Who in the world are you?! How much do you know? Why did you come to this city?!"

Elmer fell into thought at Huey's uncharacteristic questions, and laughed sheepishly.

"Well, let's see now. As you can see, I'm the Mask Maker. Here to dye the streets in the blood of my victims... oh. And after you finish scolding me, I'll build an evil empire and get shot by the Three Musketeers to make everything a happy ending."

Huey sighed as Elmer obviously made things up as he went.

And the long sigh managed to return Huey to a state of calm.

Huey slowly got to his feet, quickly reached out to Elmer's right hand, and snatched the strange pistol.

"Oh!"

Elmer lost his grip without realizing it. By the time he noticed, however, it was too late. The unusual gun was pointed directly at his face.

"... Tell me the truth. Who are you? What is your purpose?"

Huey had returned to his cold, calculating self again.

And this was enough for Monica to realize what would happen: the cold-hearted Huey *would* pull the trigger.

"Wait! S-stop, Huey! Y-you can't!"

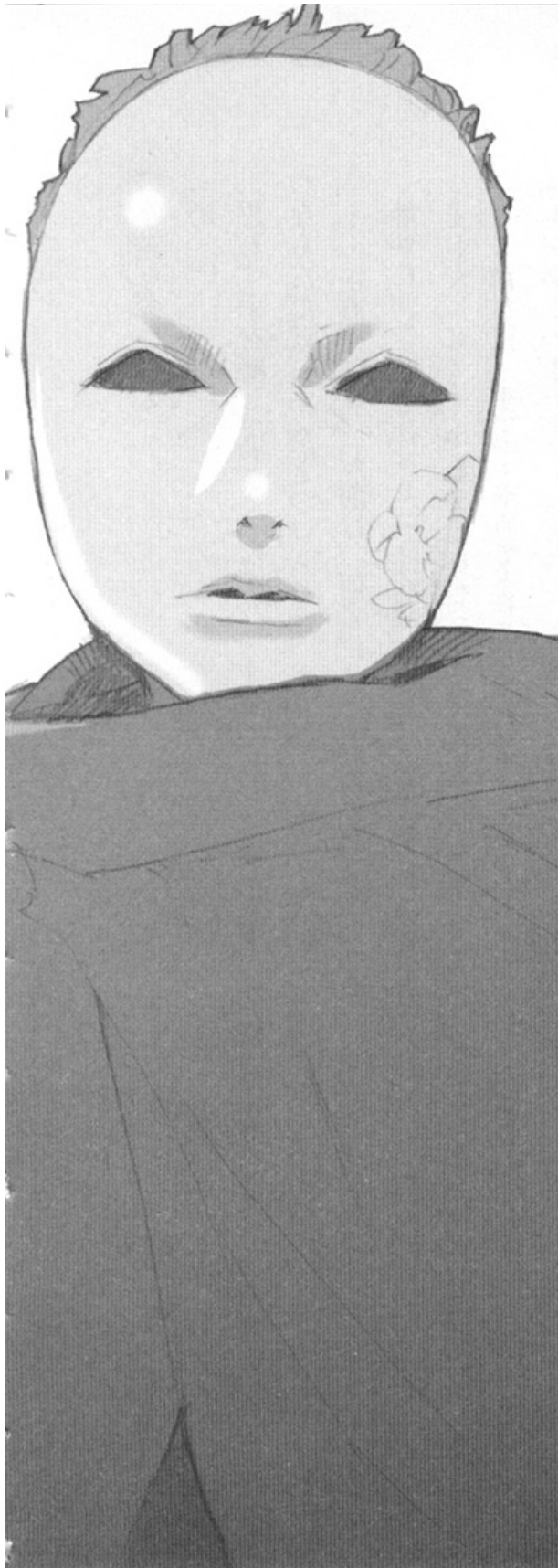
"Elmer!"

The two girls screamed at once. However, if anyone would die in this situation, it would be Elmer himself.

The brunette--Niki--was dragged into this abandoned house without so much as an explanation.

The building seemed to be private property, as it was usually locked. Niki had no idea why she was brought here, why the boy and girl she had seen before were here, why Elmer was wearing the same mask as the Mask Maker, and what she could do now that she had been miraculously rescued.

'I'm supposed to die.' Niki thought, and she moved reflexively as the boy pointed the gun towards Elmer.



Niki stepped forward to try and shield him, but stopped when she saw the other girl acting first.

Huey's eyes widened slightly when he saw the girl getting between Elmer and the gun.

"...Get out of the way, Monica."

"I refuse... No, this is wrong, Huey."

Niki suddenly realized that the air around the girl called Monica had changed completely.

"...What do you mean, 'wrong'?" Huey asked warily. Monica quietly shook her head.

"I'm... the one who told Elmer about this place."

"...What?"

Elmer fixed his mask and butted into the conversation, ignoring Huey's confusion.

"No, Monica! That's supposed to be a secret..."

However--

"Shut your mouth!"

Monica yelled sharply. The others found themselves suddenly flinching.

