

BACCANO!

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

バッカーノ!
1931-Winter
the time of the oasis

電撃文庫



Baccano! 1931-Winter
the time of the oasis

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¹ The actual Japanese here is ウサギ追いし & ウサギ美味し, which means like "rabbit chase" and "rabbit is delicious," but the two phrases are pronounced the same.

² In Japanese, one term for "anyhow" or "in any case" is *tonikaku*, which is spelled using the characters for "rabbit" and "horn," as a reference to the term *tokaku*, or literally "rabbit-horns" (which is an expression for something that doesn't exist). Weirdly enough, the origin of the expression *tonikaku* actually has nothing to do with *tokaku*; they're just written with the same kanji.

³ In the Japanese version of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the White Rabbit is called the Watch Rabbit, which makes the connection to Melody a little clearer.



"Once upon a time, here in America, there was a train called the Flying Pussyfoot that was involved in a certain incident, a singularity that brought together all kinds of lives and their respective fates. It was also the origin of various events that would happen afterwards.

"History is a multitude of threads, of lives entwined together into a great, complicated cord. Those cords then twist together to create an enormous cable.

"The Flying Pussyfoot could be called a part of that cable where all those different threads fate were noticeably condensed--a place where many threads met and twined together in a dense knot.

"That train certainly changed many lives; that's what makes it unique. Of course, the world kept on turning even as the train ran along its tracks.

"Ah, yes.

"Many fates continued to twine together away from the train as well, as if they were being twisted together into the already-tangled knot.

"The threads and fates that have once been tied together can never be untangled. No matter where those threads lead in the future, they cannot be severed from the past.

"Although, the threads that had interwoven in the Flying Pussyfoot incident twisted together with all the threads that just happened to be nearby to form another even greater knot...

"Well, no matter.

"That is a story for another time."



Designed by Yoshitake Kamekura



- P19 プロローグ
1 ウサギ小屋
2 パニッシュパニー
- P43 第一章 野良ウサギとダンス
- P87 第二章 闇に寄り添うウサギ達
- P107 第三章 パニー&ハニー
- P129 第四章 ウサギ達いじるウサギ美味し
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- P215 最終章 兎にも角にも
- P273 エピローグ お茶会帰りの時計ウサギ達

Now, let's begin the hunt.

Take your blade in hand and set out after your prey.

Dart and tremble; run fast, run far.

Don't overtake him once you've nearly caught up,

Don't let him evade you if he nearly escapes.

Round and round; sneaky and slippery.

Now the rabbit is spent; raise the blade in your hand.

Oh, little rabbit, too tired to move.

The strength is yours. The kill is yours.

All you need are courage and hope.

Now kill the rabbit, tired and worn.

After the rabbit, take the boar,

Take the boar's head, and then the deer's,

Human or demon awaits you at the end.

Whether big, whether small,

Drag them all into place, these blessings of the earth;

Cut them apart, brave warrior,

With gratitude, with greed.

Now, let's begin the hunt.

Extra Chapter

1924

Outskirts of Chicago

A farm town

"Hey, Neider! Hurry up and put those tools away! It's about to rain!"

"I hear you, Pop. Just wait a minute," the boy called back. Neider, still in his early teens, gathered the farming tools under his arm and headed towards the barn, but then paused for a moment along the way. "Ah..."

He had seen a girl a few years younger than him emerge from a house standing a little ways away, along with her mother. She smiled agreeably as her mother took her hand and walked toward the woods. The girl, with her innocent smile, was carrying a long, narrow bag on her back. It was nearly as long as she was tall, and also apparently quite heavy. She staggered along under its weight, almost as if it were carrying her and not the other way around.

The girl noticed Neider, turned toward him and waved energetically. "Oh, Neider! Good morning!"

Neider raised his own hand in answer almost subconsciously, but the girl didn't approach him. Instead, her mother took her hand and led her away.

"Oh..." The boy lowered his hand, a little disappointed.

He watched his friend get smaller and smaller as she walked away, but then his father thumped him on the back to bring him back to earth.

"Ack!"

"Hey, what're you staring off at, son?"

"Oh, uh, s-sorry." The boy hurriedly adjusted his grip on the tools as they headed toward the shed. "Hey, Pop, I've been seeing Sonja with that bag a lot lately. Where is she going?" he asked.

"..."

His father didn't answer and just walked along in silence. Neider followed him, head tilted in confusion, until they had nearly reached the shed and the older man finally answered. "...It might be best not to have too much to do with that family."

"How come?"

"I feel bad for little Sonja, but... you can't do much about her parents. They were fine before, but recently they've been kinda...anyway."

His father was being very vague.

Neider didn't want to let it go at that, but the moment he went to ask further, a cold sensation ran down his arm. "Yikes, it's raining!"

The two of them dashed for the shed.

Neider didn't think it was too important, so he never did ask more about the girl's parents.

How the boy found out about her upbringing is another story.

<=>

One hour later

A dull gunshot rang out, deep in the forest drenched by the downpour.

The mud-stained girl held a long-barreled rifle that didn't suit such a young girl at all. Of course, a young girl and a gun formed a mismatched pair already, but the gun itself was so big that a child shouldn't even be able to fire it in the first place.

The raindrops dripping from the end of the barrel had evaporated into a light mist that mixed with the gunpowder smoke, causing one to wonder just how long she had been shooting.

"How is it, Sonja? Shooting in the rain is completely different, isn't it?" her mother asked.

The daughter had taken out her earplugs, as if she had finished a session of shooting. She pouted a little, unsatisfied. "Aww, I can't hit anything."

"That's okay, Sonja. I won't teach you any tricks or techniques. You should just shoot however you want. Hitting or missing doesn't matter." The mother knelt down next to the girl lying on her stomach in the mud, smiled gently and patted her head. "You're free to do as you please. You don't have to go to school."

"Just shoot the guns you want to."

<=>

Night
The girl's house

"Oh, Sonja! What a great smell, just like gunpowder." Her father patted her head the same way her mother did.

The girl turned her lips up happily and hugged her father's arm as he lay on the bed.

It was a typical, heartwarming exchange, in a way--a father about to go to bed and his daughter.

Or it would have been, if the father weren't covered in bandages, and there weren't several gunshot wounds visible between the strips of cloth.

In that case, it would still make sense to conclude that it was a daughter visiting her injured father, but--

The owner of the room filled with guns softly patted his daughter's head and spoke to her with a kind, fatherly expression. "Is it fun to shoot, Sonja?"

"Mmhmm! You and Mama always praise me!"

"I see, I see. You're a good girl, Sonja."

The father looked affectionately at his beloved daughter. "Listen to me, Sonja. You don't need to go to school. Making friends and falling in love comes later in life."

The father, filled with love, planted the seeds of his own peculiar beliefs in his daughter's heart.

"Take good care of your guns. As long as you shoot, Sonja, you won't have to worry for the rest of your life. If someone bad shoots you, you can shoot them back if you just know how, and if life gets too hard you can shoot yourself. What you should believe in isn't arithmetic or history or science or the Bible or law or me or your mother, either. *Guns*, Sonja. If you believe in your guns, you'll live a life full of happiness."

"Huh? I don't get it." The small girl gave an honest answer.

But the man just patted his daughter's head again, even as the things he was saying didn't match the warm voice he said them with. "It's okay not to understand anything, Sonja. You'll have peace of mind as long as you have a gun. That's all you need. Your mother and I are happy because we have them.

"They're our gods, Sonja."

<=>

Neider had no idea that his friend, who didn't even go to school, had grown up under a kind of curse.

The boy was separated from the girl when he fled from the village, and how he would find out about her past is a story for much later. For the year 1935.

They would meet again during a certain event in New York, after they had grown up.

But they had a "near-miss" before then, too.

This is the story of a certain incident that the girl was involved in.

The story of the events that happened around the train called the Flying Pussyfoot, not far from the boy--the story of the incident that first pushed the girl into this great, fated spiral.

However, she certainly wasn't the only one involved.

Prologue 1 -- Rabbit Hutch

1931

The outskirts of Newark

In the middle of the forest, there was a prince who lived in a mansion.

At least, that's what the children who lived near the boy thought of him.

It was a compliment, and also intensely ironic--the boy was the direct descendent of an influential man, and in a different time and place may have been an actual prince.

However, that influential man couldn't exercise his power in the light of day.

The boy had every freedom but one. Those were the rules brought upon him by his world.

Anything he asked for, he would receive. His grandfather had a stern side to him, as one who held manners and etiquette in high esteem, but his parents were indulgent and bought him everything he wanted, all the things that normal children might have.

But the boy wasn't satisfied.

He could have been satisfied with the amount of freedom he had and grown to be an exceedingly selfish boy, but there was only one thing he wanted for himself. He was so enraptured by that one wish that he didn't have time to be spoiled.

He wanted to go outside all by himself.

To go for a walk of his own volition, all alone, away from his house, even if it was just for a hundred yards, was the only thing he absolutely could not have.

He wasn't being confined. His parents loved him plenty. And that was precisely *why* he could never be alone.

The boy's heart was beset by a sense of isolation. He sought solitude, yet was always surrounded by a crowd of people. Melancholy crept into his heart without him even realizing it.

His parents knew full well this weighed on their son's mind, but they still wouldn't let the boy be by himself.

As for why?

At the end of the day, it was because the boy was a direct descendant of a very powerful man.

He was Carzelio Runorata, "Cazze" for short.

It was the name his parents had given him, as well as what determined his position.

The Runorata Family was a mafia based in Newark. Starting with their boss, Bartolo Runorata, they were a great organization that numbered well over a thousand, if you included the lower-level members.

Yes--it was certainly an influence that never saw the light of day, and the Runorata name was proof that Cazze held a part of that power.

Generations to come would call this the Age of Prohibition.

The reasons for the ban on alcohol were varied--the belief of the temperance movement that alcohol was immoral, for one, and sanctions on the alcohol-manufacturing state of Germany for another. The high-minded ideals and cold hard math of the government combined to form an alcohol-free society, if only a temporary one.

However, what this brought about for society was even deeper corruption than before, along with a great power that began to grow from that corruption. The constraints of Prohibition turned alcohol, a run-of-the-mill recreational substance, into something as precious as a rare gemstone.

Wine was now quite literally a "forbidden fruit."

It comes as no surprise that the heavy drinkers were among those who frequented, even scrambled for the speakeasies, but even those who hadn't drunk alcohol until that point were swept up in the waves of corruption around them.

The goal of Prohibition had been to reduce the number of crimes committed by alcoholics, but once you lifted the lid, it had ironically turned even the citizens who had been previously innocent into criminals.

As if to deliver the finishing blow, the Great Depression overtook America, and the powerful uncertainty that swirled all over the world drove people more and more to

alcohol.

While the speakeasies shone with light, the leading players with the power to push aside the Depression were growing up in the shadows, commonly all lumped together under the name "Mafia." These gangsters either eluded the web of the law or just trampled it underfoot, all the while gathering immense power from their foothold in the trade of contraband liquor.

In short, the government's policy of Prohibition ended up as a breeding ground for these enemies of the law to make great advances in society.

They wielded their power sometimes with violence, sometimes as gentlemen, sometimes with eloquence, and they strode confidently through the underside of society, raised up by the shackles of Prohibition.

And one of those powers was the Runorata Family that had brought the boy into the world.

They were a large family that had put down its roots from its foothold in bootlegging, spreading its influence throughout the East in the blink of an eye.

The boy, who had just turned nine, had been able to understand a little bit about the fact that he belonged to a peculiar domain called the Mafia.

However, to Cazze, that didn't matter one little bit.

He wasn't able to go out to school, and instead had his brain stuffed full of knowledge by private tutors.

And yet, if he had some big party at the house, their neighbors would gather together all at once like in one of those "festivals" they talked about on the radio.

Cazze would meet other children there, but they would just say hello at the urging of their parents, their eyes filled with a look that said they were looking at some creature of a different species from themselves.

From where the neighborhood children stood, Cazze really was a prince. He didn't go to school, but he wasn't poor. Plus, he spoke more properly than them, and he knew twice as much as they did.

To a child, that was the very definition of a prince.

The children were told never to approach the Runorata estate, and at the parties held there, their parents all gathered and paid their respects to the owners.

A castle in the forest.

A refined boy they had never seen in school.

All the children saw him as the hero of a fairy tale. Some called him a "prince" out of spite, and some out of admiration.

But, whichever it was, they wouldn't meet him again until the next party. Even if they tried to go visit, their parents would sternly forbid it, until eventually they even forgot what the "prince" looked like.

This went on for years, and the thirst in Caze's heart grew stronger by the day.

His mental age was slightly higher than his actual age, thanks to all he learned from his tutors. He knew considerably more than children his age, too.

Caze even ate and got dressed together with various other people, and not just his parents and grandfather.

This boy, who was not yet ten, still couldn't put his discontent clearly into words--his heart was simply filled with a desire to go outside from his mansion that even had a fountain inside.

Caze's grandfather Bartolo Runorata, his children and their families lived together in the same house, but there were no other boys and girls Caze's age. His mother was Bartolo's oldest daughter, so all of Caze's cousins were children too young to be his companions. Even though they played with him and looked out for him, they were far from the friends he wished for.

Plus, even if there were friends in his house, the fact that he couldn't go outside wouldn't have changed.

Even if he said he wanted to go on a walk, there was always someone accompanying him as a bodyguard.

If he just took a look around, he would see a number of bodyguards surrounding him in a wide arc. Walking under those circumstances wasn't pleasant at all for the boy. He felt like he was in a cage, and that feeling of being watched wherever he was slowly but firmly wound his childish nerves tighter and tighter--

Until they snapped.

<=>

December 30th, 1931
Somewhere in Newark

"...unh...hah...hah..."

A small figure panted as he ran.

Cazze was dressed in fine clothes that were splotted here and there with mud. The boy dove onto the lawn and covered his mouth with both hands, doing everything he could to calm his ragged breathing.

"Was he there?" "No" "Not over here, either"

"Where the hell did he disappear to?" "You don't think the Gandors..."

"No, it looks like he went out by himself." "What for?!"

"No way!" "For now we should just tell the boss--"

The commotion approached him little by little, then passed by where he was hiding.

About ten minutes ago, the boy had hung a rope ladder he had made in secret from his window, and his escape from the hall began to unfold.

Cazze cautiously continued straight across the grass, slowly, hiding the sound of his breathing. He stiffened again at the sound of another group of voices approaching.

"This is bad." "Get the car."

"Spread the word." "Wait."

"We don't want to make a bigger racket about it."

"Does it fucking matter? We're in deep enough shit as it is, both him and us!"

"The boss doesn't know yet, does he?" "Hurry it up! We'll find him."

"Even if he did leave, nobody outside of the Family will know who he is..."

Cazze still didn't change his resolve, even though he felt the inevitable guilt at hearing the

voices in their search for him.

Outside.

I'm going outside.

He crawled through the grass, carefully remaining aware of his surroundings, and little by little put distance between himself and the mansion.

--thump--

The boy's heart was pounding audibly, or so it felt.

Freedom, freedom, freedom! his heart cried, over and over.

No matter how beautiful his mansion was, if he couldn't go outside it was nothing more than a hutch for raising rabbits. The most luxurious rabbit hutch in the world.

He never thought he might die of starvation if he left it. He didn't have the time or presence of mind to think about that.

Instead, the boy was delighted to find that even the roads he had always taken when he went for a walk somehow looked different.

Up until this point, he hadn't paid much attention to the landscape or anything like that, seeing as his consciousness was only directed at the people surrounding him, but Cazze, still a child, wasn't clearheaded enough to think about that. He was just drunk on how wonderful the scenery was, looking so different.

The boy glanced behind him. When he was sure he couldn't see any men from the house--

He ran as hard as he could for a small trail in the woods.

He ran and ran and ran.

Run, run, run, run, run! his heart cried in his chest.

He didn't think about anything after this point.

If a truck came by, he would sneak on board and go far away.

The thought occurred to the boy, below his level of consciousness, as he ran through the woods.

He didn't think about whether or not he could come back.

He could only see what was in front of him.

The boy believed that there must be something great at the end of this bright path through the woods--

And he just ran with all his mind.

And when he left the forest, there *was* something great: a small truck with a canopy over the back, parked along the road.

The boy looked behind him to make sure the men from the house still hadn't found him--

"Scuse me, I'm coming in!" he whispered, then climbed into the truck.

In the end, the boy didn't understand the essence of where he stood.

How valuable his very being was in this world--and how much danger his life was in because of that value.

Cazze, as the direct grandson of Don Runorata, would likely shoulder the burden of his great family in twenty or thirty years. Given the nature of that family, it would be appropriate to assume he would take the position within the next generation.

But regardless of all that--Bartolo's relatives would be an incredibly attractive tool for negotiation to his enemies.

Not knowing the importance of his path--

The boy escaped his spacious rabbit hutch, and, filled with hope, fled into the outside world.

Prologue 2: Vanishing Bunny

The same moment The outskirts of Newark

"So, do you actually think that'll work?"

"I told you, it's fine! 'Failure' isn't in my vocabulary!"

"I know it isn't. That's why you never learn, no matter how many failures you have."

"Wha-...now wait just a-...oh!"

"You shouldn't fight~"

Rattle rattle rattle rattle thunk

A canopied truck with a worn-out engine rattled along a country road in a forest near Newark, one it appeared they could barely make it through.

The three females in the car continued their rowdy conversation. Two of them were in the front seat, and the third poked her head out from the front of the luggage compartment.

The one in the driver's seat was a woman about twenty years of age, her hair tied back in a ponytail that swung back and forth. "So, Lana. Do you actually think that'll work?" she asked with half a yawn.

The woman in the passenger's seat rubbed her forehead and responded to the same question as before. "Huh? What? Why are you asking me again? Hey, why are you asking me again?"

Lana appeared to be in her early twenties, with sharp eyes behind a pair of glasses. Although her eyes made her look older, she could actually be the same age as the woman in the driver's seat.

"No reason. I'm just trying to add the word 'failure' to your deficient vocabulary."

"Hey! What do you mean, Pamela? What do you even mean, 'deficient'?!"

"Oh dear, looks like it's missing 'deficient,' too. Honestly, you wear glasses, but you're still so dense. Fraud."

The woman with the ponytail, Pamela, sighed in disbelief and glanced at Lana with pity.

On the other hand, Lana's face grew redder and redder as she curled her hand into a fist and shouted in a fit of near-hysterics. "That's not what I meant! So what! Do you discriminate against people based on their glasses? That's--that's lensism!"

"You misunderstand, Lana. I don't discriminate against people who wear glasses."

"Oh, r-really...? Okay, then."

"I was saying you personally are an idiot."

"Why you...youuuu....!"

"Come on, I *told* you not to fight~!"

Lana was about raise her fist, but the delicate voice from the luggage compartment stopped her in the nick of time.

"B-but Sonja! Pamela's so mean! She hasn't made any plans herself, but she just complains about the ones I come up with..."

"Your plan is so scatterbrained that there's no way for me to come up with any alternate ideas, even if I wanted to."

"Guah...y-you..."

"I'm telling you, stop fighting~"

The girl's laid-back intervention must have been successful, because Pamela and Lana just looked away from each other, and the conversation continued without any more quarreling.

"Anyway, if you want my two cents, I'll give it to you. I don't want another repeat of the art museum last year."

"That wasn't my fault! ...It was that weird couple dressed as mummies or something! If we see them again, we'll shoot both their arms and both legs! Three shots each, bang, bang, bang!"

"That would just waste bullets," Pamela told her drily.

Immediately after, Sonja innocently called from the back. "Hey, hey, Pamela, Pamela. Can I

shoot a lot on our next job?"

"...Well, it'd be best if it didn't come to that. I expect that to be a last resort, Sonja."

"Woohoo!"

The three talked like family, even a group of sisters, but their topic of conversation had a sense of violence to it.

It wasn't surprising, though.

"Well, for our next job...I actually can't come up with anything."

"Huh?"

"I mean...three girls? Pulling a train robbery?"

They were a band of thieves, after all.

The three robbers "Vanishing Bunny."

The three girls wanted to be like the famous outlaw Myra Starr (also known as Belle Starr)⁴, and they went all over the country committing organized robberies. How exactly they would reach that level was just a minor detail to them.

For the most part, they stole from gardens and committed other petty thefts before their major robberies. When they did decide to pull a big heist, it inevitably became a big mess that culminated in a shootout with the police or the Mafia. They were like a trio of tragic heroines, jinxed by some petty god.

Although, given that they were still alive after so many scuffles with gangs and the police, they could be said to be enchanted by a goddess watching over them--just one who could only bring bad luck rather than good.

The most dangerous of their crises was when they were trying to leave after stealing some jewels on display, and somehow the door had disappeared. Standing outside was a crowd that had formed--including police.

They heard later that a man and woman wrapped head-to-toe in bandages like mummies had run off with the door, and people had gathered thinking it was some kind of performance.

⁴ There's a mistake in the original here--Narita says her name was Myra Belle, but her full name was actually Myra Maybelle Shirley Reed Starr (after being married twice).

The women, who had appeared afterwards, were mistaken as part of the incident, so not only did the police remember their faces perfectly, but they chased them around for two weeks.

"I was sure that was it for us, back then. The police we can handle, but even the Mafia came after us..." Pamela smiled bitterly and began to sweat a little just remembering it.

Lana "hmpf"d and irritably reflected on their past herself. "Apparently a mafia boss carved his initials there with his first love...I mean, how the hell would anyone know that? And who cares?! If he has such a problem with it, he should take it up with the mummies!"

"Lana~, calm down." Sonja joined the conversation, scolding Lana in her usual leisurely way. Her expression revealed no anger or sadness, which made it difficult to understand how she was feeling towards their current predicament.

"The museum...oh, by the way, do you know what the train we're after is called?"

"No, I don't!"

"...I was hoping you would know, Lana. I was hoping that the one who suggested that we rob this train would know what it's *called* at the very least...!"

Pamela gripped the steering wheel with one hand while she pressed the other to her forehead, but she recovered quickly and turned to Sonja.

"That train, the Flying Pussyfoot, is pretty famous," she said, acting as if Lana weren't even there. "There's a lot of ornaments, like little sculptures, stuck on both sides of the train, so people have called it a 'Speeding Ornament' or a 'Mobile Museum'.

"Huh, really?"

"Lana, if you're going 'huh, really' at something like that, I'm gonna have to ask you all over again if you actually think this'll work..."

Train robbery had existed since the age of westward expansion as a popular form of theft, but what were three women like them planning to do? That was Pamela's worry.

"It's simple! We just have to stop the train over a bridge! If we stop it right in the middle, they won't be able to run away! Then we'll take over the passenger cars from the back...that's the plan!"

"...How do you plan to stop the train?"

"We'll set up some explosives on the bridge and blow it up!"

"Yeah that's not gonna work." Pamela pulled over to the side of the road in exasperation and immediately opened the map they had brought along for finding places to stay.

"Wha--wh-why are you already giving up!"

"Don't worry, Lana. I gave up on you a long time ago."

"Gaah! Now you just let me tell you something, you...! Hey, Sonja! Help me out, here, tell her...huh?"

When she turned around, Sonja was not there, and all she could see was the mountain of luggage piled up in the back.

Lana hurriedly poked her head through the window and looked at their cargo--and there she saw Sonja in the shadow of the pile of luggage near the front of the truck, snoring softly.

"...Well, that's fine, then. Sleep, sleep. We'll be awake the whole night, so you should get some rest now."

"We're going to find a hotel and rest, obviously. Nice and quiet."

"Just a--wait! Hold on! I'm going to tell you all the ways my plan is amazing in 100,000 words or less!"

30 minutes later

Lana's dissertation continued for some time, the truck still parked on the side of the road.

A gentle snore sounded through the window into the back of the truck, but it didn't reach Pamela's ears through the sound of Lana's frantic speech. In the end, Pamela compromised, agreeing go to the site for the time being and argue with her there, and they finally drove away.

Pamela sighed. "I wonder when the day will come when we finally end up rich..."

"Don't worry, if you just leave it to me...hey, you could even live in a mansion like that one!"

Lana saw the roof of an enormous villa through the trees, and imagined it as a part of her future, eyes sparkling.

Pamela just shook her head drily and drove the car in silence.

As she headed for a major highway, several other cars passed them. Pamela furrowed her

eyebrows. "...Looks like something happened. There's a lot of cars going awfully fast."

"No matter how you look at them, they look pretty shady. Maybe they're in some sort of fight? Let's go before we get involved."

"Yeah." She nodded in answer, pressed the accelerator, and rather hurriedly left the city of Newark behind.

And, thanks to the engine's loud, steady roar--they didn't realize it until they had reached the next city.

The sound of snores in the luggage compartment had doubled.

Chapter 1 -- Dance with a Wild Rabbit

December 30th
Evening
Somewhere in New York State

The single term "New York State" may not be enough to convey how big New York really is.

When people from outside the United States hear the words "New York," the image that comes to mind is almost always the Statue of Liberty, or perhaps Wall Street on the famed Manhattan Island. There are probably some among them who think that Manhattan is the whole of "New York."

However, if we ignore population density in favor of land area, Manhattan is only a part of a part--a borough within New York City, which is in turn a part of New York State.

And the stage this time is not the glamorous heart of the state's biggest city⁵, but in a wooded area at the furthest corner from it.

