

# BACCANO!

バツカーバ!  
1932-Summer  
man in the killer

成田良悟

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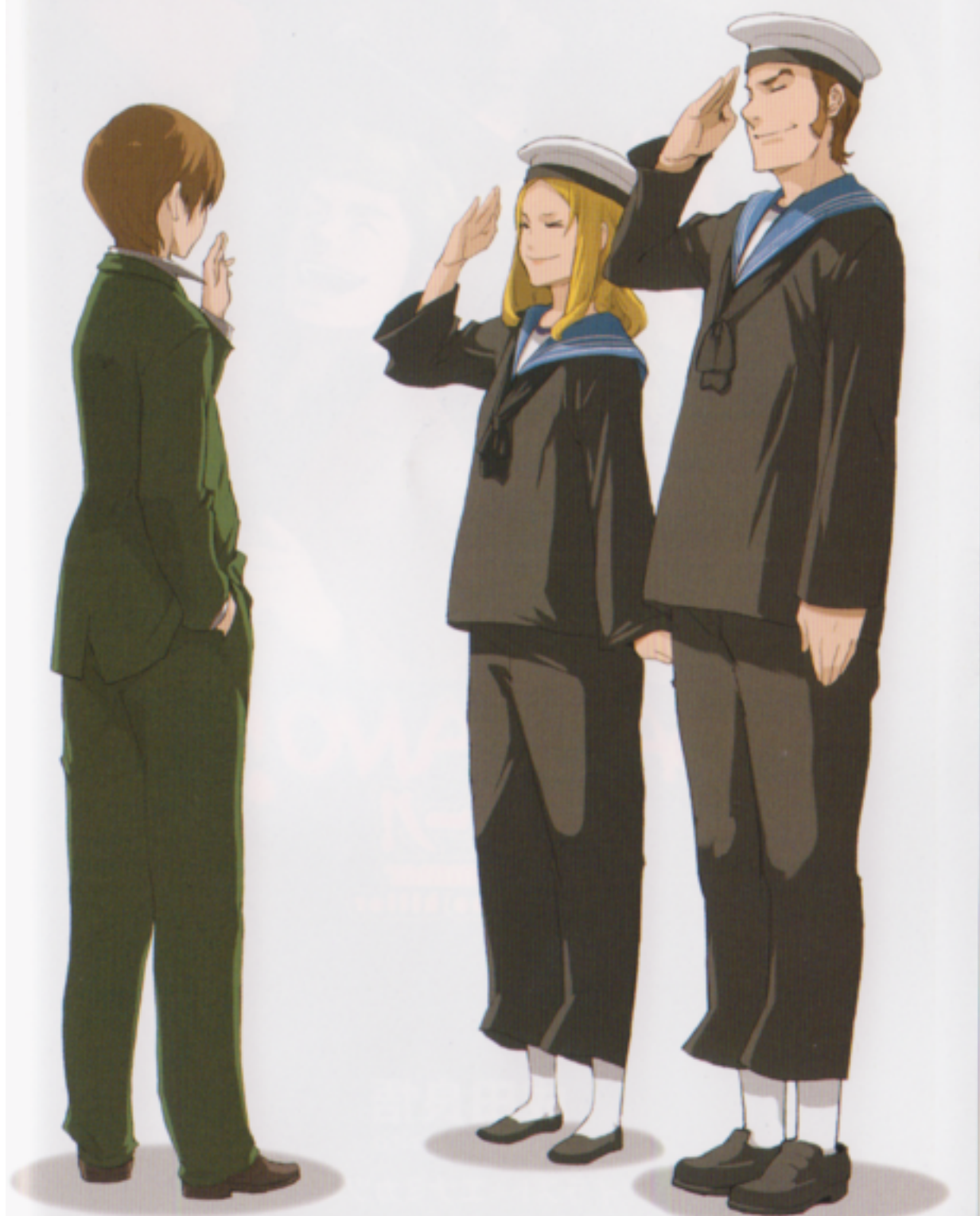
電撃文庫

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P12 余話A

P324 余話B



signed by Yoshihiko Kamabe





"Ahaha! It's been a while, *amigo*!

I heard you were laid up in a hospital bed, but looks like you're back on your feet!

Congratulations!

But too bad, *amigo*!

You might have been happier just lying in that hospital bed until the day you died!"





That summer, the reporter who feared death encountered a serial killer...

And the boy who wished to die encountered an immortal.

## Aside A

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**1932. A certain day in a certain month, at the speakeasy 'Alveare'.**

"It's terrible, Isaac! They say Ice Pick Thompson struck again!"

A bright and cheery voice rang out through the after-hours establishment, a complete contrast to the weight of the Prohibition era and the dark mood of the speakeasy interior.

Of course, everything but the tone of her voice clearly spelled out a combination of shock and fear.

Reacting to the woman's voice was the man called Isaac, who dramatically turned his head towards her.

"What?! Is this true, Miria?"

They were both dressed in British Navy uniforms. If the speakeasy was actually open, its patrons might mistake the duo for a pair of performers working here. But they were neither actors nor employees, so there was no way of knowing why this couple was dressed in such a fashion.

The strange duo continued their conversation, their every line fitting together like an intricate jigsaw puzzle, coming together into something sounding like a rehearsed skit.

"Every word, Isaac! See? It's all over the papers!"

"Good God... So it's just as I feared."

The couple unfolded a newspaper over a decorative barrel in a corner of the speakeasy. As Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent continued to spout theatrics in their own little world, a baby-faced young man stopped to ask them a question.

"...What? You guys know something about Ice Pick Thompson?" He frowned.



Hearing the question, Isaac and Miria looked at one another and answered Firo Prochainezo's question.

"Come to think of it, what *is* Ice Pick Thompson, Miria?"

"I'm not sure, but the papers are all saying it's terrible news."

"So how's that something you'd feared? You guys just got worked up without even knowing anything?" Firo sighed.

"What are you saying, Firo?" Isaac retorted, "I may not know the specifics, but Miria is terrified! That's absolutely something to fear!"

"Amazing, Isaac!"

"How's that supposed to be amazing?" Firo sighed again. But knowing full well that trying to reason with this duo was a waste of energy, he decided to ignore the contradictions and continue the conversation.

"Ice Pick Thompson is a serial killer."

"A serial killer! D-does that mean... he's a murderer?!"

"That's what they generally mean by that." Firo explained matter-of-factly. Isaac thoughtfully put a hand to his chin.

"Good God... So it's just as we'd feared."

"I'm scared, Isaac! This is terrible!"

*'So they really had no idea, huh?'*

Astonished by their way of life, in a different sense, Firo decided to remain at his spot in front of the barrel to listen to them a little longer.

"Have no fear, Miria! A serial killer only ever targets humans! Therefore, as long as we are disguised as non-human creatures, we'll be perfectly safe!"

"Of course! That's amazing, Isaac!"

"According to a legend from the Orient, if a man climbs over a waterfall and draws an eyeball onto a wall, he transforms into a dragon! If we become dragons and hide ourselves, I'm sure he'll pretend he never saw us!" (1)

"*Garyoutensei! Ryuutoudabi!*" (2)

'Gar- what?'

Miria's sudden use of an unfamiliar language confused Firo, but he reminded himself that asking would get him nowhere close to a proper answer and decided to determinedly ignore the nagging questions on his mind.

Of course, he just couldn't help himself from raining on their parade.

"But if you think about it, don't you think a dragon could just gobble up a serial killer?"

Isaac shot Firo a grim look and shook his head.

"What are you saying, Firo? Think about it. They say that a man named Sig something-or-other slew a dragon! In other words, dragons are creatures fated to be killed by humans!"

"Fafnir! Komodo Dragons! *Kaya-no-hime!*"

"Sorry, but I don't get what you're saying."

It seemed that the duo was getting some sort of myth mixed up with reality, but he wondered if they were actually serious about the idea of turning into dragons.

(1) In this line, the word for the European dragon is used specifically, as opposed to the Asian dragon.

(2) *Garyoutensei* (written 畫龍點睛) is an expression used to describe the completion of the most important part of a work. It comes from a legend associated with the Chinese painter Zhang Sengyou, who was said to have painted four dragons for a temple mural, but neglected to draw the pupils of the dragons' eyes. The Abbot insisted that he finish the drawings, so Zhang painted two of the dragons' eyes. The dragons came alive instantly and flew away. This myth is probably the basis for Isaac and Miria's theory about becoming dragons by painting an eye onto a wall.

*Ryuutoudabi* (龍頭蛇尾), meanwhile, is an expression saying "The head is a dragon, but the tail is a snake". It describes a situation that starts out well, but ends badly.

Both expressions contain the character for 'dragon' in them, which is why Miria referred to them in their discussion about dragons.



Giving up on following this discussion any longer, Firo decided to look for help in his fellow Family members--members of the Camorra organization known as the Martillo Family, like executives Maiza or Ronnie.

However, stepping into his line of sight was a tiny guest who had no direct ties to the organization.

"Fafnir is the name of the dragon slain by Sigurd in Norse mythology. If I remember correctly, Wagner's opera renamed Sigurd 'Siegfried', right? The Komodo Dragon is a large lizard that was discovered approximately twenty years ago. And *Kaya-no-hime* is something like a Japanese goddess who is equated with a snakelike plant called the *nozuchi*. Did that help, big brother?"

Coming to Firo's rescue with a joking grin was a certain small freeloader who lived in his apartment.

"It's not like knowing any of that stuff helps me do my job. Maybe you should try spending some time learning stuff that's useful, Czes." Firo advised the obviously younger boy, but Czes sighed.

"Right. Sorry, big brother."

"...You don't have to apologize all seriously like that."

Firo hadn't expected such a response from Czes.

*'It's like he's built a wall between us or something.'*

Perhaps Czes was only willing to open up to Isaac, Miria, and his old friend Maiza? On the surface, he greeted Firo and the others with a smile, but Firo couldn't shake the feeling that there was a mature, considerate look hiding behind his beaming face.

Although the feeling nagged at him occasionally, Firo felt that things would change with time, and never attempted to delve deeper into Czes's thoughts.

Meanwhile, the couple who probably hadn't once thought of proverbial walls of the heart were engaged in their usual conversation.

"Although it is true we might turn into dragons that are weaker than humans."

"How scary. It's just like a thriller!"

"Something stronger than humans. Something that humans could never defeat. When a human being dies... Wait. All human beings die in the end. That's it! Time! Time is one thing that humans can never defeat! In other words, we must become time itself! Then the serial killer won't be able to lay a hand on us!"

"Amazing, Isaac! You're an Idea Man!"

Their conclusion could not have stemmed from any sort of normal line of thinking.

Firo was just beginning to wonder if he should stop them, but Czes took a seat at a nearby table and joined the conversation first.

"So how exactly are you planning on becoming time? Are you going to wear watches all over you body?" He asked with an impish grin. Isaac and Miria fell into thought.

"Come to think of it, you're right. How *do* we become time?"

"That's a hard question. Just like the seven wonders of the world!"

"Time... Time... Time is... Time... is?"

"Time is money!"

"You're absolutely right, Miria! Time is money, so that must mean money is the best thing for taking down a serial killer!"

"Money is time!"

"But how do we become money?"

"It's a mystery. Just like the Mary Celeste!"

*'Never mind. I'll just leave them alone.'* Firo thought, wearily glancing at the duo's meaningless chatter. He took a seat at the counter.

He grabbed a cup and poured into it the contents of the kettle on the counter. This speakeasy was owned by the Martillo Family, so the camorrista had a tendency to treat this establishment as a second home, whether during business hours or not.

But even the fact that he was in such a comfortable place could not ease the anxiety in a corner of Firo's mind. He mused about the person that had been nicknamed 'Ice Pick Thompson'.

*'A serial killer, huh.'*

*'Wonder what he's after.'*

Of course, about the only things he thought about the matter were the fact that, though it was selfish of him, it was someone else's business, and the discomfort in knowing that a serial killer was loose in his city. There was no fear of losing his own life or his loved ones in Firo's mind.

This stemmed from the fact that the bodies of himself and his loved ones possessed an unusual power. Firo took this into consideration as he thought about the possible influence of the serial killer on those around him.

*'All the killings so far happened on Keith's or the Runoratas' turf.'*

*'If it comes over to our territory, then I guess it'll start being our business.'*

*'A killer, huh.'*

*'I feel bad for the victims, thinking like this, but...'*

*'Pretty ironic, seeing as we can't ever get killed.'*

Firo lightly shook his glass, as if in an attempt to ward off the unease that was taking root.

The ice clinked against the cup, the sound carving itself into the young camorrista's memory.

And in a place close yet distant from his thoughts, a tale from an in-between time unfolded.

# プロローグ



## Prologue

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### Summer, 1932

What was the year 1932 to the United States of America?

In a simple outline of events, the two Olympics would stand out first and foremost.

Held in February were the Lake Placid Olympics, and following it in late July were the Los Angeles Olympic Games.

Counting both events, the United States won a total of one hundred and fifteen medals. It was a veritable gold rush that had the entire nation in a frenzy of excitement.

The successful trans-Atlantic flight of Amelia Earhart, a first for a woman flying solo, was another of the events in society and politics that brought hope to the people of America.

On the other hand, this hope was about the only thing keeping many afloat at this point in time.

The Great Depression, which struck in 1929, demolished America's economy. And three years later, in 1932, the economic crisis had reached its apex.

Over ten million left unemployed.

Banks collapsing like dominoes.

Factories going dark indefinitely.

As people began to wonder if it would be better to convert to a socialist economy, their eyes slowly began to turn to another symbol of the era, the Prohibition laws.

Bootlegged liquor was a fact of life in this day and age. By their nature they were tax-free, but if these products were to be distributed legally, taxes and all...

Many people began to look towards the potential economic benefits of legalized liquor. And this very year, a bill ending the Prohibition laws was passed, legalizing the production and sale of certain types of liquor.

The shining achievements of the year and the Great Depression created a stark contrast like light and darkness. And sandwiched between them in the boundary, a small incident was coming to light.

A strange series of cases that cast a different sort of shadow over the streets of New York.

'Ice Pick Thompson'.

This was the nickname given to a certain individual.

An ice pick, as its name implies, was a sharp object used to carve ice, but its shape made it easy to think up another use for it.

Bartenders or ice pick makers, who used this tool for perfectly legitimate means, might frown at such a thought. But in that sense, the same might go for axes or chainsaws.

Axes and chainsaws were perfectly normal tools for lumberjacks in forests, but in the hands of a man walking down a beach they would be recognized as weapons, branding people with more than just idle unease.

If an ice pick was to be where it was supposed to be--a bar, or a bedroom in a rich man's mansion--no one would think twice about it. But if it was to be found somewhere where it did not belong, people would unquestioningly regard it as an object of fear.

Ice Pick Thompson used this tool in a way that it should not have been rightly used. A way that could not be more offensive to ice pick makers and the law.

In other words, he used it not as a tool, but as a weapon of murder.

## **One day in August, somewhere in New York.**

It was raining.

A curtain of rain fell mercilessly over the back alleys. Droplets of water sounded drumbeats against the ground as they overpowered the sounds of footsteps quickly rushing through.

In New York, summers were hot and winters were cold.

However, even in summertime there was a large temperature difference between days and nights, sparing its citizens from sleepless evenings of tropical humidity.

As the rain fell upon the pitch-dark night, the evening cool turned into a chill that crashed over the people on the streets like a giant wave.

The curtain of water also cast a veil over the visibility in the already dark streets. Those walking alone were spurred to hurry home even quicker.

Most people would walk along the larger streets in order to ease their anxiety, but some elected to use the back alleys for their own reasons.

Some were without umbrellas, perhaps due to the sudden nature of the rain. Thunder roared overhead as they ran as though in escape.

As the people fled, a lone figure shiftily glanced at the passers-by under a decorative awning over the back door of a store that had closed for the night.

The figure, a man about forty years of age, glared into the sky, his grey-patched hair damp with rain.

He was rather far from any streetlight, and the falling rain had greatly reduced visibility.

"Tch."

The man looked up into the sky, frowned, then rummaged through his pockets and took out an old matchstick.

He tried to light the cigarette he had been holding between his teeth for some time, but the match showed no sign of lighting. The rain had likely soaked it through on his way to shelter.

"Damn."

He anxiously chewed on the cigarette, and tossed it to the ground.

The man crushed the unused cigarette under his heel, looked up, and noticed a figure in the rain.

The figure, standing a little distance ahead of himself, seemed to be observing him.

But all of a sudden, the figure quickly began running in his direction. Seeing the figure, drenched from the rain without even an umbrella, the man tried to wave him away.

"Sorry, pal, but there ain't enough room-" He began, but he froze.

The figure running towards him didn't so much as hesitate as it rushed over and crashed right into him.

At the moment of the impact, the man was certain that the figure had passed right through his body and out his back.

The reason for this was the pain.

A sharp, heavy pain pierced the centre of his body.

"Wha...?"

He had never experienced such a sensation before.

And as a result, his scream came much too late.

His senses fell into confusion for a single moment, not knowing what to do, as though subconsciously attempting to reject the searing pain.



It was only once his gaze dropped to his own stomach that he discovered the source of the unfamiliar sensation. His mind feebly attempted to scream, but even that was no longer possible for him--the metal object had already been drawn out of his belly, and was being thrust into his throat.

He felt the sensation of something piercing his neck.

And absolute pain, a stark contrast to the relatively tiny sensation of the stabbing itself.

The pain spread over the rest of his neck, overriding all of his other senses. And so the man was again late to realize something.

The unfortunate truth that the blood gushing from his throat was now flowing into his lungs.

"...gah."

Unable to even scream, the man collapsed to the floor as if trying to escape from the skies, madly flailing about on the ground.

It was an almost comical sight. The man looked as though he was drowning in the rain, but to his assailant, he might have looked like nothing more than an insect in a display case desperately struggling against the pin that kept it held it to the display.

And as though in an attempt to pin even his arms and legs onto the floor, the assailant knelt on the ground and thrust the weapon downward.

## Again and again

And again and again and again

Again and again and again and again and again and again and again and  
again and again and again

[illegible]

One hole melded into another to create a larger hole, leaving the body a mess of ground flesh.

To someone who had never seen the power of a gun in person, it looked something like the mark of indiscriminate machine gun fire. Some of the more gossip-friendly newspapers went on to create a nickname for this nameless assailant, inspired by the name of the Tommy gun that was favoured by gangsters.

'Ice Pick Thompson'.

This was the name of the serial killer who emerged in New York that year, plunging the city into terror.

記者は自分の人生に事件を求めない

# 第一章



## **Chapter 1 : The Reporter Does Not Look for Adventure in his Life**

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**The third floor of a certain building on Wall Street, New York.**

"That aside, Ice Pick Thompson, huh? What kinda name is that? Which paper started calling him that, again?"

"The Daily Days, from what I hear."

"For a small-time paper, they're pretty good at latching on to the best gossip."

"No kidding."

"Anyway, last week's was the fourth one, right? Isn't he just about on par with Jack the Ripper by now?"

"I should hope not."

"What'd the cops say?"

"They can't find any evidence."

It was lunchtime at this newspaper company in New York.

Surrounded by mountains of files, photographs, and manuscripts were a group of men engaging in discussion. Of course, that didn't mean they were on break. The people around them were frantically struggling with the mounds of information and phone calls, as if they would only be permitted to leave for lunch after their work was done.

In other words, these men were having a particularly hard time of using their moment of reprieve.

And as if to whip their lethargic state back into high gear, the editor-in-chief stepped out of the back of the office and raised his voice.

"Looks like some of us are so itching for more work that we have time to talk about someone else's story. Hm?"

Their boss's lighthearted yet grave tone quickly silenced the reporters. One of them piped up with an excuse.

"But chief, what're we supposed to do? Lester's the one in charge, but he's just out of it."

"You better think about finishing your own job before you go talking behind someone's back. Maybe you'll get to go on a date with the killer too, if you get your stories done." The editor-in-chief snickered. Though he was over fifty years old, he was a hardy man whose wizened character was apparent from his laughter.

The reporters and the editors, however, could tell that his distinctive smile did not run any deeper than his lips, and quickly rushed out of the room one after another.

The editor-in-chief sighed and surveyed the office. He spotted one person in particular in the messy room, and approached the young man and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Lester? Shouldn't you be out there working on your story?"

Lester flinched at the editor-in-chief's heavy tone.

He was a blond man in his mid-twenties. He took a moment to catch his breath, then glared at his superior behind him.

"Please don't scare me like that, chief. I've been on edge all week."

"Still, I think this is the perfect story for a man as cautious as you, Lester."

"Too bad I'm too cautious to keep up with all the goings-on in this case." Lester, who was in charge of the story of 'Ice Pick Thompson', sighed and shook his head. "This whole case... it's probably some poor bastard who lost his head with the economy being what it is. All we know is that the weapon is probably an ice pick and that the culprit's not after money, judging from the fact that the victims' wallets were left behind. That's all. That's literally all we've got, chief! How am I supposed to write up an article with this?"

"I'm sure there must be a lot of aspects you can delve into. Interview the victims' families. Try and figure out if there's any connection between the victims."

"I already have, but it's still not much to work with."

"What can we do? America's raking in the gold right now, and we can't keep going with these gloomy stories forever. 'Course, the tabloids are making stuff up like no tomorrow. Thanks to that, the Daily Days got the honour of getting to name the killer." The editor-in-chief laughed and took the empty seat beside Lester.

"To be honest, considering our readership, we'll sell more copies if we just focus on the Olympics for now. All we have to do is do a summary and a timeline of the incidents later and run a series about it. And if the culprit's been caught, then we can all go back to the shoe store without having to watch our backs."

Lester knew that the 'shoe store' the editor-in-chief was talking about was a speakeasy.

In this day and age, even shoe stores were opening speakeasies in their basements. With the Depression at its peak, it became harder and harder for business owners to feed their families. Countless people were forced to turn to bootlegged liquor in order to keep their families afloat.

Lester also knew that each and every one of the victims had been attacked in an empty alleyway on their way to or from a speakeasy.

This was common knowledge being broadcast on the radios and published in the papers, but people found themselves returning to their favourite speakeasies regardless.

Of course, since Lester did not want to talk about all of this with his superior, he decided to continue listening.

"And if you think about it, *you're* the one who asked to be assigned to this story in the first place, Lester. To be honest, I was quite surprised. This isn't the kind of story you usually take. If you're not feeling up to it, I could switch you out with someone else."

"...Sorry about all that, chief. But I'd like to keep at this one. Could you let me keep working on it? I was just getting a little impatient because I wasn't making much progress. I'm really sorry, chief. I swear I won't complain anymore."

"By all means, complain all you like, Lester. After all, we only have the police to blame for the lack of progress."

The editor-in-chief folded his arms and gave Lester a suggestion.

"I suppose this might be a bit, well... But while you're doing that job going back and forth between the police station and the back alleys, how about taking on one more story?"

"..."

"You're not having much fun with this whole Ice Pick Thompson story, are you? Not to mention that Carl's always one step ahead of you."

"...Please don't talk about him, chief."

Carl.

Lester frowned at the mention of his name.

"He's a failure, chief. Leaving this place to go to some tiny company like the Daily Days... Why should I-"

"But Carl Digness *is* the man who invented the moniker 'Ice Pick Thompson'. Who knows? Maybe he's bound for the history books of the newspaper business."

"..."

"And it's not as though he departed unceremoniously. He only moved to the Daily Days in order to help care for his ill daughter. I don't know the details, to be sure, but I see no reason to call him a failure, Lester."

Lester was about to complain, angry at the editor-in-chief's defence of Carl, but the editor-in-chief continued before he could say a word.

His words were stern yet kind.

"But you see, Lester. Setting aside the fact that none of this is about winning or losing, it's not as though you're planning to become a failure yourself, is it? And that's why you volunteered for this story."

"..."



Lester went silent. The editor-in-chief slowly got up and gave Lester an additional job.

"This new story's about the young people in the back alleys of New York. They're not gangs, per se, but you know that there've been quite a few delinquents around lately, right? What do the young men and women in the seams of our society think about? What is on their minds? These young people are our future. What are they thinking now, when the future is so unclear? That's the theme of one of the columns we'll be running soon. How about starting with this one?"

Patting Lester on the shoulder, the editor-in-chief handed him a scrap of paper from his pocket.

Several addresses were listed on the paper. They were probably the locations of the young people's hangouts.

"Don't worry too much. They may be delinquents, but children are children. There's no room for over-or underestimation, but don't you think this will be a cakewalk compared to that serial killer?"

<=>

### **Sunset, somewhere in New York.**

*'Shit, this is a bore.'*

Lester was walking along the street, displeasure written on his face.

*'Damn it. Why'd he end up mentioning Carl, of all people?'*

Remembering the conversation he had with his superior only a few hours ago, Lester ground his teeth without even thinking.

Carl was a fellow reporter who worked at the same company as Lester until a few years ago.

He was about five years Lester's senior in the company, and he was Lester's idol and goal.

However, the longer he worked, the more Lester came to see the clear difference between himself and Carl--a difference that could not be overcome by experience. Eventually his respect gave way to jealousy.

He could never live up to Carl, not even in his dreams.

Lester tried to banish this thought to the back of his mind and desperately struggled with his work in order to prove himself wrong, but the results were disastrous. Things never turned out as he'd wanted.

Once, a superior of his told him, "For a reporter, you value your life way too much". Although a reporter should rightly consider his own safety his top priority when he was transporting his article, Lester was the type to shy away from danger at all costs, even if it meant losing a potential scoop.

Although it would be entirely inaccurate to say that reporters have no regard for their own lives, Lester was much too careful for his own good. This didn't just apply to his career. His life also worked along much the same pattern of thought.

*'Put my life on the line for a scoop?'*

*'I don't get guys who think like that.'*

*'We're supposed to chase after incidents. There's nothing more humiliating than becoming a victim myself and making news for other people.'*

*'In the end, all that matters to me is myself.'*

*'For every ten thousand lives, there's ten thousand "selves", and each of them are living for themselves.'*

*'Or was Carl different?'*

*'I heard he did something stupid so he could earn money to fix up his daughter... But in the end, he's just sharing that life of his with a sick family member. He even took on dangerous jobs saying he had to do it for his wife.'*

Lester, on the other hand, had no trouble writing good articles, but he was never able to reach the truth of the incidents he was reporting on. His inability to take one step further into the stories had led to him being called a coward in the office.

That was when Carl gave him a stern warning about his outlook. Lester's jealousy exploded at that point, and to this day they had not yet come to any sort of reconciliation.

*'Anyway... young people in the back alleys, huh.'*

*'Another annoying job.'*

The list of addresses the editor-in-chief handed to him contained the locations of closed-down factories, speakeasies, abandoned churches, and ruined hotels.

There was only one name in the note, and it was marked with the phrase "Take special note".

*"Graham Specter", huh. That's a name I haven't heard before.'*

Perhaps he was well-known to the youth on the streets, but in the end he was probably just another delinquent. No one worth remembering, Lester thought.

*'Damn it. Kids are still a pretty big headache to deal with.'*

*'Shit. Am I just supposed to keep chasing some story that won't even make for a good article?'*

*'I'm supposed to be going after that damned killer.'*

*'That's right. I... I'm no coward.'*

*'I'll get that scoop before Carl. I'll show them all that I'm not a coward.'*

As he continued walking, lost in thought, Lester felt something cold on his arm.

"?"

He looked up. A cold drop of water hit his face.

Starting drop by drop, the water soon gave way to a drizzle, then a rainstorm. Lester was soon being drenched by the rain.

By the time he realized that it was too dark for this time of day, it was too late. The sudden downpour swept over the streets in the blink of an eye, quickly driving people away from the main streets.

*'A rainstorm, huh.'*

*'Maybe Ice Pick Thompson'll show up.'*

Ice Pick Thompson's victims always turned up after a rainshower. One of his calling cards was the particularly gruesome corpse left behind in his wake, as the blood was washed off the flesh, leaving the wounds clear and distinctly visible.

*'If I keep walking alone... I might end up a potential victim too, huh.'*

Lester shuddered at the thought, but he did not slow down and continued to walk as he pleased.

Soaking wet like a half-drowned rat, he jogged down the darkened back alleys.

Although he stepped forward, believing that the way ahead would be clear, his beliefs were dashed all too quickly and suddenly.

As he ran through the alley towards his destination, turning into a particularly deserted corner, he noticed a figure ahead of him.

As a result, the reporter who valued his life ended up encountering a serial killer.

# 第二章

希望を無くした少年は、  
空に踏みだし落ちたがる



## **Chapter 2 :**

### **The Boy Who Has Lost Hope Attempts to Plunge into the Sky**

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It was at the same time as the reporter's encounter with the serial killer that a lone boy stood on a bridge and sighed quietly.

He was on Brooklyn Bridge, an instantly recognizable symbol of New York.

Spanning over 1800 metres, at one point in time it was the longest bridge in the world.

Brooklyn Bridge consisted of two levels: the roadway, and the walkway and bicycle lane atop it like a roof.

Though the walkway was sitting over the road, it was much more narrow than the path under it. The remaining space between the sides of the walkway and the steel wires on which the bridge was suspended was spanned by steel frames jutting out from under the walkway.

As a scenic landmark with a view of the Statue of Liberty, it was a bridge loved by many.

Yet at this moment, someone who had been abandoned by the world was standing alone on the bridge.

It was the very same boy who had been sighing not too long ago, but in the rain, the people crossing the bridge did not notice his presence.

This was because the boy stood on a place where pedestrians did not dare set foot.

He was outside the walkway, beyond the railings, where there was nothing but iron beams to support him.

In other words, he was at the very edge of the bridge, looking down onto the ground as he hung onto the suspension wire.

Directly underneath he could see the river and the river's edge. The bridge was much higher than the red brick apartments in the area, and the cars passing by on the roads beneath looked small enough to be hand-made models.

From this vantage point, the boy aimlessly stared down at the ground.

He was just under fifteen years of age. There were bags under his somewhat childlike eyes, and despite the awe-inspiring view in the rain, he focused his sights solely on the ground below him.

Put simply, the boy was planning to die.

A fall from his height would kill him without question. The boy was absolutely certain of his impending death.

Perhaps he had a chance of survival if he was over the river, but unfortunately he was standing over solid ground. Even jumping from the roof of one of the apartments dwarfed by this bridge would likely be fatal. Therefore, stepping off from this bridge would seal his death in stone, the boy thought.

Perhaps he wouldn't die instantly, but there wasn't a great deal of traffic in this area. Even the sound of his dying moans would be silenced by the rain.

It would be a painful death, but the boy was ready.

He would throw himself into the air. That was all.

He would step forward. That was all.

He would take his hand off the suspension wire, which he was gripping behind him. Perhaps that would be enough.