"From this point on... this is my business. Whatever happens is up to me."

Monica's tone had done a 180 from her usual girlish voice--she spoke coldly and roughly.

"Huh...?"

Niki came to a sudden realization.

She had figured it out.

"This voice... and tone...!"

The dots connected in Niki's head, but she could not accept the conclusion she reached. However, her memories connected the girl called Monica to a certain person.

"I... I didn't realize before, but..."

"..."

As Niki pointed this out, Monica looked down for a moment, reached her right hand behind herself, and took the white mask from Elmer.

"Hey! My mask!"

Monica ignored Elmer's complaints--

She then silently placed the mask in front of her face and smiled.

"...It's been a while, Niki."

<=>

24 hours ago, Patisserie workshop, second floor.

When Monica returned to her room, she saw outside the window--

A man wearing a strange, flimsy mask made of parchment paper. At first, she wondered if she should widen her eyes and scream, but she decided against it the moment she saw the red cloth wrapped around the intruder's left arm.

"..."

When Monica wordlessly opened the window, the man in the paper mask entered sheepishly and quietly sneezed.

"Uaaatchoo!"

"...What were you doing outside my window, Elmer...?"

Monica asked coldly, not letting her guard down against the masked Elmer.

"Oh? How'd you know it was me?"

Elmer took off his mask in awe and revealed his unchanging smile. Monica put on her usual face and asked him a question.

"...What happened to your arm?"

"Huh? What are you talking about...?"

As Monica asked this cautious question, Elmer widened his eyes and replied.

"You're the one who stabbed me, Monica."

Elmer wasn't trying to provoke her--he had a look of genuine confusion.

"..."

Dumbfounded by the situation, Monica clenched her fist, sighed wearily, and went to close her door.

Once she had locked her room and stood with her back to the door—
"How did you know it was me?"

She deepened her voice and pushed back 'Monica' deep within herself. The voice of her true self, appearing as if in replacement, had no girlishness to speak of--it was tone of bewitching maturity.

Elmer, however, was completely unfazed.

"Huh? Well, before, you held me down by the neck when you stabbed me, right? It felt exactly the same as when you grabbed me by the collar earlier."

"...You've got to be kidding. How could anyone figure that out when they've been stabbed--"

"No, no. I'm completely used to that."

"..."

Elmer spoke nonchalantly. Monica went quiet, remembering the scars she had seen that evening.

"...Was that really all?"

"To be honest, I could find some other hints. Like **your older brother**, for one."

Monica narrowed her eyes at Elmer's carefree words.

"...So when you said you heard nothing about my true self from Dalton... you were lying?"

"Huh? I never asked the Headmaster. **Your brother told me himself**. Oh, don't worry. I don't think your brother knows that you're the Mask Maker."

"...!"

"I didn't even ask him, and he told me on the first day--'She plays innocent, but try to get along'."

Elmer chatted with a hearty laugh, but Monica's tone became colder and colder.

"...Why did you come to me and not the police? Revenge for what I did earlier? Or are you planning to threaten me? Either way, don't think you're going to leave this place so easily."

The warmth faded from her voice as her eyes glinted maliciously. She was holding a stiletto in her hand and pointing it directly at Elmer's heart. Elmer, however, clapped his hands and spoke with a smile.

"That's right! I didn't plan on leaving just like this. You know, it's about that mask of yours--can I have one?"

"...Still joking around?"

Monica immediately slipped behind Elmer's back and pointed the tip of the stiletto at the base of his chin. If she stabbed with all her might, the blade would skewer his brain. Despite knowing this, Elmer continued speaking.

"If you give me the mask, I'll take the name of the Mask Maker off your hands."

"What... are you saying?"

Monica mumbled like a ghost, but Elmer responded with a genuine smile.

"That **weight** on your shoulders is getting in the way of you dating Huey, right?"

"...!"

"What made me realize for sure that you were the Mask Maker was when I saw you with Huey. Figuring out fake smiles is my specialty, you know... I can't explain it very well, but I just know. Normally, you force all your laughter, but you always smiled for real when you were with Huey."

For a single moment, Monica was visibly terrified of the boy in front of her. She could tell that he wasn't just a common hypocrite. But the moment she recognized the strangeness about this boy, Monica felt as if her heart was being softly embraced.

"You actually don't care what happens to Niki or this city. ...You just wanted to get rid of the drugs to help further Huey's plans, right? For his counterfeits, I mean."
Elmer was smiling. He was just smiling.

He smiled as he disclosed all this. He disclosed everything.

'This guy... is he some sort of seer?'

Monica's heart began racing in fear as Elmer pointed out the precise details of her true self.

"...And... Huey's counterfeits... who told you about them...?"

"I heard about that from your brother. And Headmaster Dalton told me about the fact that he's the ringleader. The Headmaster's quite a bold guy. Setting the drugs aside, he didn't tell anyone anything about Huey being the mastermind."

"..."

Monica still had the upper hand. The stiletto was still fixed under Elmer's head, ready to take his life at her will. But Monica still felt like *Elmer* was the one holding the knife.