The air was thick and dense. Normally humans were nowhere to be found, but this time there was a group enveloped in their own unusually bright atmosphere.

"Alright! Let's make sure everyone's here! Count off! 1!"

"2."

"3."

"4."

"5." "6." "7." "8." "9." ...

... "19." "20."

"21."

"22."

⁵ Speaking of misconceptions, Narita actually refers to NYC as the "capital" of New York...

"Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Okay, stop, stop, stop!"

The young man who had started the count-off held out both hands in front of himself to forcibly stop them, although agewise it might be better to call him a boy. His physique and age were that of a mere teenager, just like the others around him. Nobody would say he dressed well, either. In fact, if he were a little older, he might look like a worker laid off thanks to the Depression, practicing for a demonstration.

Most of them gave the impression of delinquents loitering in the backstreets, and some of them were clearly children.

The boy who had lead the roll call for the band of ne'er-do-wells shook his head and pointed at a particular member of the group. "Chaini & Co., say your numbers. Your *numbers!*"

An Asian-looking girl wearing thick glasses stared back in dismay at suddenly being pointed at. "Hyahhaa?" she responded, tilting her head.

"Hyahhaa!" The small boy next to her followed suit, like a parrot.

The boy's eyes closed with irritation at the duo. They were like a pair of little animals. "No, not 'hyahhaa'! Cut it out with the 'hyahhaa's already!" he shouted.

"Hyayayayaya." *"Hyaya~"*

"I'm serious, you two! Jacuzzi gave me a very important mission! It may be only temporary, but it's the job of a lifetime! Failure is not an option!" the boy preached, folding his arms.

The others around him just looked at each other.

"Huh? Did Jacuzzi ask him to do anything?"

"Mmm, yeah, but he just did what he always does, beating around the bush and acting all vague about it."

"Yup, sounds about right."

"By the way, who is this guy?"

"Yeah, who are you?"

"Who? Who?"

"Nah, I don't care who or what he is...what I want is money! Hand it over!"

"If I did, would you at least say your number?!"

"Hyahhaa!" "Hyahhaa." "Die." "*Hyahhaa!*"

Everyone began to yell whatever they wanted.

"Hey, wait a sec!" the boy yelled back, rubbing his temples. "Someone just said 'die,' didn't they! The one who said to die is gonna be the one who dies! Well, okay, then! One of you guys is gonna di~e! You're definitely gonna die in 100...er, 200 ye~ars!"

"Shut up, kid." "You're even more of a kid!"

"Why'd he change his mind? Hey, why did you change it from 100 to 200 years?"

"Because I thought maybe he'd live to 115 years, asshole!"

"Wow, he's more of a worrier than I thought."

"Chicken! Chicken!"

"Hyahhaa!" "Die~"

"YYOOOOOUUUUUU AAASSHOOOLES!" The count-off boy shouted at the top of his lungs, eyes filling with tears under the onslaught of abuse--

Ring-ring ring-ring-ring

--when suddenly the sound of a bell rang through the forest, and all the delinquents instinctively looked in the direction of the sound.

"Okay~, that's enough. We're killing time, killing it dead, you know~."

"Melody..."

A girl with two blonde ponytails stood in front of them, holding a pair of handbells like those used by shepherds. She wore three watches on each wrist, of varying designs and prices, and all pointing to different times.

The girl they called Melody spoke in a leisurely voice with sleepy-looking eyes.

"We've wasted 83 seconds of our precious time just on this pointless conversation~. And

talking like this this we lose time, too, second by second~. But you know? I still have a question. A query."

"Wh-what?"

"It's about counting off out of the blue~ when we got here. We didn't count off before we left, so how would you know if the count is right or not? That's all~."

"...uh."

It was an extremely sensible question. They all looked at each other, starting with the count-off boy.

"If we assume this roll-call was completely pointless, and if we put it in seconds like before~, we've lost 518 seconds. If a human life lasts for 50 years, then each person has 1,576,800,000 seconds. It's a pretty heavy crime to make someone lose 536 whole seconds of that time~. Enough to warrant death~. I wonder if you can stand it. Hey~, can you stand it? Will you try and savor the weight of 500 seconds...? Those 500 seconds won't ever come back. The time that's gone by is dead, dead and gone. Hey, it's about to become 600 seconds soon, you know~?"

Her eyes still sleepy, she tilted her wrist so that all the watches slid together.

"Wai--, uh, I-I'm sorry! Yeah?! Okay?!"

Her voice suddenly became serious. "Nope. I can't let it slide. I thought so before, that you and Jacuzzi waste too much time. If everyone is wasting time, then nobody will notice my hobby."

The boy instinctively swallowed. "...Hobby? What's your hobby?" he asked.

"My hobby is...wasting time."

"...Huh?"

"I should know the value of time more than anyone. That's why I kill time with perfect confidence. I crush it, one second at a time~, loving and cherishing each one. Time is a monster, an endless monster, chasing people through their whole lives~, but I crush it down...it's the best kind of fun, you know? Hey, just talking like this, right now, 650 seconds of our time for today have already disappeared, you know?"

"I'm gonna knock you flat." The boy smiled faintly and grabbed Melody's wrist, still rubbing his forehead.

The others just heckled and booed him even more.

"This jerk wants to hit a girl!"

"He's a disgrace to men everywhere!"

"He's gonna end up hitting kids in the future!"

"Gck...how about I save time by clobbering you right now, instead of some kid who isn't even born yet! It'll be more economical!"

"Time is money... yeah, time is money!"

"Why'd ya say it twice?"

"Oh, I get it...he said it would be more economical, so that means I should get a dollar every time I hit you!"

"Why?!" The count-off boy shouted in a voice approaching a scream at his friend's illogical argument.

"Also, who are you, anyway?"

"YOOOOOUUUUU--"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Alright~, the world has lost 700 seconds now~."

The conversation continued unabated, like idle chatter over lunch.

However, regardless of whether they had come here to camp or not, in a forest like this, the clamoring group only seemed to be making their unease fully apparent.

As they continued chattering away, a few of them thought back to the role that was given to them.

<=>

A few days earlier Somewhere in Chicago

The group gathered together here consisted of more or less the same people as the one in

the woods, and they were listening to a serious-looking boy with a sword-shaped tattoo on his face.

"...So, me, Nice, Donny, and a couple others are gonna get on the Flying Pussyfoot, and the rest of you all will go wait for the train before it comes."

"Nope!" "No way." "*Kotowaru!*"⁶

"Whaaa?! Wh-why not?!" His proposal was shot down in no time. The boy, Jacuzzi Splot, looked around at the group, eyes filling with tears.

"Eh, I just wanted to say no."

"That's so mean!"

"It's like...uh...well, it's weird seeing you so confident. It's not like you, so I had to make it stop..."

"I-I'm so confused!" Jacuzzi was already starting to cry, an act at odds with the impression his tattooed face gave.

The group smiled, as if the sight of Jacuzzi's weak demeanor warmed their hearts.

"So, Nice," one of them said to the woman standing next to Jacuzzi. "Once we get the package, we can do whatever we want, right?"

"Yes. If there are any left over, I'll deal with them. But fire is absolutely forbidden, and please be careful not to drop them. And when we drop them from the train, I'd recommend you stay far away from the river, too."

"We get it, we get it."

They continued the review of their plan, genial and amicable. It was obvious why the review was necessary, if you thought about what the plan actually was--it would not only affect their way of life, but their lives themselves.

After all, they were going to steal some items hidden in absolute secrecy from the transcontinental express named the Flying Pussyfoot--the train sometimes even called the "speeding ornament."

Jacuzzi and Nice had considered how the plan would go, to some extent, but the majority of

⁶ This is literally written as KOTOWARU. It means "I refuse," and it's literally what the previous two speakers were saying in Japanese.

the delinquent group didn't notice. They just expressed their approval of the plan with whatever emotions they were feeling at the moment.

"So, what are we stealing again?"

"He said it 25 seconds ago and 123 seconds ago. Be sure to remember it, like you should."

"Uh, sorry. I wasn't really listening."

"Mm. We steal new bomb. Nice happy."

"Bomb? The hell, doesn't Nice already have a ton o' those?"

"But new is new, and they're supposed to be five times as powerful as regular explosives anyhow."

"Five times?!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"We'll get a lot of dough for those...!"

"Nn? We sell them?"

"I've got a relative in Hollywood who said he needed explosives for a movie."

"But you know Nice. She probably just wants to set 'em off herself."

"Well, can't do much about that. Guess I should strip to make Nice happy instead."

"Speaking of, I really wanna go swimming in that river." "Are you kidding? It's December."

"Could warm up with the gunpowder." "Oh, yeah, that's brilliant!"

"So anyway, are we gonna blow up the Russos or what?" "I like bombs, too. Years and years' worth of destruction packed into a single second."

"Why is everything about time with you, Melody?" "Putting things in terms of time is the most familiar to her, yeah? Melody builds her world on that and feels her life more deeply, yeah." *"Build on Melody and feel it deeply yeah!"* "Hey, Chaini said something that wasn't 'Hyahhaa.'" "Her little follower tried to imitate it too. Not very well, though." "It's been 13 days 3 hours 33 minutes and 24 seconds since Chaini talked normally." "You were counting!?" "Don't make shit up." "I'm serious." "Alright, if you were lying, become my little sister!" "Gehyaa." "Hyahhaa!" *"Gehhaa!"*

"Wai--wait, hold on! Calm down, everybody!" Jacuzzi clapped his hands to draw attention back to himself, needing to suppress the confusion. He forced his expression to be firm again. "Anyway, everyone, be careful. Someone might contact the police soon after, so if push comes to shove, you should say you don't know who I am. Everything should be okay that way. You could say that you were just fishing and happened to pick up the luggage..."



"Stupid. Don't say something so ridiculous. I wouldn't care if it was just you, Jacuzzi, but there's no way we'd throw Nice and Donny under the bus!"

"Ah, huh? It sounded like you said something really mean to me just now but you sounded

so nonchalant about it..." The leader tilted his head, looking a bit doubtful.

The delinquents chuckled and gave him some advice. "Jacuzzi, you better not get scared lookin' out the window of the train. I can see it now: 'Oh no, something so big made of iron shouldn't be able to go this fast!'"

"I-I'm not that bad of a scaredy-c...b-but, when you think about it, something that heavy going that fast is really amazing...what if it hit you...a-aaaaaahhhhhhh!!" Jacuzzi paled and pressed his back against the wall, imagining himself being hit and sent flying from the front of the train.

"Don't worry, Jacuzzi. We'll be *on* the train."

"Y...yeah, you're right, Nice...We'll be safe on board the train."

Jacuzzi showed her an expression of relief and thought ahead to the plan they would carry out in a few days' time.

The New York mafia had apparently bought some new explosives, and if they used them, something awful would happen in New York. Jacuzzi had decided to entrust them to Nice and sell them to a construction site right afterwards. He had chosen to steal them without another thought, but--

At the moment, there was a part of his heart that had let down his guard at the prospect of tasting a journey on a luxury train, even if it was only in third class.

He had no idea what kind of trouble he would get wrapped up in...

<=>

In the forest

And now it was the evening of the 30th.

Jacuzzi was probably already on board the train. The delinquents, believing that their leader was in the middle of a luxurious journey, made sure of their plans for here on out.

"So what do we do now?"

"Help me look for my sister!"

"I'm tellin' ya, you don't have a sister."

"Can't we just bum around the woods like this until tomorrow morning?"

"It's December!" "We'll freeze to death!"

"It'll be fine as long as you don't fall asleep."

"Let's start a fire." "Yeah, set the forest on fire."

"Dumbass! We're picking up explosives, so we're not allowed to use fire, remember?"

"I don't think that's the problem..."

The girls eyed the boys and their incoherent, unproductive dialogue from afar. Melody, Chaini, and the other girls calmly checked the map and sorted out their situation.

"We don't know exactly when the train's gonna pass by, but we can't do anything about that, you know? On the other hand, if we come too late the explosives will get washed down the river...Plus, it takes time to get the boats in the water," Melody said, looking towards the two trucks behind them.

A boy who could drive had borrowed them from a station nearby, along with a few boats. They didn't know where he got them or what kind of connections he had used, but one truck carried the boats and the other carried the people.

There were around five girls, and five times as many boys still making a racket. But as their surroundings became darker and darker, more and more of them moved over to the girls and looked at the map seriously along with them.

"Soo if we stay out like this we're going to freeze, so what should we do? Maybe we could all warm up together in the truph." One boy stuffed his mouth with stale bread.

Sleepy-eyed Melody leisurely pointed to a location on the map. "Hmmm. Look here, there are a few bungalows hunters use in summer. So let's use those~. Even if someone's already there, they might let us at least have some blankets and fire. If no one's there, we can just use it for 10 hours or so~."

<=>

The same time Somewhere in New York State

As the delinquents headed off to the bungalows--

Not too far away from them, the band of thieves and their truck were once again parked on the shoulder of the road.

"What's the matter? We're almost there, aren't we?"

The place Lana had chosen for the robbery of the Flying Pussyfoot was a bridge over a river that ran between New York and the Great Lakes. It was a moderately long bridge, and they could make their escape in any direction. If they wanted to head for Canada, all they needed was money.

That was their logic, although really they had chosen this point without considering any alternatives. Because of that, they couldn't do anything if they didn't scope it out in person first.

Pamela had figured this out back around noon, so they had driven the poor old truck all the way here.

"Ah, it's because we're out of gas. We need to fill up." She checked the gauge and turned off the car for a second.

Gas stations were already in existence at this point in time, but they hadn't yet come to cover the whole country. Many travelers carried their own gas in drum cans and barrels. Pamela and the others were no exception; they wandered around the country with a number of casks of gasoline in the back of their truck, too.

"I'm gonna check the map for a bungalow or something around here, so will you fill up the tank?" Pamela said, already unfolding the map.

Lana had already decided that she didn't want to go outside at all, but she clicked her tongue and opened the door. "Honestly. I'm the one who does all the thinking around here. What are we gonna do if the gas fumes make me stupid?"

"I'm not worried. I don't think you can get any stupider."

"...I hope you get into a wreck or something!" Lana grumbled. "...Oh, wait, no, then I'd get hurt, too..."

Pamela watched her go and calmly checked the map.

Up ahead, there was a cluster of bungalows used by hunters in the summer. If they did end up actually carrying out their plan to rob the train, they should probably use that place as their base.

And as Pamela marked the location with a pencil--

"Hyaaaaa!!"

--she heard a hysterical scream from the direction of the back of the truck.

"...? What's the matter? Did you spill the gas on yourself? If so, I could light a fire to warm you up. Forever," Pamela quipped from the window, although it wasn't a laughing matter.

Lana didn't respond.

"...?"

Pamela furrowed her brow doubtfully, folded the map and got out of the driver's seat herself.

When she looked back, she saw Lana staring into the canopy over the luggage compartment, gaping like a fish.

"What's the matter?" Pamela sighed, walking around to the back. "Did Sonja take off all her clothes a...gain...?" She stiffened, just like Lana.

What they saw under the canopy was--

A small boy they had never seen before, snoring happily.

ZZZZZZZZ ZZZZZZZZZ ZZZZZZZZZ ZZZ

<=>

The same time In the forest

After the delinquents had driven off with their boats--

Some people watched them go from afar, whispering emotionlessly to each other.

"...Are they gone?"

"What do they want? There's no way they're camping this time of year."

"They were probably planning to do drugs or have some lascivious party. I think they gave up because of the cold."

The men turned back towards the depths of the forest with grim expressions, dressed in what looked like military uniforms.

"Let's go back to the site. The plan will begin in less than two hours."

"Yes, sir."

The men silently began to walk. The man among them who appeared to be the leader smiled faintly. "If we can manage it, I hope our negotiations will be successful the first time around," he muttered.

"I suppose it is for the sake of the revolution....**but I would prefer it if Comrade Goose didn't blow off a child's head, after all.**"

And so they headed in the direction of the bridge.

They were a detachment of the terrorist revolutionary group called the "Lemures." They served as the negotiators, as well as the messengers who would relay the results of their negotiations to their allies on the Flying Pussyfoot.

Their plan was incredibly risky, taking a senator's wife and daughter hostage.

But they had absolutely no doubts that the plan created by Goose and their comrades would have any outcome other than success.

However, that was only natural.

They had no way of knowing what else would be on board the train, after all.

<=>

The "Vanishing Bunny" truck In the luggage compartment

"...So I want to make sure I've got this right. What's your name?"

"Carzelio...Carzelio Runorata."

"Okay, we'll call you 'Cazze.' Cazze, where did you get in our truck?"

"I'm sorry...um..." The boy looked down in apology.

Pamela patted him on the head to reassure him and spoke kindly. "Don't worry, we're not mad at you. We were just a little surprised."

"Th-thank you... When I ran away from my house...the truck was right there, and I got in so they wouldn't take me back..."

"I see...well, I'm glad you didn't fall out of the back while you were sleeping or anything. Sonja, you take care of him, okay?"

"Ummyah?" Sonja mumbled from inside the truck in response with bleary eyes. She was already awake, but she was still drowsy. She still didn't seem to have a full grasp of the situation.

Pamela left Cazze to her and pulled Lana away for a moment.

"He probably climbed in right after Sonja fell asleep." Pamela took Lana to a spot a short distance from the truck, calmly considering the boy.

He was stained with mud here and there, but he was dressed in clothes that were clearly different from normal children's. Of course, there was nothing unique about the clothes themselves, but even an untrained eye could tell that they weren't clothes a normal child would wear--they were created to give an aura of class.

If someone said the boy was a descendant of English aristocracy, they would have no choice but to believe it. Lana's eyes were positively sparkling.

Pamela sighed with a troubled expression. "I never thought we'd pick up a runaway."

"I'd say from his appearance that he's definitely from that incredible mansion. We could get a week's worth of a small-time banker's wages just for his coat, or...we could even get a whole month's worth!"

"I wonder what he thought he was missing out on, living in a huge house like that."

Remembering the great house Lana had pointed out, Pamela even felt a little envious of the boy. *But then again*, she thought, *rich people must have their own worries*. She didn't try to offer the boy any advice. *Robbers like us don't have any room to talk in the first place*. Pamela smirked inwardly.

Lana's glasses gleamed as she shoved them up on her nose. "I just had a great idea! Hey, let's kidnap him and get ransom money!"

"You say that like it's nothing. ...Although, to be honest, I thought the same thing for a

moment..." She clicked her tongue in embarrassment as having thought the same thing as Lana, even if just for a moment, then fell into thought--then decided to agree, although with some conditions. "I think it's a better plan than a train robbery...But try not to let him know he's been kidnapped. It'll be trouble if he gets scared and tries to run, and I don't want to traumatize him."

"What if we shoot him in the legs?"

"...Are you actually asking me that?"

"I'm kidding, of course!" Lana looked away as a cold sweat broke out over her forehead under Pamela's fierce glare.

On the other hand, Pamela thought back to the feeling of unease she had had for a while now. "Even so, I feel like I've heard the name 'Runorata' somewhere before..." she muttered to herself.

"Well, obviously, it's the name of the rich family that lives in that big house! You heard their name on the radio or in the newspaper, but you just weren't interested enough to remember."

"...I guess."

Although she wasn't completely satisfied, Pamela just couldn't remember. She just decided to suppress that feeling of unease.

"Aww, yay, you're so cute! Just like Neider when he was little!"

"P-please stop! And who is Neider?"

When the two returned to the truck, Sonja was petting Cazze's head like a cat.



Lana smiled reassuringly at Cazze, who was turning bright red. "Hey, Cazze," she asked. "Do you know your phone number?"

"Huh? U-um...are you going to call my house?"

"Oh, it's okay! We aren't calling them to come get you. But...you disappeared so suddenly, your family is probably worried. So we just thought we would let them know you're okay. Either way, you're going to go home tomorrow, right?" Lana smiled and adjusted her glasses.

Cazze looked a little hesitant for a moment. But, as if he had finally decided that the three women were trustworthy, he obediently gave them his phone number.

And as a result, another seed was planted into the commotion.

<=>

The outskirts of Newark Inside the Runorata mansion

[I'll be home by New Year's. Please don't worry. And it isn't anybody's fault, so please don't get mad at them.]

The oldest grandson had disappeared, leaving a note behind.

Bartolo Runorata, the don of the Runorata Family, sighed with a look of chagrin upon hearing the situation. "Hmph...his current environment certainly is strict for a child his age." He appeared to be over 50 years old, with wrinkles carved into his face that were neither shallow nor deep, and a pair of intellectual glasses that sat over his solemn face. "But he's more of a go-getter than I thought, most of all," he muttered.

"This isn't the time to be talking about that, boss!" Cazze's father cried frantically at his father-in-law. "That's exactly why the kid doesn't know about the outside world! I'm serious! He has no idea how dangerous it is!"

"You were the ones who brought him up that way, aren't you?"

"Ugh..."

Bartolo didn't say anything more than what was necessary about his grandson's upbringing. He taught him the manners suitable to a boy his age, but he essentially respected the perspective of his daughter and her husband. Even though he had raised his concerns a few times that their refusal to let him go outside was like keeping him in a box, in the end he deferred to his daughter's will.

This isn't the kind of incident that I need to take care of personally, to begin with.

His son-in-law's subordinates were looking desperately for the boy, but Bartolo didn't spare any more of the Family's men than he had to. It wasn't that he wasn't worried about his grandson--he just couldn't agree to recklessly making a fuss and alerting other Families.

*This case doesn't involve **us**. Yet.*

On the one hand, he was worried; on the other, he wasn't completely unmindful of his

grandson's feelings. It would also be wrong to drag the boy back kicking and screaming, he thought, so he decided it wouldn't hurt to just send a couple of bodyguards. They would find him, but not alert the family immediately.

In stark contrast to the grandfather's attitude, Cazze's father was clearly uneasy. He jabbed a finger at the ones responsible, Cazze's guards standing nearby. "This is all because you weren't watching him properly...!" he shouted.

"Put your finger down."

"...!"

Everyone around him held their breath at the quiet pressure in Bartolo's voice.

"Uh, boss, he's not wrong. It is my fault."

"That isn't for you to decide." The bodyguard seemed about to propose his own death, but Bartolo just spoke quietly. "If Cazze came back and found out that the ones who have taken care of him had been punished, it would be quite a shock to him. He would never have thought that a little trip out of the house would cause you to lose all of your fingers on both hands."

"..."

Everyone knew that that was not just a hypothetical example. Even Cazze's father felt sweat on his back.

They weren't making any progress, and as an uncomfortable silence fell over the room--

A man who looked like a butler came in and whispered something to Bartolo.

"Oh...?" Bartolo's eyebrows raised slightly, and he stood from his chair without changing his expression.

"Boss...? What happened?" Cazze's father asked uneasily, concerned by his father-in-law's reaction.

Bartolo spoke quietly, calm as ever. "We got a phone call asking for a ransom."

"Wha..."

"They said to bring cash to a bungalow that they specified, and not to contact the police. I find it quite amusing that they are more afraid of the police than of us, myself."

"N-n-no! There's no way! They...they can't have kidnapped Cazze!" The father's face paled.

Bartolo replied, completely unperturbed.

"If that's the case...I should at least send out someone appropriate for the job."

<=>

And only a few minutes later--

Two motorcycles roared out from the Runorata mansion.

Both of the vehicles had been modified to easily race more than 60 kilometers per hour⁷ down the dark road.

The two men who straddled the bikes were dressed in shiny shoes and stiff tailcoats, as if they had been called straight from a party. They appeared to be identical twins. They both wore goggles over identical faces, driving their bikes as expressionlessly as machines, but--

When they were some distance away from the mansion, their bikes running at top speed--the two began to ride side-by-side in formation, and their lips turned up in perfect sync.

The twins were bodyguards under Bartolo's direct supervision, and even in the Runorata mansion they almost never opened their mouths for anyone other than their boss.

Their hearts were alight with excitement over the prospect of a "hunt." It had been too long since they had received such a mission.

And, at the exact same time, they opened their mouths and began to sing a strange song.

♪ Now, let's begin the hunt.

	Take your blade in hand and set out after your prey.
Dart and tremble; run fast, run far.	
	Don't overtake him once you've nearly caught up,
Don't let him evade you if he nearly escapes.	
	Round and round; sneaky and slippery.
Now the rabbit is spent; raise the blade in your hand.	
	Oh, little rabbit, too tired to move.
The strength is yours. The kill is yours.	
	All you need are courage and hope.
Now kill the rabbit, tired and worn.	
	After the rabbit, take the boar,

⁷ A little under 40 mph, if you're from a country that doesn't use the metric system. (...america)

Take the boar's head, and then the deer's,
 Human or demon awaits you at the end.
Whether big, whether small,
 Drag them all into place, these blessings of the earth;

Cut them apart, brave warrior,
 With gratitude, with greed.

Now, let's begin the hunt. ♪

Singing like children going on a hike--

The two continued on their motorcycles at top speed, driving into the night excitedly.
Delightedly.

Their voices were drowned out by the sound of the engine and the wind rushing past. Even though they were side by side, their voices didn't even reach each other.

Even so, they sang at exactly the same tempo, in exactly the same rhythm.

As if singing the prelude before the curtain rose over the commotion that was about to begin.

Extra Chapter

193X Restaurant and bar "Alveare"

"Say, Isaac."

"What's that, Miria?"

"Have you ever been to the circus?"

"Of course! I went to see it once when I was little! Well, probably!"