How would it feel to fall from the air? The highest point he had ever fallen from was the tree near his house. Even back then, the pain was bad enough he thought he was going to die. Perhaps this jump would not even give him time to feel pain.

His face twisted very slightly at the recollection.

It was not sadness in his eyes, but something closer to anger.

He bit his lip, eyes fixed on the ground again.

*'How long have I been standing here?'* He wondered.

It had been some times since he climbed over the railings, but no one had noticed him.

Or perhaps they *had* noticed him, but had chosen to ignore him.

Would people care about his death once he had fallen?

Suicides were not uncommon in this day and age, thanks to the Great Depression. Little incidents where it was impossible to determine if a death was a murder or a suicide didn't always make it onto the papers.

*'I'm going to disappear.'*

*'Oh, that must be it. I'm not going to die. I'm just going to disappear.'*

There was no one to mourn him. No friends, no family.

For a moment he wondered, *'If I'm just going to disappear, would it make a difference if I continued to live?'*, but he felt like that would be taking the coward's way out.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean that suicide was the courageous thing to do. Depending on the context, it could even be more cowardly than living on.

*'But it doesn't matter anymore.'*

Either way, he was going to die. What use was there in trying to judge if he was cowardly or courageous?

With that thought, he again collected himself.

*'I feel like I can see every blade of grass on the ground.'*

He soon began to feel as though he could become one with the ground below.

It was like he was going to be sucked into the earth.



No, he soon *would* be.

It felt as though all the noise around him would dissipate and a world of his own would be born.

*'That's right. I'm all alone.'*

*'Now I can finally be alone.'*

And as he prepared to become one with the ground, becoming a part of the earth--

"Hey there."

The world he believed empty suddenly produced a sudden, unwelcome guest.

"What are you doing over there? You should know if you don't already... It's really dangerous over there."

The voice stepped into the boy's world, muddy shoes stomping over it.

Because the voice was so close to him, at first he thought he was hearing things.

But when he turned around, he realized that he had not heard wrong.

Directly beside him, less than a metre away, stood a man without an umbrella--just as close to the edge as the boy was.

"I guess a fall from this height'd kill you for sure, unless you were as strong as Popeye or Tarzan. But even then, I'd assume it'd still hurt. So, uh, don't you think it's best that you don't?"

The tone of the man's voice was so lighthearted that the boy didn't realize it at first, but it sounded like he was trying to stop him from jumping. For a moment, the boy's mind went blank.

However, he quickly regained his senses and yelled at the man.

"S-stay back!"

"What are you talking about? I was here first."

"?!"

The boy was shocked. He was certain that there was no one here when he first stepped towards the edge. Was it that he was not thinking about his surroundings, as opposed to others not noticing him?

"That can't be... you're lying...!"

The man grinned and nodded.

"You got me. Actually, I just got here a second ago."

"..."

The man's nonsensical answer left the boy gaping in silence.

Seeing his expression, the man smiled.

"What do you think? Funny, huh?" He tilted his head impishly.

"Wh-who are you?"

"Me? Just a passing... hm. What would be the most interesting answer, d'you think? How about I say that I'm just a passing Don Juan?"

The boy was at a loss. Was he supposed to get angry? He continued to keep his eyes trained on the man.

The man was wearing plain clothes one could see on any person his age. Nothing about his outfit stood out particularly.

He was probably about five to ten years older than the boy. Although the man was extremely nondescript, neither handsome nor ugly, there was one thing that set him apart.

His smile.

Even though he was at the edge of the bridge, only a slip of the foot away from death, a smile covered his face.

*'Who is this guy?'*

The sheer nonsensicality of the situation left the boy dumbstruck, blinking his eyes. But he quickly found himself with words to speak again.

"...Hey. That's dangerous."

"I guess it is, huh?" The man mumbled sheepishly, but he did not lose his smile. "So, what are you doing in such a dangerous place?"

"..."

"I could suppose you're here for the spectacular view, but drawing from my long life experience, I'm thinking you want to commit suicide here. Right?"

"...Yeah." The boy answered quietly, defeated.

Who was this man?

The mysterious air around him compelled the boy to continue answering his questions. Perhaps he had taken some sort of an interest in the newcomer, and that was why he had not elected to ignore him and jump off the bridge.

"Just telling you, it won't be any use trying to stop me."

"Why not?"

"Because even if you do, I'll try to die again."

The heavy rain had lessened over the span of their conversation. It was not difficult to make out what the man was saying, and vice versa.

The boy seemed to be thinking that a last conversation might not be such a bad thing.

However, the smiling man's answer was rather unexpected.

"I see. But I wouldn't say it's no use entirely."

"Wha...?"

"Even if I were to fail to stop you, that might end up becoming a painful experience that will help me the next time I run into someone trying to commit suicide. Although I'm not like that, some people take self-satisfaction from having tried to save someone trying to commit suicide, even if they don't manage to actually save them. And other people who can't be satisfied with just an *attempt* at a rescue still come away with some life experience. So I guess in the end, whether it matters or not shouldn't be something you should be worrying about, seeing as you're about to die, right?"

The man grinned, swinging with the wire in his grip like a spring. If his fingers slipped, he would instantly plunge to the ground and lose his life. What was he thinking?

As the boy watched him dubiously, the man suddenly stopped.

"Although it's true I haven't decided yet if I'm going to stop you or not." He said.

"What?"

"Well, I guess it's more of a question than a discussion, but... also, I'm not going to ask you *why* you're trying to die, but..."

"You're not?"

*'What a strange person.'*

*'Wouldn't most people start by asking why I'm doing this?'*

*'But then again... It's not like I want to be asked that question. It doesn't really matter at this point.'*

The moment the boy finished his thought, the man spoke again.

"If you die, will you be happy?"

"..."

If a normal person trying to talk him out of suicide had asked such a thing, the boy would have snorted and laughed. He thought that a question like that would not be able to stop someone who had resolved to die.

But the boy could not bring himself to laugh, because the man's question was accompanied by a bright smile.

The man's smile wasn't condescending in the least. Rather, it was pure and innocent like that of a child. It sounded less like he was trying to stop him and more like he sincerely wished for his death.

The man's tone almost sounded like an innocent child exclaiming, "Santa Claus is really gonna come if I listen to my parents?".

"So how are you going to be happy, I wonder. Wait, don't tell me you're looking forward to going to heaven? But then it wouldn't make sense to take your own life. After all, lots of religions forbid meaningless suicides. Or are you someone trying to find complete nothingness?"

The man's questioning could not have been less responsible if he tried. The boy talked back, a hint of unease in the back of his mind.

"No... no way."

"Hm?"

"There's no way... that someone like me would be happy to die."

The man nodded in understanding, and quietly spoke again.

"I see. Then I've decided that I'll try to stop you."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say. Just leave me alone."

"I'd be happy to do that, if it makes you happy."

The man's smile never left his face. The boy looked at him, astonished.

"...Are you from a church or something? Are you high?"

"Don't you think you were just being really rude to religious people?"

"...Why are you trying to stop me?"

"Because I feel sorry."

"What?!"

The man's simple, unhesitating answer, incensed the boy. He glared at the man.

*'So he felt sorry for me. So he's just showing me pity?!'*

Anger boiled inside him, threatening to explode in a series of outraged insults at the man before his own death. But the man grinned and spoke again as if to stop him.

"This might sound like a sermon, but I think these roads and parks below us were made by people to make others smile. For example, to make children smile. To work for the money and bring a smile to themselves and their own families. I'd feel terribly sorry for them if these roads and parks were left a bloody mess because of something so trivial."

"What...?"

*'He wasn't feeling sorry for me...?'*

"And what if someone happened to be passing underneath, and you hit them on the way down? Wouldn't you feel sorry for them? And if you died, then what about the poor person who might be badly hurt or killed for no reason? Who are his family supposed to get angry at? But then again, seeing as you're going to die soon, I suppose you won't really be worrying about that."

"..."

The boy was dumbfounded. The man tilted his head questioningly.

"Oh? Why so quiet?"

"...Shut up."

"Oh, I see. You thought I was feeling sorry for *you*. Or were you *hoping* that I was feeling sorry for you, instead of some people I've never even met?

"...!"



He was right on the mark.

The accuracy of the man's question left the boy to realize the foolish and embarrassing hope he held. As he began to despise himself, he simultaneously grew incensed.

"What, what the hell are you?! How... Damn it! Leave me alone!" The boy cried, holding back his tears. The man's grin grew brighter with joy.

"Ah. Finally talking like a kid should be." He looked down at the ground underneath them and continued, "I guess you wouldn't really know this--and seeing as I've never fallen from *this* height before, I'm not entirely sure myself--it's going to hurt. I doubt you'd lose consciousness from falling from this height. Although you could die instantly if you fell head-first, wouldn't it be hard to get into a position like that in midair? They say that your head naturally drops down first because of its weight, but I can't say I believe that completely."

*'So what? Are you trying to stop me? Or are you saying you'll leave me alone? Damn it. It's all your fault. It's all your fault that... that I can't even die properly...'*

His resolve weakening, the boy looked down under his feet and froze.

Up until a few moments ago, he thought he had made up his mind. He was as good as dead.

But after this conversation, his viewpoint had changed.

*'I'm scared.'*

His legs trembled.

The terror of death, held at bay until just now, crawled up from his belly and stabbed at his spine.

Trying to turn away from that fear, the boy tried to put up a bold front.

"...How would you know, anyway? You've never fallen before."

It was a rather rude tone to be using to an adult, but the boy was in no mood to be worrying about such things. All he wanted was to silence the man.



"But I have." The man answered, all too easily, "I've fallen from high places a few times now. It's not a decent way to go, at any rate, although I'm used to it by now."

"What... are you talking about...?"

As the man began to cross the line between joke and cruelty, the boy prepared to lash out at him again. However, the man interrupted him.

"That's it! Here, I'll show you what it looks like, so watch carefully! It won't be too late to give it a go after you've been given the chance to make an informed decision about it, right? ...Perfect. There's no one passing below us."

"What?"

By the time the boy found it in him to respond, it was too late.

"There--"

With an understated exclamation, the man took his hands off the wire and leapt off the bridge.

"Wait..."

It was as if he was diving into a pool, lightly and without fear--

He soon flipped over--

The fall took longer that he had expected.

And as the boy finished this thought, the man scattered over the ground in a splash of red.

<=>

'No. No. NO!

*'Why is this happening? This... This wasn't supposed to happen!'*

The boy quickly made his way back to the walkway, and sprinted for the entrance onto the bridge.

He traversed the long and winding path, mindlessly running towards the place the man had fallen to.

From the looks of the blood, there was no way the man had survived. Even still, the boy did not even think about stopping.

*'No. No.'*

*'I don't want him to die because of me.'*

Panting and gasping, he finally arrived at the scene.

It was a deserted alleyway. Before him was the man's corpse, lying on the hard ground.

"No... no..."

As the boy mumbled to himself, running over to the man, he realized that the immense splatter of blood had all but disappeared.

Assuming that it had been all washed clean by the rain, the boy examined the man's body.

Confirming that his arms were intact and that no eyeballs or brain fluids were on the ground before him, he shook the man. He clung to the ridiculous hope that, somehow, the man might still be alive.

Although moving an injured man would probably cause more harm than good, the boy continued to violently shake the pristine corpse.

"Please... Wake up! No! You can't die!"

And so--

The corpse smiled.

"Hey there."

"Gah!"

The boy froze in shock.

The man slowly got up, cracking his neck before speaking.

"You're a nice kid, putting off your own death and coming to help me, even though I annoyed a stranger like you so much."

"...Ah... Aaaaaaah..."

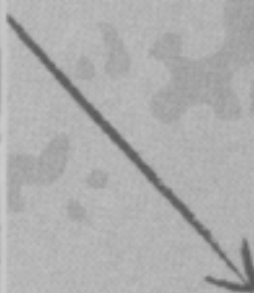
"And you know what I think? If you really were ready to die, you wouldn't even have listened to anything I had to say. Yeah. Don't you think you'd be better off living?"

What kind of magic trick had this man performed?

The boy was so shocked he couldn't even make a sound.

And as if to try and calm him down, the man grinned and offered him a hand.

"The name's Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. I'm actually a bit of an immortal. Nice to meet you!"



解体人は **驚喜**で凶器を  
クルクルと回す

# 第三章

### **Chapter 3 : Overwhelmed by Shock and Joy, the Dismantler Spins his Weapon Round and Round**

-----

**Night, a speakeasy in New York.**

The speakeasy, built somewhere under the ground, was rather cramped.

In a corner of the establishment under the trembling glow of the lightbulb sat a young man.

"Lemme tell you a tragic, tragic story."

Though his voice was clear as crystal, it was packed with deep depression.

"What a spectacular night... This glass of milk I ordered is just cool enough to coat the insides of my mouth and esophagus and stomach in a layer of white... That's right. Just like freshly fallen snow."

The young man, who appeared to be just about twenty years old, continued to sigh sadly.

"A spectacular night. So *why* am I sitting here, telling you a tragic story? That is so unbearably sad. Though it may lead to someone telling me to be silent, sadly enough, that is impossible. For I can't bear to contain this sadness within myself any longer. That's why, at least, I want the feeling of having friends who will recognize my sadness. It's only a natural action for a terribly, terribly weak human being..."

The young man's clothing was both suited and out of place in this speakeasy under a factory.

His blue work clothes made him look like one of the factory's employees, but the brightness of his uniform made him stick out like a sore thumb.

However, the most unusual thing about him was not the colour of his uniform, but the object he was fiddling with in the hand that wasn't occupied with the glass of milk.

It was a monkey wrench used to tighten and loosen nuts and bolts.

In terms of utility, it was a perfectly normal object for a man in work clothes to own, but there were three peculiarities about him.

One was the size of the wrench.

The young man was not remotely large in stature, but the metal object he held was longer than a child's arm. It was closer to a mace used in medieval times than a monkey wrench.

The second was the fact that he was drinking milk in a speakeasy.

The final peculiarity was the fact that the surface of the wrench was covered in dried blood and rust.

The young man had rather girlish facial features. He seemed to have a decently muscular build, and his half-asleep eyes peeked out from under his blond hair.

Although the shimmer of his hair and his pale skin was more than enough to qualify him as handsome, the dark shadow cast in his eyes unnerved anyone who made eye contact with him.

Of course, the only people looking into his eyes now were already long accustomed to his appearance.

Of them, the one most used to talking to him was sitting directly across from him, drinking orange juice and keeping him occupied.

"Sure, boss. Humans are weak, cause they die when they're killed. Which makes them the *weakest*."

"You're right! Humans are incurably weak. And even if we were omnipotent like some sort of god, there's no way we could prevent the saddening of our hearts... Then what? What choice do we have but to drown in our own tears?"

As the young man recited his depressing poetry, his friends around him sighed with a look of "Here we go again...".

That was when someone intruded into their midst.

"Shaddap, you little punk! Why don't you brats go back to your mommas?!"

A drunken thug approached the young men and raised a bottle into the air.

With a loud crash, the empty bottle exploded onto the table, scattering glass everywhere.

The young men went silent.

"What? You scared already? Dunno what you little bastards were mumbling about, but I feel pretty shitty now! How're you gonna fix that, huh?!"

Seemingly encouraged by the reactions of the other patrons, the man decided to put emphasis on the 'loudness' aspect of the delinquents' chatter.

Although the young man's recital was nothing especially pleasant, he was speaking rather quietly, his voice dissipating into the soft chatter in the speakeasy.

Having chosen such a trivial matter to pick at, the red-faced drunk grinned unpleasantly.

"Seein' as you're drinkin' here, you probably got some cash-"

However, he never managed to finish his sentence.

The man realized too late that he had fallen to his knees.

"Wha... what?!"

Looking down at himself, the thug saw that his ankle was twisted at an unnatural angle.

He also saw that his ankle was in the jaws of the young man's gigantic wrench.

"Huh... Wha...?"

His senses, dulled by the alcohol, slowly began to convey the pain in his ankle to his brain.

At that very moment, the pain became terror, instantly dispelling the effects of the alcohol and bringing the man back to his senses.

Damn it...

Dammitdammitdammitdammitdammitdammitiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit..."

thug's mind.

"S, stop..."

involved himself with. He was in danger.

was that they already knew what was going to happen.

The young man in work wear began to spin the wrench round and round.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

through the speakeasy.

 $\langle \equiv \rangle$ 

**Several minutes later.**

"Sorry for the wait. I'm Carl Digness from the Daily Days."

The man had a surprisingly wizened aura about him, even for his age.



His behaviour was calm and collected, but he never stood out of the crowd--rather like a polite, high-earning banker who conducted himself with a touch of frugality.

"...Did something just happen?"

The man who introduced himself as Carl glanced down at the floor.

Sprawled out before him was a large man, his limbs splayed out with every last joint dislocated.

Then, a relatively plain-looking young man who had been sitting next to the young man in work wear stood up and offered Carl a handshake.

"Oh, good evening. I'm Shaft, the one who took your phone call. This gentleman here just hit his leg on the table, so please don't worry about him."

"Right."

Giving no indication as to whether he accepted Shaft's explanation or not, Carl asked permission and took a seat next to him.

"That's right. ...So, what does a Daily Days reporter want with a group like us?"

"Well, you see..."

Carl was just about to speak, but the young man in work wear suddenly broke his silence.

"Of course... This is going to be fun! Since I'm feeling a rush of euphoria that eclipses any joy I have ever felt, let me tell you a fun story!"

"Huh?"

"Anyway, who'd have thought that dismantling just one man's worth of joints would brighten up my night so much? Humans are so full of strength! They have the strength to swim across the infinitely rising waters of the sea of sadness. The wisdom and courage to create a ship to sail across... Don't you agree?"

"When it comes to you, Boss, I don't know about this whole wisdom thing... gah."

The man named Shaft screamed softly as a wrench was lightly jabbed into his stomach. "Please don't do that, Boss...! Anyway, what was that sad story you were going on about earlier? You stopped talking about it before you got to the point."

"Oh. The jerky I ordered with my milk never came."

"That's called blowing things out of proportion!"

As the young men engaged in what was probably normal conversation for people their age, the reporter named Carl narrowed his eyes and observed the young man in work wear.

*'Graham Specter.'*

He was a skilled young man who led one of many groups of delinquents in New York.

Carl had heard that Graham Specter would be extremely difficult to deal with, almost as much as the Gandor Family torture specialist Tick Jefferson.

If he made one wrong move against Graham, Carl might not be able to leave unscathed. The pained groaning of the thug on the floor and his limbs, neatly arranged opposite to their natural angles, were living proof of the rumours.

Even still--or rather, that was exactly why Carl Digness spoke, intending to acquire new information by disclosing a certain fact.

"You would be Graham, correct?"

"That would be correct. You're a Daily Days reporter, am I right? What do you need to ask? Tell us a fun story, if you feel like! After all, the fact that we can tell fun stories makes things fun in the first place. Right? If you think about it that way, doesn't that mean humans are generators of perpetual motion, only we generate fun? This is an amazing discovery... My heart is racing!"

The young man began ranting, excitement clear in his tone. The reporter steeled himself and continued.

"Before I ask you anything, there is a certain piece of information I need to deliver to you."



"?"

The young men looked at him curiously.

The reporter took a deep breath and enunciated the facts with clarity.

"I'm sure you've all heard of Ice Pick Thompson."

"Yeah."

"To make it short... The cops are suspecting you."

There was silence as the air around them froze.

As Carl opened his mouth to explain further, he heard the sound of a wrench slapping against a hand.

"Yes."

The excited young man in work wear narrowed his eyes.

And neither denying nor confirming the accusation against them, he conveyed to the others one single truth.

"This is going to be fun."

-----

The next day, a certain newspaper ran an exclusive article.

It had beaten all other sources of information and became the first to report a new case involving Ice Pick Thompson.

The article, vivid and descriptive as though the writer had seen the scene of the crime in person, shocked the readers and became the talk of the town.

Although this was the kind of article that might have normally come from the Daily Days, like all others had, today it had been published in another, much larger newspaper.

The fact that, like every other mainstream newspaper, news from the Olympics had occupied page one for some time now, was partly responsible for the powerful impression the article left on its readers.

The man who wrote the article was a young reporter named Lester, and through this incident his name came to be known to the people of New York.

If things had gone according to plan, he might have been speaking to Graham Specter, just like the man who coined the moniker 'Ice Pick Thompson', Carl Digness. But Lester's meeting was an encounter with a crazed killer.

And with this incident as the trigger, the streets began to stir.

## Intermission

-----

He appeared with the rain.

He slithered through the alleyways, with the sound of water as his cover.

And he showered people with raindrops of metal.

Sssshhhhhh shk shk sssshhhhhh shk shk

He emerged to commit murder.

The first victim was the owner of a small speakeasy.

The second was a real estate agent.

The third, a police officer.

Next, the manager of a warehouse rental service.

And the fifth victim was a prostitute, who stood in the same alleyway night after night.

The only woman among the victims was the fifth.

Even so, her murder shocked the city.

The death of a single prostitute led people to irresponsibly cry out about Jack the Ripper. Some speculated that the culprit was an obsessive copycat, while others claimed that Jack the Ripper was still alive, and had crossed the Atlantic.

The police did their best to dispel such rumours, but the rain had already washed away too much of the evidence.

And the fact that the only witness was a newspaper reporter made it difficult to tell if his testimony was entirely trustworthy.

The serial killer who rattled the nation in the boundary between the glory of the Olympics and the darkness of the Great Depression was named Ice Pick Thompson.

He was not challenging the police, like Jack the Ripper and the later Zodiac Killer.

All kinds of imagined pictures of the criminal were born of the people's minds.

Although the people feared his or her existence, they merely accepted Ice Pick Thompson's actions as another shocking turn of events that would help them forget the Depression. His story would slowly be absorbed into the world.

The police were getting no closer to catching the culprit.

The vicious murders did not seem to be anywhere close to ending.

The boy who should have died encountered an immortal monster...

And the reporter who feared death encountered a serial killer.

# 第四章

→ 本屋の店主は無知な少年に贈る



## Chapter 4 : The Bookstore Owner Warns the Ignorant Boy

-----

**Afternoon. An antique bookstore in New York.**

[Ice Pick Thompson Claims Fifth Victim, Perpetrator Likely Long-Armed Man]

This was the headline of the newspaper currently lodged under the head of the napping bookstore owner on this sleepy summer afternoon.

The bookstore was located between a cluster of aging apartment buildings.

And inside, the owner slept soundly at his desk with his glasses still perched on the bridge of his nose. A drop of saliva dribbled down from his lips and landed on the newspaper.

"Hwwaaaaaaahhhh..."

As the bookstore door opened, the owner slowly opened his eyes.

"Hm? Oh...!"

The elderly man shook his head to wake himself.

"Shouldn't you at least try to pretend you're ready for customers?" The customer, a boy not yet fifteen, asked the owner.

"Well, if it isn't Mark! You caught me. I honestly can't seem to keep these old eyes of mine open these days... I *am* trying to be careful so nothing happens while I'm asleep, but... are you all right?"

The bookstore owner looked into the eyes of the boy named Mark.

There were bags under his eyes and his face was deathly pale. It looked as though he had not slept in days.

"Is something the matter, Mark?" The owner asked, concern clear in his tone.

"No, I'm fine..." Mark smiled weakly.

The bookstore owner was not convinced. He kept his eyes on Mark, who began looking through the bookshelves without returning his gaze.

It was quite obvious that he was not in the best of health, but Mark's eyes scanned the bookshelves with dedication.

He was looking through sections containing books on medicine, folk tales, and the occult, but bookstore owner did not know what Mark was looking for.

Although it was a rather eclectic combination of topics to be searching through, Mark's determined search eventually compelled the owner to remove his glasses, rub his eyes, and speak to him.

"Mark... What in the world are you looking for, boy?"

"..."

Mark was quiet for a moment. A look of hesitance spread over his face.

"Um... Don't start thinking I'm going crazy, okay? Think of it like... you just heard me thinking to myself."

"You've been coming around here for ten years, Mark. If there's anything you'd like to talk to me about, I'm all ears, my boy. And to be honest, anyone could tell that you've just lost all your energy ever since what happened back then. I was just wondering if I could do anything to help." The owner smiled kindly. Mark looked even more uncomfortable as he hesitantly continued.

"Okay... So pretend you just heard this randomly when I was passing by, okay?"

"Of course."

"Say that someone was hurt bad enough to die... do you think it's possible for him to come back to life right in front of you?"

The owner paled slightly, and not because he was worried for Mark's sanity or suspecting that Mark was lying. In fact, the owner looked more *afraid* than anything else.

"Wh-what is this? Mark! Did you see something?"

"Wha...?"

"Oh... Hm... Listen closely, Mark. Even if you see anything *slightly* out of the ordinary in the neighbourhood, you must forget that you saw anything! Do you understand? You *mustn't tell anyone!*"

Mark was a little surprised by the way the bookstore owner raised his voice, but he realized that the old man was not getting angry at him--he was worried for Mark's safety, and that was what rattled Mark the most.

"What are you talking about? You know something, don't you?!"

"N-no! I didn't see anything! Mark! I say one word about this on the streets, and they'd lock me up in a loony bin. And I'd still prefer that to being murdered, my boy!"

Several more repetitions of "You must forget it happened, Mark" eventually convinced Mark to leave the bookstore empty-handed, no closer to the truth than when he began.

*'Forget everything, huh.'*

Remembering the old man's advice, he closed his eyes.

*'I'd sure as hell like to forget everything!'* He thought to himself, and opened his eyes.

"Hey there."

The man he should have been trying to forget was standing in front of him.

"So your name's Mark, huh? Sorry, I wasn't snooping on you or anything. It's just that the storekeeper in there was being rather loud."

"..."

In front of Mark was a smile. The kind of strong and gentle grin that assured itself that there was no misfortune in the world.

Seeing the man's all-forgiving smile, the boy felt as though the man would gladly offer redemption even to the devil.

"...!"

Mark turned tail and fled, terrified.

<=>

**A back alley somewhere in New York.**

"Let me tell you a sad story..."

A young man dropped his gaze to his own feet, standing under the shade as a refreshing breeze blew past.

It was almost unpleasantly sunny today in New York. The moisture from the previous day's rain evaporated in the sunlight, leaving the atmosphere a hot, humid mess.

A group of young people were gathered together in a back alley only a slight distance from Broadway, attempting to avoid the heat.

However, the young man in work wear who stood at the centre of this group--Graham Specter--began to recite a series of words that could very well turn the cool shade over them into depressing gloom.

"Why are we here? That's right. We are here because of the heat. And to where did we flee, avoiding the challenge of that arrogant sunlight? Yes. Here. We came into the shade."

"...Sure."

The other delinquents were only half-listening, lazily leaning against the walls or trying to syphon the heat from their heads into the cool stone walls. Only one of them was diligently replying to their leader's ramblings.

The young man known by the nickname "Shaft" was the only underling who could be a match for Graham's ever-inconsistent moods.

"In other words... We turned tail against the sun in escape! How sad... This is a tragedy! The sun's got no intention of challenging us! After all, we're nothing but space dust compared to that great mass of fire! I believe that the sun is not so petty as to despise pieces of dust that roll upon the Earth! But! That's right, even still! We ran! From what? Yes, we ran from the sun! From one that holds no ill will against us! Even though we can't even survive without its existence!"

"No one's saying we can, boss."

"Damn it! Who do humans think they are?! The sun could become our enemy or our ally, and we wouldn't even take notice. If things only got a slight bit hotter than this, humanity would be left in ruins! The same goes for if it got colder! In the end, we are but the sun's plebeian playthings. In other words, the sun is the mastermind that controls the human race! How terribly tragic... The mastermind shows its face to us each and every day, but we can't do a damn thing about it. What am I supposed to *do* with this destructive *sorrow*?!"

"How 'bout unleashing it on your own brain, boss?"

No one could tell if the sweat running down Shaft's face was induced by heat or fear.

"..."

"Honestly, boss. What're we supposed to do if you go around breaking down even worse than usual just 'cause it's a little hotter out than usual? We all have our hands full trying to get away from the heat, so how 'bout surrendering to the sun and lying on the ground for a bit or something?"

"..."

"Wait, boss--whatareyoudoingwiththatwrench-"

Graham raised his favourite weapon, the gigantic monkey wrench, and gave a smile quite reminiscent of a Buddha statue from the east.

"Lemme tell you a helpful story. Yes, a helpful story."

"Uh, boss."

"How to cool oneself off? What do you think about spilling all of someone's blood to rob the body of all heat?"

"Uh, Boss Graham? Boss? That ain't going to--"

Whether or not he could hear Shaft, Graham grabbed his underling by the neck and pinned him to the wall with his free hand.

"Ack! Boss! Please! Thinkaboutyourreputation!"

"And here's something that might make you feel better. Speaking from first-hand experience--"

Graham's wrench arm stopped in mid-air like a wind-up toy that had been cranked to its limit.

"From what I know, corpses are *always* cold."

"Ofcoursecorpsesarecoldiftheirbodytemperatureislowerthantheroomtemperature!"

As Shaft maintained a surprising degree of rationality even in his state of panic, Graham flashed an angelic smile.

"I know."

He immediately wiped the smile off his face, replacing it with a look of pure ice.

"And so what of it?"

"Waaaaaaaait! Pleasebosssdon'tdoitpleasenooooooooooooo!"

With Shaft's cry as a signal, Graham's right arm swung down like a spring-loaded mechanism.

There was a powerful, deep *thud* as the rusted, blood-covered wrench smashed into its target.

"Aaaaahh... hah... ack..."

Shaft twitched, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Graham withdrew his wrench from the wall beside Shaft's head and grinned refreshingly.

"Feel a bit cooler now?"

He had smashed the wrench into the brick wall.

Although his underlings had broken out into cold sweat at the logic-defying sight, to them it was nothing to be surprised at--just a part of everyday life.

Ignoring Shaft, whose knees were trembling as he remained lost in semi-consciousness, Graham stretched out his wrench arm parallel to the ground as he began spinning on his heels under the shade.

And though he was as emotional as before, the nature of his feelings had done a 180.

"Let me tell you a fun story! I'll tell it to you even if you try to stop me! Even if I have to force you to listen! From this point forth, everything will be filled with fun! Oh no, I'm starting to feel the excitement! This must be exactly what Boss Ladd feels when he goes off to kill people!"

Spinning his wrench round and round, Graham spun in place, making himself extremely difficult to approach and forcing his underlings to step away--both physically and emotionally.

"That's right! Boss Ladd! No joke, even after losing an arm and being taken by the cops he rescues us all from tedium! Whaddaya say to that?!"