"I can say this because I know about your past, but there's a homicidal side to you. You think nothing about human lives and burn them like pieces of paper, and you hate this world."

Elmer was speaking from the bottom of his heart, but the fact that he could still talk so calmly with a grin was threatening in and out of itself.

"But I can also say this. Your embarrassed smile in front of Huey is, without a doubt, the real thing. It almost makes you look like a different person altogether. I think *you* can make Huey smile--and I also think that Huey's the only one who can draw out 'shy smiles' from you--he's the only one that could make you truly happy. At the moment, anyway."

Monica slowly came to realize Elmer's intentions and questioned him incredulously.

"...So the reason you're here is--"

However, the answer was a series of words completely removed from the atmosphere.

"Like I said before, you and Huey make a great couple! I'm here to help make it happen! After all, it's best to get a head start on things like this. Oh yeah! I was trying to give you a scare in exchange for stabbing me before, but that didn't work out at all. Too bad."

"You think 'too bad' is going to get you off the hook--"

"Let's see... If you want to attract Huey's attention, how about you pretend you've seen the Mask Maker and act scared? Hm? That's right! If we do that, you won't be suspected of being the Mask Maker, either! All right! From tomorrow on, I'll threaten you as the Mask Maker, and you can take the opportunity to cling to him, or grab his hand..."

Elmer continued chatting, oblivious to the plots of the City Police and the events that would occur in a day's time.

As these coincidences began overlapping, time continued to pass--

<=>

Present time, abandoned house.

Huey staggered as he quietly questioned Monica.

"Wait a second. Let me get this straight. ...What do you mean, you told him about this place...? I brought you here today..."

"This is the first time you brought me here, but... w-well... you see, I... I've been watching you the whole time."

"...?"

Huey and Niki frowned as Monica returned to her normal tone of voice. Monica glanced at them periodically as she awkwardly squeezed out her words.

"You see... I've... I've been watching... for a long time now. Y-you know, Huey? You'd come here once in a while... wearing that wooden mask...?"

"Sorry. You can stop now. ...I think I get what you're trying to say."

*'How could this be...? When was I found out?
Then what was all my fussing earlier about?'*

"So... what they're saying... about you being the Mask Maker..."

"Um, well... you said before that you didn't care if I was the Mask Maker..."

'Who'd have expected that you were actually the Mask Maker?'

Huey found himself out of the strength to say anything. Elmer quietly snatched the gun back, checked the hammer, and spoke.

"Monica? I know things didn't go according to plan because of all the unexpected things that happened, but you didn't have to confess everything. Well, I guess it's a good thing I happened to save Niki while I was tailing the Police Chief. But still..."

At a loss, Elmer cocked his head and questioned Monica in a complaining tone. Monica, however, smiled and shook her head.

"I realized... I can't hand over the Mask Maker to you after all."

"But--"

"But setting the two of us aside, it won't make you happy."

"Well, I've said this a lot before, but you can set me aside and--"

Elmer was about to reply just as he had always done. However--

"...I don't need your pity."

A powerful voice signalled the return of Monica's Mask Maker personality.

"You think... that I would stoop so low?! I don't care about sacrificing others for my love. But I don't intend to receive someone's sacrifice just so I can... love... Huey... oh... um... uh.... um...."

Monica's yelling turned into stuttering as she realized that Huey was right in front of her eyes,

'So this isn't just an act?'

As Huey looked on in confusion, Elmer laughed and sighed.

"Oh, Monica."

"Um... uh, Elmer...? I..."

Niki, who should rightly be the most confused person in the room, tried to collect herself and speak to Elmer. Elmer, however, just looked outside through the window.

"Oh? Looks like everyone's gathered in just the right position."

As the commoners gathered around the burning ship, sharp objects in hand, Elmer cheerily clenched the gun in his hand.

"Well then... let's bring this carnival to a close."

<=>

"Damn... what in the world...? Who could have done this...?!"

LaRolf shielded himself from the heat as he stood before the burning ship. His subordinate officers and his masters--the leaders of the commoners--gathered at the scene of the fire. They

were all holding weapons of tools, kitchen knives, and pots, having been in the midst of an alchemist hunt.

'Wait a second.'

LaRolf was struck by an ominous feeling and prepared to order his men to disperse the citizens, but--

"Hey, what's that?"

"That's... that's not the City Police! Damn it! That's--"

It was already too late. An armed force led by a cavalry was making its way towards them from the other end of the street.

"I don't know if they're a private army or the military police, but... they're soldiers!"

As they spotted the eye-catching Esperanza leading the charge, the commoners fell into panic.

'The nerve of that garish bastard...!

Wait. Calm down. This kind of situation is exactly why the citizens aren't holding any "weapons".

They can just excuse themselves by saying they were cleaning up their tools when they saw the fire...'

As LaRolf and the commoners stood in anxiety, all thinking over the same scenario--

A clear gunshot rang out over the harbour.

"It...it can't be!!"