"Probably?"

"That's the thing, Miria. I remember that there were all kinds of animals doing things, but I can't remember if it was the circus or the zoo. But don't worry about the details!"

"Okay!"

"So why do you want to know about the zoo, Miria?"

"The circus, Isaac. Oh, yeah! Firo said his friend was in the circus a long time ago! He can do all kinds of things, like tightrope walking and flaming hoops and knife-throwing!"

"Amazing! Just what you'd expect from Firo!"

"You mean *Firo's* amazing?"

"Of course! People with amazing friends can learn how to walk a tightrope from them whenever they want! In other words, if Firo ever decided he wanted to walk a tightrope or jump through a flaming hoop, he could do it! And if we throw a knife at his head we'll always hit the apple on top of it!"

"Wow!"

The same scene as always played out in Alveare, Isaac and Miria's conversation included.

And, same as always, Firo's bewildered voice rang out in response. "Are you serious? No

way," he said.

Isaac and Miria widened their eyes in surprise at his denial. "Huh?! So you're not amazing, Firo?!"

"You're not amazing?"

Firo gave them a look. "Uh, no, it's not a question of whether I'm amazing or not..."

"No worries, Firo!" Isaac laughed. "Even if you're not amazing, Miria and I like you anyway!"

"It's amazing that you're not amazing! You're so cool, Firo!"

"...Ah, yeah, well. I'll just accept the sentiment and leave it at that." Unsure of how to respond, a complicated mess of expressions rose to Firo's face.

"The circus?" Ennis' voice sounded from behind.

"What, are you interested, Ennis?"

"It certainly sounds like something everyone enjoys," the alchemy-born homunculus inquired sincerely.

"Eh?"

"I'm sorry, Firo...I know the definition of the word, but I have no memories within me of actually visiting the circus, so I don't have the emotional response. What makes it so pleasant?"

"Uh...that's, um, I dunno..." Firo didn't know how to answer such a sudden question, especially when Ennis looked so serious.

One of Firo's bosses had been listening from his seat at the counter and chimed in to help him out. "A big part of it might be that people can see things that surpass the limits of their imaginations."

"Limits?"

"Yes. People have an idea of what's possible for humanity, but things like acrobats at the top of their game and performances by trained animals surpass the limits of what they've imagined. It's uncharted territory, pure and simple. Maybe the wonder of laying eyes on it stirs up something in their souls."

"Yeah...that's right! There was one time when I saw this great big pumpkin, bigger than I'd ever seen, and all I could say was just 'Whooooaa!'"

Maiza continued from Firo's example. "Exactly. When you see something that goes far beyond your expectations, people may shout with excitement, or even get scared. Both happen quite often."

"Yeah, I guess you can't say people get too thrilled when they see a giant bug..." Firo said.

"Hey, boys, don't go talking about giant bugs in a restaurant," Sena called from behind the counter. "People will think we have roaches!"

"Then don't yell it so loud, Sena!"

"I wonder why everyone hates cockroaches so much?"

"Not you, too, Ennis!"

Isaac and Miria watched Firo and the others as they went back and forth.

"Hmm. I don't really understand, but it seems like they can't decide if big things are incredible or scary!" Isaac commented.

"It's incredible! *And* scary!"

"But if you were as big as a skyscraper, Miria, dear, I wouldn't find you frightening at all! It'd be amazing!"

"Really? Wow, thank you, Isaac!"

Firo caught a little of their conversation, lost as the two were in their own little world. "...To me, what's scary is how innocent your minds are," he muttered to himself.

"Not that I mind it, though."

Interlude

1931
December 29th
Noon

Jacuzzi's gang was still in Chicago, and Cazze was still studying quietly in the Runorata mansion--

And a lone child was playing in a forest in the northern part of New York state.

His parents had told him never to go there alone.

There was a river that ran through the middle of the forest with a railroad bridge over it, and a road that led up to the bridge. It wasn't the kind of forest where he would get lost forever.

But the forest was still the forest, no matter how deep it was. The child's parents had always heard that from their own families, and it certainly wasn't a place to go unprepared.

But he had still come.

He was here to prove that he had grown up enough to walk through the forest alone-- simply put, it was a test of courage. He hadn't been threatened by any bullies, nor had he made a bet with any of his friends. The boy had come here on his own.

There were no coyotes or wolves or boars here. He walked around the forest feeling a little let down by the anticlimax. But if he were an adult, he might have noticed that things were already out of the ordinary.

There weren't *any* wild animals--no wolves, but no deer or dogs or rabbits, either. You could say it was because it was winter, but there was no trace of any animals. It was too quiet.

That was why he saw it.

Something that was still in the forest, something he shouldn't have seen.

He saw "him."

The boy didn't make any contact up close.

Very far away, so far his eyes could barely even tell if it was real or not--"he" was there.

The child was far, far, far away. He should be safe.

Yet his body was frozen.

A sound reached his ears--*clickclickclickclickclick*.

He didn't realize that it was the sound of his own teeth chattering.

That was how overwhelming "he" was.

"He" only looked about as big as the insects flying around him, but the boy knew how frightening "he" was. He understood by instinct, almost forcibly so.

Suddenly, "he" turned his face towards the child, and that was the signal for the boy to dash away from there as fast as he could.

It was only a few minutes, but it felt like ten years to the boy. He didn't know how or where he was running, but by the time he came to he was in front of his house.

And, without revealing what happened to anyone, the boy crawled into his bed and trembled, hoping what he had seen was just a dream.

It was the only thing he could do.

Chapter 2: Rabbits Huddled Together

The children had nowhere to go. That's all.

There were many reasons why they had lost their direction, of any and all kinds. You could find any reason among them, whether they brought it on themselves, lived off the kindness of others, or had fallen prey to a laughable twist of fate from a comedy of errors.

On the other hand, you could say that the reason why didn't matter in the slightest.

The aimless children just wandered in the currents of the city, lost among the voices of others. Like withered leaves in the wind, they finally drifted into a number of separate places.

The ones here were nothing more than that--a pile of leaves formed by the wind.

What was different about this group was the small sack in the center of the pile. It could take in any number of leaves. It was thin, it was fickle, but it would never break.

What Jacuzzi Splot had could be called "virtue," perhaps. He was much more cowardly than most, but his actions themselves were truly audacious.

He had gotten his hands dirty bootlegging in the city of Chicago, which put him on the wrong side of the Russo Family. Eight of his friends had been killed as a warning.

Normally, one would either retreat in fear or go down in the fight, filled with rage all the while.

But the youngsters that had gathered around Jacuzzi were not exactly normal.

They had attacked several of the speakeasies and moneylenders under the management of the Russo Family simultaneously, and they did so much damage as a result that they shook the very foundations of the Family.

Not a single one of them retreated.

Not a single one of them opposed the plan, either.

It wasn't that Jacuzzi was so powerful. He didn't have the charisma to make people serve him, and they didn't owe him any particular debt.

The ones who surrounded Jacuzzi just knew from experience.

They knew that maybe, just maybe, this crybaby himself was where they would come to rest for good.

Before, they had been blown around by the wind, destined to disappear with no way out.

But the one who had taken them in and created a place for them to belong--that was Jacuzzi. If they lost him, their fate would be that of withered leaves on the side of the road, crushed underfoot.

And before they knew it, they had become a rowdy mob, just a closely knit flock of crows--

And sometimes they had the strength to rip out the throat of a wolf.

One by one, as if captivated by their flock, more and more of these aimless youngsters drifted into the pile until they had the strength to challenge a small gang.

Whether Jacuzzi wished for it or not--

They were always growing and maturing.

<=>

Night
Somewhere in the woods
Bungalows

ring ring ring ring

The sound unbecoming of a wintry forest rang out into the night, followed by Melody's clear voice. "Okay everyone~, it's time for our meeting~. Gather around in about 28 seconds, okay~?"

There was still some snow left here and there from yesterday in the great forest laid out around them.

A number of large bungalows for hunting season stood next to a road that ran through the forest. They were deserted, awaiting the arrival of hunters who typically inhabited them.

Or they should have been.

Over 20 boys and girls were gathered in front of the biggest bungalow, chatting freely, with one girl ringing her bells.

"What do you mean, 'about' 28 seconds..."

"Why's Melody in charge?"

"Eh, doesn't matter who it is."

"Then I should be able to do it, too."

"No, you're the exception."

"Why?!"

"...because I hate you..."

"Geez, don't just say it like that! Have some tact, mislead me or something! If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!"

"Heeey, it's cold out here. Let's go inside!"

"Is it okay for us to just barge in here and use these...?"

"Well, it's not like we're stealing anything, just getting out of the cold. We should be fine."

"What's most important is taking care of food."

"No, what's most important is finding my sister inside."

"What."

"Hyahhaa!"

"Wait, I'm really hungry."

"That's not my problem, stupid."

"I wonder if we can eat the walls or something."

"The hell are you talking about?!"

"I mean, the cabins are made of wood, right? Trees are plants, so we should be able to eat them."

"I heard if you fry it up in that tiger oil stuff you can eat it."

"Tiger oil?"

"You mean butter?"

"Like the ones that ran around the trees?"

"I get it...yeah, tigers and trees do have some close connection."

"No they don't."

"Hyahhaa!" "Hyahhaa!"

It was chaos, a simple, rowdy exchange. What they actually said wasn't the point, only the words that came one after another that served to assert their presence there. But even so, they genuinely enjoyed the exchange of words that formed a sort of bubble around them that protected them from the desolated atmosphere of the forest.

Melody waited exactly 28 seconds after she had finished her proposal, then rang the bells in her hands again.

Ring-ring-ring-ring

"Oka~y, quiet now~, quiet down. Now, we have to kill the time until tomorrow morning, but..." Melody's sleepy eyes lit up with fresh sparks of excitement. "Aahh, 'killing time'...what a great expression. We live our lives ruled by time, but we have the wonderful luxury of killing it. Wasting time is an even more extravagant luxury than wasting money, in a way!"

"O-oh, really?" One of her friends cocked his head to the side.

Melody nodded with the smile of a girl in love. "Of course! We're wasting the limited time of our own lifetimes, whiling away our very lives~! Isn't that a luxury?"

"I'm not so sure that's a good thing. Nobody's gonna credit you for that."

"If I just wanted people to credit me for things, those things wouldn't be luxuries~. Ah, we have to kill time now, any way we can! Time is too good not to! We all have to kill time, as soon as we can!" Melody rang her bells as she got more and more excited.

The delinquent deliberately shook his head. "Sometimes I don't know if you're smart or just stupid," he muttered.

The other delinquents around him jumped on the chance to join the conversation.

"You don't know that, either? Wow, you are stupid."

"I know... Hey, Melody, what's 35 plus 26?"

"Hm? 61."

"Whoa...she can add two-digit numbers...well, she's smarter than you."

"Yeah, you don't have any room to call Melody dumb, at the very least."

"Hyahhaa!"

"*Hyahhaa~!*"

"Y-you assholes! Don't butt in! And you just think I can't add two-digit numbers?! Of course I can!"

"It's okay, no need to hurt yourself."

"Grrrrrrr!"

And as the conversation once again drifted off into something inane, Melody's bells rang again.

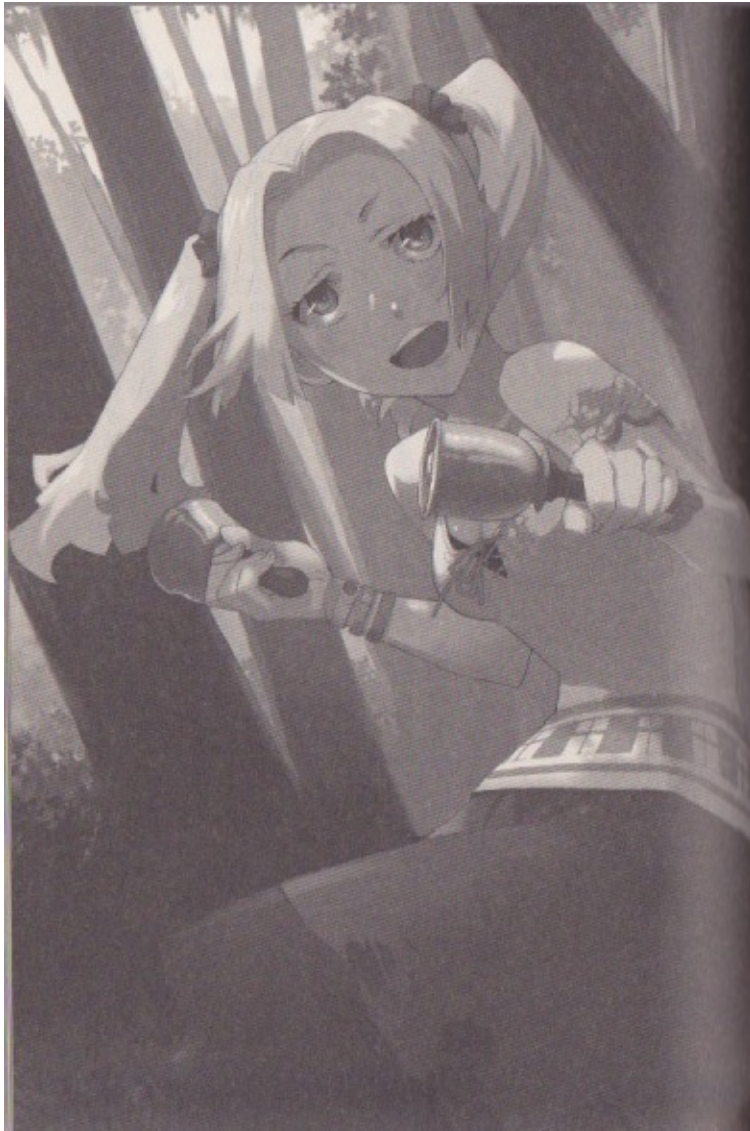
Ring-ring, ring-ring.

The sleepy-eyed girl spun around to the rhythm.

Around and around, around and around, as if she was in a musical, with the forest as her stage.

One of the delinquents spoke up. "...What's up with the dance, Melody?"

"I dunno. I just wanted to dance to kill the time! It seemed like the right thing to do." Melody puffed out her chest proudly.



The delinquent boy held his head in his hands with a loud groan. "...Oh, come *on*, can we *please* just talk about something that has a point?!"

"A point? We're killing time until tomorrow morning, aren't we~? So while we're waiting here like this, everything we do has a point. Waiting is super important! Wow, it's amazing! What an important way to kill time! What a marvelous luxury, killing time!"

"Dammit...you're gonna look back one day and regret all the time you've wasted, you know..."

Complaining all the while, the delinquent boy took a look around at the others. One of his front teeth was cleanly broken off, as if he had lost it in a fight.

He felt the chill of the forest anew. There was the fact that no one else was around, but the climate of the area was already considerably more bone-chilling than their home of Chicago. In fact, given how cold it was, it was surprising that there wasn't much snow now that it was winter.

"Well, whatever. Let's go in the bungalows. If we stay like this we'll freeze," said the boy with the missing tooth, and the gathering of youngsters trickled into the cabin.

But Melody suddenly stared at the road that passed by next to the bungalow and tilted her head to the side, mystified.

"What's the matter, Mel?" one of the girls of the group asked.

Melody rang her bell once. "Hmm..." she muttered, narrowing her eyes, "I just thought it was odd. All those tire tracks."

"Huh?" "Hyahhaa?"

"I didn't think this was the kind of place lots of cars drive around...well, whatever." Melody decided that there was nothing she could do even if she thought about it more deeply, and headed into the bungalow.

She smiled blissfully, looking at the plethora of meaningless watches on both her arms, thinking of the time she would kill later.

"I just hope nobody else comes in the next 13 hours 21 minutes and 53 seconds."

All they had to do was kill the time. That was it.

That was why they didn't carefully inspect the row of bungalows.

They entered the bungalow without realizing that something was lurking in the building furthest from them.

And the curtain rose over a long night for the young delinquents.

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Bungalow #7

"He" wasn't supposed to be there in the first place.

"He" should not have been there, in more than one way.

His birthplace was not here. It was far to the west, in northwest California.

"He" had not seen his family in a long time, having been separated from them when he was still very young.

By the way, "he" didn't know that there was nobody like him near here, not to mention his family.

On the other hand, humans would never know what "he" thought.

"He" could only communicate through his actions--although he was only snoring now. He was in the furthest cabin from where Melody was.

A great quantity of food was piled up in front of him. Of course, "he" didn't know that normally, the food would already be stuffed into his belly, and that he had to sleep for a long, long time until spring.

"He" was by nature a light sleeper among his species, but something had interfered with his instincts so that "he" couldn't sleep for such long periods of time.

"He" just felt a need to keep eating and greedily devoured all he could.

Whether due to the chill of winter or the cabin, there was almost no smell that leaked through to the surroundings.

That was why nobody noticed "him."

Not before, and not now, either.

On the other hand, a few noises reached *his* ears as he napped.

The light, high-pitched *ring-ring-ring* of a bell, and the sound of an argument between young humans a little while before.

Maybe "he" felt some sense of nostalgia at the sound, or he was influenced by some other instinct--

Either way, even though the sun was setting, "his" chest began to heat up, little by little, bringing him closer to wakefulness.

Slowly, slowly--

<=>

Bungalow #1

The bungalow the delinquents had opened wasn't even locked, and it was almost completely empty inside. There was nothing resembling decorations--just abandoned open space.

The bungalows were probably not owned by any one person for personal use, but rather erected by a group of hunters on state-owned land. If so, there wouldn't likely be any problem if they came in to warm themselves. They could just say they were lost in the woods and happened upon the cabins.

Although only a few of them thought about that at all. The rest just marched right in without a care in the world and made themselves at home.

"Man, there's really nothing here."

"Good thing it's so big."

"We're on a camping trip, so we can just take it easy and sleep on the ground."

"I want a blanket."

"And food after the blankets."

"A beef steak. Yeah, a steak sounds good."

"Give me money."

"Give me a sister."

"Hyahhaa."

They all spoke freely and sprawled out where they could. They didn't care if they got dirty on the ground and just stretched out without changing clothes.

The girls briskly walked among them and high-fived each other when they found a number of beds in a room next to the outside wall on the other side of the cabin.

There were no sheets, but they could use the blankets packed into the truck with the boats to make proper bedding. Melody and the others immediately began preparations and

returned to the open room where the boys were sprawled everywhere like a litter of kittens, but--

One boy, who was peering out of the front window, turned to face everyone. "Hey, there's a car," he said.

"What?"

"The hell."

"Damn, it's the owner of the cabin."

"Nope, it's definitely my sister."

"Shut up."

"Listen, no matter what they say, just tell them we got lost."

"...Even though our trucks are parked out front?"

"Gaaaah! Shit!"

The boy who first saw the car ignored his confused comrades and calmly continued relaying the situation. It was already dark outside the window, but the porch light on the bungalow illuminated a vehicle parked right behind their trucks. "What? It's a really really beat-up truck...ah, they parked next to us. Inside...there's...? Whoah! Hey, a pretty lady just got out!"

"It's my little sister!"

"She's older than you."

"Stupid, there's no older or younger for a little sister!"

"Yes, there is!"

"Sorry, that's not your sister. That's my girlfriend. What's she doing here?"

"...? ...! Dammit! I was about to believe you for a second!"

"Plus, even she was your girlfriend, she could still be my little sister! There's no contradiction!"

"Uh, well, yeah, but..."

"And I wouldn't let you have my sister, anyway!"

"...I dare you to say that again, asshole!"

"Hyahhaa!" *"Hyahhaa!"*

Regardless of the irrational line of reasoning that was about to start a fight between the boys, another change to the situation arrived outside the window.

The first person was a woman with a ponytail and a thin coat who climbed down from the driver's seat. Next was a young woman wearing glasses from the passenger seat, and then a much younger girl from the back of the truck. Finally, a boy who looked less than ten climbed out, staring at the delinquents' trucks and saying something to the others.

"Huh, they're all girls," the boy said with a whistle.

Another boy clenched his fist and cried the same thing he always did. "All of them are my little sisters!"

"...The last one is a boy, isn't he?"

"Then he'll be my brother!"

"How does that work?"

"I just...want a family, okay!?"

"Moron....! Aren't we already like your family?"

"...! You bastard! You tryna' make me cry?!"

Behind the two and their heated exchange, the boy missing a tooth muttered himself, tightening his expression.

"What a sham."

Chapter 3: Bunny and Honey

The name "Vanishing Bunny" was Lana's idea.

They had started out as a nameless trio of thieves, but at some point she just started referring to them by the name. When she started using it in front of other people, though, Pamela put a firm lid on that.

Pamela herself didn't confirm or deny the name, however. She just smiled when Sonja commented that bunnies were cute.

Lana had worked solo as a petty thief at first, swiping unattended bags and such, but when a group of ill-natured men had captured her and tried to kill her, Pamela had been passing by at the time and saved her. They had been together as a team ever since.

Pamela, for her part, had started out as a gambler who frequented underground casinos, but in truth her hands weren't clean, either--she stole money from those casinos.

The two had completely opposite personalities, but oddly enough they got along well. Together, they robbed several casinos and ticket windows for illegal gambling on horse races all over the area, but--

Along the way, they found a strange girl from the prairie shooting her guns. The girl was named Sonja, and next to her was a wagon stockpiled with dozens of firearms.

"They remind me of Mom and Dad," she had told them, still firing.

Pamela and Lana had added her to their group gradually, and in the end the pair of thieves became a trio.

Sonja could get almost any pursuer to leave them alone with a warning shot. It was almost as if she wasn't so much handling the gun as skillfully becoming one with the barrel itself. She even made use of the recoil to deftly control the bullets.

Pamela had acquired an unexpectedly powerful weapon in Sonja. Although she felt guilty, since the girl didn't seem to have a full grasp of her situation, Pamela continued her "work" together with her smooth-spoken partner, Lana. They were nothing more than a pair of small-time villains like any you would find in a big city, together with the trigger-happy girl they used.

But now, thanks to their windfall, they had figured they could pull off a little scheme to get

rich quick.

If the boy's family was earning enough to live in a mansion during the Great Depression, surely they were involved in some sort of black market dealings. If that was the case, they could divert themselves by taking a little of that money, right?

The small-time villains made to carry out their kidnapping plan, just between the two of them, but--

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The old truck Driver's seat

"Okay, well, that plan was promptly a failure. What now, Lana?"

"...This isn't my fault, you know."

It was the bungalow where they had arranged to receive the ransom.

Their truck was illuminated by the light next to the entrance of the bungalow--which meant that the supposedly unoccupied cabin was in use by someone else.

Pamela sighed deeply, eyeing the two trucks parked in front. "It's my fault, for sure. I didn't stop you when you decided to call them before we actually checked the place where the exchange was supposed to happen. I apologize. I'm sorry." She bowed her head in the driver's seat.

"Huh...?" Lana wasn't sure how to react to her honesty and hastily said the first thing that came to mind. "N-no, you don't have to feel that way! You apologizing is...well, it makes me think there's no hope at all!"

"Honestly, for all intents and purposes, there isn't."

"Cut it out! The trucks were just abandoned here! I bet there's nobody inside! And even if there is, we can just leave! It's just...oh, those damn trucks!"

"I don't know what you're trying to say, so I'm gonna get out and look around." Pamela's expression was still contrite as she opened the door.

Lana hurriedly prepared to do the same. To be sure, the only "preparation" necessary was undoing her seatbelt and opening the door, but she was still so flustered at Pamela's sincere apology that it took her a little longer to get out.

Sonja and Cazze got out of the back around the same time as Lana. They all gathered around Pamela for the moment and discussed what to do next.

Cazze was completely unaware of the important fact that he had been kidnapped, so Pamela and Lana needed to play along with that version of events.

Relatedly, they hadn't told Sonja about the kidnapping, either. Lana had determined that Sonja was the type who would probably tell Cazze if she knew--even feel sorry for him and help him escape--and Pamela had agreed. Pamela and Lana had nothing against Sonja's serene disposition, but it was ill-suited to a kidnapping like this, and she would probably be quite uncomfortable with it.

With that in mind, they had decided to keep the current plan just between the two of them, but--

...If you think about it, this was a pretty ridiculous plan, too.

Pamela was having her regrets, although it was too late now.

Thanks to the even more ridiculous train robbery plan earlier, the kidnapping plan had seemed extremely feasible.

In Lana's case, she was not only still quite enthusiastic, but on their way here she had made the even more ludicrous suggestion that if all went well they could get both the ransom and the passengers' money. Pamela had shut her up with a thump on the head, but even now Lana was probably holding onto vestiges of those thoughts.

As for Pamela, a kidnapping had seemed like a cakewalk compared to a train robbery, but now they had stumbled into a problem--someone was already at the supposedly unoccupied location for the exchange. She held her head in her hands as she regretted her choice.

We probably can't change the location now.

If their liaison was already on their way from the mansion with the money, there would be no way to make contact. If there was no sign of Cazze or his kidnappers when they got here, they would call the police, regardless of what Pamela and Lana had said. The possibility that they had already done so was also high.

That was why the trade had to go smoothly.

Worst-case scenario, they could just leave Cazze here and run for it if anything else went wrong. If their liaison showed up, they would take Cazze home on their own. The girls wouldn't get any money, but their chances of getting away would go up.