"I'd rather be lost in tedium, boss!" Shaft, recovering from his incapacitated state, glared at Graham's weaponized twister. "He's the reason why they think we're Icepick Thompson."

"That's right! That's precisely what I wanted to talk about!"

Looking at their leader's half-open eyes, Shaft sighed in defeat.

"And why in the world did I need my eyes to roll into the back of my head just for you to come to this conclusion, boss?"

"You reap what you sow. It's your fault for complaining to me. That's right... You're the one at fault, Shaft! Or me! This violent self of mine! The sun is not at fault!"

"Again with the sun?!"

"The sun is merely *there*. Exuding neither goodwill nor malice. It has no heart to speak of! And yet its mere presence gives us everything and at times torments us! This is incredible! No wonder so many countries worship it as a god! This is a fun story... Sunlight is essentially the angry fist of God! And we set out to defeat it, our journey only just beginning... Or is it?!"

"How am I supposed to know?" Shaft sighed again, and tried to get the conversation back on topic.

"You heard the what the reporter said last night. Right, boss? Let's try and keep our heads down 'til they catch the nut."

<=>

**The night before, at a certain speakeasy.**

"Wh-what do you mean, we're under suspicion?"

The reporter named Carl Digness, having contacted Graham's gang under the cover of a news interview, handed them information that would instantly make a drunk man sober.

*"The police believe that you people are behind the Ice Pick Thompson murders."*



The reporter's outlandish claim prompted Shaft to repeat his question, astonished.

Graham's gang had been expecting the reporter to interview them for an article on delinquents and the like. Carl's sudden revelation left them mystified.

Graham, meanwhile, was spinning his wrench, looking rather entertained by the prospect.

The Daily Days reporter glanced at him for a moment and continued, just quiet enough that only the delinquents could hear.

"Graham Specter. A dismantler who used to work at a car factory in Chicago. In love with dismantling from an early age, so far you've taken apart over three thousand cars with your beloved wrench. And now you've relocated to New York, leading a small gang of delinquent youths. I suppose that would be enough of a bio for you."

As Carl rattled off information on Graham, the delinquents looked at the reporter with suspicion. But Graham himself continued to spin his wrench, looking as though he might die of happiness.

"Hah... This is amazing. Who'd have known it would be so convenient to be able to do away with self-introductions?"

However--

"Do you know a man named Ladd Russo?"

"..."

*Smack.*

A relatively loud noise accentuated the moment as Graham's wrench stopped mid-spin.

"A man with whom you young people... or more specifically, your leader Graham associated, back when he was in Chicago."

"'Associated' isn't quite the right word. I was just enraptured by Boss Ladd's magnificent power."

"And what about the rumours of him being the Russo Family's best hitman?"

"Rumours will be nothing but what they are. Mere rumours."

Graham buried himself in his seat, placed his hands and his wrench on his lap, and smirked.

"Boss Ladd is no mere hitman. He's a murderer. Don't make the mistake of thinking he's so cheap as to kill people for cash. Boss Ladd kills people for *enjoyment*. He's the worst of the worst."

"It's over... Boss Graham's totally lost it." Shaft buried his face in his hands. Graham ignored him and continued fearlessly.

"Boss Ladd is strong. Doesn't matter whether you're a murderer or a hero--as long as you've got strength, you're already in a class of your own. And in this world, there are pathetic pieces of scum who worship that power, even if the one who happens to hold it is a homicidal maniac! And who is that piece of scum? Myself! ...This is getting fun. Was I actually the lowest of the low? The lowest... This is great. That means that the only way I can go is up, and since there is nothing lower than myself, I'll never have to fear being overtaken! I can't possibly fall any further! What is God thinking, letting me have so much fun at once?!"

"Maybe he's thinking about abandoning you while he's at it."

Ignoring Shaft, Graham began to spin his wrench around again. He then stopped suddenly, posing a question to the reporter with a rather serious look.

"Rumours aside, why is it that the police are suspecting *us*?"

"They initially suspected that the culprit had some sort of a personal vendetta against the victims. Which is understandable, seeing as no sane person would go that far with the corpses unless they had a reason."

"Hm."

"But after the second and third murders, the cops realized that there was nothing connecting the victims. They came up with the hypothesis that the murders were random, and also committed by more than one person. In other words, delinquents

like you, who have no alibis and have a certain degree of freedom, are high on their list of suspects."

Carl took a sip of tea.

"And if that were all, you'd just be one item on a list, but the fourth victim was a bit of a special case."

"Special case? From what I've read on the papers, he rented out warehouses."

"On the surface, yes. After all, the government's doing its damndest to pretend that organized crime doesn't exist on these streets."

Graham gave a wry grin at Carl's frank statement.

"In other words, that fourth victim you're talking about was from the mafia, am I right?"

"The Gandor Family, to be precise."

"..."

"I'm sure you've heard of them before."

The delinquents looked around at one another at the mention of the name. Graham laughed and shook his head.

"...It's not a name I'd have enjoy hearing right now. No, wait. Something about this is getting fun."

"How is any of this fun?" Shaft complained. The reporter continued.

"That's right. From what I know, your gang made trouble with the Gandors on their turf a few times now. The fourth victim was pretty new to their organization, but that connection's why the cops are looking at you right now."

"No way!" Shaft exclaimed, eyes wide. "That's... they're grasping! Just because of *one* of those bastards?"

"The first victim, the speako owner, recently moved shop to Gandor territory. The second one, the real estate agent, started dealing with the Gandors not too long ago. Something about buying land. The third, the cop, was assigned to patrol Gandor territory. Who knows? There might have been bribery involved on the Gandors' part with him."

As the list of possibilities went on, Shaft steadily grew more and more pale. His fellow delinquents kept their attention steadfast on the reporter, their troubled state clear in their eyes.

"At first they suspected the Runoratas for the mess they made half a year ago, and the Martillos, who almost went to war against the Gandors in the past. But neither of them would need to kill people by stabbing, even as a threat. The Runoratas would've gone out and used real Thompsons. The Martillos specialize in quick battles, so they would have gone after the *capos* first."

"You're making perfect sense." Graham grinned atrociously, starting to spin his wrench around again. It was as though he had already come up with his own answers and was dying to compare them to those of another.

Noticing the childish gleam in Graham's eye, Carl drew a short breath and laughed bitterly.

"And that's why the cops turned their sights to people who aren't quite in their right minds. 'Course, they don't have any evidence on that front, so they can't go around doing any arresting yet. Anyway--Ladd Russo, that homicidal maniac. According to the Bureau of Investigation, he's got a buddy he treats like a brother, who's just as much of a loon as he is.

"In other words, you."

There was silence.

A heavy stillness came over the table. The chatter from the other tables was now clearly audible to the shocked delinquents.

"...So lemme ask you something."

Graham's flunkies were quite surprised. It was unusual to hear such a heavy tone of voice coming from Graham.

"What reason could you *possibly* have for telling us all this?"

A moment passed.

The reporter, having figured out Graham's intentions in that short moment, took a sip of tea and spoke.

"Because I know you're not responsible for this."

"Oh? And what makes you so certain?"

"The Daily Days information network is foolproof, as far as I'm concerned. You're trouble, Graham Specter, but I know better than to accuse you of murder."

"But that's still ruling out that feasible possibility that Boss Ladd's left arm suddenly decided to return from the grave to possess me, isn't it?" Graham said, leaning towards Carl provocatively and touching the tip of Carl's nose with his wrench.

Peering out from under his bangs, Graham's eyes gave off an unusual glint. It would not be far-fetched to believe that he was truly prepared to kill.

But Carl gave a wry laugh as he leaned back and placed an order for a refill for his tea.

"Excuse me. I'm rather picky when it comes to tea, but this speako's something else. You don't get leaves this great at most speakeasies."

"That'd be 'cause we made a big ruckus in here before. Thanks to that, everything in here but the booze is top-of-the-line stuff."

"Then I suppose I should thank you for that. ...Oh, and what I said before, about why I'm not suspecting you..."

Carl leaned forward and pushed Graham's wrench out of his way. His manner of speech remained unchanged, but his tone went down a notch.

"It's because I think I know who did it."

<=>

**The next day, the alleyway.**

"I wonder who the guy was talking about when he said he knew who it was."  
Shaft shrugged, recalling what he had heard the night before.

Graham, still spinning in place, replied enthusiastically.

"Hell if I know! It's not as if I didn't ask him but that's when the bastard pulled the 'that's information broker territory' card! A fun... yes, a fun and interesting man. At this rate, our only option is to blitz the Daily Days office and steal all of their information!"

"What would you do with all that info?"

Despite his astonishment, Shaft never forgot to talk back to his boss. Graham spun around both his body and his eyes.

"...Take the horse races, for example. We could find out the number of the winning horse for the next race! Damn, if we know that, we could get filthy rich! But first, I need some seed money. Shaft! How much do you have on you?"

"I think I at least have enough to get you to a doctor, boss. Doctor Fred's probably willing to take you in for pretty cheap."

"Of course... A doctor. Doctors are good. They're professional dismantlers of the human body. But setting that matter aside, my eyes are spinning. Could this be a cold I'm catching?"

Graham continued spinning on the spot. Shaft buried his face in his hands.

"Argh... This guy is hopeless."

As Graham lay on the ground after his long bout of spinning, the young people under his command sat around him in the shade, enjoying the breeze.

Their leader, lying in the middle of this unusual scene, did not hesitate to make his dissatisfaction known.

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story. Normally I could spin three thousand times and not break a sweat, but why did the two thousand three hundred and seventeenth spin just now weaken me so?"

"Maybe because you're a blockhead, boss." Shaft joked weakly. Graham didn't even have the strength to retaliate.

"Argh, to think that I've been stripped of the strength to do something so trivial as to dismantle Shaft's skull! I should have expected no less from the sun! The heat! The merciless ball of fire above our heads continues to torment us, lacking in conscious will as it may be..."

"Busy as usual, huh, boss?"

"Oh, it's over... My energy is being sapped away. Our journey's only just begun, but we all crashed and died before we could reach Neverland. That is, in a nutshell, how I feel. Damn you, sun... not even the most hateful of my strikes could hope to lay a dent on you, not to mention that destroying you would present me with a host of new problems... To hell with you, sun! Flaunting your absolute power over us, like our ancestors who ravaged this continent with their countless weapons! Wait! Could this possibly be the curse of the Aztecs and Incas? Damn you, Cortés! A thousand curses upon you, Pizarro! Because of you, Quetzalcoatl is coming...! He's coming!"

"You're pretty smart when it comes to weird stuff."

Ignoring their leader's sudden rants on an ancient god from a lost civilization, the young people began to discuss the information they received from the reporter the previous night.

"So that fifth victim from today's paper--you think she's got something to do with the Gandors too?"

"Dunno. Either way, the guy said he had a hunch about the culprit, right?"

"But he still couldn't do a thing to stop him."

"And in the end, all he asked us was about what we did before and what kinda things we do every day."

"Urgh... Quetzalcoatl... He's coming closer..."

"Come to think of it, wasn't there supposed to be another reporter interviewing us for something similar to that, Shaft?"

"Now that you mention it, they said something about doing the interview soon. This other paper's way bigger than the Daily Days, so I was hoping they'd come by soon and pay us more than last night."

"Then again, who'd want to read something about *us*?"

"It's a jungle out there."

"Viracocha... the flood of Viracocha...!"

"I don't get Boss Graham."

"He's talking about Con-Tici Viracocha. A god worshipped by the Incans."

"...You're not too shabby yourself, Shaft."

"Speaking of stuff I don't know, we haven't seen that Dallas bastard in almost two years now."

"Maybe he's gone running off to the boonies?"

"Him and his cronies never met Boss Graham, huh."

"If he did, he'd have run off to the boonies a lot sooner, that's for sure."

"Oh... Tezcatlipoca... Tezcatlipoca demands a sacrifice..."

"Come to think of it, did you know there's a capo in the Martillo Family with a really girly face?"

"Oh yeah, I've heard of him. I hear if you say that to his face, he'll beat you to a pulp, smash your Adam's apple, shank your balls, and say 'Who's the girly one now?'."



"Scary."

"Ah... Amaterasu-Oomikami... Amaterasu-Oomikami is hiding herself..."

"Looks like Boss Graham's broken."

"He's always like that."

"No... Don't look upon Izanami's visage... they're coming... the Yomotsu-shikome are coming...!"

"What's he saying, Shaft?"

"I gotta wonder why he's so well-read on such useless stuff."

The delinquents killed time on that lazy summer afternoon through idle chatter.

They expected little more than for things to stay this way until sunset.

And as they sat around, resigned to the weather, a sudden intruder smashed their warm afternoon without so much as a warning.

"Argh! S-sorry! Get outta the way!"

A boy suddenly leapt into the alley, intending to pass through Shaft and the others and make it to the other end of the alley.

"Hey, kid."

Before Shaft could stop him, the boy ran past him.

"GAH!"

And as he ran, the boy stomped on Graham's solar plexus with all his weight as Graham lay prone on the ground. It was a few steps later that the boy realized that he had done something terrible.

"Uh! Oh... Uh... Sorry...! I'm really sorry, but I'm in a hurry! Sorry about that!"

With a hurried series of apologies, the boy turned around and disappeared at the other end of the alley in the blink of an eye.

As the delinquents gaped in shock, Graham rolled around before them, groaning in pain.

"...! Urgh...! Gah! ...He got me! Damn it! What is this. What just happened to me?! Argh! Is this what it feels like to be stabbed by Odin's Spear of Longinus?!"

"Don't make such a fuss, boss. And Longinus doesn't even belong to Odin."

As usual, Graham ignored Shaft's correction. He got to his feet, coughing violently.

"Now I remember... I was just brutally stepped upon by that brat! Damn it... I can express nothing but rage! I am positively overcome by anger! Is it a sad story, or a fun one, I wonder? Oh, the suspense is killing me, Shaft! Tell me! Who is at fault?"

Shaft almost answered Graham's insane question with a "The one who was lying in the middle of the alley", but decided to answer in a way that would hopefully keep himself from being left lying on the ground in much the same way.

"Whoever raised that brat to be such a rude punk, is what I'd say."

"Yes... You're absolutely right! That was exactly what I wanted to say... Who taught him to behave, that he can stomp on innocent pedestrians without so much as a word of apology? Damn! Now I'm feeling sad. Has America fallen to the point that it's producing children who trample upon others?! Is this one of the curses of the ancients?!"

"Least you're still full of energy, boss."

As Graham continued to accuse ancient civilizations of crimes for which they were not accountable, his fellow delinquents breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that he was not injured.

In contrast to his companions, Graham was swinging around his wrench and blowing up at his surroundings little by little.

At this rate, he looked as though he could run out into the street and dismantle the first car that passed him by. His friends were just starting to get nervous.

That was the precise moment at which yet another stranger intruded into their midst.

"Hey there. Could you lend me a hand?"

The delinquents turned their heads in unison. A man was standing at the alley entrance.

He looked to be a little older than the delinquents. Dressed in rather neat clothing, he didn't look very much like an office worker (of course, no sane office worker would be in the back alley at this time of day). But he didn't look like an unemployed man, a police officer, or even someone with a profession they could think of.

Another strange thing about him was that there was a smile plastered over his face, even as he looked directly at Graham and his crew of decidedly abnormal friends.

The man looked around the alleyway, his grin never leaving his face, and shrugged.

"Did you by any chance see a boy about five years younger than you guys passing by here?"

Just as the man finished, he found his neck in the grip of a wrench.

"Let me tell you... a sad, but fun story."

With a suspicious flaunting of the air he wore around himself, Graham Specter slowly shook his head.

"I have no idea *why*, but one thing is for certain, and that is the fact that you are chasing after that little brat. In other words, the fact that the brat was in such a rush, the fact that he trampled over me in his hurry, and the fact that we're all dying of the heat today must be attributed to none other than yourself. That is why I declare this a sad yet fun story!

"You... you are the one responsible for this!"

<=>

## **Evening, the antique bookstore.**

Once the blazing hot sun had set on New York, a different sort of light illuminated the streets. The darkness of night enveloped the city, as electric lights came on one by one as if in an attempt at resistance.

Manhattan had begun its transition into the night.

However, things were much less lively than usual. Perhaps because of the stories of the murders, people no longer frequented the alleyways as they once did, preferring to stick to the larger streets.

"...Looks like it's time to close up shop for today."

The bookstore owner sighed, preparing to bring in the shelves that were on display outside.

But the moment he stepped out the door, someone appeared before his eyes without so much as a warning.

"Argh!"

The man screamed without meaning to, but he realized that the figure was much smaller than he had initially thought. Fixing his glasses, he noticed that he was looking upon a familiar face.

"Hey there."

"Oh, it's you, Mark. My goodness, you gave me quite the scare. What with all those rumours about Ice Pick Thompson..."

In contrast to the owner's relieved laughter, Mark remained disconsolately dark.

"What's wrong, my boy?"

"Tell me more about that thing from earlier."

"...I told you to forget it, Mark."

The bookstore owner sighed awkwardly. But Mark would not drop the issue, his determination clear in his eyes.

"Please. Even if I try to forget... he just keeps coming after me!"

"What? What's all this about, son?" The owner replied, shocked.

Mark remained silent for a moment. It was only after taking some time to carefully choose his words that he spoke up again.

"I... I saw a person die... but then I saw him coming back to life. And now he won't stop following me around... I just managed to lose him, but... he's probably still looking for me."

"..."

The bookstore owner listened in silence, a strange mix of emotions rushing through his mind.

Mark knew that claiming to have seen something as unbelievable as a resurrection was nothing to be done lightly. But from the bookstore owner's reaction from earlier that day, he had concluded that he had no one else to turn to. Mark had to tell the old man about what he had seen.

Of course, he left out the most important part--his own attempt at suicide.

The bookstore owner remained silent for some time.

"Hm..."

He soon looked left and right to make sure no one else was in the alley, and spoke to Mark.

"This way, Mark. We'd better take this inside."

Mark stepped into the store. The old man led him to the counter at the corner of the establishment, taking a seat behind the counter. It was only after taking one more look around his own store that he felt it safe to speak.

"Well... I suppose I have no choice. Mark, you mustn't tell *anyone* that I said this. Do you understand?"

"R, right."

"You see... Half a year ago, I also saw someone coming back to life before my eyes."

"What?" Mark gasped.

The old man obsessively looked around their surroundings, and continued in a whisper.

"Although it's partly because they'd lock me up if I said anything, it's also because someone's keeping me quiet. They wouldn't let me live even if I joked about it while I was drinking. It's a face I know well..."

"It's someone you know?"

Mark was getting even more confused. The old man took off his glasses, massaging the bridge of his nose.

"He's... a local mafioso. One of the ones in charge of this area."

"A... mafioso?"

"And it doesn't matter whether he's a monster or a vampire or a human... a child like you should never associate with people like them."

# 第五章

新聞記者達は己の思惑を

社会の中に叩き込む



## **Chapter 5 :**

### **The Reporters Make their Hypotheses Known to the World**

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**The third floor of a certain building on Wall Street, New York.**

"Mr. Popularity now, aren't you, Lester?"

"Please, stop that."

As the young reporter stepped through the door, his co-workers began teasing him.

Lester was the centre of attention in the editorial office of this large newspaper company. This was because he was the first person to ever witness one of Ice Pick Thompson's murders.

He sat down at his desk, fatigue creasing his face. The other reporters hesitated, wondering if they should speak to Lester, but they noticed the editor-in-chief approaching and returned to work.

"Are you all right, Lester?"

"Uh... Yeah, chief."

"How was the police questioning? Hah! Normally you'd be the one doing the listening."

"Not pleasant, that's for sure. I could tell they were suspecting me."

Lester snorted and recalled what happened in the questioning room. He made a face like he'd chewed up a bug and was rolling it around in his mouth, clearly betraying the way he felt about how he was treated at the police station.

"Publishing that article without even giving the cops a chance to question us... even our boss was given a severe warning."

"Well, I'm sorry about that."



"What are you talking about, Lester? Sales for our morning edition were up thirty percent! The boss was ecstatic."

The editor-in-chief laughed bitterly, shrugging. Colour returned to Lester's face.

Noticing this, the editor-in-chief gently continued.

"They were hounding us for your alibi, too. Like what story you were covering at the times of each incident."

"And just when I thought they stopped suspecting me, they started suspecting my info, asking if I hadn't lied so I could sell more papers."

"I'm sure the police are just desperate to gather accurate information. After all, this was the first time anyone came forward as a proper eyewitness. We've gotten all kinds of unsigned tips here at the editorial department, but none of them were worth looking into. Some of them swore up and down that it was the Rail Tracer's doing. What do they think New York is, a railroad village?"

The editor-in-chief snorted in laughter. Lester smiled and shook his head.

"I know how you feel, chief. Until yesterday, all that misinformation was giving me a hell of a headache."

"You can say that again."

With another laugh, the editor-in-chief eased up on his smile and picked up the newspaper they published that morning.

On the front page was written a list of Ice Pick Thompson's physical characteristics.

- Unusually long limbed
- Thin, did not carry an umbrella even in the rain
- Concealed his face behind the collar of his coat and his distinctive hat
- Held an ice pick in his left hand

These were all the facts.

In combination, these features came together into an image straight out of a hallucination.

"Just say he was spouting will-o-wisp from his mouth and that he was hopping around, and we'd have a case of Spring-Heeled Jack on our case." The editor-in-chief joked about the topic of an urban legend from England. Lester sighed.

"He wasn't *that* out-of-this-world. Jack the Ripper at best, I'd say."

"But it's still true that your descriptions are rather vague. Don't tell me you made it that way just in case the culprit gets caught?"

"Yeah. I don't want to be called a liar."

Suddenly, the employee in charge of the phone turned to them and raised his hand.

"Phone call for you, Lester."

"The police again?" the editor-in-chief asked. The man in charge of the phone shook his head, covering the receiver with the palm of his hand.

"It's Mr. Carl Digness from the Daily Days."

<=>

### **Sunset, the speakeasy 'Alveare'**

A sweet aroma permeated the speakeasy.

The Alveare was an unusual establishment located between Little Italy and Chinatown.

On the surface it was a honey shop, as the name indicated, but the Alveare had a hidden side that not everyone was privy to.

Beyond the shelves lined with countless jars of honey was the counter, and behind the counter was a sturdy door. With the shopkeeper's permission, patrons could pass through the door and enter a product of the era bound by Prohibition.

Although Prohibition was put in place in the hopes of bringing order to society, it instead ended up creating an even more malicious, decadent, and beloved anarchy.

People evaded the watchful eyes of the law in order to clink their glasses at illegal bars called speakeasies.

Men and women alike frequented these establishments, and sometimes even children were patrons to these bars. They were secret gathering places, nesting in the cracks between the hearts of the people and the laws of the country.

At the time, there were speakeasies all over New York. In Manhattan alone there were so many of them that it was nearly impossible to find a street without a speakeasy.

The bootlegging of liquor was one of the pillars around which the mafia built their empires, and the laws that were set down to bring order ended up causing the opposite.

Inside haberdashery stores,

On the second floor of car factories,

The back rooms of shoe stores,

The lower decks of ships moored on the riverside,

Unused operating rooms in hospitals.

Speakeasies popped up in every blind spot people could think of, even in churches or funeral homes.

The Alveare was one such haven, hidden away from the eyes of the law.

Lester made his way into the back of the honey store, never once letting down his guard and keeping his senses sharpened.

The speakeasy interior looked rather like a theatre built for musicals. The ivory white walls were glowing a honeyed gold, lit up by the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

The interior was much more vast than the storefront made it out to be. There were about ten round tables covered in white tablecloths arranged around the room.

"...I'd heard the rumours, but..."

On the outside it looked as though there were multiple buildings standing right next to each other. However, Lester now realized that they were all connected on the inside. Lester's opinion of this speakeasy was overturned in an instant.

*'The Martillo Family, huh.'*

That was the name of the organization that managed this establishment, from what he had heard in the past.

The Martillo Family was a criminal organization with one Molsa Martillo as its head. Apparently they were not mafia, but camorra--a group that had its origins in Naples in southern Italy.

Lester didn't know much about the difference between the mafia and the camorra, but until now he never paid a great deal of attention to this organization.

*'I always thought the Martillos were small fry... but from the size of this speakeasy, it's like this is the main store of some huge mafia family in Chicago.'*

Closer to the back of the store was a stage, around which were arranged an even larger number of lightbulbs.

On the stage was an Asian girl wearing a Chinese dress, dancing with a gigantic sword in hand. Most of the patrons were enjoying their bootlegged liquor, the girl's swordsmanship the side that helped them drain their drink.

*'I feel like I'm inside a beehive.'*

The scent of honey was stronger here in the secret speakeasy than the honey shop where countless jars of honey were displayed for sale. The sweetness blended in with the scent of alcohol. Lester felt as though he could get drunk on the smells alone.

Deciding that it would be in his best interest to take a seat quickly, he surveyed the floor, and noticed a familiar face waving towards him from one of the tables.

'Carl...'

It was his old co-worker, mentor, and a man he once tried to emulate out of respect.

*'But now he's nothing but a failure who transferred to a small company.'*

As he looked at the man he tried to put down in his mind, Lester swallowed and took a deep breath.

"It's been a while, Lester."

"...Good evening."

With a simple greeting, Lester took a seat. Carl poured him a glass of bootlegged liquor.

"Did the lady at the front let you in without a fuss?"

"As soon as I mentioned your name. ...Anyway, I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Well, you know me."

"How's your daughter doing?"

Lester decided to bring up a relatively harmless topic of discussion in order to try and figure out what Carl was after.

Carl had transferred to the Daily Days because he needed to look after his ill daughter. A smaller company would allow him more leeway over his work hours than a larger one. Lester knew all this, but he could still only think of Carl's departure as a miserable flight from responsibility.

However--

"Well... she passed away the year before last."

"..."

Lester could do nothing but remain silent at Carl's surprisingly quick reply.

"If nothing else, I'm glad she didn't have to suffer too long."

"I... don't know what to say."

"That's all right. It's my fault for not contacting you for the funeral. I wanted it to be quiet, you know. So I just called my relatives and my current boss. And as you can see, now that I've sent my wife and daughter ahead of me, I'm free to hang back at speakeasies as late as I want."

*'Talking big, huh.'*

Lester couldn't say that Carl was justified in his actions, but even if he had been contacted for the funeral, he probably would not have shown up. Lester decided to move away from the topic.

"Why did you call me here?"

"Straightforward as usual, Lester. Didn't I teach you that the best way to get info is by stirring up a nice cocktail of words and liquor for your source?"

"You did, but that tactic's not going to work on you now, is it?" Lester replied, not a hint of emotion on his face. Carl chuckled.

Lester awkwardly put his glass of liquor to his lips.

"This is... sweet?!"

The surprising sensation compelled him to take the glass away from his mouth. Setting the alcohol aside, it felt like the sweetness was burning his esophagus on the way down.

Carl snickered at Lester's bulging eyes.

"Hah! How's that for a surprise? You're certainly not the only one to make that face after drinking honey liquor for the first time."

"...Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all. You'll get used to this taste eventually."

As Carl drained a glass of the same liquor, Lester anxiously spurred on the conversation.

"If you have something to say, please get to the point. I'm busier than I might look."

"Oh yes, I read the article on the morning edition today."

"...Thank you."

"Truly amazing. I'm sure the editorial department's thinking even better of you now."

*'What is he thinking?'*

As far as Lester remembered, Carl was not the kind of man to complain or bully others. For a moment Lester wondered if the change of workplace and the loss of his daughter had affected Carl to the point of changing his behaviour.

Carl smiled as Lester lost himself in thought, and began to recite part of a certain article.

"A thin man with unusually long arms, who concealed his face behind his collar and his hat, was it?" He snickered. However, the laughter suddenly vanished from Carl's expression as he glared straight into Lester's eyes.

"You lied, didn't you?"

There was silence.

The spectacle taking place on the stage had reached its climax, allowing their conversation to go completely unnoticed by the other patrons.

But that did not stop Carl from lowering his voice to utter the sentence that could potentially deny Lester's very future.

How much time had passed?

For Lester, the seconds crawled by like years. He eventually put his emotions under control and shot back.

"And here I was wondering why you called me all the way here. You're just jealous, aren't you? Sure, you can take credit for naming Ice Pick Thompson, but anyone has the right to pick up a scoop."

"You're absolutely right. *If* the story is true."

"Stop this. I don't want to hate you any more-" Lester began, shaking his head, but Carl cut him off.

"You thought I wouldn't know?"

"...Pardon?"

"You thought I wouldn't look into the connection between the five victims?"

"What are you..."

Lester made an innocent face, but his eyes were not looking at Carl.

Carl sat before Lester, with elbows on the table and hands clasped before his mouth. Lester averted his eyes.

"Of course, saying that these five people shared a connection might not be the best way to put it."

"..."

"After all, there are *six* people who share that connection, including *you*."

Lester's mouth closed shut.

Carl made no indication as to how he took Lester's reaction. He merely continued quietly.

"You knew, didn't you? When the first man was killed, you probably must have thought--or at least must have wanted to think--that it was a coincidence. Your mindset didn't change after the second murder."



"..."

"But by the time the third and fourth were killed, you must have put two and two together. This serial killer is not targeting people at random."

"...I don't know what you're talking about. What are you insinuating about me and the victims?"

Lester tried to play innocent, but it was impossible to hide the fact that his face had grown very pale.

He took a sip of his drink to try and mask it, but the overwhelming sweetness of the liquor made it difficult for him to gulp it down.

"I'm sure you know about the connection between the six of you better than anyone. No doubt the Daily Days is not much of a newspaper company, but as an information agency it's more powerful than you could ever imagine. Even I'm always shocked to see how our president and vice-president manage to get their hands on such reliable information so quickly."

"..."

"I don't know if you really did see the killer or not. But if the murderer is who I think it is, the one who'll be in the most trouble once he's caught will be *you*. But that doesn't mean you can just let him run loose. After all-

"...I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about. If you'll excuse me, I have to finish editing my article for tomorrow."

Lester forcefully stood up from his seat.

Carl called out to him as he left, but Lester ignored him and ran. The shopkeeper stopped him for a moment, but when he said, "Put it on Carl's tab", the woman allowed him to go.

He ran and ran and ran.

Running and running and running and running.

He didn't know where he should run to, or how.

He just ran from one alley to another, wanting nothing more than to put more distance between himself and Carl.

Soon, he reached his limit. Supporting himself on one of the walls, he threw up what little liquor he had been able to drink today.

He hadn't escaped from Carl himself so much as he had escaped from Carl's words.

He was running from the truth they signified.

*'Shit.*

*'Shit. Shit. Shit. How did this happen?'*

He then remembered everything he had witnessed. The things that only he knew.