It was a single shot. The cavalry's horses whinnied as the soldiers tensed. The citizens, shocked by the gunshot that should not have existed, looked at each other, frozen to the spot. This allowed the soldiers to approach even closer, as a second shot rang out somewhere over the harbour. Less than ten seconds passed before a third shot was heard.

The cavalry changed formations to defend Esperanza, but the Count himself frowned as he thought over the three gunshots.

'That sound... it's my gun.

Elmer, you little bastard. What was all that about saving a girl?'

Esperanza sighed, dumbfounded, and smiled viciously.

'What do you get from helping someone like me?'

"I have confirmation that the citizens are rioting. ...I order you, as the representative of the Governor of Naples! Quash this rebellion at once, and display to the people the authority of the State!"

Although they didn't understand the reasoning, the soldiers followed the orders of their commander, the Count, and dispersed. They received the surrender of the citizens, who did not show much in the way of resistance. It was only natural, as the gunshots made them out to be a rebellion. If they resisted any further, they might end up fighting the Spanish army in the worst-case scenario.

And because they knew all this, the people escaped to the 'safety' before them--they chose to surrender to the soldiers. As if they had no other choice to begin with.

<=>

'It's exactly the same.'

Huey watched the scene unfold from the second floor of the abandoned house.

The moment Elmer fired into the sky from the roof, fear spread through the crowds. By the second shot, the fear had turned to despair.

Huey was overwhelmed by indescribable emotions as he recalled the faces of the villagers as they were accused by his mother.

The soldiers did their best to prevent any bloodshed. After all, they wouldn't want to stain their reputation by committing mass murder. The fact that the citizens were also surrendering peacefully almost made everything look like a pre-planned event. Huey looked to see if any soldiers were approaching this building.

He tensed as he watched one of the men on horseback--a man who stood out quite strangely--coming towards the building. The man stopped in front of the house, dismounted his horse, and exchanged words with Niki, who was at the entrance. His wide, owl-like eyes gave away his identity.

'That's... Count Boronial?'

Elmer, who had climbed down from the roof some time in between, poked his head out beside him, opened the window wide, and looked down at the aristocrat.

"Hey, Speran! Are you ditching work to chat with a girl again?"

"Shut up, Elmer. This matter is top priority. ...In any case, my heart is at ease to see you safe, Miss Niki. I hope that the other ladies of this city are uninjured as well."

As though bored by the fact that he was ignored, Elmer shrugged and asked a question of Esperanza.

"Oh, right. Thanks for letting me borrow the gun. Want it back?"

Elmer's thoughtless words sent Esperanza scrambling to look around for any onlookers. After confirming that there were no citizens within earshot, he spoke in a whisper that barely carried up to the second floor.

"...You can keep the gun. I can't really take it back now, after that stunt you pulled."

"Really? Thanks, Speran. You're a great guy."

"...Hmph."

Esperanza did not look up at the window anymore, seemingly having nothing more to say.

Elmer closed the window with a slightly disappointed look as he spoke to Huey, who had hidden himself behind the wall.

"Why are you hiding?"

"What good is it for me to be seen by the Governor? And you... who in the world are you? You know him? How can you talk so casually with that Count?"

"We don't just know each other. We're friends."

Elmer lightly brushed off Huey's questions and turned his focus to Monica, who was crouching in the opposite corner of the room.

"You're not gonna say hi?"

"I don't need to. That bastard's nice to girls, but I'm an exception."

"?"

Huey was confused by this information. But the ensuing exchange of words cleared up his questions immediately.

"Well, how many guys do you know that treat their own sisters that way?"

'Sister... his sister?'

"You're... his sister?"

As Huey mumbled, Monica looked at the ground with a blush. Elmer responded in her place.

"Yeah. She is. Huh? Didn't you know?"

"..."

"You see, it looks like the police were after Monica first and foremost because she's Speran's sister. Maybe they thought they could influence Speran if they framed Monica for the Mask Maker's crimes? Of course, Monica *is* the actual Mask Maker. Isn't it funny? All right, let's laugh. Why don't you join me, Huey? There's an old wives' tale that says laughing will help you live longer."

Huey stopped listening to Elmer halfway through and put a hand to his temple.

'Then... don't tell me... We managed to get out of the holding cells in less than a day because...'

As if in realization, Elmer smiled at Huey's stagger and spoke.

"Collecting information is really important, in a lot of ways. ...It prepares you for situations like this."

<=>

Niki was hesitating.

Esperanza was sincerely relieved at her safety, and he told her to come over to his manor any time she wished.

'But... I shouldn't be allowed to.'

In the end, she was never able to tell the truth about the Mask Maker to Esperanza.

It seemed that LaRolf had been arrested as a leader of the rebellion, and there was a chance that he would confess to the truth.

'I... I have to follow the others... I have to die.'

And when she told all this to Elmer, who knew about everything, he held back his smile a little and replied.

"If that's what you consider the best--and if you can die with a smile like that--I won't try to stop you. After all, however you end up dying, you're free."

"...Free?"