For that reason, Pamela got out of the truck to get a thorough handle of the situation, but--

When she looked at the bungalow, she saw the faces of the occupants looking back at her. Quite a few of them, too.

"..."

Pamela was uncomfortable with so many eyes staring at her from the window, but she casually looked away. "...This is the bungalow we were going to borrow, but it looks like someone else is already here," she said to Lana and Sonja.

"Aww. What should we do?" Sonja asked leisurely.

Pamela quietly looked around, then turned towards the other bungalows. "...For now, let's just check out the other ones."

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"His" ears picked up another sound, the sound of Pamela's truck and its worn-out engine.

Two similar-sounding engine noises had reached him before, but "he" had still been dreaming at the time.

And, now that "he" was waking up little by little, he could clearly identify it.

It was a sound full of nostalgia for him, the sound "he" had always, always heard, or at least, it was something similar.

"He" had ridden from place to place with that sound.

"He" slowly raised his body. Perhaps the sound had called something to mind.

But then the engine sound stopped, and "he" couldn't hear it anymore.

"He" gave his body a lumbering shake, then lay back down on the floor.

Turning towards the pile of food, "he" strained his ears again so he wouldn't miss any more sounds that came his way, no matter how small.

In the back of his mind, half-awake, half-asleep, "he" reflected on his old memories, back into his past.

When "he" was surrounded by the voices of humans.

When "he" was surrounded by innumerable noises--and by humans who approached him without fear.

In the end, it was difficult to tell whether "he" could tell the difference between himself and a human. A human couldn't tell whether "he" accurately understood the concept of humanity, either.

There was no way *to* tell.

A number of scenes played inside his head from his sea of memories.

The echo of voices.

The echo of noises.

So many voices and sounds directed at him, pouring over him.

But, as the memories continued to play, they brought to mind someone else who was showered with those voices and sounds even more than himself.

The one he connected with the most--

A boy with flaming red hair.

Maybe it was because he had gotten up once before, but little by little, the cycle between dozing and waking grew shorter and shorter, and blood began to rush through his body. He silently lifted his head, and decided to raise his own voice to get his still-drowsy consciousness awake along with his body.

He just raised his voice. That's all.

<=>

Bungalow #3

"Grrrrraaaaaaaooooooooo"

"?"

Lana noticed the sound of an animal's cry from somewhere and halted for a second in front

of the door.

Are there coyotes around here?

She strained her ears for a moment, but she heard nothing afterwards. She went inside without worrying about it any further.

"Well, now, shall we spend the night here?" Pamela said, looking around at the drab interior of the cabin.

They had parked the truck in front, with the back facing the bungalow to make it harder for thieves, and gone to see what was inside. There was a large table and shelves made of wood and metal for hanging up the game the hunters had caught. The bungalow wasn't even half the size of #1, but it was big enough to house all four of them for half a day.

"Is this okay? You won't get cold?" she asked Cazze, who was wearing a too-big winter coat from the back of the truck.

He just gazed at Pamela with sincere eyes. "Yes, thank you very much!" he answered compliantly.

"O-okay..."

The honesty in his eyes pierced right into her heart, and Pamela instinctively looked away.

We really shouldn't have done this, she thought, sighing mentally.

The term "rich boy" brought to mind the image of a pampered little prince, unaware of how the world worked and prone to the tantrums of the entitled upper class.

But the boy in front of her was quite level-headed for his age. He was naïve to the ways of the world, but in a completely different way. In this boy's eyes, there was no such thing as bad people, so he trusted them without a moment's hesitation.

That gaze stirred up a deep, bottomless guilt in Pamela. "Okay, you go play with Sonja a little more. We're going to go say hello to the people in the bungalow next to us."

"Okay!"

"Alright, see you later. ...Hey, let's go, Lana."

"Huh? Wait, I just got inside...Owwwww, that hurts! Hey!"

Pamela, now feeling thoroughly awful, grabbed Lana's arm and dragged her outside to a spot a little ways away.

"...Hey, should we just give up on this after all?" she asked.

"Wh-what are you saying all of a sudden?"

"I'm not sure how to put it, but at the end of the day, taking advantage of a kid like that is just...kinda..."

"What are you saying?! Crimes are crimes, just like all the robberies we've done before. Why're you suddenly acting like you're some saint now?" Lana's eyebrows shot up behind her glasses. Her eyes were impatient, bewildered and doubtful.

"...Well, that's true, but there are lines, even when it comes to crime. Like how there are people who act all righteous but break the Prohibition law. Plus..."

"P-plus...what?"

"You're not sure about this either, are you, Lana?"

Lana's face suddenly froze stiff. She opened her mouth to protest, but Pamela continued before she could get a word in edgewise. "It's not a bad thing, to have different types of bad guys. Right? The people at the casinos and banks are held liable thanks to what we do. They may lose their jobs or their fingers, maybe even their lives, but we don't care. We just keep on doing it like the scum we are. But personally, I can't stand the type of scum who would lie to a little kid's face and take advantage of his parent's emotions to scam them out of money. It's a simple matter of taste. Am I wrong?"

"...That's just hypocrisy, isn't it?" Lana said, looking down. "So it's because we're lying to a kid? Are you just going to ignore the people from the casinos? Maybe they have families. I can't believe it, Pamela, you of all people being so pretentious, pretending to care--mph!" Pamela's finger over her mouth cut her off.

Pamela brought her face close, and her lips warped into a sly little smile, as if she were enjoying herself. "Aren't you forgetting something? Sonja aside, you and I are lowlifes. We're on the wrong side of society. We're bad guys." She spoke like a child laying out a plan for a prank, with that sly smile on her lips and the unchanging warmth in her eyes towards her friend. "Of course the bad guys are hypocrites."

"..." Lana watched her face intently for a moment, then relented with a sigh. "I get it, I get it. I'll think about it. Just think about it, mind you."

"Thanks. But I don't know if it'll take you several years to come up with a conclusion, so don't think too hard."

"...That would have been really nice without that middle part..." Lana scowled irritably, then voiced her thoughts with even more regret. "Hmm, but I don't think it's something to feel

really guilty about.... I mean, if they're living in a mansion that big in this depression, they might be doing something bad for profit on the side."

"I thought so, too, but looking at the kid, maybe not."

"And, for the ransom all I said was 'Bring as much as you can pay and as much as you can carry.'"

Pamela's face twitched. "...If he hadn't actually disappeared, most people would think that demand was a prank..."

Lana blushed slightly and looked away. "Don't do that, don't...praise me like that."

"...Um, I wasn't."

"Then be more straightforward when you praise me!"

Are you an idiot?!

But just a moment before she could shout the thought aloud--

"I love your glasses! I'll call you beautiful a hundred times in a row, no problem!"

--a young man's voice sounded from next to the pair.

""?!""

Pamela and Lana turned at the same time to see a lone boy who looked like some sort of delinquent.

He marched briskly towards Lana and grasped her hand firmly in both of his.

"I complimented you! So please, miss, become my little sister, if you would!"

"Wha--?! Uh...huh?!" Lana answered, confused.

Pamela cut in next to her. "N-now wait just a minute, who are you?!" she asked tersely. "What are you trying to do all of a sudden?"

"Who am I? ...I'm your older brother! And as for what I'm doing, I just want you to be my little sisters! That's all!"

"Wait...what? What the heck are you trying to say?"

I have no idea what he's saying... Was he listening to us?!

If so, this was no longer a question of whether they would carry out the kidnapping plan or not.

The choice was whether they should run away, shut the boy up, or talk their way out of it.

"Y-yeah! Making us your sisters all of a sudden...you have to give a girl time to think about something like that!"

"Shut up, Lana."

Her companion was going to make this even more complicated, so Pamela made her stay quiet, turned back to the boy--and then noticed something.

What?

The boy who had asked them to become his sisters wasn't the only one there.

Soundlessly, completely silently, the group of boys and girls who had been in Bungalow #1 had been watching them from the shadow of the truck.

? ! ! ? ? ? ? !

She was overwhelmed with confusion. Even though the darkness was certainly a factor, Pamela shivered instinctively at the uncomfortable realization that that so many people had been able to get close behind them without making any noise.

"Hyaah?!"

Lana followed Pamela's gaze to the group, where she promptly screeched and ran around behind Pamela.

"Are you...the kids staying in the bungalow next to us? Are you camping?" she asked, taking hold of a small ray of hope. Maybe she could deceive them...

But a girl with watches on both arms smiled peacefully with her sleepy eyes and sent Pamela and Lana into despair with a single word.

"Nooope, just killing time~. It's nice to meet you, **kidnappers.**"

The girl laughed and laughed and laughed, savoring the joy and anticipation of a child who had found her favorite toy.

"So, can we ask you more details about what you were talking about 47 seconds ago?"

<=>

The same time In the forest

"Comrade Serges. I'm concerned about something."

"What is it?"

"It sounds like the negotiators have found a potential obstacle."

"Wait a moment."

A great river cut through the woods, and a great bridge crossed over the river. On that bridge were the train tracks that ran across the whole continent, and right now a normal train was noisily chugging across those tracks in a cloud of black coal smoke.

In the woods not far from where that bridge was built, the men in uniform calmly spoke to each other.

After making sure the train crossed the bridge as normal, the man called Serges silently turned back to his subordinate. "Now, then, what is this potential obstacle?"

He was wearing a military uniform, but it was unclear what country it would be from. Even someone familiar with the trade wouldn't be able to tell. Their own unique uniform originally didn't belong to any country on this world, and the design only added to the impression that they were ghosts of a country that had been destroyed.

"A moment ago, those children we saw in the woods are stationed in the bungalows at Point K."

"...Point K, you say?" Serges scowled openly. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. The two trucks we saw in the woods before were parked there, and the lights were on in the bungalow."

"There, of all places..." He clicked his tongue.

The underling's face remained calm as he advised his boss. "The negotiators will pass through there on their way back. The kids might become witnesses."

"Can we contact the negotiators at this point?"

"Not immediately. We're too far to use the wireless."

They were members of the terrorist organization called the Lemures, belonging to Huey Laforet. While one detachment hijacked the train the Flying Pussyfoot, the others would negotiate with the government using the passengers as hostages.

There was only a little time left before the plan to hijack the train.

The five who were in charge of direct negotiations would return here one at a time according to a fixed schedule, in order to give a progress report. That was the plan.

The aforementioned bungalows lay along a path they had chosen specifically for throwing the police off their trail. Since they were expecting perfection, they shouldn't have had to worry about witnesses.

"I'm not sure we could eliminate so many, either..." *Eliminate*, Serges said, like it was nothing, before he continued coolly. "Send two to watch them. If they don't look to be a problem, don't stir them up. If there are any problems, remove any obstacles...Although, do your absolute best to minimize the use of your guns."

Then, he pointed at the nearest two to him and sent them towards the bungalows.

Watching his subordinates depart, Serges hid himself in the darkness of the night.

"Now then...8 hours left."

His voice didn't reach far beyond his immediate surroundings, as if he were talking to himself. He smiled in the darkness, so slightly nobody could see.

"Now, Senator Beriam, what kind of man are you? Let's see what you've got."

Chapter 4 -- Rabbit Pursued and Rabbit Stewed

If they're living in a mansion that big in this depression, they might be doing something bad for profit on the side.

Pamela's thoughts about Cazze's house were not necessarily the selfish delusions of a petty thief.

But there was one major error in her thinking--it wasn't just "something bad on the side."

The Runorata Family had carried out an extensive array of "bad things," and quite boldly, too. That was the solemn truth.

They were a large gang that held the power of organized crime in the eastern part of America.

Their greatest asset wasn't money or military power, but the person of Bartolo Runorata. He had people to protect him who were a particularly high caliber of crazy, even for a gang.

Bartolo's personal bodyguards were such people, who climbed the ranks of the organization in a different sense than the capos.

Their duty as bodyguards was not to use any means necessary to drive off the enemies that attacked them. Instead they took the most efficient route, serving as human shields to protect their boss Bartolo from bullets: no more, no less. Even though they were part of the Runorata Family, they were capable of simply throwing themselves in front of Bartolo, with perfect logic and perfect timing, so that their lives wouldn't go to waste. They didn't hope for prestige, nor did they want to climb the ladder.

Bartolo knew his bodyguards were such people, and so he trusted them more than anyone else--and so he used them and destroyed them.

After all, he knew that to them, it was the highest compliment.

However, even if the human shields were the most important, it certainly wasn't as if he had no other resources. Some of his bodyguards periodically served as offensive forces and assassins.

The twins riding their motorcycles through the night were a part of that group: the shields who could fight back.

**In the middle of the night
Somewhere in New York State
The near side of the woods**

"Now, what shall we do?"⁸

"No ideas here."

The young men, straddling their motorbikes in the same way, used the first person even to refer to each other.

They stopped their motorcycles in the trees next to the road Bartolo had directed them to take, and whispered their pointless conversation.

"The place for the trade is up ahead, isn't it?"

"Yup, just up this road."

"Shall we go?"

They should have been tense, given the content of their conversation, but--for some reason, the two were smiling as they continued their hushed exchange.

"By the way, how much money do we have right now?"

"Yeah, good question. Wait a sec."

Looking at each other, they checked the contents of their wallets.

"Hey, looks like we've got 20 bucks over here."

"Hmm. We only have 12 dollars, here."

"So together that's 32 bucks."

⁸ The twins have a very unusual speech pattern in the Japanese, where they use the first person expressions *ore* and *watashi* to refer to each other. (The polite one is *watashi* and the more rough-spoken one is *ore*, by the way). In addition, they use *kochira* and *kocchi* to refer to themselves. There is no way to approximate this in English, so I chose to have them use "we" to mean both "I," "you," and "we." In order to distinguish between the uses, I'm using "here" to make it clear that they are referring specifically to themselves in that particular sentence. (I'm hoping that's clear enough in the text that you didn't need me to explain that, though...)

"Oh dear, that might be a problem."

They sighed and shook their heads in unison.

"After all, their demand was...."

"...to bring what we could."

"Will they accept only 32 dollars?"

"Well, if they do, then that's good for them."

They chuckled softly, and little by little their eyes began to take on an unpleasant light.

"If they refuse to accept it..."

"...then it's time to start the hunt."

"What shall we do if anything has happened to the young master?"

"Well, duh. We'll kill 'em all."

--[Just bring Cazze back.]

--[What to do with the kidnappers? I don't care. I'll leave that up to you.]

Those were the orders from their eminent Don, whom they loved and respected.

Under normal circumstances, the only opportunity they would have to show their loyalty would be when they gave their lives as human shields, but they had received a different mission for this situation.

Once upon a time, they had been assassins for the organization. However, they had so little respect for human life that they had killed unnecessary targets, so they were taken from the front lines. They happily and proudly held the responsibility of being their boss's bodyguards, but now that they had received a special set of orders, a different kind of joy from before stirred within them.

They were trigger-happy by nature, and they eagerly awaited the opportunity to wield the skills they had cultivated. However, they were also angry. They held a pure, simple fury towards the unknown culprits who had kidnapped Cazze, the future of the Runorata Family they so loved and respected.

Filled with that anger and joy, they quietly examined their surroundings.

As they continued little by little into the heart of the forest, their ears suddenly caught the sound of an engine from the road they had tried to conceal themselves from.

A few seconds later, a vehicle came through the trees where they were hiding. It was a car built specifically for off-road driving, and the man driving it was oddly dressed, like a soldier, although his uniform didn't belong to any particular country.

The twins looked at each other and nodded. The next moment they simultaneously accelerated their motorcycles and raced down the road to follow the car.

<=>

The bewildered man was one of the Lemures on his way back to the base.

The police weren't supposed to tail him, and even if they did he was sure he had shaken them off. So what was with the two motorcycles that had appeared out of the blue?

They couldn't be just a couple of youngsters out for a drive, given the way they had suddenly come flying out of the forest. The bikes looked military-grade, too, and they were clearly intentional about following him.

He didn't know what was what. The man from the Lemures turned his attention towards his equipment in the passenger seat.

What do I do? I can't bring them back to the base with me. Even if we wanted to take them out together, they might run.

Should I finish them off at the bungalows at Point K...?

The moment he turned his thoughts towards the bungalows up ahead, something strange happened in the corner of his vision.

The bikes in the rearview mirror looked like they were almost on top of each other, but as soon as the thought occurred to him, they joined into one.

"?!"

He frantically concentrated on the mirror, but the reflection was of only one bike.

"What the--?!"

And just as he turned around--he realized.

The apparent fusion of the motorcycles was an illusion that they had intentionally induced.

The reason was because the other bike was next to him, headlights off--and its rider watching his moment of confusion and observing the state of affairs inside the car.

The man promptly grabbed a gun from the passenger seat, opened the window, and fired a shot.

Far from running away in fear, however, the bike came so close it seemed like it was trying to run him off the road. The rider reached out towards him, neatly avoiding the bullet.

"Haha, bingo! Yeah, you're no ordinary kidnapper, are ya, punk?!"

Kidnapper?! What the heeeeeee--

"--eeell!"

With no time to raise his doubts, the man in the driver's seat let out a scream as the man on the bike grabbed the man's wrist holding the gun and twisted as hard as he could.

"Agah! Agh, the fu...Gaaahhhh!"

At first, it was a cry of pain.

"Aahh....aaaaahhhhhhh!"

And then it was a cry of fear.

He had let go of the steering wheel entirely for a few seconds, and the trees rushing straight for him filled his vision--

And the sound of violent impact rang out through the still, quiet darkness.

<=>

10 minutes later
The bungalows
Bungalow #7

"...He's sure taking his time."

"I agree, he should come through here any time now."

The two members of the Lemures who were sent out as scouts looked at each other doubtfully.

They had been watching the bungalow and its hustle and bustle, paying no mind to the chill of winter. But now, with no sign of the negotiator, they were beset by a different kind of unease from the one they got from the youngsters in the other bungalow.

They had been watching bungalow #1 from the shadow of bungalow #7 for a few hours now, but the boys and girls in it didn't seem to be doing anything worth observing.

The two were concerned when another truck showed up, but the lights were only on in #1 and #3, so most of the cabins were still unused.

They were just some kids who had come on their own to camp after all. It was completely normal for them to go ahead and use the bungalows.

There would be no problems to speak of, if only the negotiator's car had passed by on the road in front.

That's what they thought, but the man in question hadn't appeared.

"...I wonder if something happened."

"Should I contact Comrade Serges for the time being?"

In contrast to their terse conversation, the commotion in the first bungalow got bigger little by little, and a hubbub of voices echoed their way.

"Shit...bunch of easygoing brats, " one of the Lemures spat quietly.

But he hadn't yet realized.

The louder the hubbub grew, the more it drew "him" to it--and "he" was now completely awake inside of the seventh bungalow.

And a few more minutes later--

"...Yeah, something's off. I'm going back for now, you stay here."

"Okay, got it," the other nodded.

After he saw his companion nod in agreement, the man turned back towards the wall of the seventh bungalow--

Skree

--and his ears caught a small noise.

It was the sound of the door to the bungalow squeaking in a small gust of wind.

...? It was closed before. Or was supposed to be, anyway.

Right when they first arrived, they had checked the inside through the window, but all they saw was darkness.

The biggest mistake they had made was not actually entering bungalow #7 to make sure earlier. Although, as a result, they also hadn't needed to struggle with the door, and so had escaped the notice of the surrounding bungalows--

And if they had gone to peer inside, **it was very possible the tragedy would have struck a little earlier anyway.**

What...? What is that smell...?

He hadn't sensed it until just a moment ago--a slight, but pungent odor.

Was there something in Bungalow #7?

A thrill of anxiety suddenly ran through his body, and he turned back towards where his companion was.

The other man was looking at him, too, with a look of confusion on his face that indicated he had also noticed it.

"...What's this smell?"

"That's what I wanna know. Maybe someone was storing food in the bungalow and it went bad?"

As they both tried to deduce what the source of the smell could be, they remembered what they had seen through the window before.

There had been nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

But they had misunderstood.

When they had peered into the room--they had mistaken "him" for a mountain of blankets piled up in the cabin.

If they had concentrated more--if they had been thorough and turned on the light, they might have sensed that it was not blankets, but something **moving** ever so slightly.

But--they only saw "him," impossibly enormous as he was, as a bundle of blankets.

They didn't realizing that in the interior was a great pile of food--

And as a result, they were allowed to come so close to "him."

"...Is that smell...getting stronger?"

"No...this one's different..."

By the time they realized it was the smell of an animal, it was already too late.

"He" was already outside of Bungalow #7.

Already watching them from the underbrush.

Already right next to them.

The two uniformed men held their breath and looked around quietly, still making eye contact with each other.

They looked around.

But because he was so impossibly large, for a moment they didn't recognize him--*couldn't* recognize him as a living being.

Although that mistake lasted only for a moment.

"...Hm?"

"...Eh?"

Feeling a wave of apprehension, the two reflexively looked into the underbrush.

And this time, they noticed.

There, in the underbrush, was something standing on two legs, but definitely not human.

When they realized what it was, they couldn't move.

No...

It was something that shouldn't be here. It was common sense that sent their decision-making capacity into a tailspin.

Still, lower-level members though they were, they were Lemures. They were only struck immobile for about two seconds.

But two seconds was enough to be fatal in the face of such a thing.

And so "his" time arrived.

"He"--

A giant grizzly bear over 3 meters tall, leapt upon the two clad in military garb.

As if to drown out the sound of the commotion in the first bungalow, the men's screams echoed into the night--

And that was what burst the dam on the great *baccano* in the forest.

Extra Chapter

Claire Stanfield's life contained something like a hiatus, a period of about 5 years between the childhood he spent with Firo and the Gandors and his rise to fame as the assassin "Vino."

Firo had heard that the local circus wanted Claire to join after the Gandors' father died, but he knew hardly any of the details. Before he knew it, his friend was already an assassin.

But, that was as far as Firo could tell from his perspective; in Claire's opinion, of course, there was no such thing as a "hiatus."

1927 New York

"So why'd you end up becomin' a conductor?" Firo, not yet a Martillo Family *capo*, was conversing with his friend who had returned after a long absence.

The red-headed young man--Claire Stanfield, twisted his spaghetti around his fork as he replied. "Well, I'm a hitman, and now I can get all over the country for free. Pretty handy, right?"

"And that's it?"

"That's it. Well, that's what I wanna say, at least. There was a cook who worked at the circus, really helped me out a lot. He's working on a fancy train now in the dining car. I heard about it from him, so that was a pretty big part of it."

The circus.

Firo inquired a little further at hearing the word, albeit a little delicately. "That circus...broke up, didn't they?"

But Claire didn't seem particularly upset about it. "Oh, yeah," he said, unaware of Firo's attempt at sensitivity. "The boss said they'd start up again when things cool down a bit. When that happens, I might take a break from the conducting and assassinating."

"Cool down'?"

"You see, we had a run-in with a pretty big gang, so everyone who worked for the circus scattered all over the place. By the time me and the boss took 'em down, there was almost no one left."

"That's amazing, you know, and here you are talkin' about like it's nothing," Firo said, sweating a little.

"Really? There's nothing that amazing about it," Claire replied. "What's amazing is all the guys from the circus. Like the magician, *he* was incredible. He wore these bright sparkly clothes, kinda like a jewel beetle, and he called himself a vampire. But he could turn his hat into bats from his hands, and walk around split in two. His illusions were incredible."

"Those were...just illusions, right?"

"And there were all kinds of other guys, too. The cook could twist a manhole cover like he was wringing out a sponge, and some acrobats would do a kung fu battle on the trapeze. I joined them too, sometimes, but I always won so they didn't let me do that anymore." Claire nodded and closed his eyes, reminiscing fondly. "And one of the main attractions was this pretty girl in boxing gloves. That was a great show. You could challenge her to a match for a dollar a pop, and if you won, you'd get a hundred bucks. Most of the time nobody'd be able to hit her and time would run out. There were some creeps who just wanted to hit a girl and perverts who wouldn't stop the clinch fighting, too, and she'd knock 'em right out. Haha, yeah, she was great."

"I'm starting to think it wasn't actually a circus you were in..." The nervous sweat was now running down Firo's back.

"In the end, I was the only one who ever got the hundred bucks," Claire responded.

"You fought her?!" Firo looked at Claire disapprovingly.

But Claire started offering his explanation, as if he was shocked Firo would suggest such a thing. "Hey, hey, don't get me wrong, now. I didn't actually punch a girl. I stopped just short to let her know I'd won, then I played my best card and said 'If you want me to give you the 100 dollars back, go on a date with me.'"

"..."

"...Well, she got me good on the jaw right afterwards, so I think it's safe to say she turned me down."

"She shoulda hit you a hundred times," Firo shot back, amazed by his friend's lack of inhibitions.

"Seriously, I can't believe how casual you are about asking out girls..."

Claire grinned at Firo's understandable complaint. "The world belongs to me, after all. Someday, at the perfect time, the right woman will say yes."

"Where the hell do you get that kind of confidence..."

"It's not about the girls, though. The people I meet are the characters in my world. There's no doubt in my mind I'll run into them again if I need to. And if I don't, that just means they weren't someone that important to me."

Claire's declarations only served as evidence of his delusional worldview, and Firo just shook his head as he always did in response.

"So I don't really feel lonely about it. Not even back when the circus broke up. I'll see them again someday, when the time comes. The boss, the other guys, Cookie..."

"Cookie?" Firo questioned at the sudden mention of the word. "What are you talking about, the little cookies they sell at the circus?"