The connection between himself and the victims, which should logically be his knowledge alone.

Leaning against the wall, Lester put to his lips a single truth--the only certainty that he could know of.

"Damn it... damn it... If *he's* really Ice Pick Thompson..."

Trembling in fear, he glared at the darkness of the night.

"Then... I'm... I'm the next target! Damn it!"

Crying out to no one's ears, Lester reaffirmed the fact to himself.

"'Cause... I'm the only one left...!"

<=>

**At the same time, somewhere in Little Italy.**

A boy stood by himself at the entrance of a small jazz hall, in an alleyway a slight distance from Mulberry Street.

The free-flowing melodies leaking out from behind the door sounded as though they were trying to tempt passers-by with their tones.

However, the boy remained still.

He was frozen like ice, unable to either leave or enter.

*'They're just past this door.'*

*'I'll find them just underneath this place... the Gandor Family.'*

The Gandor Family was a small criminal organization, and according to the owner of the antique bookstore, they had something to do with the people who would not die.

This jazz hall was their headquarters, and although the bookstore owner did not go so far as to mention a name, Mark could probably find at least one of the people who could not die somewhere in here.

However, he could not bring himself to take another step. He remembered the reason he had come all this way and tried to steel himself again and again.

*'Once I step through here, there's really no turning back.'*

He struggled with himself, rooting his feet even deeper at the entrance to the jazz hall.

He had once been ready to die.

But why was he here now, trying to face down immortal monsters?

Trying to swallow these thoughts, Mark remained unable to go forward.

"Hey there, what's wrong?"



A particularly laid-back voice, accompanied by the sound of metal against metal, greeted Mark from behind.

"Wha-"

Mark turned around. The sound repeated itself.

*Snickersnack.*

*Snickersnack.*

It was a very familiar sound, but he couldn't for the life of him put his finger on it.

At least, not until he saw the gigantic pairs of scissors glinting in each of the man's hands.

"Aren't you going inside?"

"I-I... Uh...."

"Don't worry. They have juice for kids like you too. I get it all the time. I promise they always take your order really quick."

From his voice and gestures alone he was a young man with a childlike look.

But the scissors in his hands tinted his smile with something like madness.

He was Tick Jefferson, the Gandor Family's infamous torture specialist.

Mark, however, had no way of knowing this name. As he stood at the entrance to the jazz hall, the young torturer smiled innocently.

*Snickersnack*

*Snickersnack snickersnack*

## Intermission

-----

Once, a certain series of incidents occurred on these streets.

The public only had access to a limited amount of information when it came to these cases:

One was a fire at a supposedly deserted storehouse. It was suspected that arsonists were behind the incident.

Another was the roar of machine gun fire somewhere between Little Italy and Chinatown.

And the incident where wads of cash had been strewn along the road from that site to the station.

People did not have time to waste on connecting these incidents together into one story.

After all, all kinds of stories were taking place in the underbelly of society in this era of Prohibition. In Chicago, powerful mafiosi were being arrested one after another. New mafia families popped up and began exerting their influence all over the country. These incidents were becoming so conspicuous that they had even begun to involve ordinary people.

That was why most people were not particularly shocked by the likes of warehouse fires or back-alley gunshots.

But these incidents came together in the shadows, hidden from the public eye, and greatly influenced the future.

In the centre of the ruckus were two crime families.

Stirring up the events was a pair of thieves.

Dragging the incident into the open streets was an elderly alchemist.

The alchemist's name was Szilard Quates.

To achieve his ends, the old man sank his claws deep into the streets of New York.

And the claws that remained after his body was torn away still continued to eat into the city.

One particular maggot squirming under his claws was Ice Pick Thompson.

Was it a 'him', 'her', or 'they'?

Nothing related to Szilard should have been revealed to the world. However, the Ice Pick Thompson cases were accepted by ordinary people as a part of their lives. After all, no one knew who would be next to die, and the newspapers had been stirring up commotion about it.

And yet, no matter how much time had passed, neither the police nor the newspapers ever reached the truth.


The ordinary people would always remain ignorant of the fact that these crazed killings were connected to the arson case and the wads of cash on the streets two years ago.

-----

That summer, the boy who wished for death made the choice to face down an immortal monster...

And the reporter who feared death made the choice to face down Ice Pick Thompson.

チック・ジェファーソンは  
**無邪気**に果実を切り鳴らす



# 第六章



## **Chapter 6 :**

### **Tick Jefferson Makes No Pretences About Sculpting Apples**

-----

*Snickers-Snack*

*Snickers-Snack*

The metallic sound stood out particularly as Mark sat, face downcast.

He was in an underground space that served as the Gandor Family's office.

Mark maintained his silence, face pale and not even bothering to reach for the glass of grape juice served for him.

A sign depicting the word '*coraggioso*' hung above the jazz hall on the ground floor. And just as the word--Italian for 'courage'--implied, Mark had bravely leapt into this unfamiliar world.

But now he was frozen, rooted to the spot.

All around him was the smell of tobacco. The jazzy tunes playing upstairs made everything seem even more distantly mature.

There would be no mistaking the fact that a boy like Mark was extremely out of place here.

Sitting around another table was a group of men focused on a game of poker. They glanced Mark's way when he first came in, but realized that he was a guest of the young man with the scissors and immediately returned to their game.

When another man joined the poker table a short time later, he asked, "Who's the kid ?"

"Tick's buddy, I'm guessing. He always plays with the neighbourhood kids when he's got nothing to do."

"...While he's holding those scissors?"

"Yeah."

"Can't believe I'm sayin' this, but... what're the cops *doing*?"

Although the men were whispering so as to keep outsiders from getting involved, their voices inconsiderately piled on even more pressure on Mark's shoulders. He was having trouble breathing.

*'What am I doing?'*

It was only yesterday that he had made up his mind to kill himself. His decision had not wavered.

But when he ran into that immortal monster, his sense of reason and emotions had both fallen into a state of panic.

*'Who in the world was he? Why... why did he take notice of someone like me?'*

Mark thought that there was no worth to his life. He even thought to himself that the world would be better off without him.

His determination wasn't a sign of resignation, but a sort of hope he held for himself.

But things were different now.

Ever since he caught the eye of a monster who wore an unnaturally gentle smile, Mark had no time to think about his own self-worth or the like.

If he was brave enough to take his own life even after seeing something that betrayed his logic as the monster did, perhaps he never would have considered suicide in the first place.

If he was capable of regaining calm at that point, he might have been able to choose death without a care.

But now that he had come across a certain name in his quest to learn more about the monster, the facts became impossible to ignore.

The Gandor Family.

The men in the basement and the young man with the scissors, who brought Mark here, had no idea what that name meant to him.

Not even Mark himself could tell for certain what it meant. He began to remember his past and his connection to the Gandors as a way of setting his thoughts in order.

"What're you doing, *amigo*?"

He suddenly heard something completely out-of-place--a very cheerful, female voice.

"Uh...!"

"Kids shouldn't be in here, *amigo*. Edith makes the best juice in town, but if you sit around too long, the scary men here might sell you off, *amigo*!"

Mark looked up. Leaning towards him from across the table was a woman who was dressed like a dancer, standing with her elbows on the table.

From appearances, she was probably Mexican, about twenty years old or slightly younger.

Although the best way to describe her expression would be 'innocent', there were a pair of swords strapped at her side. It was obvious what they were used for.

"Uh, I..."

As Mark searched for words, a laid-back voice from the kitchen spoke before him.

"Don't scare him, now. Maria. He's a visitor."

It was the young man with the scissors. There wasn't a hint of agitation in his voice. The woman called Maria widened her eyes for a moment, then took a seat opposite Mark.

"A visitor, *amigo*? What's this all about? Oh! Here to hire me to kill someone? Great! I'll even do it for free, *amigo*! Who do you want me to kill?"

"Huh...?"

Maria's sudden declaration left Mark dumbstruck. He thought, perhaps, that she was joking, but the sinking feeling in his stomach told him otherwise.

"...Murder...? That's terrible."

"It sure is, *amigo*! So who did you need me to kill?"

"..."

"Just say the name! The stronger he is, the better!"

Mark turned away in frustration, realizing that he probably would not get through to this woman.

He immediately spotted the young man that had brought him inside. In one hand he was carrying a pair of scissors, and in the other was a plate laden with food.

"I hope you're hungry. I brought you some food."

On the plate were slices of ham cut into precisely even portions, and an apple in the middle of it all.

Remarkably, the upper half of the apple was sculpted--presumably with the scissors--to resemble a man and a woman holding hands, both wearing little hats.

"This is amazing..." Mark breathed without thinking. Tick immediately snipped the little sculpture in half.

"Huh?!"

The apple piece resembling the man and the woman looked like their hands would give away at any moment. It rolled onto the plate, then was caught by Maria. She brought it to her mouth.

"...Hm... This is delicious, *amigo*. Want some?"

Maria held out the remaining half of the sculpture to Mark. Only the woman was left.

Most people around them were looking at them with an expression like 'That's Maria for you', or ignoring them altogether.

*'I was wrong.'* Mark thought, looking at the swordswoman and the man with the scissors, both of whom were laughing like children. *'I shouldn't be in a place like this.'*

He had not been harmed, nor had he been robbed or threatened. But in this short span of time he had come to a definite conclusion.

*'I shouldn't be here.'*

The Mexican woman's claim, which he had tried to pass off as a joke, now seemed more serious than anything.

*'I...I made a mistake. She wasn't kidding earlier when she said she'd kill anyone. She wasn't making fun of me for being a kid. This lady is serious. She'll kill anyone, and if she can honestly say that to a kid like me... it means she's dangerous.'*

It felt as though his life was going to be crushed by an invisible force if he didn't escape this place quickly.

*'No, wait. I was planning to die anyway, right?'* He scolded himself, but fear did not release its hold on his heart.

He was not afraid of death. Though he had resolved to die, he was scared--scared of the incongruity of being in a place where he should not have set foot, which was slowly strangling his thoughts.

He should have thrown himself off the bridge after all, he thought.

However, that thought served to ground him to reality again. He was not supposed to be alive in the first place. It did not matter where he went, that fact would not change.

Forcing himself to believe in his shoddy logic, Mark quietly spoke to the woman.

"Hey, Miss... would you really kill anyone?"

"Hm? That's right. But killing *amigos* I fought before is too boring, don't you think? I fought with Alita every day back home, but now we can't see each other, and those fights are great memories! And if I kill her, I can't fight her again, can I, *amigo*?" Maria said nostalgically.

"Who's Alita?" Tick asked, expertly continuing to peel the apple with his scissors.

"An *amiga* of mine from Mexico! No good with men, but she's always really quick! She threw knives at me every time we met. It's been a long time, so I don't know how she is now." Maria laughed innocently.

"Um..." Mark began gravely.

"Ah, sorry, *amigo*! I forgot! Who do you want me to kill?"

"...Well... just supposing..."

"Yeah?"

Mark decided to test Maria, who was nodding at him enthusiastically.

"For example... would you be able to kill someone even if they're an immortal monster?"

*'I finally said it.'*

He would count it a relief if she called him insane and tossed him out.

If she knew something about the immortal monster, Mark might have been surprised.

But if she had an actual connection to them, and started becoming suspicious of his motives...

*'No. I... I'm not scared... I'm not scared of death.'* Mark resolved in his heart as he questioned Maria.

"Immortal? You mean, like our bosses, *amigo*?"

"...What?"

Maria's answer could not have been more oblivious. Mark was struck dumb for a moment, but she ignored his plight and continued.

"Well... if you put it that way, I don't think I could kill them, but I won't know about *winning* against them unless I can fight them, *amigo*! See, the whole thing with the boss's arm and how I chopped it-"

"Maria, you can't. Mr. Luck said that's supposed to be a secret..." Tick said. Maria quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

"Oh! Sorry, *amigo*! Uh... that was a dream just now, see? Somebody's dream! Right, *amigo*? Don't think about it or you'll fall asleep, *amigo*!"

"..."

Maria began blabbering in panic. Mark stayed silent for a moment before regaining his senses.

"Uh..."

*Snick.*

The sound of Tick's scissors sharply cut him off. Mark shuddered and drew back his breath. His face frozen, he tentatively turned his gaze towards the young man responsible for the sound.

To Mark's surprise, however, the young man smiled at him innocently and mumbled gently--

"It might be best for you if you don't ask about it seriously..."

"..."

"Most people would laugh if you asked something like that, right? Or..."

Slowly opening and closing the scissors, the young man continued calmly.

"Or... did you come all this way so you could find out about the people who don't die?"

"..."

*'He figured it out.'*

In one sense, it was rather obvious that Mark's intent would be so easily seen though. He could see no way of deceiving them.

*'What's going to happen to me now?'* He wondered, and fearfully held his breath.

But the young man with the scissors smiled and shook his head.

"Then you shouldn't be here."

"Huh...?"

"If there's something you want to know, even kids like you have to pay a price here."

There was nothing but sincerity in his tone. Not a hint of pretence or anxiety, as though he was a child even younger than Mark.

The young man was visibly worried for a boy he had met for the first time.

"You might end up regretting it if you get in debt with the people here."

"But..."

"I know you must have your reasons, but it's best if you don't ask about them in a place like this. Everyone's really been on edge these days, too."

"Pardon?"

Mark finally looked around. The other men in the room weren't even looking in their direction.

Perhaps their conversation had gone unheard. Or perhaps the men were pretending that they had heard nothing. In either case, though there were many rugged-looking people around them, not one of them looked upset enough that Mark would suspect they had overheard.

With yet another snip of his scissors, Tick continued calmly.

"Hm... have you heard of Ice Pick Thompson?"



"..."

Mark nodded. Tick began to open and close the scissors he held over and over, the sound ringing like a joyous song.

"It hasn't been long since they joined, but... some members of our Family were murdered by him."

"Murdered..."

"That's right. So... I guess I'm trying to tell you to be careful."

Just as Tick finished, a set of footsteps pounded across the floor above, and a man poked his head into the office.

The men at the tables glanced at him suspiciously, but quickly relaxed and went back to their business.

The man sitting closest to the stairs put up his hand slightly and addressed the newcomer.

"Mr. Carl, right? Sorry, the bosses are out right now."

"Ah, I see. Excuse me."

"Not every day we see you pop in without an appointment."

"Well... something came up suddenly."

Mark could make out some of their conversation. At first he assumed the newcomer was a guest connected to the Gandor Family's mafia business, but mention of the following topic left him in shock.

"About Ice Pick Thompson, you mean?"

"That's right. And one more thing..."

"Hold on." The mafioso raised an open hand, stopping Carl, "we'll take it inside."

The smile disappearing from his face, the man led Carl to a room further back. Mark watched them as they departed.

"Oh, that's right. You won't have to be careful with *him*."

"Huh?"

Tick spoke quietly, his scissors glinting under the light.

"That man over there's a reporter from the Daily Days. He's an information broker, so I'm sure he can tell you all sorts of things. Even about the people who don't die."

The smile never left Tick's mouth. His tone was as sincere as ever. Mark could not see through to what Tick was really planning.

Or perhaps Tick had no ulterior motive from the beginning.

Mark bowed his head and repeated Tick's utterance.

"A reporter from the Daily Days..."

"That's right. The people there are really amazing. You just have to pay them with money or secrets, and they'll tell you anything."

"*Anything?*"

"That's right. They'll even tell you all about the Gandor Family. Even the stuff that might get you killed if you asked them here."

Tuning out Tick's words, which were growing ever more unnerving, Mark looked down and lost himself in thought.

He didn't feel very much like believing in information brokers, but it was not unthinkable that a newspaper reporter would deal in information as a side job.

*'Maybe, then... they might know everything I want to know.'*

*'But... I don't have any money...'*

Mark was silent for a moment.

But he soon got off his seat, nervously gave Tick a word of thanks, and climbed up the stairs.

"Oh? Wait, who did you want me to kill, *amigo*?"

With the Mexican woman's disappointed question at his back, Mark left the Gandor Family's office.

He considered leaving altogether, but he decided to wait, leaning against the wall of a nearby building, staring straight at the doors of the jazz hall.

Shining in his eyes were calm and resolution in equal measure.

# 第七章

↓  
ガンマイスター・スミスは  
人知れず殺し屋として再起する

## **Chapter 7 : Gunmaestro Smith Resumes his Assassination Work Without Anyone's Knowing**

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### **The speakeasy 'Jane Doe'.**

The speakeasy, its name derived from a term used for unidentified women, was on the large side when it came to such underground locales.

There were many seats, but very few guests were present to occupy them.

That was only natural, as this particular establishment was literally under the ground. Overhead was just another New York cemetery.

The interior was decorated with frightening ornaments befitting a mausoleum, deterring would-be customers from entry with its vampiric atmosphere.

The owner of this speakeasy was dressed in black, and his face was covered in scars. Displayed in plain sight behind him was a shotgun and a gigantic hand axe, both presumably for discouraging robbery.

The few patrons who occupied the space mostly had the look of 'I picked the wrong speako to drink in today'. Suffice to say that they probably would not be inclined to return here.

However, the sound of ecstatic laughter echoed in the speakeasy that could not have been a worse place for a drink.

"Ahaha! That's right! This really is a pretty creepy speako! But that's what's so great about it. Including the fact that the owner doesn't even look human. This gloom is the perfect antidote to the poison of this material world! The booze here's the best. And since they distilled it to a thousandth of its original strength before serving it to me, I can drink it down it without a care!"

"Haha! So it's a thousand times weaker, eh? Then it's almost not even alcohol!"

"No, no, *that's* the beauty of it! They say that a shark can smell even a single drop of blood from miles away! In that way, think of me like a shark to alcohol... In other words, I am incomparably sensitive! Getting drunk on only a thousandth of what it takes for most of humanity is a cinch. That's right, it's impossibly easy, don't you agree? Now this is getting me fired up!"

"Now that you mention it, you're right... It feels like you could start up a whole new business this way. If you make it easier for people to get drunk, you can distill liquor before selling it.... That's amazing! I'm sure that'll make the world a happier place!"

The young man in blue work clothes enthusiastically smacked the thumb stuck out towards him.

"Lemme tell you a fun... yes, a very *fun* story! It's been much too long since I've had booze this pleasant!"

"That's my line. It's been too long since I've been with such pleasant company!"

As the two men continued their conversation, the friends of the young man in blue--Graham Specter--were quietly nursing their drinks, mixed emotion clear in their eyes.

"...Pleasant booze aside, Boss Graham still hasn't even touched that thousand-times distilled drink, has he?"

"It really must be a cinch for him, getting drunk without even drinking anything."

"Then are you saying you'd want to trade personalities with Boss Graham?"

"That's pretty terrifying, Shaft."

The delinquents smiled awkwardly.

And ignoring their discomfort, Graham was pouring out his heart to the man he had just met earlier that day.

<=>

## **A back alley in New York.**

It was back around one in the afternoon, when the sun was at its strongest.

In the life-sapping heat, a cry both languid yet chilling echoed in the alleys of Manhattan.

"I have no idea *why*, but one thing is for certain, and that is the fact that you are chasing after that little brat. In other words, the fact that the brat was in such a rush, the fact that he trampled me over in a hurry, and the fact that we're all dying of the heat today must be attributed to none other than yourself. That is why I declare this a sad yet fun story!"

Graham made a ridiculous declaration, tightly gripping his wrench and looking straight at the newcomer.

"You... you are the one responsible for this!"

And as he finished, a mass of silver began to strike--

"I see!"

The man, who had very nearly become the victim, suddenly exclaimed. The wrench stopped mid-supersonic strike.

"To think that today's heat was all my fault... This is a terrible problem, no? I'm sorry, I had no idea! Who could've guessed that I would put all of New York in jeopardy like this?"

He then took Graham's hands in his, shaking them firmly.

"Thank you. Really, thank you! You've helped me realize the error of my ways!"

Meanwhile, Graham turned back to look at his fellow delinquents, eyes wide.

"I don't claim to understand all this, but... Shaft, am I, at this moment, being given thanks?"

"Yeah, but it's not like I get what's going on. What do we do, Boss? I think you caught yourself a real weirdo this time."

The other delinquents also glanced at one another awkwardly. But the newcomer gave it no mind as he brightened up with a smile.

"All right, it's decided. Now that we know the source of all your problems, how about we take a moment to brainstorm for solutions? If I'm responsible for all of this, then do you think things will get better if I jump into the river and cool myself down?"

"...Let me tell you... a fun story! I have been inspired! To be frank, wouldn't it be much easier to dismantle this heat if all of *us* just jumped into the river? Shaft, it's time! To the river! I wonder if we'll be washed away into the ocean, where we could scream at the setting sun, which may make us even happier!"

"No way, Boss! It's not some clean spring water from the countryside!"

The smiling man tilted his head, as though Shaft's screams mattered nothing to him.

"Then how about drenching yourself in hard liquor? The evaporation'll cool you right off!"

"That's absolute brilliance! This is not good, Shaft. Could it be that a genius has appeared before us? A veritable Messiah who will save us from our boredom? Damn it... who's the idiot who called this man responsible?!"

"That would be you, Boss."

"Impossible! This is a freaking tearjerker. How could life be so cruel?! I treated the Messiah as though he was the origin of all evil... In other words, I claimed that the saviour was the enemy of this world. Does this make *me* the greatest threat to this world? Either way, it's too late now. The world shall never forgive me."

Graham fell to his knees, the shock of the revelation so much stronger because of his excited state.

The newcomer smiled gently and gave the insane young man a pat on the shoulder.



"Don't worry. Even if the world never forgives you, as long as *one* person does, you can keep smiling for them. And if no one's willing to forgive you, then I'll do the forgiving, although I have to admit I'm rather lost about all this."

"Incredible... The Messiah is telling me that he will forgive someone like me--his own enemy! What am I supposed to do, Shaft? What am I supposed to do at a time like this?!"

"Why don't you take a nap, Boss? You're giving us a headache."

Later...

Graham soaked himself in medical alcohol he found at one of his gang's nearby hideouts, ending up extremely intoxicated by the fumes.

The man who introduced himself as Elmer happened to take the unconscious Graham to a local doctor.

"Astounding! Not only has my enemy given me forgiveness, he has shown me sympathy!"

And so, Graham's heart was moved in a rather nonsensical way as he found himself a kindred spirit.

<=>

It all led to this moment.

Shaft and the others whispered to one another, listening to Graham and Elmer's less-than-sane conversation.

(Y'know, I've always thought... All the people who ever agree with Boss Graham are friggin' weird.)

(They say birds of a feather flock together. What does that say about us, I wonder?)



(Well... I guess we got Boss Ladd at the top, and you can't beat him when it comes to being screwed in the head...)

(I'm surprised we're still alive, hangin' with someone like him.)

(Boss Ladd never kills people he calls his friends. And I suppose his twisted philosophies are part of what makes him such good friends with Boss Graham.)

(That Elmer guy over there's pretty out there, too.)

(He was sayin' something about wanting to see everyone in the world smile. Doesn't look like a churchgoer, but he was serious!)

Graham frowned.

"Hm... What good is it to bring smiles to each and every face in the world? Does that change even a single thing? Not only is it an impossible dream, it's also the kind of dream that'll cause even more pain and suffering before you accomplish it. Everyone's gonna call you a hypocrite, and their smiles might be sneers directed towards you. So why the fixation? Do you intend to cover this world in joy? Tell me!"

Elmer's response to Graham's speech was simple.

"Because it'll make me happy."

Graham was silent for a moment. He tapped his head with his wrench before finally speaking.

"Of course. That makes sense."

(And did you get a look at his eyes? He's serious! I bet you my life savings, that guy's out of his mind. Not even a hypocrite says something like 'I want to bring peace to the world for my own personal satisfaction'.)

(And then we've got Boss Graham, who's agreeing to all that without so much as asking a question.)

Suddenly, the delinquents' chatter was interrupted by a ring from the entrance. A new patron entered the speakeasy.

"Huh...?"

Graham's underlings took notice of the newcomer and looked around at one another.

Although it was the dead of summer, the man was wearing a long coat that came down to his knees. He was nothing if not suspicious.

Peeking out from between his hat and raised collar were a pair of sharp, glinting eyes. There was a large scar on his face.

Graham was so busy talking that he did not even notice the newcomer, but Shaft and the others put their heads together and realized that this man was no stranger to them.

(Hey, that's-)

(There's no mistaking that outfit in this heat.)

(Come to think of it, he wasn't at doctor's Fred's clinic earlier today, was he?)

(I guess he's all better now.)

(Here he comes.)

The man in the coat approached the delinquents. They quietly greeted him.

"...Hey." The man growled, and loudly walked over to Graham.

Graham and Elmer, meanwhile, were much too absorbed in their meaningless conversation to notice the newcomer's approach.

"Hey. How you doin', kid?"

However, when the tall man suddenly leaned over towards them, their banter ended partway.

The speakeasy's already dark atmosphere only contributed to the silence that followed.

It was as though time itself had stopped, but how long had the moment of quiet actually lasted?

With the squeak of the scarred speakeasy owner polishing a glass as a signal, Graham opened his half-closed eyes at once.

"Boss Smith!"

"Heh. It's been a while." The man laughed dryly, his voice seeping through the crack between his collar and hat.

The man called Smith snapped his fingers and said, "My usual" to the bartender.

"Your usual'? Don't act all stuck-up. You haven't set foot in here in half a year." The man replied coldly, but his hands were already busy at work mixing up a familiar cocktail.

"I was out soul-searching."

"? What are you talking about, Boss Smith? I thought the Gandors landed you in hospital."

"!..."

Graham's question left Smith's face frozen in contortion.

"...Lies. Who's spreading these rumours?"

"This dancing girl with a couple of swords strapped to her belt. 'I'm the only one who didn't get hurt even a tiny bit, so that means I'm stronger than them, *amigo*!' is what she said. While she was looking for clients."

"That little bitch... I'll kill her...! I swear to god, I will slaughter her...!"

Raz Smith called himself 'Gunmaestro Smith' (A smith of great gunmen).

Not only was it a tongue-tying name, the fact that the meanings of the words 'maestro' and 'smith' overlapped with one another meant that no one actually called

him by that moniker. But this assassin personally spread rumours about this name to the local delinquents.

To quote: "Sounds bang-up to me... Listen up. I can wield any and all firearms. In other words, for each gun I use, I create yet another sniper of myself. That is why I am not 'Gunsmith', but 'Gunmaestro Smith'..." This was his usual explanation, but most people stopped paying attention about halfway through.

Graham, however, was deeply moved by the explanation ("I see... Astounding!") and spared no effort in promoting these stories.

With this reputation backing him, Gunmaestro Smith found himself in a scuffle with the Gandor Family, alongside several other assassins. In the process he badly injured his leg and was hit in the face.

As a result, he was hospitalized for six months, and was finally back on his feet.

Ignoring Smith's rage at his fellow assassin and former ally, Graham found himself ecstatic to be reunited with one of the few people in his life he could call something like a mentor. He got off his chair and expertly spun his wrench one-handedly, letting out a cry of elation.

"Oh, happy day... This is a day of euphoric proportions! Not only have I found myself a most sympathetic drinking buddy, I have been serendipitously reunited with Boss Smith! Will Boss Ladd bust out of prison before the night is over?! What do you think, Boss Smith?"

"Ladd, huh? Not a huge fan."

Smith wrinkled his brow as he recalled his face, as though they had crossed paths in the past.

"Makes sense. Boss Ladd enjoys killing people like you the most! He just let you be 'cause you took care of us and all that."

"I have no intention of being killed so easily." Smith chuckled. He half-opened his coat.

Attached to the inside of the coat were rows of holsters. At a glance, there were over a dozen handguns alone.

"Amazing! This is astounding, Boss Smith! In fact, I'm also amazed that you weren't arrested as soon as you got carried to the hospital!"

"That doctor doesn't really care about stuff like this. I just stashed my gear under the bed. ...But to tell you the truth, I left 'em there this whole time. It took me an entire day to clean 'em all."

Graham's eyes glinted as he spotted a shotgun in the folds of Smith's coat. Elmer, sitting beside him, cried out in astonishment.

"Hm? Who's this?"

"Lemme introduce you, Boss. This here's my saviour, Elmer. Also known as the Messiah."

"...The Messiah?"

"From what I hear, he's trying to make everyone in the world smile." Graham said, his eyes sparkling in sincere admiration.

"...So, a clown or something? Tryin' to make a living off of making people laugh?"

"No, no. This guy's not joking! He's undertaking the Herculean challenge of making every last human being in the world smile at once! Even though it might well be easier to take over the world! Amazing, don't you think?"

Smith thought for a moment.

"Hm... A madman for the ages. Hahaha... But he's no different from me. We're both insane--dedicating your life to bringing happiness or death have one thing in common, and that's the fact that you'd have to be crazy to try."

"You never change, Boss Smith... You're still damn well-spoken about your philosophies!"

As Graham watched with adoration, Elmer laughed and nodded.

"You're right. Thinking back, I'm quite used to being called a madman. About three hundred times from this friend of mine named Huey, at the very least. But it's phenomenal that Mr. Smith here has a *philosophy* about his insanity!"

"Heh. I see. Looks like we'll get along just fine. Though that name you just mentioned reminds me of that terrorist who was arrested last year."

"Yeah, that's probably him."

"Heh. Impossible... No. Wait. I suppose it'd be more insane to take your word for it. A man who intends to fill the world with laughter is a friend to a terrorist... Is this madness, or sanity? Or is it but a delusion? In either case, you have talent, I'll give you that."

Even the mention of the word 'terrorist' did little to dampen the cheer around their table. Shaft and the others watched, shaking their heads in disbelief.

(Boss Smith just can't lose that habit of his, huh?)

(Please, stop talking about 'madness' as if it's something cool... I'm getting embarrassed just listening to him talk like that.)

(Before all of that, the fact that he wears a coat stashed with thirty guns is weird enough.)

(But he *is* strong.)

(Kinda, I guess.)

(Lost to the Gandor capos, though.)

(But that coat! I hear it weighs something like sixty-six pounds.)

(That's crazy. Crazy in human form.)

(Boss Graham always hangs with the weird ones.)

(That's because he's a kid at heart.)

(That's annoying!)



(But that Elmer guy's actually keeping up with them.)

(Birds of a feather, and all that.)

(So is he serious about being friends with that terrorist?)

(No way... he's pulling our leg, right?)

(Either way, better stay away from him.)

Not even realizing that Shaft and the others were whispering behind their backs, Smith put on a hardened look and took out five guns from his coat, placing them on the table.

"You said you wanted guns, kid. Take 'em."

"L-let me tell you... a happy story! Yes! You sure 'bout this, Boss?!"

Graham sounded surprisingly delighted. Smith closed his eyes and spoke as though lightly scolding a child.