"Yeah. Right now, you have the freedom of choice. ... You know, I think that a person can be truly happy when they have 'freedom of choice'. I think someone who has more to choose from, or someone who's realized all the choices that they can have, would be really happy. Even if death is the only possible path--I want to help them at least figure out the choice between dying happy or dying in pain."

Niki fell into thought at Elmer's perfectly calm declaration.

She had the choice of being taken in by Esperanza, or ending her life immediately.

At a loss, she looked over to Elmer, but the boy just smiled an empty smile and looked up at the night sky. He didn't try to convince her one way or another.

While Niki thought him a bit cold, she was also grateful.

And as she savoured the multiple choices she was given, Niki made her decision.

She didn't know if it was right or wrong, but Niki wanted to believe that this choice would result in a path that would give her even more freedom of choice.

After countless choices, she might be able to find meaning in their lives. Or at least, she chose to believe so. For now, Niki decided to mimic Elmer and put on a smile.

<=>

Several hours later, the basement of the abandoned house

*'This is annoying.
It's just as I thought. The world's full of annoyances.'*

"So what now?"

"Who knows...? And why are you here?"

Elmer looked at Huey with a cheery grin, as Huey put on an obvious sulk in this room full of riches.

"'Why am I here'? I wonder why? All right, let's say that our first priority now is to think about what we're doing here. Are you okay with that, Monica?"

"Hu-huh?"

Monica gesticulated wildly and just shook her head as the conversation turned to her. Niki sat in the corner, her breathing just audible.

Huey had decided to hole up in his basement hideout until morning, as he was not interested in mistakenly being rounded up with the other commoners as the soldiers went around outside.

Once he arrived, however, Elmer, Monica, and even Niki were already there.

With all the secrets he had not been privy to this time, Huey was already feeling like he had been played like a fool by the world he hated so much. Elmer's next comment only served to irritate him even more.

"Anyway, it all ended up with a lot of people being arrested. I wonder if the people on the streets are going to be all right?"

"The people on the streets...?"

Huey was overwhelmed with rage. Elmer's remark was the last straw. It would be understandable if Elmer had been worried for individuals like family members or loved ones, but Elmer's words encompassed everyone--including the commoners who had masterminded the incident--the commoners who had tried to kill Niki.

Huey decided to vent his frustrations at Elmer before he would expel him from the room.

"This is absurd. You're telling me you'd want those petty idiots to 'be happy', too?!"

"That's right."

Elmer's response was as nonchalant as ever. Something in Huey's heart snapped.

"How much of a hypocrite are you?! Or do you think you're some sort of omnipotent god who can save all humanity?!"

"I think that'd be impossible, even for me, but... I'm free to dream, right?"

"Shut up! Talk is cheap--what good are ideals when you're trying to achieve 'peace' and 'happiness'?! What can someone like you accomplish to begin with?!"

There was no end to the words Huey had to say.

What was he seeing from the boy standing in front of him?

The villagers from five years ago? The Inquisitors? Or his mother?

'Or myself, back when I still thought the world was full of despair...?'

"It was just a coincidence this time that the people on the streets, me, and Monica were all villains. But what if none of us had any ill will? What if someone has acting out of a perceived sense of justice? You think you're powerful enough to uphold both standards and stop a tragedy? If you don't, everything you say is just going to needlessly drag people into despair!"

Huey's ranting was a conclusion of sorts.

To Huey, the person of Elmer was just an irresponsible pacifist who talked about ideals but did nothing to take action himself. But even his most hostile voice could not erase Elmer's smile.

"You're right. I can't do anything without power. I really agree with that. I think so too. I won't say that ideals are useless, but that's why I want power. I'm not going to ask for power like I'd ask a god or a king. For now, I need power to gain power to gain power... In other words, I need a foundation."

Huey frowned as he looked into Elmer's face--he had expected Elmer to shut up, but found himself breaking out into cold sweat instead. Elmer, meanwhile, slipped the mask off Monica's face and looked around the countless ornaments around the room. He spoke with a nonchalant tone.

"And... I've found it."

"...What?"

"The power to change things is right here."

"...?!"

At that very moment, Huey found himself swallowing his words, pushed back by something about Elmer.

"I've found the 'legend' of the Mask Maker, and a financial supply system in the form of these counterfeits. You two can use your systems to destroy this world. I'll control that flow of energy and do my best to build the world."

It was a simple series of words. But Huey was covered in cold sweat.

"Build... the world?"

"Yeah. After all, a world is part of an individual's mind... it's the combination of the worlds of the individuals who think that the only things that exist are things that they can see with their own two eyes. ...In other words, changing one person's mindset will change the world by the same amount.

If it's where your happiness lies, I'm not going to stop you and Monica from hating this world. ...And all I'll do is use your powers. What I want to ask now is--if I can use everything you've built up until now. Nothing more."

"..."

"Of course, I'll still wish for your happiness from the bottom of my heart."

As Huey watched Elmer saying these forceful yet strange words, he realized something.