"No, no, no. Huh? Have I not told you about Cookie?"

"This is the first I've heard."

Claire scratched his cheek. "I see...I guess Keith and those guys were the ones I told."

"Cookie was my competition as one of the main attractions at the circus, and..."

Interlude

"Your name is Cookie. Yeah, that should do."

Perhaps the great mass of fur would stop at the redheaded boy's voice--

But the next instant, it sunk its teeth into the boy, without even letting out a roar.

1920

Somewhere in America In a circus tent

The next instant--the grizzly called Cookie stopped moving.

Normally, he would tear the flesh from the bone right then and there, using his claws and teeth to pin the boy down.

But Cookie's entire body froze in that moment, and the teeth that could tear effortlessly into wood didn't sink any further into the boy.

After another moment, Cookie opened his mouth with the same force he used to chomp down and began to roll on the ground, flailing his paws as if the whole upper half of his body had been scalded.

The people watching from outside the cage raised their voices all at once. There was one wearing a western-style helmet and armor; a muscular, yet rotund man; his opposite, a tall, wiry man; and a man wearing the armor of a Japanese warrior. They all formed a clearly eccentric picture.

Although, their appearance wasn't all that strange once you thought about the fact that this was in a circus tent.

"Nghehe, what happened? What's going on, Claire? Hehehe," asked a clown wearing a teary-eyed mask.

The boy Claire answered calmly. "Oh, I just doused my arm in hot sauce beforehand."

"But he bit you as hard as he could, didn't he? He bit you just now, right?" another girl

asked. She was wearing a leotard decorated with a spiderweb pattern.

"Ah, don't worry, it'll heal soon. Any harder and he would have broken the bone, though," he answered with a smile, as if he was talking about a dog bite.

A young man watching from afar called out to him. "Ahahahaha! I guess you win the bet, then, Claire!" The man's right eye was covered by a large scar, and instead of an eyeball, a red crystal was fitted in the socket.

Claire laughed him off. "Okay, boss, you promised! You can't get rid of Cookie now!"

"I know, I know. No bear stew this time. Alright, you know what'll happen if that gets infected. Go get some cooking wine from Gregoire or something to pour on it!"

"Yes, sir!" the boy answered cheerfully.

The others around him began to cheer.

"But still, that was amazing, actually lettin' him bite your arm like that."

"But he didn't rip your arm off...how muscular are you, I wonder? Hehe."

"Wow! That's the thing about a genius; no matter what they do, it always turns out!"

But when the boy heard that particular compliment, he sighed and shook his head. "I keep tellin' you, I'm not a genius. This is the result of hard work."

The boss smiled in response to Claire's complaint. **"But your hard work has never been in vain,** Claire, and I think that's a pretty legitimate talent."

Whether their conversation reached his ears or not, "he" could feel the attack on his taste buds diminishing.

"He" was a little unique among grizzlies.

"He" had grown to a bigger size than normal, maybe because he was well-fed, and one day "he" was captured by humans.

They had been about to put him down, but the circus picked him up and showed him off as one of their enormous caged animals. However, his ferocity grew day by day, and in the end, "he" even tried to attack his trainers.

While all this was happening, a red-haired boy who had recently joined said that he would make him be quiet and entered the cage. There was something wrong with both the boy and the other members of the circus who didn't stop him, but--in the end, the red-headed

boy survived, and "he" was left rolling on the floor of his large cage.

But, "he" didn't understand the situation with the humans who did that at all.

From that day on, "he" obediently went through his training.

"He" knew that he could have as much as he could eat, every day, and all he had to do was follow the orders of his trainers and the boy and hear the crowds of people cheering.

Cookie, as "he" was named, came to understand three things perfectly in the months afterwards--even if they weren't entirely correct.

One was that the cheers of the people thrilled him to the core.

Another was that these things called humans were poisonous to him.

And the last was that the red-haired boy, who had taken his bite without fighting back, was his friend.

After that, the boy, the circus members, the lions, tigers, anacondas and other animals in the cages next to his spent the next few years together.

Cookie was satisfied with that state of affairs, and before he knew it he started to feel an emotion that might be called bliss when he heard the cheers of the audience, regardless of how well he was fed.

A few more years passed--

After the circus broke up, one thing led to another, and the bear who had once been taken all over the country by animal tamers found himself lost and masterless.

As a result, he wandered around the northern forests of New York, alone.

What was he thinking? No human could tell--

And so he simply wandered through the forest.

Chapter 5 -- Running Like a Frightened Rabbit

Bungalow #1

While a great beast pounced on the two Lemures--

A different mood was forming in one of the bungalows, completely unaffected by the tension nearby.

"Huh. Hey, did you hear that just now? That sounded like a scream."

"Really? Probably just your imagination."

"Hyahhaa!" *"Hyahhaa!"*

The room had originally felt large, but it was so crowded that the youngsters of all ages had to shuffle around each other.

"More importantly, how long before we get out of here?"

"Ask Melody."

"Don'tcha just wanna hang out here for a few days?"

"But then the packages would get washed down the river."

"We can just go to the beach to pick them up."

"That's ridiculous."

"But the beach, man...I wanna see some girls skinny-dipping."

"Don't say that so straightforward."

"But I wanna see 'em too." "Me too." "Me too." "Me too!" "I do too!"

"Hey, you're a girl!" "Girls can want to see other girls naked, too, you know!"

"What...?!" "Well, that got steamy fast."

"Okay! You should become my sister." "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Hyahhaa!" "Hyahhaa." "Gyaaahahahaha!!"

They moved around with no rhyme or reason, like a mass of confused ants. The term "bustling" might be appropriate to describe it.

There were also a couple of figures who looked oddly out of place in the bizarre energy of the mingling boys and girls.

Pamela and Lana watched the boys chatter from a corner of the room.

Sonja was off to the side, snoring away, and Cazze was serving as a doll for the girls to play dress-up with.

"Hey, please stop..." the boy complained, face beet-red while they played around dressing him in girl's clothes. The girls just giggled and cooed and kept changing his clothes.

Watching the peaceful state of affairs, Pamela and Lana looked at each other and spoke in low voices.

"...So now what do we do, Pamela?"

"There's no *doing* at this point. Whatever happens will happen."

"We can't just play this by ear!"

"I never thought I'd hear that from you, Lana. Well, aren't you glad? We're doing your train robbery after all," Pamela muttered with a wry smile.

Lana sighed. "How does a coincidence like this even happen? We came to do a train robbery and then stumbled across another one..."

"Of course these things happen. Did you forget about the museum?" Pamela muttered self-deprecatingly.

Lana sighed again.

The train they were targeting had been thrown into chaos by a series of coincidences and insanity that would put this to shame, but they had no way of knowing that as they thought back to their conversation from a little while ago.

<=>

A few hours earlier

"So, how much money were you planning to scam out of that rich family? Ehehe." The sleepy-looking girl with the ponytails giggled.

Lana looked away, sweating. "Wh-what on earth are you talking about? I didn't--"

"It's okay, don't hide it. 34 seconds ago, you said 'And, for the ransom all I said was 'Bring as much as you can pay and as much as you can carry.'" Didn't you?" The girl chuckled, repeating what Lana had said earlier like a tape recorder.

"What is with you..." Lana turned to the side, her face as white as a sheet, and shook her head desperately. "Yeah! You have no proof that I said anything like that! Hahaha, yes, that is an interesting deduction! Maybe you should become a mystery novelist!" She chuckled, a little deviously.

Pamela sighed and looked down at Lana's sudden burst of confidence while the boys and girls around them shot her down in full force.

"No, I heard it, too." "Me too." "Me too." "Please be my sister." "Me too." "Me too." "Marry me."

"And anyway, a testimony counts as evidence, too."

"Yeah, and what does our job have to do with it?"

"Miss, are you stupid?"

"No, *you're* stupid! You said it first! Also, have some tact!"

"I guess so. Well, then...uh...excuse me, do you happen to feel ill, miss? Uh, behind your eyes or in your skull, mainly?" the boy asked courteously.

"Hey...do I look pale or something?" Lana whispered into Pamela's ear. "Is there anything wrong with my face?"

"The problem is with your brain."

"Don't say that! You're a jerk, Pamela!" Lana protested.

Pamela gave Lana's head a shove away from hers and addressed the boys in defeat. "Just so you all know, this one with the glasses isn't too bright. It's best to just assume sarcasm or anything indirect won't get through." She looked around at the boys with a smile that didn't

reach her eyes. "So, what're you gonna do?" she asked with some defiance. "Call the police? Take us down? And just so you know, the kid doesn't know he's been kidnapped, so try not to scare him."

Pamela was pushing her luck, but the delinquents looked at each other and voiced their unfiltered thoughts on the matter.

"What are we gonna do?"

"I don't know...*you* haven't thought of anything!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Shut up! And Chaini, you should say something other than 'Hyahhaa' for once!"

"If we want to be humanitarian about it, the logical thing to do would be to rescue him, yeah? But we're accomplices in a train robbery, so I don't think we should be pointing any fingers."

"Where did that come from, Chaini?! Why are you being so serious? You're just confusing everyone!"

"*Hyahhaa!*"

"Shut up, squirt! Why don't you try saying something other than 'Hyahhaa,' too?"

"...Die."

"Did you just tell me to die?! Hey, did you just whisper 'die' at me?!"

"*Hyahhaa!*"

"...Maybe it's just my imagination."

In the midst of the commotion, the girl with the ponytails took a step towards Pamela and brought her sleepy-looking eyes close to hers. "What do you want us to do?" she asked merrily.

"Huh?"

She quietly smiled at Pamela's confusion. "I just want to kill some time until our train robbery, and do something worthwhile in the process. Soo...you can take care of your plan with us until then."

In the end, maybe Pamela and Lana's miscalculation had been a fortunate one.

The boys and girls who knew Pamela and Lana's plan were not the scum of the earth, but they certainly weren't saints either.

And so Pamela and Lana discovered that this group of delinquents was planning to steal some cargo from the train they had originally targeted themselves: the Flying Pussyfoot.

<=>

"I can't believe they already snuck some of their friends aboard the train...I thought they were just winging it, but they planned this way better than us."

"Hmph. I doubt it. I hope they can get around on a freight train," Lana complained.

"The first time you get on a train, you can't tell left from right, so my plan is much more--"

"Aw, don't worry about our crew on the train." One of the delinquents interrupted with a hand on her shoulder. "We've got two of the staff in our group, too." He talked to her as if he'd known her forever.

Lana shoved him off. "What do you mean 'staff'...?" she asked.

"Ah, the cook and the bartender are old friends of ours! They tell us all kinds of things! They're the ones who told us about the freight, too," the boy said confidently.

Pamela looked at him in disbelief. "Are you sure it's a good idea to tell us that?"

"Huh? Why?"

"If we ever got caught by the police, don't you think we might take the chance to testify against you?"

The kidnapper's question was extremely natural.

"So don't get caught," the boy answered, looking a little mystified.

"..." Pamela was silent for a moment at his ready answer.

During that momentary pause, the others around them scampered over and gathered around.

"Stupid, you don't know whether they'll get caught or not."

"There's such a thing as turning yourself in, too."

"Eh? What? You ladies aren't planning on turning yourselves in, are you?!" the boy cried frantically.

"Not on your life!" Lana answered in a voice brimming with confidence. "Our dream is to become the greatest band of thieves in all of America! We'll never turn ourselves in, and we'll never get arrested, count on it!"

"Whoaa!"

"I'm not sure what's goin' on, but that sure sounded neat!"

"Just what I'd expect from my little sister!" "Shut up." "Then my older sister!" "Okay, that's better." "Seriously?!"

"So how do they decide who the greatest robbers are?"

"Well obviously it's...how much you stole, or...something."

"So you just count it all up one at a time?!"

"Then by intuition!"

"Intuition?" "Yes, intuition is very important for robbers!"

"Brilliant!" "Hyahhaa!"

"I see...so robbers use their intuition to decide who's the best."

"I'd expect nothing less." "Hyahhaa!"

"By the way, what happens when you're the best?"

"Maybe...you get some sort of cash prize from somewhere?"

"You do?" "No, you don't."

"They should just steal it themselves, then!"

"Geez, what're you snapping for?" "I'm confused."

"It doesn't matter, does it, if that's what my sister is shooting for!"

"Hyahhaa!" "Hyahhaa!" "Guhehe."

The mess of confused conversation echoed around Pamela and the others, same as always.

I can't keep up.

They're talking on a completely different wavelength.

Pamela sighed in disbelief and stole a few glances at the others around her.

Cazze was near the far wall, with Melody and the others still messing with him. He was blushing, but laughing, and he still didn't seem to know that he had been kidnapped.

On the other hand, over here:

"You know, I think the three of us should have matching uniforms. It would get our name out there!"

"...How about nothing at all?"

"You mean naked? Huh...I bet nobody's ever done that before!"

Lana's dense conversation was being added into the mix.

I can't really join in, but... maybe it's okay like this, too, Pamela thought, looking up at the ceiling for a while.

In the end, the group of delinquents had discovered their plan, but for some reason they had started talking with the women about their own train robbery.

Even though they hadn't asked, the delinquents had shared their secret of their own volition.

At first, Pamela was unable to understand why they did such a thing, but--

Listening to them talk like this, she somehow understood.

There was no "understanding" it, because they weren't thinking anything.

Pamela had a sudden thought as she watched them living their lives, going wherever their hearts led them.

In the end, they're just like us.

Thinking back on their own pasts, and taking into account how the future was completely uncertain, she smiled to herself, quietly and bitterly.

Geez. The only one here with a stable future is Cazze.

But she didn't realize it yet.

The boy they had kidnapped was the very one with the potential for the stormiest future.

Nor was she able to recognize that it was not the distant future--

But today, the immediate future, that was ready to plunge them into an uproar.

<=>

The middle of the forest Near the train tracks

A military truck and a number of passenger vehicles were parked next to a tent erected near the train tracks. At a glance, the cars looked normal, but the license plates and other official components were completely falsified.

Serges and the other members of the Lemures weren't amusing themselves with any kind of idle chatter in particular, but they were killing time in an entirely different sense.

"...They're late," Serges muttered, looking at his watch. It was long past time for the first member of the negotiation team to return.

Furthermore, he saw no sign of the ones he'd sent to keep an eye on that one factor that could cause them trouble: the delinquents.

"...What's going on?"

It was normal to think that some sort of trouble had occurred, but he wasn't able to believe it so suddenly.

When they had seen the delinquents in the woods before, they didn't look like anything but ordinary delinquents. Of course they didn't look like they had received any kind of special training, and he couldn't imagine that the two he had sent to investigate them would fail.

But there's that one-in-a-million chance...

There could be additional factors--for example, they could have joined forces with a third party. There were many possibilities.

Serges considered the matter for a while, then, checking his watch again, gave his orders.
"...Alright, two of you stay here on standby.

"The rest of you will come with me to Point K."

<=>

Near the entrance to the forest

"Let's see, now what shall we do?"

"Yeah, now what?"

The twin hunters crossed their arms with cruel smiles.

Before them was a car with a crushed front bumper and hood.

Although there was no fire, anyone could tell from a glance that the car was totaled beyond repair.

There was also a mass of flesh hung on a tree nearby. The mass was breathing slightly, dangling from a sturdy rope. Rather than surviving, it might be better to say he was forced to remain alive.

"As soon as we said we wanted him to release the child, his expression changed completely."

"Yeah, even called us 'dogs of the government.'"

"'Dogs of the government,' of all things."

They had dragged the "kidnapper" from the car and interrogated him appropriately, but they were still on completely different pages. In the end he had just kept calling them dogs of the government until he lost consciousness.

But--although they didn't know if Cazze was safe or not, they had managed to get him to admit where he was going.

"Past the bungalows up ahead, next to the railroad trestle..."

"So that's where the young master is?"

"That's what we're hoping."

The twins sighed and peered back at the man they had strung up.

He had lost consciousness, but he had held up under their torture surprisingly well.

"Although...really, why did he call us dogs of the government?"

"Maybe 'cause the boss is friendly with Senator Beriam?"

The instant that assessment left his lips, the temperature around them began to drop, little by little.

"So that means...perhaps they are so misguided as to think our Don Bartolo is below Senator Beriam...?"

"They're makin' fun of us."

"Shall we teach them a lesson?"

They both tilted their heads to the side and popped their necks in rhythm as they straddled their motorcycles.

And then they quietly drove off.

Towards the heart of the forest--toward the bungalows where all the diverse elements were waiting to assemble.

With that, the ones in the forest continued to converge, little by little.

Swallowing both good and evil impartially, the deep forest created its own unique atmosphere.

Although, at the moment--

In this forest, there was almost no one that could be called a good person.

<=>

Bungalow #1

"Mmmmyaa..."

It was a mollusk with a human voice.

Or at least, that was what Sonja looked like as she slowly got up in a corner of the room.
"Good morning, Pamela, Lana, and, um, all."

"All'?"

She had slept through the whole thing, so she didn't know what the situation was. She picked up the helmet resting on her chest and put it back on her head with a smile.
"Mm...oh! So what's going to happen with Cazze? Are his mom and pop going to come pick him up?"

She had not the faintest inkling about the kidnapping as she smiled innocently at Lana and the others.

On the other hand, Lana and Pamela's smiles twitched considerably as they tried to deceive her with their replies.

"Uh, well, it wouldn't be unusual if they came to get him now, but..."

"M-more importantly, shouldn't you be doing maintenance on your guns, testing them out or something?"

"Lana!"

"Huh? Did I say something wrong?"

Already forgetting what she had said, Lana's eyes began to dart around behind her glasses in alarm.

Before the other boys and girls could react to what Lana said, Pamela cut in to try to fix the damage, but...

The moment before she could, the well-rested girl opened her mouth.

With an amenable grin on her face, she didn't hesitate for a moment.

"Yeah! I should work on about ten of them for today!"

A few minutes later

Most of the people from the bungalow were now gathered around the worn-out truck.

Pamela opened the canopy of the luggage compartment with an expression of half-resignation. Lana was crouched a ways away, fallen into self-loathing.

In stark contrast, Sonja happily watched Pamela work, and the others looked on with faces brimming with interest.

"I'm gonna let you know now, I think these are Sonja's mementos of her parents, so no stealing them or shooting them without permission. Understood?" Pamela warned.

The boys thumped their chests as they answered:

"I told ya, we get it!"

"Come on, give us a little credit."

"She just met us."

"Well, maybe she can trust us because she just met us... The more time you spend with someone, the better you know them and the harder it gets to trust them... but when you've just met someone, like now, you can just go with your gut and trust them! So please, place your blind trust in us! You can fall in love with me, t--guha"

"Shut up, you creep." "Yeah! You can't hit on my little sister!"

"Die!" "Tellin' him to die is overdoing it." "Then... suffer!" "Beat him up!" "Make him bleed!" "We'll roast you alive!" "In the flames of Hell!"

"Gaaaahhhh!!" "Hyahhaa!" "Gyahhaa!"

Pamela ignored the boy who was getting slapped silly like a burlesque routine from the movies and silently started taking out the luggage.

But what do we do about Cazze? I wonder if he'll understand that these are Sonja's keepsakes.

Cazze still hadn't caught on that he'd been kidnapped, but Pamela's worry was that if they showed him guns, he might get scared. She turned towards Cazze, thinking she should say something to deceive him--

But his expression hadn't changed at all. He was just looking her way with a little smile.

Sonja had already started to take a gun out of a box, but his bearing still didn't change.

The delinquents at least were excited:

"Whoa, that's the real thing!"

"That's incredible. Makes the ones we left back in Chicago look like peashooters."

"That's because our biggest, baddest gun was that machine gun Jacuzzi used."

"Your arms are so skinny, can you shoot a gun this long?"

"If I get down on the ground, I can shoot perfectly fine."

"Whoa! That's amazing!" "Hyahhaa!"

They chattered as they gathered around Sonja, but Cazze didn't even look at them.

Maybe he thought they were toys, or he didn't know how dangerous guns were.

Pamela thought about which one it was, but then she wondered what was going on with his silence. She decided to say something for now, to get a sense of what he was feeling.

"Um...are you surprised?"

But Cazze tilted his head at Pamela's question, still smiling. "Huh? About what?"

Something was wrong.

It was slight, but the boy's reaction definitely stirred up some misgivings in Pamela.

A feeling that something was amiss--a simple, overwhelming sense of unease suddenly ran down Pamela's spine.

She understood instantly where that feeling was coming from, and she asked the boy again. "I mean...aren't you...scared, at all? With all these guns..."

"Huh?" The boy's smile disappeared in favor of a look of confusion, like he didn't understand the question. He thought for a little while, then his eyes widened in realization. The smile returned and he nodded. "Um, I know they're dangerous."

"...Huh? Ah, um..."

Just as expected, the boy's answer was a little off.

Pamela was momentarily at a loss for words, but what the boy said next robbed her of them

completely.

"It's because they said I'm not allowed to touch them until I turn 13!"

Crick

At this thrill of unease, Pamela's spine made an audible crack.

Before she could consciously think the boy's words were strange, her intuition from years spent as a gambler told her.

"If you take one more step, this will get dangerous." It wasn't that kind of warning.

Instead, her intuition was telling her: "It's already too late, so brace yourself."



Even so--

Even so, Pamela wanted to say that her intuition had grown dull, thanks to spending so long working with Lana rather than gambling.

She didn't realize that what had dulled was her own psyche that wanted to deny her intuition in the first place.

And as if to deliver the finishing blow to Pamela's heart, the boy continued with a child's smile--and a child's cruelty.

"All the people who work at my house have one of those!"

<=>

The forest Near the entrance

The twins pushed their motorcycles along so they wouldn't make noise with the engines, and carried on their conversation.

They knew the kidnappers were armed, so they had decided the noise would give them away if they weren't careful about driving their bikes. The possibility that the kidnappers might string a wire trap across their path also occurred to them.

They had thought to torture that information out of the man as well, but he had completely lost consciousness. They decided that if they wasted time with him it would get in the way of ensuring Cazze's safety, and so ended up in their current state.

"By the way, which weapons did we prepare?"

"Great question. We've got three handguns, including backups."

"And we have two knives and wire, but only one gun."

"Don't be so modest."

Setting aside the two who talked like it was an everyday conversation, the forest was wrapped in an unsettling quiet. It was after midnight.

It would probably be dawn soon.

They needed to reach the bungalows by morning, but on the other hand, there was the option of attacking what appeared to be the kidnappers' base first. However, that option would be a little tricky, timewise.

They thought for a moment, then one of them finally spoke.

"Shall we do this? First, take all the money we've got here."

"Oh, so one of us'll have all of the money, then?" asked the one with the rougher manner of speech. "That means..."

"One of us will take another route and attack their base, and the other one will take care of the exchange." The polite one straddled his bike, pulling out his wallet.

"Got it.

"And if they won't take the money...after we do **anything we have to** to rescue the young master, we'll kill 'em all."

<=>

Around the bungalows

A very gloomy Lana was wallowing in self-loathing.

"Argh, why do I always do that..."

Because of her slip of the tongue, the passing group of train robbers had heard something she'd rather they hadn't. Things had gotten quite complicated, all beginning with their plan to rob the train.

"Yeah...we should have just gone with my train robbery idea from the start. If we had, we wouldn't have had to do a kidnapping...argh, but it's too late now! We should just rob the train anyway!"

In the blink of an eye, Lana's feelings had done a 180. She sprang to her feet and went around behind the bungalow.

Yeah, if we can use these kids robbing the train, it'll be perfect!

Or actually, we can tag along with the kids' robbery, and then make our escape in the

confusion!

Whatever she had gotten from their explanation, her plan completely ignored the part about "getting the freight without stopping the train."

Lana made a small fist. "Yes!" she cried quietly.

"Now that we know that, the question is what to do with Cazze... Pamela isn't really on board with it anymore, and neither am I, so we can just leave him at the bungalows and it'll all be okay!"

Now that Pamela wasn't there to poke holes in all of her ideas, the self-proclaimed criminal mastermind was running her brain on all cylinders.

"Wait...our footprints and fingerprints are all over bungalows 1 and 3... Oh, yeah, and I wonder if there really is no one else in the other cabins. It'd be bad if there were other witnesses--"

Her words and her mind stopped at the same moment.

The moonlight and the outside light on the cabin only filtered through to the area around Lana, so it was quite dim.

But even so, she was positive.

Her eyes had landed on something while she was casually looking around.

In a place she normally wouldn't have looked, between the bungalow and the forest, she saw two apparently human figures.

They were about 20 meters away. If they had been a little further into the foliage, 10 to 1 she wouldn't have noticed them at all.

At any rate, they appeared to be dressed in military uniforms--and they were also lying on the ground.

"Um...who are you?"

It felt like her spine had been replaced with an ice-cold rod.

Her legs began to shake uncontrollably, and her voice wouldn't come out.

Robbers? Or the owners of the bungalows? There's no way they could be police...is there?

Finally, after hesitating over whether to call Pamela, she thought they might be mannequins or scarecrows or something similar, and for her own peace of mind she finally took a step

forward.

One step.

Then another.

With each step, she began to see more details about their current state.

Their clothes were not in disarray, nor could she see any noticeable outward injuries.

But their bodies never so much as twitched. She couldn't tell whether they were dead or just unconscious.

Her consciousness focused on the situation in front of her, instantly sharpening her senses, and something she hadn't noticed before started a relentless assault on her nose.

What is that smell?

The closer she got to the prone figures, the stronger the odd smell in her nose became.

The stench was characteristic of a large amount of food that had gone bad, or fresh garbage, and mixed with the distinctive smell of an animal, like the fur of a wild dog.

What?

What is this chill...?

Her instincts had picked up on something strange about her surroundings.

But she missed something vital.

Next to the men's bodies was a great shadow, watching her from the darkness of the forest.

The shadow slowly shifted its body. It was moving sluggishly, but definitely getting closer to Lana.

It was 3 meters away, a distance short enough for it to reach her in a single leap.

But Lana still didn't notice the creature looming near.

2 meters.

Lana realized the animal scent around her had gotten stronger. She turned her head slowly, shoulders trembling.

She heard the *swish-swish* of grass being trampled underfoot. When she turned to face the sound--

1 meter.

Lana saw the enormous shadow.

Suddenly--

A single gunshot rang out from near the bungalows.

<=>

Some seconds ago

"Okay, I'll shoot that broken branch as a test!"

There was a conspicuously tall tree in the woods around them, illuminated by the moonlight.

Sonja had found a dangling branch that was broken in the middle, swaying in midair, and announced she would shoot it as a test.

It was surprisingly far from where Sonja was standing, but still well-lit by the moon.

Army helmet or no, a little girl is a little girl. It was hard to think she would actually hit it, but Sonja picked up a rifle, humming all the while.

The boys started to bet on whether she would actually hit it or not, and the whole affair was quite laid-back, but--

The next moment, a gunshot rang out, and part of the half-broken branch snapped back, twisted, and fell to the ground.

Staggering back from the recoil, Sonja made sure her bullet had struck home, then smiled. "Ehehe, I hit it~"

There was a moment of silence, then the delinquents started to cheer all at once.

"Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Whoa...whoaaaa! That was nuts! That was awesome!"

"She actually hit it!"

"Hell, she actually shot it!"

"That's amazing, she did it with that skinny body of hers!"

"I haven't been this surprised since that time Jacuzzi was crying and shooting a machine gun all over the place!"

"It's amazing~. It only took 0.00023 seconds to hit the branch after she fired~."

"Whoa, Melody, do you actually know that?!"

"I just picked a time that seemed to work."

"This girl, I swear..."

"Encore! Encore!"

"Encore! Encore!"

"Encore! Encore!"

Although she wasn't sure what they wanted as an encore, Sonja looked around for another target to shoot without losing her good humor, but--

That moment, they heard a scream.

The scream came from behind one of the somewhat far bungalows, another sound shattering the night stillness.

Lana?! Pamela had been leaning against the truck's canopy, but when she heard that sound she sprinted forward.

She ran, her mind in turmoil, and what she saw was--

Lana lying on the ground, out cold, and two men in military uniforms pinned under her.

And--an odd depression in the grass on the ground, as if something had been standing there only moments before.

<=>

In the woods

"...Was that a gunshot?"

"It came from the bungalows, Comrade Serges."

"Understood."

The gunshot had suddenly reverberated through the woods. Echo notwithstanding, it couldn't have been far.

Serges determined that it came from the bungalows and announced to the others with a face of stone. "...Let's hurry." He had also figured that something must have happened and hastened his steps along with his growing irritation.

That wasn't the sound of one of ours. ...And I didn't hear any return fire.

The man's mind had shifted completely into high alert. He clicked his tongue, but his face was still icy as he turned his head.

Shit....don't tell me someone did them in?

I can't ignore the possibility that the government hounds have arrived, either.

<=>

In the woods

" ... "

The twin in charge of taking care of the exchange remained silent when he heard the gunshot.

But his expression tightened instantly, and he broke into a sprint, still pushing his bike.

It was a one-in-a-million chance, but his resolve hardened all the same. If that shot had killed Cazze--

Once all of his enemies were dead, he would die as well.

<=>

Around the bungalows

"He"--Cookie was surprised.

He had been drawn by the voices of children and instinctively left his cabin.

It felt unusually cold outside to Cookie, but his instincts from the circus won out, perhaps. Just after he decided to go towards the voices, he saw two shadows.

It wasn't that he was hungry and wanted to eat them. Not at all.

Ever since he had bitten that boy Claire's arm, he knew that humans were poisonous, after all.

So perhaps Cookie was just hit by a wave of nostalgia, seeing humans again after such a long time.

Maybe he just remembered how he would pounce on Claire and his trainers so long ago, knocking them over and rolling around with them.

Maybe he wanted to do it again.

We may never know the truth, but regardless Cookie leapt at the two men without a hint of intent to harm.

But Cookie had miscalculated on several points.

First, the people he had leapt at in the past were special people who had received training at the circus.

Second--he had grown a size or two after the circus had broken up, and along with his volume, his weight had jumped up considerably.

The two men from the Lemures were squashed flat. Although they didn't die, they lost consciousness instantly.

Cookie was surprised to see them like that, remembering back in his own mind.

Once, he had knocked out a young member of the circus (who was obviously smaller than him) in the same way, and his trainers had scolded him severely.

It was unclear how much he understood what was going on, but he at least remembered "If the person stops moving, you'll get yelled at."

He reflexively turned the other way and withdrew into the depths of the forest.

Then--remembering that neither his trainers, nor Claire, nor any of the people from that time were around, he padded back over--

And there he bumped into the human with glasses, and at the same time the sound of a gunshot reached his ears.

He hated that sound.

If he had the same linguistic system as a human, Cookie might have thought as much in his mind.

Before he had been sold to the circus, he had heard it over and over in the forest. His friends who looked like him and his food always fell down when he heard that sound. Cookie remembered that perfectly.

And when the circus had fought with the group they called a "gang," he had heard that sound again--and one of the children who cheered for him had fallen down with blood flowing from his leg.

In the end, Claire and the ringleader had made sure the one who made that sound stopped moving, but the cheers had all stopped, and the tent was just filled with cold, unpleasant silence.

After that, Cookie had come to loathe that sound even more.

He hated it.

He let out a quiet, cautious growl and hurriedly thudded over to the path behind the bungalows.

The great beast Cookie ran as fast as he could, almost like a frightened rabbit.

Lana was sure that the giant thing that had appeared before her had left as suddenly as it came.

She trembled, unsure of what had happened for a while--

And as soon as "he" disappeared completely from her field of vision, she finally let out a scream.

<=>

Everyone came out to the back road at Lana's scream, so Cookie cut around to the front path, switching places with them.

There was no one there, and there were none of the cheers he had heard before. Their smell was already spread all over, and he couldn't figure out where they had gone.

But--there he saw something that brought back memories.

A large truck, the same kind the circus used to drive him around.

There was another smaller truck parked next to it, but Cookie ignored it and padded over to the bigger truck--maybe he was drawn by nostalgia, or maybe he couldn't stand the winter cold. Regardless, he crawled into the back.

He quietly turned around a few times in the luggage compartment--

And slowly closed his eyes, hoping he would hear those cheers again.

If grizzlies do in fact dream--he would have certainly been dreaming about the past.

About swaying back and forth in that truck as he traveled near and far with Claire and his other circus friends--

<=>

A few minutes later
Around the bungalows

"I-I'm serious! You have to believe me!

"Okay, before we talk about believing or not, I need to know *what* I should believe. What happened?"

"It was there! Something was there!"

"But *what*?"

"Something! Just something!"

Pamela had awakened the unconscious Lana, but she couldn't get anything relevant out of her.

Lana was surprisingly unhurt for someone who had been attacked by a giant "something." Pamela had checked around the bungalows just in case, but she didn't see anything suspicious.

On the other hand, the mysterious men were actually unconscious, so she decided it would be best to be cautious, all the same.

"So who are these guys in the uniforms, I wonder?"

"I have no idea! Deer hunters or something? M-more importantly, is that-that big thing really gone?"

"For now, it seems, so calm down a little, okay?"

Unlike Lana, the two men seemed to have suffered some bodily harm, and it would be a little while before they fully regained consciousness.

Even so, Pamela couldn't just leave them alone, either, so she let them sleep in the bed of their truck for now.

On the other hand, the youngsters had already started getting ready to clear out of the bungalows.

Melody seemed to be urging the others to get ready. "There's 33 minutes and 32 seconds before the train comes by at the earliest, so we should get going now~!"

"Can't we just do it after the train comes? I'm still sleepy."

"No, Jacuzzi won't drop the freight until they see our boats. It'll be bad if we aren't there."

"Ugh, Jacuzzi and his plans are such a pain. If we had just stolen it before the train left we wouldn't have to worry about all these details."

"So how would you steal it?"

"Maybe just have Donny pick up the train and throw it?"

"How strong do you think Donny is?!"

"Well, even if he can't do that there's probably other ways!"

The boys continued the same silly conversations they always did.

Melody rang her bells a couple of times as a warning. "Okay, okay~. Now we have 32 minutes and 50 seconds~. It'll take us 5 minutes by car, so we need to leave with some extra time, okay~?"

"Nothin' for it, I guess."

The eastern horizon had already started to turn white, but the stars were still twinkling overhead.

In the midst of that romantic forest setting, the kids cheerfully continued their preparations for departure.

"But *damn* it's cold."

"Won't it be even colder on the river?"

"Yeah, with the weather like this it'll probably snow if we get any clouds."

"Let's borrow the blankets from the bungalows. If we just fold them up and put them back on our way back it should be fine."

Everyone agreed with the suggestion, and they busily started to take out the blankets from the cabin.

Whether or not they planned to return them, it was a crime, but it was too late for any of them to be worrying about morals.

Only one boy would have been against it and tried to stop them, but he was currently involved in the hullabaloo on the train. Blissfully unaware, the rest of them cheerfully started loading up the blankets.

"Hey, I thought I was the first one to have the idea, but there's already a bunch loaded in here." The boy who should have been the first to bring blankets sighed dejectedly.

In the dim light of the truck, there was a mass of brown blankets.

Or so the boy decided. But he didn't care and just threw his blankets onto the brown ones.

Following him, the other boys covered the pile one after another.

"? Hey, does somethin' smell like a dog to you?"

"It's probably the blankets. Maybe somebody used them for their hunting dogs."

"Oh. Well, can't exactly say we got the deluxe blankets!"

In the end, nobody checked to see if the pile of brown blankets was moving or not--

And the "brown blanket" succumbed to the warmth placed on top of him, ushering him into sleep.

Drowsily dozing off...

<=>

In front of Bungalow #3

[The child is next to the bridge with some youngsters that happened to be passing by. Place the money in this box and send it down the river.]

"Alright, that should work."

Pamela wrote the message by hand on a piece of paper, emptied out a decent-sized box from their truck, placed the note inside and left it in the bungalow entrance.

"I hope that's enough to fool them..."

"What are you talking about, Pamela? We have bigger things to worry about...huge, giant things..." a terrified Lana interrupted.

Pamela sighed quietly and answered with a serious expression. "I am concerned about the thing you saw, Lana, don't get me wrong, but there are things that scare me more right now."

"Wh-what?! There's nothing scarier than that thing! I'm telling you for a fact!" Lana insisted.

Pamela ignored Lana's exclamation and told her as calmly as she could. "You know what? I remembered about Cazze's house a little while ago. More like I was reminded, actually."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Cazze was already with Sonja in the truck bed at the moment.

Pamela turned back again to make sure that was still the case, then told Lana a certain fact in a low voice. "I remembered about the name 'Runorata.'"

"Huh? What's a Runorata?"

"...Cazze's last name! Please, can't you just remember that?!"

"Ah, oh! Yeah, that's right! Duh, of course I remember! I was just testing you to see if *you* rememmmm--buh."

Pamela pulled at Lana's cheek, sighed, and replied. "The Runorata *Family*."

"Huh?"

"A Mafia, a gang from the East. They don't have any dealings out West, but they're pretty damn famous in the East. I don't know all the details, though."

"A...gang...?" Lana's eyes widened.

Pamela smiled of bitter defeat. "Yup. They didn't get that mansion by doing 'a few bad things on the side.' And we told them not to contact the police. We told them 'Hey, don't turn us in, take care of us by *your* standards instead, please!'"

"..."

Thanks to Pamela's serious words, Lana too had accepted the truth of their predicament.

Her face blanched even more than it had when she had seen the shadow, and her teeth chattered together.

"So that means...huh? If they catch us..."

"After they cut off all our fingers, yank out all our teeth, and gouge out both our eyes, they'll finally kill us."

As Lana started to shriek Pamela clamped a hand over her mouth and muttered, with the eyes of a woman facing her executioner.

"...Or we should hope that's all they do."

<=>

Having finished her general preparations, Pamela forced a pale and frightened Lana into the passenger seat and took the driver's seat herself.

Lana was staring up at the ceiling, looking quite ill, but she finally asked in a tired voice.

"By the way...what are we gonna do about the hunters? Their pulses were normal for now, weren't they?"

The soldiers didn't seem like they would be opening their eyes anytime soon, so at the moment they were in the truck bed.

There wasn't enough room for both of them to lie down in the back, so one of them was propped up so that his upper body was leaning against the canopy. The back of the canopy was open to make it windier, so if they had been driving through a city people would wonder what in the world was going on. But since they were in the forest, there probably wouldn't be anyone around to see them.

"I'm telling you, we can't just leave them. We'll take them to the river for now. If they still look like they won't wake up, we can take them to a doctor afterwards. Okay?"

"...Sure. Aagh, I'm too stressed to think about all these details!"

"What a coincidence. Me too."

Her head may have been full of thoughts about the Runoratas, but Pamela was handling the situation quite appropriately, all things considered.

If the soldiers were the owners of the bungalows, they would probably accept the excuse that the girls had gotten lost and decided to use them for the night.

They were awfully strange-looking for actual soldiers, but their guns were disproportionately powerful for hunting. The women had removed the bullets for the time being, and Sonja was probably having fun looking at the guns themselves at the moment.

"But, what if they aren't hunters? What if they really are soldiers? Maybe being in the army was too tough for them and they ran away and wore themselves out and collapsed... They could also be Mafia goons coming to pay the ransom--or to kill us--so I secretly tied up their arms and legs."

"Wow, you really went the extra mile."

"I'm just not comfortable leaving the whole thing to chance when we don't even know who

they are."

While they talked, the youngsters finished their preparations and began to leave.

Pamela slowly shifted her car into gear to follow their two trucks.

"Now...if only we can pull off our act: two innocent girls, forced to make a phone call by mysterious kidnappers..."

They were going to the river with the delinquents because they had determined that maybe the Mafia wouldn't suddenly open fire in a large group of people. This would get the delinquents involved, but they were train robbers, not normal people. They were fellow travelers, and fellow villains, so they could at least make use of them.

Pamela was certainly no saint. She felt a bit of a pang in her chest, but she still resolved to make the most of them.

She knew that both they and the delinquents were like rabbits lost in the same desert.

Unable to see what was around them, their pasts dry and withered and their futures uncertain.

That was why they had to keep walking forward, looking for an oasis, at least.

If they lost their purpose in life, the rabbits would instantly disappear into the sand.

Pamela's thoughts were somewhat forlorn, but at the same time she had a sense of reconciliation, like she was a little more enlightened than before. She quietly pressed down on the accelerator.

And so the delinquents and the robbers left the bungalows behind.

The worn-out truck and its ticking time bomb named Cazze, and the large truck, with its own bomb named Cookie, just drove towards the bridge.

<=>

In the forest

On the road to the river, three trucks passed the group of Lemures led by Serges, although the ones in the trucks didn't notice at all.

When Serges and his followers heard a sound they presumed belonged to an engine, they hid in the forest.

The men in uniform spoke to each other in low voices, watching the trucks as they went by.

"...Those trucks...are those the kids we saw yesterday?"

"Probably."

"What happened? They don't look like government dogs..."

The fact that they were coming this way meant that the two men from before had failed in their mission.

They didn't look armed. They looked like any other group of delinquents.

But on the one-in-a-million chance they *were* armed, it was possible the Lemures didn't have enough numbers to deal with them effectively.

There was also the possibility that state troops or Beriam's personal soldiers were on board, so they couldn't move carelessly.

"Either way, if we don't send up the signal, Beriam's daughter will die....hm?"

The last truck. The moment that conspicuously worn-out truck passed by, they noticed something strange in the truck bed.

One of their two comrades they had sent out on reconnaissance was asleep, his back propped up against the canopy.

There was no blood, but he couldn't tell if he was alive or dead.

Serges held back his comrades until the truck passed, then muttered in an icy voice. "No matter who they are, there's no mistake that they are our enemies.

"Bring them back. Once we've ascertained their identities, we'll eliminate them."

<=>

Next to the bridge

Next to the Lemures' tent, the two remaining men calmly chatted with each other.

"Geez, what's the trouble?"

"No idea. At the very least, if they got our intentions across, there shouldn't be any problem."

They were talking about their plan to free Huey Laforet.

"But I do feel bad for the kid, not even 10 years old and all."

"Don't. Think about what it must have been like, raised under the almighty umbrella of Daddy dearest and all his power and money. Just think of it like payment for all the happiness up until now."

"That's true. Either way, it's the end for the brat whether our negotiations are successful or not."

"Ha, can you call this a hostage situation anymore?"

They were talking together about the girl Mary Beriam who had been captured aboard the train, but--as bad luck would have it, that conversation spurred a man who had been listening from the trees into action.

"Hey."

""Hu--wha--?!""

Suddenly addressed from behind, the two turned at the same time to face the voice--

And at the exact same moment a pair of thumbs pressed into their throats, sending their consciousness into darkness.

Although, when they awoke a few minutes later, they endured a brief, but effective round of torture that made them wish they had lost consciousness forever.

"It seems you plan to kill the young master...? Is that what you said?"

"We'll take our sweet time killing you bastards. A hundred days each should do it."

Extra Chapter

The Runorata Family don, Bartolo Runorata, always had an organized team of twelve bodyguards.

They were divided into three groups of four, who would rotate through protecting Bartolo and his family so that one team was always off-duty.

And when they were off-duty, nobody could force them to work.

Not even Bartolo himself.

Two members of that team, the twins Gabriel and Juliano, were off-duty when Carzelio was kidnapped, but--

"Mr. Bartolo, please allow us to take care of this matter."

"Yeah, we should be the one to take care of Master Carzelio, right?"

Gabriel's speech was always polite and respectful, and Juliano gave off a particularly boisterous air.

They always referred to each other in the first person, so their speech was sometimes confusing, but they always worked as a duo. Everyone around them thought of them as one person in two bodies.

They had been on duty as bodyguards when his first grandson was born, and they had been entrusted with protecting Carzelio many times since.

At first, Gabriel and Juliano had thought that their duty was to put their lives on the line for Bartolo, not his family.

But a long-time bodyguard had told them that Bartolo's family was also a part of Bartolo himself, and so they had mechanically carried out their job.

What changed their minds was the time when ten-odd people had attacked them, after Cazze had just turned five.

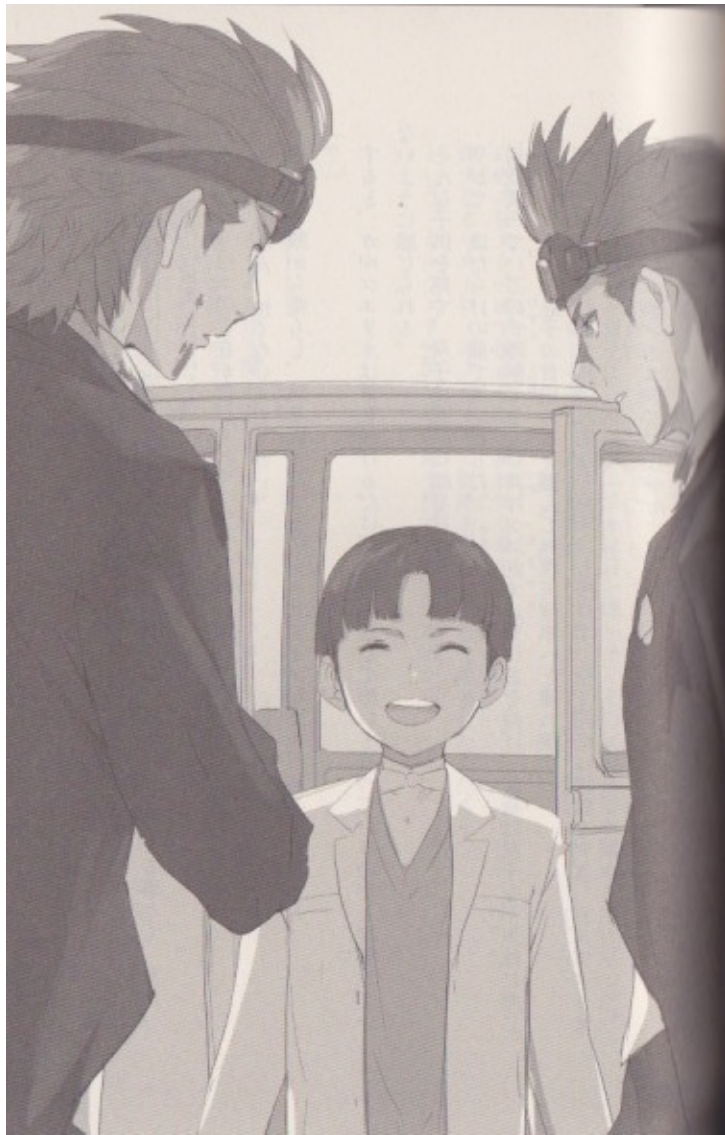
A few years ago

"We were to do our utmost never to let the young master see us kill anyone, weren't we? At least as much as possible."

"That's impossible. We tried as hard as we could, for about 5 seconds."

Gabriel and Juliano conversed, cracking their necks in front of the car containing Carzelio and his father.

Around them lay the bodies of several hoodlums, already dead. The pair, splattered with the blood of their kills, looked like demons who had crawled up from Hell itself.



" ... "

Carzelio's father, as the boss's son-in-law, was at a loss for words in the face of the sudden attack and the slaughter that had occurred afterwards. Although you could say he still had considerable nerve, considering a normal person would have curled into a ball inside the car screaming at the top of their lungs in front of such a scene.

But Carzelio suddenly opened the door and got out of the car. He **smiled at the twins innocently**, just as they were.

"Umm...er...thank you very much, Mr. Gabriel and Mr. Julian!" Carzelio's eyes were sparkling, as if he was meeting a hero from a manga in real life.

It was just one sentence of gratitude.

The innocent child's thanks were completely at odds with the stench of iron and dark red liquid that covered the area.

But that sentence undoubtedly touched their hearts.

Everyone except for Bartolo called them mad dogs and looked on them with fear and hatred.

But Cazze, looking at the brutal scene and breathing in the stench of blood and gunpowder, had offered them a simple thanks without a hint of fear.

The two were astonished, unbelieving that someone like Cazze could even exist.

"...Young master, aren't you scared?" Julian asked. He wiped some of the assailants' blood off of his face, gun still in hand.

"?" Carzelio just cocked his head to the side, as if he didn't know what he was supposed to be afraid of.

Seeing this child, the twins looked at each other--

And finally a smile appeared on their bloodstained faces.

Carzelio tilted his head even more, wondering why they were smiling.

His father, unnerved by the twins, grabbed his son by the scruff of the neck and dragged him back into the car. But the twins paid no heed to his father's reaction, and at the exact same moment dropped to one knee and bowed deeply to Carzelio.

"Our deepest apologies, Master Carzelio."

"We just treated our mission for you as 'work' and nothing more."

"From now on, not just Mr. Bartolo..."

"...but you also are our worthy master."

The twins alternated back and forth between them as they spoke. Carzelio's eyes sparkled, while his father's narrowed.

However, that day was a turning point. Ever since, a rumor began to float around the Runorata Family.

That the innocent young leader had won the hearts of the two mad dogs in an instant.

The fight for the succession to the eminent Bartolo Runorata had already been decisively won.

That rumor had twisted Carzelio's own father's face with a complicated expression.

<=>

And now--

Even though the two were off-duty, they had requested Bartolo to give them the mission of rescuing Carzelio.

"...You're off-duty, aren't you? Not even I have the right to give you orders right now," Bartolo answered calmly.

Gabriel opened his mouth. "Yes, but...when we are off-duty, there is a rule that we may do whatever we please, as long as we don't harm the Family, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," Bartolo nodded simply.

"So in other words," Juliano continued, "we aren't bodyguards now, just hunters working another job on our day off."

"Oh?"

"Please. If you have any faith in us, please let us do this job."

The two sounded like they were delivering lines from a play.

Bartolo sent them an overwhelming look--then he looked into their eyes made sure they were unshaken in the slightest. He answered them with a sigh. "You're awfully dramatic, you two.

"For you, hunting has been your main job from the beginning. Guarding is only your side job."

<=>

And so a few minutes later--

The two hunters were set loose.

They were hunting dogs.

Or maybe rabid dogs.

Regardless, they were undoubtedly top-class hunters--pursuing their prey and sinking their fangs into its neck.

They hummed their hunting song, proud to protect their other master, and enjoying themselves in the process.

Their song was well-suited to the sound of their engines as they honed their fangs to their heart's content.

Not knowing what kind of uproar was waiting at the end of the road, for their songs, their bikes, and their bloodlust.

Final Chapter -- Anyhow, Any Hare

Next to the river

"Alriiight, here we are!"