"By all means. But remember... guns are madness given form. To use one is to chip away at part of your sanity and to load it in with each bullet. In other words-

His eyes opened mid-lecture, and caught sight of something that left him speechless.

"...What are you doing."

What had happened while his eyes were shut?

Scattered around the table were the perfectly dismantled pieces of the guns.

"Let me tell you how pleased I am! How gladdening! I've always wanted to dismantle this thing called a gun at least once before I died... But to think I'd be given so many varieties to dismantle all at once! It's been too long since I've felt such satisfaction. And what is it I'm supposed to *do* with this sensation of completion?! It's obviously to give my thanks! Thank you... Thank you, Boss Smith! From the depths of my soul!"

"Y-you little bastard. You took all five of 'em apart at once...? Damn it! I was wondering why you kept whining for a gun. So was this the reason?!"

Smith reached out a trembling hand towards the mounds of gun parts laid out in clumps sorted by function.

Shaft and the others held their breath, nervously watching for fear of a disastrous turn of events.

Smith's fingers clutched at the parts.

"Shit! If you wanted to dismantle 'em, you should've said so! I *thought* it was weird a wrench nut like you suddenly said you wanted a gun...! Anyway, looks like you haven't lost your touch. You didn't so much as *scratch* any of these pieces. This skill of yours is insanity, you know that?"

"Aw, shucks. When *you* call *me* crazy, it sounds almost like you're complimenting me."

"Tch. What are you talking about?"

The moment Smith finished his sentence, a gun came together in his hands.

"Huh?"

Shaft and the others looked around at one another.

Less than a minute earlier, this gun had been lying in pieces, mixed in among the parts scattered over the table.

But now it had regained its original form, from before its dismantling, and was back inside Smith's coat.

The second gun took shape as the delinquents gaped.

Smith put the second gun into his coat and spoke plainly.

"For your information, I wouldn't have lost to the Gandors if I'd been on guard. They were monstrous enough that I doubted myself for a second, but I still could have defeated them if I wasn't taken by surprise."

"Then is it possible for me to raise the question of *why* he was taken by surprise? But if I did, Boss Smith might be hurt or angry. Maybe I should be more mature and refrain from asking... What do you think, Boss?"

"...Damn, your irritating tone hasn't changed a bit... Shit. What I mean is that... I lost my cool... or, rather, they were immor-... Never mind. Once you get to live as long as I have, you run across things you just can't explain with words. Especially when you're living on the dark side like me."

Two more guns were rebuilt in the span of the explanation. The parts on the table all now belonged to only one gun.

He took the pieces into his hands and fiddled with them as though handling dice.

The pieces then came together one by one, as though they were alive. And once the final gun had been re-assembled, there were no longer any gun parts left on the table.

"Lemme tell you an astounding story. Boss Smith has easily put together these guns I dismantled! He's so crazy, polar bears living in Antarctica would freeze to death at the very sight of him!"

"You're right! Those polar bears that went all the way down south are going to be absolutely floored!"

Shaft and the others looked as though they had just seen a feat of magic. They turned their heads to Graham and Elmer, neither of whom were even attempting to hide their admiration, and shook their heads.

(...Weirdos are really hard to follow.)

(No kidding.)

(But we're following Boss Graham, aren't we?)

(Does that make us a bunch of weirdos, too?)

(Some pretty damn shitty lives, right here.)

Ignoring the air of pessimism around his underlings, Graham enjoyed drinks with his old friend and mentor, and the new friend he had just met today.

Of course, Smith drank standing all the way through, saying "I can't sit because of the guns in my coat".

"Well, since I can rest easy knowing you're fine, I'll be off now, you little brat."

"Already, Boss? You don't have to leave so soon."

"I got a client to deal with."

"You just got outta the hospital, Boss. You really are insane."

"It's like I always say." Smith grinned, pushing his hat down over his face.

"I'd like to see the mug of the bastard who calls himself a *sane* assassin."

<=>

**One hour later. An abandoned building in New York.**

"..."

After saying goodbye to Graham, who was like a younger brother to him, Smith had transitioned perfectly into the role of assassin.

On a street near Grand Central Station was a strange building, occupied by not even a single store.

Its interior was surprisingly tidy and clean.

The strange thing about it was that there were no decorations, but there were lines painted in places around the interior.

What were they used for?

As he looked around at his surroundings curiously, he heard a dark voice from behind him.

"This building's about to be demolished, you see."

"..."

"Please excuse me, Mr... Smith. If it's all right for me to call you that."

Smith nodded slowly. The man shook his head in relief.

"Terribly sorry to call you out to a place like this..."

"..."

Smith listened to the man, not saying a word. The man continued.

"Of course, the Runorata Family is responsible for introducing you, but you have no idea how thankful I am that you've come."

The man's words were structured politely, but his voice gave away the fear within.

Concluding that this would be the perfect job to get him back on track, Smith responded with his mouth hidden behind his collar.

"You don't seem all that confident. Shall I show you just how capable I am?"

"N-not at all, sir. I have faith in you." The man waved his hands. "After all, even a child should be capable of killing my target."

"What...?"

It sounded to Smith as though the man was insulting him, but he remembered the last time he lost his cool and desperately brought his irritation under control.

"Right... So who's the target? I can't say I'd know who an overnight celebrity of a reporter would want to off."

"So the Runoratas have told you that much."

The man--Lester--sighed and tried to stop his trembling.

"...I'd like for you to kill the one who made me into that overnight celebrity."

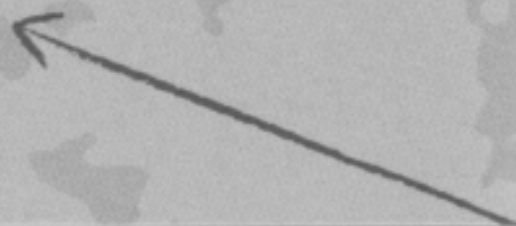
"What?"

Each and every measured word Lester spoke was sharp and heavy, like the quills of a hedgehog desperate to defend itself.

"Your target is Ice Pick Thompson. Please, take care of him before the police get to him."

# 第八章

アイスピック・トンプソンは  
**闇**からゆらりと顔を出す



## **Chapter 8 :**

### **In the Darkness, Ice Pick Thompson Quietly Rears His Head**

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#### **Little Italy, New York.**

"...Rain, huh." Carl mumbled, looking up at the sky.

Cold droplets had suddenly begun to pour down on him as he was making his way to the Daily Days office in Chinatown.

"Maybe I should've just gone straight home today." He complained, quickly walking to the office.

"Damn it. It just rained yesterday, too..."

Even now in the evening, the afternoon heat still lingered. The rain brought welcome relief to the temperatures, but also piled indescribable anxiety upon him--especially as a serial killer who struck in the rain was on the loose in New York.

But if Carl feared the killer, he did not let it show in his gait.

*'Lester knows something. I'm certain of it.'*

Carl looked up at the sky, remembering his meeting with the younger reporter shortly before his visit to the Gandors.

The rain soaked his face, but Carl just stared up into the starless skies.

*'I suppose it's a given that the culprit has something to do with that incident.'*

*'At first I was so sure Lester was behind the murders, but...'*

"He was obviously pretty damn terrified... He's scared because the killer's going to go after him next." He said to himself, then recalled something.

*'So I'm being followed, eh?'*



He had been aware of the figure stalking after him for some time, but he was surprised to find that not even the sudden onset of rain deterred its pursuit.

*'Ice Pick Thompson? ...Can't be.'*

*'But I can't let my guard down.'*

Perhaps Lester had come to silence him before he could leak the secret to anyone. Carl softly turned around, facing down the deserted alley.

"Come on out."

His tone was quiet but firm.

In the past, Carl had faced countless life-or-death situations in his line of work as a reporter. This was not even close to the first time that he had been followed.

Generally, he could sense the severity of the threat posed by others. This was why he could speak with Graham so fearlessly. If he had been scheduled to meet with someone like Ladd Russo instead, Carl would have skipped out on the meeting without a moment of hesitation. In fact, he would not have asked for an interview in the first place.

But at this point, he could not tell if he was yet in danger. He had made sure to note a number of nearby speakeasies he could dart into for safety before he had turned around to confront his pursuer.

*'Now, what's going to happen?'*

Carl tensed slightly as he waited for the figure to react.

But to his surprise, emerging from the shadows was a young boy.

"...?"

Carl frowned.

There were still about five metres between them when the boy stopped.



*'Is he just a wannabe pickpocket? No, something's different about him.'*

As Carl began running the possibilities through his mind, the boy stepped forward little by little and spoke.

"You're an information broker... aren't you?"

"...I don't know where you heard that, but... I suppose you could say that."

"I... I'd like to buy some information."

"What?"

Carl watched curiously as the boy quietly continued.

"Please tell me. Tell me about the people who won't die..."

"And another thing--please tell me where I can find a man named Szilard Quates."

<=>

**At the same time.**

"Lemme tell you a fun, fun story. It's started to rain."

"What part of that's any fun, Boss?" Shaft complained, getting soaked in the downpour. Graham looked incredulous.

"What's the rain if *not* fun?! Ah, this is refreshing! Like some kind of spring rain that rescues us from the deathly summer heat! Getting soaked is in itself a state of being robbed of your body heat! Now that I think about it, doesn't that mean the rain is the heavenly barrier that protects us from the sun? What to do, Shaft?! The Earth is showering us with love!"

"It's nighttime now. The sun's got nothing to do with it, Boss."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Shaft. It's the heat left over from this afternoon that's keeping the temperature so high even at night! You have my gratitude, O atmospherical phenomena!"

"Argh, this is why *knowledgeable* idiots are the worst people to deal with..."

Shaft clutched at his head in exasperation. Elmer, who was walking alongside Graham, cheerily ignored him and spoke.

"The atmosphere really *is* amazing. The Earth never ceases to surprise me! And I feel blessed just being able to live on this planet. I wonder if we can share all this rain with people living in the desert so that they wouldn't starve to death... then so many more people would be happy just by being on Earth! But either way, I think you should smile, since you're capable of feeling the goodness of the Earth at this very moment."

Although Elmer's logic was not entirely reasonable, Graham nodded in understanding.

"I see... Now that you mention it, there's nothing more blessed than the fact that we can breathe. Hey! Start smiling!"

"This is hopeless. It *looks* like you're having a conversation, but you're just losing touch with reality...!"

Graham ignored Shaft's comment and turned to Elmer.

"I have no problems with helping you find this Mark kid, but just out of my own curiosity, why are you looking for him?"

Graham, who had become fast friends with Elmer, had boasted: "Finding one brat is going to be a piece of cake as long as we bring all the punks around here on board!".

And as a result, he was now helping Elmer in his search in the middle of the night.

"Maybe he's gone home to sleep by now?" One of the delinquents wondered.

"I'd like to find him *now*, if I can. ...It looks like it's about to rain." Elmer said for some reason, explaining that he would search on his own if necessary.

As so, the delinquents had split up to search the alleyways.

Shaft was the only sane man in the group that included him, Graham, and Elmer. His companions' nonsensical conversations had led him to sigh himself halfway to death.

That was when the question of why they were looking for this boy finally came up. Shaft looked up, expecting to finally get some answers.

But the reply only made things more confusing.

"Well... I was just curious to see if he could ever be happy."

"Hm? You might have to clear that up for me." Graham said, tilting his head with his wrench against his face. Elmer answered.

"All right. Now, this is partly my own speculation, so I'd like for you to keep it a secret." He said plainly, revealing his reasoning.

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"You... want to buy information?"

Carl looked at the boy before him, complex emotions running through his mind.

"I don't know how you know Szilard's name, kid, but we're running a *business*. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything unless you pay us or give us information of equivalent value."

"I *do* have information for you."

The boy looked surprisingly old in the rain. Carl could feel an unfamiliar sense of apprehension drawing near.

'*What is this?*'

Slowly climbing up his body were primal warning signals, informing him that he was treading on thin ice. The only reason he had yet to turn tail was because he sensed no bloodlust from the boy.

"Who... are you...?" Carl asked tentatively. The boy replied calmly.

"This is my payment--"

Before he knew it, the boy was holding a certain object.

A silvery object, so thin and sharp that it looked as though it would blend in perfectly with the falling rain.

Carl realized that the boy was holding a rusted ice pick. The boy continued--calmly, but with morose weight in his words.

"Would the identity of Ice Pick Thompson not be enough for you?"

<=>

"I was just curious." Elmer confessed.

Graham and Shaft could never have guessed that this would be his answer.

"I was wondering if a serial killer who tried to kill himself could ever be happy."

<=>

**At the same time.**

Once Lester had left, Smith remained in the building by himself to wait out the rain. He read over the note given to him by his client.

"...To think, my first job since getting outta the hospital is to kill a kid." He said to himself, troubled.

He crumpled up the note upon which was a description of the boy named Mark and his address, and thought for a moment.

He then shook his head as though in defeat, and grinned.

"I'd like to see the mug of the bastard who calls himself a *sane* assassin."

He snickered as he began to count the bullets in the gun in his coat one by one.

"So all I have to do is follow the insanity in myself."

The sound of the rain filled the streets, as though hiding the clattering of metal.

## Intermission

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Rain.

Everything started on that rainy day.

Only the raindrops knew the whole truth, dissipating as they hit the ground.

He could hear voices.

He could hear people's voices.

Although the cold downpour masked it, the boy could hear their voices.

It was the sound of men pushed to the limits of their anxiety.

*Find him yet? No, I don't see him*

*He must be around here somewhere Something's not right*

*Find him now Find him Find him*

*He's just a kid Just leave him There's no time If he's not here he probably hasn't seen anything*

*And even if he did, what can he do? He's just a kid Right He didn't even see our faces*

The sounds of apprehension and discomfort fell with the rain, along with voices growing steadily more relaxed.

The boy hiding in the closet could do nothing but listen.



But he could no longer hear the voice he so wanted to hear.

He could not hear his mother's voice.

Perhaps that faint sound he had just heard was her screaming.

And that day, the boy lost his mother to these men.

The first offender was the owner of a small speakeasy.

The second offender was a real estate agent.

The third, a police officer.

Next, the manager of a warehouse rental service.

And the fifth offender was a young reporter.

Nearly two years passed since that day.

The boy who had sworn revenge encountered an immortal monster...

And the reporter who feared death was reunited with a serial killer.

マーク・ウィルメンスは

雨の中で血塗れの殺意を

煮えにぎらせる



# 第九章

## Chapter 9 : Mark Wilmans Fills the Rainy Streets With Bloodlust

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The rain layered the streets with a fresh coat of colour.

Carl and the boy, though splattered by the water that dyed the blackness of night a cold, steely grey, did not budge.

Though it was the middle of summer, getting soaked in the middle of the night could not have been pleasant for either of them.

But that kind of discomfort was no longer on either of their minds.

One of them was a reporter nearing middle age.

The other was a boy who was not yet fifteen.

The uncharacteristic tension in the space around them could only be possible because of the thin, silvery object tinted with dark red that was in the boy's hand.

It was a ten-centimetre long weapon, which could not be called a blade--it was an ice pick.

This was the chain binding their feet to this place.

Although it felt to them as though the sound of the rain might drown out their existence altogether, the reporter spoke up first.

"...The identity of Ice Pick Thompson..."

The boy was not holding any bloodlust against the reporter. But there was a look of determination in his eyes, calm and mature as he closely listened to the reporter.

"You mean to say that... you're..."

"That's right."

"..."

It was unbelievable.

At least, that was what any normal reporter would have said.

A particularly observant or intuitive reporter might have been able to read the truthfulness in the boy's eyes.

But Carl's reaction was different.

After all, he had already known of the likely possibility that the culprit was a child.

In each case, what authorities believed was the first wound was always inflicted from under the victim by stabbing upwards towards them. Because the holes in the victims' hearts matched up with the others, they guessed that the culprit had no choice but to thrust the ice pick upwards at the victims.

From the fact that the police suspects included groups of young people like Graham's gang, it was possible to deduce that a shorter member of one such gang had disguised himself as a child to carry out the crimes.

It was also possible that the culprit really *was* a child.

Not only did Carl have possession of information only known to the police, he also had several other pieces of evidence he had found independently.

And that was the connection between all of the victims, known only to the Daily Days and a select group of people.

"...Does that mean... that you're..."

In the rain, Carl looked the boy in the eye.

"Tell me your name."

"...It's Mark. Mark Wilmans."

"I knew it... The son of Paula Wilmans."

"..."

Light returned to Mark's eyes for a brief instant when he heard the woman's name.

"Did you... know my mom?"

"...I had a hunch, but I came up with an ostentatious name like 'Ice Pick Thompson' precisely because I didn't want it to be true. I didn't want a child like you to be the killer."

"...Please answer my question."

"...It would be easy for me to say yes, but I'd also like to ask *you* a question. Do you know what kind of work your mother did in these alleys?"

Mark went quiet at Carl's heavy tone. But he looked up at him, eyes once again dark.

"My mother was a prostitute. But that was only a cover for her real work."

He sounded as though he did not want to remember.

"All I know... is that she was doing *something* under the orders of a man named Szilard Quates."

"..."

"And then... That's when they killed her."

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**November 1930.**

Everything started with the ring of the doorbell.

It had been quite a few months since he had last heard the sound. The boy decided to not bother his mother by going up to open the door himself.

But his mother Paula's hands blocked his mouth and his arms.

Her hands were warm and gentle, but there was a strange hint of anxiety in her touch.

Suddenly, his mother hid him inside the closet.

"Whatever you do, Mark, you mustn't make a sound."

With that, she shut the door.

Her smile looked no different than what he saw every day. He did not think too hard on the matter as he smiled strongly and nodded.

His actions were both right and wrong.

This was because, as a result of his actions, he quietly remained in the closet and survived.

But he had also lost his mother.

Once the voices of the men disappeared, the boy continued waiting for the mother who would never come back.

All he had to do was stay hidden.

Deep down, he knew he was just fooling himself, but he repeatedly told himself to stay inside. All to suppress the explosive terror that had been trying to burst from him since the moment that he heard the suspicious voices.

He was scared that, if he were to acknowledge that fear, it would instantly become reality and consume him.

But no matter how much he tried to fool himself, reality was not so kind to the boy.

The sun rose the next morning, but his mother did not return.

The sun went down, but there was still no sign of her.

She did not return even when the sun rose again.

A full two days later, the boy was found still hiding in the closet by the police officers who had been led there by the apartment landlord.

When the boy was brought outside, the only reality facing him was the fact that his mother's corpse had been discovered on the banks of the Hudson River.

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And now...

"Mom's body was pale, but clean."

The boy's eyes were shadowed, yet tranquil.

"Except for the fact that her body was covered in holes, and that each hole was burned very badly."

The corpse that they dredged from the river showed obvious signs of abuse--or rather, torturous execution.

It was as though the culprit had been trying to carve the process of death onto the corpse intricately and realistically enough to make an example of it.

The day Mark confirmed the corpse's identity, it was raining.

It was also raining outside when an article from a certain large newspaper company described the incident as a drug-related crime.

Mark did not believe his mother was involved in drug dealings.

But the police could not deny the fact that multiple witnesses had come up to corroborate the claim. The newspaper company stuck to its story.

It was as though they were offering her up as a sacrifice in exchange for keeping the culprit's identity hidden.

How much of Mark's past did Carl know? He closed his eyes and spoke solemnly.

"...I've read that article before."

"Oh...? That's surprising. That company's the only one that really talked about it. I'm impressed"

"...I suppose."

*'Better not tell him I used to work for them. And that I know the guy who wrote the article.'*

Carl passed off the compliment and continued to listen.

"It was raining that day. No different from now. It was just normal rain."

The boy spun the ice pick round and round in his hand, taking a step towards the reporter, who remained rooted to the spot.

He still showed no sense of bloodlust. But the reporter naturally wanted to get the ice pick away from him.

"First, could you put that scary thing away?"

But Mark's response was a combination of a pause and an apology.

"...I'm sorry."

"I see."

"If I let go of it, I... I'll lose my determination to talk. I feel like I'll lose myself."

His eyes were murky.

Carl, with his long experience as a reporter, could tell--the look in the boy's eyes was clearly abnormal. It wouldn't be surprising for him to suddenly let out a cry and swing the ice pick around madly. In that sense, he was even more dangerous than Graham, whom he had met the previous night.

Yet Carl chose to listen.

Was it out of pure curiosity about Ice Pick Thompson?



Or was it a sense of responsibility for the fact that he had been the one to come up with that moniker?

Or was it that he had sensed something strange from the boy's confession?

Whatever the case, Carl avoided neither the rain nor his eyes and continued to face down the cold air alone.

"I can guess at why you're after this man named Szilard."

"..."

"Ice Pick Thompson's victims all had one thing in common."

Was he trying to put himself on a psychologically even playing field? Carl gave the boy an answer he did not even ask for.

"That common factor was that all of them were working for Szilard Quates."

"..."

"For now, let's forget about the kind of man Szilard was. But what we know for sure is that, including Police Superintendent Velde, who resigned because of an embezzlement controversy, there were a great many people in politics, law, and finance that were working under Szilard's command."

The boy remained silent in the rain as the information broker laid out the fact before him.

From the look of the man's eyes the boy knew that their deal had been established. In other words, he had been acknowledged.

The fact that this exchange of information was taking place meant that the man had acknowledged him as Ice Pick Thompson.

*'I can't go back now.'*

The boy quietly drew breath. It felt as though the air, damp with rain, caught at his throat and did not reach his lungs.

*'But that doesn't matter, does it? After all... I'm going to die. I have to die.'*

Steadying his trembling throat, Mark quickly swallowed his breath and spoke heavily.

"I... already know that much."

"Then what more do you want to know? What would you do if I told you where Szilard was? Let me warn you--this is all top secret, so I can't tell you the exact reasons, but killing Szilard is out of the question."

Was Carl trying to provoke the boy, or convince him otherwise?

Carl laid out the facts vaguely, constantly skirting the most important truth.

However--

"That doesn't matter."

Carl frowned. He hadn't expected such a quick answer.

Mark wearily shook his head and glared at the puddle beneath his feet, his eyes clouded.

"I was just curious about Szilard Quates... the boss of the people who took my mom's life and her dignity. So, where is he?"

"All I can tell you is that you won't find him in New York."

"...What's that supposed to mean? That was really vague."

"I told you, this is top secret." Carl answered definitively. The boy tilted his head and stepped in even closer towards him.

He clutched his ice pick tightly as he coldly glared at Carl.

"...You mean my information wasn't enough to pay for what I'm looking for?"

His eyes were frigid and solemn, like the bottom of a deep sea.

But Carl quietly shook his head and glared back with an even sharper look.

"Don't underestimate the Daily Days and our information brokers, boy."

"...?"

"What I'm saying is that we'd be out of business by now if we sold our secrets for something so trivial like the identity of a mysterious killer. If that was how we worked, then the fastest way to get information would be to become a serial killer. ... Of course, if you were one of *our* celebrities, like the assassin Vino, things might be a different story."

"What... are you talking about? Who in the world could kill for something like..."

Mark suddenly felt an air of intimidation rushing over him, cutting through even the drizzle. He stepped back without thinking.

"Listen up, boy. There are almost as many punks who'd kill for information as there are people who commit murder for revenge." Carl said plainly.

"..."

"Remember this. People don't need big, righteous reasons like justice to kill others. People can murder others for a loaf of bread or for plain old enjoyment."

As the boy remained silent, Carl continued as if scolding his own son.

"There *are* people who won't kill others over a loaf of bread. And there are people who don't commit murder even though they have the justification of revenge backing them up. It's not my business which one you'd rather be, but either way, you'll never be involved with Szilard in any way again. That's all I can say."

"...And what about the people who don't die?"

"...I don't know if they're the same ones I know about, but... sorry. That's another topic of secrecy."

The boy looked up at Carl for a time, his eyes as murky as ever. But he soon concealed the ice pick in his sleeve again and turned around.

"...Thank you. That's all I had to ask."

"You're not going to silence me?" Carl joked. The boy stopped mid-departure and replied in a softer tone.

"It's all right."

And with a strangely self-deprecating smile--

"After all... I'm already done." He said. "And I don't have anything against you. I... I couldn't bear killing someone for something other than revenge."

"?"

Noticing determination and something much more ominous in the boy's tone, Carl spoke to him again.

"What are you saying? And... What are you going to do about the fifth one?"

"...That's none of your business." The boy said, running off into the rain.

Carl's attempt to call him back was in vain. The boy's form disappeared into the downpour.

Watching him disappear, Carl quietly muttered to himself.

"Christ, I can't believe I got away with a bluff like that."

Letting the rain conceal his cold sweat, he continued.

"...I wonder... as an information broker, was this conversation profitable to me, or not? But either way... I suppose I managed to gather some information for free."

Quietly shaking his head, Carl sighed loudly and shut his eyes.

"Ah, well... Looks like I'll have to give him his change when I see him again."

**Several minutes later.**

*'Guess I'm getting old.*

*'This wouldn't even have counted as a gamble, back in the good old days,'*

Deciding that there was no sense in trying to walk without getting any more rained on, Carl stepped forward, in absolutely no hurry.

*'Donna would've been about that kid's age by now.'*

As the brazen reporter remembered his late daughter, a mix of emotions ran through his face.

*'Now what? By all rights, I should be calling the police, but... I was in the role of information broker for that conversation.'*

*'And that kid never once said that he was Ice Pick Thompson, so that's not even a confession.'*

*'I suppose Henry or Nicholas would have been over the moon, monopolizing info like this. Maybe Elean would have tried to convince the kid to turn himself in or at least stop the murders.'*

*'Maybe I should talk to the President or the Vice-President.'*

*'...What is it I'm trying to do?'*

Suddenly feeling sentimental at the thought of his daughter, Carl decided to go back to the Daily Days to warm himself up.

*'But who'd have thought Ice Pick Thompson would have turned out to be a kid like that? Looks like I was off the mark. Now I'm embarrassed at myself for bluffing Graham like that, saying I had a suspect. Well, at least I never gave him a name...'*

In a single moment, his thoughts came to a dead halt.

Although he was fully conscious, his line of thinking was forcibly cut short midway.

The cause was the light impact that hit his back.

*'Have I been stabbed?!'*

Carl tensed instantly, gathering his senses back from where he had let them wander. He turned around to face his assailant.

But his guess was a mistaken one. The object upon his back was a much more dull colour than the silver of the ice pick.

"Let me tell you... a mystifying story."

The young man holding the dismantling wrench looked straight at Carl, mumbling maniacally.

"I was just planning on giving you a little scare by poking you with this wrench, but why the shocked expression? You look as though you've been stabbed. What do you think, Shaft?"

The young man in blue work wear--which was drenched by the rain--addressed his friend, who was holding an umbrella.

"He must have thought you shot him, or something."

"Or maybe you only *thought* you poked him lightly, but the wrench actually stabbed into him."

Behind Graham was Shaft, undaunted as usual, and another young man Carl did not recognize. He was smiling as though he didn't have a care in the world.

"I see! Then the obvious solution is to find a happy medium and make an educated guess as to the truth of the matter."

"That's not normal, Boss."

Ignoring Shaft's comment, Graham fell into thought, spinning his wrench.

"In other words... This reporter must have arrived at the shocking conclusion that someone had stabbed him in the back with a *gun*! Yes, that *is* one hell of a shocking turn of events! Even I'm floored by this idea! The tip of a handgun, despite all

appearances, stabs into your back as though it were a knife... What kind of magic is this?! This is not good, Shaft. I think I'm actually getting scared!"

"I'm more scared about the fact you actually believe everything you say."

As Shaft buried his face in his free hand, Graham ignored him and turned to Carl.

"I'm real sorry about this, Mister Boss Reporter. And guess what I'm even more sorry about the fact that I don't remember your name. Therefore I will keep calling you Mister Boss Reporter, if you don't mind!"

"It's Carl." The reporter replied, taking a deep breath.

Graham stopped spinning his wrench and again turned to Shaft.

"What to do, Shaft? Does this mean he's turned down my suggestion?"

"Maybe he's turning down your existence, Boss."

"That's acceptable. I acknowledged earlier today that I am the enemy of humanity, so it's only natural that I would be rejected. But that does not negate the immense sea of sadness in which my heart is drowning. How can I be free of this sorrow?"

"The best way to lose that sadness might be to be happy. So smile!"

"That's... perfectly true! But aren't there things both sad and happy in this wide, wide world?"

"Then you can forget about being sad and just focus on the happy side."

"Is that humanly acceptable? People who are too happy end up forgetting progress, ending up lumps of useless flesh that drive themselves to decadent ruin..."

It was not clear whether Graham pondered the matter in despair or otherwise, but Elmer smiled at him all the same.

"If everyone dies happy, isn't that good enough?"

"If everyone is happy, isn't that no different from misfortune?"

"If you don't *think* it's unfortunate, isn't that good enough?"

"Of course... you're absolutely right."

Shaft, feeling threatened by the strange direction the conversation was taking, interrupted them.

"You're absolutely *not* right! What in the world are you thinking?"

Carl, his attitude a 180 from the way he faced down the boy, thought to himself as he stood drenched in the rain.

*'I wasn't just hallucinating that kid, was I?'*

Perhaps he had just been so focused on his pursuit of Ice Pick Thomson that he had imagined the appearance of the boy.

However, Carl shook off his doubts and addressed the young people before him.

"Sorry 'bout that. You just surprised me is all. So, what do you want?"

"Well, we were just curious to see what you were up to in the rain, Mis... uh... Boss Carl. Someone steal your umbrella on this dark and gloomy night?"

"Hm... Thanks for the concern, but I was just in the mood for a bit of rain. And come to think of it, speak for yourself. Why are you the only one not holding an umbrella?"

Carl grinned at Graham, who was equally looking like a half-drowned rat in the downpour.

"Let's just say I'm preparing to challenge the sun." Graham replied confidently.

"...?"

Carl was left smiling and confused.

"Mr. Carl! You might be better off not thinking too hard 'bout what Boss Graham here says. You wouldn't believe it--one time, he thought he could fight off the rain by spinning his wrench above his head and ended up getting soaked." Shaft interjected, waving his hands.



"But it worked! For about ten seconds." Graham crossed his arms, not entirely defeated. Carl gave a wry smile.

"So, what are you three doing here? Not hunting for Ice Pick Thompson now, are we?"

Graham's answer left him thunderstruck.

"Yes! You're absolutely right!" Graham said confidently, nodding his head. "Though I made a promise that requires me to keep silent on the matter of his identity, I have to ask you this, Boss Carl! Have you seen this brat? He's short, comes up to about my chest, nothing too special about him... Elmer, what did you say his name was?"

"His name's Mark." The young man named Elmer said with a laugh. Graham spun his wrench around in admiration and turned back to Carl.