Elmer was always laughing, but maybe laughing was all he ever did.

The moment Huey realized this, the boy in front of him began to look almost like an eerie, demonic disciple. And Huey asked a question of him to find out who he really was.

"What is it that you want? What do you gain from making people in the world laugh? Why don't you just find your own happiness? 'Your world' can't extend much farther than what you can reach your hands out to. Isn't your own happiness enough? You can just laugh your way through your own life..."

"That's exactly what I'm planning."

Elmer's smile was unchanging. It was scarily constant, as if it was his duty to maintain this expression.

"You see... I want to see people smile sincerely, but it's all just for myself."

Elmer's answer made Huey confirm this:

That the boy in front of him was the kind of human being who would not hesitate to manipulate, deceive, step on, and control other people for the sake of his own goals.

In other words, he was 'pure evil' to an absurd degree.

Perhaps the being in front of him was the most heinous of villains he had ever seen. The kind of person who--if his goal wasn't to see people's happy smiles--would terrify and sicken Huey just by presence alone.

*'No... I'm already scared and sickened.
But more than that, I'm curious.
I... I want to get a better look at this guy's thoughts.'*

The moment he realized this, Huey opened up ever-so-slightly to this curiosity about Elmer--

And after a short moment of thought, he simply said this.

"You're just... a complete Smile Junkie."

"What?"

"You can try and use my power if you like, on the condition that you keep this room and my 'business' a secret."

"Really? Hooray!"

Elmer rejoiced innocently, but Huey did not open his heart to him.

And as for Monica, she did not even think about rejecting Huey's decision.

The three had come to an understanding of one another's perspectives, but they had yet to look into each other's hearts.

At least--not yet.

And the young alchemists still did not know.

That the choices they made on this day would be the trigger for several incidents in the future.

That their decisions would bring about great chaos--in five years' time, and again nearly three centuries later.

They still had no idea. They did not know, but--

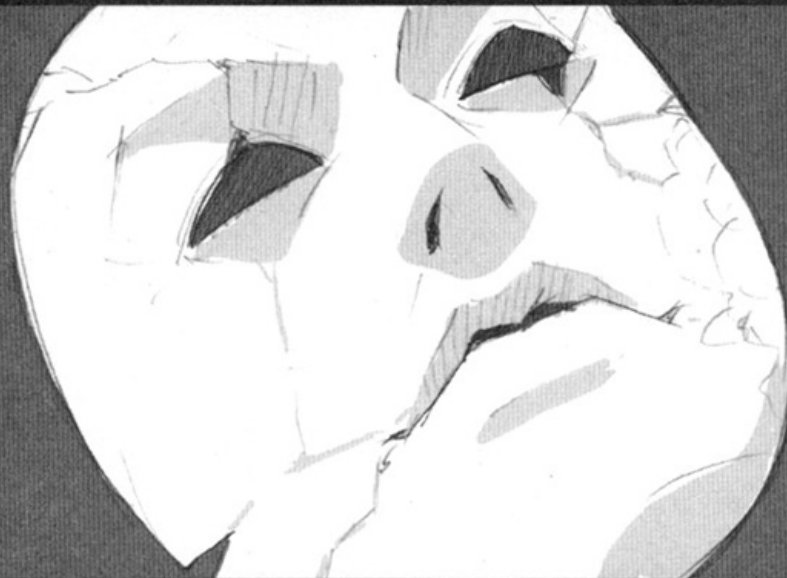
They had chosen a path, and directed their futures in that direction.

For Huey and Monica, their worlds up until now came to an end--

They now began to walk in a new world.

They walked towards the end of this world--where their next choice lay in wait.

Epilogue:



The Beginning of the Story

Dawn arrived as if nothing had ever happened.

With the exception of the still-smouldering buildings around the harbour, the morning sun rose over the streets, just the same as usual.

Aristocrats, commoners, and alchemists alike would be busy with their own circumstances, but this was too far to be visible from a certain corner of the hill.

And atop this hill, at a corner of the aristocrats' district, two shadows looked over the city.

"Ohh, looksliketherewassomesortofacommotionlastnight.
Icametosurveythisplacewhenanacquaintancetoldmethattherewereimitationsofmydrugsgoingaround, andwhatdofind? Howinsolent,
makingacrudecopyofmyalreadythirdratedrugandsellingitonthestreetslikenotomorrow.
Don'tyouthinkso?"

The fast-speaking man was dressed like a peddler. Standing beside him was Aile, the leader of the Rotten Eggs, glaring at him with a look of irritation.

"...Begg Garott. ...Do you even know what you've ended up causing here?"

The man called Begg, who wore his long, dry hair in a ponytail, stroked his unkempt beard as he looked around in surprise. He then began spewing out words like waves.

"That'sfoolishness. TheonlythingIdidwastoprescribedrugsasyourfatherordered.
Andthefirstonetooorderthedoctorsheretoproducethisdrugwasyourfather. Ofcourse,
heprobablycouldn'thaveexpectedthatinferiorcopieswouldbecreatedandproducedbythepeoplehere. Idon'treallyknowwhat'sgoingon,
butlookslikethatthingthat'sonfirewastheproductionworkshop. Ohh,
justthecolourofthesmoketellsmehowawfulthatcopywas. It'sterrible."

"...'Awful'? People who used it always looked sickeningly happy with it."

"It'sverypleasurablebutitwearstoomuchonthebody. Ifitgetsoutofhand,
itmesseswithyourheadandbreakstheuserandhissurroundings. IfIhadtosay,
Idon'tminddyinginexchangefordrugsthatcouldmakeyouevenhappierthanthat,
butinferiorimitationslikethatdonothingbutbreaktheuserandeveryoneelsegoesagainstmyphilosophies."

After speaking this much, Begg turned around and waved at Aile.

"Well then, I'll be leaving now. My teacher's family all just passed away in an accident. The only survivor is my teacher's grandson. A kid named Czeslaw who's just about five years old. Fermet, that newbie is taking care of him, but he's too nice to be left in charge of educating a kid. So I have to get back early and take care of a bunch of things..."

By the time Begg had finished, he was already turning the street corner.

Aile sighed quietly as he watched Begg disappear into the distance.

"...Are all alchemists like that bastard?"

He watched the streets in disdain, but--

A youthful, boyish voice suddenly called out to him.

"Big brother Maiza!"

"...The little brat."

As he turned around, Aile gave the boy who ran over a sharp look and yelled clearly.

"I told you not to call me that! Why does my name have to sound so much like 'Miser'? They just had to stick me with a name like this...! Wasn't it enough that my family name is 'Avaro'⁵ Well?!"

"That's not the problem, big brother! There's a huge commotion in the streets today because there was a riot last night and Count Boronial sent out his private army..."

⁵ Avaro" apparently means "Miser" in Spanish. Huh.

"...! So that hedonist finally made a move, has he?"

Aile narrowed his already sharp eyes at his brother's report, and looked down at the smouldering streets.

"I hope this changes the city for the better, at least a little bit."

Although he could not know what lay in wait in the future, the young aristocrat spoke his hope.

He searched in his heart for what he could do, as his lips spoke of his wishes.

"Whether it's the aristocrats, the commoners, or the slaves... As long as this 'city' gets better."

<=>

Several days later, the Third Library archives. Second floor.

"And therefore, um... Mr. Arnaut⁶'s theory of blood distillation⁷ made its way through generations of researchers. Professor Dalton is now one of the leading experts in the field~. Isn't it amazing?"

As Renee continued the lecture, Huey quietly sighed and turned to the next page.

In the end, the students were all released as if nothing had happened.

It seemed that Esperanza had exerted quite a bit of influence behind the scenes, but the carrier pigeons Dalton sent out had also caused other cities to pressure Lotto Valentino.

Setting the drugs aside, Huey had expected that his secret stash would be seized as well. However, there was no talk of the counterfeits--only the drugs were strictly regulated. As a result, normal days returned to them--and this was what Huey disliked.

⁶ Who is this guy? I can't seem to find out anything about him.

⁷ Ditto for this theory.

'That means... the professors knew about the counterfeits from the start and kept quiet about it?'

With this uneasy assumption that he had been played like a fool, Huey continued to curse the world as he always had.

'This world is insignificant. It should just be destroyed. ...Humans are all just...'

Just as he had reached this point in his line of thought, Huey was lightly elbowed by Elmer, who was sitting beside him.

When Huey turned to face Elmer with an obvious look of disgust, he was greeted by a familiar grin.

Elmer gestured towards Monica, who wasn't glancing at Huey anymore--she was outright ignoring Renee's lecture and staring at him through class.

The moment their eyes met, her face reddened like a lobster and Monica buried her face in her book.

'...Is she really the same person as the Mask Maker?'

In the end, the only information he found out about her was the fact that she was related to Esperanza. Elmer seemed to know something more, but Huey's question was met with a "I promise you'll find out once you come to really love Monica".

'This is absurd. What was I going on about, manipulating her? In the end, it was all just me going off on my own.'

Elmer himself, meanwhile, whispered, "It's going to be Monica's birthday soon, so let's celebrate". He began writing up a party plan in ink, ignoring the lecture.

Huey ignored him at first, but once he noticed an item on a list of presents for Monica that said, "Huey with a ribbon", he stomped down on Elmer's foot with all his might.

In exchange for dodging the stomp, Elmer fell backwards with a loud crash.

As Renee widened her eyes and the other students laughed cheerfully, Huey quietly closed his eyes.

'Come to think of it... How much did Elmer know when he took action? He said that it was a coincidence that he rescued Niki, but is that really the truth? Had he already found out everything about me from Dalton when he first talked to me?'
Huey had his suspicions about other things as well, but he decided that thinking wouldn't give him any answers and focused his thoughts on another topic.

The boy who hated the world had a book in his heart--a book that recorded the names of all the people he knew.

He decided to put a note on the pages of Elmer and Monica⁸.

Every person was labeled "enemy", but he changed these two's verdicts to "pending".
'...Hmph.'
Slowly but surely, his world began to move.

Although he could tell what change was on its way, he didn't feel very much like resisting.

After all, it wouldn't be too late to do so after he'd found out about what lay beyond the changes.

Huey sighed and slightly turned up the corners of his mouth.

And as he kept secret whether or not this smile was a fake--

The boy smiled for his own sake, hoping that one day, he would know the meaning behind his mother's final smile.

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⁸ I reversed the order of the paragraphs here because the structure gave me a headache.

It was yet again several days later.

"Now now, hurry up wagon. Hurry up."

Begg drove a luggage-laden, horse-drawn wagon towards the outskirts of town.

However, the horses pulling the wagon made their way slowly through the street, in contrast with his quick pace of speech.

Suddenly, he spotted a girl standing with an arm raised into the air.

Curious, Begg stopped the wagon right beside the girl.

"Excuse me... Could I ask for a ride to the next town?"

"Travelling by yourself, girl? What an open-minded child. I'll do what I can to help, but where are you going?"

"I'm going to spend the rest of my life... looking for a place to die."

The girl in tattered clothes smiled softly, but her words were surprisingly cryptic.

She seemed to have her own reasons, but Begg did not pry. He gestured her towards the back of the wagon.

As the girl sat against a wooden crate in the back of the shaking wagon, she blankly looked up into the sky.

And just as Esperanza had, the brown-haired girl looked up into the endless skies and quietly sang along to the rhythm of the horses' hoofs.

"The demon is coming, lantern in hand.

The demon is coming, wearing a mask.

It's coming to mask your face.

It's coming to mask everyone's faces."

The girl who sang this song with a smile was most definitely a demon and a sinner--

But she was happy.

The song of irony bounced off the luggage and faded into the skies.

And with her song as the prelude, the orchestra of irony began its performance.

So that their song would reach into the future, years--and centuries--away.

The sound spread into the world.

Deeper and deeper still.

To echo into a larger world, to sing a song of irony that still held hope.

[The End]



Afterword

Hello, this is Narita. I don't have a lot of pages, so I'll make this short.

This time, I tried my hand at writing about the meeting of young Huey and young Elmer.

One character's backstory hasn't been revealed in this book, but that will be covered in the later stories of 2002 and 1710, so please look forward to it! ...Well, it's not a very happy past, though.

Next will probably be the 2002 story. I'm currently aiming for an action-packed story of a set of two tales of atrocious idiots going on chaotic rampages. I hope you'll be able to enjoy it alongside the anime.

That's right! An anime! The anime's finally going to start airing this month!

During production, I saw the production art and got scared, thinking, "Huh? This is amazing... so amazing it's almost terrifying". I also had butterflies in my stomach when I got information about the opening and ending songs, and I was caught up in the kind of indescribable emotions one feels on a shopping trip for a school picnic, times 100.

I had a lot of stressful days, what with going to watch the voice recording sessions, but now I see that all I can do myself is to pray and keep working on this series. I'd be happy if you could all tune in! It's on a free channel, so anyone with an antenna and tuner can watch it from anywhere in Japan!

T/N: I omitted the special thanks section from the afterword. Too much work and no interesting info.

Translator's Rants

Hello, readers who managed to get this far! This is Untuned Strings reporting in with the conclusion of Baccano! 1705.

I feel like I just finished running a marathon. While my other series, Gakuen Kino, was like a relatively light jog through the neighbourhood, Baccano! was a big headache for me all the way through. (But I still love it to death.)

And as I spent only about a month translating this book, I'll be going back to make many, many edits and corrections. I'm not quite satisfied with my quality, though it's pretty much expected from such a rushed job.

I forgot to make this clear with Baccano!, but I'm translating from the official Korean version, with the Japanese used for referencing purposes. I did what I can to try and match the original, but please expect wordplay, puns, and other literary devices to have been lost in translation.

I will also echo the sentiments of Anonspore (The translator who worked/is working on 2001 and 1933) and say that Narita's writing style is a bitch to translate. Seriously? I used to *like* using dashes before I started translating this book.

Anyway, I'll try to finish up the 1934 summaries at TV Tropes ASAP and move on to translating 2002... sometime during the school year? (Don't expect me to touch 1934 with a ten-foot pole. Blame Graham, Christopher, and The Poet for talking like crazy people. Oh, wait.)

I might also try my hand at excerpts from *1931: Another Junk Railroad* that didn't make it into the extra episodes of the anime. Mostly involving Firo's troubled love life and hilarious backstory that vaguely relates to his troubles, Ladd's mysterious childhood, and Chane's not-so-mysterious parentage. And that guy everyone wishes would just die in a fire (but this last one might not happen until post-2002).

In any case, if you're still reading this, thank you for your support, wonderful readers! Your comments always mean a lot to me. I hope you enjoyed my translations, and more importantly, I hope you enjoyed this little piece of the amazing story of Baccano! that I couldn't hope to do justice. Thank you again!