"Yes! Now let's get out the boats!"

"We have 21 minutes and 31 seconds~"

They used their arrival at the river to psyche themselves up completely, acting like they were camping with no attempt to pretend otherwise. Even the ones who had been sleepy up until now all jumped up and put their feet in the river's cold December water, shouting "Hyahha! Hyahha!" even though Chaini wasn't among them. Melody and her crew watched them with some bewilderment, but also dry smiles.

On the other hand, a little ways away, Pamela and Lana hadn't moved from their truck where it was parked.

Sonja and Cazze had already gotten out of the back and gone to have fun with the delinquents. Apparently the two had become quite close in only half a day, and even though Sonja was 5 years older she acted more like Cazze's friend than an older sister.

"So wh-what do we do now? Take Sonja and run for it?"

"If we do that, they'll be convinced that the kids are the kidnappers."

"...Wasn't that the plan?"

"I'm not sure. If they were just some normal people it would be out of the question, but they're train robbers, same as us. On the other hand, they also didn't get in our way, so I don't know what to--...hold on." Pamela suddenly fell silent and opened the window, listening closely.

"W-what's the matter, Pamela?"

"I thought...I heard some people screaming just now..."

<=>

"Hm...it sounds like someone's here. Did someone hear your screams?"

Before he finished saying it, one of the twins delivered a sharp blow to the stomachs of the men he had been interrogating, and they lost consciousness instantly.

Stopping his torture for now, he hid the two in the shadow of a car parked a little ways away, then hid himself in the shadow of the trees, deciding to determine who the approaching figure was.

And what appeared before the watchful man was--

A pair of young women who appeared to have absolutely nothing to do with the uniformed men.

<=>

The two got out of the truck to investigate the woods a little ways up the hill towards the railroad trestle and saw something that looked like a soot-stained piece of cloth.

They realized it was part of a tent, and slowly started up the hill between the trees--and discovered several cars parked in a place they couldn't see from below.

"What...is this?" Pamela looked around, but she couldn't hear anything like screams anymore.

This wasn't a tent for camping, but a large military tent, with steel rods holding up its low cloth ceiling. Underneath was a folding table and several chairs, and something spread out on top that looked like a small cipher.

On top of the car was a radio, and no matter how she looked at it she couldn't imagine that this belonged to some regular campers or birdwatchers.

"...Blood...?"

A chill ran down their spines when they found blood on a corner of the tent.

Lana was shaking so hard her glasses made noise as she gripped Pamela's hand. "It-it's that thing! That...that giant black shadow did this..."

Pamela wanted to brush her off as an idiot, but even though there was a considerable range of equipment here, there were no people, only the traces of blood. Given the situation, the existence of some monster-like creature wasn't unthinkable, even without Lana's input.

"...Let's go back for a moment, Lana. Everyone will worry."

"Y-yeah...but, that big shadow...I don't know if Sonja's guns could--huh?"

Lana turned her eyes away from the bloodstains, and they landed on something odd lying in the corner on the other side of the tent.

It was a white, vaguely cylindrical pipe, and on its bulging end was a pin.

"This is a grenade!" Lana automatically picked it up, eyes sparkling as she turned back to Pamela. "If we have this, if that big shadow comes back maybe we could beat it! Yes!" Lana crowed with her finger in the air.

Pamela's only response was an utterly weary expression.

She didn't engage with her further, just warily pulled her back the way they came. She didn't scold her for the theft of the hand grenade, either. "We're going back. Cazze and Sonja will be worried."

A lone man appeared from the trees, having decided that the two were headed down the slope.

"...Those women...definitely just used Master Carzelio's nickname..."

He hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow the women without letting them know he was there.

<=>

Riverbank

The delinquents had finished lining up the boats next to the water and were playing around in the water as if they had no idea how cold it was or that it was supposed to be winter.

Cazze, of course, had no desire to experience the cold with wet pants and just enjoyed watching them from the riverbank.

But then, one of the delinquents accidentally slipped and plunged headlong into the river.

"Whoa!...That's c-cold!"

"Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

""Hyahhaa'? What's 'hyahhaa' about how cold I am right now?! Dammit! Ah--uh, hey, where'd my shoes go?"

He was angry at Chaini (and Co.), and there was no way the cold water would cool his head down in an instant. Apparently the shoes he had taken off and left by the river had been washed away, and he saw that they had in fact been swept quite a ways downstream.

He hopped into the nearest boat and called to the ones on the bank who still had their shoes on.

"Hey, get me a blanket! I'm going to get my shoes! Somebody bring me a blanket from the truck! I'm freezing here!" the boy shouted, sneezing, but almost nobody could hear him--or if they did hear him, they just laughed heartlessly and told him to get it himself.

But Cazze heard his shout and called back happily. "I'll get one!"

"Oh, thanks! And sorry! I'm counting on you!"

The delinquent sent the boy they had just met (and who had also been kidnapped, although he himself didn't realize) on an errand. However, his intentions were not malicious--he had just brought Cazze into their band.

For Cazze, that unaffected attitude was probably a breath of fresh air. He had never been treated this way before, but he didn't get upset.

After all, this was exactly what he had wished for deep down.

He didn't know why he was held up on a pedestal at home, but he was happy to be treated like a comrade of the older boys. He climbed into the truck with a smile on his face.

And without losing that smile for a moment--

He came face-to-face with "him," in the supposedly unoccupied truck.

<=>

Cookie was again pulled from his deep sleep into a doze.

As he shook and rattled in the truck, he kept hearing the commotion of the boys and girls. His body again began to warm, probably remembering the excitement of the circus. When

the noise ended he was about to again fall into sleep, but then Cookie felt his back being shaken by someone and blearily raised his head.

And when he brought his head out of the pile of blankets and looked behind him--he came face-to-face with a lone little boy.

<=>

A bear.

Even Cazze, raised like a bird in a cage, knew this was a bear.

It was an unusual bear, one or two sizes bigger than normal, but he probably didn't realize that.

But a bear.

A bear through and through.

A breathtaking grizzly.

Alas, a grizzly.

Those words fit the situation.

The small face of a boy not yet ten and a furry face about three times as wide touched noses.

It wouldn't be inconceivable for a weak-hearted person to die from shock in that moment. Even if he escaped death by heart attack, he would have no choice but to resign himself to his impending death, for a different reason.

But the boy was blessed with two things.

One was that this bear didn't eat humans, and was in fact quite used to them.

The other was that ultimately, **the boy was the Runorata grandson.**

"Wow! I've never seen anything like you before!" Cazze said and **ruffled the fur of the bear's cheeks.**

Any normal person who saw it would think it was strange.

Who would say it was innocence and naiveté and leave it at that? Sitting before the boy was a great creature with sharp teeth and claws, several times larger than a human. Even so, the boy was completely unafraid of the awe-inspiring beast and gently ran his fingers through his fur like a cat or dog he had owned for many years.

"This is amazing! So this is 'outside' ...!"

Young as he was, Cazze was overcome by a great wave of emotion, and the words slipped out.

"Outside" is an ill-defined concept, but for the boy who was freely experiencing the outside for the first time, it was the best he could do.

On the other hand, Cookie seemed relieved at the boy's cries of delight and pressed his nose to the boy's cheek.

"Ahaha, that tickles!"

The boy touched him without any caution at all. He reminded Cookie of the red-headed boy.

The grizzly caught a glimpse of the past he missed so much as he observed the boy's face.

Cazze was excited over the creature that had appeared in front of him for a while, but he suddenly remembered why he had come and hastily grabbed a blanket.

"Sorry, I have to bring this blanket back," he told the bear. "See you later, Mr. Bear!"

Mr. Bear tilted his head a little sadly, but he didn't try to force the boy to stay.

Wow! I got to become friends with so many people...and I met a real live bear!

Maybe it was because he had been raised by the embodiment of fear, Bartolo Runorata, but the boy's sense of fear was unusually dull. Encouraged by his miraculous communication with the bear, he got out of the truck and started to run.

And--again something unexpected happened to the naive boy.

It was a short distance from the truck to the riverbank.

He held on to the blanket and made to call out to the other boys, but--

Those words were stifled by a hand that suddenly reached around and covered his mouth

from behind.

And the next moment--

The incongruous sound of a gunshot rang out through the forest next to the river.

<=>

"What?" "Hyahaa?" "*Hyahaa.*"

The ones on the riverbank all turned around at once at the sudden gunshot.

"Hey, what's the matter with them?"

"Maybe they know the guys who were laid out back at the cabins."

"That's not the issue here, guys!"

There were five or six men there dressed in military uniforms, all of them holding guns. One of them had apparently fired at the ground creating the sound just now, given the fresh smoke rising from the barrel.

But what surprised them was not the guns or the group holding them--

But that their apparent leader had captured Cazze.

"Now, then...I have something to tell you all," the man said coolly.

His left hand pressed down on Cazze's neck and held it fast. He took up a knife in his free right hand and put the sharply glinting blade to his throat.

"Playtime is over, children."



He wasn't shouting angrily, but Serges' voice reached the youngsters loud and clear.

The Lemures had decided to spy on them from next to the river for the time being, but they saw their chance when the one who appeared to be the youngest went off by himself. They had successfully secured a hostage in no time.

And so they began their interrogation of the youngsters.

"Who the hell are you?" Serges asked calmly.

The youngsters made no attempt to hide their alarm. "Hey...wait! We should be asking

you!"

"Hey...they look like soldiers... Maybe they found out about our train robbery..."

"Wh-what do we do?!"

Melody ignored the boys who started talking to each other quietly, her expression still sleepy as ever. Even though she sounded afraid, her voice was clear as a bell as it sounded from the boat. "U-um...we just came to check out the area downriver! We aren't up to anything, and we didn't mean to get in the way of your army training, so, um...please let him go!"

The leader of the uniformed men chuckled and shook his head. "If so, then how do you explain our unconscious comrade in that old truck over there?" he replied.

"That truck isn't ours, but...they were just on the ground, on the other side of the forest! We thought if they didn't wake up from air around the river we would take them to a hospital!" Melody spoke in a tone completely different from her usual one.

The boys looked at each other and started whispering.

"Melody's doin' great. She sounds so confident."

"What do you expect? Some people can only survive as long as they do by conning people like that."

"Anyway, seriously, what's the matter with these guys? I never heard this was a training ground for state troops."

"Either way, they've got guns, so let's try not to piss 'em off."

The group of delinquents, mistaking them for actual soldiers, stopped moving because they didn't want to do anything unnecessary. They watched their conversation, but--

"My, my, did you think that would pass for a convincing lie? I can shave off this boy's nose, if you like."

"Nn, nn--" When he heard the man's cruel words, Cazze's throat tightened, and his voice wouldn't come out.

The youngsters raised their voices in protest all at once at the sight.

"Now wait just a minute! You're soldiers, aren't you?! Isn't it your job to protect us citizens?!"

"Forget about us, what did that little kid ever do to you?!"

The boys showered them with disapproval, booing and hissing.

"Still playing dumb? What kind of idiot would release a hostage just because you told him to? Well, in this situation I didn't really need a hostage to begin with. I could just shoot all of you right here and now."

Even the duller delinquents finally realized, seeing Serges and his cruel smile.

The men in front of them were not soldiers--but something much more dangerous and perverse.

<=>

"Wh-what do we do, Pamela? It looks like those guys in the uniforms were up to no good after all!"

"Be quiet, Lana, or they'll notice us."

Pamela and Lana had come down from the hill and were watching the riverbank from a slightly higher location.

Somehow or other, their arrival had been well-timed. The men in uniform hadn't noticed them, and it was still possible for them to escape without being drawn in, but--

"What should we do...? If this keeps up, Cazze will..."

"...If worst comes to worst, I'll make a distraction. If we can just rescue Cazze..."

Apparently for them, abandoning Cazze and running for it was not an option.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. If I can get to the truck and get one of our guns from the back, maybe I could..."

"It's best not to do anything rash."

""!?"

Every hair on Pamela and Lana's bodies stood on end at the sudden voice from behind. They turned around, prepared for the uniformed men to capture them from behind, but--

Standing there was a young man whose manner of dress was completely out of place in a riverside forest.

"Those men look like they have some experience shooting guns, in their own way... They aren't opponents a novice could challenge in a shootout and expect to win." The man was dressed entirely in black, and he spoke quite politely.

Pamela and Lana hadn't noticed him at all until he let them know he was there, and there was something in his polite words that carried even more weight than the man in uniform.

And his next words let them know that this man was definitely not their ally.

"It is not your job to bring back the young master unharmed--that role belongs to us."

The term he used to refer to himself was a little odd, but there was no doubt that this man was connected with the Runorata Family.

"Eek--" "No, Lana."

Shaking, Lana reached for the grenade she had just found, but Pamela instantly pushed her hand back.

The man in black muttered to himself, as if he could no longer see the two. "If they leave some sort of opening, we could take them all out in one go, but...oh?" The man in black looked mystified, as if his eyes had landed on something in particular. He continued, again in a mumble. "What is that...?"

<=>

"Answer me! What did you do to disarm my comrade?" Serges bellowed. He was confident they wouldn't lose their upper hand as he questioned them with a somewhat sadistic smile.

Heheh, it seems they're just a pack of regular hoodlums after all. How did they take out the two on reconnaissance? he thought. I'm concerned that our first negotiator hasn't returned, but...if nothing else, we should probably finish off about half of them. There's too much to think about when there's too many.

He was about to order his subordinates to reduce their number by half for the time being, but--he felt a sense that something was off. He stopped moving, and his smile grew thin.

...? ...What?

What made him uncomfortable was their gazes.

The youngsters' faces were as pale as they had been before, but now they weren't looking directly at the Lemures.

What are they looking at...?!

When he started to look around for the source of his unease, a few of the delinquents muttered to him.

"Uh, the one who got your friends? ...Uh..."

Serges turned in the direction of the trucks--

"I think...it was probably **that**."

And "that" forced its way onto the scene.

"He" was standing on two legs, stretching his body up as high as it would go, and "his" head rose higher than the canopy of the truck.

What...is that...? What am I looking at right now...?

He was so huge it had to be a joke.

At least the timing was certainly comedic as he appeared before Serges and his men.

<=>

"A-aaahhhhhh! That! That thing! That's what I saw!" Lana shouted, violently shaking Pamela's shoulders.

Pamela was lost in a daze for a few seconds as the massive creature burst onto the scene, but--

The shaking brought her back to her senses. She grabbed Lana's head in both of her hands and pressed her forehead against Lana's, temple twitching.

"...That is a goddamn grizzly bear, Lana, not a 'giant something'!"

"Well, it was dark, so it was a 'giant something' back then!"

Listening to her friend's inane response, Pamela turned to the man in black who had held them back earlier. "What are you planning to--huh?"

The man in black had disappeared from next to them.

<=>

What kind of joke is this?

For the rest of the Lemures, too, this was wholly outside of their expectations.

Almost all of the humans paused for a moment in the face of such an unimaginable situation.

They needed to suppress the confusion in their minds and plan what to do in light of the situation before them.

If they had originally come to hunt a monster, they would have had no need to pause. They would have pulled the triggers on their rifles and machine guns in a moment.

If the bear were a size smaller, like a normal bear, their reaction would likely have been the same.

But they were members of the Lemures, who had received training--they had no choice but to take some time to think before such an unthinkable creature.

They weren't originally combat specialists. They were the ones who had been chosen to negotiate with the government.

Although, many of the Lemures on board the train had hesitated before the red monster in the same way.

The pause was only a few seconds. But just a few seconds can be enough to be fatal.

At least, for them it was--because the bear that hated gunshots and a third party, who recovered faster than anyone else, were now poised to attack from both sides.

The bear in question, Cookie, hadn't gone outside with the desire to hurt anyone.

Just after the boy left the truck, he heard the "bad sound," so he had poked his head out to see where it had come from this time. Outside, there were several men holding the things that made the "bad sound," and somehow they seemed to have stopped the boy's cries of happiness.

Cookie was sure that those tools were the culprit behind everything, and he wanted nothing more than to knock them out of their hands.

At the very least, what he did was less an act of hatred and more one of fear of the "bad sound."

But for a mere human, the giant grizzly's single strike was no different than being sucked into a tornado, even if the bear's only intent was to knock his gun to the ground.

As soon as the gun flew out of his hands high into the air, the one once holding it was flung away.

Perhaps he had lost consciousness before he could even shout--the man sailed silently to a place a few meters away and landed flat on his back on the riverbank.

He didn't seem to be dead, but he was clearly out for the count.

With just one attack, one of the men holding guns had been incapacitated.

That reality was the spark that shocked the terrified Lemures back into action.

But it was too late.

Far before that, someone who was almost completely unperturbed, even in the face of such an unusual grizzly, had already arrived behind them.

"Wha...what are you...do...ing...."

Still holding onto Cazze's neck, Serges made to shout at his subordinates to shoot, but before he could, he heard a groan from behind--and an engine sound from the forest once again, chilling his heart.

While everyone had been focused on the giant grizzly--one of the twins had knocked out two of the Lemures using the same technique as before.

On top of that--with perfect timing, his partner appeared from the forest on his motorcycle.

The other man in black came flying onto the riverbank, with the box Pamela and Lana had left with the letter on the back of his bike.

"Wha...wha...!"

Serges was completely unable to take in the situation, but the next moment, he felt an overwhelming pressure on the wrist holding the knife.

"Gah...what...ooowwaaa?!"

He knew instantly that someone had grabbed his right wrist.

But, when he turned his body to see who it was, he suddenly lost all sense of his position in relation to the ground, the sky, his own right hand, and everything else.

Not long after his feet left the ground, he did a flip in the air and slammed into the ground with a thud that shot pain through his whole body.

"Gah..."

As the scenery blurred, Serges saw a man in black playing around with his knife. Behind him, he saw the boy he had held until three seconds prior, with the man in black standing in the way as if to protect him from Serges.

The man in black spoke to the boy behind him, his voice filled with the highest respect. "Young master, this place is dangerous. Please, make your way down next to the river."

"Mr. Gabriel!"

The man the boy called Gabriel smiled kindly to calm him.

On the other hand, the man on the bike looked around at their surroundings. "What the hell's goin' on here?" he asked.

"Mr. Juliano!"

When the boy called his name, Juliano got off his motorbike and motioned to the side with his left hand, bowing respectfully like a butler.

"I'm glad to see you safe, Master Carzelio."

Watching the easygoing exchange, Serges realized something.

There were no more Lemures holding guns.

He couldn't tell by sight, but it seemed that the others had lost their weapons around the same time he'd been taken down. One of his comrades was groaning, a knife sticking out of his arm, and another seemed to have been knocked away by another swing of the bear's paw, lying on the ground in the opposite direction from the one who had been taken out first.

On top of that, their hostage, the boy called Carzelio, was going down towards the riverbank where the youngsters were at the urging of the men in black, and he was no longer any use as a hostage.

No...it's not possible, it's not possible...!

The grizzly seemed satisfied with the current state of affairs for the time being, hunkered down on all fours, and stared at the youngsters next to the river.

What the hell...what's going on...?

Juliano calmly told the confused man. "Alright, we don't know who you are or where you're from...but you didn't think you could actually accomplish anything by turning the Runorata Family against you, did ya? Huh?"

"What...?"

Did he say 'the Runorata Family'...?

Serges was confused for a moment at hearing the name so suddenly, but he put together the pieces of information he had in his head and derived his own answer.

"I-I see...! So Bartolo Runorata is eating out of Senator Beriam's hand now, is he? He told you to come and finish us...off...."

The words he had started with such conviction tapered off into a weak ending.

That was the moment he felt the brunt of the murderous pressure rolling off of the twins.

"...He sure said something interesting, didn't he?"

"He certainly did."

"What did he call our family, our Don Bartolo?"

"We'd rather not say. Hearing it even once is profane."

Their voices grew more and more frigid, little by little. Serges could feel the blood draining from his face and running cold.

"So what do we do?"

"Our first priority is to make sure we never hear his voice again, so as not to disrespect Mr. Bartolo."

Their words sounded like a joke, but Serges felt nothing but despair.

Then another change came to turn the tides.

"Freeze!"

A voice tore through the thick atmosphere, along with the *chik-chik* of a gun being cocked. When he looked, there were two men in uniforms who had just arrived, their guns aimed at the twins in black.

The two held up old-fashioned submachine guns, approaching them little by little, as well as remaining cautious of the grizzly.

"Comrade Serges! Are you alright?"

"Who are these guys?"

Pamela, Lana, Sonja, and the delinquents remembered their faces.

They were the two who had been unconscious behind the bungalows just a little while ago.

"Aah! Those are my guns!" Sonja cried in protest, but the uniformed men didn't hear her.

Apparently they had regained consciousness in the truck bed. After untying themselves, they had grabbed the weapons close at hand and gone outside.

Either way, they could see their unconscious comrades and the giant grizzly bear from before. If it weren't for the lingering pain in their bodies, they would have instantly joined the fight.

On the other hand, although the twins didn't feel that their lives were in danger, another worry rose in their minds as they whispered to each other.

"Looks like we've got no choice but to take care of them, too."

"Although we were told to do everything we could not to let Master Carzelio see someone be killed until he turns 13."

"That may be so, but we already let him see once...and if we hesitate he might get hit by a stray bullet."

"...My goodness, this is a bind, isn't it?"

<=>

"Y-yeah! This is our chance!"

Pamela and Lana watched as the situation once again grew tense, when Lana suddenly pulled something from her pocket, eyes sparkling.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Right now, Cazze is away from them! We can get those guys, the Runoratas, and the bear all in one fell swoop!" Before she even finished talking, Lana pulled the pin from the white grenade.

"What?! W-wait! Lana!!"

If you do that, you'll turn the entire Runorata Family against--

But, just a moment too late to stop her--

The white grenade had already left Lana's hand.

<=>

A few of the men in uniform stood up, able to move again, and picked their guns back up.

"Heh, heheh, so you're just a lap dog's lap dogs after all. Looks like you weren't able to follow through."

Serges stood up himself, now that the tides had turned once again, heaping insults on them with his sadistic smile.

But--

The situation then reversed a third time.

Clink clink clink

A white, cylindrical object came flying in and rolled into the middle of the group with a dry sound.

It was an object Serges recognized.

It was, in a way, the single most important object to their plan.

*No way. Why is the **smoke grenade**...*

Unable to even finish his thought--

He could only watch as a colossal amount of smoke began to pour from the device.

<=>

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, wait a minute! What's goin' on here?"

"Bears and guns...since when were there bears around here?!"

"H-hey, what do we do?! Hey!"

"It's only been 283 seconds since I heard that gunshot~"

"U-uh, well, even so..."

"Hyahhaa..." *"Hyahhaa..."*

Starting with Melody, the group of delinquents could only stare on as bystanders at the bewildering change unfolding in front of them.

"But...that's a heck of a lot of smoke..."

"It's even better than Nice's smoke grenades! Maybe."

What Lana had thrown was a smoke grenade the Lemures were going to use to communicate the results of their negotiations. Huey Laforet had made it for fun, but it was tremendously powerful. The smoke shrouded their surroundings with the force of a small explosion.

A white wall filled the air around Serges and swirled high into the sky.

W-wait! That one's for when Senator Beriam accepts our demands...!

But it was too late for his mental shout.

The smoke was blown into the sky where the stars had started to go out, as if to celebrate its own dawn.

Although--

At the moment, for those on board the Flying Pussyfoot, the smoke was already meaningless anyway.

<=>

It was a confusing situation.

Cookie had been disinterested from the start, since he had no idea what was going on, but when he saw the smoke shooting into the air, he sprang into action.

He remembered this from the circus: this was when he would appear in front of the audience.

He would run through a powerful cloud of smoke, and the giant grizzly would appear with a red-haired boy riding on his back.

Remembering his show--

Cookie jumped up happily and leapt into the expanding cloud of smoke.

<=>

"H-hey, we can't shoot like this! We'll shoot each other!"

"Calm down! Let's go around and cut in from the other side, first we need to take care of that grizzly--"

The two who said this were the ones who had borrowed Sonja's guns, but their dialogue was cut off halfway through.

Without any time to adjust their hold on their guns, a mass of fur came bounding through the smoke and happily sprang upon the pair that had gone stiff from fear.

""AAAAAAAhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!""

Their screams were crushed as they experienced the same thing that had happened to them at the bungalows earlier.

But this time, the physical damage came with a thirty-percent bonus.

<=>

When Pamela and Lana cautiously came out, it was all over.

The twins in black seized the new advantage the smoke gave them and beat the black suits until every inch of them was black and blue--then threw the unconscious men down into a pile one by one before Pamela and Lana.

As they tentatively approached, they heard the twins' discussion.

"But what the hell's goin' on? Puttin' money in a box? It makes no sense," Juliano said coolly.

Gabriel smiled wryly and replied. "We'll talk about it later in detail. We already got most of the information about their goals from torture a while ago."

"Huh? Their goal...wasn't kidnapping the master?"

"No, their target was apparently the train that will pass by here any minute now."

"Whaaat?" Juliano gave a look that said he wasn't buying it. He dropped the unconscious uniformed men into an unceremonious heap. "Are we sure about this? Weren't they kidnappers?"

"Well, one thing that should give us some pause is that the voice on the phone belonged to a woman," Gabriel muttered. He grinned and turned around to face Pamela and Lana.

"Eep."

This is bad. They didn't...figure it out, did they?

Resigned though Pamela was, the man in black's smile made her legs freeze in fear. Even so, her expression didn't change as she faced him.

Before she could open her mouth Juliano cracked his neck and addressed the two. "Oh, thanks for the flare earlier, ladies. It was a big help, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was a great help. Ah, yes, we should go get the young master, please, since there don't seem to be any more enemies around."

"Got it."

Gabriel watched his partner dash off to where the youngsters were watching them with worry from next to the river, then quietly confronted the girls. "Now...may we ask who you might be? You don't seem to merely be passing by."

This is it. Maybe I can get us out of this.

It's the gamble of a lifetime.

Worst-case scenario, she would take all the responsibility. She sucked in a deep breath, half to solidify her resolve, but--

Before she could say anything, Lana began to apologize with tears filling her eyes. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! It was me! I was the one who wanted to kidnap Cazze after he got in our truck!"

"Wai...! L-Lana!"



Perhaps she had caved to the pressure of their adversary--Lana's confession was incredibly straightforward.

Pamela's eyes went wide, and all of the excuses she was going to use disappeared from her mind.

Lana rambled on and on about the whole series of events, but she never once said Pamela or Sonja's names. "B-but, they didn't know anything about it! I was the one who called, so, ah, u-um, er...please only turn me over to the police."

The police?! You idiot! Suppressing the urge to shout, Pamela secretly took a look at Gabriel's face.

He chuckled a little and answered politely.

"It seems you are mistaken, miss."

"Huh...?"

"We received a message not to contact the police. Plus...our venerable master told us that he would leave everything that happens to the kidnappers up to us."

"M-meaning...?"

"We may do whatever we wish to the offending party, here and now."

"Eeeekk!"

Lana shook in terror, but Pamela stepped in between them to protect her.

"...What are you planning to do to us?"

Gabriel chuckled again and replied. "Either way...hmm." He pulled his wallet from his hip pocket and looked into the change compartment. "We were to bring as much as we could, is that right?" He had thought the wallet was empty, but then he found a half-dollar coin stuck in the corner and put it in Lana's hand. "This is all we can give you at the moment. Is it enough?"

Lana stared at the coin as if she didn't know what it was--but when she realized the situation, she frantically nodded up and down. "D-d-don't be silly! It's enough! It's definitely enough!"

"Good, then our exchange is complete. ...And just between us, this is a secret, okay? If they knew the young master had been recovered with a price of 50 cents, they would torture the one responsible for a thousand days before they allowed him to die."

It sounded like it couldn't be anything other than a joke, but they accepted his words as serious when they saw the chill in his eyes.

"...So you're going to let it go? Why...?" Pamela asked doubtfully in place of Lana, who was still trembling,

"It would be best if you thought of it as paying respects to some distinguished criminals who would turn the Runorata Family against them for 50 cents. Plus, we are truly grateful for your assist with the smokescreen. The young master didn't need to see blood spilled needlessly." Gabriel chuckled a little, then turned towards the pair. "However, if you get carried away again...you understand, don't you?" he said quietly.

Lana and Pamela felt something cold run down their spines at his smile, colder than ice.

His words forced them to understand that he was serious as they realize that this was what true bloodlust looked like.

Lana had gone so white she was about to collapse. Pamela supported her, and mustering all her courage, spoke to the pursuer she had just met. "...Thank you. We owe you."

"...Not at all, we owe you as well."

"Huh?"

Gabriel was no longer looking at her, watching the boy running this way with Julian. "It's been a long time since we've seen the young master enjoying himself so much."

As if to change places with Gabriel as he walked towards Caze, Sonja came running, having recovered her guns from the uniformed men.

Seeing Lana trembling and pale, Sonja tilted her head in confusion. "What happened, Pamela, Lana? Oh, did you fight again? You can't do that~" she said blithely.

Pamela mustered up as much false bravado as she could and showed her a smile. "Sorry, sorry. It's okay, Sonja, we didn't fight," she said, giving Lana a good thump on the shoulder.

Lana stumbled a little bit under the force, then smiled with tears in her eyes. Her face was still white as a sheet. "Hey, look. I'm still conscious. I deserve some praise for that. Hey, praise me."

"Okay, okay, you're amazing, you're fantastic, Lana."

"Pretty amazing~" Sonja smiled and joined the conversation, but--

The next moment, her smile was directed somewhere else.

"Oh, it's the big bear from before," she said innocently, pointing at the giant grizzly that had appeared from the smoke--

And Lana's consciousness was promptly swallowed into the abyss.

<=>

"Are you alright, young master?" Gabriel asked as he approached.

Cazze looked down, a little dejected.

"? What is the matter?"

"Um...I'm sorry for making you worry..." the boy said quietly, with a voice heavy with regret.

"Being angry with you is not our job, but your family's," Gabriel answered, smiling a little. "If we were to scold you, we would be making light of what your family has to say."

Juliano suppressed his usual rough manner of speech and spoke. "But you should probably get ready for the scolding of your life when you get home."

"...Okay." The boy kept staring at the ground with a very sorry expression.

"Was your experience worth it, though, young master?" Gabriel asked quietly.

Cazze's face lit up as he gave a big nod. "Yeah! I'll never forget this day for the rest of my life!"

"That's excellent. Now, let's go home. We'll arrange for a car. Do you have anything to bring with you?"

Since Cazze had run away, Gabriel didn't think he had anything big with him, but he still asked on an off-chance.

Cazze opened his mouth a little bashfully. "Um, can I ask you...one thing?"

"Anything, as long as we can do it."

"There's someone I want to bring with me."

"Oh my, that's quite a thing to say." Gabriel's eyes widened at the unexpected request, remembering the boys and girls nearby.

The girl with the ponytails? Or the Asian girl? Or the kidnappers? Who does he want? He doesn't want one of the boys, does he?

As all kinds of things swirled in his imagination, the boy pointed to--

The giant grizzly bear lumbering towards them from the dissipating smoke.

"We became friends earlier! Nobody knows this bear, so um, can we keep him?"

The boy made his rash, pure-hearted request, pointing at the bear that would normally be the embodiment of fear as if he were picking up a stray puppy.

But the twins in black looked at each other and smiled back without hesitation--

"As you wish," they said, bowing to their future master.

<=>

As the bear and the twins squared off against each other, and the youngsters put their boats in the water--

There was a man in a boat that had launched from a place a little ways away, breathing raggedly with blood pouring from his head.

"Shit...I'll kill them...all of them...!"

Serges had barely escaped from the twins and the grizzly.

The emotions left within him could be called a thirst for revenge, in a way.

In the end, he couldn't complete the mission he had received from Goose.

His mission had been stolen.

And the target of his revenge was every living thing in his field of vision.

The signal had already been sent.

At this point there was no way to confirm whether Senator Beriam had accepted their

exchange, but it didn't matter anyway.

It was possible that this had ruined the plan on board the train. If so, the Lemures' plan could not succeed.

He could hear the sound of the train approaching as the sky began to lighten.

It's over. It's all over.

Climbing into the boat they had brought on the one-in-a-million chance that they needed to make a getaway, Serges quietly let his desire to kill them swell.

I'll kill them. It's all because of these...these crazy kids...!

He lifted up the barrel of a submachine gun he had quietly gotten ahold of and turned it towards the figures on the bank and on the boats a little ways downstream.

To hell with proper posture. He was just going to shoot them.

He didn't know how accurate he would be, but he was in no state to make such a calm decision.

But if you thought about the number of bullets he would be sending their way, he would probably hit at least a few of them.

As if releasing the urge he'd been pushing down, Serges began to pull on the trigger--

But just before the gun fired, his finger stopped.

Wh-what...?

He had sensed the exact same unease as before.

That extreme unease froze his urge to pull the trigger.

The creatures before him he hated so much--

Almost all of them, even the giant grizzly, had stopped moving and were looking his way. The only exception was a few of the ones in the boats downriver.

What...is this...? Above...?

It was only about a second in real-time.

But to Serges' well-honed senses, he figured it out instantly.

Were they looking at the train on top of the bridge? But their expressions were awfully strange for that.

The doubt helped calm him down a bit, and Serges turned his gaze toward the train his fellow Lemures should have hijacked--

And as he did, something appeared--black, red, skin-colored and beautiful.

A jet-black dress, like a raven with the hem fluttering in the wind.

A black-haired woman with an injured shoulder jumped lightly off the train towards the river.

"Cha...Chane?!" Serges shouted instinctively.

According to Goose's plan, they would wait for her to let down her guard during their hijacking and take her out.

Normally, he would have instantly pointed the gun at her and shot her down at close range.

But he began to move just a moment too late.

A pair of slender legs flashed as the woman dropped from the train, with the sunrise and the train behind her.

Serges paused for a moment, captivated by the beauty.

The next moment, a shadow came from above.

It would have been best for him if it had come from Chane's dress, but--

What appeared above him was a sturdy--and very heavy--wooden box.

<=>

A few hundred meters downstream

"Heeey, here it comes! They're dropping it! That's what we're supposed to get, right?"

"Whoa, that's a lot faster than Melody was expecting."

"Anyway, isn't that train goin' awful fast?"

"Looks like there's more smoke than just from the smokestack, too."

"It's just your imagination."

The youngsters, having gotten out their boats, watched from afar as the wooden boxes fell one after another from the train.

"Huh...? Did you see a big black thing fall just now?"

"Huh?"

"That looked like a woman in a black dress..."

"It's my sister!" "You never give up, do you?"

"Hyahhaa!"

As if the commotion before had never happened, the kids continued their dialogue like always.

Then a few minutes later--they met the woman clinging one of the boxes when she washed down the river.

She didn't know what kind of fate was in store for her because of them--

"Hey! It's a girl! She musta fallen from the train!"

"What...this girl was part of the freight, too?!"

"Jacuzzi, you bastard, stealing someone's girl..."

"Heey!" "HEEYYY!!" "You okay?!"

"Hyahhaa!" *"Hyahhaa!"*

Or rather, whether she knew or not--

They welcomed her with a smile, as they always did.

<=>

The moment the train passed by--

Cookie seemed concerned about the men in black standing on either side of him for some reason, as he looked at a point on the train.

A red, human shape sliding along the side of the cars.

The red "something" appeared to look this way for a moment.

As if Cookie realized what it was--

He roared out into the morning, as if calling out to a friend from the past.

<=>

On the other hand--

The red "something" moving along the side of the train looked closely at the giant grizzly.

At first, he had only thought that the young train robbers were putting the boats into the water--but then he realized that for some reason there was a giant grizzly standing near the river, facing this way.

"...Cookie?"

The young man was sure that this bear was once his friend and smiled happily.

Even though it was a completely self-centered conviction, he just so happened to be correct.

"Haha!"

For a moment, he forgot the current situation on board the train and remembered the past.

I don't really understand, but...meeting Cookie again like this...

Do coincidences like this even happen?

With the nostalgic days of the past rising up in the back of his mind, the Rail Tracer showed an expression as Claire Stanfield and nodded, waving at Cookie.

"Just like I thought! The world is mine, after all!"



Extra Chapter

On the Flying Pussyfoot In a second-class cabin

"Owowowow! Guh--ah! Aaaaaahhhhh!!"

Jacuzzi Splot passed out with a pathetic shriek.

A doctor wrapped in grey was tending to the boy's torso. "The anesthetic should have taken effect..." he muttered.

"Uh...he probably saw what you were doing and imagined how much it would hurt."

"I see. Fascinating."

They were in an area that had been under the control of the terrorists in black until just recently--a second-class cabin. It had originally belonged to a different group from the terrorists, the murderers in white; now, it contained a man who wore a cross between the two colors--grey--who was healing the leader of a multicolored band of delinquents.

"Get ahold of yourself. Aren't you the hero who saved this train?" the doctor in grey asked the delinquent boy, the "hero" who had saved the train in a very real way. He didn't know how the whole series of events had played out, but he did know that this boy had gone among the terrorists in black and the murderers in white to set the train free.

"Uwaaa...it-it really wasn't that big of a deal..." Jacuzzi answered with tears streaming down his face.

Nice glanced at him from the side and smiled wryly. "Sheesh, you weren't nearly this noisy when you were unconscious."

Jacuzzi had actually been unconscious until a short while ago. He had woken up when they had taken some minimal measures to stop the bleeding.

Now, he was bawling in a way rather unbecoming a hero as he received further treatment.

"Th-that's mean, Nice."

The doctor in grey continued. "But you were lucky. The bullets seem to have missed all of your vital organs."

"R-really?!"

"Yes. But if I hadn't started treating you until three minutes later, you would have died from blood loss."

"Died...?"

Sure of the danger closing in on him again, Jacuzzi lost consciousness once again.

Nice sighed deeply and asked uneasily. "Doctor, is Jacuzzi..."

"No need to worry. I can see the will to live in his eyes."

Continuing his treatment with graceful technique, the doctor in grey let out a muffled laugh. "It's my duty to make sure he lives. I don't know what kind of life he'll live after this. I'll do everything I can to save him, even if he is to become an unprecedented villain."

"...Jacuzzi is a hero, you know."

"It seems he himself would deny that."

"To me...to everyone, he's a hero." Nice smiled gently at Jacuzzi and continued. "But before that, he's a dear friend."

"A friend...that's good. Take good care of him." The grey doctor's voice was filled with all kinds of emotions, as if he were thinking of something specific. "I presume you are saying that he is loved by many people." He told Nice something like a prophecy, as if he were a magician who could see everything. "Jacuzzi, was it? This boy bears the fates of many people, and it seems his own fate is borne by many others." The magician carefully wrapped a bandage around the boy. "That's why when he moves, the waves of fate become quite large. The bonds between people are an oar sturdier than anything else. An oar that can stir up the very fate of the world."

"...?" Nice looked at him doubtfully.

"Ah, my apologies," the magician said. "I sounded like some conjurer just now. That wasn't intended to be some kind of fortune-telling or divination, only a guess that such a thing may happen."

"..."

"If this boy gets involved in anything, that alone will influence the lives of many people. He will probably be afraid, but he will not run away."

Nice had no answer to the magician's words.

He spoke as if he could see her entire life, and he was giving her signs pointing out the way ahead. "Death and life both depend on this boy. His bonds with you may serve as shackles that drag him towards death, or perhaps a lifeline that pull him from that abyss....although nobody truly knows."

"Please don't say that. It's disturbing. ...And I'll protect Jacuzzi."

The grey magician's mouth relaxed slightly on the other side of the cloth as he saw the powerful will shining in Nice's remaining eye. "I see. That sounds promising. Both you and Jacuzzi, and your other friends, should live on as long as you want. And, as much as you can please help the others around you to want to live, too."

After muttering not to Nice, but someone far away--himself, who had lost so many friends until now, the magician nodded silently.

"But at least...I won't let him die here. I promise you that.

"Your fate from here on out all depends on you. I hope you become lifelines not just for each other, but for many people."

Epilogue -- The White Rabbits Return from the Tea Party

Cazze was snoring peacefully in the passenger's seat⁹ of a large truck prepared by the Runorata Family.

After everything was over, the police had come and arrested the incapacitated men in uniform one after another. Many of them were taken directly to a police hospital. Apparently they had all miraculously survived--although for Serges, his injuries were so serious it would take a few months to a few years for full recovery.

Cazze didn't know about the bloody aftermath, though--he just dreamed contentedly.

He became a caged bird once again, wandering in the boredom of the dry desert of his life.

But he didn't find it nearly as hard as before.

Now that he knew about the outside world, it would have been easy for him to yearn to go back out even more than before, but he didn't. He had caught a glimpse of what he would be able to do outside when he became an adult, after all.

"Outside" was his oasis, and he held hope in his journey through the desert knowing that the water was even sweeter than he imagined.

This exceedingly simple boy would later be called the "pure-hearted dictator," particularly feared among the gangs of the East, and rumored to have tamed great beasts (in more ways than one), but--

That's another story.

<=>

In the old truck

"Honestly, I didn't expect you to spill your guts about everything back there."

⁹ The Japanese says "driver's seat" here, but that doesn't make a whole lot of sense...

"So what! It saved us in the end, didn't it?! You should be praising me!"

After everything was over, the three members of "Vanishing Bunny" had said a simple goodbye to Cazze and the delinquents, jumped in their old truck and fled as fast as they could.

As they rattled down a road that ran along the train tracks, Pamela and Lana kept themselves occupied the same way they always did--with verbal sparring.

"If you had confessed that you threw that smoke grenade because you thought it was an actual bomb, we would be stuffed in a drum at the bottom of the ocean."

"And you're not going to praise me for my brilliance in *not* telling him that?!"

"Okay. You're great, you're amazing. Your brain is as valuable as a dinosaur fossil. Although it should have disappeared along with the dinosaurs, too."

"OHH YOU...!"

"Stop fighting, okay~?" In the end, Sonja didn't notice the strain at all and scolded the two for fighting, same as always. "It's okay. If we were really in trouble, Neider would have come to save us," she said with an innocent smile.

"Neider again?" Lana scoffed in disbelief. "Think about all the trouble we've been in! Your little prince has never once come to save us, Sonja."

"Neider's not a prince, he's a *hero*. And he promised. And all the times we made it out of trouble before, he was helping us behind the scenes, I know it," Sonja pouted, remembering her old friend who was a little older than her.

If only they had stayed at the scene for a few more hours, Sonja would have been able to see her childhood friend again, but the chain of coincidences didn't take them that far.

Pamela's jeers at Lana's expense continued for some time afterwards, but once they had calmed down a notch, she gripped the steering wheel and spoke. "Anyway, you were trying to save me and Sonja, weren't you, when said you were the only one at fault?"

"Uh, wh-what, are you gonna yell at me again? You are, aren't you?!"

Pamela could have legitimately yelled at Lana for going off on her own, but after glancing at Lana's wary face she smiled bitterly and told her what was honestly on her heart. "It's, well...thanks. I thought it was pretty stupid, but I was kinda glad."

Lana froze for a moment at the unexpected words, but--

The next instant, her face turned bright red, and she started to shout wildly, waving her arms. "What the--! ...What...why are you thanking me?! Stop it! It's like you think I was trying to get you to thank me! And I wasn't! It just...happened!"

"Stop fighting~"

As the atmosphere in the car returned to normal, something occurred to Pamela.

Rabbits looking for an oasis in the desert, huh. Remembering the metaphor she'd thought of earlier, Pamela smiled wryly and looked at Lana and Sonja. I'm surprised. These two might be the best oasis I'll ever find.

Pamela didn't dare to voice the thought as she pressed down on the accelerator.

A few minutes later, they would find a man hugging a sniper rifle, collapsed on the road, pulling them once again into the great current, but--

Again, that's another story.

<=>

The road to New York

After everything was over, Melody and the others headed straight back into New York.

Once they retrieved all the explosives, half of them went directly to meet with a buyer, and the rest of them, including Melody, went with the injured woman in black to New York.

The woman had written her name as "Chane." Apparently she couldn't speak, and she kept her mouth almost completely shut no matter what they asked, but as soon as they said they were going to New York, she had written "Please take me with you," and so they loaded her into the truck with the rest of them.

Not only had she fallen from the train, but her shoulder was injured and she was carrying a large knife. All of those things were quite suspicious, but they didn't make a fuss and took her in without any concerns in particular.

"Y'know, I get the feeling a buncha stuff happened, but I don't know what's what." Lying sprawled on the floor of the truck, the boy with the missing tooth looked back on the half-

day with bemusement. "Like I have no idea how things turned out with that giant bear, those guys in the uniforms, or those kidnapper girls."

"Nothin' we could do. We couldn't just stand around dilly-dallyin' until the cops showed up."

Afterwards, they had heard from the men in black that the police were on their way, so the delinquents had frantically gathered the freight and fled into the forest. They weren't able to say a proper goodbye to Cazze or the kidnappers, so in the end they didn't know what had happened with them.

"Ah, this is gonna drive me nuts! I shoulda gone in the kidnappers' truck. If I had, maybe right now I could be gettin' a little action, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"I think the only thing drivin' you crazy is the girls."

"Get your paws off my sister." "Unforgivable."

"Punch him!" "Hyahhaa!" "Hyahhaa!"

"How did this turn into hitting me?!"

Melody smiled as they carried on the same sort of conversation as usual and stretched out like a cat. "Well, it's fine when all's said and done, right? We can just ask next time we see them," she muttered to the boy with the missing tooth.

"Next time'? We don't know where they live, and we don't exactly have an address ourselves."

"But I feel like we'll see them again, you know? Somehow...I think they're on the same side of society as us. If we just keep on living our lives like this, we'll get to ask their names, and they can get ours, too."

"I guess," the boy said doubtfully.

The Asian girl giggled. "Us and them, we're all travelers wandering the same desert," she declared. "We'll see them again, yeah? We can struggle all we want, but it doesn't matter. As long as we don't leave the desert, there's only a few oases, after all. ...Hyahhaa!"

"Hyahhaa!"

In response to Chaini's rare bout of proper speech, Melody chuckled and gave her bell a small ring--

And mumbled a single sentence, filled with her own peculiar brand of humor.

"So it's only a matter of time."

Afterwards, they would come to live in a mansion in New York, drawn into all kinds of trouble involving "immortals"--

But again, that's another story.

<=>

The rabbits wandered through completely different parts of the desert, and each found their own oasis in that desert, if only for a moment.

Or rather, like the delinquents, their oasis always came with them--their friends.

Whether they wished for it or not, they all ultimately stepped out into a new desert.

Without realizing that that desert was what tied them all together.

They believed that their path would lead them to a new oasis, at the very least--

And somehow or another, they continued on their journey.

Wherever it might take them, however long it might take--

Afterword

Thank you, this is Narita.

First off, I'll explain about this book, since it's a little unique.

This book, same as *1932-Summer* published before it, is a revised update of the special stories that came with the anime DVDs. And, same as before, I think there may be some of you thinking, "But I spent all that money just to collect the DVDs!" If you feel that way, I am truly sorry.

This is becoming a repeat of the afterword to *1932-Summer*, but my personal stance is that turning things like the short stories in *Dengeki Bunko Magazine* and DVD specials into a novel is the same as broadcasting uncut movies that were shown in the theater and sold on DVD and Blu-ray, or like making a different version like a director's cut. So I appreciate your understanding.

As for why I turned this into a novel now, those of you who have read the currently in-progress 1935 will likely already know, but--the third volume of that arc, *1935-C*, is going to feature some characters from this novel as important characters. Rather than rewrite the material from this book, I thought it would be more natural to put the specials into book form.

But I wrote this about 5 years ago. Reading back over it, there were various places where I was embarrassed. But, with the exception of the added "Extra Chapters," it's almost exactly the same as before.

This *Baccano!* is more heavily comedic and its nature is a little different than usual, but I hope you will enjoy the more relaxed, leisurely side of this world as well.

And I hope you will look forward to watching the characters from that setting get thrown into the tension of 1935!

Well, then, let's put aside that explanation that sounds suspiciously like advertising and talk about how I've been recently instead of a proper afterword.

Recently, I've been cursed by the overeating and overdrinking of New Year's, and it's aggravated a stomach inflammation and acid reflux. I'm recovering, but I have a troublesome personality. I think, "Oh, am I better? Okay, well, I'll eat all I want and see if I'm actually better. If I have no problems, that means I've recovered!" and then I eat all I can, and then thanks to overeating and overdrinking I get stomach problems and acid

reflux again. I think it's not so much a troublesome personality as it is that I'm an idiot, but even if I see that for a fact, my stomach won't get any bigger.

Once, I told my friend, "That's weird, back when I was a student I ate about this much and there were no problems..." My friend said, "Why did you think you would be able to eat the same as a student with a long commute that took 2 hours one way? You're over 30 years old and your body's gotten all slack from holing up and writing books all the time."

I'm getting old.

That phrase "over 30" echoed in my head.

By the way, my debut work, right as I was graduating from college, was *Baccano!*. It's already been 10 years since then. And my injuries are already taking a long time to heal and I get winded from climbing stairs. I'm just going to ignore the possibility that it's a lack of exercise.

...While I was writing the above, I remembered.

10 years.

Yes, one month before this book will be released...on February 10th, it will have been 10 years to the day since I debuted! I get nostalgic remembering those days, when I was worried if after 10 years my job as a full-time writer would be enough for me to eat properly. And now, 10 years later--wait, I'm *not* eating properly, I have gastritis and acid reflux!

I didn't expect my dream to be shot down by my aging--or maybe my lifestyle, but somehow I'm able to continue as a full-time writer.

Once again, it's all thanks to all the editors and all of you who have bought these books.

Thank you very much!

At the time of this writing, it hasn't been officially announced, but I will be writing various new works for Dengeki Bunko and some other places as well. Of course I plan to continue *1935* and *Durarara!!* and my other series, so please keep reading from here on out!

I'll do my best to keep working as an author for 20, 30 years.

I hope we can continue like this for a long time!

January 2013, Ryohgo Narita

Translator's Afterword

Hi, everyone!

Well, this one took a while, didn't it? I was hoping it would take a little less time than the others, but I didn't count on the other things in my life--although I really should have, because the past few months have involved some pretty major events. But enough about me.

Thank you so much for your patience and for all of your support and kind comments! I hope you enjoyed this volume, even though it is, as Narita says, a little different from the norm.

I'm really looking forward to working on 1935-C...and I hope 1935-D is released soon, so I can work on it, too!

Thank you for reading, and back to 1935!