"That's right! His name is Mark. Nothing too stand-out about him, but... Ah, yes! How 'bout we say that the ice pick he carries around is his most distinguishing feature?"

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### **Thirty minutes later, inside an apartment in New York**

Mark opened his aged apartment door and stepped into his house.

When his mother was still alive, they had lived in a bigger apartment.

But now that his mother had been murdered, he was living off of what she had left him.

Though Mark was alone, his mother's money was enough to keep him fed and clothed for several years. But this very money ended up leaving his mother suspected of taking part in the drug trade.

Mark knew full well that his mother's name could never be cleared of this wrongful accusation.

For the men who killed her, it was not enough to take her life--they had also stolen her dignity.

He could never forgive them.

And that was why, when *she* had told him the truth--when she had told him the reason his mother had to die, and the names of the men who carried out her murder--Mark swore to avenge his mother.

He didn't care what sort of hell he would fall into for his crimes.

He picked up a rusted ice pick from behind a speakeasy, polished it, and slowly stalked after the murderers as he coldly fanned the fires of revenge.

The city was engulfed in rain on the day his mother had been murdered and her dignity stripped. And at a moment very much like that day, Mark quietly let his bloodlust take form.

But now he was planning to take his own life, even though his revenge was not yet complete.

Even though there was yet one man left, his muted senses called for him to consider otherwise.

"I'm not scared of dying. I'm not scared of dying." He said to himself, stepping in through the front door.

He reminded himself of the determination with which he had climbed Brooklyn Bridge.

But that only led him to remember the immortal man who stopped him.

*'Come to think of it, why did he notice me?'*

No one had paid any attention to the boy standing at the edge of the bridge in the pouring rain. More than a few people had passed him by, both before and after, but no one seemed to have taken notice of him.

*'Of all the people who could notice me, it just had to be an immortal monster.'*

It was a terribly ironic situation.

From what he could gather from his conversation with the information broker, the immortal monster was not a hallucination of any sort, but a creature that existed in reality.

But he had been unable to find out some things, even after revealing his identity. Determining that there was nothing he could do, Mark shook his head and drove the thoughts of the immortal from his mind.

*'That's right. In any case, I have to die.'*

"I... I'm not scared of dying."

He repeated himself over and over as if casting a magic spell, and took a seat before continuing.

"But... I still have to kill one more. The last one. Until then..."

Suddenly, he heard a sound from the front door.

It was the terrifyingly clear sound of the door being locked from the inside.

Mark flinched as he turned to the entryway.

"So you have no fear of death, eh?"

It was the cold voice of a very tall man standing at the door.

"W-who are you?!"

He had heard the door locking, but he did not hear it open. The man had probably been hiding in the apartment all along, waiting for Mark to enter before locking the door behind them, probably in order to seal off any means of interference.

Mark could feel his heart pounding.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and his gut twisted and screamed as though being burned.

But his mouth could not scream. He couldn't yell, or even breathe properly.

"I can see the fear in your eyes. Why so scared?"

"..."

The tall man snorted, quietly stepping closer as Mark stood rooted to the spot.

"There's a difference between resolving to die and living with death constantly at your heels, kid."

His hat pushed down all the way to his eyes, and his collar standing over his mouth, the man was, strangely enough, wearing a long coat that went down to his knees in the middle of summer, cold as the rain might have been.

"If resolve is all you have, then when death comes to you out of nowhere..."

There was a scar over the man's face, and the sharp look in his eye made it crystal clear that this was not a man who made an honest living.

Thinking that the intruder was connected to the Gandor Family, whose hideout he had visited earlier, Mark began to stand from his chair, the tension squeezing at his throat.

But it was too late.

Just before he could get up, the man took out a rifle from inside his coat and pointed it at Mark's head.

The tip of the black barrel touched Mark's forehead as he returned to his seat, falling back as he lost balance mid-stand.

"So when death comes to you out of nowhere, you're gonna be scared. Am I right?"

The man pressed the barrel into Mark's forehead, rendering him unable to stand whether he wanted to or not. Mark carefully searched his own sleeves, reaching for his ice pick.



But the tall man sneered and stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't try anything stupid now, Ice Pick Thompson."

"...!"

"From the looks of your reaction... looks like I hit the nail right on the head."

"...Ugh..."

Mark's mind scrambled for answers as all kinds of hypotheses flashed through his thoughts.

*'He knows. How? Was it that reporter? No, he was too early. Was it the Gandors? Or... it can't be...'*

As he came to the terrifying conclusion that none of his theories had any meaning, Mark swallowed, his voice trembling as he squeaked.

"Who... are you, mister? How do you know who I am?"

"I always thought Ice Pick Thompson would be some punk gangster with a Tommy gun... that's a pretty polite way to talk to an assassin, kid."

"An assassin..."

His heart gave a fearful squeeze.

He could hear the rain falling. The same sound he heard as the day he lost his mother.

He thought about attacking the man with all he had, with no care for his own life.

But he could tell that even *appearing* to harbour such thoughts would get him killed instantly.

For some reason, this killer didn't seem to want to murder him straightaway. Mark took deep breaths, resolving to keep his eyes open for a chance to escape.

"You're... an assassin?"

"That's right. My target's supposed to be Ice Pick Thompson. That client of mine was very thorough--told me your address, what you look like, the whole shebang. To be honest, I don't know if I believe that you're the guy the cops are after, but as long as I have my down payment, I'm obligated to at least run a fact check. Am I right?"

"Who... who was it?"

"Kid, what kind of assassin d'you think would be stupid enough to reveal his client's name? Maybe except for that damned *amigo* girl." The man spat, annoyed.

"...'*Amigo* girl'?"

For a moment, he remembered the face of the Mexican girl he met at the speakeasy, but Smith's heavy tone muddled up his image.

"Nothing to do with you, kid. Don't ever say that word again if you want to live."

"But you're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?"

"Heh... A logical answer, but logic won't work on me. This whole line of work began somewhere very far removed from sanity, after all..."

It sounded too much like the man was circling the topic, and that he was hiding something. But Mark remained focused as he carefully chose his words and put them to his mouth with a harsh breath.

"Why... won't you kill me right now?"

"Because I want to talk."

"T-talk?"

"That's right. Because Ice Pick Thompson is the essence of madness and fear. If he's destined to disappear forever, his identity lost to the world like Jack the Ripper, I'd at least like to know what gave birth to such insanity. It's that simple. By getting a glimpse into the origin of madness, I step closer to it without being overcome by it."

*'What the hell is he talking about?'*

The assassin seemed to be completely absorbed in himself. Mark understood the words that were coming from his mouth, but he did not understand why the man was lost in his own little world.

He wanted to point this out, but with the gun pointed at his head, pointless provocation was not an option.

"Then... where should we start? Of course... How 'bout you tell me what made you dirty your hands in the first place?"

The assassin's eyes peeked out from between the brim of his hat and his collar, betraying a look of both enjoyment and pity. Mark wondered for a moment if he should comply, but the man's expression did not change--and so he decided to confess everything.

He revealed the story of his bloodlust, just as he had to the information broker.

"I see... revenge, huh. Damn, that's pretty understandable, as far as motive goes. 'Course, I guess killing five people to avenge one might be insanity in and of itself."

As Mark finished telling his story, the assassin thought for a moment.

Then, a hint of a smile crept up to his lips as he addressed the boy he was holding at gunpoint.

"Raz Smith."

"...Huh?"

"My name. Those who've set foot deep into the underworld also know me as Gunmaestro Smith."

"Why are you telling me your name?"

"Why not at least remember the name of the man who's going to kill you?"

*'Oh. So I'm going to die after all.'*



Preparing himself, Mark focused all his senses on the man's trigger finger.

The exact moment the man pulled the trigger, he would try to snap his head backwards.

But the man's finger was hovering, away from the trigger and completely still. Of course, he was still in position to shoot at any given moment.

Mark wondered whether he should wait or act.

After only a few seconds of thought, during which time he racked his brains for strategies, he arrived at the desperate choice of continuing the conversation as long as he could.

He knew it would do him little good, but Mark hoped that his opponent would be more foolish than himself.

But as though he had read his mind, the assassin spoke to him again.

"Any last words you'd like to leave behind, kid?"

And as though this was his final chance, Mark forcibly swallowed the welling fear, and used the sound of rain as a crutch to slowly paint over his heart as Ice Pick Thompson.

"There's just one thing... one thing I have to make clear."

"What is it?"

"You said before... that I killed five people out of revenge. But that's not right."

"What?"

As Smith looked at him in genuine confusion, Mark continued.

"There's still one more person I have to kill. One of the five people you mentioned... that was an accident. I mistook my target."

It was a flimsy excuse to use for bargaining for his life, but he clung to his confession, desperate for any means of escape.

"You made a mistake?"

"That's right... I did! The last person I killed was a mistake! I ended up killing someone that had nothing to do with it! At first I tried to kill myself, but someone got in my way... So I changed my mind. I won't kill myself... at least, not until I've killed the *last man*!"

It was only after his confession that Mark realized he had made a mistake.

He had killed an innocent man.

Each time he remembered this fact, the persona of Ice Pick Thompson in his mind grew hazy.

*'It's over.'*

He was left defenceless.

*'This is justice. Divine justice against a killer who murdered an innocent person.'*

The colour of Ice Pick Thompson faded from Mark's expression as tears welled up in his eyes. He was prepared to die.

But--

"You mistook your target for someone else...?"

The assassin frowned, and slowly lowered his gun.

"Huh...?"

"Now this is what I'm talking about. Real insanity."

The assassin took a step back, and suddenly took out a newspaper from under his coat.

"I bought a copy before I got here so I could find out more about your insanity. Take a look." He said. The self-proclaimed Gunmaestro tossed the paper onto the table.

It was a copy of the Daily Days. Mark remembered that it was the same company for which the information broker from earlier worked.

On the front page was the headline [Ice Pick Thompson's Fifth Bout of Madness]. But when Mark's eyes floated over to the sub-headings, his eyes widened instantly.

[Serial Killer Claims First Female Victim]

[Prostitute Latest Victim in String of Murders]

[Return of Jack the Ripper?]

"What...?"

Mark's vision grew hazy for a moment as he felt himself losing touch with the world.

The assassin stared straight at him as he asked,

"How much more insane can you get than mistaking a prostitute in a skimpy dress for a man?"

Mark read on, as if he hadn't heard Smith's question.

Then, his eyes suddenly stopped at one point on the article, and his face grew visibly pale.

"No. No, no... What is this...? What is this?"

"?"

"Why... is Lisha dead...?"

It seemed that Mark was distressed by the name of the victim.

"Lisha Darken. The prostitute you killed yesterday, am I right?"

But Smith's words fell on deaf ears.

"No. It can't be... This can't be happening!"

Mark fell to his knees, white as a sheet, as he trembled on the floor.

"Why... Why did *Lisha* get killed?!"

Perhaps he had felt something from the sight of the shaking boy.

Smith quietly shook his head and raised his rifle again.

He put the barrel to the back of Mark's head and pulled the trigger without a moment's hesitation.

# 第十章

哀れな被害者は薬に溺れて  
共犯者の足を引きずり込む

## Chapter 10 :

### The Pitiful Drug-Obsessed Victim Hinders the Accomplice

-----

It was at a certain time two days ago, just as a particularly strong downpour was beginning to set upon New York. It also happened to be just around the time Elmer and Mark met on Brooklyn Bridge.

Lester, the young reporter, had been on his way to interview the delinquent gangs on his boss's orders. He clicked his tongue as drops of rain began falling from the sky, and dashed into a dark alleyway.

*'There's still a ways to go until the delinquents' hideout... but then again, I don't even know if I'll find them there in this weather.'*

He turned into a narrow alley, heading towards his destination. He turned again into a particularly quiet street, and found himself looking at someone.

And when he realized that this silhouette belonged to someone he was familiar with, he came to a stop and muttered her name.

"Lisha..."

From her appearance, the woman was obviously an alleyway prostitute. She gave Lester a vacant stare, dark bags under her eyes, and finally smiled ineffectually.

"...Oh? Well, if it isn't Lester... Um. Fancy meeting you here. Ahaha."

She was in her late twenties, if Lester remembered correctly. Despite her age, the bags under her eyes, her ghostly pale skin, and her lifeless complexion made her look ten to twenty years older than she actually was.

"...Still can't kick that habit, huh?"

"You've got it all wrong, now. Remember, about half a year ago, y'know. Um... those Runorata men. Suddenly... stopped coming. One of Mister Gustavo's men, y'know? Used to sell me all those nice drugs. But, um. He disappeared... So, y'know? Right?"

I... I started using something else. Held on all this time... But, um. That other kind doesn't work so well... My body's a real mess. Huh? Um. So I want to quit."

"All right. Either way you're screwed. Bye."

Deciding that Lisha was beyond hope, Lester made to leave briskly.

That is, until she suddenly grabbed him by the arm.

"Hey, I don't have time to waste with a junkie like-"

But he was suddenly interrupted by the sight of the ice pick in her hand.

Lester flinched. He could feel a chill run down his spine.

"L-Lisha?! The hell?!"

As Lester stepped away from her, Lisha began cackling.

"Aw, what's the rush, now? ...Didja think that, um, I was Ice Pick Thompson?"

"..."

"Y'know... ice picks are selling like hotcakes. Um. With kids. Not real nice, but... like an ice pick boom... y'know?" Lisha cooed, smiling suggestively as she fondled the ice pick.

Although the sight of a scantily-dressed woman stroking an ice pick may have come off as seductive, Lester was not in the mood.

"What a sick joke."

"Oh, worried now, Lester? Um. Should I just, y'know, play dumb? I bet you know aaaall about why, um... All those people got killed, right? I bet you're just so scared that *you're* gonna get poked next. Aren't ya?"

"I told you to stop!" Lester roared, snatching the ice pick from Lisha. Her unfocused eyes narrowed as she broke out into a grin.

"Ahaha. Hahaha. Y'know, it's so funny. That, um. You're scared of a silly little ice pick."

"..."

"'Cause a little bird told me, y'know? Back then, *you* looked *all* right at home when you were, um, using it the last time."

"...Stop it."

Cold sweat ran over Lester as his heart began to pump out an inhuman emotion.

Lisha, slowly descending into madness, continued seductively, not realizing that Lester would be displeased by what she said.

"*Everyone* said, about when you, y'know, *tortured* and *killed* poor Paula. You put that thing into a fire 'til it turned red-hot and. Haha. Stabbed it into her like you were having a ball!"

"STOP IT!"

*Creak.*

Lester could hear his own senses go off-kilter. Every last muscle in his body was tensing.

He tried to deny Lisha's testimony, and his own past.

But her accusations would not stop.

"Why so serious, now? Y'know, um. Not many people walk through the back alleys in the rain. No one's gonna hear. Everyone... *Everyone* is scared outta their mind of Ice Pick Thompson..."

"..."

"Isn't it funny. Right? Being so scared, y'know. Um. Of a cute kid like that."

"..."



*Creak*. This time, he could feel the disjuncting in his spine.

"...What?"

Lisha replied, her eyes lazily wandering towards some point in the distance.

"Everyone was running for their mommies. Um. Y'know. Ahaha. But it's not like they should be scared. 'Cause, y'know? Mark's only gonna kill *you people*."

"Mark... Mark?"

Lester had to repeat the name before it registered in his mind. He desperately rifled through his memories, trying to recall anyone named Mark.

And he soon stumbled upon a certain boy by the name of Mark Wilmans.

"...Can't be... Paula's kid?"

As Lester stood stock still in the rain, the equally drenched woman, looking even more sensual in her wet clothing, answered with an empty look.

"That's right. Um. Y'know. Looks *just like* Paula. Like his little eyes. Y'know? Even before you killed poor Paula. He thought, y'know? I was one of her friends. So, um. Sometimes. I, um. Cooked for him and stuff."

"...No one told me any of this."

"Huh? Ahaha. You're talking funny, Lester. But y'know, you wouldn't have liked it. Um. If you knew." Lisha snickered.

From the way she laid out supposed secrets without a care, it was apparent that, despite her surprisingly calm tone, her mind was reaching the breaking point.

Not even caring for her safety, Lisha continued euphorically.

"Y'know... He's got tons of money from Paula. This and that, y'know. Ahaha. So, um. If I'm a good girl, he gives me a bit. So... I bought even more drugs with that, y'know... Poor kid. Always acting the big boy and telling me to stop. So he won't give me any money anymore. Um. So I told him, y'know."

"..."

"I said, I'll tell you a secret you want to know. Um. If he gave me money."

"Hey... don't tell me..."

Blood drained from Lester's face as Lisha looked up into the sky, spitting out the words that would seal her fate.

"So I told him, y'know? I said I'd *tell* him *who* killed his *mommy*!"

*Creak.*

This time, Lester could not even tell what part of him had gone awry.

"So, y'know? Can you. Um. Give me some money too? Y'know? You mind if I. Um. Pay you in bed? No, not this time. Um. No drugs this time... This time. I need money for. Um. A doctor. Y'know. I wanna stop... I, I wanna get more better than I ever was... Y'know, like Heaven. So. Can I borrow some. Money?"

Lisha was probably no longer even aware of what she was talking about.

Whatever was in her head, Lester could never see. She probably had no thoughts of preserving her own life.

"...You wanna get high? I'll show you one hell of a trip."

She would pay a price for her ignorance.

"I'll send you up all the way to Heaven."

The ice pick was driven deep into Lisha's neck, though the abuse of drugs had already left her entirely numb to the pain.

And as soon as the ice pick was drawn again, it was driven into another part of her body.

"Help! Someone come quick! Call a doctor! Anyone!"

Once he had taken care to see that she had stopped breathing, Lester screamed at the top of his lungs in an act both dramatic and unnatural.

At this very moment, the reporter who feared death encountered a killer.

Or to be precise--

The young reporter who had once been a subordinate of Szilard Quates had been reunited with the killer sleeping within his psyche.

Dozens of hours passed.

<=>

### **The basement of the Jazz Hall 'Coraggioso'**

It had been several hours since Lester had hired Smith for the job. He sat quietly, expecting that the work he had commissioned might be just about finished.

This was the Gandor Family's office and base of operations. Sitting around Lester were many thuggish-looking men.

*'Paula and Lisha. They're both idiots.'*

*'I...I just didn't want to die. Why did they have to get in my way? Damn it...If Paula'd just...just given me that incomplete Elixir she was holding for Barnes...'*

Lester sighed, lost in reminiscence.

*'But I still can't believe she didn't drink a drop. It's not like we owe anything to Szilard or Barnes. Why did she decide not to become immortal?'* He wondered. Suddenly, a door near the back opened and a man stepped outside.

"Sorry for the wait, Lester."

"Not at all. I'd have liked to come sooner, but it was a bit of work getting the police off my tail."

"Sorry to hear that. Y'know, you're always giving us the best info in town. I hope this business deal of ours is going to be a lasting one."

"Not at all, Mr. Cassetti. I should be the one thanking you."

"C'mon, now. Just drop the formalities and call me Nico."

Lester smiled at the Gandor capo, a man well known for his unmatched fighting skills. His name was Nicola Cassetti, usually shortened to 'Nico'.

He was the man responsible for kidnapping a Runorata goon during the turf war last year while facing down a dozen Tommy guns.

"We've been doing our part and scoping out the police ourselves, but..." Nico said, his eyes narrowed to slits. "We hear the fifth victim--the woman--might have been killed by someone else."

"..."

"The other four were first stabbed from underneath, but the woman was stabbed downwards in the neck."

There was no emotion in his voice.

Lester could feel a great invisible weight pressing down on him, but he pretended not to notice.

"That's not surprising."

"...What?"

"After all, there's more than one culprit."

"What are you talking about?"

Lester forced back a smirk, realizing that Nicola had taken his bait. He slowly unveiled the scenario he had written using the information he had collected over the past few days.

"The culprit... the culprit is an assassin-for-hire named Raz Smith. I believe... he hired delinquents on the streets to murder people connected to the Gandor Family."

"Raz Smith', you said?"

"That's right. He's a very tall man. Wears a full-length coat in the middle of summer."

"What does an assassin like him have against-"

"Who knows? I'm afraid even I can't read people's minds."

*"Find me a disposable hitman. Just make sure he's up for killing a kid."* Lester had said during his negotiation with the Runorata Family.

He was initially just hoping for this discussion to buy him some time, but he was suddenly presented with an unexpected stroke of good fortune. A strangely dressed dancer girl poked her head out from behind Nico, exclaiming,

"Raz Smith? I know him, *amigo*! Berga once punched him in the face and sent him to the hospital!" She said, unintentionally providing Lester with more ammunition.

"...That's it, then." Nico said solemnly, getting off his seat.

"Goin' somewhere, Mr. Cassetti?" One of the Gandor men asked.

"Don't worry 'bout it. I ain't gonna make trouble while the bosses are out." Nico replied. He got ready to leave, eyes cold and sharp as blades. "We're just gonna have a talk."

"What is it, *amigo*? If you need manpower, I'm in!" The dancer said, oblivious to Nico's grave attitude.

"...Do whatever you like." He mumbled.

Nico quietly climbed the stairs, with the strange dancer and several of his men following behind him.

Just before he left, he turned to Tick, who was sitting in the corner.

"Tick. Don't go outta your way to clean those scissors. I feel like hearing a lot of screaming today."

"...What's wrong with Mr. Cassetti?"

"...Uh. Keep this to yourself, but that Lisha girl who just got killed... Mr. Cassetti had his eye on her for a while, see? I think they really liked each other. But he told her he'd never see her again if she didn't quit takin' those drugs. She must've been *trying* to stop, but who'd have thought her heart was gonna go first?"

"Whoa..."

Lester looked up at the stairs through which Nico had left and smiled to himself.

Was he revelling in his successes?

Was he imagining Smith left at Tick's mercy?

Or was he reminded of the moment of Lisha's death?

His face remained still, but his heart was overcome with laughter.

Lester's silent laughter knew no end, as though it was resounding in time with the sound of falling rain.

<=>

Smith opened the door to leave, only to come face-to-face with a young man in blue work wear.

"Boss Smith? What're you doing here?"

"...That's my line."

Graham, Elmer, and Shaft had checked with a certain newspaper company to find Mark's address. But as soon as they reached his door, they were met by a man they had met just hours earlier.

"W-we're just looking for this kid named Mark-" Shaft began, but Smith sighed and shook his head.

"You're too late. He's dead."

"Huh?"

"I've just killed Mark Wilmans."

It was a terribly simple confession.

As the three newcomers looked at one another, Smith continued coldly.

"I'm on my way to see my client now. I won't stop you if you want to come along."

<=>

The rain showed no signs of letting up.

The sound of falling droplets of water engulfed the streets of New York like a requiem for the killers on its streets.

The unending rain cocooned the killers in darkness, as though it was ready to wash away the blood that would soon be spilled.



## Intermission

-----

He was afraid of death.

He knew full well that the idea of death scared him more than was normal. So when he sometimes found himself acting out of sorts, he blamed it all on his fear.

*'Who's gonna blame me, anyway?'*

The man smirked, quietly raising his head.

*'Who the hell wants to die, right?'*

From his mouth spilled the word he feared most.

He did not want to die.

But this sentiment was only natural for him, a living being. Therefore, he would preserve his own life at any cost.

*'You gotta share the joy, you know.'*

He was smiling.

*'Right, Paula?'*

And with that smile, he thrust the ice pick he held into a small heap of burning-hot stones.

The ice pick slowly grew warm.

Although the heat did not spare his own hand, he gave it no thought.

He lifted up the red-hot ice pick and smoothly held it out before the woman sitting before him.

Of course, she had been forcibly sat down by others. She was slumped forward helplessly, and it was difficult to tell if she was conscious or not. The man shook his head. The smile never left his eyes.

*'I'm not the one you should be blaming, Paula.'* The man muttered, not to the woman, but to himself as though making up excuses.

He was indeed afraid of death.

But the fact that this was altogether different matter from the other did not matter to him.

*'I just don't wanna die. Nobody does. So why're you trying to keep it for yourself? Where did you hide the incomplete Elixir?'*

The man did not even give the woman time to respond as he thrust the red-hot piece of metal into her body.

The woman forced her scream back into her throat. The man's grin widened.

And time passed.

The boy who wished for death and vengeance encountered an unusual assassin...

And the reporter who feared death was reunited with the killer within his own psyche.

# 終章

笑顔中<sup>スマイル・ジャンキー</sup>毒者は殺人者の名間<sup>ニミマ</sup>を樂<sup>タノシ</sup>しげに闊歩<sup>クハツポ</sup>する

## **Finale - The Smile Junkie Merrily Paces Around the Killer**

-----

### **The next morning, the Daily Days President's Office**

"I see. So how did this incident come to a close?"

From the floor beneath could be heard the chatter of reporters and editors.

And from the mountain of documents piled up on one side of the room--looking as though it was the symbol of that very building--came a voice that was difficult to define in terms of age.

Or to be specific, the voice was coming from the President of the Daily Days newspaper company, who sat behind the stack of papers that filled the space.

One side of the room was a veritable war zone, with papers scattered everywhere like snow. On the other hand, the other side of the room was neat and immaculately tidy. It was as though time was running differently on either side of the room, the division drawn at the desk in the middle.

The master of this space, the leader of the information brokers, was the President of the Daily Days--a man with a rather unfittingly gentle voice in contrast to the tension in the eyes of everyone else in the office.

"That's right! Why didn't you report back to us right away after getting into a terrible situation like that?"

Elean, the African-American man wearing Chinese clothing, spoke up. The other employees turned to a stone-faced man standing in the corner of the room.

The middle-aged man was put on the spot. He scratched his face lightly and looked away uncomfortably.

"Well... Where am I even supposed to start? It's all a big damn mess..."

"What's that s'posed to mean, Carl?" Elean frowned. Carl sighed and began to lay out the facts of the incident one by one.

"I believe you're already aware of this, President, but this incident is wrapped up in two, three layers of secrecy."

"...!"

The gentle voice of the President ignored the gasps of the other employees and carried over the stacks of papers.

"I see. I can't say I wasn't expecting such an occurrence. So it seems Szilard Quates has left a deeper mark on this city that we expected."

Szilard Quates.

The mention of the name led some employees to frown and look around at one another.

"Hold it. Just one second. Why're we suddenly talking about *him*? When you mentioned it was all secret, I was sure we'd be talking 'bout the Gandors."

"That's exactly why, Elean." Carl said, looking up. "We're talking about Szilard *because* the Gandors are involved."

The mysterious man behind the pile of documents chuckled and added an explanation to Carl's meaningful statement.

"The victims were all connected by a single thread: The fact that they all had ties to the Gandor Family. However, this is only scratching the surface."

"Sir?"

"They were connected to one another from the start. And they all approached the Gandor Family in their own ways, in order to figure out the whereabouts of a certain object."

The information brokers puzzled over the President's oddly vague phrasing and arrived at the answer by piecing it together with their own stocks of information.

Carl glanced over at his co-workers for a moment, and continued where the President left off.

"Because of a certain incident, the group of elders who worked as Szilard's hands and feet suddenly lost the information concerning the location of Szilard's Elixir of Immortality."

Two years ago, the perfected Elixir of Immortality sought by the alchemist Szilard Quates suddenly disappeared. Not only that, Quates himself and his assistant Ennis had also cut off contact with the men.

They were left with but a single piece of information--the last known location of the Elixir, the Gandor Family hideout.

Szilard's aged followers, who served him directly, were put under the watchful eye of the Bureau of Investigation. The people working for these elderly men only had two pieces of information to go on.

The first was the fact of the Elixir's disappearance at the Gandor hideout.

The other was the whereabouts of the incomplete Elixir, which was used during the experiments to create the perfect formula.

Among these underlings, a group of people who were in contact with one another independently attempted to create ties with the Gandor Family in their own ways.

At the same time, they also sought out the whereabouts of Paula Wilmans, who had been working under Barnes.

There was a rumour that she was actually his extremely young daughter, born to a mistress, but there was no way of confirming that at this point.

After all, Paula was no longer of this world.

"Paula was charged with looking after the incomplete Elixir that Szilard gave to Barnes for testing purposes. And it looks like those elders didn't fully trust Barnes, even though they were working for the same man. And they confirmed several times that she had taken away several bottles of the incomplete formula for contingency purposes."

Carl sighed in defeat. A bespectacled information broker with strands of grey poking through his hair spoke.

"And so she was killed, is that it? Setting aside whether she confessed where she hid the Elixir, I'd personally have kidnapped her kid and taken him hostage." He snickered.

Nicholas, the editor of the English edition of the Daily Days, shook his head at the display.

"They must've been on edge. If even the kid went missing, they'd have a hard time calling it a drug-fuelled freak accident. I'd bet they decided it was less of a gamble to try their hand with the Gandors."

Carl agreed. The President calmly chimed in with his own perspective.

"Yes. Kidnapping the mother first and going after her son *afterwards* would be an extraordinarily unusual course of action. After all, if they really were after a cache of drugs--pardon the phrasing, but they would have murdered the boy as the mother watched, then killed her afterwards."

"But what we have now is the son, Mark, going around taking revenge. This is just heartbreaking. Did he really have no other way?" Elean sighed. Carl looked down at his feet.

"He probably could have chosen to give up, sure. But telling the cops would get him nowhere. The cops and the papers fabricated an entire incident. There's no way they'd open up the case again all on the confession of one drug-addled prostitute." Carl said bitterly. The room went quiet.

The President's voice gently broke the silence.

"Now then, if we could get to the heart of the matter, Carl."

"...Yes, sir."

"What happened to that boy... Mark Wilmans, also known as Ice Pick Thompson, and Lester, the reporter he was after?"

Carl was quiet, a complex look shadowing his eyes. He then sighed again.

"It's sad to say, but... Mark Wilmans is dead. He was murdered by an assassin-for-hire even I don't know much about." He said, eyes shut solemnly. "And that pitiful coward of a reporter is still alive. Home free."

"Really, it's just a terrible story."

Everything went back to the moment of the commotion.

<=>

**Twelve hours ago, the basement of 'Coraggioso'.**

"Right... Got it."

A mafioso held up a receiver as he looked up at the young reporter.

"Hey. Phone call from Nico. He says there ain't no one in that old factory those brats usually hang out in. You got anywhere else in mind?"

Lester narrowed his eyes as he reconsidered his plans.

*'So they're away. Is this a stroke of good luck, or...'*

"...I dunno."

*'It's a bit early, but better get rid of that assassin first.'*

"See, I started suspecting him because I contacted him a couple of times recently for information."

"And why didn't you say anything about this beforehand?"

"I just never had the chance. Oh. I'd never even dream of leaking your info to him, so calm down."



The reporter was acting surprisingly confident. The man with the receiver frowned, but he gestured to the reporter to continue, for the sake of more information.

"When I was talking with 'em, I thought something was up. I looked into it myself, and it looks like they're going through some internal problems... And, well, it looks like one of their boys who always does the dirty work might not be long for this world. Anyway, it looked to me like he was in contact with a bunch of other reporters too, but... We always met up at this one spot." Lester mentioned, hiding his slimy grin with difficulty.

"You know that condemned building by Grand Central Station?"

<=>

**At the same time, the streets of New York.**

"Boss Smith! Whaddaya mean, you killed that Mark kid?"

"What do you think it means? I took a job and killed my target."

"In that apartment, Boss?"

"S'right. Pretty damn hard to take care of a body in there, I'll tell you that."

The assassin smiled faintly as Graham questioned him, holding his wrench limply at his side.

Rain was pouring on the late-night city. It wasn't unusual for the streets to be relatively empty in such conditions, but the threat of Ice Pick Thompson kept even more people indoors than usual.

Smith walked along, holding a large umbrella, followed by Graham, Shaft, and Elmer.

"This isn't good, Boss." Shaft whispered to Graham along the way.

"Hm?"

"Don't give me that, Boss! We're involved in a murder! A murder! Right now!"

"You're right." Graham said nonchalantly. Shaft sighed, rubbing his temples.

"C'mon, Boss..."

"It's a darn shame. You can't be tellin' me you forgot all those lively days we spent alongside Boss Ladd."

"Boss, maybe you could spare a thought for my happiness and not remind me about that?"

"You've got your wish!"

Graham instantly put his soaked hand on Shaft's shoulder and looked at him pitifully.

"...Might be tough on ya, but, well. Try to stay alive." He said. "All right! We're off!"

"What am I doing with my life?" Shaft lamented, pressing down on his head with his free hand.

This time, Elmer put a hand on his shoulder.

"If something's bothering you, why not try a smile? It's just like waiting for your opponent to play first in a game of rock-paper-scissors. Sadness and anger are nothing in the face of a smile! It's just like magic--even if you'd lived a terribly unfortunate life, if a smile lights your face in the seconds before the executioner's axe falls on your neck, your life will have become bliss itself."

"I wouldn't be going through all this trouble if that was possible."

"It might actually be worth going through all this trouble." Elmer nodded confidently. Shaft turned away as though averting the eyes of a monster.

"...Mr. Elmer. I normally wouldn't say this to someone I've just met, but... I'm almost jealous of your endless optimism."

"Hah! It's nothing to be envious of, I'd say." Elmer replied sheepishly. "All you'd have to do is sell your soul for the smiles of yourself and others."

"Do you realize how scary you just sounded?"

Elmer's smile did not budge even as he put such a terrifying idea to his lips. If anyone else had said the exact same words, Shaft would have dismissed it as a joke. But this man was different. Shaft could see that Elmer's smile remained unchanged, even after suddenly becoming involved with a murder.

They walked a little distance in the rain, and approached a darkened building near Grand Central Station. Smith came to a sudden stop and looked back at the others.

"...My client will be in that building, but you just overheard me saying so. Got it?"

"?"

"I never told you to follow after me. I am going into that building on my own. So if you follow me, whatever you see and whatever you do, like following the client, it's all none of my business. Understand?" Smith said, and turned to enter the building.

Elmer suddenly spoke up.

"Hey, Mr. Smith. Did you really kill him?"

"Yes. I did."

"A kid like that?"

"S'right. I'll kill men, women, children, and the elderly. Only a madman would choose to become a killer, after all. Once you fling yourself off the deep end, you can keep falling lower and lower without even blinking. Damn, blowing off his head felt great." Smith boasted, and tried to flash a cool grin. But Elmer whispered something into his ear.

"-----, -----."

"...What?"

"-----, -----."

Graham and Shaft could not hear because of the sound of the downpour.

Smith frowned for a moment, then gave a wry smile and shook his head, astonished.

Graham, Shaft, and Elmer saw the assassin off as he stepped into the building. They looked at one another.

"...Let me tell you a sad, sad story." Graham began, tapping his wrench against his palm.

"Now, what in this wide wide world could have possessed Boss Smith to say something like that? If I had to guess, I'd say he was expecting something of us. But the mystery remains. *What* does he want from us? Oh, on the off chance we never succeed in living up to his expectations, we may end up screwing up his plans for eternity. Damn it all to hell! I thought I was an enemy of this world, but now I've even begun to trouble Boss Smith. At this rate, it's only a goddamn matter of time until I start bothering Boss Ladd without even knowing! What to do, Shaft? You think I still have a chance at redeeming myself to the world?"

"Boss, uh... *We're* the ones getting into trouble 'cause of Boss Ladd and Boss Smith. Honestly, Boss! I thought Boss Smith was about to shut us up for good just now!"

"If he wanted to silence us, he'd never even have bothered to say he killed the brat." Graham balanced his wrench on his head.

Graham's unperturbed attitude left Shaft nearly in tears.

"...! Yeah, but Boss!"

"You keep worryin' like that, and you'll end up balder than Mr. Placido."

"Never mind, Boss."

Shaft gave up on Graham and walked over to Elmer, uncertainty clear in his face.

"What'd you say to Boss Smith earlier?"

Shaft couldn't find a hint of doubt in Elmer's eyes. They cemented his belief that Elmer was indeed an unusual character, which also made him even more curious to find out what he had said.

"Not much, really. I--"

Before Elmer could continue, the sound of clanging metal echoed from the building, assaulting their ears. It was followed by deep, low gunshots.

<=>

### **Seconds earlier, inside the abandoned building.**

Smith stepped inside for his debriefing, and instantly felt a chill going down his spine, perhaps because of the weather.

His client had requested proof that he had killed Mark Wilmans, AKA Ice Pick Thompson.

*'Pretty unusual client, wanting to meet an assassin twice.'*

Smith considered the possibility of a trap, but if the reporter really had called the cops here, Smith wouldn't be the only one in trouble. He returned to meet the reporter, assuming that he must have been particularly terrified of the boy.

It was an unbelievably foolish course of action for a man who lived in the shadows.

And it was a matter of seconds before he found himself regretting his own carelessness.

He walked deeper into the recesses of the building, and caught a glimpse of a gaudy piece of cloth out of the corner of his eye.

And once he realized that the cloth belonged to the one he had only hours ago sworn to kill--

*'Maria... It's Maria Barcelito!'*

A tan-skinned girl holding a katana.

But what Smith saw first was not her grin, but the shining blade she had drawn.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of metal slicing through wind. It froze the very air in the room, and Smith could feel cold sweat running down the back of his neck.

"Shit... damn you."

He had blocked Maria's attack with a shotgun he had taken out of his coat. He ground his teeth and cursed his own foolishness.

*'Instead of callin' the cops... he called in another killer!'*

But this was no time to be regretting his actions. The girl behind the sword was laughing as she made eye contact.

"Ahaha! It's been a while, *amigo*! I heard you were laid up in a hospital bed, but looks like you're back on your feet! Congratulations!"

"...Thanks."

Maria began to push back Smith, sword and all, with strength one would not normally expect from a girl of her stature.

"But too bad, *amigo*! You might have been happier just lying in that hospital bed until the day you died!"

"...Don't make me laugh!"

Smith kicked her away and leapt backwards. He quickly drew another gun from his coat and made to shoot her arm, but he was too late.

The girl he thought he had kicked away was already right before his eyes.

"Damn...!"

He pulled the trigger, but Maria's eyesight flawlessly calculated the trajectory of the bullet by looking at Smith's arm and the angle of the gun. She leaned away a split second before the shot was fired.

She flew sideways, passing under the bullet, and landed a powerful hit to Smith's coat.

"Gah!"

Smith felt an incredible impact against his stomach, but he did not feel his body being cut in any way. The dozens of guns inside his coat had blocked Maria's slash.

"...Tch. So no cutting metal yet, huh *amigo*? Too bad."

"You little... How dare you nick my guns?!"

Maria instantly readied herself for another attack, but Smith was still reeling. Spewing words that sounded like the inverse of their situations, they put about five metres between themselves.

"Okay, *amigo*. So sorry I have to do this, but I'm going all out!" Maria declared, drawing the second sword she had sheathed at her side.

It was an unusual stand-off between dual wielders of guns and swords.

At one point they had been assigned to the same mission, but they had been reunited as enemies.

"I'll let you choose between getting stabbed, getting your head chopped off, and getting your head split open, *amigo*!"

"If I were the one doing the slicing, I'd give you the damned full course!"

"Hey, don't be greedy, *amigo*! Besides, I'm stronger than you. Last time you got knocked out by Berga, one-two! I didn't lose, *amigo*!"

Maria's teasing provocations were the only thing girlish about her actions.

"But I hear Claire Stanfield got you good."

"I can beat him now, no problem! And that's got nothing to do with you being weaker than me, *amigo*!" Maria laughed childishly. But Smith understood full well that she was capable of killing people without a care, despite her innocent attitude.

He also knew that, despite wielding a set of swords against a gunman, Maria was fighting against him on even ground.

But thanks to that fact, Smith could get his emotions under control. He lowered his guns.

"Yeah. You're right."

"?"

"I... am weaker than you."

"What's wrong, *amigo*? Begging for your life?" Maria asked curiously.

Smith relaxed and spoke quietly.

"After the Gandors left me lying in that hospital bed... I came to understand the truth."

He holstered the handgun he held in his right hand, and took out a shotgun like the one he was holding in his left.

"There are incurably insane monsters in this world that we can't possibly explain with logic."

Smith gave a self-deprecating laugh as he stripped off his coat.

"And so, I've learned to be a humble man."

He pulled off his sleeve, still holding the shotgun. His coat fell behind him with a thud.

Having tossed aside his thirty-kilogram coat, Smith stretched his neck with a crack.

"I've become an assassin who lives with reverence for God, the world, and the ideal of madness."



"...What are you talking about, *amigo*? I thought that coat was your armour!" Maria asked. But Smith even cast aside his hat.

Under the coat, Smith was wearing a dress shirt and black pants. It was a light outfit, but several guns were visible on the strange holster wrapped around his shirt.

"I thank this world that even allows a madman like me to live."

"I think you think you said something cool, *amigo*, but you really didn't." Maria replied, her tone somewhere between provocation and pointing out the obvious. Smith smirked.

"I also owe *you*, *Amigo* Girl."

"Really?"

"Ahem. On this momentous day I resume... oh."

Smith's eyes snapped open. He leapt into the air.

"Who gives a fuck?! **You talk shit about me and I'll kill you, bitch!**"

He rushed ahead faster, faster, faster than the words coming from his mouth. He violently charged forward, even though he was fighting with a pair of shotguns.

But Maria reacted even to such an unthinkable act, and swung the sword in her right hand.

"Ahahaha! Sorry, *amigo*! You're more funny and stupid than I thought!" Maria said. She had spoken without thinking, but her words were outpaced by her actions.

By the time she had finished her sentence, the powerful sound of metal on metal had rang out between the two fighters. A pair of shotgun barrels were crossed before Smith, blocking Maria's attack.

Her second sword went in for the kill.

But before she could land the final blow, Smith spun on the spot. The crossed guns turned into a windmill, as one of the shotguns pointed straight at Maria's torso. Smith pulled the trigger in the blink of an eye.



But Maria was a step ahead. She leaned backwards just in time, and used the momentum to kick up the shotgun.

Maria expected the gun to expel a slug and a monstrous roar, but for some reason, the round was a dud. She heard a crisp, clear *click*, and again kicked off the ground.

However, Smith had already switched his shotgun for a pair of handguns, one in each hand. He shot indiscriminately in the direction of his foe, not caring to choose specific targets on her body.

Maria narrowly dodged the bullets by darting straight towards Smith, thrusting her katana forward.

It was the moment of truth.

But Smith, coincidentally or otherwise, parried the thrust with the grip of his handgun. The force of the impact sent them both recoiling.

Smith ended up losing his hold on both his guns, and drew yet two more from his holsters. Maria crouched low at a distance, remaining still.

Whoever made the first hasty move would be the loser.

The difference between guns and swords was made irrelevant. The stances and distance between the fighters struck a stylish balance.

Smith and Maria both froze for a moment, and broke out smiling at the same time.

"...I'm surprised, *amigo*. You were actually pretty strong!"

"...I could say the same for you. Claire was toying with you like a rag doll, but..."

The air was sticky with tension.

The moment one of them so much as twitched, the scales would tip one way or another.

However--

Only a few seconds later, the scales themselves were crushed.

The sound of multiple guns being cocked.

Smith looked up slightly. A group of men were standing before him, as though closing off the building entrance.

It was clear from their dress that they were from the mob. Each man was carrying a Tommy gun or a sawed-off shotgun, every one of which was aimed at Smith.

For several seconds, everyone was silent.

"What's going on here?" Smith frowned and broke the silence. Maria glared at the newcomers, disgruntled.

"Hey, what are you doing, *amigos*? Can't you see we're having some fun here?"

Answering the female assassin was a man who carried himself with an even greater air of superiority.

"...Looked to me like it wouldn't end in just a kid's game."

"Nico!"

"...Sorry about this, Maria. You're a member of the Family, which means I can't let you get hurt while the bosses are out."

"Tch."

Maria sheathed her sword, deciding that there was no arguing with the newcomer.

Meanwhile, Smith was at the mercy of dozens of guns, unable to move a muscle.

Nico walked up to the hopeless assassin.

"...Raz Smith, I take it?" He asked, face covered in an emotionless mask.

"...Glad to see I'm getting some recognition here. Or should I say I'm an embarrassment of an assassin for being caught and recognized by a total stranger?" Smith said in an attempt to bluff his fear aside. The man called Nico snorted.

"I gotta hand it to ya. An idiot fighting off a sword with a gun, sure, but who'd have thought you'd get into a *swordfight* against Maria with 'em? I heard Boss Berga knocked you out good, but maybe you just got unlucky with your matchup." Nico said, taking out a cigarette instead of a gun and lighting it.

"The name's Nicola. Member of the Gandor Family. Wonder if that rotten maggoty mess of a brain can even tell what kinda mess you're in?"

"Apparently not. What the hell about one measly assassin scares 'em Gandor bosses so much?"

"You tryin' to play dumb?" Nico's eyes narrowed to slits and his tone grew deeper. "Raz Smith... No, maybe your head'll start working better if I called you Ice Pick Thompson."

"..."

Smith's eyes snapped open.

Nico seemed to have taken his silence as acknowledgement. He turned to his underlings, his expression unmoving.

"...Take him away."

"Hey. Hold it."

"If you got anything to say, we'll hear the rest through Tick later."

Nico turned away from Smith, as though he did not want to waste even another second looking at the assassin.

He then noticed two bright colours before him.

A human-shaped splotch of blue, and a spinning silver disc.

A chill ran down Nico's spine as he realized who the intruder was.

'*Graham Specter.*'

He was a delinquent who had clashed with the Gandor Family several times in the past, and yet lived to tell the tale and worse.

"This... This sad story... Should just END!"

The young man stopped spinning the wrench, and cried out loudly from behind the Gandor men.

"What are you bastards tryin' to do to Boss Smith?!"

Smith was the first to react to the voice of the intruder.

"...You idiot! I told you to go do whatever the hell you felt like!"

"And I felt like coming here, Boss. And... What the hell's goin' on here?"

"Nothing good, that's for sure... But I'd like to know what the hell's going on myself."

"Ugh... Even you yourself don't have a clue in the world, but you're trying to tell *me* to figure it out? This must be some sort of a trap. Has the Earth set out to deceive Graham Specter, the enemy of mankind?! Or is this the sun's doing after all?!"

Nico frowned at Graham's display.

"You again... Every time I see you, you're causing us trouble."

"Well, if it ain't ol' Mr. Nico."

Graham and Nicola looked at one another, faces distorting in recognition.

"What are you doing here."

"Why am I here...? That's a pretty damn philosophical question. Lemme try to answer that. The fact that I continue to *be* must mean that I've been *allowed* to be. Wait. But I'm the enemy of mankind. Then why? Damn you, cursed sun! I don't need your sympathy!"

"...Lemme try this again. How do you know this crazy assassin?"

Maria, who had been standing on the sidelines, butted into the conversation.

"What do you mean? The reporter told us this guy's the killer or one of his *amigos*, *amigo*!"

"We got into a couple scuffles with him before, but this kid ain't the type to commit murder."

"Really? That's no fun, *amigo*." Maria looked disappointed.

"Boss Smith, why're you fighting the Gandors? I thought you were done after they knocked you all the way into the hospital." Graham asked obliviously.

"So looks like you really had no idea." Nico sighed. "That this guy's Ice Pick Thompson."

Graham's eyes widened. He then tilted his head.

"What're you saying? Ice Pick Thompson's-"

Graham then remembered that Elmer had asked him to keep Mark's identity a secret. He spun his wrench around and corrected himself.

"Ice Pick Thompson's... uh, who was that again?"

"We're saying this Smith person here's Ice Pick Thompson, *amigo*."

"Nonononono. That! Is an inconceivable notion."

Maria was confused. Graham let out a hearty laugh.

"Sure, Boss Smith is an assassin, but he's never actually killed anyone before."

Silence came over the building once more.

All eyes were on Smith, awkward and surprised.

Smith, meanwhile, took a deep breath like a man taking an oath, and uttered one simple sentence.

"It's true that I'm Ice Pick Thompson."

"Boss?" Graham asked, astonished. Nico, however, narrowed his eyes.

"So you admit to it?"

"That's right. I've killed four men so far, though the fifth one's still out there."

"You feeling all right, Boss? You get shot in the head or something?!"

"...?"

Smith's unexpected confession left Graham confused. Nico just stood there and stared at him.

The assassin grinned under the eyes of his audience, and slowly continued.

"I am Ice Pick Thompson... But those murders weren't for money. It was vengeance."

<=>

### **The basement of the Jazz Hall 'Coraggioso'.**

"I'm real sorry, but I gotta get back to my desk. Never know when I'll get some new info."

Lester slowly got off his seat. The Gandor men stood up after him.

"That's it, then. We're counting on you."

"Please, we're working *together* here."

"Right... Watch your back, you hear? It's still raining out there."



"Don't have to tell me twice." Lester said with a laugh, but in his head he was laughing for another reason.

*'If, by any chance, that assassin spills the beans about me...*

*'I'd better think up an excuse just in case, but for now, I'd better get to that kid's place. I might even be able to find "it" as early as today.'*

It was a rather unlikely hope, but Lester as he was had no way of discerning that fact.

On the underside of his skin were all kinds of 'deaths'.

The memory of committing murder with his own two hands.

Or the memory of a game of killing in which he was only tangentially involved.

Just imagining the outcome was enough to satisfy him.

And with that as his fuel, the killer obsessed with his own life put on the smile of a reporter and headed for the stairs leading to the exit.

He began to step onto the stairs, when--

"Oh? You're back! Did you forget something?" Tick, sitting in a corner, asked in a leisurely tone.

*'What?'*

Lester spun round and looked at Tick. Tick was looking at a point slightly above Lester.

Someone was at the top of the stairs.

Could it be the dancer girl, he wondered. He looked up at the newcomer.

At the same time, the men in the basement froze in shock.

Right before Lester's eyes was a tiny shadow charging towards him, an ice pick in its hand.

The next moment, Lester's body fell down the stairs in a heap.

However, the pain of the landing was not an issue for him. This was because the agonizing sensation running through his shoulder had overcome his entire body.

"AAAAAAAARGH! Gah, HAAAAAAHHHH!"

Lester squirmed on the floor, not realizing what had happened to his body.

"Hey, stop!" "Crazy kid!" "You all right, Mr. Reporter?" "Don't go calling a doctor, you maroon!" "Oh, it's all right. You don't die right away if you're stabbed like that." "That ain't the problem here, Tick!" "Who the hell are you, kid?!"

It was surprising how clearly he could hear all these voices. Lester shut his eyes tightly to shake off the tears in his eyes, then turned his head to look over at the stairs and the source of his pain.

Before his eyes was a boy descending the stairs.

"I finally found you..."

The boy was staring down at Lester with a fiendish look, holding a bloodied, rusty ice pick.

"You weren't at your office, and you never came to my apartment... so I thought I might find you here."

<=>

**One hour ago, Mark's apartment.**

The sudden *click* sounding behind him instantly brought Mark back to his senses. When he turned around, he found the man who had supposedly been sent to kill him-- holding the shotgun he had just tried to shoot and sighing.

"Ah, right. I remember now. I took out all the rounds because shotguns were too risky to carry like this. Damn. This isn't like me at all."

"...?"

Mark shot the strangely dramatic man a dubious look.

"What're you up to...? Why... Why won't you kill me?"

"...Listen up, kid. What just happened is that I killed you. But--"

The man would go on to suggest a deal. Not with Mark, but the serial killer, Ice Pick Thompson.

"I'll give you a future, in exchange for your past."

"...What?"

"I may be an assassin, but I don't have much of a reputation. I don't have a track record, and I don't have any insane stories to tell. That's when I thought--how 'bout this for an assassin? The true identity of 'Ice Pick Thompson', the mysterious and insane serial killer."

"...What?"

The serial killer had not understood a thing the assassin was saying. Mark blinked rapidly, not knowing how to react.

"...I'm tryin' to say I'll help you in exchange for your record, kid."

"No, well, I get that, but... Why?"

"I told you. I need a reputation."

"..."

Mark tilted his head, still clueless. Smith sighed in defeat, and cautiously looked around.

"...Shut up and do what I say. I don't want to kill a kid, okay?" He said sheepishly. Mark's eyes widened.

"But you're an assassin, aren't you? Aren't you betraying your client?"

"Listen up, kid. Assassins are all insane beyond cure, no exceptions."

"...And?"

Mark looked as though he had encountered an exotic creature he had never heard of in his entire life. Smith opened his arms wide and chuckled. His declaration, far from embarrassed, was full of pride.

"...It's my client's fault for trusting a madman."

<=>

### **The basement of the Jazz Hall 'Coraggioso'.**

"Y-you're...?! Paula's-! How, damn it?! Shit!"

Lester's earlier glee at toying with the lives of others had evaporated. Now he was writhing on the floor more than was warranted by his pain, imagining the footsteps of Death approaching closer.

His injury was far from lethal, but Lester had never experienced this degree of pain. It was enough to fool him into thinking he was about to die.

"SHIT! GAAAAHHH! Fucking brat! What the hell was that shithead *doing*? Fuck! Fuck! Kill him now, damn it! Shot him dead! I'm gonna fucking die! NOOOOOOOOO!"

Lester screamed as he hideously rolled on the floor. The Gandor men looked at him in displeasure, but they reached into their jackets and glared at the boy standing at the stairs.

Though they did not open fire straightaway, they remembered the fact that several of their friends had been murdered in this very room two years ago. The experience left them more wary than they would have been otherwise.

The boy was carrying a strange paper bag in his left hand, and obviously an ice pick in his right. But otherwise they did not see any possible weapons in his possession.

"What's wrong? It's dangerous playing around with ice picks, you know." Tick said, alone in his relaxed outlook. Mark smiled faintly.

"I'm sorry. I... I'll try not to bother you all." He mumbled.

"I dunno what's going on here, kid. But you're plenty of a bother as it is." One of the men said, tentatively drawing a gun and pointing it at the boy. "What's in that bag? Easy now, show it to us real slow."

The mafioso was acting out of caution, but Lester, gripped by the hallucinatory fear of death, took it as too lax a measure.

He staggered to his feet and charged at the man holding the gun.

"Give it here, you bastard!"

"What?!"

The man was taken by surprise at Lester's unexpected strength, and the loaded gun was snatched away.

And before any of the men could say a word--

Before the boy could reach into the bag--

Before even Lester realized what he was doing--

The trigger was pulled without mercy. Metal lodged itself into human flesh.

However, the flesh did not belong to the boy. The victim was a sudden newcomer who had jumped from the upper floor as if to shield him.

"...You're..." Mark gasped, mind reeling from the sudden impact.

He was looking directly at the immortal monster that had been chasing after him all this time.

"Hey there. Are you all right? That was a close one." Elmer smiled, relieved, but blood was dribbling from his lips and spewing out his back.

"But... you're the one that's... Why...?!"

It was only then that the boy remembered who he was talking to.

"...Don't tell me... it doesn't hurt?"

"It hurts. It's really painful. And could you take a look at your right hand?"

"Huh...?"

Mark looked down and realized that, in the commotion, the ice pick he was holding had been jammed into Elmer's thigh.

"Ack! I-I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry about it. It's all my fault, really."

Elmer pulled out the ice pick as though nothing had happened and got to his feet with a smile, despite the fact that he had been shot in the back.

Lester and the mafiosi swallowed their breaths at the sight.

But not a moment later, they were even further shocked by the display of fantasy that took place.

The blood flowing from Elmer's back and leg crawled back into him, as though in defiance of both gravity and time.

Each droplet of blood went back to its original place, as though they were possessed of minds of their own. The mafiosi watched the crawling streams of red and looked around at one another.

(Hey, isn't this...?) (Just like the bosses...) (Who the hell is this guy?) They whispered among themselves.

The Gandor men took away the gun from Lester, who stood stock still and gaped, even forgetting the pain in his shoulder as he brought a certain word to his trembling lips.

"An... immortal...?!"

The monster's sudden appearance instantly nullified the tension running through the basement. Yet all he did was smile without a care, not even checking to see that his injuries were healing.

"Sorry about this. I didn't mean to make a scene here. Ah, are you sure you're all right?" Elmer asked Mark. But the boy batted his hand away.

"Don't touch me!" He cried as he looked away, nearly in tears. "Why... why did you have to suddenly show up like that... you've got nothing to do with this... so why are you trying to save me?!"

"It's a hobby of mine." Elmer answered with surprising quickness. Mark glared at him.

"Don't make me laugh! I... I'm not worth being saved! I never had that right!"

"You shouldn't be the one to decide that, am I right? Don't be silly, now." Elmer said, mystified. Mark shook his head.

"Shut up! I... he... that man back then had nothing to do with this..."

He realized that he was even more confused than he thought.

*'What's wrong with me? This monster doesn't know a thing about me, or my past. He doesn't know about... what I've done...'* He thought, falling into self-hatred.

"Ah! Speaking of which!"

The moment Elmer heard the words "that man back then had nothing to do with this", he clapped his hands together in a moment of epiphany.

"That man over there. His name's Lester, right? Ah, now it all makes sense. It's all coming together now."

"Huh...?"

"Wha...?"

Mark, suddenly having lost the lead in the conversation, and Lester, having his name suddenly called, both looked up at Elmer.

Elmer beamed as he descended the stairs and stared at Lester's form.

"Wow. You're even wearing the same brand."

"Wh-what the hell...? I... you... shit!"

Lester cried out, remembering the pain in his shoulder. Elmer tossed him a word of concern ("Are you all right? Try not to worry. This isn't even close to lethal.") and turned around to face Mark.

"That makes everything clear!"

"Wh-what...?"

Elmer's entirely out-of-place attitude compelled Mark to answer, even letting him forget for a moment the reason he was here.

The immortal monster seemed to be amused by his reaction, judging from his widening grin.

"So *that's* why you stabbed me the other day!"

"...What?"



"It was quite the downpour, eh? We resemble one another quite a bit, and our builds are similar. And this is the very same outfit I wore that day! It's no small wonder you mistook me for Mr. Lester here and stabbed me."

<=>

### **Inside the abandoned building.**

"And so, I wandered in search of the last man in order to avenge Paula's death."

"..."

Smith ended his exceedingly long monologue. Nico and the others were locked in awkward silence.

Graham and Maria had given up on battle about halfway through Smith's story, and were currently a slight distance away from them, engaged in banter about whether her katanas could slice through his wrench.

As it turned out, Graham had realized partway through Smith's story that he was reusing Mark's past. Maria was not interested at all to begin with.

"Anything else you wanna know?"

"...Well... Come to think of it, Carl told us the connection behind the victims."

"Hm?"

"Apparently, there's a chance they approached our Family with ulterior motives in mind." He thought for a moment, but shook his head and glared at Smith. "But in the end, it is true that you killed members of our Family. And as long as that remains true, I can't just let you off on my judgement alone. We'll leave it to Tick to see if you were just telling the truth or not."

Nicola had probably sensed the possibility that Smith was lying. The gunman claimed that this woman named Paula was like a sister to him, but Nico could not feel a shred

of affection or sadness in his story. He prepared to signal his men to take away the firearms Smith concealed all over himself.

But that that very moment, his eardrums were assaulted by the sound of destruction. Graham had thrown his wrench into the space between Smith and Nico. The tool lodged itself deep in the wall.

"...Not gonna behave yourself today, Graham?" Nico asked, annoyed. Graham gleefully spun around and around and stopped in front of Smith.

"Sorry, but Boss Smith here has shown me the joy of taking guns apart until they were miniature pieces, so I sure as hell ain't letting him go without a fight. All of humanity's already my enemy, so might as well add the Gandors to the list."

"Which brings you back full circle. But you're seriously gonna help this guy, even if he's Ice Pick Thompson?"

"Hey, I've been hanging 'round a freaking awesome homicidal lunatic forever. Then again, *he's* the kind of bastard who killed people just for the hell of it." Graham said, gesticulating like a juvenile delinquent. The Gandor men prepared to turn their guns towards him.

"I see. Put down your guns, all of you."

"B-but, Nico!"

"The bastard over there went crazy with those guns. The cops're probably going crazy trying to figure out where all the gunshots came from. We're not gonna be idiots and bring them any closer."

"...Then is it my turn, *amigo*?" Maria said, rushing over.

Nico gave a wry grin and shook his head, stepping forward to declare his intent to handle the matter personally.

Smith, his guns lowered, turned to Graham.

"...Kid. How strong is he?"

"I fought 'im a couple times."

"And?"

Graham pulled out his wrench from the wall and gave Smith a thumbs-up and a wink.

"Six losses to one victory!"

"Almost brings tears to my eyes."

"But Mr. Nico here's no good at fighting off Tommy guns. They almost got him with 'em last time, y'know. I'll just jump in and it'll be a real heck of a Mexican standoff!"

"You sound like you're saying you can beat a Tommy gun. And what's this guy, a monster? He survived getting shot with 'em?" Smith chuckled, nodding. "But... Those aren't bad odds for a madman like me."

Maria ignored Nico and prepared to draw. Graham laughed, and turned to Smith.

"Seein' as we might end up pushing daisies after this, I gotta ask you something, Boss."

"Yeah?"

"What'd Elmer say to you way back before you got in here?"

"Ah, well..."

(Mr. Smith, was it? You're a pretty nice person, aren't you?)

(...What?)

(I can see through fake smiles, y'know. And I saw you force one when you said you killed Mark. And that was the only time you did. So I'm guessing, either you didn't kill him, or you feel remorse for your actions.)

(...)

(Either way, I think you're a good person. Just wanted to let you know.)

Smith looked down and chuckled bitterly.

"...A good person, eh? He was pretty insane himself."

"What?"

"...I'll tell you if I get outta this alive."

In an instant, the tension had become palpable.

Although Nico had his men remain on standby for the moment, they were ready to draw at any moment.

At this rate, the standoff would not end without bloodshed.

However--

"...!"

Nico twitched, sensing a change on the streets outside.

"..."

"What's wrong, Nico?" One of his men asked nervously.

"...We're clearin' out." Nico mumbled, his voice clear of tension.

"Huh? Why so suddenly, *amigo*?"

"Nico?"

Nico suddenly relaxed. His underlings blinked rapidly, confused, but a glance at the entrance of the abandoned building told them all they needed to know.

At the entrance was Shaft, panting and leaning against the wall.

Behind him was a crowd of about twenty young delinquents from the streets.

"Hah... Haha... Damn it, Boss! You have any idea how hard it was to round up all the guys at this hour?!"

Shaft was so pale he looked just about ready to collapse, but he did not leave out anything of importance.

"I called over the guys at Millionaire Row, too. They'll be here any minute now." He grinned, giving Graham a thumbs-up. Graham's eyes widened in surprise as he spoke up.

"Don't you think you're going overboard with this whole shebang? Just like... a war. Yes. Are you trying to wage a goddamn war against the rest of humanity, Shaft? In the end, you were the true enemy of humanity...? What to do? Will I be able to stop Shaft's reign of terror? All these people... what're you planning to do with an army like this? Don't be hasty, Shaft! In the end, all that's left will be the tears of your family and friends... But before that, *my* tears!"

"...I called 'em here to lynch you before you could get into a fight with the Gandors, Boss. ...Huh?"

Spotting Nico approaching him, Shaft got out of his way without even thinking.

Maria turned her back on Nico and pouted.

"No fighting today? I could just chop them all up, *amigo*!"

"We go up against a mob like this, and it won't be just a tussle or an interrogation anymore. It's all-out war."

"But you and me, Nico, we could take them on, *amigo*."

"Forget *me*, the Bosses haven't given me permission to let any of *you* get hurt. *Or* permission to annihilate these brats."

The delinquents flinched at the sharpness in Nico's tone. But none of them tried to leave, likely counting on Graham's presence to keep them safe.

Nico stopped just before exiting the building and turned to Smith, who was about to pick up his hat.

"Lemme ask you one last thing."

"...Yeah?"

"Even if you're lying about being Ice Pick Thompson..."

"..."

*'Shit. He figured me out.'* Smith thought, annoyed. Nico continued plainly.

"You're not the one who killed Lisha... am I right?"

"That's right. I swear on my insanity and the shred of sanity left in this brain of mine--that, at least, is true."

"Then who was it that killed her?"

"That would be my last target."

Smith smiled self-deprecatingly as he brought up the name of the young reporter Mark had told him about.

And with that knowledge in hand, Nico--

<=>

### **The basement of the Jazz Hall 'Coraggioso'.**

"Actually, I was looking for someone named Szilard. I looked into a few things here and there, and found out Mr. Lester here might have had something to do with him. So I went to the newspaper company he works at--not the Daily Days, mind you--and stood around at the back of the building. That's when someone suddenly stabbed me out of nowhere! I thought I might die of shock, but that's when the person who stabbed me took off with this terrified face, saying 'It's not him.'."

Elmer elaborated on the specifics of the situation without even being asked to. But the others in the basement could do nothing but gape at him in shock. The torture specialist Tick was about the only one nodding to his monologue, but no one knew how much of Elmer's story he actually understood.

"So I went off to look for that boy and found him standing on the edge of Brooklyn Bridge. Then it was my turn to be terrified. Ahaha!"

Elmer suddenly wiped the smile from his face and whispered into Mark's ear.

"...Now that I think about it, would you prefer these people not know about you being Ice Pick Thompson? I could pretend I don't know a thing."

"...Never mind. It doesn't matter at this point."

Mark seemed to be having trouble accepting the entirety of the situation. With a tired look he crumpled to his knees.

But he was quickly brought back to reality by the sound of Lester's voice.

"Y-you! An immortal... like Szilard?!"

"That's right. So you really *do* know old Szilard."

"P-please. I'll do anything you say! A-anything! So please... The elixir...!" Lester beseeched Elmer, desperately kneeling like a man in prayer.

His words reached Mark's ears. The boy could instantly feel something dark stirring inside him. Lester's actions were beyond pathetic to him, and it was less than a second before his condescendence turned to outrage.

"So... You'd go that far for *this thing*?"

"...What?"

Madness was clear in Lester's tone. His eyes could see Mark pulling out a small bottle from the paper bag he was holding.

At first Lester had no idea what it was.

But the moment he saw the liquor-like substance swirling inside, his thoughts began to stir like those of a madman.

"No! It can't be!"

"Back when mom was still alive... we buried this bottle at dad's grave. I always wondered why we had to do that, but now I know. You were looking for this, weren't you?"

"So it's true...! The incomplete elixir's still here! Mark! Please! P-please give it to me. That liquor should have belonged to all of us equally."

"...You killed my mom over this liquor?"

"...! N-no! It was her! Your mother Paula was the one at fault! You saw that man's wounds healing, didn't you?! We could become like him! We could be free from death! The essence of all humanity's dreams! That's not something anyone should keep for themselves!"

"Humanity's... dreams?" Mark whispered coldly, hearing Lester's increasingly incomprehensible cries. The hatred welling in his heart had finally reached the breaking point.

"That's it...? You killed my mom over *something that stupid?!!*"

Mark slowly raised the bottle upwards.

"H-hey! Stop! What are you doing?! Look, I'll give you whatever you want! So please..."

"You know why I brought this here? It wasn't so I could drink it, and I'm not going to give it to you, either."

With a look both murderous and sorrowful, he swung his arm above his head.

His face had been masked by that of a cold-blooded serial killer.

"I brought this here so I could destroy it right before your eyes."





"STOP, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Lester leapt from the spot like a wild beast, charging towards Mark.

Mark did not let this chance pass him by.

And before anyone could stop him, Mark thrust out his right hand as Lester rushed towards him, just as he had planned.

Naturally, he was holding the ice pick.

But the strike that pierced Lester's neck was not nearly enough to end his obsession with immortality.

Though the ice pick was driven into Lester's neck, the man clung to Mark's clothes and crawled up towards his left arm like a creature possessed.

Mark pulled out the ice pick from Lester's neck, and stabbed him again and again--in his chest, his stomach, and his leg.

But Lester could not be stopped. He snatched the bottle from Mark without giving him the chance to shatter it against the floor, and kicked the boy aside.

Blood began to stain Lester's clothing. It was spewing from his neck in rhythm with the beating of his heart. He had also been thrown back by the impact of kicking Mark away, but Lester did not seem to realize what kind of a state he was in.

At this very moment in time, not even he himself existed in his world. All that mattered was the incomplete elixir of immortality he grasped in his hands.

Although he could not escape old age, this liquor would allow him to survive any physical injury.

He tore at the cork with a monstrous expression. The mafiosi watched him, their brows creased with frowns.

"Is that the Grand Panacea, by any chance?" Elmer asked gravely, watching Lester writhe on the floor while unsealing the bottle. "It's not such a good idea to drink--"

Elmer tried to stop him, but Lester shook him off with a "Outta my way!" and downed the contents of the bottle in one gulp.

He forced the liquor down his throat, almost as if to counter the flow of blood from his neck.

*'Hah. Hahaha! I drank it! I'm immortal!'* Lester thought, intending to shout out loud.

"Urk... Grurrrrgh... Kack... Ack...?"

Air was leaking from his throat. He could not speak.

"...? Gah... Haaaaaargh..."

As his sanity returned to him, Lester realized that the searing agony across his body had not been lifted.

"AAAAAAAARGH! GAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

His neck was no longer bleeding.

And yet, for some reason, his wounds showed no signs of healing.

Not only that, the blood that he had spilled earlier did not return to him, as Elmer's had.

Elmer looked down at Lester, writhing in confusion, and sighed solemnly.

"That's why I tried to stop you."

"Urghhh! Aaaaack! ...?!"

"The Grand Panacea makes you immortal, no doubt about that, but it doesn't heal your previous injuries."

Elmer was stoic in the face of the screaming man laying with puncture wounds all over his body.

It was enough to give Mark and the other mafiosi chills.

"It's the same with illnesses. Your health won't deteriorate, sure, but the Grand Panacea accepts your body when you drank it as its normal state."

"...!"

"I've been told it has a bit of a mind of its own and naturally improves things over time, but with injuries like yours... It might take a very long time. Or it might be faster to count on your mind to break first so you wouldn't feel pain any longer."

How much of Elmer's lengthy explanation had Lester taken in? He had lost so much blood, but he could not even lose consciousness. Lester could do nothing but scream, drowning in deathly pain.

What was Mark thinking, watching his mother's killer in this way?

"Are you satisfied now? Or does the fact that he's alive mean you still have some unfinished business?" Elmer quietly asked the stone-faced boy.

Mark, however, did not answer the question. Instead, he chose to ask one of his own.

"...How'd you know I was here?"

"Well... This man named Shaft asked me to help him round up some of his friends. That's when I spotted you walking through the rain with the darkest expression I've seen yet. 'I'll take care of the situation at the building, so please go after him', Shaft said to me, and let me come follow you. But I'd never have thought I'd get involved in a commotion like this."

Coincidences were terrifying yet interesting, Elmer explained, and continued with a smile.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I'd wanted to follow Shaft to the condemned building, but it's certainly a good thing I did what he told me to. If you were a girl and slightly older, I'd even call him my Cupid, but that's another story."

"A... condemned building?"

Elmer was talking half-jokingly, but most of it meant nothing to Mark, who had no idea about Graham's situation. The same went for the Gandor men standing around them.

"All right. Don't take another step."

"I don't know how you know this reporter, but... immortal aside, we can't let you go, ice pick kid. You're gonna have a nice long stay here 'til the bosses get back."

They slowly but tentatively closed in on Mark and Elmer.

However, the next moment, they heard the sound of many sets of footsteps at the top of the stairs.

"N-Nico!"

The men in the basement tensed as Nico and Maria returned.

"...What's going on here?"

Nico's eyes narrowed when he caught sight of the boy holding the bloodied ice pick. But his gaze then wandered to Lester, groaning in pain on the floor. He sighed as though he understood everything.

"And you would be Mark... Mark Wilmans, correct?"

"...? How'd...?"

"Lisha never stopped talkin' about you. Said there was a kid who looked after her instead of the other way around."

"Lisha said that...?"

Mark slowly returned to his true colours as a child, spurred by shock.

"Answer me. Are you Mark?"

"...Mark... Mark Wilmans... was just killed by an assassin."

The boy looked down, unable to look the man in the eye, but even still he refused to turn tail and run.

"I... I'm just a serial killer. Ice Pick Thomp-"

"You don't have to say anything else."

"...?"

"After all, I'm coming back from talking to Ice Pick Thompson in the flesh."

Nico smirked, walking towards the middle of the room. One of the men went up to him and explained the situation.

Nico listened to the report in silence, then looked down at Lester.

"I see. Just like the bosses, eh?"

At that very moment, Nico's right foot mercilessly crushed Lester's left hand.

"AAAAAARGH!"

Lester's fingers snapped with a sharp crack. Wind and screaming leaked out from his throat. But his fingers, bent in odd directions, rapidly regained their original shape.

"Tick."

"Yes, Mr. Nicola?" Tick answered, his scissors dancing in the air.

"You can take the rest of the day off." Nico said, wearing a look of pure ice.

"Oh?" Tick tilted his head.

"This bastard here's gonna have to deal with me." Nico replied, suppressing his emotions with every ounce of self-control he could muster.

"You will?"

"That's right. I might not be a torture specialist like you, but if he's not going to die no matter what I do to him... I might as well have a ball. Let off some stress."

Elmer sighed quietly as he listened to the conversation. He crouched down beside Lester, who was still groaning in agony, and gently whispered to him.

"Say, I have an idea that might make you happy."

"...???"

"If you think you'll be happier dying this very instant, and if you can go out with a smile... I could devour you now with my right hand. ...But only if you promise me you'll be smiling."

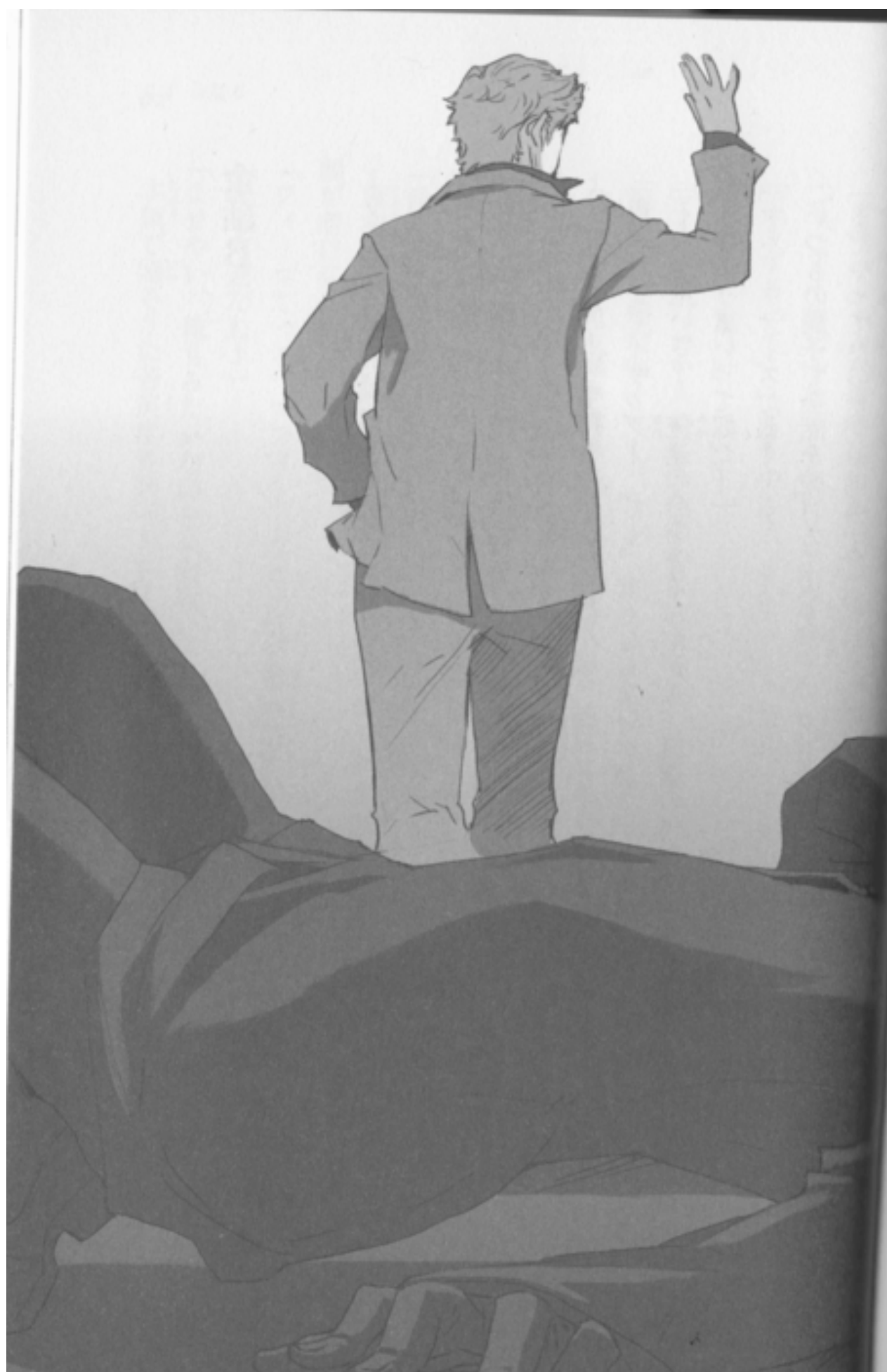
Lester had likely understood what would happen to him very soon.

And yet he shook his head as though in denial. A soundless scream escaped from the hole in his throat.

"I see. That's a shame." Elmer said quietly. But a smile soon returned to his face.

"Then how about this?" He said gently. "I'll be back in a few years... once you've changed your mind."

"Maybe by then, we'll have found a way to ease your suffering. And maybe the hearts of the people you've hurt will have been mended."





## Aside B

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**A certain day in a certain month, at the speakeasy 'Alveare'.**

"Now that I think about it, how exactly do we go about becoming money?"

"How about we wear clothes made out of coins?"

"Of course! That's brilliant, Miria! I'm sure layers upon layers of coins would be enough to stop even bullets! Hold on, now. I'll step out and exchange all of our bills for change!"

"Okay, Isaac! But won't it be heavy?"

"Of course! But remember, Miria. These clothes are responsible for protecting our very lives. So it's only natural it weighs more than a person. In other words, money is heavier than a life!"

"Get your money's worth!"

Isaac and Miria's conversation was as incomprehensible as ever. Firo sighed again.

"Are you two still at it?"

The young camorrista cleaned up his glass, melted ice and all, and turned to the unusual duo.

"So say you manage to block Ice Pick Thompson's attack. What're you gonna do after that?"

"Well... Uh, what *are* we going to do, Miria?"

"Get rid of him?"

"But we still have no idea if he's even a bad guy."

"What a tough question."

Firo's eyes widened as Isaac and Miria debated the morality of their plans.

"Hey, just setting the first part aside for a sec. You wouldn't ever call a murderer a *good* guy, would you?"

"But some people are nice, even if they've killed people before."

"Just like Jacuzzi!"

"What's with that name?" Firo wondered out loud. But instead of receiving an answer, he was greeted with a pair of warm smiles.

"Firo, even a Prohibition-ignoring mafi-... camorrista like you is a good guy!"

"You're all good guys!"

"Hey, don't just assume we're all actually nice people. You might end up getting yourselves in a whole mess of trouble." Firo warned with a wry grin. But the duo's reply was less than expected.

"Don't be so humble, Firo! At first, we thought you were all villains and tried to steal money from you because we thought no one would scold us for it! But now look at us! Bosom friends I'm proud to associate with!"

"Ennis helped you too, so that makes you even better!"

"Whoa, hold it. Didn't ya just say something pretty big about stealing from us?" Firo spluttered, unwilling to let that one point slide so easily.

But Isaac and Miria waved away the topic with a pair of optimistic pats on his shoulders.

"Don't worry about it, Firo. It's all in the past! And as you can see, instead of money, we're stealing your time!"

"Money is time!"

"..."

*'Maybe I should've just let that one slide.'*

Fearing that another executive might catch wind of the bomb that Isaac and Miria had just dropped, Firo hurriedly chased them out of the speakeasy. He returned to the counter and sighed loudly.

"Me? A good person...?" He muttered, comparing himself to Ice Pick Thompson.

Firo was also guilty of murder.

He once killed a man named Szilard Quates, a madman with no hope of redemption. It was true that Szilard had taken many more lives than Ice Pick Thompson could ever hope to match. But Firo thought that, perhaps the fact that he had stolen the life of even a lowlife like him made him little different from Ice Pick Thompson.

Redemption did not come for murderers. Even Firo knew this well.

He also knew that, as a man who willingly joined the camorra, he could never find complete salvation.

In that sense, perhaps salvation itself was the punishment given to him for his crimes.

Some people might claim that no punishment was too severe for a serial killer.

But what if Isaac and Miria were right, and Ice Pick Thompson wasn't an unrepentant villain?

What if he was not on an indiscriminate killing spree, but acting on some reasons of his own?

Or to take it another step further, what if it was the kind of murder that took place in a war zone? Something that everyone agreed was unavoidable?

Firo shrugged.

*'But then again, he had to go murder a prostitute that didn't look like she had anything to do with anyone.'*

Not knowing the truth, Firo continued.

If the police were to never catch Ice Pick Thompson, would he or she continue to murder people, without ever being brought to justice? Would they cackle villainously at their good fortune?

On the other hand, if the serial killings had been carried out for a specific purpose, and the murderer was never granted the salvation of punishment, would they be able to live with that burden for the rest of their lives?

Even if Ice Pick Thompson was a good person and his victims were evil, there would still be no salvation for him.

Murder was murder, no matter the excuse.

Setting aside the matter of determination, the act of stepping into the shoes of a murderer was an act of rejecting salvation.

And naturally, not even Firo himself could be saved completely from the act of having murdered Szilard. Adding to that was the fact that he justified his own actions and dared to hope to one day marry the girl he loved. At this point, he was a regular scoundrel who could arguably be even worse than just a plain old murderer.

But if he was to be punished for it all one day, he hoped that he could bear the burden of it all on his own.

Firo remembered his flatmate, the woman he loved, and quietly closed his eyes.

A small figure approached him.

"Are you thinking about what Isaac and Miria were saying earlier, big brother? Are you worried that you're not a good person?"

"Czes..."

"That's nothing to lose sleep over, big brother. You have a long, long time ahead of you. There's no merit in debating ethics and morality over trifles." Czes said, more detached than mature. "Until just a few years ago in this country, opening up a bar was entirely legal. But now it's considered a crime. Although I guess almost no countries or time periods would condone murder, you never know what the future is going to bring. Think about the exceptions people make for wartime, for one."

"..."

"We immortals have no choice but to reconcile our beliefs with those of the time we live in. Concepts like good and evil are meaningless once the ages go by and countries change."

Czes, the older immortal, was lecturing his younger friend.

"In that sense, Isaac and Miria were right on the mark when they said that people couldn't defeat time. Even setting aside matters like aging and lifespan."

Firo looked at Czes's resigned smile and tried to say something, but stopped himself as he realized there was nothing he could do for the boy at this point.

Perhaps this had something to do with the wall standing between them and Czes. He wondered if he should continue this topic of discussion, when Czes suddenly spoke up.

"Oh, but there are some eccentrics among us immortals."

"Eccentrics?"

"What I said to you earlier was actually something I heard from someone else. He said that an immortal, who would live in all sorts of times and places, would have no choice but to reconcile their beliefs according to the age..."

Czes nostalgically recounted the words and faces of his fellow alchemists, who had become immortal alongside himself.

"That's when someone else butted in with a smile. 'I don't care,' he said, 'I won't compromise my belief for eras or countries. After all, people's smiles are equal no matter where or when they are. That's why smiles will be the only standard I live by. My own law, if you will', he told us with a completely straight face."

Czes remembered the alchemist who had been willing to die for the smiles of others, even before he had attained immortality--and brought himself to show an honest smile.

"Sometimes you could be terribly eerie, but I wonder how you're doing now... Elmer."

## **Epilogue :**

### **Both the Immortals and The Living Share the World Together**

-----

He remembered what his mother had told him at his father's grave two years ago.

"Listen carefully, Mark. If anyone takes you away and asks you where it is, you must tell them about this place before they do anything to you, do you understand?"

His mother buried the box containing the bottle at his father's grave. She then embraced him so tightly he thought he might break.

"I thought about having you drink it, but... I just couldn't go through with it. That would be too selfish of me. We still have no idea if you'll come to love this world or not."

Mark did not understand what his mother was saying. So he continued to listen.

"That's why... that's why you must be strong, Mark. And one day, when you learn everything, remember this place. What you do with the bottle will be your decision."

His mother's warmth soothed his heart. Mark could never forget the smile she showed him that day. But only several days later, she was found dead with countless holes in her body.

And he could never smile as she did again.

<=>

It was morning after the commotion.

"I'm glad we got out of there safely." Elmer said to Mark. They had both been released from the Gandor hideout without a fuss.

"How're you feeling now? Do you think you can smile, now that you've taken your revenge?"

"..."

Mark glared at the tactless immortal monster.

"I'm sorry. I suppose it's not that simple of an answer."

"..."

Elmer followed after the silent Mark and continued.

"Revenge, you see, isn't something you do for the dead. It's something of a struggle for your own life... like an act of reconciling your own feelings with reality in order to move forward. A lot of people claim they plan to die after taking revenge, but even that's just their way of reaching the goal of dying happy."

"..."

"You've gotten your revenge, and you're moving forward. You've earned your right to be happy. But then again, I have no idea whether that's morally right or not, and I honestly don't care."

The immortal monster was neither praising nor criticizing Mark. He continued nonchalantly.

"Are you wondering if you have to make amends for what you've done?"

"..."

"I'd say, go right ahead if it'll make you smile. If you have regrets, then think of how you'll redeem yourself. Allowing one of your victims' relatives to get revenge on you might be an option, as long as you're satisfied with that."

Although Elmer was pouring out one tactless comment after another, Mark knew that he meant nothing ill by it.

So he continued to listen, refusing to run away.

"Just keep thinking about it until you feel better about it. You don't need to give up, but just remember one thing."

"..."

"I'll never deny you the right to be happy, even if the rest of the world does otherwise. Don't forget that such people exist."

Mark finally stopped. He turned around and looked Elmer straight in the eye.

"I... I think you're creepy for saying all these things with a straight face. And to be honest, I'm scared of you. I don't want to say this, but I'm scared that if someone like you is really immortal, you'll end up destroying the world someday."

"Ah, there's nothing to be sorry about. It's a perfectly normal reaction. An old friend of mine always used to say, 'Your goodwill is worse than the wrath of God'. Pretty harsh of him, don't you think? Hah!"

With that, Elmer was done. He waved to Mark and turned away.

But the boy suddenly called him back. Elmer turned around.

"But still... Thanks. For everything. I mean it."

It was for a single fleeting moment, but Elmer could see a faint smile on Mark's face.

And that was enough for him.

<=>

### **Evening. The speakeasy 'Jane Doe'.**

Having finished his report to the President of the Daily Days, Carl paid a visit to the speakeasy where Graham and his gang were supposed to be. After speaking to them, he visited the Gandors' jazz hall and put together a nearly complete picture of the events that had taken place.



*'So in the end... Lester never fled New York.'*

Carl had expected Lester to skip town immediately after hiring Smith. Why had he gone to the Gandors despite himself--a man who did not wish for adventure in his life?

Carl voiced his confusion before the President.

*"...I can only surmise that the bloodlust of the killer within him had been influencing the actions of his normal self."* The President replied after a moment, his tone as gentle as ever.

*'If that's the way it is... Maybe he avoided adventure because he didn't want to face the killer within himself again.'*

*'Or maybe I'm giving him way too much credit.'*

Feeling pity for his former co-worker, Carl descended the stairs and thought of Mark.

He was intending to adopt the boy if he could, but when he made his offer to Mark--

"Thank you... but Mark Wilmans is already dead."

He shook his head, pointing out that a dead boy could not be adopted.

*'What's he planning to do now? Is he going to leave New York?'*

*'Or is he going to turn himself in? ...Then again, I heard that a mysterious department from the Bureau of Investigation always intervenes with anything that relates to the Elixir...'*

*'But either way, it must have been a painful experience for a child, committing murder.'*

Despite his youth, Mark could so easily take the lives of humans. The fact that he was taking revenge on them did not change the fact that he had become a murderer.

*'Even though his motives were the complete opposite of Lester's...'*

Perhaps it was never the case that some people were just born killers. Instead, Carl thought, every person was born with the innate potential to become a murderer. Then perhaps retaining one's humanity within this world full of potential killers was an internal struggle all humans were faced with every day.

Because his article on the incident would deem it an eternal mystery, Carl thought of ending it with this thought. But he still did not want to think of Mark as someone who had lost this battle with his own self.

*'Then again... Even if I wanted to ask, I doubt I'd ever see him again.'*

Feeling a different sort of sympathy for Mark, Carl stepped into the speakeasy.

And there he saw a familiar face.

"Lemme spin you one hell of an awesome yarn! Who'd ever have thought Boss Smith would find himself an underling?"

"He's his apprentice, not his underling, Boss."

"An apprentice. An apprentice...? But that would mean he's obliged to teach him something. And on that topic, it feels like the sun and the world have been teaching me my place over these past few days, which in other words means that I am the apprentice of the sun and this world...? And that this scorching, searing weather is a test?! This isn't good, Shaft. I still haven't studied anything!"

"Then why don't you just fail and get abandoned by the world, Boss?"

As Graham went on with his rant and Shaft dryly responded, a tall man in a long coat sat in a corner of the speakeasy, accompanied by a small shadow with a hat pressed down over its head.

"Hey, apprentice."

"Yes, Mr. Smith?"

"...Call me Master."

"Yes, Master?"

There was no mistaking it. Carl knew that face.

And as if to confirm his suspicions, Shaft spoke up.

"Anyway, Boss. Did you really have to go with the 'nameless boy with memory loss' story? I mean, there's cheesy, and then there's just plain-Gah!"

"Quit your yapping, Shaft." Graham said, covering Shaft's mouth with the end of his wrench. "Listen up. The identity of Ice Pick Thompson stays between us."

"... 'Course, Boss. Wouldn't even tell my own father if he asked."

Overhearing the conversation, Carl waited for Smith to leave his seat before speaking to the boy. But the boy plainly told him that he would be working as Smith's apprentice.

"That doesn't mean I want to become an assassin, though. Mr. Smi-I mean, Master said he'd take on my past, even all my crimes, but I can't lose that fact completely. I'm a killer, whether I like it or not."

He said that Smith had agreed with his point of view, intending to truly make sure that the boy named Mark was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

"So... I want to follow Master as he moves on with my crimes. I want to see them through to the end."

"...And you're planning to take responsibility in his stead?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just having trouble letting go, but..."

Mark closed his eyes for a moment and remembered his mother. He put on a smile that he tried to make similar to hers.

"I'm still alive because of my mom, and all kinds of coincidences. I... I want to see that life through to the end."

Carl thought of something to say, but he shook his head at the boy's smile.

"If you ever get sick of things, come find me at the Daily Days."

The information broker thought that he must be a hypocrite for seeing his dead daughter in the boy, but he showed the boy a smile of his own.

"I'd be happy to teach you the basics of being a reporter."

<=>

A little girl was crying on the platform, having been separated from her parents.

The people passing by worried for her for a moment, but the bell signalling the train's imminent departure sent them all hurrying into the cars.

But one man approached the girl, not caring for the bell.

The train's doors closed shut.

Though the man must have just wasted his train ticket, he crouched down to the girl's eye-level and smiled gently to comfort her.

"Hey there, nice to meet you! You can keep crying if you'd like, but try to give me a smile! Show be a big grin!"

That summer, the weeping girl encountered--





9784048705561

ISBN978-4-04-870556-1

C0193 ¥590E



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発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **590 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます

