



BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1934 完結編

Peter Pan In Chains

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「ま、それから何だかんでツルむようにな
つてよ。妙な気分だが、落ち着くんだよ。ジ
ャグジーとかいってよ」

「ニースの姐さんとジャグジーを見てると、
なんか色々飽きねえしな」

「つまり、私達は集められたパズルのピース
なのよネー。ジャグジーとニースが余りにも
ピッタリ嵌^はつてるもんだから、そこを目印
に他のピースも集まってくるよネー。キヒ
ヒヒ」

「チャイニー……久々に喋ったと思ったら」

「なんか哲学的な事を言い出したぞ」

「この女、普段ヒヤッハアしか言わない癖に」

「……ヒヤッハア」

「おい、声小さいぞ」「照れるな照れるな」

「ひやつはあー」

「お前じゃねえよ、チビ！」「ややこしい！」

「ヒヤッハア」「ひやつはあー」

「……ジャグジーは、人に好かれるのはいい
けどよ……ちよつとは好かれる相手を選ん
で欲しいもんだよな」

「俺らも人の事言えないけどな」

「……違いねえ」

The Delinquents' Racket

"Huh? What's that? You want to ask what kind of person Jacuzzi is?"

"If I were to use one word, what would it be?"

"He's a crybaby."

"A baby."

"Hyaha!"

"What kind of a person is that?"

"I don't like this talk about crybabies."

"We first met him then, right?"

"Wait, it should have been that time there was that big gang fight, right?"

"Yeah, right! That guy suddenly appeared and yelled 'you guys, stop fighting!'"

"Back then, I wanted to tell him, 'all of us fighting for our pride right now, so stop trying to make us stop!'" and send him flying with a punch."

"But wasn't the reason for that fight because a movie was going to start and we all wanted aisle seats?"

"You guys really can exaggerate, huh...but since you just flattened Jacuzzi, *that* would be next then."

"You guessed right – Tony grabbed us by our necks then and threw us to the ground."

"And then Nice said something: 'most of the time, people who fight are wrong,' and smiled as she lit a bomb."

"Big sister's mind has always been a bit weird."

"Hyaha!"

"Oh, and after that, Jacuzzi saved us."

"Back then, he was crying really hard as he told us to run. And after the bomb went off, he was the one who flew the farthest and was the most dazed afterwards."

"Yeah, and after that I don't know how, but we just started being together. Jacuzzi just needed to be there, and the atmosphere would become comfortable and everything would feel right."

"Plus, when we're by Nice and Jacuzzi's side, we never run out of things to see."

"To put it another way, we were like a pile of puzzle pieces that had finally been put together. Because Jacuzzi and Nice were so perfect together, all the other puzzle pieces would just automatically gather together so they were in the center, ha ha".

"Chaini...you haven't made said anything in a while."

"When you opened your mouth, I didn't think you would say something so philosophical."

"This kid, most of the time she just stands to the side and just says "hyaha.""

"...hyaha."

"Hey, this time it was really quiet. Are you becoming shy? Huh?"

"Hyaha!"


"No one's asking you to shout, you brat! You're so troublesome!"

"Hyaha – hyaha!"

"...it's great that Jacuzzi can get people to love him so easily...but I still wish he could stop loving his enemies so much."

"Yeah, but it's not as though we have any right to talk about other people."

"...you've got that right."



リカルド坊ちゃんの独り言？

「バズルを造った時、クリスが言った事がある。

「この世界がジグソーバズルだとするなら、僕は真四角だね。どことも接合しない。成立するとしたら僕だけがいる、たった1ピースのバズルだね、楽しいね、嬉しいね」

訳の解らない事を言うクリスだけど、今、冷や汗を掻きながらも楽しそうに動き回るクリスを見て——思う。

グラハムさんも、あのお姉さんも、きっとクリスと同じように真四角のピースなんだ。

だからこそ、だからこそ——真四角同士なら、恐ろしい程完全に噛み合っただ。すぐにバラバラになるけれど、枠組みに嵌ればとてもとても綺麗な絵を造るんだと思う。

できる事なら、オレも……いや、よそう。

今はただ、オレはオレのできる事をするだけだ。

とりあえずオレがやるべき事は……どうやってこの喧嘩を止めるべきか考える事。

この馬鹿けたバズルの台を、思い切り蹴り上げる事だけだ。

オレが、世界に対してそうしたいと思っているように。

派手に、気持ちよく、今の三人のような表情で——



本当に、ムチャクチャな人達だ。
クリスといーグラハムさんといー、あのシ

ツクルって名前のお姉さんといー。

本当に不合理極まりないよ。

こんな所で殺し合っても、誰もなんの

得も無いっていうのに。

いや、違う。少なくとも、クリスとグラハ

ムさんは得してるのかな。

あの一入、凄く楽しそうだしね。

なんていうか……その……

少しだけ、本当に少しだけど……羨ま

しいと思う。

オレはもう何年も、あんな風に笑った

事はないから。いや、そもそも生まれてこ

のかた、あんなに『生き生きと』した事って

あるのかな。……父さんと母さんが死ん

だ時も、現実を受け入れられなくて……

泣き叫んだりしなかったような気がす

る。

クリスは自分の事を不自然な存在だと

言ってるけど、人間らしさで言ったらき

っとオレの方がずっと不自然な存在だ。

もう一つ羨ましい事あるとすれば――

本当に悔しい事だけれど、オレと一緒に

いるクリストファーは、あんなに生き生き

とした表情をした事が無い

この前、ルーアさんと暇つぶしにシグン

Ricardo Russo Talks to Herself

They really are a bunch of irrational people.

Chris is a good fighter, Graham is as well, and even the one called Sickle is on the same level as them.

They truly are incredibly unreasonable.

It's obvious that fighting here won't benefit anyone.

No...that's wrong. Chris and Graham, at least, have gained something.

Right now, those two have incredibly happy expressions.

How would I describe them...hm...

To be honest, I feel a little, really just a little...jealous.

Because it's already been many years since I smiled like that. No, ever since I was born, have I ever felt that alive? ...it seems like when my parents died, even then I was unable to accept reality...because even then, I didn't cry or react.

Chris says that he has an unnatural existence, but when it comes to acting like human, I think I'm far more unnatural than he is.

If there was anything that could make me feel jealous –

Then it would be seeing Chris like this. Seeing him overflowing with so much life, it makes me feel discontent about myself.

When he was helping Lua with puzzles before with pass the time, Chris once said:

"If the world was a puzzle, I'd probably be a square piece – you know, the type of piece that can't connect with any of the others. But since a square's also a complete puzzle, that makes me an independent person, a whole puzzle made from just one piece! How great is that!"

Back then, Chris's words just confused me, but seeing him right now – covered with sweat, eyes gleaming with happiness as he moves – I'm starting to think...

Graham and that woman – they must be square puzzle pieces like Chris, too.

And because of that – when these square pieces are placed together in a puzzle, they fit together incredibly well. Even if they would instantly fall apart, if their pieces are placed inside a frame, they would definitely form a beautiful picture.

If that's so, then I, also...

No, I'll stop thinking about it.

Right now, I should just continue doing the things I know I can.

And what I should do right now...is to calculate how to stop them from fighting here.

How to knock over the stand of this senseless puzzle.

This is how I want to be towards the world from now on.

When I kick, I want to make my movements a little bigger, a little more carefree, as though I, too, am the same as these three –



囚人達の会話

「俺の彼女はジグソーパズルが好きでな」

「へえ。まあいいんじゃないの」

「一番好きなのは、真っ白なジグソーパズルでな。何百という数のピースを、ただ形だけを便りにひたすらひたすら集めて行くのさ。それで、完成した白い板に絵を描く。それは風景画だったり自画像だったり、もっとわけの解らない絵だったりするんだけどな」

「なるほど、白いジグソーパズルってのは気が遠くなりそうだが、その絵を描く為には何となく理解できる」

「だろ？ ソレデよ、絵を描きあげたらそれをバラバラに崩してうっとりと笑うんだ。その時

の寂しそうな表情が、思わず首に手を掛けたくなるほどに素敵だよ……」

「……流石、ラッドの彼女なだけはあるな」

「流石、俺の彼女だろう？」

「……」

「どうしたよ？」

「……いや……まあ、いいけどな。俺の彼女や仲間も狂ったようにドミノ並べたりするしな。すげえ綺麗に模様とか造っても、それをできた瞬間に倒すんだからな。なんの為に造ってるんだか」

「人生と一緒さ。死ぬと解ってても生きる事は楽しくて仕方ない。死ぬと解っているからこそ楽しく生きるのさ。……なのに、それを解つてない奴が多すぎる。そういう奴らに人生をレクチャーしてやる瞬間の事を考えただけで、俺はどうしようもなく生きてるって事を実感できるのさ」

「興奮するなよ」

「俺の彼女にとつては自分の人生そのものがジグソーパズルなのさ。だから俺は、あいつの人生のピースが全て揃った瞬間に——あいつを……おっと、悪いな。惚気話を聞かせちゃった」

「……惚気話だったのか!?」

The Prisoners' Conversation

"My fiancée loves putting together puzzle"

"Oh? That's neat, then."

"Yeah, but her favorites are blank white ones. Since you have to go by the shape of the pieces, she has to really concentrate – but once she does, she can put together several hundred pieces together all at once. And when she's done putting all the pieces together, she'll paint on top of them. Sometimes, it'll be a landscape – sometimes, a self-portrait – but most times she'll just paint something really weird."

"When you put it that way, I can understand it a little. Even if the puzzles are tough, she puts them together for the sake of her paintings."

"You think so? 'Cause every time when she finishes painting, she'll break the puzzle into pieces and give this hollow, empty laugh. That extraordinarily lonely look on her face, every time it makes me want to let my hand reach toward her neck..."

"...you know, I can see how she's your fiancée now."

"Isn't she the worthiest woman for the position, though?"

"..."

"What?"

"...nothing...forget it, it wouldn't make any difference anyways. My girlfriend and her friends, sometimes they'll also pull crazy stunts like that, too. Like stacking dominoes: right when the dominoes form a nice shape, they'll knock them all over. I really don't know why they even set them up in the first place."

"It's the same with people's lives: since they all know they're going to die, life becomes incredibly pleasurable...but since some people don't understand this, they need *me* to teach them. Ah, just thinking about being able to do that makes me feel so incredibly alive – "

"Hey, don't get too excited here."

"And when it comes to my fiancée, her life's like a puzzle. So the moment it's all put together – I'll kill her...Ah, whoops, looks like I just accidentally revealed our lovers' talk there."

"...that counts as lovers' talk?"

NYの酒場にて

マイザー「どうしたんですか、チェス。なんだか昨日からそわそわしていますけど」

チェス「う……いや、なんでもないよ」

ロニー「なに……シカゴであんな事件があったんだ。次はNYかもしれないと思って不安になるのは当然の事だ。そうだな、チェス」

チェス「えっ!? ああ、う、うん」

マイザー「ああ、なるほど。考えてみれば当然ですねえ。周りの皆さんが余りにも暢気なので、私も余り脅威に感じませんでしたよ」

ロニー「うちの連中は危機感の無い連中ばかりだからな」

マイザー「暢気と言えば——エルマーもそうで

すが、それよりも彼女を思い出しますねえ」

ロニー「ルネか」

チェス「おや? ロニーは、エルマーの事を知っているのか? 同姓同名の別人だろうか。そして……ルネとは誰だろ?」

マイザー「あの人は暢気というか、感情が欠落してるだけのように思えますけど」

ロニー「いや……あの女は感情ではなく、人との繋がり、欠落しているのだろう」

マイザー「繋がり、ですか」

ロニー「運命の縁を二つの巨大なバスルだとするならば、人は必ずしも自らピースを捜し出す必要はない。自然と、あるべき場所に当てるものだからな。だが、あの女には他者と繋がるピースの「形」が欠落している。だからこそ、繋ぎ止めるには自らのピースの下敷きにするしかない。ふむ……あの『造られた子供達』は……彼女にのし掛かれた運命を払いのける事ができるのか……その為には、他の誰かとの確固たる縁を掴まなければ……」

チェス「ロニーさん! ロニーさん!」

マイザー「何を独り言をフツフツと……?」

ロニー「む……。飲み過ぎただけだ」

チェス「ロニーさんって、お酒に酔うと必ず独り言を言いますよね」

マイザー「お酒じゃなくて自分に酔ってるんですよ。この前のヴィクターと一緒にです」

ロニー「……まあいい」

ロニー「否定は、しない」

At a bar in New York

Maiza: "Czes, what's wrong? Ever since yesterday, you've seemed a little restless."

Czes: "Ah...well...no, it's nothing."

Ronnie: "Let me guess...You're feeling anxious because you when look at the incidents in Chicago, you think the next place to be attacked might be New York. Am I right, Czes?"

Czes: "Huh? Well, that is...yeah, you're right."

Maiza: "Ah, so that was it. Thinking over it, it *would* be normal to worry – but the people here are all really so hard to bother, I don't think there's any real danger."

Ronnie: "Whoever taught the people here must have truly had no sense of danger, then."

Maiza: "Speaking of people who are hard to bother – Elmer would obviously be one, but the first person who came to mind was her."

Ronnie: "Renee?"

Czes: (Huh? Ronnie knows Elmer? Or is it just someone else with the same name? And also...who is Renee?)

Maiza: "But I also think, when it comes to Renee, it's not so much that she's oblivious, but that she lacks a certain kind of feeling."

Ronnie: "No...what that woman lacks isn't that – it's her connections."

Maiza: "Her...connections?"

Ronnie: "If fulfilling a person's life is like completing an enormous jigsaw puzzle, then people don't always have to search for all the puzzle pieces, as they'll just naturally snap into their places. But that woman lacks the "shape" to connect to others. Because of that, she can only fit in by making others who share her lack, too. Ah...those "created children"...because of her, their fate is to be excluded from humanity...in order to reach their goal, they'll have to find among themselves others who share the same shape, and then grab onto them tightly..."

Czes: "Mr. Ronnie! Mr. Ronnie!?"

Maiza: "You were talking to yourself for quite a while there – what was it about?"

Ronnie: "...ah...it's nothing. I've just had a little too much to drink."

Czes: "If Mr. Ronnie was drunk, of course he would be talking to himself."

Maiza: "He's not drunk on wine, Czes, just his own words. Just like Victor the other day."

Ronnie: "...forget it."

Connecting Chapter: The Researcher Discusses Love and...

Words of Salomé Carpenter, subordinate director of Huey Laforet's research institute, *Rhythm*—

When it comes to the results of this experiment, I'd still rather not talk about it. To be honest, I still have a lot of regrets.

Because of a few small mistakes, I lost one of my most important test subjects.

From then until now, that subject has been hated us for about ten years...really, it makes a person want to cry.

The subject I am referring too was named, for convenience's sake, Rail, number 0038.

From the four digits in that number, you can see Huey was hoping to have several thousand test subjects. For a normal person like me, there would have been no way to see the results of such an experiment...but when it comes to those who are immortal, numbers don't matter that much.

I wish I could tell you I was just speaking enigmatically, but I'm not.

No doubt about it, all the time I've spent over my life with this subject is just one part of his life – an extremely small one, at that.

And because of this, it's even more important I make use of my time!

I've always been very careful around each completed experiment, but even so, I still lost number 0038...losing Rail, even now, it makes me incredibly depressed.

Right now we're in middle of creating test subject number 0068, but among the total number of subjects, that's not even half of what we're working on...all of the test subjects we made ourselves, and we've put them all through so many horrific ordeals, a person can't help but feel uncomfortable.

Rail was one of our creations who could tolerate a little more – no, it'd be better to describe him as someone whom chance allowed to handle a little more.

There's a disease called analgesia – have you heard of it?

It's a congenital disease where you lose all ability to feel pain. Rail's sensitivity might not have advanced to that extent...but it was very close to it. Before, we used to conduct experiments on certain subjects' brains, but when less than half of them were successful, we started to

experiment on both the entire body and the body together. Rail's present state is one of those results.

...according to my speculations, it's possible that because the brains of artificial humans have been created without consulting evolution, they started to stop processing pain. Like a wire going over its voltage, the nerves blow their fuse.

Yes...it's true. Back then, without any anesthesia, we took our knives and vivisected Rail.

The purpose of this experiment was to, by slowly increasing its intensity, test exactly how much pain Rail and other immortals could endure.

In a short period of time, he experienced the amount of agony most people endure in their entire life. I've heard New York has a famous torturer whose specialty is scissors – if I get a chance to talk to him, I'd very interested in hearing what he thinks. When it came to Rail, the pain morphed his body into the state it's in now.

Around five years ago, Rail began to slowly lose his sense of pain. The first time it happened, Huey was the one experimenting on Rail. Yes, I remember it all very clearly. From that time on, Rail stopped screaming. The odd thing was, at the same time Rail stopped feeling pain, it was like he had come to the conclusion that he was only an object to us.

Additionally, instead of being alarmed or puzzled at losing his feeling, Rail seemed to think that someone was helping him by injecting anesthesia.

At times, his sense of pain seemed to return...but after repeated surgeries, his body slowly began to react with only numbness.

Ah, yes, you're right. We cut Rail's body up one time after another. The scars all over his body are the evidence of our long years of experimentation, in that sense.

Because of this...we would be very regretful if he's not happy at having no sense of pain.

Of course, since pain is an important sign of physical danger, it's also a kind of drawback.

What kind of existence he'll end up having...that was another aspect I wanted to study, but seeing how the situation is what it is, it's a pity I'll never be able to.

I know another case similar to his, however.

But what this subject lacks is not his sense of pain, but rather what we term "emotion."

It's an old acquaintance of Huey's, a man by the name of Elmer C Albatross.

I thought that Elmer was a perfect subject for observation, but Huey stopped me.

Elmer is an important friend of mine, and I won't allow you to perform any testing on him –
well, Huey might not have said those words when he stopped me, but that was the general sense he gave off.

At the time, I thought it was amazing that a man who saw the whole world as test subjects, even his own daughters, could utter such words...but for Huey, a line seems to divide the world and this being called "Elmer."

...ah, I'm sorry, this time I really am talking in riddles.

Going back to the topic, even though Rail had the same experiences as Elmer, the path he chose is completely different. He hates...or rather, rejects people like us, meaning the majority of humanity.

That, then, is the type of person Rail is. However, if he ever stumbled into a white lab-coated scientist, his manner would certainly become much more timid.

That the child who naturally defies us is reduced to dread in our presence – saying it, it's actually quite funny.

When it comes to Rail, we're like a fixation he can't get rid of. Or would it be an incomprehensible trauma? Ah, well, there's no way to confirm any of this, anyways.

Hm? What did you say?

You're asking me why I'd do such terrible things to a child?

Ah, it's true, we also thought such they were rather excessive.

Even if we didn't see him as human, but rather on the same level as a white lab mouse, we still went overboard –

It was unforgivable. Ah, even I don't think our crimes can be pardoned.

Every time Rail's cries beat against our ears, our hearts would fill with incurable guilt and regret, confusing our minds and making us question ourselves...thousands of conflicting emotions would whirl in our hearts, almost making us cry.

But in the end, we were able to overcome all those unpleasant feelings.

Why?

Do you even need to ask?

It was because we loved him, of course!

Doing such awful things to Rail made us feel indescribably guilty, of course.

But what let us overcome such obstacles, what got rid of the guilt stopping us, was our love for our test subject!

Because our hearts were filled with love, it didn't matter how many cruel things we had to do to it, we would still do them all!

Yes...before us, there was another surgeon, an immortal who's been documented as declaring something similar to what we feel. He said that it was only because he loved his subjects so much that he was able to bear the pain of treating them so cruelly.

Who was that person?...I've heard he's already been devoured, by an immortal boy he loved. I believe I recall...he was called "Fermet", and the immortal boy, I think his name was "Czeslaw."

Ah, sorry, I'm speaking enigmatically again...to be truthful, if Rail were to devour or kill me, I'd welcome it as the sweetest fate possible. I suppose this is what they call "love," then.

Concerning Rail, we were his creators, and so we might as well be the creators of god.

I'm not an atheist or an deist – I believe God exists.

And because I believe this, I know that we are gods to these homunculi.

Just as God has endless love for us, so I, too, have limitless love for Rail.

And that is why I can't stop the tears welling from in my eyes.

Because the being that we had loved so much has suddenly been lost from our world.

...you want like to hear what happened after we lost him?

You want me to go back and remember, to plunge myself into that bottomless grief again?

You information brokers are all the same!

But it's alright. I'll tell you anyways.

In telling this story, along with our observations and our analysis of its consequences afterwards, perhaps we will be able to understand the meaning of what occurred.

Through the information Sham and Hilton collected...we were able to pinpoint the main culprits of all this, a pair who seemed to also be lovers, surrounded on all sides by a group of young delinquents.

But then again, this story also involves that crazy involves female scientist from Nebula, Christopher, the Russo family – even the man called Graham is involved one hundred and twenty percent in these events. Strictly speaking, even a certain incident that occurred to a man currently then in prison is involved – Firo Prochainezo is also connected to this story.

Alright, where should I start from...ah, well, since this *is* Rail's story, I guess I'll start where his narrative begins.

That sad experiment, after losing his friend Frank, slowly set foot on his uncontrollable path.

His steps were not fast – but slowly, he was nearing his destination.

Rail, in order to save Frank...no, it'd be more correct to say in order to snatch Frank away in revenge, moved towards for the city's shadows. His soul, by then, was already on the verge of collapse.

Rail's movements, then, were toward hopeless despair and resignation.

No, I think he wasn't just giving up on himself...but also on everything else in the world.

Chapter one: The Bombs Light up the Blue Sky, and...

Elson Hill, outskirts

A dazzling day.

The time was morning – not just morning, but one that gave out rays of dazzling radiance.

Elson Hill.

It was a small town near Chicago.

A town that would have just recently appeared on a detailed map, and which, on a general map, would not even be present.

But because of certain reasons, this small town hidden by Chicago had suddenly become well known to the world.

Even though it had not yet taken on any special signification in the wider world – for the town, this reason had a great importance.

Although the town was full of farmland, buildings were scattered over the vast plains, connected to each other by a series of wide, easily accessible roads.

At first, it appeared a quiet agrarian town, but nothing could be seen growing on the actual land. A handful of places appeared to be actual farms, but they were so heavily fenced it was nearly impossible to see what was inside.

In general, the buildings in this town were heavily spaced apart, the only exceptions being what seemed to be a few normal residential buildings, which were concentrated in a corner of the town.

Some of these buildings were actually two or three smaller structures built together, but they generally were all built along the same roads. It was like the small town had been split into several dozen separate schools.

Additionally, all these “facilities” all shared something in common.

Both the facility buildings and all the trucks entered and leaving it had been painted with a certain badge –

– that of the corporation called “Nebula.”

The emblem of one of America's most famous corporations: that was what they used as their symbol.

Rumored to have been created by German artist Carnald Strassburg, it was a very unique design.

And it was one that could be seen in every corner of the small town.

The town was filled with Nebula research institutes and warehouses, and the town's residents were very unusual in one major aspect: all of them were connected to the same company.

That was one reason the town's organizations were so close: it was because they belonged to the same group, conducting experiments as different divisions of the same company. Among the children of the town, however, it was rumored that because the organizations conducted a series of strange, suspicious experiments, their relationships were ones that could explode at any moment.

Such was the daily life in this small town.

One where the rumors of such disturbing occurrences had suddenly become reality.

It was as though if the sunlight trickling down had retreated, and the town was now bursting forth with blinding red light.

The reason for this was a blinding flash, which momentarily dazzled its viewers before slowly fading away.

But before the light could completely fade away, the skies were rocked by the sound of an explosion.

It was a deep, powerful roar, as though the sky was being torn in two.

And spreading through the town, a heat wave induced by this light –

Sound, smoke, and heat emanated from every corner.

On top of a small hill overlooking the town, several silhouettes moved.

Standing in front of the group overlooking the situation, one small shape could not help but murmur:

“Oh – looks like it's started.”

Body shaking from the blast and heat of the explosions –

The boy with striking scars on his face and hands sighed.

“Well, there’s no way to turn back now.”

This remark was directed to himself, but from behind came what seemed to be a comment in response.

“You don’t know that, Rail.”

“...I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

A group of men comprised of varying ages, some even children, was the source of the many shadows behind the boy.

From within this group, a figure shook his head at the boy he had called Rail.

“If you want to go back, you can do it at anytime. All you have to do is stop.”

“...you say that, don’t you, but it’s clearly not going to stop me.”

“Oh, don’t worry, your actions are hardly an impediment to Huey’s experiments. Plus, your plan to destroy Nebula’s research facilities won’t really affect their ability to carry out experiments.”

“...”

Rail fell silent, the emotionless crowd behind him blankly staring at the boy.

Seeming to have thought of something, the other man once more broke the silence.

“Oh, are you getting angry now? What, because you feel like you can never escape Huey?”

“...”

“Really Rail, relax. Right now, Huey’s also run into some inconveniences – so not only is there no way he could interfere with our actions, he doesn’t even have any of his trusted spies to give him information.”

Sham’s sarcastic remarks, however, were barely registered by Rail, who was gazing at the light below him. Now engulfed in a brilliant red radiance, the blaze was spreading to the town’s neighboring areas.

In such a suddenly volatile state of mind, Rail considered his situation.

A short two weeks before –

The most important person in the world to him was taken. Before his eyes, Frank had been kidnapped.

Not kidnapped – it would be more accurate to say he was brutalized. And though he would not rather not dwell on it, Rail knew it was likely that Frank had already been killed.

Contemplating the current situation, Rail's thoughts turned to the white-clad figures he loathed so much – and, currently powerless to do anything against them, ground his teeth in anger.

Right now, all he could do was stand there, and watch the blaze take his revenge.

In Chicago, Rail had come into contact with Sham and asked him for his assistance. And even if Sham had turned out to be no help, he was determined to continue alone, not believing “they” could do anything to stop him – and here, in the fire currently raging through Elton Hill, was the result of his efforts.

He had never had many supplies to start with, but Rail had already spent half of them in Chicago.

Though the residents didn't know who was responsible, the sheer force of the attacks was enough to terrify them. Even Rail, who knew the blaze below was the work of his preferred weapon, could not help gasping the first time he had realized the extent of its true power.

And here he was, deliberately using that power.

If he considered the terror he had caused unexceptional, it was because Rail, in using so many of his supplies, was trying to abate his own feelings of his confusion.

In order to leave his previous self behind, a self that felt unable to accomplish anything, Rail was driving himself insane.

And so for a motivation that might have just been sheer obstinacy –

The small town below had become a sheet of blazing light.

However, even after seeing the town below him wracked with explosions, Rail felt no change in his heart.

–it wasn't enough.

Within his heart, a new, bitter anger arose.

So this was how it was, all the impact his actions had had – and it was still not enough to calm the hatred in his heart.

Despite their efforts to fan the flames, the fires did not continue to spread, instead slowly smoldering to a halt and dying out. Rail, seeing their failed efforts, gritted his teeth and, with a great force of effort, turned to Sham.

“Let me ask you – during today’s bombings, did you find Frank?”

“No, we’ve confirmed that he was in none of the areas we hit.”

“Oh...you’re sure?”

“If he really was inside, then it’s possible that he was caught in the flames. For all we know, he could have burnt to death there.”

Sham’s untimely news made Rail grind his teeth even harder, but he made no retort.

When it came to their enemy, the fact that their attacks could endanger Frank was something Rail obviously knew. But apart from their current actions, Rail had no other plan of action.

As Rail was thus momentarily lost in thought, a flippant voice from behind him loudly declared:

“Well, to be honest, I think that gathering reliable information and then spearing all the company heads would also be a nice idea – but that’s just another option. With all the explosions going on, our opponent’s hardly going to have time to consider Frank.”

So that was it then, the impact of his reckless violence – but if this was now the meaning of an action originally meant only to wreck destruction, then Rail, quietly smiling, thought it was a step forward.

“Well then, what are we going to do now? Or do you just really not know?”

“...you’re really irritating, you know.”

Rail’s visible displeasure, however, seemed to be lost on Sham.

“If you want, I can ask Huey’s opinion on this. *That’s* something I definitely know I can do.”

“Shut *up*!”

Unable to control himself, Rail screamed these words, then took a deep breath, forcing himself to focus on the matter in front of him.

“Anyways, Sham. Do you know any ways to stop yourself from going crazy?”

“Based on the experience I’ve collected...by the time you can realize that you’re crazy, then you can’t be considered insane anymore. Of course, if you asked Huey or Hilton, they’d probably just deliberately give you conflicting answers.”

Sham's occasional mentions of Huey had always made Rail upset, but he still calmly forced himself to ask:

"...what about Chris, though – what would he say?"

"Chris? Oh, he's already gone mad a long, long time ago – he'd probably just smile and cheerfully tell you 'well, you'll have to try to surpass madness, then!'"

"Ha ha...Sham, you really don't understand Christ at all."

Rail smiled wryly as he answered, but Sham's next words made his stomach clench as he heard them.

"Or..."

"If he really cared for you, then what he would say is: 'There's no way I can make things the way they were in the past, so if you wish to pursue insanity, then I will gladly be your guide – but I think that right now, you're at a junction, and I'm powerless to help you chose. So Rail, you have to think about it yourself and then make a decision, to see whether you can find some way out of this situation before you insane and find a clear future for yourself.' That's basically what he would say, I think."

"..."

Sham's words were said in Christopher's exact voice, leaving Rail speechless with shock.

Though the wording wasn't exactly the same, in his memory, Rail could clearly remember Chris saying similar words.

During an instance when Rail, overcome by despair and powerlessness, had soundlessly cried all night.

A night which, in reality, had occurred barely half a day ago. What Christopher had told him then truly resembled the remarks Sham had just uttered.

Glancing at the man next to him – a man who, although responsible only for liaisons and odd jobs, somehow had a deeper knowledge Christopher than he did – Rail felt a mixture of surprise and sudden anger at Sham's remarks. Scowling, he glared at the crowd behind him.

Receiving no response, Rail was momentarily at a loss – when suddenly, he realized something incredible.

More accurately, he confirmed something that he had suspected before but which his earlier agitation had stopped him from investigating – namely, the fact that the large group that had stood so patiently behind him was made up of all men.

“...hey Sham, were you the only one who came here? Where’s Hilton?”

“Hilton seems to be in a mess too, so she said she doesn’t have time to get involved. I think I mentioned it, but it has to do with Huey.”

“What happened?”

“Someone attacked Huey, then gouged out one of his eyes. Since then, it’s been missing.”

“Oh...”

Huey Laforet.

At the mention of the man who had created him, Rail should have felt only hatred. But upon hearing the news that Huey’s eye had been stolen, though Rail thought ‘it served him right,’ what he felt first was surprise. ‘Oh,’ he thought, ‘so there are people who can do this type of thing.’

In his memories, Huey was someone who was untouchable in all respects, always manipulating people behind the scenes – an invulnerability which had always increased Rail’s apprehension and hatred for him.

Seeing the difficult expression on Rail’s face, the man responsible for it gently smiled...

“Huey’s predicament – does it make you happy?”

“No...he deserves it, I guess, but I don’t feel any satisfaction from it, and I’m not really interested in details. Even when it comes to who did it and why, it doesn’t feel connected to my current situation.”

After he’d said these listless words, Rail lifted his head towards Sham’s face.

“Sham...is it just my impression, or do you look somehow happier today?”

“Really? It must be you, then. Besides the pleasure of helping you, now I have to take care of Huey’s matters too. For someone used to only taking care of liaisons and odd jobs, it’s a lot to ask when what I can actually do is so limited.”

“So that’s how it is.”

Lowering his head slightly, Rail took a watch out of his pocket and glanced at it.

“But at least you have something you *can* do. No matter what it is, that’s something to envy.”

“...”

From the words he spoke to Sham, it seemed as though Rail had already returned to his previous mood.

But Sham had long since perceived the truth.

Right now, Rail might not have been truly insane –

But he was on the verge of it.

Rail glanced at his ticking watch, then lifted his head and cried to no one in particular, but to the sky itself –

“And since I’ve got nothing else to do right now, I guess I’ll just blow everything up!”

Immediately afterwards –

The small town once more exploded in a burst of light.

Turning his back on the blinding light, where smoke was rising from unremittingly burning flames, Rail calmly addressed the Shams:

“So I’m going to continue walking down this path, right to its very end, no matter where it takes me. Besides, going crazy doesn’t sound that bad.”

Rail’s voice had become emotionless once again, and the icy sound of his words drifted with the rising smoke into the sky.

“If it could let me go somewhere else...then I would happily chase madness.”

Interlude: The Camorrista Reluctantly Speaks, and...

Alcatraz Jail, Special Underground Cell

A dungeon – built in the depths of Alcatraz was a room of pure isolation.

And one level below that darkness –

Hidden within the prison’s structures, in the truly deepest depths of the prison –

“They” resided there.

Originally, this place had been specially built for a certain man.

In terms of prison accommodations, it was a rather spacious room, around the same size as a small hotel room.

However –

Because of the number of people present in it, the room nonetheless held an oppressive air.

“You bastards...”

Within of that crowded and narrow space, came a sound filled with resentment.

Hearing those words so clearly filled with murderous intent, Firo Prochainezo began quietly thinking.

If curses could really kill, then this is probably what it would have felt like.

Just hearing these words alone would chill most listeners, making them feel suddenly several years younger than Firo – but now the source of these curses was in front of them. Trapped inside by the men surrounding him, Ladd Russo’s position only reinforced the current situation.

Within the situation currently developing, Firo’s role was especially elusive, and it was difficult to discern how simple or complicated his part really was.

Because of a certain event, Firo had become immortal, and because of another event, he had been thrown in a wild storm of incidents that had caused him to catch the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the immortal working within in, Victor Talbot.

After that, Firo had accepted the agent's terms. In exchange for not pursuing the girl he was in love with, Ennis, Firo would undertake the task of investigating another prisoner imprisoned within Alcatraz, the immortal Huey Laforet. In the last thirty minutes, however, things had suddenly become much more complicated.

Because Huey had come with his own guards, it would have been natural to believe he had been able to sneak several of his faithful followers as spies into Alcatraz, and it was those followers who had presented Firo with a deal –

(“You could help me...no, you could help “us”... just take out one of Huey's eyes, alright?”)

This was a request that would make most people's minds foggy.

To dig out the eye of someone who was immortal – what purpose could such an action serve?

But the guard who had issued this request didn't give Firo a chance to bring this question up.

Because once again, Ennis's name had been brought up – on the conditions of her safety, the guard had presented his request.

And just as Firo had grudgingly obeyed Victor's commands, he had reluctantly agreed to help the entity called “Sham.”

At the same time, Firo was filled with anger at his own weakness and obvious disgust at his situation.

And now, the present –

At the entrance was the guard brought by Huey. A man who should have been beaten into a coma by Ladd, he now calmly standing up.

Within the room, there was another guard on Ladd's other side, standing roughly the same distance from him as the first.

Additionally, surrounding Ladd were three embattled prisoners.

An extremely short white man, an African-American man whose body was covered with scars, and an Asian man with heavily tattooed hands.

At Firo's feet, there another person, a man dressed in white.

And there was yet another person, one whose presence was most at odds with the settings of a prison – a young, black-haired girl girl.

Firo's gaze fell on the man besides his feet – a man who, although Firo had stuck a dagger in his neck, had only temporarily lost consciousness –

The immortal Huey Laforet.

Gazing at him, Firo reflected for a moment. In his right hand, desperately squirming to return to the body it had come from, was the eye he had just dug from Huey. As the eye squirmed in his hand, Firo felt distinctly nauseous.

Alright then, with things like this, what should I do now?

In front of him, Ladd was surrounded on all sides by the entity called “Sham,” formerly the Felix Walker group.

But from the depths of Firo's memory, as he searched those hateful parts that were not his own recollections, came the knowledge that that “Sham” was not the name for any organization – but was rather the name for an existence that, although it encompassed many bodies, was still one entity.

“Hey....”

Just as Firo was attempting to calmly analyze the situation, the source of the curses addressed him.

At the same time, Firo felt a chill. Lifting his head, he saw Ladd's face, its expression slightly impatient but still exuding an overwhelmingly murderous aura towards the ones called Sham.

“Firo, you ain't working with these guys, are you?”

“...yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Even though Firo had already had an inkling of it, now that he had already helped remove Huey's eye for them, he supposed there was way to deny he was working with Sham. Still, the strange air the men in front of him gave off made Firo decidedly unwilling to stand next to them.

For it was Sham here who was the strangest presence of all – a fact he displayed right then.

Five people, voices completely in sync, began to talk as though they were one person, words echoing through the room.

“Now then, don't you think that's a little too much?”

“How can you say we aren't working together?”

“Even though it's only temporarily, aren't we cooperating together now?”

""""I hope that after this, I can still have be on good terms with you, Firo Prochainezo.""""

By the end, what started out as five voices in sync had changed to only three.

It was like there were loudspeakers placed around the room, randomly going off – a sensation that only made Firo feel more and more confused.

None of the other men, however, seemed the least bit surprised at these strange events.

Ladd's mood seemed on the verge of exploding – but instead of being either anger or sorrow, it was pure murderous intent. His tone was unchanged, however, as he addressed Firo.

“Eh, I guess it doesn't matter – but hey, I wanna ask a quick question.”

“...”

“These guys...just *what* exactly are they?”

“That, well...”

This incredibly simple question left Firo momentarily speechless.

However, it was the five men being spoken of who then urged Firo to reply.

""""""It's alright, Firo Prochainezo.""""""

""""You can tell him.""""

""""Since it's you, you should be able to explain it simply enough.""""

""""""After all, you do have Szilard's memories.""""""

Saying these last words in unison, the five men who comprised “Sham” broke out in smiles.

Five men, of differing ages and builds, now all had the identical, malicious smile.

These expressions, together with the words they had just said, filled Firo with unspeakable disgust. Gritting his teeth, he took a deep breath before finally speaking.

“...alright then, I guess I will.”

“Try to keep it simple, will ya, Firo? Be best if you could just tell me the easiest way to get rid of these guys.”

Similarly clenching his teeth, Ladd was smiling – but it was a smile without any friendliness in it.

Even though his air of animosity had relaxed, Ladd still gave off the sense that at the slightest hint, he would immediately rush forward to attack the five men known as Sham. This was an strike that should have already occurred spilling his opponents' brains in the process – but at mention of “Lua” by the men called Sham, his ferocity had been stalled at this critical point.

“Explaining this simply....that might be kind of difficult...Oh, but since you don't seem to know about it, I guess I could start with this whole business of immortality.”

Though Ladd was undeniably possessed the most murderous aura in the room, it was not Ladd that Firo was eyeing warily, but rather that calm group of five people –

Slowly, Firo began his explanation.

“These guys...they're one of the results of the ‘elixir of immortality.’ This old coot called Szilard created them when he was doing experiments on this type of “water” – a water that when anyone drank it, would have their memory and consciousness taken.”

“...who'd take it?”

“No one, if you put it that way...”

“They just became part of its consciousness.”

The researchers of Szilard Quates.

In the pursuit of two goals, they had spent years endlessly experimenting –

“The creation of homunculi” and “immortality.”

The method to create the elixir of immortality, however, was locked in the memories of a man called Maiza Avaro. In his attempts to recreate the elixir, Szilard had created several incomplete formulations of it.

These creations gave their drinkers a partial form of immortality, enabling them to recover from any physical damage. But when it came to protecting against natural aging, they were still an imperfect product.

And from these incomplete products had come his other, more successful experiment.

From his experiments with the elixir, Szilard had discovered the method of creating homunculi.

It didn't matter if the immortality was complete or incomplete or if it had been granted by the demon originally summoned – all allowed a person's cell to fuse together with another “thing”.

When it came to alchemy, if you were able to create an organism where the cells would infinitely reproduce, then immortality could be achieved...

That was the principle Szilard had then discovered.

Just as a group of sardines will form a shape resembling an organism, if a similar effect could be applied to human cells and other units, then wouldn't it possible to create something that was immune to being damaged or destroyed?

This was the theory Szilard was then testing.

To allow separate individuals to live separately while, at the same time, being possessed by some "thing" they were unaware of –

Then wouldn't it be possible for an endless number of individuals to be part of this entity?

And if this product was administered to a large number of people, pulling numerous different individuals into one consciousness – then wouldn't it be then possible to control an innumerable number of people at the same time? In that case, wouldn't they then exist as one person, sharing the same feelings and experiences across different times and places?

According to the memories that Firo had acquired from Szilard, that particular experiment had been left incomplete and passed on to his descendants, who had continued to progress in it.

But even though this projected had then been unable to reach its objective, from the knowledge Firo had absorbed from Szilard, he couldn't help but believe it had succeeded.

In Szilard's plans, once this experiment was complete, he have a puppeteer's control over an incalculable number of people.

In theory, it was possible that such an experiment could succeed –

And, in front of them, were what were probably its results

"Completed experiments, huh...so that's what they are?"

Finished listening, Ladd, hands still shaking with suppressed action, directed another question at Firo.

"So these guys, they're like a bunch of puppets controlled by some invisible puppet master?"

"That's basically it, I guess."

“So if it’s like that...then one of their pals could be right beside Lua right now...no, it’s the same person, right? So if I shot one of these guys right now, he’d know it?”

At Ladd’s question, the anger in it barely concealed, the five men who were also one person smiled calmly.

""""""Very good. You catch on quickly.""""""

Filling every corner of the room, these voices made Ladd momentarily lower his gaze – only to look up again, inexplicably smiling. Uncurling his fists, Ladd raised his artificial hand, which glinted eerily in the room’s light.

“Ah...ah...ah...so it’s like that, right? Yeah, I understand – my understanding’s deeper than the sea is deep, higher than the skies – yeah, I’d like to say that. I’ve got two things though, just two things I wanna make sure ’bout.”

""""""What are they?""""""

“First of all, when it comes to you people...no, when it comes to “you,” you can’t die, right?”

""""""Unless I were to kill myself or the world were to end, no.""""""

Sham gave this answer with an easy, relaxed smile –

!

Listening to them talk, Firo felt a sudden chill run through him.

What...what happened?

Just then, Sham’s words had sent a shiver down his spine.

What Firo had detected was a fundamental change in the atmosphere.

This room which had always been a dungeon now seemed to have suddenly transformed into the cage of a bloodthirsty animal.

That was the sensation Firo now felt.

Oh, I get it now. That’s what changed.

In the room around him, Firo had sensed something that would make the blood in anyone’s veins freeze. Warily, he searched the room for the source of the strange chill – and immediately found it.

Ladd is...smiling?

Ladd...this guy...is smiling.

That was the simple change that had occurred.

Ladd's air of murderous intent remained, but now there was a cheerful, carefree grin on his lips.

That was the type of smile Firo saw now.

The same happy smile Ladd had had when he was pummeling Gig, the African-American man who was Sham's vessel, that time in the cafeteria – that was the expression he had now.

That's not to say that his smile back then had been free of murderous rage – looking back it, it was clearly the same type of smile, but the impression it gave had been completely different.

If Ladd's smile then had been one of a hungry predator, his smile now had a much more indescribable air. Sham, however, didn't seem to have noticed it at all, revealing the difference in their levels of perceptiveness.

If I had to describe it...what would it be...

If a guillotine or a rifle could smile, then this is probably what it would have looked like.

With such an air of madness that made Firo unconsciously flinch, Ladd calmly continued his questioning.

“Second thing – is Lua okay?”

""""""She's currently fine, but whether she continues to be depends on your behavior.""""""

...yeah, it'd probably be better if they stopped talking.

Hearing Sham continue to issue these verbal taunts, Firo became only more convinced.

He couldn't be sure of the specifics, but if Sham continued to talk like this, the results would surely be unpleasant.

Though Firo himself was just watching from the sidelines, surveying the actors in the scene unfolding before him, he could not help but get a sense of foreboding.

“Huh, so that's how it is...in that case, then...guess the only thing I can do, then, is trust Lua.”

""""""It is. We advise, however, that you even while you help us, you continue praying for her safety –""""""

“Okay! I trust her!”

""""""Huh?""""""

This word was uttered by only four people.

Though five people should have been speaking, one voice was missing, that of the guard who had brought Firo over –

Because Ladd's fist had already slammed into his mouth.

Seizing the opportunity, Ladd punched behind him, his fist smashing like a jackhammer into the Asian Sham stationed there.

The guard whose face had been pummeled collapsed to the ground, and the Asian man's body flew against the wall – two events that happened at the same time.

"Hey, don't worry. This is nothin' personal."

""""Wait...wait a moment!""""

Kicking the African-American man in the stomach, Ladd leapt and kicked the other guard in the face.

"I just had a change of priorities, that's all."

""Don't you care about your girlfriend's safety?""

The Shams seemed to have finally understand the situation, but Ladd's face still had that sinister smile –

Gathering all his strength, Ladd turned to the man whose stomach he had just kicked and punched him full-force in the throat.

With a soft "*oof*" as air left his body and the "pop" of something crunching inside, the African-American man toppled to the ground like a row of dominoes.

With an utterly cheerful grin, Ladd turned to face the small Caucasian man.

"I told ya, it's 'cause I trust her!"

"You...how could you..."

In front of the Caucasian man's stunned face, Ladd twisted his neck and, clicking his tongue, said:

"No, that's right – I believe in her more than I believe the sky'll stay up! Now that I'm here, I ain't got to careful! I've got the same dream as Jack Dempsey! I completely, one hundred percent trust her! I believe in Lua!

"What..."

Like someone unable to comprehend the being before him, Sham's remaining vessel took a step backwards – only for Ladd to follow, leaning in as he took a step forward and cried:

“*Oh*...you don't believe, don't believe in her don't believe, *coooooom*-----pletely don't believe! Really, I'm gettin' to the age when people are starting to call me “mister,” I shouldn't be getting so excited – but ya know what happens? Whenever I hear Lua's name, I just can't sit still! And since it's all your fault for bringing her up, how're you going to make up for it, hm? Heeeey, don't look at me like that – ‘cept for trying to kill that Huey bastard over there, I've been a model prisoner!”

“I...I don't understand your logic at all!”

“Don't understand me? Oh, don't worry, don't worry, I don't understand this world either, but the sun still rises in the east and goes down on the other side, doesn't it? Ya know what you should know? Not if you can understand me! But how to look at the situation in front of you and, when you see a dead end like this one, make a choice about it – accept, resist, or deny it. Ain't that true? Even if you say it's not, I won't accept that!”



Looking even more excited than when he had first come in, Ladd continued hopping in place like a boxer.

Listening to Ladd rant, Firo couldn't help but feel that everything was a dream. But Huey's eyes, squirming in his hand, told him that this was indeed the real world.

– *actually, when this guy's like this, he might even be crazier than Isaac and Miria.*

This feeling briefly flitted through Firo's mind as the two men in front of him – one who could not understand reality and one who rejected it – continued their absurd conversation.

“W...w-wait. This Lua girl – don't you care about her?”

“God, you're so annoying – didn't I just say I trusted her? What, you deaf or something? Or are you so just stupid you can't understand what I'm saying? Don't worry, a kick'll fix that – and even if it doesn't, it's okay, since it won't matter how stupid you are when you're dead! What I'm saying, is you'll be free to be as stupid as you want then! Capiche?”

“W-wait! I don't understand what you're saying!”

“Ah, it's alright – so long as *I* understand it's all a-OK. You and me, our differences might be pretty bog, but that's completely *completely* unimportant – we've just go to overcome them, right? You've just gotta spin around a coupla times, get a little little-headed, and then when you're feelin' dizzy, they'll all be gone! Mister, oh yeah, *oh* mister – ”
Suddenly, he halted.

“Hahahahaha...it doesn't matter. You really are annoying.”

His arm swiftly moving up, Ladd dealt the Caucasian man an uppercut in his still open mouth.

“Go die.”

Before Ladd had even finished the punch, the Caucasian man was already shooting through the air like a cannonball, his body tracing a trajectory in the air.

A trajectory which happened to be heading right for Firo –

Hey, can't this guy stop throwing people around?

At the same time this thought passed through his head, Firo took a step backward.

But rather than trying to move away, what Firo was doing was recoiling his body, readying his head to use to hit the Caucasian man flying towards him.

“Gah!”

Head slamming against Firo's, the Caucasian man bounced onto the ground, and then stopped moving.

“...damn, that hurt.”

As Firo rubbed his head, Ladd – face still as cheerful as ever – turned toward him, raising a hand.

“Oh, sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine...I was just thinking about punching him right then, but I guess you got tired of him first and beat me to it.”

Firo let out a bitter laugh, then changed his train of thought and turned towards Ladd with a question. In his nonsensical conversation with the Caucasian man, Ladd had nonetheless said something that had sparked Firo’s curiosity.

“...hey, so this Lua girl...what exactly are you trusting her to do?”

“Huh? Hey, what exactly are you trying to do – you wanna know how I sweet-talk my girl? But okay, since you’re my friend, I’ll tell you! Aah, whenever I’m near her, my soul feels like it’s gone to the highest level of heaven –just thinking about it now, all the wonderful times we’ve had together –”

“Try to keep it simple, Ladd.”

Recalling the words Ladd had told him earlier, Firo repeated them now.

Shrugging his shoulders, Ladd nodded, then calmly revealed the agreement between him and Lua.

“Well, to put it simply, me and her, we talked about it, and she agreed to let me – me! – to be the one to kill her.”

“...that might have been a little too simple.”

Firo’s head hurt from trying to make sense out of such a nonsensical explanation, but Ladd, not seeming to care, continued happily prattling on –

“Oh, well when it comes to that, it’s a really long story so I’ll just let you figure it out, okay? What matters is that she agreed, that she’d let me kill her! Which means she’s not going to let this group of creepy bastards kill her! That’s what I trust her to do, can you understand *that*?”

“Understand using *what*?”

“Intuition.”

“How am I supposed to –?”

—oh, God, I understand now. This guy’s completely crazy.

Though his words were completely different from Isaac and Miria's, the man in front of him similarly made Firo's head throb. Heaving a dumbfounded sigh, Firo continued speaking.

"No, I think that's enough...I was just wondering, even if she does her best to not let herself be killed, when she's killed, she's killed, right? What'll you do then?"

Firo's question made Ladd pause for a moment, stroking his chin as he thought.

"Hm...when that happens, I guess it could be like I indirectly killed her...what do you think?"

"W-why are you asking me – how am I supposed to know that?!"

Firo's exasperated answer, however, was lost on Ladd, who continued as if he hadn't heard him.

"In that case...I'd really like to say "yes!" to it, but when it happens, Lua'll probably be the only one happy – me, I won't be. But when it comes to her, I'll kill whoever killed her to calm down, but...Hahahahahahaha! This won't do won't do won't do at all! It won't do at all, this hitting and banging on my heart! I can't imagine a world where I won't be able to kill Lua, and I don't think she could imagine one either....a world where I don't end her life, slowly wringing her lovely neck...anyway, that's what I think. Firo, you?"

Once again, Ladd directed this at Firo, who, after wearily processed his words and struggling with Ladd's explanation, threw another question back at him.

"...if I can, I'm going to ask a more normal question. Have you two ever considered a future where no one kills anyone or is killed by anyone, and you two just live happily ever after?"

"Nope!...hold on, wait a minute....nah, still nope."

"W-wait a second. I need to confirm this, but what kind of relationship do you have with Lua, again?"

"She's my best friend, my sweetheart, and my finance!"

Ladd's straightforward answer, however, only made Firo want scream in frustration even more.

"Ah...thanks to what you said, I'm really starting to worry about Lua's safety...which means who should I kill her to make sure she's safe....hey! Looks like the fun's just beginning, then...don'tcha think so, Firo?"

"...not really."

"Really? But it's making *me* so excited! Okay, okay, but all this talk of "kill or be killed" – it's starting to create the option of a world where Lua isn't killed! Ah, but that's no fun...okay, so

here's another question. I personally hate guys who think they don't killed, but thinking that my fiancée couldn't be killed, d'you think that'd be just as bad, too?"

"Let me get back to you."

In the midst of a large number of people, the only ones standing were himself and a murderer whose mind was clearly addled.

Even so...with things this way...

This guy, really...what am I supposed to do with him...

Firo had a sudden urge to cry in frustration, but not with Huey's eye still wriggling in his hand.

In his hand, the eyeball spun madly and madly around, as if laughing at him...

Chapter Two: The Crybaby Cries, and...



Union Station, Chicago

Interior

Standing proudly in the middle of Chicago, Union Station was an important stop on the transcontinental railway.

Just completed in 1925, the station still had an air of novelty, and its visitors often felt the same sensations they would upon entering a newly-erected opera house.

As a result of stately pillars reminiscent of the Temple of Greece, the station had the same harmonious atmosphere as a museum. Even the crowds bustling about gave the station a solemn air.

In following years, this station would become known to the American people as the set for *The Untouchables*.

Right now, however, no sounds of a shootout filled the station – only cowardly, dispirited words.

“O-oh *no*, w-what are we going to do? We-we’ve lost them...”

Within the less than normally crowded station, walked a crestfallen young man.

Although a sword-shaped tattoo covered most of his face, the youth’s impression of carrying the weight of the world’s sufferings on his shoulders gave passersby a jarring impression.

In front of this dejected-looking youth was a group of at least twenty or so unruly youths.

Within these group, several men looked as though they had experience killing, and several others were playing with daggers in broad daylight. In particular, one man who seemed to be Mexican was especially conspicuous, and his formidable presence created an indescribably oppressive atmosphere.

Looking at this group, it was easy to worry if these hardened delinquents were planning on killing the tattooed youth – but those fears, it turned out, were groundless.

“Jacuzzi! Are you alright?”

A girl, her appearance notable for the eye patch under her glasses and the scars covering her body, ran up to the youth, her face worried.

“Oh, th-that guy...he, he just disappeared and, and I don’t know where he is...”

“Alright, calm down, Jacuzzi. It’s alright, it’s okay.”

Wearing a helpless expression, the girl – Nice – tried to comfort the tattooed youth, but Jacuzzi Splot's gloomy expression showed no signs of lifting.

“N-Nice, what are we going to do? Maybe he's already seen us and he's just hiding from us...ha, ah, wouldn't that be something? Just when we get here, Isaac and Miria have ran away!”

“Jacuzzi, it's just like you said – Isaac's coming tomorrow.”

Holding Jacuzzi's hand as if trying to calm a child, Nice didn't even notice when several of the unruly youths craned their necks towards Jacuzzi's tear-streaked face.

“Hey, whaddya think you're doing, rushing into that train like that?”

“For a second there, I actually thought you'd run away!” “Same here!” “I was a hundred percent sure of it – what are you doing back here? Gimme back the money!”

“W-what? What about money?”

“Okay, okay, if ya really don't remember it, I'll lend you some for now.” “Hey, lend me some too, alright?” “Me too!” “You've got ten days to pay me back five times.”

“W-w-what? W-wait, I can't take this money!”

His companions' mindless chatter, however, only made Jacuzzi feel increasingly helpless. Watching them, he felt like he was floating away from them all.

“H-hey, now's not the time for jokes. Who was that guy?”

“What do you mean “who was that guy”? He's a member of the Russo family, o' course!”

Hearing a hesitant inquiry from one of the less rowdy members, the tattooed youth's eyes filled with tears as he addressed his dangerous companions.

“I...I also realized that, b-but only after Nice reminded me...she, she only had to say it, and I could tell. From the scar on his face...he does seem to be a part of the Russo family.”

The Russo family.

A Chicago-based mafia family, it had a not insignificant history with Jacuzzi's gang. With people dead on both sides, their relationship had long since surpassed animosity – and not only was there no chance of a reconciliation or an alliance, the Russos also seemed determined for the bloodshed to continue.

For this reason, Jacuzzi had always been opposed to this trip to Chicago, afraid of harm to him or his companions.

But his companions, acting as if this crisis was mere exaggeration, rushed to answer.

“What? The Russos?”

“Hey, we’re in luck.” “Let’s kill ’em all!” “Hyahahahahahahahaha!”

“Anyways, what were ya thinkin’, chasing after him?”

“You’re shit at fighting, so don’t try anything!”

“Jacuzzi shouldn’t be deciding what we feel about the Russos, but how far we’re gonna go against them!”

As the conversation degenerated into warlike squabbling, Jacuzzi sat down, feeling increasing lost at what was going on before him.

“H-hey, you guys are going overboard.”

“Hey, what’re you saying? I just want ya to look at your abilities again.”

“Look, you ain’t the fighting type, but you make a great leader, okay?”

“All the dirty work – just give it to us.” “Jacuzzi might not be too smart, but he’s still loads better than us!”

“Hyaha!” “Being a crybaby ain’t bad, but you still suck at fighting.”

Though words of praise for him once again rose up, Jacuzzi – hands over his ears as he clutched his head in his hands – heard none of them.

In this kind of environment, Jacuzzi’s mind once again drifted back to the events that had led up to situation.

Ahaha, how did things turn out like this?

Just yesterday afternoon, we were still all in New York...

Prior Day

In their base at Millionaire’s Row, Jacuzzi and his gang had received a piece of news.

From the radio, they had learned of a series of explosions in Chicago, which had covered over three hundred square miles.

Police analysis revealed that the explosions were man-made, and though the motive was yet unknown, it was suspected that the culprit was the head of the Russo family – Placido Russo.

At the same time, nearly two hundred people had disappeared, wrapping Chicago in an unsure atmosphere.

At that time, he had been worried about his friends in Chicago, especially Graham Spencer – but just as the report had finished, two visitors had come to pay a call.

That's right, Tim and Adele told me Graham seemed to have been involved in a dangerous incident...which really made me worried about him...

Jacuzzi and his gang had been shaken by this piece of news, but the largest surprise had come from another source – a call to the villa from the other side of the continent.

The man calling had been a friend who was recently incarcerated for theft – Isaac Dent.

With the news that Isaac's sentence had ended and he had safely left jail, Jacuzzi and his gang rejoiced, their former worries forgotten.

And, smiling in front of them as she talked with him, was the woman Isaac loved – Miria Harvent.

And it was the middle of their conversation that things first began to take an unexpected turn.

“Ah – ah, ah, that's great, Isacc! I'm going to head for Chicago right now to meet you!”

No doubt, that was how it'd happened...at that time, I couldn't understand what Miria was saying – only after asking, I learned that Isaac didn't have enough money for a train ticket to New York. At most, he could get to Chicago –

And so, he had asked Miria to come to Chicago with his wallet.

At first, Jacuzzi had desperately tried to dissuade Miria's mind, but with Isaac the only thing in her thoughts, his words had proven useless.

Even worse, Nice – clearly crazy – had taken an interest in the bombings, and then the rest of his companions had started up...

And now we're here...

Lost in a daze as he trailed after his companions, Jacuzzi suddenly realized something – and like a puppet brought to life, he sprang up clapped his hands together.

“That's right! W-we have to go to San Francisco to pick Isaac up! In – in any case, we should leave Chicago right away...”

Face shining, Jacuzzi thought he had come up with a brilliant idea to leave Chicago, but Nice's uncomprehending face stopped him –

“If we leave to go for San Francisco now, isn't there a higher chance we'll just miss Isaac?”

“Yeah!”

“And also...if we boarded the train now, then wouldn't we be on the same train as the member of the Russo family?”

“Yeah yeah!”

As even children began to agree against him, Jacuzzi's answer caught in his throat and tears began to flow down his face.

“Plus, what about Graham?” “Uh uh um y-eah – that's right, what about him? Is...is there any w-way we could find him in five minutes? I-if we could find Graham, I don't think we'd have to worry about the Russos anymore..it's just, but...no no no, this is our problem ,w-we can't drag Graham into it too!”

Jacuzzi's teary words, however, were cut short by a torrent of words from his companions.

“Ya know, I kept on expecting someone else to tell ya off, and now you're giving up already? Well, huh.”

“It had to be said, so quit crying!” “Ya wanted us to take five minutes to find him? Quit kidding!” “Hyaha!”

“B-but you guys...it'd only be five minutes...w-when it comes to Graham, h-he's very important to me!”

“Let me think, what's Graham done for us? Oh, right, there was that time at that hill when he got into that huge fight with us!”

“Uh-huh, and I haven't even *seen* Graham before.”

“Just don't think about it anymore, okay?” “Hey, if we're going to make fun of Jacuzzi's plan, aren't we just setting it up to fail?” “Donny, you're an idiot!”

“Yeah, well, sorry.”

“Anyway, getting back to topic, even if you find Graham in five minutes, what are you going to do, just drag him out of Chicago...?” “Yeah, and what were ya going to say to him, anyways?”

“Getting back on topic, Jacuzzi's going to cry soon!”

“Getting back on topic, who wants to help me look for my little sister?”

“Getting back on topic, since when have you *had* a little sister?”

“Well, then who wants to help me look for the girl who can be my *new* sister...”

“Getting back on topic, shut up.” “Shut up.” “Shut up.” “Hyaha!”

“I didn’t mention it earlier, but I’m still pretty worried about those clothes I left outside...hey!”

“Huh?”

“What you just said...it was obviously sunset when we were at that hill, but then you just said it was in the morning. Don’cha think that’s weird?”

“You’re sayin’ this just now?” “Shut up!” “Screw off!” “Go die!” “Shoo!” “Shoo?”

“These guys, how do I stand them...they’ve gone back to fighting like kids...”

Ignoring her rowdy companions, Nice instead calmly addressed Jacuzzi.

Temporarily ignoring her glasses, Nice’s eye patch and her scar gave her an intimidating appearance – but this impression was contradicted by her gentle expression. The effect of this contrast was to only make her seem even kinder than she already was.

“It’s okay, Jacuzzi, there’s no way he saw us.”

“R-really?”

“Of course. Besides, the way he looked, he seemed really panicked, like he was trying to hide from someone...”

As she recounting the situation, Nice simultaneously tried to comfort Jacuzzi.

Hearing Nice’s words, Jacuzzi momentarily felt relieved –

But as a thought hit him, Jacuzzi’s face once more filled with anxiety.

“B-but if he’s h-hiding...w-what’s he hiding from?”

“Ah?”

At Jacuzzi’s question, Nice couldn’t help but be stumped. However, with an awkward smile, she attempted to answer anyways.

“What he’s hiding from, hm...maybe the police, I guess? Ah, don’t people say they’re looking for the Russos?”

“B-but, didn’t they also say they were just looking for Placido Russo?”

“Hm, maybe...”

Nice’s answer seemed like an inevitable conclusion, but what happened next far exceeded what she had expected.

Already pale, the blood drained out of Jacuzzi’s face, making the colors of his tattoo even more vivid against his ashen skin.

“Oh, oh no! I-in that case, then we defi-definitely have to find Graham!”

“...? Um, why would we have to do that...?”

To Nice’s uncertainly, Jacuzzi responded with a baffled question of his own.

“Ah? Because...well, the reason Graham came here, it was to help the Russo, right?”

“....?”

“And so, the police might also be looking for Graham...so we have to find him quickly, and take him with us...”

“...have you always known about Graham’s connection with the Russo family?”

Jacuzzi’s next words deeply surprised Nice.

When Nice arrived at New York, she had investigated Graham and the other groups there, and had learned of the strong relationship between Graham and the Russo family. She had initially been wary of him, but his actions had eventually convinced him he wasn’t such a bad person.

Even though Jacuzzi was already wanted by the police, he had still helped them without a thought, and so Nice had trusted him a little. However, because she didn’t want to make Jacuzzi worry, she had thought it was better not to talk about his connection with the Russos.

But how could Jacuzzi have known about it anyway?

To Nice’s question, Jacuzzi response was puzzlement.

“Ah...well, I already knew about it then...um, yeah, oh right. I did think it was weird that no one was talking about it – was that because of you, Nice?”

“...”

Seeing Nice’s dumbfounded expression and her silence, Jacuzzi guessed that she wanted to say something, and gave her a perplexing smile.

“Actually, the Russos might be our enemies, but they also know that Graham’s a good person.”

“...and that’s all you care about?”

“Ah, um...ah, did I do something wrong...?”

As Jacuzzi’s face became worried again, Nice’s astonished expression relaxed into a smile.

“Jacuzzi, you can be really fearless sometimes...”

“Is...is that so...”

Feeling oddly like he was being praised, Jacuzzi shyly lowered his head. Yet other than the subtle change brought by their conversation, there was no other shift in the atmosphere.

At the sight of Jacuzzi’s lowered head, however, his companions became very rowdy, gleefully crowing as they crowded around him.

“Hey, Jacuzzi, are you *blushing*?”

“I dunno what happened, but I gotta give it to you!”

“I’m going to kick your ass for that!” “Yeah, so? I’ll just take your wallet!”

“In other words, go die, you romantic bastard!” “Hyaha!” “Damn! I’m so jealous...” “Hey, you think Jacuzzi’s tears might have some secret to attracting girls?” “Woah! Lend some of those, then...”

“W-what are you guys going on about? Eee —!”

As someone’s foot hit his knee, Jacuzzi’s screams spread throughout the station.

“Hey, I didn’t think you would actually start crying!” “Hey, who just kicked him right then?”

“Don’t you know anything about controlling yourself?”

“Who was it?” “It was you!” “Me?” “No doubt!” “Oh. Shit!” “Hyaha!”

Pushed to the front by his friends, the boy responsible for kicking Jacuzzi nervously apologized to his leader.

“Um...uh, sorry Jacuzzi. Uh, if you want, you can kick all of us back.”

“Hey, how come I have to be kicked too?”

“If you can’t even take responsibility, then just shut up!”

Paying no heed to his companions’ whispered argument, Jacuzzi turned to the boy, his eyes swimming with tears.

“Ah, well, um...really?”

“A little lighter, maybe, if you could..”

“Um, okay. But, um, I can’t really move right now. Donny, can you help me do it?”

Jacuzzi’s words, mixed amongst his tears, made his companions freeze.

“Hey, Jacuzzi, wait! No, wait, Jacuzzi, please! W-wait – Jacuzzi, mister –!”

At the same time, the man Jacuzzi mentioned spoke up.

“Well, I don’t really know what’s going on, but sure. Lightly, yeah?”

“Oh shit shit *shit!*”

Seeing Donny starting to approach, the group of unruly youths became a crowd of schoolchildren, scattering as one.

“D-damn you, Jacuzzi! Ya gotta start acting like a leader *now?*”

“This bastard is suddenly becoming mean!” “Hyahahahahahahahaha! Hyaha!”

As this commotion occurred, one member stood slightly apart from the group, her head lifted towards the sky.

The woman who was responsible for this expedition – Miria Harvent.

A young woman whose innocent expression could have caused her to be mistaken for a girl, she stood in the bright sunlight of the blue sky, her whole body radiant from the hope filling her heart.

In order to welcome back the man she loved, Miria had come to Chicago. And as her mind filled with thoughts of her missing love, Miria joyfully sang her hope to the blue sky above her – a hope that revealed her endless affection for its subject.

“I hope I can see Isaac soon!”

Ah, but poor girl, once again your request shall be denied –
That was what the blue sky seemed to mockingly tell her –

A sky which was suddenly shattered by a sharp explosion of sound.

“...? W-what was that noise?”

Caught in the chaotic crowds, Jacuzzi – his whole body shaking – sought the source of the ground's trembling.

“...it looks like an explosion.”

As Nice calmly made her assessment, her companions glanced around. All around them, the other people in the station had reacted similarly, with those who had not flattened themselves against the ground frozen into place. However, there were no signs of smoke or flames.

With the realization that the bombings had finally spread to Chicago, panic spread throughout the crowd. If smoke had actually been seen, then it was all too possible a riot could have broken out.

“Oh no oh no oh no – ah, oh no oh no oh no, w-what are we going to do? E-everyone c-calm down please! I-if we have to, we can just leave – oh no, calm down, calm down – Graham! We have to find Graham – please don't shout guys, calm down – oh no oh no, everyone's going to die die die what are we going to do do do do do *dooooo* what are we going to do – everyone, just please calm down –!”

“You're the one who needs to calm down!”

Kicked by Nick and Donny in succession, the air left Jacuzzi's lungs as he let out a soft groan.

Despite what had just occurred, the group of delinquents seemed the unfazed by the situation – what was more, many of them actually seemed *annoyed* with the explosion. From their calm expressions, it seemed they had not yet grasped the magnitude of the situation.

There was, however, one exception – the bomb fanatic whose eyes shone behind her glasses.

“...this explosion...its blast radius must be around ten meters!”

Using senses honed from long experience, Nice had been able to determine the size of the current explosion.

“...and it's about five hundred meters west?”

However, her deductions were abruptly cut off by the scent of fumes gusting past.

Fumes that were distinctly familiar –

As Nice identified the scent, her hands began to sweat, her remaining eye widening with stark surprise.

“This...what in the world...?”

Several minutes earlier, Chicago

When it comes down to it, I guess it's just me.

Walking along the sidewalk by Union Station, Rail raised his head and gazed at the sky.

In the shadows, the striking scars that covered Rail's face and body were mostly hidden.

Normally, Rail wouldn't have cared about who saw his scars – however, given the situation he was in, it wouldn't have been wise to flaunt this attribute and thus draw attention to himself.

Even after carrying out yesterday's bombings, he had still been unable to find Frank.

No – it wasn't just Frank that was bothering him. Sham, who had promised to help him in yesterday's bombings, had – not long after bombing Elson Hill – completely disappeared.

And so Rail had been forced to act alone – but although he was a member of Lamia, Huey's personal organization, he now had no power besides the bombs on his person.

This fact, however, didn't seem to bother Rail too much. In his mind, the idea of escaping no longer existed.

Having given up on the idea of saving Frank, he had fallen into a state of purposelessness –

From an outsider's perspective, it would not have been wrong to say he had become thoroughly disheartened.

Outwardly, however, his mood seemed normal. Indeed, he seemed in a state of complete carelessness – even when it came to his safety.

In Rail's uneasy mind, rang the words Christopher had earlier spoken.

“Ah, how should I put it? Well, since I'm unnatural, I guess I can't help you get any better – though if you wanted to be like me, it'd be easy enough to do help you there! But I think that right now, you've got a choice...and whatever happens next to you, it should be your decision.

“M-my decision? On what?”

“On the type of person you want to become – though, ha, I guess we never had a choice in that, right?”

“But...I don't want to be unnatural. I want...I want to be someone who help you regain your original state.”

“Yeah, well, what's a natural person, anyways? Even if I wanted to be one, I don't think they exist...”

“And since that’s how things are...I guess I’ll just have to be unnatural, then. Oh well. Anyways, how would you “regain” that? And anyways, what would I even gain if I returned to my “original state?”

“But...but that way...you would be able to live as a human being.”

"Ha! As if!"

“C-Chris, why are you saying this?”

“Because when it comes to humans, I have absolutely no interest in them.

“Even if all of humanity were to consider me crazy, it would make no difference to me.”

“But all I want...Chris...please, help me be like you.”

A thought passed through his mind as Rail took a step closer to the station, gazing at the landscape with a contemplative air.

All this time...I guess I’ve always wanted something like that.

Then why, why can’t I feel anything?

Because last night, I was too open in laughing and crying?

Right now, such sorrows and joys felt like nothing but a blur to Rail.

As he continued walking, a vision of his heart emerged in front of him, filled with irritability and depression.

Comprehending this, Rail’s recklessness only increased.

What is this? What’s wrong with me, really?

I feel so strange now, even if I saw someone...what would I do then?

Not everyone can achieve happiness, it’s true...and even if I do find Frank and Christopher, I could still be the same loathsome person I am now.

And so, if things are really this way...I...I guess I’ll just always be the same, forever a person without any connections.

When it came to his situation, Rail decided, God was truly cruel. Just as he reached this conclusion, however, a hand reached for his shoulder –

“Rail.”

“I”

Reflexively jumping a little, Rail tensed.

Turning his head, however, all he saw was a sea of unfamiliar faces. None of them seemed to belong to one of the white-coated researchers working under the female scientist, but he couldn't be too careful – it would hardly be natural, after all, to wear a white lab coat in the middle of the street.

Seemingly sensing his alarm, the man who had called Rail smiled wearily, extended his hands out.

“It's me, Sham. Good to see you're not in too much trouble.”

“Sham! – what do you think you're doing, looking for me now?”

Even though it was the first time he had seen him, Rail acted as if he knew the man, voice returning to its normal tone.

What was more, Rail's demeanor had changed completely. Now trembling, it was as if the madness hidden in his heart was finally finding outward expression.

As Sham pulled Rail into an alley, it was hard to tell if he sensed Rail's precarious situation, but his voice was similarly nervous when he spoke.

“Ah, well...my situation's kind of worsened...”

“What situation?”

“The one between Hilton and me, that's gotten a bit worse...oh, Huey has a message to pass on. Do you want to hear it?”

“No, I don't. But you can tell him “go die” from me.”

Shaking his head at Rail's unhesitating answer, Sham smiled sadly.

“I haven't seen you react so strongly to something in a long time...alright, I'll pass your message on. Anyways, the message is a bit old, but Huey says, ‘Rail, I will be passing by Chicago soon. I hope I will be able to see you.’”

“...What? But – Huey's in prison! What's he talking about?”

The man responsible for making Rail and his kind immortal, Huey Laforet, was currently imprisoned in Alcatraz, and should not have been unable to do anything.

As a result, Sham, Hilton, and Leeza had become his couriers, conveying messages for him.

Even if he was physically present, the words that came from his messengers were still official orders –

“That bastard – is he planning to break out, then?”

“Hang on a moment – Huey just got the message you sent him. He says to tell you, “since I am an immortal, I don’t believe I can die. Anyways, when it comes to the issue of breaking from

“...you really gave him my message...I’m impressed...”

Although Rail said these words in his usual tone of sarcasm, underneath raged the emotions released by Huey’s name – resentment, loathing, and terror that had only grown over the years.

Now these emotions swirled together, increasing his sense of restlessness.

Hey, what do you think you’re doing? Just what do you you’re feeling towards Huey...

So annoying...

He was getting more and more agitated.

Ah, that’s enough...nothing matters anyways...

More and more agitated –

“Ah, it doesn’t matter anymore...I’ll just blow it all up.”

“Wait, Rail – what are bringing that out for?”

The alarm in Sham’s voice forced Rail back to his senses.

Only when he glanced at the round weapon clutched in his right hand, did Rail realize what he had just intened to do.

“Hey, um – if I’ve made you angry, I can just apologize.”

“...ah, it’s not that. Sorry, I was just kidding around.”

Only after Rail had put his weapons away, did he realize that he was covered in sweat.

Ever since his body had been cut open and his sense of pain dulled, Rail rarely sweated. The researchers studying him had thought this would affect his ability to regulate his temperature , but so far, the consequences didn’t seemed too serious.

The cold sweat he was currently covered in was another matter.

Whenever he thought back to the experiments he had suffered, his palms and neck would always break out in a cold sweat.

However, he was now sweating from his startling actions of a moment ago. Seeing the cold droplets on his skin, Rail's anxiety only continued mounting.

As Rail wondered in horror at the unhinged state of his mind, the tightness in his chest only increased. To turn from this troubling line of thought, he turned his attention back to Sham.

"...ah, sorry. Oh, Sham, what did you want to say a second ago? Also, when you left, how come I suddenly couldn't contact you?"

"Ah, that's because..."

Seemingly glad to return to the original topic, Sham nodded –

Only to be ultimately cut off.

"Hey, look! I found something."

"W-what?"

A series of sudden sounds forced Sham to look up –

To see, crowding the alley where they stood, a group of men dressed in black, surrounding them.

"*Shit –!*"

Although he seemed to recognize these men in black, Sham's face nonetheless filled with astonishment at seeing them. For a moment, he made as if to flee from the scene –

But his opponents were faster.

One man had already taken out a syringe, which he plunged into Sham's neck.

"Umph...!"

As the needle went in, another man held Sham, who struggled for a few moments before his movements slowed under the influence of the drug.

"Huh?"

The sudden change in situation, which had occurred in a blink of an eye, left Rail stunned.

Removing the syringe from Sham's neck, the man in black turned to Rail, his eyes suspicious as he regarded him.

“...hey, ain’t that the punk we let go, day ‘fore yesterday?”

Sham was still weakly struggling, but the man holding him seemed not to notice his presence as he responded.

“Well, if there are scars ‘neath that cap of his, it’ll be him for sure.”

“Hey, that’s right –!”

Nodding, the man with the needle slowly reached a hand towards Rail.

Realistically, what happened next took only a few seconds.

But in that span of time, countless thoughts ran through Rail’s head.

– who? Why did he, to Sham – and needles – men clothed in black – the Mafia? No, that’s not right –

He says he knows me...my scars, probably...the day before yesterday? Something that happened then...what? What happened? What happened what happened what happened what happened what –

Oh. The bombs.

Of course...the explosions – both times – the Russos – they wanted Frank...

Then...Frank...?

Ah!

With this thought, the images in Rail’s head of the white-coated group and the woman who led them shattered and vanished. The next moment – the bomb he had just put away was in his hand again, his finger already on its pin.

“Ah-ha! It *is* him!”

“W-wait! If you set up set that off here, then not only these guys, but also you yourself –”

Although the men in black were a distance away from Rail, he was still far closer to them than he was to the white-coated woman when he had blown her up.

In this situation, anyone would have seen that it would have been difficult for everyone to escape alive.

However –

Ah, what are those guys talking about?

It's not use, I can't hear anything at all.

It's just so loud – so loud! So so so loud –

[illegible]

Although this scream rang in his brain, Rail's outward appearance was as calm as ever.

And without any hesitation, as if he was not right next to his enemies, Rail let go of the pin.

Mind still hazy from the drug injected into him, Sham and the man holding him simultaneously witnessed this.

And, as the egg-shaped object slowly arched through the air, both simultaneously gasped.

...and in the moments before the bomb exploded, Sham suddenly realized something.

That already, Rail no longer cared about the events in front of him.

Not about the life of his ally, Sham.

Not about the lives of his enemies, the men in black.

Not even, in the end, about his own life.

As the light from the roaring heat wave dazzled his vision, Sham – clinging to consciousness – was sure of one thing.

And that was —

That Rail had begun to lose his mind.

Several minutes later

Within the heavy smoke and the screams of the din, a familiar scream reverberated through Union Station –

“A-ah! T-there’s so much smoke, a-and it E-everyone, y-you should all just leave! Oh no no *no* – it’s too dangerous, Nice! D-don’t go closer –”

“Sorry Jacuzzi, but there’s something I have to find out!”

Jacuzzi and the men who had just arrived

By the time Jacuzzi and the others arrived, the scene was already covered in smoke, and a group of bystanders had already gathered around the alley where the explosion was suspected to have occurred.

The police and the firefighters had not yet arrived at the scene, and in the chance of a second explosion, there was no one was willing to enter the alley.

In the midst of this situation –

Nice, shoving through the crowd of onlookers, rushed into the alley without a second thought.

Following after came Jacuzzi, still crying about the danger of it all – and after that, the group of unruly youths eyed warily by passersby – all crowded into the alleyway.

Those watching stared in shock at their movement, but no one thought of following. As a result, the first to enter the site of the explosion were these newly returned delinquents – an event that only caused the current situation to become even more confusing.

“It’s really true...the smell of this smoke...there’s no mistaking it...”

“R-right, Nice! Y-you’re right, it’s too dangerous here! S-so we should just go back!”

Standing in the alley, Nice began muttering to herself, completely ignoring the panicked Jacuzzi by her side.

Although the smoke made it hard to see, the monocle-wearing girl still attentively

But where...where was the trail...even a few shards would do...

Trying to find the source of the explosion, Nice scanned the area around her –

And suddenly saw, within the alley, a small, shadowy shape.

“Ah..huh? Someone...someone’s inside there?!”

To Jacuzzi, it also seemed like there was someone in the alley – and with terrified eyes, he watched the figure walk out of the smoke.

The steps this figure took were faltering, as if about to fall at any moment.

“A...a boy?”

As if to confirm the words Nice had just said, a young boy in grey clothes came staggering out of the smoke.

His face seemed to be composed of a mass of scars – but even more alarming than these scars was the bright red liquid covering his face.

“O-oh no! He – he’s hurt!”

Without a second’s hesitation, Jacuzzi – so terrified a moment before – charged forward.

Hurrying over, he helped support the boy, still coughing from the lingering smoke, and asked in a trembling voice: “Are – are you alright?”

Dull eyes gleaming dimly in his blood-stained face, the boy made no answer.

As the boy gazed dully at Jacuzzi, Nice, and the delinquents behind them, it was uncertain if he had even heard Jacuzzi’s words.

“...I have to...I have to go.”

“O-of course! We’ll take you to a hospital right now!”

Jacuzzi struggled to smile, trying to reassure the boy in front of him. The trembling in his face, however, could only make his nearby companions feel worried.

“I have to go...blow it up.”

“W-what? Why would...w-what happened?”

Still supporting the boy, Jacuzzi was unable to hear his quiet words, and made a mental note to ask him later.

But just as Jacuzzi had decided to take him to a doctor, the boy seemed to finally notice Jacuzzi and the others.

“Mister...who are you?”

“Ah – um –uh, uh, um...it’s okay! D-don’t worry, it’s going to be okay!”

Unnoticed by Jacuzzi in the noise and confusion, the other delinquents began dividing up the work, checking that the path to leave was free and making sure that no one else was injured.

To the relief of Jacuzzi and his gang, it was only a few moments before policemen and firefighters began streaming into alley.

But in the moments –

As he blankly stared at the approaching policemen, the boy suddenly gave a surprising declaration.

“Don’t...try to stop me.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t...just don’t try to stop me!”

To Jacuzzi and the other delinquents, these seemed like the words of someone still in shock –

Only Nice noticed “that thing.”

Of its own accord, the boy’s hand had moved to his pocket and taken out a small, round object.

And without any hesitation, his fingers moved towards the silver pin at its top.

“....?”

In the end, was it fate that Nice would notice this object? Or was it because her senses, after so much time spent with explosives, were so heightened that she would be able to notice it? The answer, perhaps, will never be clear.

What *was* clear, however, was that if it had not been Nice who had noticed it, then what happened next could have been deadly.

On instinct honed by long years of experience, Nice’s senses were instantly on high alert.

...oh no.

The boy’s movements, the shape and color of the objects in his hands, the smoky air around them – all these things gave Nice information about what had occurred. And from this information, Nice became sure of something.

That this scarred young boy was the one who had caused the explosions earlier that day.

That the objects in his hand were what had caused it.

And that at that moment, the exhausted boy was slowly undoing the pin at the top of the bomb.

At lightning speed, Nice darted forward and snatched the bombs from the boy.

“H-hey! N-Nice, what are you –”

Paying no attention to Jacuzzi’s exclamations, Nice quickly glanced about, then tossed the bombs into the alley with all her strength.

Oh please, don’t let there be any people over there –

As she mentally issued this prayer, Nice simultaneously shouted at her companions:

“Get down!”

Those were the orders she gave.

Hearing these words, the confused policemen wandering into the alley halted – but made no move to obey.

And amongst them, one member recognized Nice’s distinctive appearance –

“Oh, so then – Nice, that was *you*?”

That was the question he asked.

...damn.

Already preparing to crouch down, Nice’s heart suddenly froze.

When she had been a child, Nice had been taken to the police many times for causing explosions in the city. Because she had only been a girl and because there had been no injuries or damage, the police could do nothing but let her go – but because of these incidents, Nice’s face was instantly recognizable to the men.

Whether or not she had ever killed anyone, that was the type of person the police thought of her as.

“So then, what happened yesterday, that was *you* –”

As the man reached what seemed the obvious conclusion, Nice could only bite her lip and shout:

“No! Just – everyone, get down!”



As if running out of time to talk, Nice had already flattened herself against the ground.

And, as if controlled by a sudden force, the group of delinquents did as well.

To them, the situation was extremely simple – it was because *Nice* wanted them to get down. From the mouth of Nice – completely, fearlessly crazy Nice – had come the words: “Get down!”

This could only mean one thing, one thing that long experience had taught them –

They had to listen.

Acting not on thought, but rather on instincts ingrained into their body, the delinquents flattened themselves the ground and braced themselves for what would occur next.

“W-w-w-w-what? A-a-ah!”

A moment later, Jacuzzi – still wailing – threw himself over the boy’s body –

Just as, for the second time that day, an explosion rocked the small alley.

Several moments later

Arriving at the scene several moments after Jacuzzi and his gang, Miria hovered nervously in the crowd, eyes darting nervously towards the alley.

“I hope everyone’s alright...”

Initially, she had been prepared to follow them into the alley, but when the police had arrived, the crowds had become impossible to find a way in. Plus, Miria had assumed that now that the police were here, they would force Jacuzzi and the others to leave –

But not long after, the roar of explosion had rocked the alley.

Momentarily distracted by the din, Miria suddenly snapped back to the present as she realized that Jacuzzi and his gang had not come out of the alley.

“Oh – oh *no!*”

She began to run in the opposite direction of all the onlookers – towards the alley from which the explosion had sounded.

There, the thick smoke that had just come from the alleyway had thrown the newly-arrived police and firemen into disarray.

Just as Miria was preparing to rush into the alleyway –

Within the thick smoke, a familiar, hulking shape came rushing out of it.

“Donny!”

As Miria cried this, she realized that the Mexican man she was referring to had two people on his shoulders. From their clothing, one of them was Jacuzzi and the other a child.

Because there were several children in the gang, Miria had earlier began to worry that one of them or Jacuzzi had been hurt...

Sprinting at Donny’s side was also Nice. As her gaze found Miria – and without another word, Nice had grabbed her by the hand and was racing forward with her in tow.

“Huh?”

One hand grabbing an uncomprehending Miria, Nice flew out of the smoky scene –

“Oh, this is good! I was worried we might not run into you – anyways, to make things clear, we have to get out of here!”

Catching onto Nice’s agitation, Miria followed without another word.¹

As they raced together, Nice took a cylindrical object out of her pocket. Tearing it open with her teeth, she let go of Miria for a moment to fling it behind them.

Separated for a moment from Nice, Miria heard the sounds of explosions and spurting gas – and glancing back for a moment, all she could see was a rapidly spreading wall of smoke.

At a closer glance, however, she saw the other unruly youths emerging from the smoke and mingling with the crowds, causing small disruptions as they did.

The scene was exactly like one that had occurred a year ago, in Millionaire’s Row. Looking slightly embarrassed, the cause of the current explosions now turned to Miria with an apologetic air.

“Sorry that things turned out like this, Miria...”

Assured that no one was following them, Nice relaxed her furious pace and released Miria’s hand.

Miria, realizing that they were hiding from something, asked –

“What happened? And what are we all running from?”

At Miria's startled questions, Nice smiled wearily as she reluctantly answered –

“Ah, well...we're running from the police.”

“H-huh?”

Seeing Miria tilt her head in confusion, Nice once again gave her a weary smile.

“It's a bit of a long story, but...

“The way things are going, they probably think I caused these bombings.”

Interlude Two: The Misshaped Soul is Relaxed, and...

Alcatraz

Special cell, underground

One minute – that was how long it had been since Ladd had struck Sham’s vessels.

Surveying the situation, Firo sighed. A little away, Ladd had his fingers pressed to his temple, as if he was thinking over something –

Suddenly he clapped his hands, and turned to Firo with a wide smile.

“Okay Firo, ya keep on thinkin’ – but right now, I’m gonna send these guys on their last journey.”

“Why do you have to kill them in the first place?”

Seeing Firo’s questioning gaze, Ladd blankly stared at him.

“Why’d I want to? Why, ’cause I *can*, that’s why! It’s like magic – even if I don’t have a reason, even if you ask if it’d be better or worse to do it, I’ll just kill ’em anyway! That’s what I just asked myself, and the answer was YES! And notta moment to lose! Other words, my answer’s same it’ll always be...which is YES! Ya get me?”

“And when you’re killing these people, haven’t you ever considered that that’s a bad thing? The situation we’re in doesn’t change your mind at all? If you kill these guys here, you wouldn’t even have to worry about getting your sentence increased – they’d send you straight to the gallows!”

“The gallows, huh...hey, didn’t some executioner before think, “I’m the one killing others, so I definitely can’t be killed”? Or d’ya think he thought, “I might end up like him one day,” and went on livin’ his life in fear? Hey, which d’ya think they were thinkin’? Which one, huh?”

“Why does it matter?”

Ladd’s nonsensical words, the same as those he had said previously, only made Firo’s head hurt. At the same time, he wondered what to do with the eyeball still turning in his hand –

“Oh but no no no, Firo – of *course* it matters! In fact, it’s a question with a clear connection to me right now. See, right now, I could definitely kill these guys on the ground – but if I just arrogantly kill ’em like that, what kind of thoughts would I have?”

“You’re askin’ me, but who *am* I supposed to ask about that?!”

“Listen, even if I killed these guys while they were unconscious, it’d hardly count for anything, yeah? But if it makes me think “I’m a person who can’t be killed,” then there’s no way I could live with myself!”

Firo’s coldly indifferent answer did nothing to deter Ladd, who only animation only increased as he continued talking, crazily pacing as he chattered on. In this mood of abnormal interest, he leveled his next question at Firo:

“Firo, how ’bout you? You ever killed anyone who was unconscious? That ever happen to you, being so completely, absolutely powerful over another guy, way more than “I wanna kill this guy before he kills me first?””

“I would never –”

However, he found himself unable to finish the sentence.

Because although Firo himself had never had this type of experience –

There *was* a similar one in his memory.

From the memories of Szilard Quates, came the scene of a ship several hundred years ago.

Although he hardly wanted to recall it, the memory was there, and triggered by Ladd’s words, it suddenly surfaced in his mind.

In the middle of the night, he stood in front of a bed, right hand stretching towards its occupant’s forehead –

What happened next was something Firo definitely didn’t want to remember.

Because in the next moment, the person sucked into his right hand –

That...that’s Maiza’s little brother.

In the moment after he devoured the boy, a series of other memories flashed before his eyes.

Firo felt himself being caught in the rush of memories – but as he recalled Maiza’s brother, Szilard’s memories stopped, and he was brought back to reality by the object clenched in his right hand.

“Oh, *shit.*”

Remembering what the object in his hand was, Firo nearly let go of it in disgust. But just as he loosened his grip, the eye began squirming to return to its source – the eye socket of Huey, now lying on the ground.

“Hey, woah there – don’t want to pop it now. Hey, that’s right – that reminds me, how *do* ya plan to get this back? Cause I’m real curious right now how you’re gonna do it – this is the type of prison you couldn’t sneak a hairpin past, so how’re ya gonna sneak this eyeball inside, huh? I mean, whattya gonna do, swallow it? Although...people do say that human eyes are *veeery* tasty – ya gonna give it a few licks to see if they’re right? Or just gonna crunch it right up up up, savoring it like some sorta delicacy, huh?”

“Quit playing around! God, who would think about eating an *eye* –”

...although...thinking about it, I’ve already eaten people, haven’t I?

Even as his mind rejected the idea, the memory of sucking up Szilard with right hand arose in his mind, and the memories of that night were more than enough to keep Firo silent.

“Hey, something up? You got real strange there for a moment.”

“...it’s nothing.”

Firo sighed, deliberately avoiding Ladd’s question.

He had come here to devour Huey – and as Ladd had just pointed out, that meant he had come here to kill Huey.

From Firo’s reaction, it was evident that it was possible to kill an immortal.

When it came to the issue of “devouring immortals,” however, Firo had chosen to keep that knowledge from Ladd –

Ladd, who now exclaimed, “alright, got it! Guess I’ll just have to wait ’til you’re hungry enough, then just put your right hand on Huey’s head!”

From the tone of his voice, it was evident he wasn’t just bluffing – Ladd was really ready to do what he had said. And continuing from that – it was quite possible that he had plans to kill all other immortals.

No matter what happened then, this murderous madman couldn’t be allowed to learn of the secret of killings immortals.

That was the resolution Firo, with thoughts of Ennis, Maiza and the others in mind, made then.

At the moment he made this decision, Ladd – as if suddenly realizing what Firo had decided – stopped all other actions.

“Alright, alright,” he said, kicking at the guards on the ground, “I’ll cut to the chase. You know, I wasn’t planning to kill anyone, but when it comes to the guy there and people like ’em, immortals like you, I was just curious –”

“...”

“I mean, how’d ya do it? How’d ya kill an immortal?”

Hearing the question he had long expected, Firo gave Ladd a brief smile.

“You think there’s anyone in the world stupid enough to tell a murderer how to kill them?”

At this terse answer, Ladd broke out in a grin – a wide, murderous expression, his mouth stretched to its limit. Nodding his head, he cried –

“Completely – you said it! I mean, if I was a vampire, I sure as hell wouldn’t tell some stranger, ‘hey, you can kill me by putting a stake through my chest!’ Only type of person who’d do something like would be some arrogant guy, completely sure that he can’t be hurt – ah, what a bastard he’d be! A bastard a bastard an abso-abso-abso-fucking-lute bastard! “

“...!”

The change came over Ladd out of nowhere.

Suddenly leaping over, Ladd slammed his fist into the room’s wall –

A fist which, hitting it, seemed to be made of steel.

It was though his shoulders, waist, and all the rest of his body were channeled into propelling this iron fist forward – an action that, in form, seemed no different from an ordinary person’s movement –

But an action from which resulted the loud crack of something breaking apart –

As cracks appeared in the wall, Firo saw this iron fist deeply embedded in the wall.

“.....!”

If a person’s head had been against the wall, then it would have looked worse than a tomato trampled by a bull.

For a moment, Firo forgot that he was immortal, and felt a tremor of fear at extent of this damage.

Its cause, however, was a simple action – a punch.

For an ordinary person, it would be incredibly difficult to imagine what it was like to be shot by bullets or stabbed by daggers. Firo, in the aftermath of being immortal, had been shot multiple times, had his throat slit, and suffered countless otherwise “fatal” injuries. Because of these experiences, he had a good conception of horrific pain.

Right now however, the scene in front of him was far easier to comprehend than any of these scenarios.

If you were beaten like that, you would die – that was an infinitely easy thing to understand. But as to what this said about the mind of the man in front of him...

Sirens in Firo’s mind went loudly off at the thought –

Sirens which, however, were just as suddenly silenced.

This was because Ladd, wrenching his fist from the wall, began to roll on the ground in agony.

“Ah shit – ow ow ow ow ow *oooow!* Ow, shit shit *shit* – that hurt, that really fuckin’ *hurt!*”

After going around roughly three times, Ladd suddenly leapt up and fixed Firo with a bright smile.

“Damn, that hurt like hell...and aaah damn, my collarbone’s already fractured. Shit, next time I try this, guess I should take some morphine first! Ha hah! Ahahahahaha!”

“...what are you doing?”

Completely unable to comprehend Ladd’s actions, Firo dully watched him. The shaky lamplight cast a strange light on the men and the two people standing, sending strange chills up Firo’s spine.

No matter how you looked at it, this situation wasn’t normal.

What Firo wanted most was to leave this place as soon as possible, but to his surprise, Ladd turned to him with a sheepishly quiet apology.

“Aha, sorry about that – real sorry, honest! I was just thinkin’ on something – scared ya, huh? Ah, looks like I didn’t...I just got reminded of this guy who irritates me...no, who pisses me off so it drives me crazy – that sonuva bitch, that fuckin’ bastard!

“So you killed him?”

“Nope, actually, couldn’t – fact of the matter, I nearly got killed by him. That’s why I hate him so much, see.”

“....?”

– could this type of person exist?

Although the man in front of him was undoubtedly crazy, his strength was incontestable. Even if Firo had a knife or a gun, it would be difficult to know who would win between the two of them.

For a moment, Firo reflected that the world was truly wide –

“Ahahaha...yeah, that son of a bitch – the next time I see him, I ain’t gonna let him off easy. I’ll make him experience a million pains, regrets, sorrows, and all number of unnamed sufferings – then I’ll break ‘im into pieces!”

“Huh?”

These last words, though simple, reminded Firo of a certain train conductor...

“I know this is weird comin’ from a murderer like me, but this guy was completely nuts! And he had this thing he used to say all the time, something like...’*since this world is nothing but a dream of mine, I can’t be killed!*”

“...”

Oh no.

Firo said nothing, but his back had broken out into a cold sweat.

A train conductor.

A man even stronger than Ladd –

“The world is only a dream of mine.”

“Therefore, I cannot die...”

Just this phrase made Firo certain that it was him.

He nearly yelled at himself, *what kind of proof is this?* But the flash of memory was so strong, there was no mistaking it – all of his memories, experiences, and instincts told him the identity of this conductor.

“In the end, though, I never got this guy’s name – but that ain’t a big deal, all I gotta do is check the staff on the train we were on. What’d ya think of that, Firo? Oh, the train was called The Flying Pussyfoot.”

“...”

“Hey, any reason ya stopped talking all of a sudden?”

This guy...

Various memories flashed through Firo’s head.

The year 1931.

Isaac and Miria’s arrival by train.

With Czeslaw Meyer, the boy who was like Firo’s little brother, they had arrived in New York.

Only – the train they had left on had already, earlier that day, been erased from existence.

And as for the train’s connection to Ladd –

It had been called The Flying Pussyfoot.

When, towards the end of 1931, disaster had wrecked the train and forced it to be abandoned, many people had already had a premonition of it.

Isaac had said that monsters, bandits and terrorists had appeared on the train, but as always, Firo had taken his words with a grain of salt, only half-listening to him.

But considering what had happened to the train afterwards and the strange circumstances of its arrival, it looked like some of these events might have actually happened.

He’d already tried asking Czes, but seeing how the boy turned white at thought and looked as if he would cry, Firo hadn’t had the heart to pursue the issue.

After that, he’d tried his best to not bring it up – and after a while, the event had simply passed out of his memory –

Who would have thought, that in this place, I’d meet someone else connected to it.

This coincidence made Firo suspicious, and so he chose his next words with care.

“I don’t know...I know several train conductors, but I don’t go around asking them which trains they conduct.”

“Oh...yeah, guess that’s true.”

Ladd didn’t seem too disappointed at this answer – singing a note, he began humming as he kicked at the rifle on the ground.

“Yeah, what you said was true, so I guess I gotta start filling this gun...”

“Why would you do that?”

“Hey, don’t worry – I thought about it for a while, and I’m wait ’em up ‘fore I kill ’em.”

Eyes wide as he shook his head, Firo strode over to Ladd and grabbed the gun out of his hand. Although he was still wary of Ladd, after talking with him for a while, he had become certain that Ladd bore him no animosity.

Ladd let Firo take the gun without any resistance, but there was a wry smile as he addressed Firo.

“Hey there, what’d ya think you’re doing, taking my weapons? Not real nice, is that...plus, I’ve still got another hand I could beat ’em to death with – and what about you huh, Firo? That thing moving in your hand, it irritates you, don’t it?”

Glancing at the body of Huey beneath Firo, Ladd’s smile widened.

“We might be different types of people, but we’re the same in this, huh?”

Placing the gun on a chair, Firo once again turned to face Ladd.

“Who knows? Damn, talking to you is harder than talking to Isaac...anyways, don’t you care about...um, what was her name...the girl important to you...”

“Lua.”

“Right, Lua. You said she was being held by people right now? Aren’t you worried about her safety?”

Firo’s words, however, only made Ladd’s grin grow wider.

After several moments, however, Ladd’s expression become more serious as he once again addressed Firo.

“Yeah...right then when I was beating those guys up, I was pretty worked up...but if you have to ask, then I’m not worried about Lua’s safety, ’cause of one piece of evidence.”

“And what was it?”

“Well, right then when I asked those guys “is Lua okay?” those bastards told me, “she seems fine,” right?”

“Ah, well...yeah.”

Unable to comprehend where Ladd was going, Firo could only silently wait for him to continue.

“What kinda person, after seeing Lua, would say she’s only “fine?”

“...there’s no use telling me this when I don’t know her either.”

“Well, after I get outta this place, I can introduce ya guys.”

How did things end up like this?

At least now able to think about the future, Firo turned to Ladd, relieved, with another question.

“Speaking of that...looking at the situation we’re in, what are you planning to do?”

“Huh? I told ya, I was put here to kill people, so that’s what I’m gonna start doing.”

...so they were going to die anyways!

Not seeming to notice Firo’s clearly frustrated reaction, Ladd continued surveying the room.

Continuing, he glanced at the twitching bodies of the Shams below him, and took a step towards them – but Firo, catching his movement, slowly shook his head at him.

“I’ve told ya a dozen times already, but don’t do anything stupid! It doesn’t matter how you look at it, these guys are prisoners and guards – they’ll keep you here forever if you kill them.”

“Oh, alright then. Hey, I got it! These people...I’m not gonna kill them first.”

“?”

“That guy whose eye you gouged him – I think I’ll slowly finish ‘im off.”

Saying this, he stepped over the body of the Asian man –

And kicked a foot towards the small body in the corner.

“First, I’m gonna kill...the person most out of place here...”

“!”

The person Ladd referred to was the same one he had brought into this room – and no matter how you looked at it, it was the body of a young girl. Up until now, Firo hadn’t even noticed her –

“Hey, w-wait!”

Unable to help himself, he urgently grabbed Ladd’s shoulder.

Although he didn't know the girl, from her appearance, she was probably the "fairy" Isaac had spoken about – but nonetheless, she was still only a child. Even if she was immortal or a homunculus, there was no way to tell.

"Huh? Hey, what are ya tryin' – what, can't kill a child?"

Firo greatly wanted to scream at Ladd, but he forced himself to be calm. With a great deal of effort, he forced his anger down, and scathingly replied –

"...I don't know. If some punk try to shoot me, yeah, I'd probably kill them – but no matter how it is, I'm not the type of person who'd kill a helpless kid."

"Aren't you part of the mafia? What if your boss told you to do it, huh?"

"First of all, it's not the mafia, it's the *camorra*. Second, even if my Don told me to do it, then I guess I would just have to disobey him."

"Naive – yeah, that's it. Oh dear dear dear – naive, naive, naive, just *waaay* too naive."

Hearing Firo's reply, Ladd gave a short laugh – but rather than scorn, his eyes were filled with an odd admiration.

"Your way's fine, too, I guess. Not killin' her, even though the kid might kill you – lookin' at it, it's the type of thinking that means you've thought about dying."

"..."

"Even if you're immortal, I like that in a person. That fuckin' conductor I just mentioned, though, he had some piece of shit about that too! What was it – "even if a kid were to point a gun at me, I would be able to get out of it safely. Because of my strength, even if he were to shoot at him from behind, I'd still be able to escape!"

Seeing Ladd's clenched fists and teeth, Firo awkwardly avoided his eyes.

Yeah, that sounds like something he'd say.

Just as Firo thought this, Ladd was hit by a memory of the conductor – a man so overwhelmingly more powerful than him that he had been able to threaten Lua. Although his face had been covered with blood and appeared vaguely in the dawn's light, his voice, and overall murderous aura had vividly been preserved in Ladd's mind.

Seeing the snarl emerging on Ladd's lips, Firo frowned, headache increasing as he furrowed his brow.

Suddenly –

A faint pain went through Firo's right hand.

Huh?

Closing examining the situation, a guard – Firo had no idea when he had gotten up – was holding, in his right hand, the eye that Firo had taken from Huey.

What?

He'd been clenching the eye tightly, but now the fingers the guard had forcibly opened were immobile, unable to move as though they had been shocked.

“We appreciate your work, but your task is over for now.”

Although his nose was bleeding, the man nonetheless calmly smiled as he dropped Huey's eye into a jar, produced from out of seemingly nowhere. Once dropped, the eye's blood vessels began creeping up the walls of the bottle like slugs, trying to escape – but the lid of the jar had already been tightly closed, so that it could not even ooze out through the cracks.

“You bastards...”

Seeing the guard standing up, Ladd took a step forward as if to pummel him once more – only to suddenly stop, glaring fiercely at someplace over Firo's shoulder.

“?”

Unsure what was going on, Firo turned his head – only to see the muzzle of a gun, pointed by the short Caucasian man at his back.

“Hey...”

Ignoring the protest in Firo's voice and face, the Caucasian man said nothing as he took a step back.

His gun still firmly pointed at Firo's back, he turned to Ladd, uttering a statement that could either be seen a taunt or words of praise.

“Oh yes, and you...you're certainly beyond anything we could have expected.”

On the ground, the African-American man and the Asian man also began to stand up – but unlike before, the only person who spoke now was the guard.

“Oh, and also – it's been troubling us, but how can we convince you that we really have your fiancé?”

“Well, you can ask Lua what type of flower she likes, and then tell me what she says.”

“That is something we can’t do that right now.”

“...whaddya mean?”

Hearing the shift in Ladd’s tone, the Sham vessel slowly shook his head.

“Due to certain circumstances, we’ve recently lost track of her location. Please do relax – it’s not that she has no way to answer, but rather that we have no way to ask her right now.”

“...”

“Ah, well, it’s like this...when these circumstances pass, we’ll ask her properly. Now, please excuse us, but we’ll be leaving, so we can’t deal with you right now.”

“Ha – talkin’ like that, nose bleedin’ everywhere, like you could just oh so *easily* do that – ain’t that hilarious? But I just can’t find it in me to laugh – what’s wrong? Whaddya say? It’s clearly funny, but I ain’t laughing, so why’s that?”

Hearing Ladd’s unreasonable words, Sham sighed and smiled bitterly.

Firo watched this interaction anxiously, mind lost in endless confusion. It would be extremely easy to take the gun from the Caucasian man, but would doing so only lead to a repeat of the previous situation? If that were the case, then it would be best to first plan his actions in advance, stopping Ladd if he did anything rash so that things could advance.

“The way you and Graham is quite similar – no wonder you two work together.”

At the sudden mention of his protégé, Ladd once again gnashed his teeth.

Ignoring Ladd’s expression, the Shams slowly began exiting the door – then warily turned back to Firo and Ladd, bodies as tense as though walking through a mine field.

“We’ll need you to keep what happened here secret.”

“Right now, I’ll let you know something I’ve already known –”

“We will *always* have hostages in our hands.”

“You’ll cooperate, Ladd, if you and Firo want to see anything else ever again.”

Saying these inflammatory words, the four now-conscious Shams once again smiled their eerie smile, then left.

Besides the guard standing at the door, the other four Shams were gone. The room almost empty, Firo turned to Ladd with an astonished expression and addressed Ladd.

“Hey...you *do* remember that I can’t die, right? Why didn’t you just attack then?”

“D’ya wanna get shot?”

“...no?”

“Well then, that’s good. Dislikin’ pain and refusin’ to die – those’re only natural. Though with pain, ya can survive it by enduring it for a while, but ya can’t do that with death.”

So all long – no, wait.

Firo almost found himself agreeing with Ladd’s words, but then, remembering at the disastrous situation they were in, once again began frowning.

“Right now, the people who have Lua – shouldn’t you be rushing to do something?”

“I told ya, I trust Lua. Oh, that doesn’t mean I don’t believe you – it’s just that we just met, that’s all.”

Finishing, Ladd began to chuckle, the fierce expression he had given Sham giving way to cheerfulness. With a playful smile, he turned to Firo with another question.

“Plus...what would *you* do, if they had your friends and were threaten’ to kill ’em?”

“...”

Firo found himself unable to answer.

This was an occurrence he had not thought about before but which, upon consideration, was wholly likely.

If they thought it would work once, then his opponents would surely not hesitate to kidnap people again if they thought it would make their target cooperate.

As a member of the criminal world, the chances of being kidnapped were extremely high – many times more so than for a normal person..

If I were in Sham’s position and things were looking badly...no, even as myself, this is what I would do.

Although Firo didn’t like the idea of kidnapping, he knew his own position meant he had little grounds to criticize it on. Understanding this, Firo wasn’t too troubled with the morality of such an action.

Firo had, after all, already gouged out the eye of someone he neither disliked or had a grudge against. And if he was willing to do that, if Isaac and his friends in New York were captured, what would be do?

In this prison, the person he had become was hardly recognizable from those of the person he had been before coming here.

However, what Firo currently knew convinced him beyond a doubt that kidnapping was something the entity known as Sham would attempt to do to Ennis and his friends.

In this prison...have I just become a pawn on a chess board?

And do I, by letting myself become a mere pawn, really deserve to be a Camorrista?

Damn it...how am I going to explain this to Maiza and the Don?

Seeing Firo's confused expression, Ladd turned, eyes falling on Huey's prone body on the ground.

"Count yourself lucky, Peter Pan – the order of the people I want to kill has changed slightly."

Ladd laughed, a joyful, cheerful sound that contrasted with his murderous aura.

"Well, looks like Neverland is headin' towards destruction..."

Ladd's thoughts were clear – pure, simple intent to kill. As his breathing calmed down, he shrugged as he turned to Firo.

"Anyways, looking at it, these days've been kind of shitty, hasn't it?"

"How so?"

"Well, 'cause even though I wanted to kill these guys, now I gotta look at things and decide before I do anythin'."

Firo considered answering for a moment, but eventually only sighed.

This guy really is impossible to understand.

Although the two had barely met, Firo had felt he was already familiar with the type of person Ladd Russo was – a person who was not only impossible to understand, but who also should not be understood.

Ladd was the type of person he would have originally never associated, but because of current circumstances, their fates had already become intertwined.

Currently, Isaac was about to be released, but Firo had not even thought about him until now. This wasn't because Firo didn't think he could help, but rather because he didn't want to get Isaac any more involved in this affair.

If anything else, I really don't want to see Miria cry like that again...

Leaving the only man here willing to help Firo a killer whose thoughts were impossible to understand as he stood there, iron fist tightly clenched as he continued giving out an aura of concentrated killer intent.

“Well, things are gettin’ more and more interestin’, don’t you think so?”

“Not at all.”

Undeterred by Firo’s indifferent words, Ladd continued becoming more and more excited.

“Oh, but things are finally starting to get exciting! And the way the things are, I should go make it even more and more and more and more interesting!”

“Whatever you want.”

“Ha! Of course I’ll do *whatever* I want! Once I start somethin’, it’s my duty to finish it! Or else it could just be fate, eh? Ha, ha....ahahahahahahaha!”

In the eerie depths of Alcatraz, Ladd’s laughter resounded around them.

The only one to hear him, however, was Firo. Hearing this crazed laughter, Firo once again was struck by his situation.

The feeling that had only been vague before had now taken on a certain shape – and what was more, now spoke certain dire words.

This was going to be trouble...

The Elderly Couple is in a Desperate Situation, and...



Chicago

Dolce

Chicago: a city of skyscrapers. Yet in an area conspicuously lacking in them, several people now gathered.

Within the spacious but empty bar, the elderly couple who ran the place were using the moments before opening to talk.

“Hey, old girl, didya hear? Looks like there’ve been more bombings.”

“Yes...the newsboy who just came up says there’ve been happening all over the city now...I guess we can’t open today again...”

“Hey, now – isn’t that being a little *too* cautious?”

At her husband’s words, a strained smile crept onto the wife’s face.

The worry in her face, however, showed no sign of her abating.

“I just have a bad feeling about this..,”

“That again...look, whenever somethin’ like this happens, you *always* get like this. Coupla years ago, with that train that was in New York, it was the same thing. The one we were going to board, too – what was it called again? ‘The Flying Pussfoot,’ I think? All of a sudden, you said the same thing then, too, and we had to miss our trip to the springs, didn’t we?”

“Yes – and even now, I’m convinced my hunch was right.”

“What’re you talking about? Flipping through all the papers, there wasn’t anything about nothing bad happening to the train.”

“But right after that trip, wasn’t the train taken out of service?”

At his wife’s unwavering tone, the bartender of the bar could only sigh as he shook his head.

In actuality, the old woman’s hunch had been right. And with the bombings currently occurring, who wouldn’t help feeling worried?

But today also marked a momentous occasion: the thirtieth anniversary of the *Dolce*’s opening. The couple hadn’t planned any special parties or events for the occasion, nor had they advertised the occasion anywhere. Their only plan, in fact, had been to go on as normal – perhaps feeling a small sense of pride, a quiet sense of accomplishment. Nonetheless, it was still a day fully worthy of commemoration.

Starting several days ago, the bartender had anticipated this day. Now, however, he was stuck patiently coaxing his wife to even let them open.

“Oh yeah, and those explosions happened yesterday – one of Nebula’s people had to be behind it. But ten years ago, wasn’t it the same thing? Except it was that Nice girl then always causing things to blow up – same one that always looked so sweet, ya’d hardly suspect she could do so much damage. Well, it looks like same thing’s happenin’ again.”

“...that’s right, isn’t it? These last few years, we haven’t seen those kids around...”

“Uh-huh – since two, three years ago, no one’s seen ’em around. Right now, that group of punks has to have just about grown up, right? Who knows, by this time, maybe they’ve found regular jobs and moved to some other city.”

As they talked, the bartender suddenly saw a response to his wife’s objections, and subsequently tried it –

“Hey – so we don’t worry these kids when they eventually come back, we can’t close because of such a small thing, can we?”

“You’re trying to get us back to the question, aren’t you?”

Bluntly confronted with his intentions, the bartender could only shrug and answer:

“Yeah, well, it can’t be that bad, right? So look, if we just don’t let in suspicious people or anyone with weird suitcases, we should be fine, right?”

“...you really need to pay more attention to news.”

Eventually, however, his wife relented, returning inside to prepare food. And seeing her there, the bartender couldn’t help but give a cry of triumph as he returned to the front to open the bar.

All in all, however, this was a fairly quick task – a simple matter of flipping the sign outside from “Closed” to “Open.” Thirty years since the day it had first opened, the bar’s routine was still the same.

Except –

Today, when the bartender opened the door, two figures were already waiting in the doorway.

“Oh, apologies! I’m opening shop right now!”

To have two customers already waiting now, when the sun was just starting to come up, was an extraordinary occurrence.

Of the two figures, one was a bearded man, eyes heavily shaded by the brim of his hat, while the other a stunning young woman in an elegant dress. Although they didn't look like lovers, it was difficult to tell what type of relationship they had – whether they were parent and child, brother and sister, or simply acquaintances.

And what was more – the bartender felt that he had already seen these two distinctive faces.

“Huh? My dear guests...weren't you here yesterday, too? Well, do come in! We're always ready to welcome familiar faces.”



“...”

“Oh, oh...how can I even begin to voice it, the joy now etched into the corners of my brain? Our image of eternity, comprising a series of disparate moments strung together, is eternally blocked by images of the wheel of fate...If a clock's face truly binds the eternal wheel of time, then

perhaps it would not be wrong to speculate that it is the gaze upon the world that binds the wheel of fate.”

The old man quickly welcomed them into the bar. The woman entered without a word and the man with the hat, recalling several particularly beautiful lines, followed after her.

Such a strange man, still muttering to himself as he entered –

The bartender pushed his curiosity away, though, choosing instead to focus on the blue sky as the bar officially opened for business.

A decision that, in the aftermath of what, would set this bartender and his shop on their fate.

—

Chicago

Roadway

Underneath a vast and cloudless blue sky –

Graham Specter stood, practicing his usual routine.

“What a sad, sad story...difficult to notice anything but its tragedy when you first hear it. But listen closely, and you shall notice how the riddle is also an inconceivable mystery...but then, listening again, it truly is a sad, sad story...”

“Too long. Can you cut to the chase?”

“How truly sad...let me tell you a sad, sad story.”

“Hey boss Graham, you ever thought of why other people have to listen to you do this intro? I mean, you’re asking ’em to give up a chunk of their lives to listen to you talk – but when you talk, it doesn’t seem like you’ve considered that at all! In fact, do you even *know* what the word “considerate” means? If you don’t, well then, looks like the most tragic thing here is *you*, boss.” In addition to several youths behind him, a man stood next to Graham: Shaft, his second-in-command. And it was Shaft who now spoke these words with no regard for his life.

Yet despite the increasing sourness of the words, Graham merely spun the giant wrench in his hand as he tranquilly received Shaft’s remarks.

“*Listen* to me...for what I have to tell is such a tragic, tragic tale –”

“The way I see it, you’re not making yourself seem more sincere by saying that – hey, you’re not angry, are you?”

“Angry? – oh, hardly. No, what fills my heart right now is nothing but sadness, sadness and sorrow and sadness and anger – oh, anger? How sad that makes me! Right now, it seems I can

hardly sort my own emotions – and to combat such sorrow, what should I do? What should I do, so that I can finally know my own emotions? Should I move around? Is that it? Or perhaps...if I perform three actions of sorrow and one of anger, surely I will convey my feelings to the world! So be it! I shall declare the sadness of the world three times, then give my angry action to Shaft. Oh, how sad! Oh truly, human existence is truly so *tragic!*”

“Hey, hang on...that hardly seems balanced – oh, *oof*–!”

As he continued to declare his sorrows, Graham simultaneously stuck Shaft in the stomach. The blow took his breath away, leaving Shaft clutching at himself as he staggered away.

Graham’s face, however, reflected none of his partner’s pain, only a carefree expression as he alternated between elation and sorrow.

“*Alriiiiight!* Those of you who have so far patiently kept silent, these tragic and incredible events can be delayed just a little longer! For now, onward to other, more pleasant topics! Today, Shaft has proposed to show us a truly magnificent yet sadly obscure restaurant...and since he is the one who proposed it, naturally he’ll be taking full responsibility! If the food is awful, then he says he’ll accept responsibility for that, too – by paying for all of it, naturally!”

At these extravagant promises, a soft murmur of approval arose among the crowd behind.

Shaft, however, was a different matter. Still clutching his stomach, he broke out in a cold sweat at these words.

“...! H-hey, wait! I never said that!”

“Oh, you’re talking again already? It looks that blow I gave you a moment ago wasn’t deep at all. It almost makes me want to do it again, just harder...oh, but I do *hate* violence, so I suppose not. Oh, but no mistaking it! In truth, that blow I gave you was out of vengeance for your words about my mind...oh blue sky, I swear to be more honest! I apologize, Shaft! I acted out of rash, awful anger!”

“... never mind. I don’t even care anymore. But next time you want to get back at me, use words instead, okay?”

“I’ll put my best effort to it! But for now, ah, where exactly is this bar?”

Shaft glared for a moment at Graham, whose expression showed not a hint of remorse. Then, sighing, he reluctantly lifted his chin and pointed ahead –

“Just ahead, actually.”

“It’s actually a restaurant that just starting selling alcohol recently, but the food’s pretty good. Called *Dolce*, you heard of it before?”

—

Chicago, outskirts

The interior of a car

“Turn right, then just drive straight ahead.”

“O-okay, got it!”

To the cold order from beside him, the red-eyed driver gave this enthusiastic reply.

Humming as he drove, the man glanced over at the child calmly sitting next to him and grinned cheerfully.

The smile exposed a row of straight teeth – teeth that, oddly enough, were all unnaturally sharp.

“Ricardo, what’s up? Ever since this morning, you’ve been acting *real* distant.”

“Christopher...about yesterday’s bombings...what do you think about them?”

“I’m a hundred percent sure it’s Rail – it’s written all over it. Quite interesting, huh?”

“I hardly see what’s so interesting about that.”

Sighing, Ricardo Russo addressed his driver, Christopher Shouldered, a man whom she nonetheless also considered her friend –

“Christopher, if you are sure it’s Rail, then how do you really have no opinions about this?”

“Hey, I told you I thought it was interesting, didn’t I? But if you insist on askin’, I’d have to say I think he’s doing a good job of it.”

“You’re not planning on stopping him?”

“It’s his choice. Besides, it’s Rail’s way of trying to save Frank.”

After Christopher’s tranquil reply, silence fell within the car.

Ever since yesterday’s uproar, the two had driving aimlessly around the city without any thought of returning.

You only had to flip the paper, after all, to find the name of Ricardo’s grandfather everywhere. According to the reporters, Placido Russo was the mastermind behind the recent bombings and disappearances – and although Placido was currently missing, several of his accomplices had already been arrested, with several more simply unaccounted for. Traces of explosives been found inside Placido’s mansion, but when it came to Placido himself, there’d been little progress in finding him.

“Come to think of it, those people in the white coats haven’t even made the news...

“A group that powerful, they’re almost like the president’s own armed forces.”

“Hey, I don’t think this place’s in such bad shape that the president would need a bunch of weirdos like that.”

In the silence that followed, it was now Christopher’s turn to face Ricardo – this time, with question of his own.

“And you, Ricardo – your boring existence’s finally come to an end, huh? How’s *that* feeling?”
“...I haven’t had yet had the time to completely sort that out.”

Although this question was thoughtless in the extreme, Ricardo showed no sign of anger. It seemed that, after a year of knowing him, Ricardo understand that this was the type of person Christopher was, and had already become accustomed to such behavior. And while Ricardo had stated that he was still in the middle of dealing with it, he had already quietly accepted the situation.

“I don’t know why, but it feels as though Grandfather’s already died. With the Russo family heading towards its end, I don’t see why you’ve decided to still follow me, Christopher.”

“Hey there, what reason d’you *need* among friends?”
“To say such embarrassing things so boldly – it truly is something.”

With this cold reply, Ricardo once again turned the conversation to Rail.

“In that case, do you also consider yourself friends with that boy, Rail?”

“We’re more like family, but yeah.”

“Then you ought to treat him a little more like a friend. Even if you don’t plan on halting anything, you could still save him.”

“*Heeey*, I’ve already said if Rail wanted to come with me, I won’t say no. Plus, if I tried to help Rail right now, I don’t think it’d be good for him.”

“When it comes to helping friends or family, you shouldn’t have to think so much.”

“Was that the type of person your grandfather was?”

At this yet another thoughtless question Ricardo fell silent, a deep feeling of discomfort in her chest. It seemed Christopher’s straightforwardness, his lack of hesitation to spare feelings, was what let him spark self-reflection in others. Feeling thus a little more self-aware, Ricardo modified her tack –

“I admit it’s a little strange for me to say that, but the way that boy is right now, he needs someone at his side to watch over him.”

“Ricardo...if that’s the way you really feel, then why don’t you try being a little less cold toward Rail?”

“...that’s not true. I treated him the same as everyone else. In fact, are you sure *he* isn’t the one who dislikes me?”

Christopher hid his amusement at Ricardo’s blank expression, opting instead to respond calmly.

“Oh, no no *no*. You know, you guys are really alike – even when you guys are arguing, it’s ‘cause you’re so similar.”

“Stop talking nonsense. What in the world do I have in common with *that* person?”

“Oh, lots! For starters, you both think the other’s trying to take me away, and so you’re jealous of each other!”

“...you really are conceited beyond belief.”

Paying no attention to Ricardo’s words, Christopher continued –

“Another thing – even though both of you hate the world, you can’t bring yourselves to completely reject it.”

“I certainly haven’t been trying to reject anything.”

“You know what’d be interesting? – you getting red in the face and screaming, “of course not!””

“Producing such a senseless noise – the only thing that would accomplish is make a person hungry. Speaking of which, I think we ought to eat while deciding where to afterwards.”

As if on cue, Ricardo’s stomach chose that moment to give a loud gurgle.

“Uh huh. I can see.”

“...”

“Hey, right then, you actually looked kind of shy..”

Huh, it’s almost like she just acted like a girl...

In a rare display of consideration, however, Christopher managed to keep himself from saying this observation out loud.

At first glance, Ricardo looked like an ordinary boy- and in everyday life, she often acted like one, too. She had no personal reasons for doing so, but from the view of those few people who knew her secret, it seemed that her grandfather, Placido, had put pressure on her to behave this way. Christopher, however, chose to make no judgment on the situation. And as Christopher said nothing, Ricardo had never brought the subject up. Between them, it had been simply regulated an unimportant matter, a situation continuing all the way to this day.

Stomach grumbling, Ricardo was silent for a moment, then resumed giving directions –

“Turn left here, please.”

“Okie-dokie!”

“Drive a little farther, and then we’ll be there.”

“Hey – come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve come this way. Is the food at this place really that good?”

Although strange in many other aspects, Christopher had high standards when it came to food – particularly when it came to pastries or sweets, his especial loves. Christopher was so picky that he couldn’t stand the taste of commercially prepared madeleines – he had to make his own, which had already won the approval of Ricardo and Rail. If given the opportunity, it would have certainly also won over aloof Huey, too.

It was with the taste of Christopher’s madeleines in his mouth that Ricardo now replied, “it’s not very well-known, but the food is quite good.”

With these few expectations, Christopher was now driving toward the place Ricardo had picked out for him.

Pondering his companion’s question, Ricardo’s expression uncharacteristically softened.

“Ah, well, yes – it’s all very delicious, actually. The restaurant is run by an elderly couple, and it’s been there for thirty years. Their apple pie is particularly good – it’s the reason I want to go there today.”

“Okay, but there’s one more thing I still don’t quite get: why today?”

“Because, after today, I’m not quite sure what will happen...”

“So there’s a possibility this could be our last meal in Chicago.”

—

The bar Dolce

“This so-called sensation of taste – is it not just the tongue’s eyes, brain, ears, and soul? From the tongue’s dew, I can envision the dreams of the brewers; closing my mouth, the savory taste spreads, giving me visions of the past and future of its creators. Violence releases the tastes within; biting down, I hear the moans overflowing from the heart of my dishes before all leaves to the throat, to be pondered there. A savory taste? A delicious flavor? For the sake of such, tens of thousands of guilty deeds I would not hesitate to perform. And all the while, my tongue would express but one sentiment: how delicious.”

“Please just shut up and wait for your food in peace.”

As this exchange passed between the woman and the man at the bar, a mysterious mood settled on the store.

Besides the bar, six other tables were set up in the wooden interior of the store.

From its size and interior, it could have been just another one of the small stores popular in America at the time, albeit slightly smaller than most establishments. The wooden floors and other decorations, however, gave the place an atmosphere that, if still not quite fashionable, was distinctly modern. And with only two guests currently inside, it seemed far more spacious than it was.

In addition to the two at the bar, there was another person inside, standing next to the man quietly muttering to himself – the owner of the bar, who only smiled amiably at everything the odd man said. Continuing to wipe the glass in his hand, he said:

“Huh, I must not be too smart, since I didn’t understand half of you what you just said. But whatever you’re saying, it’s too much, really – I’m flattered, but you don’t have to go on like that.”

I don’t think he was trying to compliment you...

Hearing the owner’s words, the woman sighed. Putting down her menu, she turned to him.

“Please just prepare two of whatever dish you want, so long as it’s filling.”

“Then how about trying some barbeque ribs?”

In addition to being emblematic of America, barbeque ribs were a food that were also particular to Chicago.

In the past, a man who could truly be called a poet, Carl Sandburg – who, in addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize, had also counted note-taking and singing among his many talents – had bestowed upon Chicago a variety of nicknames. Among these was the title “Hog Butcher for the World,” a reference to the prosperous livestock industry there.

Made from garlic, tomato sauce, and vinegar, barbeque sauce was smeared on pork ribs and, depending on how it was cooked, gave the meat a unique flavor. Against the city’s backdrop, the wafting smell of barbeque was made all the more distinct.

Although the ingredients used were the same, the technique and temperature used to cook the meat gave rise to many different variations. In this way, it was dish perfect for displaying the cook’s skills.

“Alright then...two orders of Kansas-style ribs, then.”

“Alright, right away!”

Though he was caught off-guard by the masculine authority in the woman’s voice, the owner continued smiling at her as he left to give the order.

Seeing the owner disappear into the kitchen, the woman turned towards the man next to her, his hat shading his eyes.

“Okay, Poet, what are you planning to do? We’ve already waited a night, and Sham and Hilton still haven’t gotten in touch with us. So: what now?”

“Approaching a scene of darkness, the scales of the snake gleam gold and copper. If you can gently tap against the scales, a soft *ra-ta-ta-ta* results. Perhaps life is like that sluggish reverberation which, in its passing, leaves gold pieces among the strawberries...”

“Alright, I get it. You don’t know what to do, either.”

Seeing the woman’s confused expression, the man called ‘the Poet’ shook his head vigorously.

“The white grasses in the water – their whispering creates the sense of an unknown language, but it will be revealed as but an illusory lie. The crows flying towards the dusk compel us forward with their cries, for we must ourselves crawl from this darkness. Sickle, is there not truth in these words?”

“There’s no need to think about it so much – what we should do right now is to find Rail and Frank.”

Saying this, the woman named Sickle tightly gripped the glass on the bar counter.

Among the homunculi created by Huey Laforet, these two were part of a group called “Lamia.” And it was because of her membership in this group that the last few days had been such a headache for the woman at the bar.

The trouble had started when they had, as per Sham’s instructions, arrived at Chicago. Their arrival had gone smoothly, but soon after that, a series of circumstances had surfaced that they were wholly unprepared for.

The first was when they had discovered a group, seemingly belonging to the mafia, carrying wanted signs and out to capture them. They had fought with a member of this group, a man in workman’s clothing – and had been forced to retreat.

After they had lost Rail, they had realized that the men after them were members of the Russo family. But when while breaking into the Russos' base, they'd been attacked by a mysterious group of figures in white coats – and in the ensuing chaos, Frank had been gone missing, too.

They had returned to the Russo mansion the next day, only to find that not was the Russo leader nowhere to be found, the place was surrounded by cops after bombs had erupted at the mansion the previous night.

This explosion...it seems like Rail's doing...

Right after Sickie had reached this conclusion, the next day had followed with an even larger explosion. And although she was certain that it was Rail's work as well, Sickie could only wait to see what happened next.

Although Sickie and the other homunculi had gone to Chicago in order to help advance Huey's experiments, now not only could they do nothing, they had no information on the experiment *at all*.

Normally, Sham, Hilton, or Leeza would have conveyed information to them by this time, but so far, there had been no news from anyone. It made Sickie uneasy as she sat there, quietly draining her glass.

Sickie stood up, then briskly kicked her chair in.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

Saying this, she left the table.

Wordlessly, the Poet watched her leave, then continued waiting for his food in silence.

And in the moment after the women's bathroom door closed –

Several men walked into the bar.

Lost in his own thought, the Poet paid little attention to the identity of these men – a decision that, in the wreckage afterwards, would ultimately seal not only his fate, but that of the bar itself.

"It'll be this way, boss."

Seeing the old restaurant Shaft pointed towards, Graham happily snapped his fingers. Spinning his wrench, he began to ramble.

“Ah-ha...although this place seems pretty old, the age suits it! It makes it the perfect place to take apart – but wait, what am I saying? Am I really planning to take apart the place I’m eating? Oh, how could this be, that my own destructiveness prevents me from even the joy of a meal! What am I doing? If I could take apart my own life, then would I do that too? Oh, but it makes no sense – why must I deal with it, this persistent need toward self-death? Has there ever been such a hateful thing? And why...why do I feel the need to pour all this, all my self-hate forth?”

“If you hate it so much, then why don’t you just end it?”

“If I could have, then I would have done it long by now...but wait, no, thinking about it, I *haven’t* tried it, have I? But why could this be? Ah, such hateful thoughts, they’re making me break out in a sweat! If I forget to change myself, then what consequences could there be...forget? Someone as full of dreams for the future as me is not suited for the past...yes, I’ll end it now! But end what? This hatred in my heart, of course! Oh, what a sad, sad story this is! How long will this battle with myself rage on, and who may finally emerge victorious? And so all I do right now is say my apologies, my apologies, owners of this store, that I said your store would be fun to take apart...”

To most people, just hearing Graham’s words would have been enough to make them run. The group following him, however, had long since grown used to his eccentricities, and now only stood with weary smiles.

“We’re already here, so it’d be great if you could keep it down inside.”

Hearing Shaft sigh as he gave this request, Graham placed his wrench against his lips, breath misting on its metal surface.

Unsure of whether this gesture was endearing or just strange, Shaft sighed again as he opened the door to Dolce.

Save for one man who sat with his hat covering his eyes at the bar, the store was otherwise empty.

“Hi – is it okay if we eat here?”

“Hello, dear guests, and of course! Your presence is always welcome – ah, although since we’ve just opened, you might have to wait a little longer...”

“That’s fine – not a problem for us.”

“Then just please follow me.”

Spirits high, the owner brought Graham and the others to a table near the kitchen.

Graham, who had so far heeded Shaft's advice and not said a word, now sat down and, after a brief glance at the menu, tersely ordered.

"...barbeque ribs, Kansas style."

"Oh, well then, I'll get that as well...is everyone okay with that, too?"

Seeing the others around him nod, Shaft proceeded to order for the rest of the group.

As the owner walked, grinning, back to the kitchen, Graham leaned his wench against a wall as he glanced around the store.

"This place seems more like a restaurant than a bar..."

And then – almost right after he said this, Graham, fidgeting in his seat, heard the beginning of a beautiful speech:

"Such so-called fasting...the stomach keeps its silence, consuming nothing but its own sorrows..."

Left alone after Sickie's departure, the Poet – in order to confront the question of "what shall we do next" – decided to reflect on his own matters.

In his view, with no way to contact Sham or Hilton, it was necessary to first understand himself better before deciding what to do.

It was a thought that, over the past days, he had found himself relentlessly mulling on. Over and over again, the same ideas and the same hopes invaded his mind...

At Huey's research center, *Rhythm*, the Poet had been given a pair of eyes that could take in light and reflect it at a different wavelength.

When others made eye contact with the Poet, they couldn't help feeling a sense of unease.

With his eyes, the Poet was able to control the minds of others in a manner similar to hypnosis – that was the Poet's ability. In addition, his status as a homunculi meant that he could not grow older, but the Poet hardly thought it worth pondering compared to his other ability.

When he had acquired it, even the Poet himself did not know. By the time he had been old enough to understand, his eyes were already altered, and he had never raised the question with either Huey or *Rhythm*.

As his eyes emitting flashing streams of blue light, the Poet – by subtly moving his head – could force those meeting his gaze into a hypnotizable state.

Once half-sleep, his opponents were then rendered susceptible to suggestions.

To put it simply – if you took the effect of a swaying crystal or a flickering flame and multiplied it ten times over, then you would have the hypnotic power of the Poet's eyes.

The Poet himself, however, did not particularly know how it worked, nor did he care to know. Just like an ordinary person, he had no extraordinary urge to learn the technical details of how his vision worked.

But he was not like other people, and he himself knew no way to turn off the power of his eyes.

He could, with some effort, control the flashing of his eyes, but to do so forever would surely impinge on his daily activities. No matter how he pondered it, he couldn't muster the resolve to do anything permanent about it. So he only continued the way he always had, living half his life in near-blindness.

The people who met his eyes, after all, were all immediately plunged into a state of extreme susceptibility. If someone loudly screamed, "go die!" then even if they did not immediately take effect, the words would still be firmly etched in their hearts – until one day, for whatever reason, they would be forced to carry them out.

As a result, the Poet had deliberately tried to cultivate an outlandish personality, hoping that it would make others dismiss him as a mere eccentric.

Unlike Christopher's grandiose example, the Poet kept his outer appearance more ordinary, instead using his odd speech to convey his warning to others:

Don't make eye contact with me.

That was his simple wish – that other people would just, of their own volition, avoid looking into his eyes.

How strange...if I were to use this power without stop, I could surely live quite easily.

At this conclusion, another thought entered the Poet's mind.

If this measure cannot be undertaken, is my own cowardice to blame?

Or...could this be since I am not human, I cannot do this?

As members of Lamia, the homunculi were all, after all, artificially-created abnormalities.

All in all, they were not a group of particularly talented individuals, nor individuals with particular physical strengths.

Nonetheless, they were beings that been willed into the world – if not by a god, then by the will of chance itself, which had thus placed them among the society of humans.

Christopher and the rest – all of them were the same.

Of them all, Leeza was the only one who could be said to differ, but her origins were the same as theirs. In Chris's actions and words, he revealed a pride in feeling that, "I was blessed by heaven." That Rail, too, would be influenced by this notion of their superiority over ordinary men was odd, as it was based on his limited experience of the world.

What was more, even among their group of homunculi, there were many who were merely "pretending."

All of them, in fact, had deliberately created a barrier between themselves and the world, perhaps out of the inability to accept one crucial fact: they were not the same as others. Sickle's odd demeanor, Chi's clothing...they were just more examples of this barrier. When, in the past, the Twins had told them of a homunculus named Ennis who lived a seemingly normal life, none of them had been able to resist feeling a little jealous.

What odd existences we truly lead...

The Poet's mind went then to the missing Frank and Rail, and his thoughts changed once again.

They....they are still young.

Like that already insane Christopher, it is clear that they're difference from me.

Still...I hope that they can find their way onto that road that brings happiness.

If, that is, that road exists.

In the past, he had not been able to find this road, and so here he was today, idling his life away by daily playing a fool.

At the same time, he had also lied to himself in complying with Huey's instructions.

He had pretended to believe that it was only caution, the safest route they could take.

But to only look at the current situation, what did that truly accomplish...

Reaching this point, the Poet suddenly felt that so hungry his stomach would soon be groaning. Without even thinking about it, a rambling line dropped from his lips.

“Such so-called fasting...the stomach keeps its silence, consuming nothing but its own sorrows...”

After years of using it, such a style of speech had already become natural to him.

However, since he was able to become serious when he had to, it could still be called a kind of acting. But the Poet’s mind had already accepted such diction as normal, and so his words continued, flowing out in an unceasing stream:

“Swallowing the tears, the lowly sound lingers, questioning instinct and emotion as they exchange whispered words of hunger. If desire is the god driving all human existence, then we can neither rebel against nor doubt such a god, only continuously submit ourselves to defeat. Gurgle – nursemaid! Gurgle, gurgle – nursemaid! Only with the body that encloses our lives can we stiffly raise our inquiries! Compassion, a sighing glance – the buzzing bee falls into the flower, drowning in the nectar inside as he gazes at the ocean beyond the walls. But only after chewing all in my mouth, did I realized this buzzing bee was myself..”

In the time before Sickie and her scorn returned, the Poet – without even trying – had created an entire narrative devoted to this theme of “fasting,” with even more words emerging as they popped into his mind.

Behind him was a new guest, but either way, there was no one who would listen to him. And even if they did listen, they would only think him strange and try to avoid him. *But was that not my goal?* That was what the Poet’s heart was constantly thinking – Suddenly, however, a blue blur appeared at his right side and, pushing several coins on the counter, cried:

“Bartender, a glass of tequila for the artist here!”

“...?”

Furrowing his brow in confusion, the Poet turned his line of sight towards the figure next to him –

The next moment, a cold shudder ran through his body.

“...!”

“Oh, let me tell you a truly touching story...oh, how touching! To think, that in such a corner of the city, I would hear such lovely poetry as I just did! Language? What is language but a kind of beauty? And when clear enough, this language, when we hear it, can make us feel such deep emotions...no doubt about it, emotions! And those words you just spoke! They’ve plummeted me in a moving, swirling vortex of emotion!”

As the man continued proclaiming in this manner, waving his hands up and down as he spoke, a cold sweat silently broke out on the Poet's back

The tool the blue-suited figure carried.

His golden hair.

The strange hairstyle that covered his eyes.

And that unmatched energy in his words.

At the time, the Poet had only watched from the sidelines, but standing behind everyone else, he had still seen him –

This man in front of him.

This man who had, in a fight against Rail, Sickie, and the rest, singlehandedly brought them to their knees.

...this cannot be good.

Had they already been recognized by their enemy? Although there had been no detailed drawings on any of the wanted posters, the Poet was easily described as “a man who spoke pretentiously.” Had this man, on such a description, already been able to recognize him?

No – he might also already long known they were going to be here. Or perhaps...perhaps this was just a coincidence?

But even if it was a coincidence, the chances were just simply too low.

While it was true that several stores had closed due to the recent disappearances and yesterday's explosions, there were still thousands of bars and restaurants in Chicago.

That amidst these many stores, they would bump into each other in this one – could such things really happen?

“Ah – what a beautiful day this is! When my friends brought me here, I would have never thought that I would, in a place like this, meet such an artist as yourself! Oh, thank you, day called today, for bringing me here!”

“I don't quite get what you're saying, but congratulations anyway!”

“...”

As the smiling bartender brought the tequila over, the Poet decided to find out the true motives of the man next to him.

However, if the Poet wanted to observe his face, his eyes would be immediately visible. As a result, he could only wait, uncertain of anything as time slowly trickled by.

“Oh, you suddenly got quiet.”

“...no.”

“Are you being bashful? If so, then I should be as well...Disturbing the creation of art might be merely rude, but intending to do so is an insult! Oh, how sad – how very, very truly tragic! Just how, how can I ever rid myself of this guilt? But ah, I know – let me buy you another drink, alright?”

“No...it is no annoyance. For if the body can withstand its splashing sparks, then it can endure the fire, heady on the beauty of burning in the blaze within...floating within the glass chalice, the undulating worm dictates the depths of my existence.”

“Yes! I don’t quite understand it, but your spirit is truly admirable. Come, drink up!”

Even if his opponent hadn’t figured out who the Poet was, when Sickle came back, everything would be exposed.

After all, it had only been a few days since her right ankle and upper arm been “dismantled” by the wrench of this man in a blue work uniform.

Most people, after an injury like that, would have been in too much pain to move. Sickle, however, merely popped her bones back into place, and by sheer willpower bore the pain.

Though such an injury would still hurt, Sickle refused to show any signs of pain, an act of endurance made the Poet deeply admire her.

And if she were to see this man right now, she would surely become angry...

As the Poet continued to emit this nervous air, the man next to him hastily stood up.

“Oh, I’ll leave with time to ponder your art...right now, I will try to impart the feeling you’ve given me to others. This, then, shall be how I oppose my hate! No matter if it’s today, tomorrow, the day after day, or some day in the near or distant future, I will continue to carry this feeling as long as I live! Oh, what a joyous, joyous tale!”

Humming, he half-spun, half-walked to the men’s bathroom.

Which was next to the women’s bathroom.

And the moment the blue-clothed man closed the door on the bathroom, the women’s stall was thrown open, Sickle’s cold countenance emerging from the open doors.

This could be dangerous...

The Poet had hardly thought this, when a few moments later –

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Hey, is that...”

“It can’t be...”

“Is this for real?”

Spotting Sickle, the blue-suited man’s companions suddenly began starting up from their table.

...oh no.

When Sickle and the other man encountered each other, then these men would act just like the Poet, fading to the sides as merely spectators.

Even if he had not recognized the Poet, then it was likely his adversary would remember Sickle’s face.

Putting it that way, was it truly a coincident that they had come to this restaurant?

This thought had crossed his mind earlier, but right now, there was no luxury to continue pondering it.

“Let us leave.”

“....? Go...but where?”

Sickle, too, had noticed the men watching her, and their stares had made her restless again. Watching them out of the corner of her eyes, she frowned in puzzlement.

The Poet, however, had no time to properly explain the situation to her. Taking a few bills from his wallet, he placed them on the counter.

“Manager, we’re sorry, but something came up. Will this be enough money to cover it?”

At this abrupt statement, the manager gawked at the Poet. He didn’t touch the money, however, only shaking his head and saying,

“My dear guests, this simply can’t do...Even if we’ve already started cookin’ your order, I can’t take your money if you won’t stay to eat it.”

“Ah..in that case, please feel free to give our food to the table over there. Tell them it’s a thank-you for buying me drinks.”

“Is...is that really alright?”

“Yes, don’t worry about it.”

The manager seemed to hear the anxiety in the Poet’s voice, and without another word, he went to find the change for the money the Poet had given him.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Sickle’s question was disgruntled, but the Poet just took her hand, silently heading for the restaurant’s exit –

It was then that the Poet was certain he clearly sensed something, the quiet *click* of puzzle pieces fitting together.

Something about the timing of it all, the way it all overlapped together –

“Huh?”

That was –

A voice they hadn’t heard for a long, long time.

At the same time, it was also one they couldn’t be more familiar with.

“Well, well, well – would you look at *that*? Quite a coincidence, huh?”

Although it was a man’s voice coming from the bar’s open doors, there was also a sense of childishness in it.

Even if the voice was more mature, the tone of the words was very similar to Rail’s.

Underneath his dark hat, the Poet’s eyes widened, and even Sickle stood stunned at this sudden encounter.

Emerging from the sun outside into the dark store, was a man who gave the impression of being a vampire.

Below his red eyes, the man’s mouth opened wide to show a row of straight, sharp teeth.

Seeing this countenance for the first time, the manager could not stop his face from assuming the same expression as Sickle's.

However, this eerie-looking man was also –

“Well, how'd *this* happen?”

Face gleeful and beyond surprised, he opened his arms, and with relentless happiness cried:

“Fantastic! Just fantastic! Well, isn't this old Poet and Sickle! Aah, Rail'd told me you guys were here, but I would've never thought I'd meet you guys in a place like that...what kinda coincidence is that, huh? Is this what they call the 'ties of family,' then?”

“Christopher!”

As Sickle and the Poet simultaneously cried this name, the man it referred to broke into a bright grin. Eyes flickering between the two of them, he continued:

“Ah – it's too great, I really woulda never thought I'd bump into you guys in a place like this! I should starting thanking God, should I? But, no – type of person I am, I guess I oughta be thanking nature for leading him here instead.

“*Guur...grrrgle...*”

“After all, it was my hungry stomach that led me towards you, so I guess I should be thankful that even though we're homunculi, nature has given us the ability to go hungry! Ah, that's right – I once heard someone say that in the country of Japan, has eight million gods, 'cause they think every leaf and stone on the ground has a god of its own. Fantastic, don'tcha think? For a lover of nature like me, it sounds great, but could it really true? For unnatural creations like us – is there a god of homunculi, too? If there are eight million known gods, then it doesn't really matter who I turn to, does it? In that case, I think I'd like to thank the God of puppets –”

“That's enough – shut up and calm down a little, wouldn't you?”

This command was rather ironical, however, as it was now Sickle who impatiently interrupted Christopher's high-speed words with the question looming in her mind:

“I have so many...truly so many things I want to ask you. But, Christopher...did you, just then, say that it was Rail who had told you this earlier?”

“I did.”

“Where was this? And where is he right now?”

Though Sickle's tone was sharp, Christopher only shrugged as he told her, "he's the same as always." With a listless smile, he continued,

"Ah, not really. Yesterday, he seemed to get into some kind of trouble, and I found him on the street, collapsed. He's trying to save Frank, so now he's going around blowing things up."

"...! What happened? And why didn't you go with him? Saving Frank – you mean they aren't together? Do you know where he is, then?"

"Hey now, asking me all these questions at once, how am I supposed to response? Way I see it, you should calm down a little yourself –"

As Christopher tried to placate a furious Sickle –

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a flashing silver object.

Years of experience told him, "this thing was dangerous," and his attention immediately snapped towards it.

For a moment, he mistakenly thought it was one of Leeza's chakrams – but as it approached, he saw that the silver circle was only an ordinary wrench, albeit spinning at high speed.

At the same time as Christopher's vision was making these quick judgments, his right hand naturally reached over Sickle's shoulder.

"!"

Reflexively thinking that Christopher was going to hit her, Sickle automatically bent into a crouch – only to hear a "snap" from nearby.

Automatically, her eyes turned towards the direction of the noise –

To see that Christopher was holding, in one hand, a wrench.

Such a wrench was very familiar to Sickle, and her entire body tensed as she turned towards the direction it had come flying from.

And then –

She saw him.

A man wearing the blue clothes of a workman, taking slow, ghostly footsteps towards them –

Who, reaching his table, reached over for the giant wrench lying there.

“How joyous...let me tell you a truly joyous story.”

And, lifting the steel bar high, the light gleaming off the metal – this blue-clothed ghost smiled.

A cheerful, crazy smile.

“The enemies that vanished earlier have once again appeared in front of me – and not one, but two of them! To chance upon this woman in the green dress again – could it mean that the thread of fate connects us? If so, then should I once again love her? Mister manager, what do you think?”

“W-what?”

Suddenly brought into the conversation, the manager struggled to process the situation in front of him –

Meekly, he gave an answer, but not to the question he had been asked.

“Ah, well...sir, I think that it’s rather dangerous to throw wrenches around.”

“R...really?! How terrible...even if it had nothing to do with my question, the manager’s answer is still a hundred percent accurate...how can that be? And what now? What should I do now? Which idea should ring the right bell? Ah, it truly is strange...strange and sorrowful...but still, life can be so enjoyable, too! And to let me stumble upon such a coincidence as this!”

“S-sir?”

At this tentative word, uttered with a face full of anxiety, the figure in workman’s clothes nodded steadily, trying to reassure the manager –

“It’s alright, Mister manager. Don’t worry.”

The words he said after this, however, could hardly be counted as reassuring.

“Before the ribs are done, I’ll put this thing to an end.”

The same time
Transcontinental train
Car interior

Propelled by steam, the locomotive sped towards Chicago.

And somewhere in the compartments behind it, cargo, first-class, third-class, and all the other compartments that comprised an ordinary train –

An encounter was about to occur.

“La la la ———♪ Lalalala, la, la, la la la lalala ———♪”

Other than a young man cheerfully singing, the third-class compartment was empty.

“Dee-da la da, do-*dah* ———♪ pa pa la, pa – pa – pa – palalala ———♪ lala lu lu lulalah, ding – dong ———♪ *klun* da, *klun* da, *klun* da...”

Drums, trumpets, and piano – all these instruments came from the mouth of the man inside. Readjusting the cowboy hat on his head, bought with the money left after buying his ticket, he continued his happy song:

“Da la la laah, da la la la laaah, da la da la da la——♪”

Seeing his reflection in the window, he paused in his singing to address his reflection.

“Ah – we can improve this, can’t we?”

As he pondered whether he ought to add some other decoration to his hat, the man realized, suddenly, that another man was standing behind him.

“Who – ah, you must just be a friend of mine, right?”

At this odd question, the figure in the shadows – a young man, dressed well in a suit – shook his head.

“No, I’m afraid not, seeing as this is the first time we’ve spoken in person. Are you Mr. Isaac, by chance?”

“Eh? So then, you’re not a friend...?”

“Not yet, I would say.”

“Ah, right! We might not know each other, but starting from now, I declare us friends!”

And, issuing this bold proclaiming, Isaac Dian offered his right hand to the man in front of him.

Though faintly surprised, the man politely shook Isaac's hand. Smiling wryly, he commented, "you're very bold, aren't you, making friends with people you've just met."

"Oh? Are you saying that's something bad?"

"No, I wouldn't say..."

"Fantastic! Because right now, I'm so happy I could be friends – no, family! – with everyone in the whole world!"

Seeing Isaac's childish glee, the other man smiled faintly, politely pulling away his hand as he took the seat next to him.

"Is it convenient if I sit here?"

"Oh, is it convenient?"

Although Isaac's reply was once again nonsensical, the suited man did not seem to particularly mind it. Addressing the man in front of him, he slowly said,

"Isaac, you really are the way everyone else says you are – or, I guess I could say, the way I would expect from what I've seen of you."

"Huh? What – you recognize me?"

"Yes, I've heard about you from several people already, and I've watched you from afar...Simply put, when it comes to you and Miss Miria Harvent...you could say I'm a fan."

"A fan?"

Expression dumbfounded, Isaac's gaze traveled over the room several before coming to rest again on the face of the man next to him.

"A fan...of me and Miria?"

"That's right."

The man's words were suspicious at best, but there was no doubt in Isaac's eyes as he stared at him, eyes bright as those of a child seeing a butterfly for the first time.

"I see now – well, that explains everything! But wait one moment – being a fan of Miria, I can understand, she's as pretty as any gal on Broadway...but me? Now just what reason would you have to be a fan of *me*?"

To Isaac's question, the other man in the car met with an even response.

“Ah, none really...only, many people have told me of your exploits, and I’ve been quite envious.”

“Many people?”

Although he had only just met him, Isaac already seemed to treat the other man as though they had been friends for years.

Staring faintly at Isaac, the suited man paused a moment before making his reply.

“Certainly...for example, the Martillo family...Jacuzzi Splot...or the Russo family...Czeslaw Meyer...Miss Eve Genoard, too...from all of them, I’ve heard tales of *you*, Isaac Dian.”

As he heard the other man mention one after another of his old friends, Isaac’s mood only intensified. Enthusiasm peaking, he cried:

“Amazing – you know so many people! Then that settles it – if you’re friends with all these people, then you’re friends with me, too! And once she meets you, I’m sure Miria would be happy to be your friend, too!”

“I’m very grateful for that, then.”

As the other gave yet another restrained, ironical smile, Isaac suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to ask an important question. Slapping his knee, he exclaimed:

“That’s right – I still haven’t asked you *your* name! How can I introduce you to everyone else if I don’t have your name? Though it doesn’t have to be a name – a nickname would be just as well!”

At Isaac’s rushed question, the other man paused a moment before responding.

Then, giving Isaac another strained smile, he began his extremely belated introduction.

“My goodness, this feels almost like being a spy...”

“A spy? Wow, how incredible!”

Though these words were even more suspicious, Isaac’s eyes continued to shine with childlike joy.

Seeing Isaac’s reaction, the man was even more perplexed than before – then, giving a sigh, he finally stated his name.

“Ah, well, in truth, this name is more of a nickname, though it is my true name as well...”

“I hope you can call me...Sham.”

The same time
Chicago, outskirts

When the automobile industry had been at a peak, factory upon factory had been built in Chicago. As a result, a number of plants were scattered around the city. But when the Great Depression began affecting the world, many of these factories began reaching their end – and as their tales ended, the city became full of abandoned factories.

And just as Graham Specter would use such factories as personal bases, many of the cast-off factories in the city had become bases for gangs and other groups. Others had become the sites of contraband manufacture by the mafia, each using the factories to pursue their own stories.

Though Prohibition had already been repealed and alcohol was now no longer contraband, many people were still involved in illegally manufacturing alcohol, staying with the business out of deluded dreams or despair.

Amidst such a landscape, a gang of young delinquents knew well the meaning of both dreams and despair.

Located next to a row of other factories, the plant they frequent was a difficult one to find. Several years ago, a series of murders nearby had caused the gang to flee the scene, and even after the police had finished conducting their investigation, the group of delinquents had not returned, leaving their factory to be truly abandoned.

After three years, however, the lights in the abandoned factory were once again lit.

But other than rusted piles of scrap metal and the scent of machine oil, nothing in the factory welcomed its former residents back.

And now –

Just the same as three years ago, a boy's cries rent the air within the factory.

“Aaaaaaaah...oh *nooo*....w-w-what, what are we going to *doooo*...”

“Jacuzzi, please, just try to calm down.”

Gently, Nice reached a comforting hand out to Jacuzzi, who sat clutching his head against the wall.

Nice's gesture, however, only made Jacuzzi sink further into despair.

"This is all...this is all my fault. If-if I didn't make us come here, you w-wouldn't be a suspect now, Nice..."

"Jacuzzi, I would have come anyway, alright? Please, Jacuzzi, I've already told you, stop blaming yourself. It isn't your fault..."

"B-but it is! It is my fault! When I told everyone to run...if we'd stayed there and explained everything to the police, e-even if there were misunderstandings, I'm sure they would-would have believed us..."

Seeing that Jacuzzi was in a mood to blame everything on himself, Nice tried switching her tact to reason.

"And then given up this boy to police?"

"Ah..."

Nice pointed the other way, where the topic of their conversation was sleeping in a blanket.

Although the boy – who appeared several years younger than Jacuzzi and his companions – was currently tranquilly sleeping, the scars covering his body made all those who looked at him feel anything but peaceful.

Though he didn't seem to be any immediate danger, Jacuzzi's companions had still taken him to a doctor just in case, a back-alley acquaintance unlikely to question their lack of insurance.

When it came to the mysterious boy's condition, they didn't hold high hopes. But even if his situation was bad, theirs was equally hopeless.

Initially, they could have just taken the boy to a hospital, immediately calling attention to his presence. But not only would this have failed to clear Nice of suspicion, they would have also felt deeply guilty for sending the boy to the police.

Even so, the young boy had certainly been identified at the explosion. As a result, they couldn't help but feel guilty either way, much like their leader – but in addition to these problems, the gang had another reason for worry.

Because after they had returned to their base and gotten the boy medical treatment, Nice had shared certain observations:

"When we got a close look at the explosions, I realized something. No, it's more like I became sure of something I'd already thought...yes, I'm certain of it now."

“C-certain of what?”

“The explosives this boy used just then...they’re the same ones I stole before.”

“Wha –?”

At Nice’s words, Jacuzzi furiously blinked several times.

But as the meaning of her words dawned on him, his face paled, leaving his tattoo even darker than before.

“You mean...”

“The same as the ones I took from the Flying Pussyfoot and then sold. But if these are just reproductions, then it might not be hopeless...”

At Nice’s composed words, Jacuzzi’s mind instantly began wondering what a truly “hopeless” scenario was.

As it stood – by going through them, wasn’t it their fault that these bombs had entered the world?

As the blood drained out of his face, Jacuzzi began to slowly tremble.

Once again, it seemed they had been thrust into the middle of a maelstrom.

As the questions began piling within his head – Who was this child? Why was he using these bombs? Were Graham and his group safe? – Jacuzzi’s sense of unease only heightened.

In addition to all this, the fear that the Russo family would want to avenge themselves for their companions suffused his heart.

As this vortex of thoughts swirled in his mind, Jacuzzi, his trembling only getting worse, burst into tears.

In his fear, this easily-scared youth did not hear it –

‘It’ being the beginning commotion coming from a restaurant not too far away.

A commotion that, at least until now, had not yet started.

Dolce, interior

Inside, a scene of chaos was laid out.

No tables or chairs were flying through the air, and it was hardly if the place was in shambles – but compared to the present atmosphere, such a scene would have actually been more comforting. To describe it, the atmosphere was not that before a general fight, but rather that of two gunmen ready to draw their arms.

Within such a steadily tensing atmosphere, however, two men remained unaffected –

The two men who were, in fact, responsible for the current mood to begin with.

“Huh, and I was just wondering who this was from! Turns out it’s Mr. Wrench himself – it’s been, what, thirty-five hours and twenty-four minutes since we last saw each other?”

Christopher said this with a calm expression, casually swinging the wrench in his hand back and forth.

Across from him, Graham gave his own grin as he responded.

“No, that’s not it.. thirty-six hours, fifty-nine minutes, and twenty-three minutes.”

“Is that really?”

“Not really! I was just saying whatever I wanted to!”

“Really? Same here!”

Tossing the wrench into the air, Christopher flashed a wide, sharp grin.

“Anyways, it looks like you’re getting barbeque ribs? Can’t keep anyone waiting, then.”

Without gazing at it, Christopher deftly reached a hand for the wrench as it fell back down.

The wrench, however, slipped through his fingers, falling on the floor with a clang.

“...let’s try that again.”

Without a second thought, Christopher picked up the wrench and, twirling it, continued.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Hey, manager, I want an order of barbeque ribs too, Memphis style.”

“Huh? What – ah, y-yes, right away!”

Still in awe by the power of Christopher’s presence, the elderly manager quickly scurried away to the kitchen.

Watching him go, Christopher once again tossed the wrench into the air.

It was a careless motion, but somehow, the tension in the room only increased at that, all following the path of the wrench as though it were the most important thing in the world –

Until, that is, a third person decided to disregard the atmosphere, breaking the reverie with a question.

“Chris, you’re not going to tell give him my order, then?”

“Ah!”

So calm previously, Christopher started in surprise, and – completely ignoring the eyes on him – turned his gaze to the front of the store.

Which was the moment the wrench he had earlier tossed chose to fall.

With a *clunk*, it dropped on Christopher’s head, eliciting a cry of “oh!” from him as, before, his eyes, the now-slowed wrench was caught by Ricardo.

“...Chris, what are you doing?”

“Wow, damn, *oww* – oh, nothing. Just getting a little exercise before eating.”

Rubbing his head, he his gaze turned to the people inside the store. Christopher seemed more intent on stalling than starting, but as Ricardo returned the wrench to him, he turned back to Graham.

“You’re very skilled.”

“...you’re quite impressive yourself. Oh, but now I don’t know whether to be sorrowful or smile...”

“Hey! The two of you, quit joking around!”

This cry came from Sickle who, despite being caught between the two men, had until now been completely ignored by them.

To avoid being involved, the Poet had already unconsciously moved far away from the three figures, peering over the top of a pillar he had ducked behind.

“Christopher, be clear with me! Are you and this man familiar with each other? Who is that kid behind you? And where are Rail and Frank?”

“Ah – there’s a lot of things I have to explain to you, but I don’t now’s the right time for it.”

At that moment, Christopher's eyes darted back the man in workman's clothing. A wrench at least five times the size of Christopher's was in his hands, unceasingly turning as he fixed a pair of excited, nearly maniacal eyes on Christopher.

Continuing to spin the wrench, the man turned to Christopher and began yet another ramble –

“Oh...and now we come to a truly sad, truly regrettable story.”

“Huh? Oh, sure then, I'm listening. But make it quick, okay?”

“Ah, alright – just then, to reassure the manger, I told him that this would all be finished before the food was ready. So I suppose I've made a commitment now, haven't I? And now that I've made it, I certainly can't make him worry by breaking it. So starting from now – I'll put every effort into fighting you! For whom? Why, for the manager and my own hungry stomach!”

“You've got that right.”

Christopher said this with a sly laugh and Graham, hearing it, suddenly made an odd request.

“Oh, and now that you understand...would you mind moving a little bit to the left? My left, I mean.”

Christopher raised an eyebrow, but nodding an assent, took several steps in that direction.

“Like that?”

“A little more...good, that's it! That should do it.”

“?”

What were they up to?

From the looks of it, the only ones who knew the answer to this were the two combatants themselves. Everyone else could only hold their breath, clueless, and await the answers to their questions –

Answers that Graham, grinning wildly, straightforwardly supplied.

“That way, Ricardo and the lady in the green won't be involved.”

At the same time

The giant wrench flew across the room, flung at an almost impossible speed.

Though it had the grace of a flying saucer, its force was more like that of an artillery shell.

These qualities, however, only underlined the destructive power of the silver object – one which was now directly heading for Christopher.

And as it did –

Seeing the object headed for him, the thought flashed through Christopher’s mind –

“Woah, that was even deadlier than one of Leeza’s chakrams!”

At the same time, years of training calmly told him that if the object hit, then its target was sure to be dead.

The total time it took these thoughts to cross his mind was, at most, a second or two.

But to Christopher, such an interval seemed very long, leaving him with more than enough time to think – but when the thought flashed through his head that ‘this could kill him,’ all thought gave over as he reacted by instinct.

Kicking off the ground, Christopher intended to side-sweep the weapon –

But it was already too late for something that easy.

Whirling, the wrench spun past Christopher’s leg, the sense of passing death causing his entire body to stiffen.

What transpired next, however, proved that “falling seven times means rising eight.”

Leaping to one side, Christopher aimed a hard kick at the wrench, hurling spinning disk away from him.

“...ah!”

The kick was one of unbelievable force – upon impact, the wrench stopped spinning and, speed now slowed, began drifting upwards.

Such a move would have knocked anyone off their feet, but by using his arms to swivel like a gymnast on a balance beam, the man responsible for this incredible feat was able to keep his balance.

At the same time, the huge wrench hit the wall with a *boom* and, now slowed but still spinning, flew towards the ceiling.

In the space of a few seconds, Christopher had already demonstrated prowess far beyond human abilities.

Already planning ahead, Christopher reached up, intending to take Graham's wrench and use it against its master –

Only to catch, at edge of his vision, a glimpse of a blue figure leaping into the air.

“...!”

Including Christopher, at that moment, all eyes were fixed on the trajectory of the gigantic wrench –

All, that is, except the man who had first thrown it.

Because Graham had already made his next move.

Having earlier thrown the wrench, Graham now leapt into the air to chase after it, using the tables and chairs as stepping-stones as he closed the distance between himself and Christopher.

Logically, he should not have been able to retrieve something he had just thrown –

But as the wrench bounced off of the wall, the man who caught it was not Christopher, who had just kicked it away, but Graham Specter, who had leapt from three tables away to catch it in mid-air.

Catching the wrench, Graham kicked off a nearby wall and, changing direction, headed straight for Christopher.

And as he did, his wrench arched through the air –

Not even including Graham's companions, even Sickle and the Poet expected to next hear the crack of Christopher's skull breaking.

That was, after all, the only logical result that could come from such an extraordinary series of attacks.

But the sound that was heard next was rather that of metal clanging on metal.

Sparks flew.

Using the smaller wrench he had taken earlier, Christopher now blocked the weapon coming down at him.

“Ha!”

Even as his eyes widened in surprise, Graham's mouth proclaimed his inner delight.

“Oh, it looks like you caught it...ah, you caught it! Fantastic! You caught it!”

As he gave this praise, however, Graham only bore down with greater strength.

“Thanks, I’m flattered...uh!”

On the other side, Christopher was using his strength to push Graham back.

The forces of the two weapon were practically equal, so much so that it was difficult to tell which was stronger. Watching a confrontation like this was like witnesses a duel between two skilled samurai – only in terms of size, it would have been like matching a jitte against a naginata.

“Let me be honest! I really think you’re incredible! When it comes to people who can block my wrench, you’re only the second one to do it!”

As he shouted these words, Graham’s mind suddenly went to the only other time something like this had happened.



Although he now considered Jacuzzi Splot and his gang as close as brothers, when they had first arrived in New York, Graham had been planning to hand them over to the Russo family for the bounty on their heads.

But through a series of misunderstandings and errors, the person they had ended up taking had been Chane Laforet, and they had been forced to cross swords with her –

Or, to be more accurate, to cross wrenches and daggers.

And at that moment, like some red-headed Zorro, a figure had coolly dropped into their midst.

Then calling himself “Felix Walker,” the man had not only caught the wrench Graham had flung at him, but had actually thrown it back even faster.

In the present circumstances, Graham had no time to dawdle in reminiscences, but that could not stop certain images from flashing through his mind. The face of that hateful redhead, Jacuzzi and Nice and the rest of the youths Graham now regarded as brothers...

That’s right, I still don’t know whether Jacuzzi and them are alright...

Completely unaware that they were in fact nearly next to the bar, Graham grinned grimly and set his resolve.

I can’t let myself be defeated here.

“How sorrowful...oh, truly! Let me tell you a truly sorrowful story!”

“Ah ha ha! Go on then!”

As Christopher replied, the two wrenches bounced away from each other –

And, as their wielders took a step back, clashed together once again.

In such a situation, Graham should have had no time to talk, but he continued chattering anyways –

“The last person to avoid my blow was a man with red hair...and now it’s a man with red eyes! How? And what could this mean? Is red just not a lucky color for me? If so, then all the blood that runs through my body must be bad luck for me...ah, but this unlucky body is still strong and alive, isn’t it? And graceful – that too!”

“That line was terrible!”

“Shaft, be quiet!”

Craning his neck over, Graham shouted these words at his distantly ducking critic.

Such a move should have been a fatal mistake – but at the sound of Shaft’s voice, Christopher also turned his head towards his direction.

“Well, I think it is?”

“Thank you! But that’s not going to stop me from dismantling you!”

Following this declaration, Graham immediately jumped back onto the nearby table.

Even as he flew over his opponent, however, he was doubling back for another attack.

Its force not one bit diminished, Graham’s wrench spun toward Christopher’s spine –

But its target had already moved forward.

As Christopher ducked under the table, a gust of wind rushed over him, and he felt fervently grateful for avoiding Graham’s attack.

At the same time, Christopher kicked a chair toward Graham, intending for it to connect with his leg –

The chair, however, missed its mark.

Hearing the sound of something moving towards him, Graham had already jumped back. Using the incoming chair as a stepping stone, he brought his wrench down on the table in front of him –

Oh, he was going to pay for that.

This thought idly flitting through his mind, Graham prepared to bring his wrench mercilessly down –

Only to realize, in that instant, that the table *was flying towards him*.

“!”

Connecting with the table Christopher had tossed forward, Graham was thrown back.

Quickly recovering his balance, Graham looked up in time to see a pair of bright red, red, red eyes coming towards him –

Automatically, Graham brought his wrench in front of his body.

However, such a reaction had been meant to counter the force of his opponent’s wrench. And what Graham’s opponent now struck with was not the object in hands, but rather the same feet that had kicked the table away.

Kicking up from the floor, Christopher used all his deadly momentum to now strike Graham in the side.

“Guh...”

As cold sweat ran down his cheeks and pain made him instinctually want to curl up on himself – Graham thrust his head forward, hitting Christopher’s face with all his might.

“.....!”

Pulling back from each other, both combatants took a step back, intending to take a breath to adjust to the pain and regroup.

But before a single breath had been taken, both burst out in laughter.

“Ha...”

“Ha ha ha!”

Growing quiet, both parties then took a breath, preparing in the next instant to attack –

Only for both to suddenly lose their balance, thumping on the ground as pain shot through their feet.

Unsure what had just happened, both Graham and Christopher glanced around –

And saw, appearing in their midst, an elegant woman in a billowing green dress.

With the brisk movement of a pendulum, Sickle stood up.

“I’ve been silently listening to your banter all this time...and I’m starting to lose patience with you two.”

Catching Sickle’s cold expression, the red-eyed man, vigorously shook his head, looking somewhat abashed.

“Hey, you can’t step in, Sickle. This is between me and him –”

“Don’t worry.”

Face expressionless except for the fire in her eyes, Sickle calmly cut off Christopher’s words.

“I’m going to take down both of you.”

Their long-awaited reunion...where had that gone?

Seeing his companions caught in a three-sided battle and eyeing each other like mortal enemies, the Poet, from behind a pillar, could not help but sigh bitterly and give vent to his inner musings.

“What we call chaos is but a test the divine sets for our short lives, yet it is also but an illusion...and so the test itself, then, is from genesis naught but an illusion. To overcome scars and thus obtain the soul’s crop...even sprinkling food onto the cloudy pitch of a fish’s tank could not compare to this act of human existence...”

Although he knew he was merely spitting out words without meaning, the Poet continued his clever rambles.

His mouth ceaselessly moving, the Poet prayed that the current shambles could be resolved as soon as possible.

Before the food is ready, something has to be done.

But although the Poet understood this, if it was only himself, there was nothing to be done –

And so, he could only continue fervently praying.

What was more, this chance encounter had left the Poet vacillating between joy and unhappiness.

A lingering doubt – that was all that was needed to leave the Poet terrified.

Although it was a mere hunch, his suspicions were of high importance.

For the blue-suited man and his gang to come here was already something, but for even Christopher to show up...

At this moment, in all of Chicago, for the two of them to “suddenly” encounter each other like this –

It raised a simple but unavoidable question, one that been repeating in the Poet’s head for some time already.

Could this really be by coincidence?

He set to musing once again.

After all, there was not much else he could do.

Kitchen, interior

As this scene played out like something from a martial arts show, inside the kitchen, the owner and his wife were preoccupied with their own headaches.

Compared to the exterior of the store, this kitchen seemed rather too large. Separated by a thin wall, it performed the functions of both office and living room – not the most hygienic arrangement, perhaps, but as long as people didn't peek inside, they had no need to feel worried. Besides, the kitchen itself was spotlessly clean. In front of the oven sat a large array of barbeque ribs prepared in different styles, the orders of the first guests baking inside.

“...old lady, I shoulda listened to you earlier.”

The store had just been open for seven minutes.

But in those seven minutes, they had already heard the sound of wrenches being thrown and objects being broken.

“E-everything's already happened jus' like you said it would, and what 'm I supposed to do? Listen – you stay here and keep on cooking, and I'll go out and try to talk to 'em.”

“Old man! What're you sayin'?”

In such a perplexing situation, for her husband to want them to go on preparing food – the wife could not help the startled stare that came over her face. Seeing his wife's bewilderment, the manager smiled and, taking a deep breath, tried his best to appease her.

“Don't worry, everything'll be alright! You've still got a phone here, and if anything seems wrong, you can just call the police. Anyways, it's not like it's a robber with a gun here – just two customers tryin' to start a fight.”

“I hope it only stays that simple...”

Seeing the worn-down look on his wife's face, the owner gently patted her on the shoulder, calmly reassuring her.

“I was the one who kept on pushin' for us to open today – I should take responsibility for this. Best if you just stay here, so you don't get involved.”

Saying this, he left the room.

Although her husband had just said these words, the wife's feeling of unease continued. Despite what her partner of many years had just told her, she decided to call the police.

Old man, I'm sorry...I just have a very strong feeling about this...

She didn't know if it was the customers currently brawling or the ones quietly watching from the sidelines – either way, these customers gave her a sense of foreboding. It was not a supernatural skill, but merely the result of years of experience that had given her a simple sense of intuition –

An intuition, however, that she trusted completely.

This group of customers...suppose there happens to be among them...someone extraordinary...

She did not know if it one of Christopher and his group of homunculi, psychologically-off Graham and his party, or maybe both of them – but heading the feeling of dread they stirred in her, she determinedly picked up the phone.

And as she did –

The sense of foreboding rang in her mind once again.

This time, it was not a sensation based on experience, but truly pure intuition.

For some reason, the phone gave her an uneasy feeling, making her hesitate to even pick it up.

Towards the telephone set itself, the owner's wife felt this sense of foreboding, similar to the strong sensation she had felt earlier.

In a state of endless confusion, she finally picked up the phone –

And could feel all her premonitions come true.

Even when she picked up the telephone, there was no sound of an operator's voice – only cold, mute silence.

Because –

The line had already been cut.

Interlude Three: The Alchemist is Calm, and...

Alcatraz Jail

Special Underground Cell

“No.....it can’t be, it can’t be, it can’t it can’t it caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan’t!”

For such a scream to echo in a men’s prison –

It was an occurrence that, logically, should not have been possible.

Because not only was it a feminine voice that cried out, but also clearly that of a young girl.

However, several floors down and ensconced from rest of the prison by thick walls, such a sound had no way of reaching Alcatraz’s other levels.

And what was more –

All around the United States, this same scream was being echoed by countless women.

“No no no...it can’t, it can’t be....Daddy, Daddy’s *eye*...”

In front of the weeping girl, a man knelt forward on one knee.

In the area where his left eye should have been, the man merely had a red, gaping hole. Despite this, there was a faint smile on his face – a smile however, that was not reflected in the eyes of the girl next to him. The simple fact that the man next to her had been injured was enough to suffuse the girl with anxiety – and near-hysterical, she wildly cried:

“Hooooooooooooow!? Why....how...hoooooo....”

In the next moment, however, her screams abruptly cut off.

Because gently cradling her shaking frame, was the man the girl had called “Daddy.”

“It’s alright, Leeza.”

“Ah...aaaaaaah, wah....wah, waaaah...”

“Be a little calmer, please. It isn’t much – my field of sight has only narrowed a little, that’s all.”

As the girl continued shaking in his arms, a faint, tight-lipped smile appeared on the man’s face.

However, Huey Laforet’s smile was hardly directed towards the girl in his lap –

But rather towards the current situation’s turn of events.

After the girl had finally calmed down, Huey put her on the bed. Glancing around him, he remarked in a unconcerned tone:

“It appears that this is different from merely closing an eye...well. What an interesting experiment this is turning out to be.”

“Why....Daddy’s eye....where did it, where did it go....?”

Trying to avoiding looking at his face, Huey’s “daughter” asked this question in a small voice.

Forcing a slightly strained smile, Huey pondered what to tell her next.

Should he tell her ‘it was gouged out by one of the men here earlier?’

Or should he just tell her something else, and thus divert her attention away?

If he were to let her know the man responsible – and if that was Firo, if Huey was to name him as the man who had harmed him –

Then it was likely that Leeza would, without any regard for her safety, run to retrieve his stolen eye.

But even after she had taken the eye back, Leeza was still unlikely to forgive the men who had harmed him. Potentially, she would even try to kill everyone who had earlier been in this room.

Then again, that could be quite interesting, too.

If his only opponent was Firo, then no matter how much Leeza wanted revenge, it would be impossible to kill him, as Firo was an immortal like Huey.

However – if the men calling themselves the former Felix Walker, as well as the man named Ladd, were involved, then the situation was completely different.

That man, Ladd Russo – even when it came to a young girl like Leeza, he gave off the air of being able to kill her without a second thought. From his prior reports, Huey had already began to form a picture of the type of man Ladd was, but only now that he had met Ladd in the flesh did Huey truly understood what his reports had already told him.

Although Ladd may have been a madman, he was a logical madman.

The type of man who not only completely understood what he was doing, but who also steadfastly carried out his beliefs.

Although it was difficult to guess from his vicious personality, Ladd’s true nature was actually much more cold and intelligent. Even if he was naturally impulsive, he managed to always carry

out his plans. And although Huey was currently unable to determine whether this impulsiveness came from anger, simple sadism, or some other source, one thing was clear: if this man wanted to kill Leeza, then he would not hesitate for a moment to do it.

That could be quite troublesome.

After all, I still have several experiments I want to perform on her –

At least before we escape, if she doesn't prove to be of some use, I'll be quite disappointed.

After musing over these decidedly un-paternal thoughts, Huey gently patted Leeza on the head.

“It’s alright – the loss won’t be any bother to me.”

“No...it can’t be, it can’t be! Daddy, Daddy can’t be hurt...he can’t be...! Daddy...who...who did this? I’ll kill them, I’ll definitely kill them! It’s not okay, it’s not okay – Daddy, you can’t be hurt!”

Though he could not tell if her words were more out of worry for him or herself, Huey knew that such a reaction was natural for Leeza.

Leeza Laforet.

That was the name of Huey’s biological daughter – however, she had another as well.

A name she shared with countless others –

Hilton.

Like Sham, it was the name of a single entity occupying the bodies of many.

Though this project had originally been started by Szilard Quates, thanks to another alchemist’s theft, it had been Huey who completed and carried it out instead. And while there were many who believed Huey to be its original creator, it was this thief who could be said to be its true engineer.

In order for it to work, all that was necessary was to drink a certain liquid. After that, then the “thing” inside the liquid would engage in a battle with the person’s consciousness. And if in this battle “it” emerged victorious – then not only would it acquire all of the person’s knowledge and experience, but also a new body to control. But if, on the other hand, it was the human who emerged victorious, then they would gain only the liquid’s memories in addition to their freedom.

Unlike a poison or a truth serum, this liquid only involved a pure consciousness.

Not having personally tested it, Huey didn't know how the liquid actually worked – but if he were to take it and to be subsumed by the “thing” inside, then it would be, for him, the equivalent of being devoured.

That's right...that person was eventually devoured, wasn't he?

After he had brought them the technology to create Sham, the alchemist's name had continued to show up in Rhythm's research facilities, as he brought them various news and books. But recently, they had completely lost contact with him.

Since Firo had been the one to devour Szilard, didn't that meant that he knew this, too? Or had that person already been devoured by someone else – or had he gone into hiding, and now wanted nothing to do with them?

Ah, but I can afford to think about him later.

Smiling wryly as he found his thoughts drifting to trivial matters, Huey turned his attention back to the girl in front of him.

“No matter who stole it, it's only a minor detail in an unimportant matter. There's no hurry to retrieve it; right now, our more pressing priorities are the situation in New York and escaping from this island.”

“But how can that be...no! But....but...”

Although she had already been assured to not worry, Leeza could only frantically shake her head, completely unable to accept his words.

Of course, such behavior was only natural for someone who had just learned their family member had been hurt.

But Huey knew that although Leeza's reaction could chalked down to familial feeling, her distress was more closely tied to her particular view of the world.

And just as he knew this, he knew that it was because of how he had raised her that Leeza had developed her peculiar beliefs.

Right after her birth, Huey had had his newborn daughter drink Hilton's liquid, and had since carefully nurtured her.

In her eyes, the center of the world was Huey Laforet. For both Hilton, the consciousness responsible for gathering information, and her vessel Leeza, he was not only the most important thing in the world, but the god controlling it. In fact, it could be said her entire world revolved around Huey.

And though she possessed the memories and experience of countless people, she had remained absolutely unshakable in her views of her “father.”

Huey took a moment to muse on what Leeza must have been currently thinking.

Her God had been hurt.

Her world had been insulted.

And the one responsible for it had been someone other than her father – in her view, a completely insignificant insect.

How odd...that although I've never thought of others as insects, Leeza has come to feel this way...

Although Huey himself viewed those around him as nothing more than “raw materials,” this was how he now dispassionately considered his daughter’s outlook.

Leeza...

Among all of Hilton’s vessels, she seemed to regard this girl, her first vessel, as “a unique individual.”

Unlike Sham, who had long since seen his vessels as mere tools to be used, Hilton had thought of her vessels as the bodies through which her mind flowed, a structure in which each limb had its unique place.

Regarding her fondness toward Leeza, could the sentiment be similar to someone who said, “I like the thumb or my right hand?” Or was it, as Huey suspected, more akin to a person’s feeling towards their heart or their brain?

Huey had no way to be sure on this particular detail, but from what Hilton said in Leeza’s childish tone, it seemed that Leeza was not an isolated instance.

“Daddy...I...I can’t forgive them – who was it!? Was it that man called Ladd? Or was it that horrible Firo? I’ll go after them right now, and cut them into pieces!”

Although Leeza’s tone resembled that of a child losing their temper, there was nothing childish about the threats she now voiced.

Closing a hand over his wounded eye, Huey gently stroked Leeza’s cheek.

“Leeza, there’s no need for you to take any more risks. I don’t know what happened while I was unconscious, but if their goal had been my eye, then it’s already long gotten past the guards and been taken off this island.”

“Guards...so is it one of the guards, then?”

“Taking about this is becoming tiring.”

As Leeza quivered with every intention of killing every guard on the island, Huey could only gently pet her head, eyes glancing at the guard still stationed at the entrance – Sham, who had not passed out when Huey had and who could have thus tell him what had happened earlier.

“I’ll describe them to you later...so right now, Leeza, calm down a little.”

A different glint now appeared in Huey’s eyes –

As, in his heart, the beginnings of a vague desire stirred.

If she were to lose Leeza...how Hilton’s other vessels be affected?

As this thought flashed through his mind, Huey could not help but chuckle softly.

For someone to regard even his own daughter as merely another test subject –

If in this world, there truly exists some afterlife...

Then I suppose my place would be in Dante’s ninth layer of hell.

Absently stroking Leeza’s hair, Huey continued musing on what soul he could have left and the girl he had shaped in its image.

Who truly were they, these irrational existences who now dwelt in the world – were they like him and his daughter, who awaited an afterlife upon dying? Or rather, were they like ordinary humans, who could indeed greet death?

The answers to could be truly interesting...

“Leeza, I also don’t intend to stay forever in this condition. But in order to reclaim my eye, right now, I may have to ask you to temporarily act as my sight. This may limit your freedom for a bit _”

“As if I care about that! Even if Daddy told me to be free, I’d still be trying to get your eye back!”

Seeing his daughter’s firm nod, Huey once again smiled faintly.

But while she’s here, I still have so many experiments to test out.

He began slowly murmuring to her, careful to avoid anything that could anger Leeza.

All the same, Huey had his own doubts of Firo.

And as he continued gently speaking to her –

All the while, his mind continued pondering his endless, lonely experiments.

Ten minutes later

Though the tears on her eyelids were still wet, Leeza's eyes were closed and she was gently breathing.

Gently covering his daughter with a blanket, Huey quietly took a seat in the chair in the middle of the room.

“...what, Leeza's already sleeping? Master Huey...”

“She is, after I finally managed to calm her down enough to sleep.”

“...and your left eye?”

“A trifling matter. Please don't concern yourself about it.”

In the fading light of the single bulb above, the shapes in the room flickered, echoing voices and shadowy images spilling into the corridor outside. Without the slightest surprise, Huey remarked:

“In any case, you seem to be finally awake. I had thought you for dead, and was already planning how best to proceed.”

“If that were to happen, then it'd probably be best if you just waited here. My other vessels would come soon enough to take this one.”

“The death of this vessel wouldn't bother you then, Sham?”

“It'd feel having an arm or leg twisted off – but no, not really.”

Slowly standing up in the doorway, was the second guard whom Ladd had earlier knocked unconscious.

Alright then.

As Sham met Huey's gaze, he began quietly planning what to do next.

So far, Huey didn't seem to be aware of the fact that he had already been betrayed.

So right now...I'll need to be extra cautious.

Especially when I'm around Master Huey.

Although Sham had already betrayed his heart, he still mentally affixed this title before Huey's name.

His feelings hidden in the depths of his heart, Sham blandly spoke.

"I have an update for you. In Chicago, members of Lamia were clashing with the Russo family when Renée Palamades Brinvillier suddenly appeared. In the end, Nebula was able to shoot and capture Frank. Whether he's alive or dead at present, I would have to infiltrate Nebula to know."

Finishing with his odd report, Sham quietly awaited Huey's response.

"..."

After several moments of silence, Huey spoke.

"Are you alright?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's only that I remember that when the others were beating you, you seemed to be further back... What's more, before I lost consciousness, I remember your body being in a different posture. Were you awake earlier and moving around then?"

"..."

Huey's last words were extremely abrupt. Perhaps because of how unexpected this question had been, Sham now quickly shook his head and, as calmly as possibly, replied.

"No, I didn't...perhaps when the others were leaving, though, they managed to kick me over?"

"Is that so? Well, no matter then. Though it would have been useful if you had been awake and could have heard what they were saying."

"Yes, I suppose..."

Although this was how Sham responded, inside, he was far from calm. With someone like Huey Laforet, it was completely possible that he had already discovered Sham's betrayal, and was now silently mocking him.

But if Sham were to appear rattled now, then even if Huey had no suspicions, he would be instantly found out.

Forcing his face into a more natural expression, Sham calmly continued as before.

"Oh, and another thing...right now, Rail has asked me to aid him in rescuing Frank."

“Is that so? Well then. Who would have thought Rail would ever asking anyone for help.”

From the feud with the Russos to Frank’s capture, Huey’s attention now turned to Rail.

Having already partially carried out his betrayal, Sham now strongly felt the force of Huey’s gaze on him, and was all too keenly reminded whose creation he was. It was a feeling he couldn’t help shuddering at, but even as a cold chill ran down his neck, he forced himself to continue talking.

“Well, how do you plan to aid Rail, then?”

“Oh – well, he wants to ask you to help him, sir.”

“Alright, I shall, then.”

You’re not even going to ask what he wants help with?

As if sensing Sham’s thoughts, Huey gave a slight, knowing smile.

“I, sadly, am not yet omnipotent – if I were unbothered by this state of affairs, then I would have to be Ronnie Schiatto or one of his ilk. What’s more, I do need the experiments in Chicago to continue, even if I am temporarily absent to give instruction.”

“Ah...”

“Though I find it too troublesome to outwardly express it, I, too, am worried about Frank.”

“You can’t be serious – Master Huey –”

“Sham, I *am* sincere about my worry about Frank, though I suppose my reasons for it may seem less so. I am truly worried about him – but as you know, I am indeed the type of villain who cannot be induced to feel sorrow for others. If it were Salome or the others who learnt Frank had been shot, I’m sure they would already be frothing at the news.”

After mentioning the name of his lead researcher, Huey again fell silent.

Then, as if deciding to return to the present, he uttered, almost questioningly, a name –

“Renée Palamades Brinvillier...”

“Yes, she’s started to act. We don’t know what it’s, but it’s begun – that’s for certain.”

“I would have already guessed so, but to think she would progress so quickly...”

“Well, the Senate and the FBI have nearly all their attention on New York, and she has relations within the Russo family. That, along with some other incidents...”

As Sham's report gradually trailed off, a slow smile appeared on Huey's face.

Seemingly finished talking about the future, Huey then slowly stood up, and turned to give instructions to the vessel in front of him.

"In that case, for now, I want you to keep watch over Firo Prochainezo and the rest of prisoners who were here earlier. And as for the other guard who rushed into this room...I'm uncertain of his name, but as he was beaten by Ladd, his injuries should make him easy enough to recognize. Keep an eye on him, as well.

"Yes, sir."

Bowing deeply, the guard turned to leave. However, before he could go, Huey calmly called after him –

"Tomorrow, I'm planning to leave here...at this time then, I should be able to personally give orders."

"...understood."

Taking care not to wake Leeza, Sham silently closed the door. Standing in the darkened corridor, he let out a deep breath.

I hope I haven't found out...

He knew Huey's powers of observation were astute, and that no sign of nervousness or slip in words would slip his gaze.

But as he sucked in another deep breath, Sham's resolve hardened, and it was with renewed determination that he placed his guard's cap back on.

Even if I've already been discovered –

– I know I'll still continue down this road.

As these thoughts were whirling through Sham's head, on the other side of the door, Huey's expression had once again assumed a perplexing smile.

"Renée Palamades Brinvillier..."

As he whispered the name Sham's report had mentioned, Huey turned his eye to the ceiling, gaze seemingly focused on something far, far above.

Ah, after all this time, her name is still so cumbersome...I now understand why Elmer insisted on giving her different nicknames each year.

The smile that came over Huey's face then was no calculating or smirk, but rather that of an ordinary person, a smile full of natural warmth.

Those memories, of the time before he became immortal –

After all these years, he still considered it the happiest time of his life.

I suppose if I were to call her simply 'Renée,' that would be the simplest solution...

Huey thought, then, of their time together. Because of their difference in age then, it still gave him pause to call her by her first name.

When we meet again, however, we'll be enemies...so I suppose it's best I simply refer to her with the name I remember her by.

Thinking this, Huey quietly murmured this name –

“Professor Palamades.”

Saying this, Huey seemed to drift off into a sort of dream, his mind lost in remembrances of a lost, nostalgic time.

A time before he had stepped foot into this prison –

Before Leeza and Chane had been born –

Before he had become an immortal –

Before he had even met with Maiza and the others –

To that cherished time when he and Elmer were still students, attending classes that often seemed more like magic like alchemy.

And also appearing in that dream – the figure of their alchemy teacher, looking exactly the same as she did now, expression distraught as she stared at yet another broken piece of equipment.

Her glasses may have been from a long bygone era, but her body remained, as it always had and always would, that of a young woman.

The Supporting Character Supports, and...



Chicago
Nebula Headquarters

“Ach-*d!*”

Within the depths of Nebula’s labs, this odd noise was suddenly heard.

“Director, what’s wrong? What was with that weird sound right then?”

Turning from the files he was arranging, a man looked in confusion at the source of the noise.

Red in the face, Renée Palamades Brinvillier – the woman whom he had called “Director” – smiled sheepishly at the men gazing at her.

“Aah...well, I wanted to sneeze but then decided not to, so I ended up doing something weird, huh? Hmm, someone must be talking about me...”

Though thick glasses framed her face and the curves of her body were sadly hidden by her plain lab coat, it was undeniable that the woman now speaking was exquisitely beautiful.

Gazing at his boss’s charming, gentle smile, the man collecting data shook his head, sighing with a tired expression.

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Director – there’s no way anyone’s talking about you. Anyway, you should probably get back to work.”

“How – how mean!”

As always, an easy-going atmosphere filled the lab –

But on the other side of a thick pane of glass, where a special drug was being developed, was a much different picture.

In the center of the room lay a shape, roughly the size of a bear.

The skin peeking out of the figure’s sleeves, however, was soft flesh. Whatever was beneath the cloth, it was undoubtedly a human being.

Whether it was because of anesthesia or sleeping gas, the large youth now lay motionless on his oversize bed, researchers mill around his still body.

Gazing at the test subject through the glass window, Renée was suddenly struck by a thought.

“Oh, that’s right. Yesterday’s explosions were pretty serious, weren’t they?”

“No one died, which is a small mercy, but still...it’s that kid behind it, isn’t it?”

“Because he wants to save his friend here! Oh, that’s so sweet – ah, I think I’m touched.”

“...and because you weren’t paying attention to it, our building and even facilities those unconnected with us have suffered severe losses – what do you think about that, then?”

Though the veins in his forehead were nearly popping out, Renée seemed barely seemed to notice her subordinate’s strain. Absentmindedly, she replied:

“Well, then we should just pretend it has nothing to do with us, and if another bomber comes by, blame it on them! How does that sound?”

“If only! That might be able to deal with the police, but this morning, Chairman Karl called me up to tell me, ‘I don’t care what messes you get up to, but you can’t affect the other departments! Smooth things over with that kid right now!’ The news isn’t a secret – it’s already been out for a long time now!”

“E-eh? How...how does he know about Rail?”

Although these words were anxiously shouted, somehow, they seemed to lack a proper degree of panic. Even as she exclaimed, Renée was already pondering the question of “what should I do next?”

Expression vexed as he watched her, one of the nearby researchers chose now to cut into the conversation of this woman whose actions and attitude completely contradicted each other.

“Um, Director, on that other thing...”

“Other thing? Aah..which other thing?”

“A bit back, weren’t you talking about finding another bomber to pin the blame on? Because that might actually be possible.”

“W-what? What do you mean – are you saying there really is one?”

In response to such an absurd question, what Renée received was an equally absurd answer.

“Yes. Such a person really does exist.”

“Wh-wh-wh-*what?*”

Although Renee herself had first brought up this idea, she looked shocked to have it confirmed.

Seeing his boss's astonishment, the researcher only calmly continued.

"Well, during my last break, I heard one of my friends in general affairs say...just a while ago, the police..."

Just as the gossipy researcher was revealing the information about "Nice" to his superior –

Not too far away, a man specializing in gathering information sat on a soft couch, two women on either side.

However, while one of these women could hardly be called anything than a girl –

The other was the fiancée of a killer.

Nebula Headquarters

Chairman's Office

"Ah, it's best if you all just quietly stay here for a while."

"A thousand thanks, Karl sir."

Hearing the words of the man across from him, the Vice President of the Daily Days, Gustav St. Germain, extended these deep words of thanks.

At the Vice President's respectful tone, the old man across from him – Karl Muybridge, the Chairman of the corporation "Nebula – merely chuckled and waved a hand.

"Come on now, no need to be so formal – we're not working, after all! Besides, things have changed since then."

In contrast to the Vice President's sharp appearance, the Chairman had an air that instantly put people at ease. But despite his unassuming appearance, he was one of the few businessmen in the nation who could be considered "truly successful."

On the sofa across from such a person, two women sat. One, a young girl who sat clutching her camera, seemed unable to stop herself from shaking – while the other, a long-haired woman next to her, wore an unreadable expression as she gazed around with steady eyes.

"Ah, young miss there, with the camera – Carol, is it? There's no need for you to be so nervous; after all, this is the second time we've met. Though last time, you seemed on the verge of throwing up...are you feeling better now?"

“Huh? Oh...um, thank you – thank you for your concern! S-sorry!”

At the inquiry into her health, Carol, the aforementioned photographer, began to tremble violently.

Beside her, the long-haired woman quietly watched Carol’s distress – and as she did, Lua Klein gently smiled.

Amidst smoke and gunfire, Vice-President St. Germain had helped Carol and Lua’s escape from Placido Russo.

Afterwards, they had decided to find a safe hiding place for Lua – but as Carol had uneasily pointed out, all the hotels and train stations were sure to be watched. Consequently, the Vice President had realized something:

“Ah...without a car, we can’t leave Chicago. And so, in that case –”

Hence, the present situation, with Carol sitting on a sofa in the office of Nebula’s Chairman.

Yesterday, when Carol had entered Nebula’s inner quarters, she hadn’t been able to process much of what was happening. But now, staring at Chairman, she was belatedly beginning to understand the current situation – and beginning to regret not escaping from Chicago when she could.

“Oh, another thing – that miss with the lovely hair, did I hear you say that Placido fellow held her hostage? How terrible – I hope you were alright?”

“Karl, sir.”

“Oh, my apologies, miss – I must have been too blunt. But I just can’t understand that man. And you, you’re with his nephew – Ladd, was it? Are you his girlfriend?”

At the Chairman’s mention of her beloved, a quiet surprise seemed to go through Lua as she lifted her gaze toward the other man.

Seeing the subtle change in her expression, the Chairman gently chuckled.

“Oh – that young man’s kind of a celebrity here. When he was just a child, he broke into this office and almost killed me.”

“Oh, that sounds quite terrifying.”

Seeing his companion's unchanged expression, the Chairman scratched his head, smiling wryly as he continued.

"It was indeed! Back then, he also said something else: 'Mister...hearing your breathin', it seems like you won't care whenever you hang. It'd be too boring to kill you, so I'm leaving.' Only when I questioned him, did I discover he'd made a bet with one of his friends, who dared him to come to me... although, really, I think he was just looking to cause trouble for Nebula. But if he wanted to do that, he should have gone to Rude, Beriam, or one of those other fellows with money. Ha ha!"

"Is...is that the kind of thing you should really laugh at? You – you're joking, aren't you, Mr. Chairman?"

Despite her fright, Carol couldn't help commenting on the Chairman's words. At the same time, Lua murmured, "that does sound like him..."

Realizing what she had just said, Carol turned red. Letting go of her camera, she clasped her head in her hands, as if warding off a growing headache.

"Ah, it's no matter – because now, I truly know what type of situation you're in! For now, it's best if you three stay and hide in the staff's living quarters. It shouldn't be for long, though, before things calm down."

"Thank you very much for helping us."

Hearing Lua's quiet thanks, the Chairman beamed widely.

"Miss, there's no need to thank me – if there's anyone you should ask, then it's that evil-looking man next to you. With the promise of priceless information from him, how could I refuse?"

"You said not to speak of business, but it seems like you've struck quite a good deal here."

Hearing the faint mockery in the Vice-President's tone, the Chairman burst into laughter.

"Ha, ha! Well, if you have any other questions, then you can ask this fellow from Security. He used to work for the Runorata family, so he should know about the type of mafia tricks you should guard against."

The Chairman turned his gaze to a nearby pillar, receiving a nod from the black-haired man behind it.

In his right hand, the man held a jar filled with sugar cubes, which he was unceremoniously removing row after row of and placing in his mouth.

Seeing the man expressionlessly chew these sugar cubes, Carol felt strangely disoriented –

After the Chairman's departure left, she turned to Vice-President, calming a little at his composed expression.

"Vice-President , w-what's going on?"

"Ah...Carol, there's something I'd like to check with you."

"W-what kind of thing?"

Seeing Carol's tense expression, the Vice-President narrowed his already sharp eyes, and put forth this question to the frightened girl:

"...do I truly have an evil face?"

Nebula Corporation Corridor

"Greetings, all – I am Rubik, and I'll be in charge of your safety now. Just follow me, and I'll take you to where you spent the night yesterday. If there's anything amiss then please, don't be polite, just ask for it."

Though his words were highly courteous, the man was still incessantly gnawing his sugar cubes as he led Carol and others inside, where Nebula had reserved several rooms especially for its guests.

Although the man's black aura made Carol's skin crawl, it seemed to have an opposite effect on the Vice President.

"Rubik...I remember that name as one of our company's regular customers."

Words said with every sign of calmness...

In fact, it could be said that they were almost a little *too* calm.

With a crack, Rubik bit down on the piece of sugar in his mouth. Continuing ahead, he replied in an unperturbed tone –

"...I don't have any recollection of meeting you before."

"As Vice President, I naturally often wrote down the names of those who frequently came to us."

"...ah, that's right. Until last year, I was often involved in that type of business."

Hearing Rubik's calm reply, St. Germain was spurred to continue with his queries.

“You were involved with various organizations, selling information to both us and enemy organizations...and then, we lost contact with you. What happened?”

“Nothing in particular – I just realized the business had no place for me anymore. With that type of guy there... I had no chance at competing.”

“‘That type of guy?’ What do you mean?”

Unable to contain herself, this question slipped out of Carol’s mouth.

Without turning around, Rubik lightly cleared his throat as he divulged the name of “that guy” –

“Young miss, you’re an employee of the Daily Days – you should already be aware of them.”

“That monstrous group of men, only its members knowing who they are, calling itself ‘Sham.’”

Trans-continental Railway Compartment Interior

Sitting in the car of a train hurtling forward at over sixty miles per hour, Isaac and his new companion were leisurely continuing their talk.

A decidedly suspicious person, the self-described spy who had admitted to previously watching Isaac was now idly chatting about such espionage –

“The first time I saw you...hm, it must have been in New York, when you were throwing money in the streets.”

“Wow, that really takes me back! And Sham, you really were there, huh?”

“Yes, though I’m afraid to say I took some bills as well.”

“No no no *no*, that’s great! It’s fantastic that you helped take them, otherwise Miria and me would have never gotten away from the police!”

Seeing the nostalgic smile on Issac’s face, Sham continued with his reminisces.

“And then a year after that...it was on the *Flying Pussyfoot*, when all those odd events happened.”

“Hold on now, *really*? You were on that train too?! Wow – that trip really was something, wasn’t it? I tried to be brave, so Miria wouldn’t worry, but in the end, all of my efforts still did nothing!”

“...a coward wouldn’t have been able to just wander around that train.”

“Is that so? In that case, Miria must have been very brave, and I was just borrowing some of her strength! Although, come to think of it, Sham, where were you during all of it? In the dining car?”

At this rather natural question, Sham shook his head as he answered.

“No, I was sitting in a first-class compartment.”

“Is that so...woah, you must be really rich, then!”

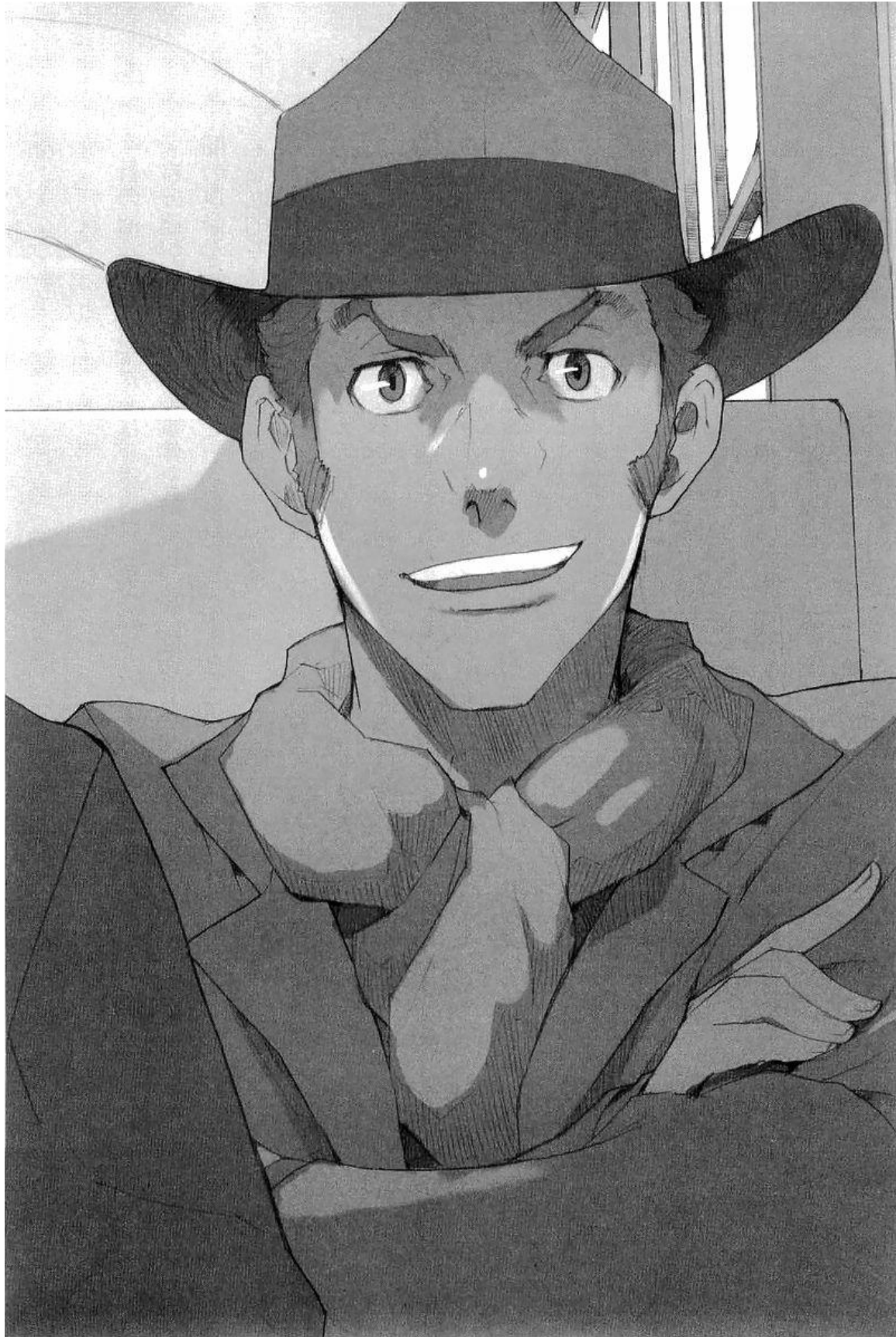
“Ha, not really – the money came from a generous patron of mine.”

Although in the end, I was pushed out by that woman without a ticket...

Instead of mentioning this, however, Sham changed the topic.

“You seemed to get along quite well with Jacuzzi and his gang.”

“Aah ha – well that’s because if you look at it like The Romance of the Three Kingdoms... um... right, then that way, Jacuzzi’s like Alexander the Great!”



“That’s quite a lofty evaluation.”

“Maybe, but it’s *aaaalll* true! He truly is great!”

Although not naturally imposing, Isaac now stood proudly as he proclaimed these words.

In reality, his actions were rather ridiculous, impressing others with little more than the sense of a childhood unbefitting his age.

Sham, however, showed no scorn for Isaac’s actions, only narrowing his eyes slightly at his words.

“Mr. Isaac...you and Mrs. Miria have truly encountered quite a lot.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Truly. Take, for instance, that time at the speakeasy – or if you want, there’s the case of the Mist Wall bombings, too...”

“Really? But weren’t there plenty of other people there, too?”

Seeing the honest wonder in Isaac’s face, Sham found himself speechless.

From what Sham saw of the man he saw in front of him, he truly had no sense of self-awareness.

The number of events the two of them had contributed to, the number of lives they had saved or the many more they had merely disrupted – all of that, Isaac was completely oblivious to.

However, his impact had been wholly unintentional, nothing more than the natural results of accidental event.

In the case of the bar, if those two individuals weren’t there...well, then it would hardly be exaggerating to say that the whole course of the United States would have long been rewritten.

Yet he had not set out to do anything – what he had accomplished had been by sheer coincidence. No... from what Sham could see, he didn’t even *know* how many lives he had changed.

...right, and that’s exactly why he could do it.

As these thoughts quietly went through Sham’s mind, Isaac, still smiling, turned his gaze to the landscape outside.

Going forward at over sixty miles per hour, the steam locomotive hurtled across the country with the speed the speed of an electric car.

Bouncing on his feet as he imagined his reunion with Miria, Isaac cheerfully turned to Sham.

“It’ll be afternoon when the car arrives. Trains are so fast – it’s nothing like walking!”

“...you’ve walked across the continent before?”

“No, I haven’t...I just think that the next time, I might try it! But if I want to really compete with a train, I’d have to pull along the same number of cars...how would that happen? How’d ya think I could do it?”

“I don’t that’s something anyone could do.”

With a slightly dumbfounded smile, Sham gave this answer.

Suddenly, however, his expression shifted as he turned to Isaac with another, sudden question.

“Isaac, sir...do you believe in God, or fate, or a power of that sort?”

“I do!”

That was Isaac’s straightforward answer.

But to Sham’s ears, these words did not sound like those of a faithful Christian.

Before he had time to inquire further, however, Isaac himself was already rushing forward to explain himself –

“This is something I heard on another car, but a man there, he said that this world has over eight million gods! They’re scattered all over the place – pebbles, trees, mountains, everywhere! According to him, even centipedes are hotspots for gods!”

“Is that so.”

He must be talking about the eight millions gods they have in the East. But in all of my knowledge, I’ve never heard centipedes being described as filled with gods before...

“So, no matter how many gods you worship, it’s okay – just be careful, because that’s the same number of gods that’ll be judging you! Why, Miria and me once spent the whole night wondering what we should give as tribute to some pebbles. After debating for hours, we decided that cough medicine would work...”

“Ah, maybe you can tell me about that some other time...”

Feeling that the conversation was veering into strange territory, Sham quickly turned the conversation back to the topic.

“Let’s say...there was a completely hopeless situation, but because of a certain extraordinary encounter everything was resolved satisfactorily ... if such a thing were to really happen, what would you say it was: luck, or fate?”

“Huh? Um, I don’t think I got that all – but everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“It did.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about! That’s great!”

Though rather ridiculous, these words completely natural coming from Isaac’s mouth.

Hearing it, a smile crept onto Sham’s face.

“In that case...let’s think about it this way. Let’s say – and this is just a hypothetical situation, of course – let’s say that there was a man who had the power of a god and could cause these encounters.”

“Huh? Ah...”

“Let’s say it’s the type of power that, while it might not be very good at solving world hunger, could know all sorts of things and push different people to a variety of places...for example, it could help two people who want to see each other, or separate two people and cause to them miss each other. Let’s imagine that the god has this type of power.”

“That’d be fantastic! A god who can create bonds between people...it’s like a lottery wheel that makes people fall in love!”

Although Isaac seemed to have confused his description for that of Cupid, Sham only nodded his head, feeling that there was no need to correct him.

“However, this person is only interested in helping those he likes. Whether or not he uses his powers completely depends on his personal feelings...to what degree, do you think, such a person could be forgiven?”

“Oh, um, you lost me there...why would people need to forgive him?”

At Isaac’s question, Sham took a moment to mull over his answer before replying.

“...let’s use another example, then. Let’s pretend...let’s pretend that you were walking in a forest, and you saw a butterfly caught in a spider’s web. Feeling sorry for it, you free it, and feel satisfied, right? Or something similar to that..”

“And?”

“Hm?”

“What does saving butterflies have to do with anything?”

Do I really have to start explaining things from this level?

Though Isaac’s childish words made Sham smile incredulously, he continued his explanation as calmly as before.

“Well, think about this way – you might be saving the butterfly, but in doing so, you’re also depriving the spider of an important meal. And because of the self-satisfying human who pities the prettier butterfly, then it’s possible the spider might even starve to death.”

“Ah, I see – so the butterfly’s good fortune becomes the spider’s bad luck! I get it now...Miria and me used to go whole days without food, so Mr. Spider’s in a real pinch there!”

“Mr. Spider...ah, of course, you’re right. Smug human self-satisfaction...that’s what it all is.”

“But what does that have to do with saving butterflies?”

“Even if no one saves the butterfly, then a bird’ll come along and eat Mr. Spider...or, actually, the bird might eat the butterfly – bad luck for both him and poor Mr. Spider’s stomach, then! Or a branch could fall down and destroy his web, right? So then, in that case...um – ah, right! In that case, it’s not because the person made the wrong choice, but just plain bad luck!”

...why does he only refer to the spider with “Mister?”

At the same time as this trivial observation passed through his mind, Sham felt his thoughts thrown into confusion by Isaac’s words. Uncertain if these words were profound or naive, Sham felt himself wondering about Miria – if she were here, would Isaac have come to another conclusion? Or would it have simply sounded different?

“That type of thinking is way too simple...”

“R-really? Ah, sorry then – guess I’m just not too good at this!”

“Ah – no, that’s not what I was trying to imply...”

To Sham’s hasty denial, however, all Isaac did was smile and say, “that’s fine, it’s fine!” before continuing.

“Anyways, I guess when it comes to it, even when you take into account things like nature, humans are really like gods – at least when it comes to things like your Mr. Spider and his stomach. But maybe I’ve got this wrong, but, well...if this Mr. Spider tried to eat Miria one day, then I’d wouldn’t care a bit about him going hungry! All I’d care about would be saving her.”

“.....”

– *what a huge jump in logic. Though I suppose it's not wrong...no, it still doesn't feel right.*

“Although – I guess we can't really know exactly how the spider and the butterfly are feeling, huh? They probably have their own ideas about us too – why, if we go off what we're saying, they might see us like a bolt of lightning! What do you think about that?”

“How should I put this...”

Hearing his companion's reply, Sham fell into reflection.

Although he had been raised as a human by Huey, Sham knew full well that he was not one. And although he felt his mind to be the same as those of humans, there was no way to confirm this.

The one thing he was certain of was this: he was not human, merely a single consciousness inhabiting many bodies.

At the same time as he had been talking with Isaac, his many other pairs of feet continued to walk about, each one with their own lives and thoughts, all forming one large, collected memory.

Could such an odd, unnatural existence like that truly be said to comprehend humanity?

Countless questions troubled him, but Sham had no time to worry about them now.

Perhaps, if he was to humanity what the human was to the spider...then perhaps, it *was* possible that he resembled a lightning strike.

And if that was the case –

No matter whether lightning or earthquakes bear ill or good will towards humans, they always cause the same reactions – so if so, how have they really accomplished their point?

As it was, the stone he had pushed forward was already moving.

He had already decided to follow his own road –

However, a doubt still lingered in his heart.

Am I really qualified to decide how to use this power to help or hurt others?

His reason for talking to Isaac then, was because Sham had thought that he might find peace by speaking with someone who had affected so many lives –

But as their conversation went on, he only felt more and more at a loss.

“Oh, so sorry about that – we started out talking about god, didn’t we?”

“Ah...yes, that’s right, we did.”

“Right! So then – sorry, but what exactly was the question...?”

“Well, that is...alright, I’ll state it directly then.”

After all that, Sham decided he might as well try asking what was in his mind.

Having determined to vanquish his doubt once and for all, he now shared his thoughts with Isaac, a man who was today only alive through sheer dumb luck –

“Say that this god became attached to the idea of ‘lasting bonds.’ In order to get these people together, though, would require him to perform some miraculous event. All the while, however, he would have to do it, while keeping the fact that he’s not human from his friends.”

“Huh? He can’t even let his friends know what he is?”

“Because he’s afraid that if they find out, they wouldn’t be grateful – they’d be scared. So scared, that some of them might not even want to be friends with him anymore. In that case...what should he do?”

Sham felt he had put the situation in the simplest terms he could, but he still worried that Isaac would be unable to understand it.

But Isaac, after mulling over it for a moment, merely gave a simple answer.

“So why doesn’t this god just do what he thinks is best?”

“...”

Although Sham had already been half-expecting such an answer, he still couldn’t help but feel it was too simple. However, a feeling of unease still lingered – had Isaac truly understood what he was asking?

“Hey – I can understand how annoying it’d be to worry if people’ll hate you. I mean, each day, I worry how I’d go on if Miria didn’t like me!”

Isaac seemed truly troubled by this, a rare pensiveness appearing on his face

However, this expression only lingered a moment, as Isaac turned back to Sham.

“But, what this god wants is to help people connect with each other, right?”

“Ah? I suppose so.”

“Well then, that still doesn’t stop him from doing that!”

“...?”

Isaac’s sudden words threw Sham into chaos.

In the sudden silence, the only sound that could be heard was the *clunk, clunk, clunk* of the train vibrating beneath their feet.

Although Isaac’s answer seemed rather irrelevant, his next words helped Sham make a little more sense of his words.

“It doesn’t matter if other people hate them, after all, as long as they know what they’re doing is right! Anyways, if they didn’t help, but got found out anyway...that’d be even more awkward, wouldn’t it?”

Hearing Isaac’s childish yet oddly profound words, Sham felt a peace come over him.

“That’s right. In the end, if they did nothing, then things would get neither better nor worse.”

“I still don’t know if I get everything, but that sounds right!”

At Isaac’s unfounded guarantees, Sham couldn’t help but smile wryly.

I feel a little better after that.

Seeking a simple, scatter-brained man like Isaac Dent to ask – perhaps that had been the best choice, after all.

That was the sentiment slowly dawning on Sham now. And with it, he determined to continue talking with Isaac for the rest of the trip.

It doesn’t stop them from helping others...

What an odd way to think of it.

...

Although, come to think of it, I’m not really trying to help them –

Just to see how best I can use them.

Same time
Chicago
An abandoned factory

A somber air enveloped the base of Jacuzzi's gang.

Although it'd been hours since the gang's arrival, the scarred boy who had thrown the bomb still showed no signs of waking up.

And with the police looking for them, there was no way anyone could find out what was happening, about the news. Effectively, they were trapped.

In this kind of atmosphere –

A sudden voice shattered the silence.

“Jacuzzi? Is Jacuzzi here?”

“Huh? Y-yes! I – I'm here –p-please don't hit me!”

Seeing the ashen-face member of his members throttling towards him, Jacuzzi instantly paled. Although the other gang members rarely touched him, he still instinctively flinched at their rough speech.

“Stupid! Who'd want to hit ya? Better be careful I don't!”

“Ah – ah – aaaah!”

“Alright, alright, stop crying! I found 'em!”

“Aaah – huh? F...found what? W-what did you find?”

Face alight with excitement, the boy now talking to Jacuzzi was one of the teenagers who'd originally joined up in New York. Although the events here had little to do with them, whether because out of boredom or worry for Jacuzzi, all those recruits had tagged along to Chicago.

And it was such a person now breathlessly reporting to Jacuzzi –

“Graham!”

“?”

At the mention of Graham's name, Jacuzzi's eyes widened.

Hearing Graham's name, every head within the factory turned, the atmosphere instantly buzzing with anticipation.

“R-really? That’s fantastic! Let’s – let’s meet him right away! Where is he right now?”

Seeing the delight on Jacuzzi’s face, the boy hesitated a moment –

Then nervously continued, speaking quickly to get his news over with.

“Right ahead, there’s a store called *Dolce* – you know it?”

“Um, no...ah, well, I don’t think I’ve been there, but I think I’ve seen it. Is...is he there?”

“It’s a bar, real old-looking..and well, actually, I don’t know why, but...”

As he heard the messenger’s next words, Jacuzzi’s smile froze.

“Graham’s there, fightin’ to the death with a girl in a green dress and a guy who looks like a vampire!”

That same moment

Dolce

And what exactly was the state of the bar?

In a word? *A mess.*

Tables were strewn about, and several chairs were already in pieces.

“Guests...p...please, just listen to me...”

Struggling to keep smiling, the owner of the store continued.

“I’ve always believed, that one day, all people would be able to understand each other.”

Saying these words visibly exhausted the owner, whose voice was already so weak as to be barely men.

Least of all the three figures – two male, one female – currently leaping about his shop.

“It’s true, tomorrow, the sun might not come up. But when it does, then we’ll still have to deal with everything that happened today!”

But even as he spoke, no one even turned a head towards his direction.

Even so, the owner continued speaking.

Speaking, it seemed, less to convince anyone and more to merely keep himself sane...

I hear you, mister, I really do.

As Christopher silently replied to the owner, Sickle's foot came drilling down at him.

At the same time, one of Graham's wrenches came spinning down.

But even if you want me to quit, I don't think these guys are ready to put a stop on the brakes yet.

Even as he rolled away to avoid these attacks, Christopher continued silently thinking.

.....

"Hey, Sickle – how's this? I apologize, and you stop attacking me, alright?"

Standing up, he quickly offered these words. But at the same moment, Sickle began leaping around, as if torn between attacking Graham or Christopher.

"Shut up and just nicely stay still, so I can hit you!"

Body swinging around in a beautiful arc, Sickle's answer made Christopher sigh.

At the same time, however, there was a smile on his face.

Huh...actually, can't think why I agreed with the owner then.

After all, I'm still having fun.

Yeah...fighting like this, knowing you might be dead any second...it's pretty great.

Is this what's it's like to be in front of hell? Because if it is...then I guess this is how I can really touch death.

To let me, if just for a moment, feel like I'm just another natural being.

Ha...isn't that something? Under normal circumstances, it's completely unnatural to kill without eating.

Best comparison would probably be a bunch of monkeys, fighting to see who'll be leader.

As he dodged his comrade's kick, Christopher simultaneously tried to gain an edge over Graham.

With every blow, Graham's wrench sang out notes charged with murderous intent.

Every time the wrench arched over his head, a jolt went through Christopher, the memories of a year past suddenly flooding back.

Though he had started the fight then, he had been easily defeated by the red-haired man.

Every move, every blow of his opponent had been well beyond normal.

That's right...that guy truly was an abnormal existence.

At the same time, he also remembered something else.

Afterwards, some thug whose name he didn't even remember had stuck a knife in his back and almost killed him –

Christopher remembered, at that moment, saying something.

“I don't want to die.”

Although he had tried desperately to forget this memory, in reality, it had been indelibly etched into his mind.

And as this memory resurfaced – Christopher was struck by a startling self-revelation.

As he dodged the impossibly fast arch of the wrench, Christopher found himself thinking –

If he had his usual gun-knife with him, then he would have easily been able to still the wrench-wielding man in front of him.

Forever.

However, he felt no desire to do so.

Even if he did have his gun – would he have been able to so simply put a bullet in this opponent's brain, heart, or stomach?

Jumping back to avoid Sickle's kick, Christopher answered his own question.

No, I wouldn't.

As the significance of this answer sank in, Christopher felt no small amount of surprise.

Ah, so that really is the case.

Obviously, fighting was great –

Even though it's a change in myself...it's still irritating.

After all, it was only when you were close to death that you really felt alive.

It seems like – I really –

Like a child who used to thoughtlessly trample ants one day suddenly feeling an odd but inexplicable aversion to doing so – that was the type of the change that had occurred in him.

I...I really can't kill them anymore.

As a professional killer, he had killed dozens, even hundreds of people.

And in the moment this ironic truth hit him –

Christopher smiled.

Continuing to dodge the deadly silver tool in front of him, Christopher grinned – a wide, cheerful grin, full of impossibly sharp teeth.

This is still fun, isn't it?

The situation had become decidedly more disastrous for him: now that Christopher was unable to kill people, he was the only one at risk of death here. Still, even that couldn't make a dent in his giddy mood.

After all, this is still fun, too!

“Ah, ha...”

Unable to control himself, he laughed.

“Ah – ha ha ha!”

And as he continued swinging his wrench forward, Graham began laughing as well.

He, too, seemed to be feeling similarly giddy.

“...what's so funny?”

Only Sickle remained unmoved, her glare shifting between the two men in front of her. No doubt she was wondering what kind of joke these two were pulling, laughing in the middle of a fight.

Whatever her thoughts, for the first time in minutes, all three of them stood still –

And as they did, a sudden flood of lukewarm liquid poured over them.

“?”

Uncertain of what had just happened, all three began immediately wiping their faces dry.

As they did, they suddenly understand – or rather, were forced to understand – what this liquid was.

From its sharp smell, it was undoubtedly alcohol.

Very strong alcohol, too, from the strength of its taste.

Whirling around, the three of them searched for the source of this sudden flood –

Only to pause at a small figure, looking abnormally calm in boyish clothing.

“Ricardo – what’re you doing?”

At Christopher’s words, Ricardo softly spoke to the fighters.

“I hope you’ve cooled down now, otherwise I may have to light a match and set you all on fire.”

“W-wait a moment now!”

Almost a scream, the boss’s words broke across the tense silence of the store.

A small figure in a suit, Ricardo held a bucket, its wood sodden with alcohol. Next to it, lay several bottles of the store’s strongest liquor – tequila.

But even so...

Gazing at the empty bottles, a thought came to Christopher.

Tequila was strong, sure, but its alcohol concentration was at best 50% – nowhere near the 70% necessary to start a fire.

Did Ricardo know this? After all, *he* had only gained the knowledge of the right conditions for lighting alcohol after many years of experience. Ricardo's knowledge of it, on the other hand, probably only came from seeing street performers drinking vodka and breathing fire.

Under very special circumstances, liquor with less than 70% alcohol could catch fire – but in this situation, it would be hard to know if a spark would even catch.

But if it was as Ricardo said, and the alcohol's fumes did cool their minds and limbs down – at the same time, when it was inhaled or drunk, it burned the lining of the throat and nose. So in the end, didn't these two actions cancel out?

At the time that Christopher was idly musing over these thoughts, Graham seemed to be silently pondering the same thing.

How well did *he* understand the process of setting alcohol ablaze? It was possible, after all, that Graham hadn't even given a thought as to whether or not Ricardo was bluffing, but had also reached the conclusion that, "fighting is pretty fun."

For a moment, Christopher tried to imagine his opponent's thoughts. Despite their brief interaction, he felt he already had a pretty good grasp on how Graham's mind worked.

With Sickle also paused in dignified contemplation, the store was momentarily plunged into silence –

A silence that was abruptly broken by a voice, coming from behind the counter.

"P-please! I beg of you – no more fighting!"

Placing one hand on the alcohol-stained table, the owner lifted his aging body up and, bowing his head to the guests, began his plea.

"Maybe you've some grudge against each other! Maybe you got along once! Maybe there are events so complicated, I couldn't understand them, even if I tried! But – but! Can you please, just please, leave it behind? I might not be a part of feud, but this *is* my shop! And today – today was supposed to be the thirtieth anniversary of its opening! Even though it hasn't made much money, my wife and I still worked hard to get it where it is today! I know all of this has no connection to you, but please...today is...I won't even charge for your food, just stop brawling with each other! At least...at least just eat a little, so that my wife and I can feel we've accomplished something! That's truly, all I want! So, so, I beg you to please stop fighting! I beg of you! I...I beg of you..."

Even as the owner seemed quickly on the verge of tears, his sorrowful tone only gave his words more impact.

Hearing the phrases, “thirtieth anniversary” and “my wife and I,” even those who had not fought, like Sham and the Poet, felt an indescribable sense of guilt.

Gazing at the owner, who was still desperately repeating, “I beg you all! I beg you all!” Christopher turned to Ricardo. With a puzzled expression, he tilted his head and asked:

“Ah – hey Ricardo?”

“What is it?”

“Right then – was I sort of acting like a villain?”

“From your face to your actions – completely. Although, I guess I also wasted his alcohol.”

Saying this, Ricardo looked uncharacteristically embarrassed.

On the other side, Shaft and his alarmed party were slowly creeping towards a stock-still Graham.

“Hey – Boss Graham? This time, you really screwed it. If you wanna fight, you can at least do it outside – can’t you at least think of that?”

“...”

“When it all started, you were the first one to throw a wrench, weren’t you, Graham? And if you’d hit the girl in the green dress, it wouldn’t have been a matter – but going for Master Ricardo’s bodyguard? Always going for that wrench when things happen – at least try to control yourself when you do it, got it?”

Hearing Shaft’s words gradually return to his normal tone, Graham replied, oversize wrench tapping against his shoulder:

“How touching...yes...let us speak on such a touching subject!”

“What?”

“...just then, the owner never once told us to simply ‘get out.’ But why? Was it because he was afraid of us? If that were the case, he could have simply just called the police...but he didn’t. All he did was stand in front of us, a group of horrifically terrifying combatants, and simply ask, ‘please let us serve you!’ Even despite what we had done, he continued to treat us as guests! Now that – wouldn’t you call that a truly touching story?”

“Um, in that case, should you really be the one saying this?”

Even in the face of Sham’s justified criticism, Graham did not quiver.

“Oh, certainly! I have no qualifications to say these words! Who, after all, is most moved by destruction? Me! Did this shop and I have anything against each other? Certainly not! And yet I’ve destroyed its chairs, its walls, and even the day of its anniversary! If I were to search for the essence of self-loathing, how would I find it? That’s right – by looking in a mirror! Oh, how can I ever, ever absolve my crimes...”

Unsure of how long Graham would continue in this vein, Sickle turned to the owner, her expression composed.

“My apologies, sir. I accept full responsibility for all the damages. Whatever you want me to do to atone for it, I will.”

Following this, she walked to the Poet’s side. In a low voice, so that only he could hear, she confessed:

“I truly do regret not controlling myself just then. I think it was because of that that my master refused to teach me the full art of capoeira...”

Seeing that Sickle was clearly angry with herself, the Poet said nothing. No matter how many various arguments he could bring up, she would only continue to suffer silently.

For this reason, he now held his tongue.

He might ramble meaninglessly to create his facade of insanity, but in situations like this one now, the Poet had enough sense to stay silent.

Seeing the three former enemies now calm again, the owner seemed somewhat revitalized.

“I...thank you all very much! Ah...yes, your food is already in the oven!”

His words, however, were merely more fuel on the fire of their guilt. Having expected angry shouts of “get out!,” the gathered throng now fell into an awkward silence.

“...ah, very well.”

Seated by the bar, Ricardo was the one whose quiet voice broke through the silence.

Gazing at Christopher and Graham for several moments, the girl dressed as a boy sighed, then addressed them.

“I didn’t get to ask a moment ago, Chris...but why were you two fighting?”

A simple question, but only all the more important for that –

“Uh.” “Um.”

In response to this question, the two seemed to draw a blank.

Although it was odd to call their recent battle a “fight,” reflecting on it, neither of the two really had any reason to try to kill the other.

“You both worked under the same roof, didn’t you? What reason did you have to go at each other like that?”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right.”

“...then why? You know, this complete lack of self-awareness really is incredible.”

The two desperately racked their brains, trying to recall why they had originally taken opposite sides –

“...right!”

At the same moment, both slapped their knees.

“Because this guy here – he said he was going to protect the bomber kid with the scars!”

Hearing Graham’s answer, Christopher thrust his chest out, straightening to his full height in retort.

“Yeah, and I was! First of all, *I* was fighting to avenge myself! And also, I hear this guy’s going around, breaking the bones of people I consider my family and friends, like Sickle, so of course I had to pay him back!”

“...and also...?”

Hearing these words, which seemed almost tacked onto as an afterthought, the veins stood on Sickle’s face.

“You thought *my* vengeance was something you could carry out...”

Seemingly oblivious to Sickle’s angry tone, Christopher turned around, scratching his head.

“Um – but thinking about it, I guess we didn’t really have any reason to fight right here, and ruin the shop while we were at it. That...um...yeah, I’m kind of rethinking that.”

“Even if you rethink it now, how does that undo any of the damage here?”

Hearing Ricardo’s icy words, Christopher awkwardly turned his face away.

Unfortunately, right on the other side was Sickle, forcing Christopher to dizzyingly pirouette back and forth between the two.

Just as he was turning back and forth, like some comic figure caught in a vortex –

“They” seized the opportunity to rush into the store.

“Graham!”

Out of nowhere, the group of youths rushed in, breaking the awkward tension –

“Ah...huh?”

“Uh...what?”

Seeing the crowd, Graham and Christopher once again simultaneously exclaimed their surprise.

“Jacuzzi? Why are you here?”

“A-ah! Oh, Graham, you’re okay...that’s so great...”

Hearing Graham’s voice, Jacuzzi sighed – and then suddenly stopped short.

Standing in the center of store, was a man who seemed to be a vampire.

Those red eyes, that sharp mouth of teeth – Jacuzzi vividly remembered them all.

Like their leader, the other youths who had entered the store after Jacuzzi stood equally stunned.

Seeing the newcomer trembling as they stared at him, Christopher all but affirmed their fears in his next words:

“Oh hey, it’s been a while, hasn’t it? So long, actually, that I don’t even remember what you’re called anymore...”

With a guileless, wide smile full of sharp teeth, Christopher uttered without malice a phrase full of harsh memories:

“You were at Mist Wall, with that kid called Tim, right?”

And, dreaming –

"Blow it up."

Someone's speaking.

Speaking right into my ears.

"Blow it up."

Again – they said it again.

I know that – you don't need to tell me what I already know.

I want to blow it up – I want to blow it all up. This whole, horrible world – I want to blow all of it up completely.

"No, that's not it, is it?"

Huh?

"You don't want to blow it all up. You can't, because you weren't born to do that."

What're they saying?

"When it comes to explosives, it's only in the bright moment of explosion that the world can realize its own existence. This moment of realization may be a human one, but even if men did not exist, neither would gunpowder. Thus, it is the explosive that obeys the man. If it had been dolphins who had created gunpowder, then it would be attuned to their needs, to carry their goals. However, dolphins do not know what to do with gunpowder. You are the same."

...I don't understand.

"No, you should be able to understand it. Physically, you might be only around twelve, but when it comes to your ability to read and understand language, you're quite older. Or, to phrase it differently, you can understand what I just said, you just can't accept it. That's all."

...if I were older, would I be able to accept them?

"It's quite difficult to define who an adult is, but they, at the least, would be pondering whether or not to accept this."

Who would know how to understand that!

"Well, it is uncertain whether someone like you can accept this conclusion. After all, you aren't human – just an artificial being, created by me. Ah, well – since it seems like we've gotten to another question of "what is a human," I suppose we'll leave it until we next meet. If you survive until then, at least."

As if I would want to. What kind of a joke are you pulling?

I still don't know what you're saying, but I do know one thing.

Right now, I know you're laughing at me.

Everything you've been saying, it's been an insult.

Ah – that's right. That voice...yes, it is it.

I've heard it somewhere, I know...yes, that's right! I can't see his face, but it's him –

Huey! Huey Laforet...!

A scream – but as it faded, the voice seemed to have disappeared.

...

Oh, it seems like I was just dreaming.

Right, dreaming. That bastard Huey...he wasn't really saying all that.

It was Rhythm...their researchers were the ones who said that.

However, the person I was speaking to certainly sounded like Huey. That's right...I'm certain of it.

.....

.....

Ugh, how awful.

I'm almost afraid to open my eyes.

After all, when I do, it'll still be the same irritating world I see.

What should I do?

...that's right, a group of weird people wanted to take away Sham and me so we blew them up only we were there too, and then there was another group of people who tried to stop us, soooo boom boom boom boom BOOM! ...ah ha, hahahahaha, it's just too hard to remember, to think –

What should I do? What should I do?

In the end, is blowing things up all I can do?

So everything – just blow it all blow it all all up!

But if that's so...then it'd probably be best if I just blew myself up.

After all, if that happens, won't everything disappear?

...but at least...

At least before that happens, let me save Frank...or at least me blow that bastard Huey and that glasses freak into tiny, tiny pieces...

...back to the question now.

Right now, what should I do?

The Abandoned Factory

Hearting thumping, Rail opened his eyes to a scene that was both oddly familiar yet strange.

In the past, when he'd first gone with Frank, they would frequently duck from the rain in such abandoned buildings.

But even in those days, living day by day – even then, they hadn't been able to escape Huey's grasp.

No matter where they hid, Sham and Hilton would mysteriously always manage to find them and pass on their instructions.

Slowly recalling the details of those days, Rail tried to assess his current situation.

From the looks of it, the police hadn't gotten him.

But neither was it a hospital, so he couldn't have collapsed there, either.

It was a place, instead, that was entirely differently.

Where was it? As he turned around, trying to assess his situation a little –

“Oh! You're awake!”

A decidedly female voice spoke next to him.

Turning towards it, Rail saw a blonde girl in a red dress peering at him.

“Are you alright?”

Taking out a towel, she began gently wiping his face. Rail had hardly had time to ponder who she was when he saw the others, groups of youths clustered in threes and twos behind her.

“Huh, it’s true – he really *is* awake.”

“‘S he okay?”

“Your scars sure are *big* – your whole body like that?”

“Hey, ya can’t ask someone who just hit their head that!”

“Your head – it doesn’t hurt, does it?” “Hyaha – hyaha?”

...who were these people?

As the sudden crowd of people milled around him, Rail’s view of the area was suddenly blocked. He felt a start of anger in his anger – or perhaps, just unease.

Whether they were concerned inquiries or sarcastic remarks, what they were saying was mere noise to Rail.

It doesn’t matter what’s going on...

Already set on blowing the place up, Rail reached into his pocket – and froze as he found nothing there.

–?

The bombs were gone!

Egg-shaped and extremely dangerous, these weapons were Rail’s first line of self-defense and, as of now, the fiery tools of his self-destruction –

And now not one was there.

He quickly glanced at the pouch he normally wore around his waist, only to find it, too, gone.

“....ah...”

Mouth open in shock, Rail felt a sweat break out over his skin.

His bombs had been stolen.

They’d been right by his side – had one of these hooligans taken them? No...at this point, that wasn’t even a pertinent question.

Rail understood the situation clearly.

With neither fight nor flight available, gone, too, was suicide.

The only weapon he had had to destroy the world – with his bombs gone, Rail felt his heart begin to race again as he gazed at the faces around him.

Surrounding him was a group of young adults, many of whom were probably still teenagers. There were more men than women in it, but Rail still couldn't place *what* type of group it was, exactly. If he was insistent on placing them, then he would say they were probably a group of juvenile delinquents.

That, however, was not the air given off by the girl in red dress, who had so gently taken care of Rail earlier – a girl who, gazing at him, now spoke.

“Are you alright? Don't be scared – we just called a doctor over, and he said you're okay. Just a couple of small bruises and burns – a little rest and they'll be better, so don't worry!”

Hearing her words, which seemed even more childish than her youthful appearance, Rail found himself at a loss as to how to answer.

He didn't know who these people were. They didn't *seem* like the black-clothed figures who had taken Sham away...no, it'd probably be more accurate to conclude that they weren't the white-coated figures he'd met yesterday. If they had been, Rail was almost certain he'd have been tied to a bed by now.

“Miss, you...who are you all?”

With difficult, he managed to ask these words.

“I'm Miria! Feel free to ask me anything – don't worry, we're all friends here, after all!”

Although her smile was completely free of guile, it only made Rail more anxious. After all, that horrendous female scientist had had the same smile, completely untainted by guilt.

“..wh-what happened to me? Why...why am I...and in this place...?”

Trying to remember, Rail found himself uncertain exactly had happened before he lost consciousness. He remembered facing the men in black with Sham, almost scared to hysteria, and then blowing something up –

However, it was not any of the crowding figures who ultimately answered his question, but rather a silhouetted figure suddenly appearing among them.

“Because your bomb exploded. For several reasons, we couldn’t bring you to the police, so we had no choice but to bring you here.”

Speaking these polite words was a woman wearing an eye patch, her body covered with scars.

Although different from Rail’s neat suture scars, her body was still covered with innumerable jagged marks. Coupled with the scars near her eye patch, it was quite a startling effect.

Is she like me?

But the moment after this thought occurred to him, it instantly went out of his mind.

Because in her right hand, the woman was holding his bag of bombs.

“...! Give it back!”

Panicked, Rail stood up – only for intense pain to rocket through him, forcing him to his knees.

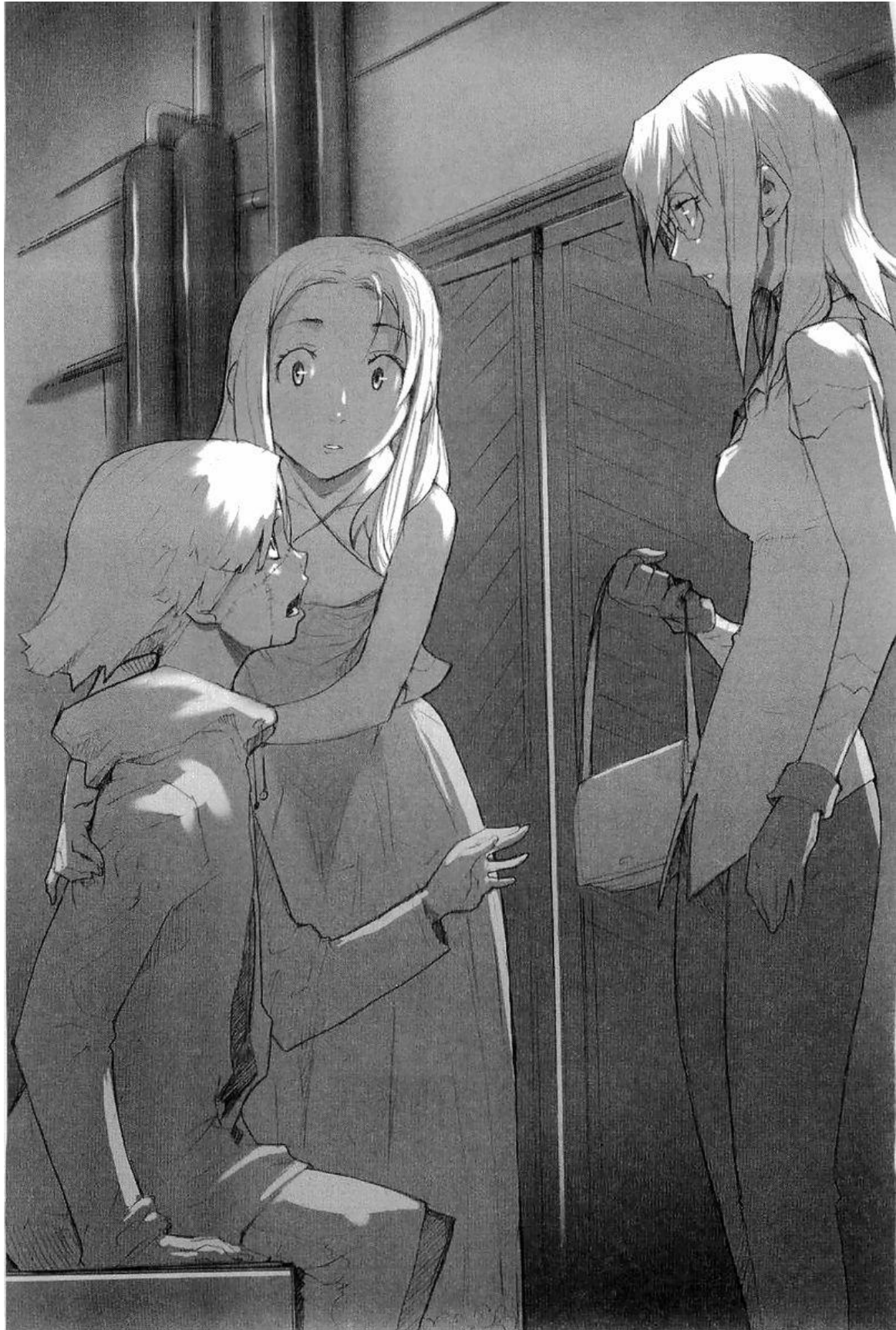
“Hey, don’t do that – you can barely move!”

As the girl called Miria rushed to hold him up, Rail ignored her, only focusing on the scarred woman as he repeated his words.

“Please, I’m begging you...give it back.”

“...I’m very sorry for having taken your bag without asking you, but you know, it did seem odd to me, leaving these with an unconscious child.”

“You know these are dangerous explosives, right...”



She knows.

I have to get of her...

Rail's mind was made. Perhaps sensing the animosity towards her, Nice sighed, shaking her head as she calmed replied.

"If you'll just answer one of my questions, I'll return these to you. Where do you get these bombs?"

"...?"

What is she saying? Do they – do they want bombs, too?

Would these people even know how to properly use them? Although...even if they did want these bombs, they could hardly buy them anywhere.

Even realizing this, Rail's reply still came reluctantly.

"...I originally bought them from a filmmaker in Hollywood, but the other modifications are mine."

Although it had been Huey who had taught him how to build bombs, the hatred Rail felt at his name made it impossible to mention this detail.

Oddly enough, the atmosphere of the place suddenly changed at Rail's words –

"Huh, it *was* it." "Hey, whaddya talkin' about?" "Shouldn't the person talkin' be Nice here?" "Not really." "Hyaha." "Hey, wait, think about this: that place that got blown up, does this mean *we're* kind of responsible for it?" "No – it's the people who made the gunpowder in the first place." "Or the people who wanted to sell it in Hollywood in the first place!" "Shut *up* – or do you wanna be responsible for this?" "If we keeping on goin' like this, wouldn't it be Jacuzzi, who wanted to buy the stuff in the first place?" "No, the person who wanted to buy the gunpowder was Nice." "Well, *that's* for sure." "So no one's really at fault." "In the end, it was just an accident." "Right, a terrible, *terrible* accident." "Hyaha."

As the debate finished, one of the teenagers cleared his throat and turned to Rail.

"Right, so if that's how things are – no one's responsible! Great, huh?"

"...wh-what do you mean?"

"Ah, well – you're the reason for that explosion yesterday, right? And then the one that nearly got Jacuzzi...but we decided! You ain't to blame for any of this..."

“...what are you even *talking* about?”

The boy's words had completely lost Rail.

Reminded of talks with Christopher or the Poet, Rail couldn't help but blurt these blunt words out.

However, it was Miria, not the boy, who finally answered.

“Ah – well, I don't get it much either, but it looks like someone's forgiven you! I don't know who it is, but they're probably someone you'd like, right?”

“.....”

This explanation was equally difficult to understand.

No matter how you looked at it, it was even stranger than a church forgiving a confessed murderer.

What kind of people *were* these guys?

But despite these thoughts, Miria's words nonetheless reminded Rail of someone.=

Christopher...

If anyone fit Miria's description, then it would be Christopher who, after Rail had bombed someplace, would have simply greeted him with a cheerful smile. However, since Chris wore the same smile while killing people, it was hard to tell with him.

“What..what are you going to do with me?”

All murderous intent subdued, Rail's shoulders slumped as he quietly asked this question.

Looking at the situation closely – bombs taken, and with only his physical strength to defend against this group of enemies – there was no way he could win.

Right now, the best course was to learn about his enemies, and then later try to take back his bombs.

Just as this plan formed in Rail's mind, the woman holding them tossed the bag of bombs towards him...

“Wha –?”

As Rail frantically caught the bag full of bombs, the one-eyed woman smiled as she spoke.

“Well, since you already answered the question, I guess I have to give these back.”

Seeing her playful smile, Rail frantically opened his bag, only to find that all his bombs were there, lying over his clothes. If any were gone, they were probably the ones he had used earlier.

“.....”

However, the sight of his weapons intact only made Rail feel odder, hand stopping as he pawed through the bag. It would have been so easy to destroy all of them, after all...

Had they tinkered with these bombs, then?

With no way to trust the intentions of these people, he would have to use these bombs carefully, then.

Thinking about this, Rail swallowed. Suddenly, his chest and back hurt terribly – a pain caused, most likely, by the earlier explosion he’d caused.

“...you do know that these are bombs, right?”

“I do! And wonderfully made ones, too.”

...wonderfully made?

Despite the oddness of this answer, Rail continued his questions.

“And you think it’s a good idea to let a child take them?”

Having recovered a little, Rail’s words were now tinged with irony.

However, this sarcasm seemed not to affect Nice, who continued in the same tone as before –

“Ah, well, definitely not – but it’s not like I really have room to talk.”

“?”

Seeing Rail tilt his head in confusion, the one-eyed woman quietly explained.

As she answered, she seemed to be almost dreamily remembering something.

When she spoke, her words were outwardly barely significant –

But inside Rail’s heart, they felt like a force dragging him back from self-imposed exile.

“After all, when I was your age...I blew up quite a few lakes and buildings, too.”

Dolce

“What is going on? Why are there even more strange people here?”

Wiping the liquor off her face with a handkerchief, Sickle glanced at the new arrivals.

Other than the tattooed boy, these group of unruly youths also included Mexican members, oddly-dressed Asian members, and various other seemingly unrelated persons. Right now, were engaged in noisy conversation.

Originally, Sickle had thought the tattooed youth was their leader – but given how quickly he had started crying and his general air of timidity, she decided to suspend that judgment.

Even more jarringly, these people seemed to not only know the blue-suited man, but had apparently also brushed shoulders with Christopher before.

But from the terrified expression on the tattooed youth’s face, this interaction seems to hardly have been a pleasant one.

“Chris, do you know these people?”

Hearing Sickle’s question, a strange smile came onto the red-eyed man’s face.

“Ah – well, not really, they were more Tim’s friends – no, or was it more like part of Huey’s experiments?”

“...then why would they be so frightened at seeing you?”

“Well, last time we met, Adele and me nearly killed them.”

“...I understand now.”

Letting out a sigh, Sickle cracked her neck, then turned to Graham.

“Well, what is it? Do we want to continue this fight?”

Hands still twirling his wrench, Graham considered this question for a moment before calmly answering.

“Of course I want to fight. But since it’s this shop’s thirtieth anniversary, how about we leave it for now?”

“That works with me, but I want to know one thing about your employers first. Those people in white lab coats – where are they?”

Having recovered her calm, Sickle now straightforwardly asked this question.

Graham, however, seemed bewildered at her words –

“People in white lab coats?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“?”

Seeing Graham’s uncomprehending expression, the veins in Sickle’s face seemed to rise once again. Noting this, Shaft quickly ran over to Graham to offer him help –

“Hey! She’s talking about that day, about those people who started firing like mad near the Russo house!”

“Ah ha! So you’re talking about *them*! ...uh hey, so who were they anyways?”

“According to the head of the Russo family, they do health check-ups and other reports for Master Placido Russo...but since the family’s been scattered, there’s no way to know for sure.”

Although these words were spoken to Graham, they were more intended for Sickle’s benefit. Sensing his intentions, Sickle seemed to finally believe that Graham and his companions knew nothing about the matter.

Graham considered the puzzle of the men in white coats for a while, but it wasn’t long before he seemed to give up. Smacking his wrench in his hand, he turned with a smile to Sickle.

“Also – as long as your names are still on the Wanted List, we’ve still got business with you.”

As Graham gleefully grinned at the idea of further fighting, the tension in the shop momentarily rose – only for a quiet yet commanding voice to quickly calm the atmosphere.

“Concerning that list...”

As Graham and the others turned towards the voice, they saw that Ricardo had at some point already returned to Christopher’s side.

And although the two had never interacted much, Ricardo was still the grandchild of Graham’s employer.

Seeing that Graham seemed ready to listen, Ricardo quietly continued.

“Since we haven’t been able to contact Grandfather, I would think that list is no longer valid.”

“.....”

“And since no one knows where Placido and the rest are...well, I think Grandfather is probably already dead.”

Words said in a crisp voice –

Hearing Ricardo talking so matter-of-factly about the potential death of a relative, everyone else felt inexpressibly awkward.

“...hey, Shaft...”

“What is it?”

“Right now, in this situation, what exactly would be the best thing to say?”

“Nothing, of cou –”

Despite Sham’s correct advice, Graham had already continued.

“A sorrowful story? A happy story? Or a happy yet sorrowful story of a gentle first love? Ah, my sweet sister once told me, ‘you, you might as well have been rescued from a riverbank!’ And to that, I asked, ‘so does mean I can marry you, sis?’ – but oh! All my sister did was take my father’s wrench, and slam it down on me! In the same moment as the sparks flew off the steel, they flew in my heart – just as I immediately realized that I had been rejected. Less than a moment, that was how long it took for these feelings to occur! But deciding that we must have really been related, I was content to give up on her. However, if such a feeling can be so easily given up, can it hardly be called love!?”

“Ugh, how weird...”

Pressing his palm against his face, Shaft sighed loudly.

“Anyways, it’s better if you don’t fight now – the police have enough work for them as it is!”

“The police...ah, of course...now would be a proper time to tell the time of that encounter I had with the police...”

“What kind of person *are* you? You’re even more talkative than usual – what, did the wine go to your brain, or something? Boss Graham? Hey, your entire face is red, Graham! Boss Graham?”

“As it is, searching for my family’s organization would help us get some data, at least ... continuing to fight here would bring us no benefit, only trouble.”

Completely ignoring Shaft and Graham's conversation, Ricardo continued speaking.

"Well, I'd feel great if I got to fight with that guy again!"

"Chris, I wasn't considering you."

"W-what? Ricardo, we're friends, and to not even consider me...wait, does that mean that you already think of the two of us as one?"

Completely ignoring Christopher's jest, Ricardo calmly turned to Sickle and the others.

"I'm not entirely certain, but it seems as though we've been swept into a troublesome tide of events. If they continue like this, we will surely all end up destroyed. As a result, we ought to exchange our reports here."

"...agreed. Even forgetting the man in blue, I still need to ask Chris about the status of Rail and the others."

Reining in her murderous intent, Sickle nodded in agreement.

Next to her, the Poet's expression suddenly turned solemn. But Sickle, thinking that he was pondering what piece of ridiculousness to say next, only paid him no mind as she turned back to the conversation.

On the other side, the now calmed gang of youths crowded around Graham –

"Ah...um, Graham, wh-what exactly were you guys talking about..."

"Ah ha, Jacuzzi...huh, well, I've sobered up...ah! Right, of course – sorry for ignoring you right then. To ask why you would come here – what a crime! I must think of the words to make up for it!"

Oh, this is going to take a while.

Just as Jacuzzi had readied himself to hear Graham's long and rambling speech –

Graham only continued spinning his wrench, neck turning as he followed it.

As his eyes stopped on the store owner, Graham turned to Jacuzzi and said, in a dignified voice:

"Ah...before that, can I ask you for something, Jacuzzi?"

"Huh?"

Mood seeming unnaturally low, Graham's face were covered by his hair as he spoke, only his words showing his regret –

“Um, well...could you guys help me fix this place up?”

Completely forgotten in the noisiness of the youths, the Poet stood quietly thinking to himself.

So it seems the number of eccentrics has increased again...

To think that that tattooed boy has been searching for Graham for so long ...this meeting must have been no accident, then.

No matter how fierce the fighting was, could all these people have really gathered this quickly in the same place?

It seems odd...

We still don't have information on Huey's experiments, and yet...it seems, at least for now, that situation has calmed.

Why is this?

It feels as though someone is behind a curtain, manipulating the events in their favor...but why I do feel this?

This unnaturalness...it feels like...like the work of Sham or Hilton.

Arriving at this conclusion, the Poet tranquilly shook his head.

...then are we Alice, falling into someone else's hands?

In that case...just who would be the White Rabbit?

Gazing around the suddenly crowded shop, the Poet whispered, nearly inaudibly –

“Just *who* is being betrayed here?”

Interlude Four: The Daughter Worships Her Father, and...

Alcatraz Prison

Cafeteria

“Alright, now how we gonna out of here?”

“...”

At Ladd’s cheerfully whispered question, however, the noodles slowly slid out of Firo’s mouth.

One evening had passed since Firo had gouged out Huey’s eye.

In that time, one of Sham’s vessels had told them:

“I’m taking you off this island – I can’t let Huey have any more contact with you.”

But in the morning, they had been merely sent back to their separate cells.

In the cell next to Firo, the Asian vessel called Dragon had told him that Huey’s eye had already been transported out of the prison.

But because Ladd’s cell had been nowhere near them, he hadn’t heard any of this –

Until lunchtime, when the two met once again in the cafeteria.

Physically, the cafeteria was a blank, bare space.

But compared to the rest of prison, it was practically heaven, with the scent of hot soup filling the room with a warm mood.

“Lemme tell you somethin’ Firo. Right now, I’m not a brat with a new toy – no, I’m the king of ’em all! I got a new bug that it’ll be *sooo* fun to crush. And if I step on it, what kind of color’ll it be? – that’s how I’ve been feeling, and boy, I barely got a wink of sleep ’cause of it.”

“Why are you sharing this now, when people are eating...”

Even as the baby-faced youth expressed his disgust, he continued silently shoveling food into his mouth.

Although it had been several days since Firo and Ladd had eaten together, one thing made this meal decidedly different: Isaac was not there. Before, it’d been said that Isaac was supposed to be released together, but Firo worried whether that had happened safely.

He had a inkling suspicion that Huey, or the person who had wanted Huey's eye, had already gotten to Isaac.

And anyways, would Victor even let him go that easily anyway...

Due to unexpected events in New York, there was no way for Isaac to fulfill Victor's demands. And right now, Firo had way to guess or know about what had happened. At present, he could only wait and worry about Huey's next move.

Seeing Firo seem to sigh, Ladd grinned conspiratorially at him.

"Hey, don't sigh at me, Firo. I'm gonna say it a million times – sighing doesn't do nothing! Just makes you *bored*, and boredom's like poison to me."

"If you try enough, boredom can be pretty nice, too."

"Huh – well, when I was twelve, my friends and I used to fool around all the time, just killin' time. Hell, one time, I even snuck into this place called Nebula and tried to kill the chairman there!"

"...wait, when you say Nebula, do you mean *the* Nebula?"

Although Firo had been so far tuning out Ladd's words, this word made him pause.

The corporate giant Nebula – a name not one person in the United States did not know.

Even for those like Firo, who lived in the underworld of the Mafia, it was a name still synonymous with the American dream.

Ladd, however, didn't seem to think much of the outrageousness of what he had said. Face calm, he continued:

"Ha, yeah – I kinda had a bet with a friend, y'know. Told him, then, "if some guy gets on my nerves, I'll end him!" And he said, "then what about strutting bastard sitting in that skyscraper? You'd dare to kill him too?" So yeah, I went there."

"...but I've never heard about their chairman being killed in the news."

"Getting in was no problem, but the chairman was just so *boring*...killing *him*woulda been no fun at all. It was like, no matter when he died, it wouldn't even matter...so I just quietly walk away..."

Seeming to have lost his interest in the topic, Ladd's words trailed off.

"Oh, my apologies for cutting into your chat."

With these words, Dragon sat down next to Firo.

Although a friendly smile was on the Asian man's face, Firo said nothing.

Something flickered over Ladd's face, but Dragon ignored him as he continued.

"I'll give you a word of advice to you now."

"Advice?"

"We're not going to bother you anymore. Right now, we don't want to find any more trouble."

Touching the still-fresh wounds on his face, Sham glanced at Ladd's face.

For a moment, Firo's heart pounded with the fear that Ladd would suddenly strike him. However, Ladd seemed to have something else on his mind, and only continued eating as he silently listened to Dragon.

"Huey, however, is another matter...no, that's not right. It's *Leeza* who's worrying."

"....."

"Putting it bluntly, that child's not normal."

...is this guy really saying this?

Firo couldn't help but roll his eyes at this.

Right, as if you can speak...

Of course, it was impossible to describe a young girl living in prison as anything but 'abnormal.' However, compared to Sham's existence, that was practically nothing—at least, that was how Firo felt.

Laughing quietly, Dragon continued.

"You'll understand soon. Oh, but since you're an immortal, I guess you can't be killed...so worry instead about being killed over and over again."

"....."

"That child...she's a strange one. She thinks her father is the entire world. Just as you regard Isaac, the Martillo family, and New York City as your world...for her, all that's contained in one person, Huey Laforet."

"What are you trying to say?"

Finishing the last of his spaghetti, Firo asked this. Dragon, however, only smiled at the question.

“Putting it another way, you and I have taken away part of her world. If the eye taken had belonged to...let’s say, Isaac...what would you do then?”

“.....”

This question didn’t even merit thought.

However, Firo had only seen Leeza when she was comatose. He felt he had heard her name before, but unable to recall the memory, he pushed it away.

“For a girl like that, who considers her father a god...how then, do you think she would consider someone who stole from him?”

With each word, Dragon seemed to be deliberately making Firo even more uncomfortable.

However, his words were abruptly cut short by Ladd.

“...I think I’ve heard about something like this before.”

“Hmm?”

“When you were talkin’, I kept on thinking she seemed like someone...”

Recollecting, Ladd’s face scrunched for a moment—then, finding what he had searched for, his eyes lit up.

“This girl – she the sister of a gal called Chane?”

“...hahah! Ahaha ha haha *ha!* Yes...you’re absolutely correct, it’s just like you said!”

“*Wha –?*”

Chane....Chane...

Firo felt he had heard that name somewhere. Racking his mind, he searched for it –

Suddenly, the image of his childhood friend flashed through his mind.

Huh?

So then...when I saw that guy the other time, that mute girl who was always at his side...

Suddenly, a shock went through Firo’s body.

They really are alike.

At the time, he had thought she was Claire's girlfriend, since they seemed so fond of each other. As a result, he'd regarded her approvingly. Now, however, he couldn't help but see how much she resembled Huey Laforet.

"Wait a minute—I wanna ask about this Chane girl..."

Just as Firo was about to ask for more details, the bell signaling the end of mealtime rang.

Damn...oh, well. His room's right next to mine anyways – I'll ask him another time.

Remembering this, Firo swallowed his question for the time being.

Ladd's reaction, however, was different. As Dragon began walking away with his tableware, he leaned over –

"Hey, you still haven't given me an answer to last night's question."

"Last night?"

"I'm talking about Lua."

Ladd's smile was forced, but hearing his words, Dragon's smile was similarly stiff.

"Ah, well...I have some rather odd news."

The air around Ladd froze for a moment – but only a moment.

"She's escaped."

Smiling bitterly as he shook his head, Dragon added, almost superfluously –

"And Placido Russo...well, he seems to be dead."

The same moment

Lower levels

Special Cell

"...how...?"

In the cavernous cell, echoed a young girl's scream.

In the innocent sound, one seemed to hear all of misfortune's despair, doubt, anger, and anxiety in one cry.

"How could it...how could it happen...?"

“Leeza, what is it?”

Perched calmly on his chair, Huey observed as the girl leapt from the bed.

“It appears you’ve just had a nightmare.”

In Huey’s hands, was a copy of a newspaper curiously entitled, “The Daily Days.” Mostly likely brought in by Sham. Currently, its front page was being perused with interest by Huey.

“Da...Daddy...”

Although the words were filled with love, they did not mask the young girl’s despair.

Instead, her expression became only more downcast. Eyes filling with tears, she shook her head and cried –

“I...I...I can’t, I can’t – *aaaahhhhhhh* –”

“Quiet down, Leeza. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Sensing his daughter’s unusual distress, Huey folded his newspaper away and slowly stepped over to her. Gently reaching his arms around her slender shoulders, he pulled her into a hug.

“I’m here – don’t worry.”

At these unprecedented words, Leeza’s face paled – and with a voice that still teetered on weeping, she said with difficulty –

“Daddy....daddy...I, I – the Mes that are in Chicago – they’ve been taken to some place!”

Huey took a moment to consider Leeza’s report.

The distraught girl had curled onto a ball on the bed, but he seemed content to let his daughter stay quiet for a moment.

Like Sham, the consciousness in Leeza dubbed “Hilton” possessed a number of bodies throughout the country. Properly speaking, it wasn’t Leeza’s consciousness, but rather a water that encapsulated her memories and experiences – but seeming no value in distinguishing between the two, Huey simply raised his daughter as Leeza Laforet.

Now, however, a mysterious, black-clad group seemed to be taking Leeza’s vessels in Chicago.

This seems to be Professor Palamades’s doing, then...

Just as the bespectacled face of his former teacher appeared in Huey's mind, footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Sham's silhouette loomed in the doorway.

Not standing on formality, Sham unlocked the door and walked in –

“Master Huey, we have a report.”

These words were given with the utmost calm.

“What is it? Does Rail want you to pass on another message for me to go die?”

Thinking of the message a rebellious Rail had given him shortly before, Huey smiled faintly.

“No – concerning that, I can't find Rail anywhere now. After the last bombings...the situation in Chicago has forced me to make this special report.”

“And that report is?”

“My vessel in Chicago – it's been taken by some unknown people.”

Although his news was the same as Leeza's, it was given with the utmost coolness.

“Sham too?”

Hearing Sham's emotionless words, Leeza involuntarily lifted her head from the bed.

Because Leeza despised Rail, when news came of his plan to bomb Chicago, she had handed all responsibility over to Sham. Their mutual disappearances, then, could not have been connected to what they were doing in the Chicago.

“Well, if that's so...it seems we ought to start considering operations in Chicago more seriously.”

There's no doubt Renee's involved in this...

But the question is...concerning Sham and Hilton – how did she learn of them?

As far as it was known, only Huey and the other researches at *Rhythm* were aware of the existence of beings like Sham and Hilton, consciousness who could occupy multiple bodies.

For Renee to have known about this—had this information come from some source even he, Huey, did not know about.

Or...

As the possibilities flew through his mind, Huey smiled faintly.

“Sham, I have an order for you. I want you to follow plan 23, just as we’ve discussed before. When Victor and the others in New York receive or hear of this news, incapacitate them; make sure they can’t move.”

“Affirmative.”

Hearing Sham’s automatic answer, Huey paused a moment before issuing his next words.

“Before you do, though, please tell him, ‘I apologize things had to end this way. I deeply regret having to do this, Victor.’”

“Affirmative.”

“Also.. ah, yes. Tell him, ‘I’m sorry to inconvenience you this way...but I can’t you interfering in my affairs with Nebula. So for now, I have to stop your actions from progressing further. He ought to understand, then.’”

Envisioning Victor’s helpless gaze, Huey couldn’t help but chuckle softly.

“Although, even if he does understand it, I doubt he’ll be able to accept it...”

“But then again, I doubt that’s there any way he could.”

Even as she heard her father’s words to Sham –

Leeza’s mind was already far away.

Now, she had been fully plunged into her own world, where it was impossible to tell where dark ended and light began.

How?

How could everything change like this?

Why does Daddy have to figure it out now?

Daddy’s so talented.

Daddy’s so perfect.

Daddy’s so much better than any, any other daddy in the world...

It's so weird.

These past few days...something has changed...changed from how it was supposed to be.

Where? Where did it go wrong?

Just a while ago...just a while ago, everything was fine...

Did it start when Daddy's eyes was taken?

When that Ladd guy beat me up?

When that Graham guy beat us in Chicago?

Before, everything was going so well...

Right now, Daddy and I can't do anything, can't go anywhere...

.....

It's him.

That guy.

It's all his fault.

Ever since he got onto this island, everything's been going wrong.

That guy – everything on this island's felt wrong since he arrived.

It's because of him that everything's been poisoned.

It's because of him that Daddy doesn't know what to do.

It's because of something he must have told Ladd that I was defeated.

He might have even been the one who broke Ladd's lock.

And then, the most most unforgivable part of it –

He hurt Daddy.

He removed Daddy's left eye.

My daddy who belongs to me – my daddy whose eyes are only on me – those eyes that were only on me, that I only have eyes for –

That guy has taken, ruined, spit on all that.

That guy – he defied Daddy.

That guy – he insulted Daddy.

That guy – he stepped on Daddy's kindness.

That guy – he rejected Daddy.

That guy – he rejected my world.

Destroyed my world, hurt my Daddy!

So then so then so then then then...

I have to fix it all.

Daddy said that there's no need to go after him...

But I think, even if some things aren't necessary, you still have to do them.

Like this. This, now, is what I've decided to do.

It's not enough to take my world back.

I'm going to make him regret all this.

I'm going to kill everyone important to him.

And I'm going to make sure that every wail, every cry—I'm going make sure he hears them all.

Firo Prochainezo.

This guy – I won't forgive him.

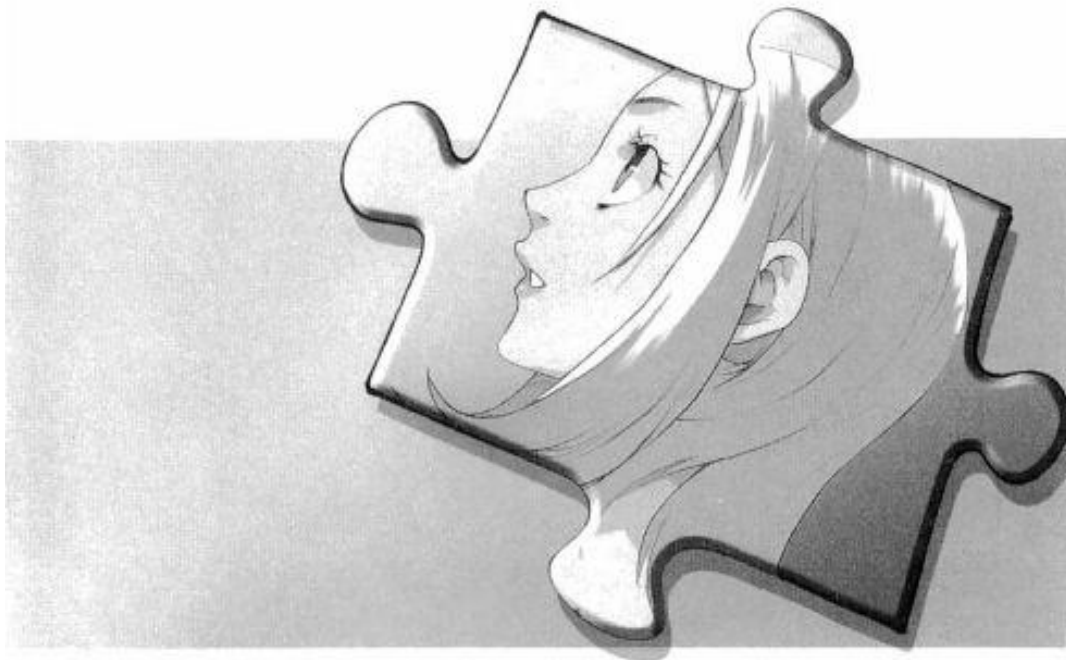
Never, ever, ever.

I won't stop! Not until I make his life living hell!

Peter Pan and Alice Tempt Each Other, and...



第五章
ピーターパンとアリスは惑わし合う



Friday
Late evening
Chicago
The abandoned factory

Over the Chicago skyline, the sun was setting.

As the fiery glow lit up the empty factory, Nice's voice echoed in the silence..

"...and just when I thought I was done *for*—the fuse lit, right in the nick of time—"

"....."

"Ah, and then—oh! Once, when Jacuzzi was scared some mafia corpses might still get up, I blew them up, And his reaction to *that*..."

Although Rail had stayed unerringly silent, Nice was cheerful as she continued relating past explosions.

Even as he listened to these abnormal escapades, Rail's mind was far away.

I have to blow it up.

But—what is 'it'?

For a long time now, thoughts of "*I have to blow it up*" had been circling obsessively in Rail's mind. At the same time, however, he had no idea what it was he wanted to blow up.

Initially, his goal had been to bomb things to save Frank. Right now however, Rail also knew that this goal and what he wanted were two wholly different matters.

*Blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up blow it up
boom boom boom boom boom boom boom boom—light it up light it up light it up already,
smash it up already smash it already smash it up until everything around me is bloody, smash it
up smash it up smash it up smash it up smash it up smash it up already already—rip it to pieces
so many awful good pieces so many awful good awful boom boom boom boom boom—blow it
up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up—*

At the same time, Rail fought to suppress these impulses.

*No no no no no! If I do that now, wouldn't it be just playing into Huey's hands? I like bombs, but
I won't be his instrument—I'm not his tool! I have my own goals—I won't just blow things up
just for him...*

Amidst these roiling thoughts, Rail briefly glanced at Nice.

This person...so this was the explosives genius he had heard so much about.

At first, Rail had hardly been able to believe it. But when Nice had started talking about gunpowder and bombs, he had found himself astonished—

What was most astonishing, though, was the loving way she talked about explosives. In the middle of a story, she occasionally would stop, taking a moment to revel in her joy. Although odd, there was no falsity in her manner, leading Rail to conclude that the two of them were completely different “craftsmen.”

It's too late, though.

If I'd met her before this...I probably would have been delighted.

Maybe...maybe then, I could have befriended her.

Maybe then, I could chatted with them like this...

...maybe then, we could have been friends.

But now...now, I feel nothing.

Because she's a human.

She's nothing like me.

....no.

I'm nothing like her.

...what am I, then? Not an human, and not an immortal, either.

Without my bombs, I can't do anything. I'm not strong, like Frank...and I'm not like Christopher, who can just laugh it off.

Even if I want to go crazy, there's no way I can do it.

However, right now, I...I guess I've had something wrong with me, from the start.

Right now, all that filled Rail's mind was the desire for destruction. At some point, it had become a throbbing ache, lodging itself deep into his heart.

Other than Miria and Nice, the only people Rail saw seemed fairly unassuming.

There had been more people later, but that was before someone had come shouting, “hey, we need more people—c'mon and help!”

At that, the majority of the group had left, filing off in twos and threes.

With his explosives back, Rail could have easily blown the remaining people up and escaped. But in the atmosphere now, he had realized it was wholly unnecessary—if he had said he wanted to go at anytime, they would have simply let him.

“Ah, that’s right...if you have any problems, please feel free to share them. We’re all friends here, so there’s no way we could just ignore you...”

Hearing Nice’s sudden words, Rail turned his head away.

“...don’t poke into my business.”

“Well, that’s exactly what our leader loves to do, so I guess he’s rubbed off on me.”

Seeing the warm smile on Nice’s scarred face, Rail only further felt the distance between them.

Perhaps if they had met before, he would have gladly opened his heart to this fellow craftsman and her sincere friends.

Now, however, it didn’t even cross Rail’s mind.

Blow it up—those three words repeated themselves in his mind, suddenly making him recall something.

(It’s just...I’d like to find someone who isn’t completely rotten yet, and help them fix you.)

(That way...you’d be able to live like a human.)

Thinking of Christopher’s words, Rail quietly shook his head.

It’s not possible. I’m already past help, Christopher.

Though the others might have been bombers, Rail realized that Nice, Miria, and the others were likely still “people who weren’t completely rotten.”

However...however, Christopher, they can’t do anything to help me.

These people who “aren’t yet rotten” ...they can’t make me feel anything anymore.

So I, so I...

Other than blowing everything up, I have no other options. Chris...

If I’m already rotten, then...then...

Would you still...would you still be willing to save me?

Please, Chris...

Please...

None of this Rail said out loud, all of it locked up in his heart.

But suddenly—

The outside world once again disturbed the quiet of his thoughts.

“Ah!”

Miria’s scream suddenly echoed throughout the factory.

...?

Uncertain what had happened, the remaining gang members whirled towards her—

“Good evening.”

On her right and left, two men gripped Miria’s arms.

“...! Hey! What are you doing? Let go of me! Why, you...let—me—go!”

As Miria continued to struggle, the men calmly swept their pistols across the watching faces.

“Please, don’t move...hm. There were supposed to be more of you. Well, no matter—those of you who are here, don’t make any sudden moves.”

These are the same people who took Sham!

Although not dressed in black, their actions immediately called back memories of the day’s earlier events. As these memories flooded Rail’s mind, a cold sweat broke out on his back.

“Alright, everyone please just stay in their places.”

Gun still in hand, the man calmly scanned the room—

Suddenly, his gaze fell on Rail and Nice.

“Found them...the one with scars.”

“Huh...? But there are two of them? Which one is it?”

Although completely different, two badly scarred faces were indeed staring at them.

Gun pressed to Miria's temple, the two men whispered for a while before slowly turning back to Nice.

"No matter—other than the bomber, we still need someone to tell us what happened before and after. The two of you, please come with us."

"...and you are?"

"We can answer your questions afterwards. Right now, however, we have to ask you to obey our orders, or else risk this young lady's life."

Rather than being commandingly strict, the man's voice was perfectly calm—and all the more terrifying for it, since it was perfectly possible to imagine him wordlessly killing Miria.

"Everyone...go! Don't...don't worry about me...!"

Despite Miria's words, Nice obeyed, slowly raising her hands.

But by her side, Rail was already reaching into his bag.

Ah..using a hostage, then?

It's probably me or Nice they came for...

More likely me.

But it really is sad...

Because even if I blow them up...

Then I'd even up blowing up everyone else here, too.

Having seemed to finally find an excuse to obey his heart's command of "blow it up," Rail almost cheerfully reached for a bomb.

And at that moment—

A sharp sting pricked Rail's neck.

"...?"

Immediately afterwards, a crippling pain shot through him—

A pain worse many times worse than any he had ever felt before.

This...

Even the pain he had experienced at *Rhythm*, at the hands of Huey and his researchers...even those didn't compared.

That needle...it must have been...must have been...poi....son...

Even as he felt his consciousness drifting away, Rail slumped to the ground, a deep sleep falling over him.

Seeing three men immediately come to scoop up Rail's prone body, Nice gasped.

"When did you...?"

Slowly lifting Rail, the three men calmly continued talking.

"Take the girl first."

Nodding, the man clamped a hand over Miria's mouth as he led her out of the factory.

"Let me go! Let go of me! Save...save me, Isaac! Save—gurgh..."

As Miria's voice choked off, Nice glared at the men holding Rail.

"...she has nothing to do with this! I'll come with you peacefully, but you have to let her go!"

"...and the moment we lower our guns, you won't blow us up? Don't worry—it'll all be fine. Once it's over, we'll let you go."

Saying this, the man popped something into his mouth—

A small, white piece of sugar.

Nebula Corporation

Interior

"Huh...?"

Contemplating the artwork in the corridor outside guest room, the Vice President's eyes were caught by a group exiting the elevator.

At first glance, the chilly men seemed to be lawyers, or members of a similar profession.

Hats shading their eyes and impressive physiques visible under their suits, they gave off an alert, predatory air—the look, simply put, of serious members of a corporation.

Seeing a figure in their midst, however, Gustave's sharp eyes narrowed. Quietly, he murmured to himself—

“He...why would he be here?”

For a moment, the Vice President of the Daily Days stood there, watching the men at the other end of the corridor.

“Ah...”

Finally, he returned to his guest room, intending to use the telephone inside.

As a result, he missed it.

In the moment that his door closed—

Rubik, still crunching his sugar, came down the corridor.

And on his back, he carried someone the Vice President had recently met—

A young boy, his body covered with scars.

Dolce

“How happy...what a happy story this is.”

Using his wrench to replace the wallpaper, Graham continued softly talking to himself.

“Isaac, Isaac...that happy lover so often mentioned by Jacuzzi and the others, now returning from jail and arriving here tomorrow...and for that, *she* has especially come to welcome him back! What a beautiful feeling! Two lovers, torn apart by the law, and yet its fetters have no power over them...a love so pure nothing can damage it...yes, wonderful, how wonderful! And because it has no form, there's no way I can dismantle it! Yes! Perfect! Such a thing—can it exist in this world? What does it matter! I'll answer that! I believe in this love between all people! And whoever dares to doubt that, know that I'll dislocate all their joints!”

“You know, Boss, if you really *did* believe in this love, you might try treating people better.” Sham's complaints, however, seemed to have no effect on Graham, who continued his repairs in high spirits.

A little away, Jacuzzi and his gang were also busy bustling around the store.

Having only recently arrived, several of these youths were complaining even as they help Jacuzzi lift a table—

“Hey c’mon, why d’we have to help too...”

“There’s no other way—the sooner we finish, the sooner we can go with Graham back to New York!”

Despite the reluctance in his voice, Jacuzzi was vigorously helping in the clean-up efforts.

Though he had already worked for hours, his eyes showed no sign of annoyance. Possibly, he had heard the owner talking earlier about the ruined thirtieth anniversary and had felt sorry for him.

“That’s right...that kid finally woke up, right?”

“Uh-huh, not too long ‘fore you called us over. Not talking a whole lot right now, but with the way Miria and Nice are cozying up, it won’t be long before the kid starts talking.”

“Ah...”

Hearing Jacuzzi’s unenthusiastic response, the others turned to him with smirks.

“Hey now—you ain’t jealous of a *kid*, are ya?”

“Of—of course not! I—I—I would never think that!”

Looking like someone whose secret had been exposed, Jacuzzi’s face flushed bright red.

“Oh, you’re thinkin’ that *kid*, better not take my Nice...” “Jacuzzi, tsk, *tsk*.”

“How emotional.” “Yeah, what a *sissy*.” “Yeah, and after we get Isaac tomorrow and get home, everything’ll be okay, right?” “Hyaha!”

As the others continued smirking and teasing him as usual, Jacuzzi’s expression turned several shades gloomier as he glanced away, looking at the other workers nearby—

Among whom was a man with red eyes and rows of sharp, shark-like teeth.

The “vampire” who had almost killed them the last time they met—Christopher Shouldered.

Thinking back, Jacuzzi also found himself dwelling on what Tim had told him. That’s right—Tim had told him they’d clashed with Graham before.

Was that why Jacuzzi had just muddled along? And because he’d forgotten, look at the chaos that had resulted...it all just made him want to cry even more.

Thinking of this, Jacuzzi took a deep breath and glanced again at Christopher. Right now, the odd man was cheerfully talking to a young child with golden hair. But while he was all cheerfulness, the child's expression was one of solemn detachment.

I keep on feeling...that's he's somehow changed from last time...

Not that this did anything to change his frightening appearance.

But while Jacuzzi had expected disaster, now he only found the former combatants dutifully working at their jobs.

Well, I don't know why, but he's stopped fighting with Graham at least. Tim should be able to clear this all up later.

Heart at ease with this, Jacuzzi turned back to helping clean a mess he had played no part in making.

A good thing, then, that he didn't know what had just happened at the factory—

“W-what? The telephone's already fixed, but...but none of us touched it.”

“Oh, don't be so paranoid! Look, as long as we speak clearly, they'll understand and help us fix things up. Besides, what reason would anyone have to cut the line?”

“...I suppose...”

“Obviously, it had to be something on the company's side—but since it's already fixed, there's no use in worrying over it anymore.”

Overhearing the owner and his wife talking, the Poet kept silent.

So the telephone was disconnected a while ago...but was that really by accident?

If someone had planned all this...then to make sure it would smoothly, wouldn't they have taken every measure to prevent anyone from calling the police?

If so...then who, and when did they do it? And when would they have fixed it?

But no one's left this store...could they have someone outside as well?

“Poet, what is it? You haven't said a word all this time...it's kind of unsettling.”

Watching the Poet silently carry on cleaning, Sickle's question was cautious, unsure.

“...such contradictory words must come from a distant time and place, resplendent with the song of flocks of birds. In the early days of God's creation, an amber-eyed girl created such conflict.

And that man, forgetting his own fate, created an entirely different world! As if to say, I, too, am the same as our divine creator!”

“...all the times I told you to be quiet, and now you come out with things like this...well, at least you were quiet for a little while.”

Suppressing the urge to kick her companion, Sickle continued talking.

“If what Chris said was true, then Frank was taken by those white coats. If Rail’s set on rescuing him, then there’s a chance they’ll take Rail, too...”

Gnawing her lip, Sickle’s expression suddenly became angry again.

“But Sham, Hilton, or Leeza aren’t here. And with no instructions on the way, there’s no way to know what to do.”

Was it the men in white that she was angry at? Or was it rather herself, now powerless in this situation? The Poet thought it was probably the latter, but he nonetheless kept these thoughts to himself as he continued musing.

As it is, if someone wanted us gathered here together, then what for? To blow up the store and get rid of us all?

No...if that’s all they wanted, they could have acted long before now. If so...then they must have come to the store to...

...create a ceasefire between us?

...no, it can’t be.

When Sickle, Christopher, and the man in blue workwear had finally stopped fighting, the Poet had given an involuntary sigh of relief.

Slowly smiling, he had felt a sense of gratitude towards the child who had dumped them with tequila.

It was the type of thing that felt odd, but even now, the Poet couldn’t put his finger on it—

Right then, a young boy burst into the shop.

“Jacuzzi! Is Jacuzzi here?”

At the sound of this shout, all eyes turned towards him.

It was one of the youths who had stayed behind with Nice at the factory. Recognizing his companion, Jacuzzi’s breathing hitched in fear as he turned to him—

“W-what is it?”

“It’s not good, not good—shit, it’s not good!”

Seeing the pale face of the breathless boy, everyone immediately recognized that this was no trivial matter. Temporarily calmed, the shop’s atmosphere was suddenly tense again.

“Nice and the others...Nice, Miria, and that kid...”

“W-w-what is it? Did...did they start fighting?”

Miria wasn’t much of a problem, but if Nice and the young bomber started fighting, it was possible the whole street would burn. Already envisioning the chaos, Jacuzzi began trembling with the helpless urge to cry.

However, just as his imagination conjured up these images—

“The three of them...they’ve been...they’ve been kidnapped by a bunch of men in suits!”

The next moment—

The store was chaos.

Hearing that their friends had been taken, the unruly youths gasped in shock.

Cries of confusion, “why?” and “how could that be?” rippled through the crowd.

These, however, weren’t the response of someone unable to comprehend why their companion had been taken—

But rather the words of someone whose plan had suddenly gone awry.

And it was these responses that did not escape the Poet’s notice.

One of these people was Graham’s companion, the man called Sham.

Another one belonged to Jacuzzi’s gang, the same boy who had called the other members over.

And the last one—

Their response was most surprising.

The figure who had formerly been calm before, his manner even cooler than Sickle’s, only now showed emotion, seeming visibly shocked at the news.

The child who had brought Christopher to this store—

Ricardo Russo, Placido Russo's grandchild.

Transnational railroad Car Interior

"How..."

A car speeding towards Chicago.

Sitting across from Isaac, Sham wore an expression of dumbfounded shock.

"Huh? Sham, what is it?"

"Ah—no, it's nothing."

"Really? Well, that's a relief then!"

Unable to sleep from excitement, Isaac gazed out the windows of the car. Seeing something shadowy flying in the dim light, he jumped up and, like a child, cried—

"Woah, Sham, look! It's so dark, but would you look at that! Those birds are still flying!"

"...I've heard that a type of bird, called the Pacific swift, can sleep while still flying..."

"Really?! Wow—that's amazing!"

Even as he obliging gazed at the birds, which flew even faster than the train, Sham was lost deep in thought.

How...

How could I not know...

They've taken Miria, Nice, and Rail...?

This wasn't in my data...

A slow, uncertain fear spread throughout his "network." At that moment, all across the country, hundreds of vessels broke out in a thin sheen of sweat.

Alcatraz Solitary Cell

“So then, Chane.....”

“Huh? Hey, what is it?”

Unable to ask his question before, Firo now hoped to inquire more fully about “Chane.”

Halfway through Dragon’s explanation, however, the adjacent cell suddenly feel silent, alarming Firo.

“Ah, no...it’s nothing...I’m sorry, I have to sleep now.”

“...? Hey, did something happen somewhere?”

“...don’t worry about it. After this, I won’t touch your friends—I promise you that.”

“...sure, okay. But don’t think that means I’ll just forgive you like that...don’t forget that.”

In response, however, there was nothing but silence.

Chicago

Nebula, lower floors

B6, R&D room—Pharmaceutical Department

“...”

“Oh no, what is it?”

Seeing a researcher suddenly freeze mid-step, Renee worriedly gazed at him.

“Ah—nothing, my head just hurt for a second.”

“Oh—were you up late? Even if you’re still an incomplete immortal, you can still have problems with your circulation. So *beeee* careful!”

Hearing Renee talk as though lecturing a class, all the researchers wryly smiled.

Posing as a researcher, Sham took care to make his tone no different from usual. Otherwise, he could arose suspicions.

Although outwardly scatter-brained, Renee’s uncanny intuition made her as dangerous as Huey.

Even as he processed the current situation, Sham was already readying to modif his plans accordingly. Now, however, there was the vessel in front of him to focus on.

“Of course, Miss Renee.”

These words came from a corner of the room, where a man sat on the chair.

A man with no outstanding features, who could have passed for any worker on the street—

“Ah, Sham, what it is?”

With complete casualness, Renee had correctly identified this man as a vessel of Sham.

I can't use the researcher now...I have to be more careful.

With this renewed alertness, Sham used the office worker's body to caustically reply.

“I have some news, but I don't know how useful it would be.”

“Oh, of course it'd be useful! After all, it's only because you betrayed Huey that I was able to capture that wonderful specimen, Frank, and all of Miss Hilton's vessels!”

“To make sure Huey doesn't suspect anything, I told him I was captured as well...”

Even as he laughed derisively, Sham's mind was already on other matters.

In the minds of hundreds upon hundreds of vessels across the country, a single thought reigned—how to regroup after this.

Sham and Hilton.

Through years of research, alchemy had created these two expansive “consciousnesses.”

With Sham in charge of males and Hilton females, they had created a wide network of vessels.

For this plan to be possible, it had been necessary to betray Huey.

With all of Hilton's vessels under the strict control of Huey and Rhythm, she had been unable to independently spread her consciousness's “water.”

Such a restriction could have been easily placed on Sham as well—however, when the right circumstances had arose, he had seized the opportunity to force Rhythm's researchers to drink his water and become part of him.

The rest had been simple.

By carefully increasing his “water,” Sham had been able to increase his number of vessels beyond Huey's knowledge. In the end, he had taken five times the number of bodies that Huey had known about.

After that, he had snuck a vessel to Renee's side.

Although Renee's accomplices had the vague nagging that they had been infiltrated, when it came to the details of the matter, neither she nor Huey knew anything. When one of Rhythm's researchers had suggested he invade Renee's side, Huey had objected on the grounds that Sham could still be used by her.

But as someone who had already transgressed, these protests meant nothing to Sham.

After that, he had carelessly continued as before, steadily increasing his number of vessels.

Having decided to betray Huey, Sham sold many of his secrets to Renee.

The location of Nebula, the notes of one of Huey's researchers, the identity of Sham and Hilton's avatars—all this he had told them.

Renee and Nebula may not have completely trusted him, but even so, they continued to rely on his reports.

As a result, before the experiment, wanted signs for Lamia had been spread throughout the city, and Hilton's bodies other than Leeza removed from the city.

After that, he'd pretended to be taken to let Rail believe Sham and Hilton had both been seized—but even Sham couldn't have predicted that Rail would react as crazily as he did.

Nonetheless, the plan would have to progress.

Even before today, Sham had been planning for several outcomes. Through talking with Isaac, he'd begun to slowly accept the current situation. Even as his plan fell apart, he was salvaging what pieces he could—

But why had they taken Rail, Nice, and Miria as well?

Logically, everything should have been in his hands.

But Sham's overconfidence had led him to make a mistake. Back then, he should have just stayed at the abandoned factory.

Within Jacuzzi's gang, however, he had only one vessel.

And with that vessel employed in directing Jacuzzi to the bar where Graham was, there had been no reason to stay at the factory.

Still, I could have left someone to watch them...

Yet even as Sham fretted over these matters, his individual vessels were reacting to their individual situations, making decisions and calculations as they saw fit.

Compared to ordinary humans, Sham could be described as truly omnipotent.

However, even as Sham's control increased, so did the number of threats.

Despite his many preparations, unexpected disasters still struck. Whether these could be considered the work of man or nature, Sham couldn't say.

Even if he managed to control all of mankind, they would still occur.

But that kind of world—a world where everyone was ruled by one consciousness—didn't appeal to him. Consequently, Sham felt no need to increasing his number of vessels.

At least, for now.

As a result, he was now scanning his vessels, seeing what information they could give.

Thousands of bodies, all simultaneously searching for the reason behind the current predicament. In a later time, it would be like typing a word into a search engine.

...

Suddenly, he found it.

An uncertain, but promising piece of news.

How...

That guy...how...how could he be involved in this...

Currently, it was just a hypothesis, with no way to verify or disprove it.

The person Sham had detected was currently in a highly protected place, as closely-watched as Nebula's top floor or United States Senate. Even if he made him drink his water and captured his consciousness, the vessel's usefulness would have been caged in by the environment around him. Alcatraz prison was such a place, where it had taken him great lengths and long months to sneak just a few vessels inside—vessels which were once again readying to move.

Even if he were to seize the mind of the president, he felt that he would have immediately been seen through by someone and dismissed on the spot. Such an intuition had come from his experience of possessing thousands of bodies—and by for intents, it was probably correct.

Confronting Huey was a similar situation.

To even imagine deceiving Huey was normally an impossible task. To get to where he was now, he had had to perform countless secret tasks, face unmoved even while performing the most horrific deeds.

To fly into a panic over every setback would have been as good as doing nothing at all.

And so across the thousands of bodies he controlled, Sham forced his vessels to suppress their panic and appear calm.

Because he knew—right now, all he could do was follow his instincts.

Dolce

After Jacuzzi and the others hurried out, the store calmed considerably.

With the majority of the work already done, the only people now left were members of the original three groups. With a cry of, “I’ll leave the rest to you!” Graham had gone with Jacuzzi and his gang, leaving his companions and an exasperated Sham to finish the repairs.

What had taken place, however, were not so much repairs as a small-scale renovation. Though its essence was unchanged, the once-tarnished store now shone with a new completeness.

What had begun as a disaster was quickly turning into some kind of lucky miracle. The morning’s catastrophic events had served, it seemed, only to make what happened next all the more dazzling.

“C’mon, we’re all tired. You’ve been waiting long enough—let’s eat!”

With a welcoming smile, the old man brought out several large platters, from which the rich smell of thick spices and rich meat wafted.

For a group of weary workers, it was a smell that was practically irresistible.

With the others reaching out to grab food, Christopher crammed a rib into his mouth.

As sharp teeth bit down, juices dripped down his chin, rich with the aroma of pork and sauces.

“Woah...this is fantastic!”

With this rare piece of praise, Christopher fell silent, busy sampling the rest of the dishes.

“He’s right!”

“Woah, fantastic!”

As they filled their own plates with food from the trays, Sham and the others proffered their own words of praise.

Observing the scene, Ricardo kept silent—

Then, seeing the man in the hat looking at her, silently reached for some food as well.

“Anyways—so what’re you planning to do next?”

Having already devoured one rib, Christopher now turned to Sickle, who was daintily eating her portion.

Putting down her table knife, Sickle calmly answered.

“In our current situation, without any further instructions from Sham, Hilton, or Leeza...I was going to search for Frank on my own. That way, there would be a chance I would find Rail as well...and you? What are you planning to do about this disaster?”

“Ah—I haven’t decided, yet. Like you said, I’ll still adjusting from New York, and since Sham and the others haven’t contacted me, Ricardo’s been my only friend and master. And Ricardo’s been a pretty good friend—who knows, I might even like the kid more than Master Huey now.”

“You...! Damn...well, I guess that is just like you...but shouldn’t be a little more concerned about Rail? Maybe if you’d just tied him downbefore, then things wouldn’t have gotten like this...”

Hearing the clear reprimand, Christopher gently shook his head.

“...if you’d asked me a year ago, I might have done just that.”

“?”

As Christopher failed to elaborate, Sickle raised her eyebrows.

Pondering what he had meant, her eyes gaze slowly moved to Ricardo.

Immediately understanding her intent, Ricardo pondered for a moment before answering.

“Right now...I want to confirm something. Tomorrow, can we meet someplace and talk about it then?”

From the lack of response this proposal received, it was clear that Sickle and her companions were in a truly precarious situation.

In the awkward silence that followed, the only sound came from Graham’s companions, who continued to eat with gusto.

And in the midst of this noise, the happy hum of people enjoying delicious food—

After setting a place and time to meet again, Ricardo and Christopher were the first to leave the bar.

Before they'd left, the owner had thanked them deeply, which only increased their guilt. In this mood, the two silently drove towards their lodgings for that night.

"...Chris, your companions are surprisingly normal."

"Really? Ha—well, of course you'd think that. The Poet's been keeping weirdly quiet all day, so you haven't had a chance to see how weird we can *be*."

"...in any case, he can't be odder than you."

"Huh? Hey, should I be offended?"

Keeping one eye on the road, Christopher laughed in reply. Inside the small space of the car, the atmosphere between the two seemed unchanged. And so it was with his usual tone of lightness that Christopher spoke again—

"Hey, Ricardo, can I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

"You—which one are you?"

"?"

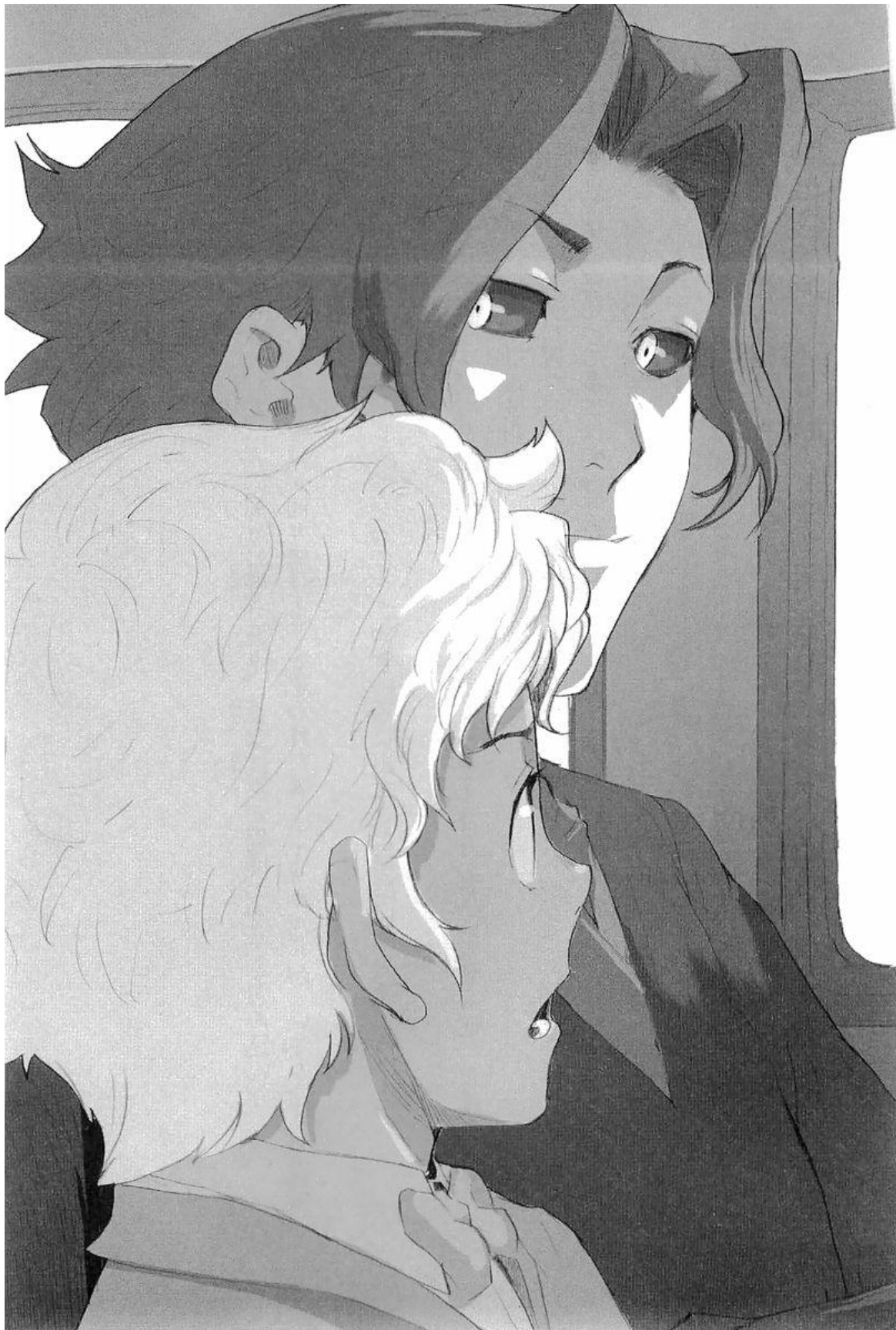
At Chris's odd question, Ricardo raised her eyebrows.

"What are you asking?"

"Well, nothing, it's just—"

As her friend slowly stepped on the accelerator, his red eyes sparkling, Ricardo felt a chill come over her.

"Let me guess—are you Sham, or are you Hilton?"



For a moment, Ricardo was at a loss for words.

In the sudden silence, the only sound in the car was the rumbling of the engine.

But just as it seemed this silence would continue forever, Ricardo's expression smoothed.

"What are you talking about? Sham and Hilton—are those the two liaisons you mentioned earlier, the ones who supervise your group?"

"Hmm...?"

Hearing such an obvious bluff, Christopher hesitated, wondering how to reply. Finally, however, he just smiled and continued.

"Hey, hey, no need to deny it—not like I'm angry or anything. Whether you're Sham or Hilton, it doesn't change that you're my friend."

"...you're saying this, but what proof do you have?"

"Lots, actually...hm, let's see, when did I first start to suspect? Right!—it was when we discovered Rail."

Thinking back to the events of several days past, Christopher's smile became more thoughtful.

"Me, I think I've got pretty good ears. But then...I haven't noticed a thing, and you tell me you've heard an explosion. The first time, okay. The second time, though, I started paying attention. Hearing another explosion...all those buildings and noise, and you still knew just where and exactly how far away each one was."

"..."

"The other time was when you were driving and saved me. Driving's not that simple—you couldn't have driven that smoothly without knowing how to stop and start pretty well."

"..."

As Christopher elaborated on his suspicions, Ricardo listened in silence.

"Hmm, but it was today that confirmed it."

"...did it now."

A resigned, helpless response.

Almost as if acknowledging the truth of Christopher's words.

“Course it did! For everything to just happen by accident—well, the chances of it are practically zero. In a city like Chicago, for all us to just meet up in an old bar...and while we were fighting, for no one come through the door? With all the shades drawn, too?”

“But, Jacuzzi Splot and his gang knew where we were.”

“See, and there you go again...”

“How could I know Jacuzzi’s full name, when I’d never heard it before?”

As Ricardo guessed his next words, Christopher laughed with delight.

“Ahahahahaha! You got it!”

Sharp teeth glinting as he laughed, Christopher stepped violently on the accelerator.

And as car’s speed increased, Christopher’s smile widened too...

In a calmer voice, he addressed another question to the person he had known as Ricardo.

“The thing I don’t get is, if you really were Sham or Hilton, you should have told me or Hilton Huey’s instructions already...”

Expression turning serious, Christopher continued.

“In that case...”

“...”

“Have you betrayed Huey?”

Once again, nothing but the engine could be heard.

Recovering from her shock, Ricardo responded with her usual cool.

“If I had, would you kill me?”

A dangerous question—one which, if asked wrongly, could end with her head as the price.

Christopher, however, only smiled and shook his head.

“A year ago...if you’d asked me then, I would have immediately said, “yeah, and what of it?”
Ha, those were the days...”

Reminiscing, a faint smile appeared on his face.

Slowly gazing down, Ricardo replied in her usual tone of dignity.

“When tomorrow’s affairs are over, I’ll explain more clearly.”

Though clearly reluctant to speak at the moment, Ricardo’s next words were determined.

“...so until then, please trust me.”

“Sure, no prob.”

At Ricardo’s request, Christopher’s intimidating face broke into a wide smile. A child’s smile, the innocence bubbling up from underneath a monstrous face.

With some difficulty, he continued—

“I just wanted to say—that I consider you a friend, Ricardo. But for a guy who goes around making friends, it doesn’t sound that serious.”

“...”

“And I want to say this seriously, as seriously as I can.”

“Huh?”

“Ricardo, no matter where your loyalties lie...right now, you’re my friend. So...so if you betray me, I’ll just smile and forgive you for it. Like I said before, friendship’s a serious thing.”

“So if it’ll make you feel better...you can use me however you want.”

The night passed.

In Chicago, the first rays of dawn shone.

The same light that had, several hours before, shone over Alcatraz.

Painting the ground in shimmering panoply of colors, the blazing light told all that morning had arrived.

However-

For “them,” this change was especially anticipated.

For these people, these morning meant that their affairs would soon be coming to a completion.

And for others, as the morning came, so too did new possibilities.

Alcatraz

Taking advantage of the exercise period after breakfast, Firo aimlessly wandered in the yard.

For the normally cooped-up inmates, the relatively spacious courtyard was a breath of freedom.

Each week, prisoners were only allowed out twice, for up to five hours each time.

In this neither long nor short interval, many took advantage of the opportunity to play ball—others, dominos or poker. Still others simply sat to the side, enjoying the sunlight.

At first glance, it was a perfectly peaceful picture—

The rifle sticking out of the windows overhead, however, painfully reminded all of their status as prisoners.

Firo, who was only now experiencing his first such break, chose to wander quietly.

He had been outside previously only for cleaning duties, which he'd had trouble focusing on even then. Seeing Dragon bit a man's ear off didn't exactly make for a relaxing time. Besides, it had been nothing like the liberating freedom he now felt.

With nothing particular in mind, Firo found his thoughts now drifting towards a certain person—Huey Laforet.

A man who, for all Firo knew, was still lurking in the depths below him.

It's been days...well, looks like the bastard isn't looking to start anything.

For a while, Firo had been certain that Huey would retaliate, possibly by attempting to break out and devour Firo—but so far, his fears had been unfounded.

I wonder if Isaac's been released yet?

Standing in the middle of the yard, his thoughts on a friend who should have never been imprisoned, Firo raised his head—and suddenly found his eyes drawn towards the end of the yard, towards one of the watch towers on the other side.

Huh...is that a peregrine falcon? They have those here too, then?

Seeing the thick cloud of birds circle the tower, Firo's steps slowed.

From down here...they all seem to be females.

Watching the thick fluttering of wings overhead, this piece of knowledge suddenly surfaced—and realizing it didn't belong to him, Firo felt suddenly uneasy.

Well, there's nothing wrong with knowing that...I'll just have to use those memories carefully, that's all.

Thinking of the source of his knowledge—Szilard Quates, the alchemist he had devoured—Firo's pace quickened.

Out here, there were few other prisoners, and the ocean breezes were cool and refreshing.

Yet instead of flying away at Firo's approach, the falcons continued to circle the tower with a sense of superiority—even smugness.

Either way, those are a lot of birds.

Wondering if they had a nest on the watch tower, Firo decided to observe a few minutes more—
Only to be startled by an inexplicable sound.

“...found you.”

Huh?

Hearing what seemed like a nearby voice, Firo instinctively glanced around him.

The voice just then—it had clearly been a feminine one.

Though less girlish than either Ennis or Miria's voice, it had a definitely female feel.

Am I starting to hear things? Or maybe there's a guard outside listening to the radio?

Wondering if his longing to hear Ennis's voice was leading him to hallucinate, Firo heard the voice come again, this time more clearly than before.

“How good of you...coming out like that by yourself.”

“...! Who?”

Getting no reply, Firo once again scanned around him.

Other than the unseen voice, there was not a single prisoner to be seen.

Suddenly, a feeling of dread flooded Firo.

...when did it get so dark?

The air around him as dark as if it had been a solar eclipse, Firo glanced up—

Only to see a far, far odder sight.

Where there had once been ten or so falcons—

Now hundreds upon hundreds were swarming out of the tower, coming to circle over Firo's head.

—?

Seeing the odd number and behavior of the birds, Firo stood gawking for a moment.

In his ears, however, the same voice continued speaking.

“You really are something...taking Huey's eye like that...taking Daddy's eye...!”

“Huh-what?”

As the venomous words resounded in his mind, Firo suddenly realized where it was coming from.

You mean...these birds...!

And just as he realized this—

Like a bolt of lightning, a falcon swooped down—

Its talons, long and wickedly sharp, aiming right for Firo's face.

Chicago Union Station

“Miria...!”

With this name on his lips, Isaac bounded excitedly onto the platform.

Although his cry was quickly lost in the turmoil of the station, Isaac still peered around, as if expecting to see Miria at any moment.

“Hey...where could she be?”

After a long journey, Isaac had finally arrived in Chicago.

Because Isaac had only told Miria he would be arriving “sometime in the morning,” it was possible that she wasn't there yet.

But as he anxiously glanced around him, Isaac found himself overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in the crowds.

“Oh, and that’s right..where did Sham go off to?”

Realizing he hadn’t seen a sign of his new friend since getting off the train, Isaac glanced around the station.

“Huh, if I’d know this earlier, I would gotten his address first...ah, never mind! Next time!”

Despite the improbability of it happening, Isaac seemed absolutely certain that they would meet again.

Though now alone, Isaac was not one iota less cheerful as he walked around, waiting for Miria.

Suddenly, Isaac noticed someone behind him. Turning around, Isaac smiled, ready to greet Miria—

Only to see someone completely different—

Ten minutes later

Wheezing, two figures ran into the station.

Nick and Jack—members of Jacuzzi’s gang.

Seeing that the train was ready to depart to New York, Nick cried—

“Aaaah, it’s already here!”

“Oh, whatever—the bigger question is, how’re we going to tell Isaac? If we tell him Miria was kidnapped, won’t go off the rails?”

“Huh, I don’t think so...but even if he did go run off to save her, he’d probably just get hit first.”

With these groundless worries in mind, the two fruitlessly searched the station for signs of Isaac.

“...? Could it be the next car?”

“Huh...let’s keep on searching for a bit first.”

As the next train readied to arrive, the men continued scanning the platform—

Only to find no trace of Isaac.

When the next train came, he wasn't on it—and even on the one after that, there was no sign of him.

**A few moments earlier—
Nebula Corporation Building
Guest quarters, corridor**

Just looking at its rich decor, one would think the guest room was a restaurant or an art gallery.

Used for receiving Nebula's many and varied guests, the room was the match of any hotel's presidential suite – the type of room that high-ranked executives and politicians use when abroad.

From that luxurious door now emerged a man in glasses, who seemed related to the group outside.

In addition to wearing similar clothes, he gave off the same, intimidating aura.

As the group passed through the halls, the hotel's workers pressed against the walls, holding their breath as they making room for the group to pass.

Terrifying enough individually, the men were truly menacing as they stalked in a group down Nebula's halls—

Suddenly, all eyes fell on two figures: a man and a young girl clutching a camera.

Though he stood directly in front of the terrifying group, this man's sharp gaze did not waver as he examined him.

By his side, however, the girl trembled violently as she gripped her camera.

“Who are you?”

“Wait, that's—”

Murmuring, the group halted.

In the brittle atmosphere of that corridor, the sharp-eyed man adjusted his glasses as he calmly addressed the group's ostensible leader—

“...it really has been a while, hasn't it.”

In response, the other spectacled man wordlessly raised a hand in greeting.

And like waves parting, the other men in the crowd cleared to the sides for this figure.

A man of roughly fifty years of age, his face set with the moderate wrinkles of middle age. With a pair of spectacles perched on his nose, his face gave an impression of regal erudition.

“It has indeed been some time since I’ve seen your men. Here on business, Gustav?”

Though clearly sardonic, the words were not particularly sharp.

Expression unchanged, St. Germaine replied—

“I thought I spotted you yesterday, so I thought it only polite to greet you.”

“Ah...well, as it is, we do have some matters to discuss. But not until after lunch, however.”

“Until next we meet.”

Retreating back into the corner, the Vice President let the group continue.

Still trembling as she crouched behind him, Carol let out a sigh of relief as the figures walked past.

“For staying silent and panicking...plus thirty points.”

Hearing this rare bit of praise from the Vice President, Carol opened her mouth—

“Right then, those...those people...they were definitely from the mafia, right? Right?”

“Hm?”

“Right...right then, what gang were those people from?”

Seeing Carol continue to tremble, the Vice President sighed as he stroked his chin.

“To be that afraid of someone, without even knowing who they are...minus 527 points.”

“That...that leaves me with nothing!”

St. Germain, however, ignored these cries.

Instead, as if introducing an old friend, the Vice President answered Carol’s first question—

“No need to fidget, at least. If you’re curious, that was Mr. Bartolo...the head of the Runoratas, a powerful mafia family on the East Coast.”

Several minutes later
Nebula Corporation
Conference Room

“...I told you, I’ve already given you everything I know yesterday.”

From her place in the chair, Nice now directed these firm words at the men in front of her.

The thin sheen of sweat on her back, however, betrayed the fear she was trying so hard to suppress.

In the past, Nice had been involved in many conflicts with the Russo family. Even before the repeal of prohibition, the two had been on very shaky ground.

With this pressure bearing down on her, Nice now felt inches away from breaking down.

These men...they’re definitely from the mafia...

And if they’re anything like the Russos, then there’s no chance of talking to them...!

So far, her captors had done nothing horrific to her, nor had they threatened to do so.

Even so, Nice was clearly in agony. Whether this was because of her captors or the effects of being toyed with by her enemies, it was impossible to say.

Whatever the reason, these men seemed to promise an impossibly brief, brutal, and hopeless future.

Even Ronnie Schiatto, the terrifying man Nice had encountered a year earlier, paled in comparison to the brutes sitting across from her.

Especially terrifying, however, was the man sitting in their middle. While his clothes suggested a respectable, middle-aged man, the sharp gaze under his spectacle made others hesitate.

With all the dignity suggested by his appearance, the man called Bartolo now spoke.

“Of course. And so we won’t be talking to you today—only the boy with you.”

Saying this, his eyes moved to Nice’s side, where Rail sat bound to a chair.

With Miria in another room, Nice knew that even if took out the bomb she’d hidden and threw it, there would be no way to guarantee her friend’s safety. Unsure if Miria was even still alive, all Nice could do was grit her teeth and continue assessing the situation, trying to plan an escape.

At the same time—

As the man's gaze shifted towards him, Rail—whose bombs had long been all taken away—felt an indescribable anxiety.

What are they, these people...

They're not immortal, so those that means...they're just humans?

But them...why...why...

Why would they be so terrifying.

Although his captors had done nothing horrendous to him, Rail still felt a burning horror rise in his throat.

Not just the bespectacled man across from him, but also all the other men in the room—standing to flank their leader, their faces so alike as to be clones—exuded an indescribable aura.

That is, each and every one of them felt like a threat.

Their stance.

Each move they made.

Their gaze.

Their breathing.

For Nice and Rail, all these elements combined together to create an inexpressibly terrifying feeling of being trapped in a spider's web.

Only one figure, cowering in a corner and uncontrollably trembling, gave off no air of intimidation. His disheveled air and beard, however, showed that he clearly should not have been there, and so his presence did little to ease the overall mood.

In this oppressive atmosphere, Rail—having already resolved to say nothing—now found it difficult to even breathe.

*I should blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up
blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them up blow them
ahahahahhahahahahah...blow them UP blow THEM UP BLOW THEM BLOW THEM BLOW
THEM UP—*

...but...no, I can't.

Even as the usual cries of destruction clamored through his mind, gazing in front of him instantly cooled his thoughts. Even if Rail had been able to overcome his fear, he had not the slightest weapon on him.

The next moment—

With a bang, the very object Rail had been longing for fell onto the table in front of him.

“...!”

“The question I’d like to ask today...has to deal with these fireworks here.”

Already well acquainted with the contents of Rail’s pack, Nice and Rail simultaneously widened their eyes in surprise.

And almost simultaneously, they began wondering what had lead to this stroke of luck.

At the same time, the bespectacled man calmly continued with his proposal—

“These fireworks—from what I recall, they were originally intended for a friend. On their way, however, they were unfortunately stolen.”

Although still severe, the man seemed to speak more directly, adjusting to Rail’s age.

However, this did little to comfort Nice, who had broken out in a cold sweat.

Yesterday, all she had told her captors was that on the way to see a newly-released friend, they had been found an injured Rail, whom they had taken in. The reason they were avoiding the police and the fact that Jacuzzi’s gang was probably the source of Rail’s bombs, however, she had left out.

But now...if word came out that it had been Nice who’d helped steal those fireworks...then there’d be trouble with the Russo family, not to mention who knows what else. If that happened...

Then Nice’s chances of returning to Jacuzzi were close to zero.

Thinking about it—an image of her corpse, a letter to Jacuzzi stuck in the sockets of her eyes—Nice began to tremor in fear, a wave of nausea coming over her.

Oblivious to the fear gripping his captive, Nice’s interrogator slowly stood up.

Leaning in towards Rail, he continued softly speaking—

“Because this friend departed a while ago, retrieving them hadn’t been a top priority. However...if these same fireworks are being used to terrorize Chicago, then it is a different matter altogether. No matter what method you use to do this, the goods are the same.”

His tone as level as before, the middle-aged man spoke slowly, emphasizing his points carefully as they drilled into Rail’s ears—

“All the same, I’m willing to make a deal with you—a quite fair deal, I like to think. I would like you to hand over the rest of the explosives you have. This includes, of course, retrieving those bombs you have cached away.”

“...!”

That meant they knew how many explosives he’d taken, then.

From the man’s tone, they seemed to not only know about how many bombs Rail had used at Nebula, but also how many he *hadn’t*, even taking into account those on the table.

Logically speaking, however, they couldn’t have exact numbers. Ordinarily, Rail would have already been scheming how best to use this fact to destroy his opponents.

However, it was not determined rage that filled Rail’s mind now, but rather a growing weariness. Only one, simple thought keep on repeating—he needed to escape.

Surely he could get away with giving them just half his supplies?

Weak as he was already, what would it matter?

But more importantly, if he did—

Would that admitting defeat?

Admitting that that immortals, that homunculi were...only as strong as the man across him?

That those who could not die or age...were just the same as ordinary humans?

Ridiculous!

Because...if he did...

Then Chris...then that would mean Chris...!

The man he had always idolized. All the pride Rail had always felt in being a homunculus—if he were to duck his head and let the man take away his weapons, like some ordinary *child*—when he found out, what would Chris think?

These thoughts whirling around his head, Rail began to feel faint.

But if admitting this would allow him to continue to defiantly live—

And if he still hoped to rescue Frank, even now—

No! I'd rather die!

If I'm really going to be this helpless, then...I might as well kill myself.

A momentous decision, one neither declared with decisiveness nor plagued by uncertainty.

Just as Rail began shaking from the compulsion to “blow it all up,” his captor suddenly turned around.

“Well? You know, we won’t just let you go.”

As he faced Rail, the man’s face was perfectly calm.

And it was to this expressionless face that Rail gave this curt answer—

“...no.”

“Ah. Well then. Why not?”

“Because I won’t...I won’t yield, not to *you*...not to *humans* .”

Speaking thus, Rail suddenly seemed older.

Instead of becoming irritated or angry, however, the man only smiled faintly.

“So, you’re ready to sacrifice yourself, then. Rather pedestrian, but common enough for your age, I suppose...”

With these words, he took another step, so that his faces was inches apart from Rail’s.

Then, staring at Rail with intense eyes—

“But you—you’re afraid, aren’t you.”

“....”

“You seem to understand that if you make a mistake, then your life is over...and yet, even if it means dying, you’ll refuse to cooperate with us. Isn’t that so?”

Wordlessly, Rail replied by spitting into his face.

After all, he had already prepared to die. Although the thought lingered that Chris would approve of avenging the homunculi against humans, these considerations were buried under the weight of Rail's current resentment.

In his moment of rebellion, however, Rail nonetheless felt a deep sense of relief—

A feeling, unfortunately, that was quickly disappointed.

Almost immediately after Rail's act of defiance, one of the man's bodyguards thrust a hand forward, blocking the missile from reaching its target.

As spit dripped from his hand, the guard neither showed emotion nor made to clean himself. Altogether, the effect was rather uncanny. Taken with the impassive expression on the old man's face, who seemed to regard the whole thing as a matter of course, chills ran down the backs of Nice and Rail.

"Living to this age, I would think it takes more than a little spit to bother me."

Shaking his head with a small smile, the man slowly made his way back to his original spot.

"What's more, to be fully honest...I think I already know what you are."

"...!"

"?"

At these words, different emotions came crashing through Nice and Rail. While Rail glared at his captor, Nice merely raised an eyebrow, as if to ask, *what* whois? To Nice, Rail was just like her—another bomb fanatic, and that was enough. While others might have scoffed, wondering how the world could stand yet another trigger-happy bomber, the idea that Nice had found someone "like her" felt like a dream come true.

Of course, this was only Nice's half of the story.

Even now, bound and unable to stop his captors from killing him, Rail's mind was still a muddle of competing thoughts—*it'd be better to kill myself; but no, if I could just slip out and grab one of those bombs...*

Just as these thoughts were running through his head, the door suddenly opened. Wearing an incongruously cheerful smile, a man walked inside.

"Ah, my apologies, Bartolo! *It has* been so long—oh, how is your grandson, Cazze, doing these days?"

At these words, the guards' faces furrowed in confusion. The man called Bartolo, however, only sighed and shook his head.

Deterred by neither the ominous atmosphere in the room nor his companion's subtle cues for silence, the man continued on, in the same cheerful tone—

“You’ve been in here for quite some time, haven’t you...oh, and is this child the guest you were talking about? Oh, but wait, both of them have scars here... Hmm, that’s tricky...which one could it be? Oh, my apologies if that’s a sensitive spot...do forgive me. But between us, my dear sir, I think those scars are *very* fetching.”

Though he had called the man in glasses “sir,” this newcomer was visibly older than his companion.

Despite this, however, the impression he gave was the complete opposite of that of “Bartolo.”

Standing over them, he seemed like nothing more than a kindly, mischievous old man. Looking at the smile on his face, Nice’s mouth fell open, and even Rail couldn’t help but feel thrown off course.

“Karl...consider the situation, for a moment.”

“Oh, don’t be so heartless, Bartolo. You’ve brought all these people, just to terrorize a girl and a child? And you, miss and young sir—no need to look so tense now. Come, let’s have a cup of tea and then talk it over, shall we? Ah—tea, please!”

At these words, another man—one who had seemingly followed “Karl” into the room—quietly sprung into action.

“...!”

Although Rail had been unable to see his face, Nice instantly recognized the newcomer as the man who had taken them hostage. at the sight of him, her confusion only increased.

W-what? These men are definitely mafia, but this...isn't this the Nebula headquarters? If so, could this man be...

Vaguely, Nice seemed to recall that Nebula’s Chairman had always been named Karl. Still, it was ludicrous—and so, unable to wrap her mind around the idea, she shook it off.

Even as these thoughts whirled through her mind, the man called Karl, wide smile still on his face, continued talking.

“Ah—fantastic! Why, this is wonderful! Bartolo, I would have never expected you to stop by.”

“...I hope Beriam hasn’t been talking. To be truthful, we were rather surprised when Rubik explained it to us. Who would have thought that *that* would be on the same floor as us...”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous—hasn’t Beriam been stuck in Chicago, since two days ago?”

Beriam...could he mean Senator Beriam?

Hearing this name, Nice was only thrown into greater confusion. Meanwhile, by her side, Rail had begun fidgeting, trying to wiggle out of the rope that keep him tied.

“Ah, this won’t do.”

Noticing Rail struggle, Karl instantly strode over—

And almost immediately loosened Rail’s bounds.

“Wha...”

Suddenly finding himself freed, Rail was so disorientated he momentarily forgot the bombs he had been reaching for.

Sinking into the chair next to him, the man called Karl smiled as he addressed Rail

“Alright...so first of all, I think I ought apologize to you. An *I’m sorry* is okay, right?”

“?”

Even as Rail felt himself thrown into confusion, Karl continued blithely on. Behind him, the man called Bartolo slowly went to gaze out the window, while the remaining bodyguards relaxed slightly.

“After all, my subordinates have caused quite a lot of trouble for you lately.”

“....?....?....?”

“Aah...although I suppose we could save this for later, right? What about that? How about you forget about Huey and come work for me, hm?”

“...?”

What did he just say?

Unable to comprehend any of the man’s words, Rail’s face froze.

But even as he found himself gaping like a beached goldfish, Rail still managed to catch one point Karl had mentioned—

His subordinate...who could that be?”

He said I'd caused trouble for them...but I couldn't have done much, these past few days...

And just as Rail reached a conclusion—

The object of his thoughts walked in through the door.

Without so much as knocking, the figure walked in—

“Chairman, did you need me for something? I know what you think, but I’m very busy, you know! I have to go and get *all* those people—”

A white lab coat, thick glasses, and an inhumanly lovely figure.

“...”

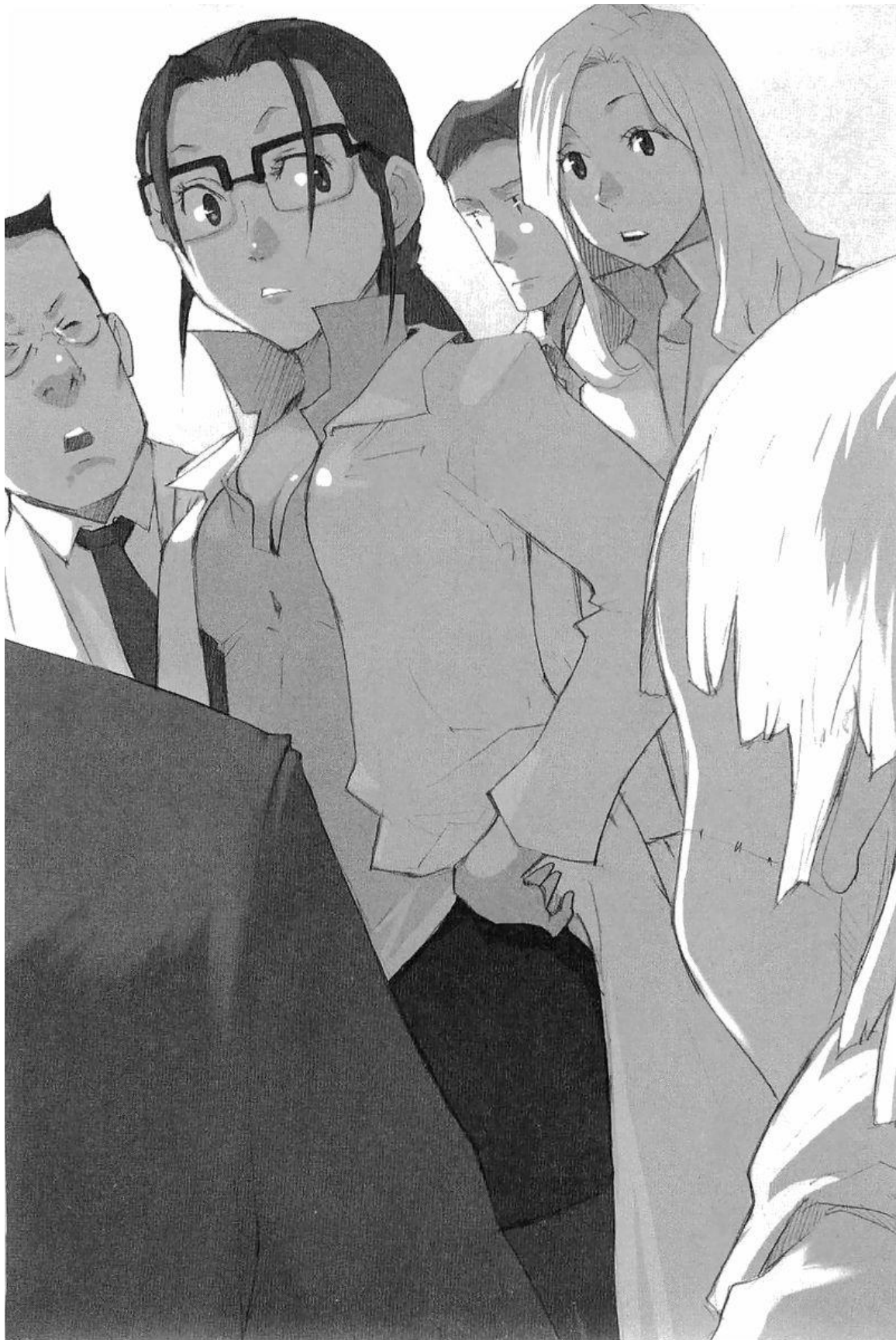
Behind the woman, five or six researchers followed—one of whom, seeing Rail, reacted before the others.

“Huh?”

The next moment, Rail and Renée’s eyes met—

And with that, the stage was set for unspeakable chaos.





Chicago, outskirts

“Ah! Found it...”

“Huh? Ricardo, what is it?”

At the sound of Ricardo’s voice, Christopher instantly paused eating and turned toward her. At present, there was still some time left before the meeting with Sickle, so the two had halted for a late breakfast.

“Rail, it seems...is in Nebula...!”

“...”

“There are scientists there as well, and...and Rail’s angry.”

The words came abruptly, like the rushed news of a radio announcement, leaving Christopher speechless in their wake.

“Well, Chris? What do you plan to do? Are you going to just ignore it as before, then?”

“Actually...”

Speaking in measured and slow words, Christopher swallowed his madeline down with milk before continuing.

“I wasn’t ignoring Rail before—only letting the kid choose.”

“Plus, remember Sickle? I picked a fight with Graham to avenge her, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but back then, the way you were acting...it didn’t seem like that.”

Despite these words, Christopher’s voice was calm as he continued.

“So...for Rail and Frank, it looks like I have to do the same thing now, too.”

Saying this, Christopher stood up, car keys in hand, and turned for the door.

When she finally spoke, Ricardo’s level voice was unusually soft.

“Chris...you’ve changed a lot this year, haven’t you?”

At these words, Christopher paused, mind flying to his self of a year ago—

“Definitely.” And nodding his head slightly, he replied with a smile—

“Most likely...I think it’s been because of you.”

Chicago, somewhere

In the time before their meeting, Sickle and The Poet scoured the streets for information.

From the explosions occurring near the Nebula grounds, it was clear that there was a connection between the company and Rail.

However, neither Sickle's skills nor the Poet's hypnotic eyes had been enough to get them inside the building.

With none of the people they had accosted part of Nebula, the two could only mill in front of the building, wandering as they wondered what to do—

Suddenly, Sickle felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Wha—”

Although there'd been no malice in the touch, Sickle immediately spun around, instincts on high alert—

And then froze.

“Huh?”

Sensing Sickle freeze up, the Poet hurried to her side.

Only to see a familiar figure—

Chicago, the abandoned factory

Nice and the others had been taken to Nebula's headquarters—an abrupt, sudden affair.

That, at least, was what Graham's second-in-command, Shaft, had heard from several members of the Russo family, and what he was now declaiming to the crowd before him.

“Another thing...they said the kidnappers wore a bunch of white coats, which probably means they're working for Nebula...whoever they are, though, they seem interested in this Rail kid.”

At these words, Jacuzzi and the others all tensed, ready to head towards Nebula at once—

All except for Graham, who stood watching with an unfathomable expression.

Only when all the others had already rushed out of the factory did he slowly join after them.

“...”

“Graham, what is it? Wait...are you in a bad mood? You don't look so good...”

At Shaft's flippant tone, Graham shot him a sharp glance.

“Well...I could say the same of you.”

He tapped his wrench against the ground, the sound ringing out softly in the silence. In the stillness, it was only the two of them there—Shaft, Graham, and between them, the gleaming metal of a silver wrench.

“A few words, just between you and me, alright? No one else has to know.”

“W-wait, Graham, what? Wh-what are you pulling?”

“Shaft...you...”

Fixing his lieutenant with a sharp gaze, Graham tapped his wrench on the ground once more. As the sound of the impact rang out, he softly said—

“Did you think I was blind?”

“...what are you talking about?”

“Taking us to that bar at just the right moment...did you really think I'd buy it was an accident?”

“...”

At these words, Shaft found himself speechless.

Just as he was about to come up with an excuse, Graham cut him off.

“Don't start. Right now, we're supposed to be rescuing Nice and the others. And plus...there's a good chance that Nebula *did* take them.”

“Graham...”

“I told you, I'm not blind.”

And grinning, Graham gently patted Shaft on the back with his wrench—

“Even so, knowing all this...just this time, I think I'll let it go and trust you. Alright?”

Alcatraz

Exercise Yard

As pain erupted through his head, Firo's face was covered in warm liquid.

Without needing to check, he knew it was his own blood.

But as the pain subsided, the drops of blood began to move—

Even as it dripped off his hand, Firo's blood was rushing back to his body.

As the wound slowly closed on inside, blood squirming back and knitting the skin over, Firo gazed at the sky, where the falcons were still circling.

What is this....

As a group, they act like one person, like Sham...and yet...

Could beings like him take birds as well? But...this wasn't in Szilard's memories!

When he had felt his blood stop moving, Firo slowly peeked out from beneath his arms—only to discover a dull pain still there.

Out of his left eye, all he saw was darkness.

“...!”

They...they've taken my eye!

Realizing what had just happened, Firo fixed his remaining eye on the sky.

“First...I think I'll make things even...”

As the voice resonated through the space, Firo's gaze caught on one of the birds, flying quickly out of the yard—

Through the blurry eyesight of one eye, Firo thought he saw something red and white squirming in its talons.

Although there was no way to confirm tell, Firo was already certain what was in the falcon's claws—

His left eye.

But even as his jaw clenched in understanding, a shadow flickered at the edge of his limited vision—

Instantly leaping back, Firo just barely avoided the dark shadow swooping towards his face.

Even as it dove towards the ground, the shadow changed direction, elegantly swooping upwards in one arc.

That's fast...!

In pursuing prey, peregrine falcons were reputed to reach speeds of over two hundred miles per hour.

To avoid crashing to the ground, the falcon attacking Firo had to have slowed down as it reached Firo— but even accounting for that, its velocity had still been enough to kill a man.

With this ominous thought flashing through his mind, Firo wasted no time in jumping back another step.

The next moment—

In the spot where he had been standing dove another flurry of falcons.

Even after they passed, the sound of wings could still be faintly heard.

Even as Firo turned to sprint away, another shadow appeared overhead, rapidly descending. With deadly precisions, its claws dug into Firo's shoulder, coming away with a chunk of flesh.

“Gah...”

Swallowing the scream rising in his throat, Firo rolled to a stop and stood up, leaning against one of the prison's walls.

If it had been ordinary human who had lost that amount of flesh, then they would have been done for. At present, Firo's shoulder was already knitting itself together, but he knew that if the attacks kept coming, he could very well be a pile of dry bones soon.

This isn't good...

The effect of losing an eye had been worse than he'd imagine.

It wasn't just that his depth perception was skewed—

Ignoring everything else, he was running around with half his vision taken away, dodging attackers that, for all he knew, could be ingesting pieces of himself.

Even if his injuries could heal, Firo knew that the pain of the blows would quickly cloud his thinking.

...damn it, I'd take armed thugs a hundred times over this.

Even as these alarming thoughts ran through his head, Firo kept silent.

This is...this is terrifying.

Admit it, Firo—

You're scared.

But...if I can get just survive this...then I'll get through it.

Even as he felt like screaming or bolting, Firo focused on this thought, so that when he finally spoke, his voice was calm.

“Hey...how about we call this even, okay?”

At these words, the circling birds seemed to become loudspeakers, one angry, outraged voice blaring across the sky—

“...even?”

In the next moment, the voice returned to its original tone, thundering with anger—

“Ha! As if!”

“...”

“Even? *Even..?* Ha! When it comes to you and Daddy, there's no such thing as ‘even’! I could take your eye, your heart, and all the skin off your body, and it still wouldn't equal a hair my Daddy's head—much less his *eye!* Not only are you unworthy of standing here, you're completely unworthy of existing *at all!* Firo Prochainezo, I won't rest until I've crushed you out of this world!”

“...you know, I think I've heard better arguments from KKK members.”

Even as he spoke, Firo was surveying the situation around him.

By this point, all the other prisoners had become aware of the birds' abnormal behavior.

Right now, several of the falcons were diving at the prisoners, seemingly intent on driving them back into the prison. Forgetting their rare freedom, the prisoners were rushing in panic back inside.

A few prisoners attempted to brashly fend off the birds, but at the guards' frantic urging to “get inside!” they, too, eventually trickled back inside.

Of the few stragglers who remained in the yard, all seemed oblivious to Firo's plight.

Most likely, the guards had all been Sham's vessels. Which meant that the unceasing voice above him – that was probably the voice of the same girl that Ladd had dragged into Huey's cell several day again. Sham had mentioned her earlier, but now it seemed he had no inclination to help.

As it was, Firo had little hopes that Sham would help him.

“W-w-woah! What, have these birds gone *crazy*?”

Just as a familiar words finished these words, a shadow appeared next to Firo's.

It was Dragon.

Blood dripping off his tattooed hands, he leaned towards Firo and whispered—

“...Leeza still doesn't know that Sham controls this body.”

“...”

“So for right not, I'm just an ordinary killer, okay?”

...because that makes perfect sense.

Even as he mentally scoffed, Firo could understand the logic of Dragon's words.

In the distance, Firo saw the African-American man and the short Caucasian man, seemingly readied for attack. Unlike the other prisoners, who had made their way away from Firo, they had remained in the yard.

Aligned thus, it was possible Leeza would try to kill them all in one blow.

And Ladd?

All the time he had been warily watching the birds above, Firo had been keeping track of his surrounding and had seen no sign of the gleeful killer. What was more, he hadn't seen Ladd at all since coming outside—he must have never entered the exercise yard at all, then.

Alright, what should I do...well, at least they seem smart enough not to rush towards the wall.

Created to prevent prisoners from escaping, the wall was covered with barbed wire, which stretched from the top of the wall towards the yard. Whether the birds dove directly or at an angle, they would still be ensnared in the sharp metal – and even if one managed to fly through the gaps in wire, it would only hit the wall directly behind it.

Seeming safe for now, Firo couldn't help but give a small sigh of relief—

“You really *are* naive.”

Above them, a peregrine's cry filled the sky with sadistic intent.

“W...what the hell? A woman's voice...?”

Face a mask of panic, Dragon frantically gawked around him for the source of the sound. To Firo's eyes, it was a patently obvious act., but he had neither the chance nor the time to voice this.

Leeza's tone nagged him, making Firo wonder if he really *had* miscalculated—

Wait—what's that?

Above him, several of the falcons seemed to have something shiny clutched in their talons—

By the time Firo had figured out what these objects were, it was too late.

Just as it was about to hit, Firo slammed his arms up before his face, the silver ring burying itself deep into the flesh.

Nebula Corporation Conference Room corridor

“Um, uh...Vice President...w-what's going on?”

“When you ask questions, you shouldn't speak so plainly. It makes you appear impatient.”

“But I am impatient! My whole head—everything's a muddle!”

From her place behind a pillar, Carol made a small sound of frustration.

Across from her, the Vice President was calm as ever as he gazed at the art on the walls.

“Ah..Carnald's work, again? As well as all the others at the entrance...Nebula is quite infatuated.”

“Please, Vice President, don't try to change the topic! I...I just want something! That room with those scary mafia men—what was that? Why did the Chairman go in? And what about Miss Renee?”

Having lived the past few minutes in a state of bewildered fear, Carol felt close to breaking down.

By contrast, the Vice President had a much more measured reaction to the same events.

“As you’ve most likely guessed by now, Miss Renee and the Runoratas don’t have ties to each other. Whether she’s come to offer an alliance or cause trouble, we’ll be left to sort out the aftermath...”

“B-but why would Miss Renee...”

In truth, Carol couldn’t imagine see the absentminded girl they’d talked to yesterday being involved with the Runoratas. After a moment of thought, however, she ventured a tentative guess.

“Then..then could she be making some kind of drug...?”

“1295 points for an excellent guess, but I’m afraid the Runoratas already have their own division for that.”

“Then why...”

“Ah...explaining all this would really take too long, but it’d still be best for you to know the gist of it before we lunch with Mr. Bartolo.”

At the Vice President’s casual mention of “lunch,” Carol paled once more.

“Then...this lunch...am I...am I supposed to go with you too?”

“I would have to ask first.”

“Wh-what? No! Don’t! I don’t need lunch today!”

“...? Didn’t I already tell you that the whole purpose of this trip is to introduce you to our clients?”

At the Vice President’s matter-of-fact tone, the camera Carol held began to violently shake...

And as if this shaking was some kind of trigger—

An explosion sounded through the floor.

And like an orchestra following its conductor, a cacophony of blasts boomed behind it.

Several minutes earlier
Conference Room

Wholly unprepared to meet each other here, Rail and the white-coated researchers froze as they stared at each other.

A tense silence followed—

And then from the middle of the researchers, a woman's voice came, completely oblivious to the tension in the room.

“Wh-wh-huh? How...little Rail...how'd you get here?”

At the sight of the bespectacled woman, Nice frowned, her face clearing asking, who is this? Besides her, Chairman Karl smiled, while the Mafiosos remained as placid as ever.

Rail's reaction, however, was completely different.

I'm going to destroy you.

At the entrance of his detested enemy, all of Rail's indecision evaporated – and leaping from his chair, he reached for the bag on the table

I have to destroy her, I have to destroy...!

As Rail reached towards the bag, the mafia men readied to pounce on him—

And at the same time, one of the white-coated men aimed at Rail—

And that was the action that changed everything.

“Don't move.”

Even as his gun aimed at Rail, another barrel slowly leveled itself against the researcher's temple—this time, that of a gun belonging to one of the Mafiosos. At the sight of another weapon being drawn, the bodyguard had reacted immediately to stop the researcher.

And with that motion, all the other guards' eyes were drawn to the armed researcher.

And so—

Rail grabbed the bag.

Damningly, irrevocably—

He took it.

As Rail reached to open the bag, one of the body guards lunged for his arm.

However, this movement was once again impeded by the researchers' presence.

For in spite of the order to stay still, the researcher's hand twitched on the trigger.

The moment the researcher shot, the gun aimed at his temple went off –

Too late, however. The trigger had been pulled.

Yet instead of hitting Rail, the sudden change in position meant the bullet merely grazed over his nose, instead hitting the man trying to stop him.

“Uh!”

As the bullet tore through his hand, the force of the impact forced the injured man backwards.

And seeing his chance, Rail reached forward and grabbed a bomb—

Tearing off the pin, he threw it towards the group of white-coated men.

However, the force of the throw meant that the bomb actually arced high over its target—

To land, instead, in the hallway.

Hallway

“Aah-aack!”

Fire burst through the corridor.

As she was thrown to the ground, Carol hurriedly covered her camera as heat exploded in the small space.

Grabbing Carol by the collar, the Vice President quickly dragged her behind a column.

“This—this place—it just never ends!”

Even as Carol shouted these words, several figures approached through the smoke.

Among them, an abnormally small silhouette could also be seen. Even through the smoke, the scars on their face were distinctly visible.

Scars, moreover, that Carol was very familiar with.

“...Rail?”

Another room

“The hell...?”

Hearing the gunshots and explosions from above, the suited man sprang from his seat.

Crossing his arms, he headed towards the doorway, pausing to direct a few words to a figure in the corner—

“Hey, I’m gonna go for a bit, so don’t try anything, ‘kay? Not that you could go anywhere anyways...”

“M—mf! Mm—f!”

That was from the object of the guard’s words—Miria, gagged and bound to a chair in the corner.

“Really, most people at gunpoint would act at least a little more scared...”

Whether because she was familiar with such threats or simply being defiant, Miria’s reaction had turned her scenario into something almost comedic. Nebula’s people really had no intention of shooting Miria—but neither had they anticipated that she struggle this fiercely.

The guard’s complaints, however, were cut short by the sound of gunshots outside.

The moment he opened the door, more shots sounded, sending him printing down the hall.

Trapped in her corner, Miria couldn’t see what was going on towards, but with the door left open, the sound of gunfire came loud and clear. At the sound of screams echoing down the corridor, Miria’s struggling intensified as she did everything possible to break free.

Shelves and chairs crashed around her—but out in the corridor, the sounds of gunfire meant the guard was oblivious to her struggle.

Not so, however, for the occupant of the nearby room—

Adjacent room

Though gunshots and explosions resounded outside, inside the empty room, Lua remained incredibly, perfectly calm. Perhaps it was because of her close encounters to death, but Lua

showed no signs of fear. Rather, as gunfire sounded outside, she found her thoughts drifting to another, earlier time.

More precisely, the moment in which Ladd, in order to save Lua from the red-eyed monster about to kill her, had jumped off the Flying Pussyfoot.

As her mind drifted over that moment and the lover who was still intent on killing her, a soft smile appeared on Lua's pale face—one distinctly at odds with the furious sounds of gunfire outside.

The next moment, however, this smile was replaced by an expression of confusion.

Because that was when Lua heard the sound of a great commotion.

A commotion, moreover, could be neither ascribed to gunshots or explosions—

One, in short, that came from the room next to her.

...?

Experimentally, Lua put one ear to the wall. From the other side, came the sound of objects crashing and the faint songs of strangled cries.

Perhaps it's an ill person there? They sound quite uncomfortable...

Driven by such curiosity, Lua serenely left the cell and walked over to the adjacent door, knocking gently on the wood.

No answer, however, came. After a moment's hesitation, Lua reached for the doorknob.

Without a top lock, the door opened easily, and in the next moment, Lua was bombarded with the sounds of struggle she had only heard faintly before.

Gingerly walking inside, Lua peered around the room—

And saw, in the middle of the room, a red-clad woman tied to a chair, fiercely struggling to free herself from her bonds.

Ten minutes later

Nebula

Front Doors

“Alright...everyone, get in now! This is what we're going to do...”

In front of the brilliantly-painted entrance stood a group of youths whose appearance couldn't have been more at odds with the stately building.

Simply put, they didn't seem to be job searchers—and if anyone had come over to interrogate them, it would have been clear that most members were far too young to work anyways.

In their center stood a tattooed youth, who now raised a timid question to the man ostentatiously spinning his wrench in front of them—

“Hey, Graham...is—is there any way we could know what's going on inside?”

Having just arrived and thus ignorant of the chaos inside the building, the group was currently dawdling outside, debating how best to proceed. With Isaac probably just arriving at the train station, they had sent Nick and Jack to meet him. By the time they arrived, the group hoped to have already rescued Miria, Nice, and the scarred child.

With this goal in his heart, Jacuzzi intently watched Graham's reaction—

“...no, that wouldn't be a good story, would it? But it did give me an idea...let us tell a story, then!”

With Shaft and several boys behind him, Graham raised his head towards the clear sky and, as if in a reverie, began to speak.

“Once before, Ladd – my dear, venerated and venerable Ladd – single-handedly broke into this building, throwing off the guards and killing his way to the chairman's office...it is said that when the chairman met him, he was so impressed that he refused to hold Ladd responsible. Oh, the magnificent dexterity of Ladd! the munificent kindness of the chairman! And they say, you know, that after all those years, the Chairman hasn't changed one bit...”

“I...I know lots of sc-scary places too, b-but...what are you trying to say?”

“Ah ha...well, Jacuzzi, I propose we win the chairman's favor by killing our way into his room!”

“Aaaaaaa—no, that won't work!”

Tears streaming down his face, Jacuzzi grabbed Graham by the collar and shook him.

In such an atmosphere—

A terrific noise came from behind them.

“...?”

For whatever reason, groups of people were hurrying out of the building behind them.

To be sure, the group had heard gunfire and the sounds of explosions on their way to the building, but in Jacuzzi's haste to get there, they had brushed such noises aside—

Leading, thus, to their current situation.

“What is it?”

Just as Jacuzzi became aware of the strange mood in the air, from behind them came the sound of an engine.

And when the sleek, expensive-looking car had parked by the side of the road, out of it stepped—

“...oh, it's him again.”

Seeing Christopher and Ricardo leave the car, Graham narrowed his blue eyes—

Only to see Ricardo running towards them, stopping only in front of Jacuzzi.

“Nice and the others—they're in the building right now!”

“Huh...?”

Uncertain who this child was or what their words meant, Jacuzzi only gaped at Ricardo's words.

“Who...who are you? How would you know where they are...”

“Right now, they're on the thirtieth floor—they just left a room, and they're heading towards the roof! Hurry!”

Ricardo's face was urgent as she shouted this news, as though she really saw Nice and the others before her.

Picking up on the mood of fright, the other youths turned their gaze to the Nebula buildings—

Only to hear, for the umpteenth time in minutes, the sound of gunfire.

A sound, moreover, that seemed to be coming from the top floor.

Just the group slowly realized the reason behind the fleeing crowds, even more people began rushing out of the building. Hurrying by, words like “explosion” could be clearly heard through the chaos.

“Hey, Jacuzzi! Right now—”

Just as one of the group turned to look for him, he found Jacuzzi already gone.

“H...hey!”

Of those present, only Christopher thought that Jacuzzi was running away.

All those who knew Jacuzzi, however, turned their gaze towards the more probable path and almost immediately spotted him.

“Nice...!”

Sobbing as he ran, Jacuzzi hurtled towards the building entrance.

When he’d broken away from the tide of others, Jacuzzi had immediately shot for Nebula’s tower.

At the sight of him, the group became momentarily somber as the members glanced at each other—

And then a smile slipped over their faces.

“Typical,” someone sighed, and with that, they was heading towards the building in twos and threes.

As the group rushed inside, the stream of people exiting and entering the building began to even, so that the doors revolved in a dizzying array.

Left behind, Christopher and Graham now simultaneously caught sight of each other.

Christopher was the first to speak, smiling as he placed one hand on Ricardo’s head—

“Hey, so just for today...let’s call things off, alright?”

“For today—yeah, sure.”

“So these gunshots...it means someone dangerous is inside, yeah?”

Right after these words left Christopher’s mouth, Ricardo was ready with a reply—

“It does—yesterday’s scientists, it looks like they’ve gotten into something with the mafia...though the scientists just seem to have guns...”

“That so...well, well. Looks like it’s time for me to help Rail and Frank get their revenge, then.”

With that, Christopher leaned forward, looking for all the world as if ready to go for a stroll.

Besides him, Graham grinned languidly and spun his wrench.

“Alright...since we’re on the subject, I’ll going in to rescue Jacuzzi then!”

And then, as suddenly as a leopard changing its spots, he whirled around to face Shaft and the others.

“Well then, men! It looks like in order to fight a larger threat, our former enemy is proposing to postpone our feud...very noble behavior, yes, but I can so simply accede? Already, my heart is bursting beyond its limits with the desire to attack him! I’ve already left the red-haired man to Ladd, so I might as well take care of this red-eyed one here...however, before settling this dispute, would it not be much better to first save Jacuzzi and the others? Well? What do you say – am I right, or am I right?”

“Let’s just get it on with.”

At Shaft’s brusque reply, Christopher craned his neck quizzically.

“Ah, that’s right...there’ve been a couple of things I’ve been thinking on since yesterday...”

“...right now? As we’re about to leave?”

As Christopher took another step to match Graham, the two faced each other, the building in front of them forgotten.

“This man, with the red hair, well...was he...did he seem somehow “off” to you?”

“...you know him?”

“Nah...don’t think I’d want to get to know him too well, either.”

Wryly smiling, Christopher shook his head as if to rid himself of a distasteful thought—then, in a much more cheerful tone, continued—

“Well, let’s have a song then! Oh, what a beautiful chaos here! Chaos, beautiful chaos just like the state of naaaature! Alright – fooorward now——♪over this small mound of chaaaos——♪”

Observing Christopher’s cheerful countenance as he sang, Graham let out an uncharacteristically glum sigh.

“...you really can’t sing.”

“Ah, thanks a bunch! Juuuust another reason for me to fight you!”

Grinning, Christopher slipped into the building, Ricardo disappearing with him into the chaos.

Right before that, however—

Something curious happened.

In the moment before she disappeared into the building, Ricardo glanced back at Shaft, her face revealing a wealth of mixed feelings.

Yet amongst all there, no one noticed the strangeness of this expression—that was how thoroughly they were embroiled in the events happening within.

Alcatraz Yard

“...shit.”

“Aww, ready to give up? Going to beg me not to kill you now? Geez, that’d be interesting to hear—an immortal asking someone not to kill them!”

Seeing the sweat beaded on Firo’s face, the voice above continued sweetly.

“Well, too bad then – I don’t think birds believe in asking for mercy, and so I’m not going to either!”

Extracting the steel disks buried in his right arm, Firo tried his best to smile through the pain.

With metal chakrams also running through his legs, Firo resembled nothing more than someone who had been drawn and quartered. Though the disks hadn’t pinned down his feet, they were nonetheless buried bone-deep.

“...uh!”

Suppressing a cry, Firo bent forward as he dug the chakrams out of his legs.

“...uuh!”

A spike of pain shot through his whole body, reaching to even his uninjured spine and back. Firo’s empty eye socket, which had only just recently ceased throbbing, burst into new agony.

And as it, another set of silver disks came flying through the air and slicing through his legs.

Talons or chakrams – it didn’t matter; his prison uniform was equally ineffectual in protecting against either. No clothes, of course, could have done that – but even so, Firo began to regret not wearing, at the very least, a coat when he had walked into the yard.

Just as his wounds began to recuperate, another two or three sharp disks flew through the air.

Desperate, Firo tried flinging the chakrams back, but without any experience with the weapon, they naturally could not go far.

“Wh...what the hell? What is it now?”

“Ah—well that’s right, I do have something I want to talk to you about first...”

“Wha?”

Though Dragon made a show of feigning fear, the voice above hardly seemed convinced as it continued, voice effortlessly confident.

“Who told you to steal Daddy’s eye? They say one of the guards left the island, but no one knows where he is now...so now you’re going to tell me where he is.”

“I...I don’t know that! The guy behind this...it was that guard’s brother...we were only following orders...”

Ugh, he really can’t act...

For Firo, who knew Sham’s true intentions, Dragon’s display of ignorance was nothing more than a contrived farce.

But even if Leeza would eventually see through Dragon’s act, any time spending extorting a confession out of him was still valuable—it was time, after all, during which Firo was not being assaulted and could thus think about getting out of their current predicament.

Amidst the commotion of the prisoners inside, Sham’s guards would surely have the time to report to their superiors by now.

Until the unpossessed guards came, the vessels of Sham present now could do nothing. In that way, Leeza’s actions were also temporarily paused.

This thought in mind, Firo had just made up his mind to wait for the moment when the voice came again, high and loud—

“In that case...you both can go die.”

Those words echoed through the yard.

Though originally speaking with the voice of a mature woman, as Leeza spoke, her tone gradually slipped into childishness. And as this startling innocent voice echoed through the air—

At the other end of the yard, a man gasped.

Turning his head, Firo saw the short Caucasian man was pinned the same way he was, with chakrams running through his arms and legs.

The moment after, silvery disks flew at both Dragon and the African-American man.

“Uuh!”

With a great effort, Dragon managed to narrowly dodge the disks headed towards him.

Though his body was weakening, his spirit, at least, seemed less damaged.

But really...are we really that outmatched?

As Firo stared up at the falcons above him, Leeza’s young voice boomed in his head once again:

“What? Feeling sorry that you didn’t answer me, now?”

“...just wondering, the way you’re going, don’t you think your father might not be too happy?”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as Daddy’s safe, everything will be okay.”

“....”

Above her, the falcons’ screeching echoed these childish sentiments.

“...well, from everything you’ve done, you certainly seem like a loving daughter.”

“Ah, but I would have loved to kill that man who tied me up, too—Ladd, or whatever...but that’s alright. I’m sure my sister and that red-haired ma will take care of him.”

“What?”

W-wait...wait one moment.

For some reason, since arriving on the island, Firo kept on hearing a certain friend’s name. Ladd had definitely brought Claire up, but how would Leeza both know his name and that he wanted to kill Ladd?

That sister she mentioned...that has to be Chane.

That idiot...could she be using him?

Despite knowing almost nothing about Chane, Firo was momentarily lost in worry for his childhood friend.

Well, with Claire, it should be pretty easy to take care of..

...wish I could say the same thing about right now.

“Anyways, I simply don’t have the time to do it..”

“...? You don’t have...the time?”

The next moment—

There was a flurry of activity from the birds above.

Like men grouping into formation, the falcons formed a circle around the roof.

And then Firo saw it.

On the top of the prison roof, a small shape stood—

A girl, dressed in white and standing on the edge.

“The last we met...I think I must have been unconscious.”

Wait...did she just get out here?

As the girl smiled with self-satisfaction, her words echoed from the falcons above.

As Firo watched, with an almost regretful gesture, she shook her head.

“Aah, but such a shame really, that right after meeting you, I have to leave this island.”

“You...what?”

“Like I said, I’ll be leaving this place soon.”

From the casual tone of her words, Firo knew she was speaking the truth.

And if Leeza was going to leave—

Then there was a high chance that Huey would be escaping too.

How they planned to do it, Firo didn’t know—but he did know that, with the number of guards Sham controlled, an escape could only be easily be accomplished with Sham’s help.

...then...after all this...have I failed?

“Well, I suppose I’ll to save the rest of this conversations for when you get out, too...but right now, hmm...I think I’ll take some of you with me. I imagine it’ll hurt, living without an eye, but you will live...”

And then, her innocent child's voice turning dark, Leeza spoke a threat.

One simple phrase—

In reality, it was a fairly crude tactic.

Until then, Leeza had been in complete control of the situation, with Firo at a distinct and wide disadvantage.

Leeza's words were much the same as those of Sham, but whereas Sham's threat had been more of a passing one, here Leeza's tone bespoke both the intent and the desire to kill—

And so it was in this deadly tone that Leeza pronounced the words she should have never uttered.

“Of course, you can try to resist...but if you do, just know I'll be doing the same thing to all your friends!”

“...”

Instantly, Firo felt a cold calm come over him.

At the same moment, a wind seemed to gust across his mind, taking with it all confusion and fear.

“Hey...brat.”

Hearing the steadiness of these words, a strange feeling came into Leeza's heart.

“W...what?”

Out of nowhere, the man below her seemed suddenly changed from mere moments again.

Glancing up with his remaining eye, Firo's fixed her in place with a cold, merciless gaze.

“You know...I've always thought that taking hostages was a shameless tactic. If someone higher up told me to do, I might—or if it was a feud between groups, and doing it would lower the amount of bloodshed, I might do it. For these things, I could dirty my hands a little. But in a fight between two people...it's pretty disgraceful behavior.”

“W..what are you..why would I care...”

“However—”

Completely ignoring Leeza's interruption, Firo calmly continued speaking.

And from the surety of his words, Leeza knew that his threat was completely serious—

“If you happen to hurt my family, then I won’t think twice about it.”

“...”

Already thoroughly alarmed, Leeza now realized something.

Namely, that the name of the emotion she was feeling was fear.

“The moment you even try to hurt my friends—I’ll set myself to it.”

In that moment, Firo’s expression resembled that of a marionette—Leeza couldn’t tell what he was thinking, or whether he even was hearing her words. All emotions had disappeared from his face —

All except one.

“I...I would put all my energy into bringing Huey Laforet pain.”

“W..what? As if...as if I’d let you do that...”

“Even if he finds in the darkest bowels underground, I’d find him—a thousand years, ten thousand years, it doesn’t matter. I’d make every moment of it hell for him.”

Finishing this, Firo calmly focused his remaining eye on his left hand.

“And then...I’d devour him.”

Words utterly in a completely certain tone.

Firo spoke not as if he were issuing a threat, but rather simply stating a certain fact.

Despite this, however, his voice contained an absolute intent to kill.

“...no, this can’t...I won’t...you...if you do this, then—then I won’t forgive you...”

“I don’t need you to. If you force me to do this, then there’ll be no need to talk further.”

Viewed as a negotiation, then the current conversation was going very poorly. Watching Firo, Leeza felt an overwhelming fear come over her.

This man..I should just end him now.

But...can I do it?

Because if I fail...if I make the smallest mistake...

If I can’t dispose of him here...then I might never be able to do it.

As this realization entered her mind, Leeza froze.

The smile slipping off her face, she stood there, unable to speak.

Beside Firo, Dragon and Sham's other vessels were similarly silent, as if suddenly devoid of the ability to move or speak.

Ten minutes passed like this—ten minutes of silence that felt like hours.

But just as Leeza was reaching her limit, ready to say anything to break the tension—

Slowly, the prison door creaked open.

“...hey, isn't this supposed to be our break?”

Saying something to the guard, the shadowed figure then calmly pushed the door the rest of the way.

“...well, I'm going out.”

The moment the man's face came fully into view, a flurry of motion rustled through the falcons above.

Metal arm at his side, the man laughed quietly as he stepped outside.

Turning, he saw first the Caucasian man, the African-American man, Firo and his missing eye, Dragon standing timidly at his side – and, lastly, the girl standing on the roof.

“Huh, I see...”

For a moment, Ladd Russo basked in the frozen scene, a sharp, faintly amused smile on his face.

Then, as his gaze turned to Leeza and the birds above, Ladd changed. His whole stance turning murderous, he spoke—

A simple phrase, spoken with whole-hearted cheerfulness.

“Well, well...looks like it's time to have some fun.”

Nebula Corporation Conference Room

Though it wasn't serious, the explosion had left an indelible mark on the room.

While all the researchers had either ducked or been hit with the impact, Nice, regaining her wits a little sooner than the others, had grabbed Rail's hand and sprinted out of the room.

As researchers rushed after the two, Renee, after a momentary second of hesitation, followed after them.

With her departure, all the room contained were two old men, a group of men who seemed anything but peaceful, and several staggering figures in white.

"And what was the meaning of that?"

Back turned to the window, Bartolo Runorata asked this question in a level voice.

Perhaps because the window had been earlier open, but the explosion had only scratched the glass, and no one inside seemed to suffer from lack of oxygen.

The moment Rail had thrown the bomb, Bartolo's retinue had knocked a chair over, simultaneously shielding their boss and themselves from the impact.

Despite this, Bartolo had not emerged unscathed, and his eyebrows had been half singed off by the explosion. As they gazed at him, the guards' eyes filled with fresh respect.

And by the wall, looking completely unharmed, was Chairman Karl, smiling.

"Well—that was close, wasn't it?"

At this, Bartolo made a sound that could have been a protest—

In response, however, Karl merely waved his hands as he explained the situation.

"Ah—so sorry about that. Completely our fault—if my employees hadn't been so hasty with firing, this would have never happened. And you, dear sir with the hurt hand, my deepest condolences—I'll be glad to provide compensation, but until then, you ought get that wound dressed. The clinic's on the first floor— would you care for me to alert them there?"

"Don't change the subject. I don't care about myself, but right now – if you had been a little more careless, I could have lost many important men, is that not so?"

"...you value your men's lives over your own?"

"I have no intention of dying, but if I did, then I would need not worry about the question of a successor. Finding replacements for my men, however, would be more difficult."

Hearing Bartolo so casually disavow his own life, Karl smiled.

"Aha ha! So you're no longer afraid of dying, then?"

“You and I, we’ve already reached the age where death has long since ceased to be a concern.”

“Well, if that’s how you think of it, then. Ah—I truly am sorry, that was unpredicted. I’ll make it up to you, I promise. Of course, this applies to all the other men here—if you want this old man’s life, then please, feel free to shoot me.”

Though there was a smile on his face, an edge to Karl’s words made it clear he was completely serious.

From the beginning, Karl had seemed to have a solution for everything. To gamble away his own life, thus, would mean that he had run out of all other bargaining chips. Towards this last chip—that of his own life—the Chairman seemed surprisingly indifferent, as though the life of a man so advanced could hardly be worth much.

To agree to such a concession, consequently, would surely compromise Bartolo’s dignity.

It was an offer, thus, that made it impossible to respond with anything but an equal magnanimity.

Consequently, even in this situation, there was no real threat to the Chairman’s life.

“...taking the life of old man like you would mean nothing. Anyways, it wouldn’t be worth the headache afterwards. In future affairs, however, it would be pleasant to be assured of such sincerity.”

Turning his collar up, Bartolo made as if to leave the room.

Right then, however, a man rose from near the doorway.

In that moment, it would have been completely reasonable to expect the bodyguards to rush at the man.

But as the bearded man approached, he only calmly surveyed the situation around him. Seeing the man unharmed, Bartolo responded with similar serenity as he called the man’s name—

“Begg.”

In a choppy, wavering voice, the man called Begg replied.

“Ex, ex, ex-actly. Th, th, th-those people...th, they’re probably im, im, im, immortals. B, but...they m, m, might be...incomplete, a-also.”

“I see.”

This was all Bartolo spoke.

As if suddenly realizing the situation he had stumbled into, the man sprinted out of the room.

No one followed him.

As if completely uninterested in the man, Bartolo began to silently pace.

Around him, the bodyguards also followed on all sides, walling Bartolo off the world.

“There’s no way for us to continue discussing matters, so I’ll take my leave now.”

“What, leaving already? But that child—wasn’t that the whole reason you came here?”

“As it is, I’d like to leave before the police arrive. What’s more...”

Standing against his barricade of guards, their leader gazed back at the room, face calm despite the chaos.

And with wan smile breaking across his face, he spoke—

“I’ve already made plans for lunch.”

Nebula Corporation

“Let go...of...me! Let...go!”

Even as he tried to tug away from Nice, Rail’s expression was oddly vacant.

“I’m not letting go of you! ...oh no, there are more of them there too...”

With the men in white already pursuing them, Nice now spotted figures on the following floor.

Reaching into the heel of her shoe, Nice took out one of the bombs she had hidden earlier and, ducking to avoid the impact, threw it behind her.

In reality, Nice had no idea who the men dressed in white were nor why the sight of the bespectacled woman had so set Rail off.

But from their readiness to fire at Rail, however, the group was undoubtedly dangerous. Up close, they exuded the same deadly aura as the mafia members they’d just faced.

And their goal, it seemed, was none other than Rail himself.

If Nice left Rail behind and ran for it, then she might stand a chance of making it to Jacuzzi and the others—

This thought, however, only lingered a second before Nice dismissed it, ashamed of even thinking thus. If she truly did act on that impulse, there was no way she could bring herself to face Jacuzzi again.

Just as these thoughts were racing through Nice's head, behind her, Rail suddenly cried out—

“I...I...I have something I have to do!”

The moment these words left his mouth, however, a cruel voice quietly rose within him—

Something you have to do? Is that really so...?

To save Frank? To kill the woman with glasses—or rather, all those humans you hate?

Aren't you lying to yourself, though? Right now, to the you that is now...none of this really matters, does it?

...meaningless...to the me right now, it's all meaningless, even Frank...huh. How odd...how strange that is...

No, I hate I hate I hate that me—

Slowly, Rail's thoughts were descending into madness.

Even as Rail's reality dawned on him, he was desperately attempting to reject it.

This kind of self and this kind of world—neither of them could be true.

Once again, the desire to “destroy everything” rose up in Rail.

As even his sense of self began to dissolve, Rail suddenly recalled Christopher's words “nature”—

We're the beings who were created—beings who aren't natural, who shouldn't have existed.

As these dire thoughts filled his mind, Rail suddenly felt become aware of the feeling of brightness and a breeze against his skin.

Returning to himself, Rail glanced around—and found himself surrounded by the very “nature” he was just thinking about.

In their haste to outrun their pursuers, it seemed Rail and Nice had arrived on the roof of the building—

And also, apparently, the site of a gigantic garden.

Alcatraz

It was a strange scene to walk into.

On the roof, a young girl, and in the sky, a thick cloud of falcons hovering overhead.

Their gazes all directed at one spot—a man on the ground.

Eerie enough to see a group of birds flying in sync while focused at the same spot – but what made the scene truly spine-chilling was the expression on their target's face.

He was smiling.

Cheerfully, eagerly smiling – as if the birds circling above were nothing more than an enticing meal.

“L-Ladd Russo...”

In the girl's mind, the memory rose of several days before.

A memory of the killer who, with neither hesitation nor mercy, had beaten and bound her.

Though Leeza had taken the memories of many women, such an experience was still a first for her. Having never experienced death, it currently stood out as the most frightening moment in her memory.

And now the man who was the source of that fear –

Like a king, he was swaggering into the space Leeza had already marked as her own.

Don't...don't get full of yourself!

Right now, right here...what do I have to be scared of?

Unable to stand the sight of him any longer, Leeza now drove her falcons towards Ladd with the same ferocity she had sent them towards Firo. More than just killing Ladd, she wanted him to concede defeat – something that would surely happen once she tore out his eyes.

Alright, just die then.

As this thought coldly flashed through Leeza's mind, one of the falcons swooped through the air.

Falling at over ninety miles per hour, the falcon descended like a small missile towards Ladd's face – Crack.

As the sound of cracking flesh resounded, a bloody mist shrouded Ladd's face.

However –

Instead of belong to Ladd, this blood belonged the falcon, whose body now lay strewn across the yard.

Peering at it, Firo and Dragon saw that the bird's head was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey...isn't that supposed to be my trick?”

Though his smile was light-hearted, Dragon's face glistened with perspiration.

By contrast, Firo seemed slightly more at ease, as if reassured by this further proof of Ladd's “abnormality.”

Rather than stepping back when the peregrine dove forward, Ladd had instead stepped forward and bitten down on the falcon's neck.

With such swift reflexes, he could have easily dodged the bird's blow –

But rather than retreating, Ladd had responded with a counterstrike of his own.

“Huh, a bunch of lousy birds...this doesn't happen usually, does it? You're so completely certain you won't die...well, here's something for ya to think on then.”

“Aah...”

While it seemed like Leeza was manipulating the peregrines, that wasn't wholly true—instead, they were a part of her consciousness.

Consequently, with the falcon's death, Leeza had also felt part of herself disappear.

At the instant the falcon's consciousness had disappeared, Leeza had felt its death—and now found herself petrified by the memory.

“Uh..uh..aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Desperate to assuage this fear, Leeza flung several chakrams at Ladd.

If she had flung the disks from all directions, Leeza would have had a good chance at harming her enemy, but in her panic, she flung them all directly at Ladd.

“...”

Without a word, Ladd jumped onto the first chakrams—and then, using the momentum from the jump, raised his metal arm to block the rest of the disks. Caught in the cross-fire, one of the falcons fell limply to the ground.

As he moved at inhuman speed, Ladd sighed, sounding distinctly disappointed.

“Huh...compared to that Chane girl, you’re way slower.”

“I—I—no no nooo!”

Clutching her head, Leeza gazed down at the scene below her—

As if hearing her cry, Ladd glanced up—and, seeing Leeza, leered evilly .

“You’re screaming, yeah, but even so...right now, standing there, you probably still pretty safe, yeah?”

“...huh?”

“Well, you’ll learn.”

With these enigmatic words, Ladd twisted his body back and then, like a spring uncoiling, pummeled his fist into the wall.

Stone crumbling at the impact, the blow sent shockwaves that made even those inside the building feel as if an earthquake had occurred.

“Ah...”

Unable to understand what Ladd was doing, Leeza initially thought the shaking in her vision the result of dizziness.

By the time she’d grasped the situation, however, the shock of the blow had already made it impossible for her to keep her balance—

“Uh...ah....noooo!”

The next moment, Leeza was pitching head-first towards the ground.

Time seemed to slow.

As the realization of her situation washed over her, the last thing Leeza saw was Ladd, body twisted in preparation of delivering another blow—

A blow that would, upon impact, reduce its target to a bloody smear against the wall.

Nebula Corporation

Rooftop garden

In contrast to many other buildings, Nebula's rooftop was covered with grass, trees, and hanging plants. Though physically modest, the presence of pools and paths gave it the air of a small garden.

In the midst of the sun-warmed air and cool breeze—

An strange scene was currently unfolding.

Racing through the chaos and rushing out of the elevator, Jacuzzi ran onto the garden –

Only to find an odd stalemate before him.

With Graham and the other delinquents still on their way, what Jacuzzi now found himself gazing at a scene that could go either way.

As it was, now was hardly the time for contemplation.

Because in front of him, on this dizzyingly high plateau, Nice and Rail were in a desperate situation. Despite the bomb in Nice's hand, they were cornered by a group of what, from their white lab coats, seemed to be researchers or doctors.

And in front of these figures –

In stark contrast to the white-garbed men stood a bespectacled, girlishly young woman.

“Um...well, I'd really appreciate it if you give Rail back to us!”

As four men pointed their rifles at the her audience, Renee leisurely addressed these words at Nice.

“...I can't give Rail up to someone who'd shoot at us!”

At this reply, Renee unhappily pursed her lips. In a low voice, she turned to one of the men at her side.

“Well, what now? I don't know who she is, but that girls seems like one of the Chairman's guests...so it probably wouldn't good if we tried to take her by force or accidentally shot her, would it?”

“Most likely not.”

“Yeah, but haven't we already done the worst with those explosions?”

“Oh no...getting fired would be such a headache...”

As a hint of worry entered Renee’s expression of bemusement, the men around suddenly broke in with a series of even more alarming remarks –

“Ah, that’s right, director – the men back in that room were from the mafia, weren’t they?”

“From the looks of it, they weren’t even part of the Russo family either.”

“Oooh, now you’ve in for it, director...”

At this barrage of alarming news, all Renee could do was shake her head in incomprehension.

“Oh, oh, my goodness...ah...let’s think about this after we get Rail back!”

“That just brings us back to the beginning, director!”

Just as one of the researchers issued this protest, two different voices came from behind him –

“Nice!”

“Nice—!”

Attention suddenly pulled from Rail, the guards saw two groups running in from different directions.

From one side, came a tattooed youth.

And from the other, two young women—

One in a red dress, the other looking eerily calm.

Following the sound of an explosion that could have come from either Rail and Nice, Miria and Lua, who had inexplicably followed her there, found both there on the roof.

Huh? That woman...could she be from...that train...

At the combination of glasses and a distinctly unique face, Lua was reminded of the events of three years ago.

Now, however, was not the time to dwell on such memories.

Because, at the sight of her friend at gunpoint, Miria involuntarily screamed Nice’s name—

At the same time that Jacuzzi, catching sight of Nice, screamed out as well.

“Wh-wh-what? Even more guests?”

Seeing the streaming crowd of new arrivals, the white-garbed group was thrown once again into turmoil.

“Director, what now?”

Turning her gaze to the arrivals, Renee seemed to ponder for a moment—and then, clapping her hands with a smile, issued her decision—

“Alright...we’ll take the boy with the tattoo!”

An order, however, that was heard by Jacuzzi, standing several feet away.

“Ah...?”

Just as horrified understanding dawned on Jacuzzi’s face, a shot sounded from behind him.

“...ah!”

But...if I can get them to all shoot at me...then Nice and Rail could escape!

Even as these thoughts flashed through Jacuzzi’s mind, events continued to unfold around him –

And in the next moment, the white robed men were being mercilessly attacked.

Out of nowhere, a silver disk spun towards the hand of the man pointing a gun at Jacuzzi – and with a wail as metal met flesh, the gun dropped to the ground.

In the next moment, a figure stepped in front of Jacuzzi. Wielding an oversized wrench, he stood like a protective wall between the tattooed youth and the men facing him.

“How sad...let me tell you a sad, sad story...”

“Graham!”

“However...this story will only be sad for there. Personally, I have nothing against you lab coats—if we could settle this dispute peacefully, then nothing would better please a lover of life like me! And yet – before my very eyes, I see you pointing those weapons – weapons constructed to end lives! And! At this young couple – two people I consider the most important in the world! And so now, having traveled many floors and miles, here I am, to share my feats with you! My feat! My weariness! And my sorrow – I’ll share it all with you, OK? Alright –OK then!”

For Nice and the others, long-accustomed to Graham’s speeches, these bombastic words had a sense of comforting familiarity.

And yet—

For the boy standing behind Nice, Graham's words had an opposite effect.

Ah...it's him again.

That freak.

What's he pulling? What is he...why did he say that? Wasn't he was working with those lab coats...?

Did they have a disagreement? Or...wait, he wants to save me? What? How could this—

The bomber girl...and that tattooed boy...they're all friends with that man?

But...if all they wanted was to capture me, why were they so nice to me?

Which is it? They could be out to save me...or they just as likely could not...

What's going on...I don't understand...I don't understand at all—

*Aaaaaah, aaaaaaaah, I don't understaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand! Ah ah ah
ahahahahahahahahahahahahahah aaaaaaaah—*

I've had enough. I can't take it anymore, I just can't—

At that moment, three thoughts were running through Rail's mind—

The impulse to “blow everything up,” a desire to deny his world, and annoyance at all “natural” beings.

That's right...yes, alright...

The cries of the researchers, Graham's words, Jacuzzi's crying—to Rail, it was all nothing but noise. Noise, moreover, from the most hated source imagination: humans.

Graham and his lieutenants stormed the room and rushed towards the researchers—

While Jacuzzi, taking advantage of the distraction, charged towards Nice and Rail—

But to Rail, all this meant nothing.

And with that thought, one hand slipped into Nice's bag.

If he could just set off one fuse, then that would be enough to light the entire bag, sending both humans and immortals alike up in a blaze of fire—including, of course, Rail himself.

And just as Rail was prepared to embark on this fatalistic course of action—

“Rail!”

A cry broke through his careful concentration..

An instant away from self-destruction, a familiar voice sounded, like the memory of several days’ past.

In the din, it was a sound that rung clearly through the chaos.

And, turning his head—

Rail saw her, a young girl clutching a camera against her chest.

“Carol...”

And with this name, Rail’s thoughts drifted to the events of several days ago.

To that brief, brief era before his world had begun to collapse—to the last time he could remember smiling.

To the first time he could remember interacting so happily with humans.

Carol, the girl who had smiled so brightly as she, Frank, and Rail ate hotdogs together—at the sight of her, the bomb slipped through Rail’s hand.

Instead, taking a bomb from one of the side pouches, Rail turned to Carol and, in an almost dreamy trance, said two words—

“Thank you.”

“What...?”

Unable to catch Rail’s words, Carol and the Vice President rushed onto the roof—

Hearing his name, an odd smile lit on Rail’s face.

“Thanks to you...I think I’ve begun to actually like humans.”

“Rail...?”

“So...I’ll be the only one dying here.”

Rail’s memories of Carol—

As his only good memories with humans rose before him, Rail made up his mind to kill himself.

Dying didn’t scare him. He wasn’t worried about disappearing.

The only thing he feared now was pain.

But even that capacity had been slowly taken away by Huey and the others.

And yet, being unable to feel...one could think of it as a gift.

With this thought of mind—

Without a moment's more hesitation, Rail prepared to carry out his plan.

With steadfast faith that Christopher would save Frank—

At the edge of this dizzyingly tall roof, Rail clutched the bomb close to him.

And climbing over the railing nearly his height—

With a faint smile, Rail pulled the trigger.

Whether that smile came from an overlay of scars or his anticipation for death—

That, only Rail could know.

Alcatraz

Yard

The moment Leeza realized she was falling, the world seemed to freeze.

Such an impression, however, was only an illusion.

At the moment, her body was still hurtling towards the ground—

Though it was doubtful, really, whether Leeza would even reach that far.

Right now, it seemed Ladd would reduce her to a bloody smear before she ever touched the ground.

It didn't matter if she died.

Even if Leeza died, Hilton would continue to exist among her other vessels.

The thought of losing Leeza, however, was a terrifying one.

Her flesh, blood, eyes, hair, voice, bones – all those were inherited from Huey, and the thought of their loss terrified her. More than anything, she was afraid of having this intimate link with Huey cut.

As this fear coursed through her, tears welled in Leeza's eyes.

But before they even had the time to fade—

Ruthlessly, mercilessly, Ladd's arm drove forward.

Leaning back, Rail let his focus slip –

And, in the next moment, felt his body begin to fall.

A few feet below, Rail's bomb was also plummeting towards the ground, ready to burst upon impact.

As he fell, Rail knew he was heading towards death.

As time seemed to slow, Rail quietly gazed up.

Before him, the sky stretched out blue and unbroken. As this sky enveloped his vision, for just a moment –

For just a moment, Rail felt an affection for the world.

This feeling, however, came distinctly too late.

And then –

Several days later
Words of Salome Carpenter

Such a sad, sad affair.

What a stupid thing for Rail to do.

Killing himself – it obviously could solve nothing, and yet he still cast his life to the winds.

Consider, now, the explosive power of a bomb. Not even pieces of Rail were found – unsurprising, considering the heat and pressure that must have been present.

If I had been there, we might have been able to salvage him. At the very least, I would have been present to study the outcome, and thus make it into a meaningful death.

Just our luck, however, but then those group of idiot delinquents arrived.

Such a stupid, stupid thing to happen!

And just like that—

We lost Rail!

Returning to the moment of the explosion –

What happened next occurred almost automatically.

Without any thought for the consequences, Jacuzzi acted, one thought running through his head—

“That...that’s dangerous!”

This was the imperative that urged his body forward—and it was only because of the almost unconscious nature of Jacuzzi’s action that he was able to accomplish his goal.

The moment he saw Rail jump over the guard, Jacuzzi was already racing towards him. As if heedless of the consequences, he reached towards Rail’s falling body—

And like that, irrevocably fixed his fate with Rail’s.

One foot on the edge of the ledge, Jacuzzi grabbed Rail’s arm.

“H..huh?”

This, now, from Rail.

Instead of the sensation of falling, the weightlessness Rail felt was the result of someone catching him.

Is that...could that be Christopher?

But when Rail opened his eyes, he saw a visage complete unlike Christopher's – the tattooed, terrified face of a youth on the verge of tears.

“W...why?”

Just Rail stared at Jacuzzi, the bomb dropped earlier went off.

As the sound of explosion reached them, so too did the force of the blast – and as the blast hit them, Jacuzzi's hand slipped off the guard.

But just as Rail and Jacuzzi began to fall towards the same fatal end –

A figure grabbed Jacuzzi's arm.

“Nice!”

“Uh...”

Though Nice was doing her best, hauling two people up instead of just one was a drastically more difficult task. Judging by the current state of affairs, it was very likely all three would soon be plummeting towards the ground.

As if to counter that possibility, however, another figure suddenly reached over the fence.

“Rail! Grab onto me!”

“M-Miria!”

Without a moment's hesitation, Miria had leapt over the fence and extended one hand to Rail.

For a moment, Rail hesitated.

Did he truly have the right to take her hand...?

And yet, even as this thought crossed his mind, Rail was already reaching up.

Suspended between Miria and Jacuzzi, Rail felt himself slowly being pulled up—

When just then, another gust from below hit them

As inexorably strong winds tore at her, Miria's palms began to sweat – and just like Jacuzzi, her grip began to slip.

No matter how strong Nice was, if Miria fell then there was no way she would be able to pull up three people by herself. What was more, it was also doubtful how much longer Rail could hold

onto Miria. Realizing this, Carol, the Vice President, and even Lua ran towards the fence, thinking to grab Miria's hand –

But at that very moment, a figure leapt with supernatural speed towards Miria.

And as her fingers slipped on the metal, Miria screamed the name of this figure—

A figure that, to her, seemed almost a miracle.

“Isaac...!”

Mortal, this time I will grant you your wish.

And as the sky seemed to answer her prayer—

Miria let out a sudden cry.

“Uh!”

The next moment, a man's face appeared above her.

Though the wind had carried off his hat, the man paid it no mind—instead, he stood there, stance as steady as he grabbed Miria's arm.

“!”

At the sight of him, Jacuzzi and Nice's eyes widened, as if expecting the man in front of them to be an illusion—

Even as at the same time, hope rose in their chests.

When Miria had recovered from the shock, she realized there were tears in her eyes.

Isaac's grip, solidly and decidedly real, held her, and as Miria realized that he was neither an illusion nor wishful thinking, a wave of warmth rose over her.

“Isaac...Isaac!”

And as this name resounded in the air, Miria, like a lost child finding her parents, began to cry from joy.



Alcatraz

Exercise Yard

Curled into a shaking ball, Leeza prepared herself for the force of the blow.

It was, however, not a particularly strong shaking however—and Leeza realized, suddenly, that far from the agony she had been expecting, she seemed to barely even feel the shock of the fall.

“...?”

Hesitantly, Leeza slowly cracked open her eyes—

Only to find herself facing the mortal nemesis who had injured her father.

“F—Firo!”

Seeing herself so close to the man she had just tried to kill, Leeza tensed to dash away—

Her body, however, would not obey.

Because, as Leeza realized then, Firo was holding her.

“L—let go...”

Though she had meant to shout the words, Leeza suddenly realized something was wrong—and as her gaze shifted to Firo’s body, she stiffened once again.

“Firo, the hell you think you’re pulling?”

The cause of Firo’s current state, Ladd was now examining him with a disgruntled expression.

“I swear, you immortals...I just don’t get you.”

Gazing down at his metal arm, where the blood was already drifting towards Firo’s body, Ladd sighed.

“Still...that looks like it hurts like a bitch.”

At the moment, both Ladd and Leeza were staring at a spot on Firo’s torso.

In catching Leeza, Firo had also taken Ladd’s blow.

Upon impact, Ladd’s metal fist had barrelled through both flesh and bone, leaving a gaping hole behind. As Firo’s body desperately tried to heal, blood streamed back towards the gory cavity.

Had he not already been immortal, then Firo would have surely been killed in his attempt to save Leeza.

With the flinty glare of a Camorra executive still gleaming in his eyes –

Firo gave a weak smile.

“...no...it...it’s fine.”

Chicago
Nebula
Rooftop garden

“Isaac...Isaac!”

“Ah—Miria! Are you alright? You’re not hurt, are you?”

After being pulled to safety, Miria had tearfully thrown herself into Isaac’s embrace.

Because standing there—irrefutably, without a doubt—was Isaac, and on his face too was a kind of wonderment.

Watching this scene occurs from the edges, Renee seemed oblivious to the warm reunion as she issued her next orders to the researchers.

“Ah...terribly sorry to cut in on this reunion, but if you could...it’d technically still be self-defense if you shot these folks in the legs, wouldn’t it?”

“But director—what about that man with the wrench? Won’t he cause trouble?”

Contemplating the men in front of them, currently outnumbered three to one, Renee hummed for a moment as she thought.

“Ah, those people...would they be allied with the Russo family?”

“Huh? ...ah, well, now that you say that, I think I did see some of them at the Russo mansion.”

Hearing this reply, Renee clapped her hands, a bright smile on her face.

“Well then, I’ve got it! This man with the wrench seems like the loyal type...so if we shoot his friend in the foot, he’d be sure to listen and let us kill him, right?”

“...if you say so.”

With more than a hint of exasperation in his voice, the researcher nonetheless obeyed and raised his gun at Graham once again, shifting a few inches to aim at Shaft’s foot—

Only for his arm to suddenly be twisted towards the sky.

“Aaah!”

As the man’s arm twisted up, so too did the muzzle of the gun—and as the bullet entered his skull, the man’s head exploded in blood.

“!”

At the sound of gunfire, all eyes turned towards the source of the noise—

“Hello, all.”

—to alight on a red-eyed demon, looking monstrously cheerful in the sunlight.

“Christopher!”

Through his fog of exhaustion, Rail cried the name of his idol.

At the sound of Rail’s greeting, Christopher waved a hand and gave a short “hi,” before walking towards the group of researchers.

“Ah! Miria, look! That’s the same magician from New York last year!”

“Wow, amazing! So right then...was that a magic trick?”

But even as Isaac continued in the same cheerful vein and Miria’s voice picked up, Nice and Jacuzzi wore nervous expressions.

“...really took your time there, didn’t you?”

In response to Graham’s jibe, Christopher only shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“...well, there were a lot of people trying to use the elevator.”

With this response, Christopher turned to examine the man he had just killed—only to discover the spilled blood was already flying towards the man’s head.

“Quick, Miria, look! There’s the trick!”

“I know! It’s shooooowtime!”

Overhearing this exchange between the lovers, Christopher smiled and spread out his hands.

“Ah, that’s fantastic—it’s so good you can’t die.”

“?”

As the researchers stared at each other, Christopher, empty-handed, began walking towards them.

Although instantly alert, the researchers had no idea what their foe wanted. With Renee still indecisive, they were left without any idea of how to react.

In the end, however, their actions at that moment were irrelevant.

No matter what they tried, it would have made no difference to Christopher.

“Alright...ladies and gentlemen, heeello! I’m Christopher Shouldered, and I’ll be performing for you today! Today, for your pleasure...a little trick of human regeneration!”

Clapping his hands, Christopher grinned.

The next moment, he was upon the researchers and, in one fluid motion, twisting the gun aimed at him towards another researcher.

And with the sound of a firecracker going off, an explosion of smoke and blood began the show.

As Graham joined Christopher on the stage, one by one, the researchers slowly to go down.

On the sidelines, Isaac and Miria were wildly clapping, while Nice and Jacuzzi and observed the battle without surprise.

And beside them, his eyes rapt with awe, Rail watched Christopher and the blue-garbed demon work.

Not even noticing that the whisper of “blow it up” was gone, he felt suddenly, immeasurably content.

And slowly, in his heart—

Alcatraz

“Ah ha...Firo, really, whaddya think you’re doing? That girl tried to kill you—what are you, some kind of masochist?”

Though the still-healing hole in his side was undoubtedly causing him unbelievable pain, Firo, teeth gritted, still managed to give a reply.

“I...I just don’t believe in hurting women or kids.”

“Huh, yeah, you mentioned that before...huh, so that’s it, then?”

With a laugh, Ladd threw his hand into the air.

“Still...me, though—what reason do I have to let this girl go? Sure, you got this thing about not hurting women or kids, but I sure as hell don’t. If I let her go now, what’s in it for me?”

Hearing Ladd’s unreasonable demands, Firo paused a moment before slowly nodding – and then, in a voice too low for Leeza to hear, whispered his proposition.

“Look, if you let her go...later, I’ll tell you how to kill immortals.”

“Deal!”

And as he accepted Firo’s offer, Ladd relaxed. Devoid of his former murderous intent, he clamped a friendly hand on Firo’s shoulder.

“So, Peter Pan...tell me, how’s it workin’ out for you, this whole saving kids thing?”

At Ladd’s jibe, Firo smiled wryly and responded in kind.

“First...why don’t you tell me how you plan on getting rid of that clock, Mr. Croc?”

With Ladd currently pacified, Leeza took the opportunity to finally ask Firo the question that had been nagging her.

“You...why did you save me?”

“Didn’t I just tell you? I don’t hurt women or kids.”

Although Firo had earlier radiated nothing but deathly intent, Leeza felt none of this coldness as she trembled in his arms.

Far from reassuring her, however, his explanation only further confused her.

“But...I...I wanted to kill you—I was trying to kill you. Even after I told you I would kill you and your friends—why, then, would you still try to save me?”

Nebula Corporation
Roof

“Why...”

Standing by a joyful Miria and Isaac, Rail had been standing transfixed by the sublimity of Christopher’s battle.

Suddenly, however, something pulled him from his reverie, and he turned to Jacuzzi.

“Huh?”

“Why would you...you just met me, you knew nothing about me, so why...why would you risk your life for me?”

And on a prison miles away to the West, a Camorra executive gave this reply—

“Do I have to have a reason? I mean, seeing a girl falling off a roof—anyone would do the same, right?”

At the same time, miles away on a lake-bordered city—

The tattooed crybaby gave his answer.

“I...I d-didn’t have a reason. B-by the time I realized what I was doing, I was...I’d ah, ah, ah—already ran over. Just thinking about it now...I...I...that was so scary!”

Nebula Corporation
Below

“Woah...to build such strong creatures...Huey truly is impressive.”

Spurred by fear, Renee hastily run towards the floor level of Nebula.

The moment Christopher sprang into battle, Renee had understood there was nothing she could do—and so, weighing her options, had opted to flee the scene.

With the last three floors of the building devoted to research, Renee was currently headed towards the sanctuary of the sixth development room. With this room close to the ground, Renee was now left with several options.

“Hm, I guess I should come up with something...should I ask someone here to help me? Or just do it myself—ah, I’ve got it! I’ll keep Frank as a hostage!”

Cheerfully pronouncing these dire intentions, Renee opened the lab door—

Only to find an unexpected scene before her.

“Huh?”

Before her unbelieving eyes, the researchers lay around the room’s wreckage.

Besides several unconscious men, stood a woman in a green dress. Close by, standing next to several other researchers who seemed to be dazed, stood a man with his hat pulled over his eyes.

Instantly, Renee knew it was Sickie and the Poet in front of her.

But it was the sight of the man they were with, however, that made Renee widen her eyes—

The same moment
Chicago
Nebula Corporation
Roof

"Hey, Isaac...how'd you know to come here?"

“D-did Nick and Jake take you here?”

Although they felt awkward cutting into Isaac’s reunion with Miria, Jacuzzi and Nice found themselves unable to contain their curiosity.

Hearing these questions, Isaac, still holding Miria, gave them a blank expression.

“Huh? Nick? I didn’t see him anywhere.”

“W-what? Then...then how did you know where to find us?”

Could this be the power of love?

That was the wild thought currently spinning through Jacuzzi's brain.

However, the answer Isaac gave was far simpler.

"Well, I made this new friend on the train...and there was another friend I made in prison...and when I got off, they took me here!"

The same moment
Chicago
Nebula Corporation
Ground Level

"W...what? This...this is...how? Wh...wh...what?"

Staring in front of her, Renee could hardly believe her eyes.

Before her, the man next to Sickle and the Poet gave her a small smile.

"It has been quite a while...Professor Palamades."

In all the world, there were only a few who knew her by that name.

And this man—

Oh, she had no doubt he was one of them.

"H...Huey, w-what a surprise to see you here."

Huey Laforet.

One of Renee's old acquaintances—and one who should have been, at that moment, trapped in the depths of Alcatraz, in a cell designed specifically for the alchemist and terrorist.

Rather than a prisoner's uniform, however, he now wore the clothes of polished politician. Incongruous with this appearance of respectability were the bandages wrapped around his head, covering his left eye. Seeing her fellow immortal thus, Renee knew that "Felix Walken" had accomplished her mission.

Then...why would he be here first?

Just last night, her reports had told her that Huey Laforet was in Alcatraz Island. Even if he had managed to escape and hop on the first train to Chicago, there was no way he could have reached her this quickly.

Then how did he get here? The most probable answer would be an airplane...but where would he have gotten one there?

Seeing Renee's shocked expression, Huey laughed softly.

"It's been a while since I've seen you so surprised, Professor Palamades. When we were your students, you used to look the same way during each of Elmer's pranks."

"...uh...say....what did you come here for?"

"What do you think?"

"To...reminisce a little over old times?"

"Ah, professor...you really haven't changed at all. Though if it had been Elmer here and not I, I suppose what you said would have been true, wouldn't it?"

Watching Renee's obvious distress, Huey gave a faint smile.

"Make no mistake...even if they had taken his eye first, Elmer wouldn't hesitate to catch up with an old acquaintance."

"Well, Elmer never did have much sense."

As a wistful expression crossed Renee's face, Huey softly laughed as well—

And as he did, his right hand dove for Renee, fire shooting from his palm.

Or rather, from the flamethrower he now aimed towards Renee, who had jumped back from the flames.

"N-no—ah ah—aaaaaah!"

The next moment, Huey had pinned her against the wall.

"Now that you have my left eye, I look forward to seeing what you do, professor."

With an almost romantic gentleness, Huey reached forward to remove Renee's glasses.

"But first...I think I'd like some new material for my experiments, too..."

Gently, he patted the eyelid of Renee's left eye.

"This way, we'll be equal."

"...y-you...only one of them..."

Renee seemed to have understood her situation.

With a deep sigh, Renee gave Huey a shaky smile.

“...you’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt, right?”

Hearing this request, Huey gave an almost teasing reply.

“How unfortunate, then...I don’t think I brought any anesthesia.”

“H-huh? Ah, then...w-well, there sh-should be some in one of the l-labs o-o-o-over there...o-oh, Huey, please listen, please just a little mercy – ah ah ah ah aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“And now...you have Frank back again.”

Renee lying unconscious in front of him, Huey gingerly picked up one of the bottles from her lab and dropped her left eye into it.

As the bloody organ tried to dart towards Renee, Huey firmly closed the lid.

Gazing at an unconscious Renee, Huey gave a soft laugh.

“Well, Professor Palamades, now that you have only one eye, I suppose you’ll be bumping into things even more often...”

“Do be careful, now.”

The same time

Alcatraz

As the Caucasian and African-American had been sent to the medical unit, Firo, Ladd, and Dragon began walking back inside the building. Though it was uncertain whether they would be reprimanded or allowed to return to the yard, Leeza found herself unable to attempt anything.

At that moment, the turmoil in her heart consumed all her attention.

...liar.

Liar. Big fat horrible liar, liar liar liar—

But no, that's not right.

This man, Firo...he hurt Daddy...he's my enemy, my enemy!

Right then, he was talking about killing Daddy, about devouring him!

...but, but...that's not all right, either.

Then right then...why did he save me?

He's lying—he had to have a reason.

Because, otherwise...what he just did...

Unable to comprehend her emotions, Leeza's thoughts spun in the same circles over and over again.

As the warders slowly came out, questions began to fly through the air:

“Why's there a kid here?”

“Hey, little girl, where'd ya come from?”

“The hell is going on with these birds...”

“Are you okay?”

Such reactions were no more than what Leeza had prepared for. In fact, she had originally planned to use her unassuming appearance to land her in the prison hospital. Then, she would escape and use another body to find Huey.

Right now, however, all such thoughts were far from Leeza's mind.

Instead, all that remained was a single thought and a web of tangled emotions.

He's not Daddy...

Then why...why do I think...

That right then...that was really cool...

Ten minutes later
Chicago
Nebula Corporation
Rooftop

Gazing out at the chaos-strewn landscape, Karl Muybridge began to laugh.

“Ah—ah ha ha ha, how fantastic! To think—that an old man like me could still be so happy!”

“You do realize that for our employees, this is nothing short of a disaster.”

Having said his part, Rubik crunched a sugar cube between his teeth.

Just as Christopher and Graham had managed to stun all the researchers, a massive group of young delinquents had barged onto the roof. Supposedly, they had been right behind Graham as he had rushed up the stairs, only to tire as they neared the top – and yet, when the police had begun to swarm the building, they had been quick enough to disperse.

This was because Ricardo, after finally reaching the roof, had led Jacuzzi and the others away through a back door.

In the wake of such a situation, with irrevocable losses done to his company, Nebula’s chairman stood in the light of the setting sun, surveying the rubble before him –

And smiled.

“Well, after this today...I wonder what will happen next?”

“If you’re thinking about that now...for us, it’s undoubtedly a huge loss.”

“Yes, yes, but still...because of it, we now know a little more about what Huey and his followers are doing. That, I think, can be called a victory.”

“That’s pointless. Even if he wasn’t immortal, what good would come from getting into this game with him?”

In response to Rubik’s sharp words, Karl only spread his arms magnanimously.

“All of life is just one big ruckus! Accept it or fight it, but all of our fates are intertwined! Such a power—we humans can’t fight it! Even if it’s just one person, they’re already involved...and if

they challenge us, well, then the only proper way to respond is to risk it all and fight back, isn't it? Otherwise, it just wouldn't be interesting!"

"If you're going to gamble, then please just do it with your own life

I've been with Bartolo and Beriam for a long time...if this were my company, then we could do so much better.

...this damn idiot...how has no one replaced him yet?

With a helpless expression, Rubik shook his head. Taking a row of sugar cubes from his bottle, he began readily crunching them.

By his side, Karl watched his companion's actions for a moment before issuing a decidedly unprofessional request.

"...you know, you really seem to like those cubes...care to let me try one?"

"You wish."

Somewhere in Chicago

Intent on dodging the police, the gang of delinquents hurtled down Chicago's streets.

With Rail still injured, one of the group was currently carrying him on piggyback.

Being carried like this...it really is annoying.

Even now, Rail's mind was still troubled.

Because with his mind finally calm, Rail was suddenly hyperaware of his original goal.

Even if it meant working with this group of humans, he was going to rescue Frank –

As these thoughts passed through Rail's mind, a voice whispered in his ear.

"Don't worry—Huey and the others already rescued Frank. He's safe."

At the sound of this voice, Rail understood that it was Sham currently carrying him.

"...you really are everywhere, aren't you."

Though he spoke sarcastically, Rail's heart lightened at the news that Frank was safe.

Hearing these words even through the din, Sham gave an equally sharp response.

“Well, what now then? Going back to Huey?”

“...”

Though the question was a natural one, it nonetheless gave Rail pause. Although he wanted to see Frank, for the moment, Rail decided that he would have to be content with a glance from afar.

Because right now, he had a message to give Huey.

“Tell Huey I say, go die, you bastard, I don’t need you! And then, tell Frank, I’m coming for you.”

“...you seriously want me to pass that on?”

No response, however, was forthcoming.

Realizing that his companion was asleep, Sham only smiled wryly and continued running, content, for now, with merely following the others.

Even as he approached sleep, however, Rail’s mind still drifting—speaking, now, to a figure who was no longer there.

Hey, Chris.

I guess I can’t help it.

Ordinary people didn’t save me.

Instead...it was a group of people just as broken as we are.

To charge onto that roof just to save me, someone they’d only just met...only a group of lunatics would do that.

So Chris...I guess I’m one of those lunatics now, too.

So next time...next time—

I’ll be there to pull you up.

No matter how unnatural, how unchangeable you are...I’ll definitely be holding your hand.

And until then...with these broken people...

I'll keep living.

And when it's time, Frank, Sickle, Chi, Adele, the Poet...I'll see them there as well. And won't Huey and Leeza be surprised then...

Is this supposed to be fun?

Because it is fun, Chris...it really is...

Even as he drifted off to sleep, Rail still continued speaking to Christopher.

And, as if smiling down on this sight, the sky above shone brightly—

While before them, a golden line taking them from one city to another —

Under the flickering shadows of the skyscrapers, the road stretched on.

With no concerns for good or evil, the road stretched forward, shining the way towards new destinations.

And in the shadows, far away from this light—

Several trucks stood in front of Nebula Corporation.

In one were Frank, Sickle, the Poet, and various vessels of Sham. As its neighbors took off, this one headed towards the nearest hospital.

Once the trucks were all gone, Huey Laforet turned to his companion.

“Such a rare event, the two of us here...and yet you haven't spoken a word.”

“U-u-ugh, y, y-you bastard. T-t-take away E, E, Elmer, a-and you're j, j, just an-any other m, m, ma, ma-madman. Wh, wh, wh-why w-would an, an, any-anyone want t, t, t-to do with y-you.”

“Not quite the words I'd expect from a drug addict...but I won't deny it.”

“D-d-did you c, c, c-come here f-fr-from p, p, p-prison?”

At Begg's question, however, Huey only softly laughed before turning to the other man beside him.

“Well then...Mr. Bartolo, it is an honor to dine with you. I do wonder, though...now that you’ve found me, what do you plan to do? Become immortal too?”

“I have no interest in that.”

With bodyguards flanking him on either side, the old man coolly lit a cigar.

“My goal was only to see you...to finally meet the terrorist Beriam is so obsessed with.”

“Well...in that case, my illustrious Mr. Bartolo, how do you see me?”

“You’re a kid.”

Hearing this, Huey only seemed amused.

“Well, that’s quite flattering.”

“I meant no judgment of the sort. Whether or not some boy is good or bad, he still has the potential to change the world.”

Faced with a companion who had outlived him several times over, these were the level words Bartolo spoke.

“Alright...and what do you plan after this?”

“Well, now that it seems as though I won’t be able to carry out my initial project here...I suppose I’ll just stay around, perhaps searching for the next site to start my experiments...”

As he spoke, a soft, almost childlike smile drifted on Huey’s face. With scrupulous manners, he then addressed the mafia leader before him.

“First, however...I’m afraid I’ll have to impinge on your hospitality for this meal.”

The sun beat down, new roads glittering to life before fading with the light.

And in the newly arrived dark, a new road slowly emerged.

A new, bold road, a stage set only for the ambitious and the mad—

And like that, this day—

In the middle of the commotion, the man called Huey Laforet quietly released his poison into the city.

With even Huey unsure of what the consequences it would cause—

The vortex continued to spin.

Epilogue: All Return When the Time is Right, and...

エピローグ
奴らは時々帰っていく



That afternoon Alcatraz

“Huh. Well, I’ll be damned—”

In compliance with their deal, Firo had dutifully told Ladd the secret of killing immortals—and yet, musing over it, Ladd couldn’t help wondering if he’d been somehow duped.

To be sure, he doubted Firo had outright lied. When he spoke, Ladd had detected no falsehood in his words, and besides, Ladd doubted Firo was the type of guy to renegade on a promise.

(“To kill an immortal, another immortal has to put their right hand on their head and think, “I want to devour this person.”)

Such a simple answer. No wonder, then, that Firo was always so vigilant, with Huey Laforet nearby.

At the same time—Ladd had not anticipated that if he wanted to kill an immortal, he would have to become one himself.

And what was more, if he killed Huey, then he would gain all his experiences too.

“Is that really how you kill one of ’em? Even after that guy’s dead...he’ll still be rattling around my head?”

An odd question to ask right now, but in truth, Ladd had other worries.

“So...if I become one of ’em...I’ll won’t have to worry about dying?”

For a man like Ladd, in whom murderous intent rose up at the thought of people ignorant of their mortality, such an existence was completely out of the question.

Stuck between these two options, Ladd stared at the ceiling of his solitary cell and pondered the situation.

If Lua and I both became immortal...

Living for a billion years...I wouldn’t mind that. So then, I’d kill all the humans and devour all the immortals, and then for last, I’d devour Lua?

...ah yeah, but I’ll leave Firo. Kid’s a friend, after all.

For a man like Ladd, the thought that “no one can devour Firo” was a surprisingly normal one—even if whatever friendship between them was purely imaginary.

In the end, his ultimate decision was similarly unexpected—Ladd, who had ruthlessly killed so many men, resolved to be a model prisoner.

Well, anyway, I'll have get outta here first and talk about it with Lua.

Earlier, the entity called Sham had—for whatever reason—promised Ladd that he would no longer touch Lua.

Though he had no way of trusting Sham's words, currently keeping out of trouble sounded more sensible than trying to escape.

Not, of course, that Ladd doubted he *could* escape. But if he tried, however, he would inevitably have to kill several of the armed guards—and to be honest, Ladd was rather fond of the guards on the island. Their willingness to face death, at the least, was something he respected.

Yeah...I'd rather not kill these guys.

...aah, but once I get out of here, the killing can really begin.

Sunk in this bloody fantasy, Ladd grinned, fist clenching before him front.

As he did, the scent of fresh blood seemed to fill in the air—

That same afternoon
Chicago
Gunslack Hotel

“Ah, what a truly magnificent meal that was. Truly, I would rank it among the top seven dining experiences in my life.”

“...it's...it's a miracle you could eat at all with *those* people there.”

Hearing Carol's faint words and seeing her drained expression, the Vice President gave her an icy look.

“Not the mafia, nor businessmen, nor politicians...tell me, Carol, with whom will you finally feel safe talking to?”

For the time being, Carol and the Vice President were enjoying a brief respite.

At present, they already had tickets for the departure. However, because they'd been asked to scout out the general situation while in Chicago, the Vice President had decided they would stay in the city for a few more days.

Leaving the upscale restaurant where they'd dined with Bartolo, the Vice President and Carol arrived to find police standing on the corners of their hotel's street.

Too tense to eat a bite during earlier, Carol now continued murmuring as they entered the hall.

"It's just not *natural*, the way the Vice President can speak so *calmly* with anyone..."

"Well then, whom could you speak with?"

For a moment, Carol paused, at a loss of words—and then everything began spilling out.

"T-that person at the other end, the one with a bandage over his eye...if it'd just been him, I'd be perfectly fine!"

"..."

"Such a good-looking man...he looks kind of sad though, with the bandage, but in a manly way..."

Hearing Carol speak thus, the Vice President—knowing this particular individual far more well—narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

Even if he had, Carol wouldn't have heard him, as she was too busy currently fantasizing about her imaginary meeting with the man.

"And from what my reporter instincts tell me...he has to be an important person! So come on, Vice President! If we catch up to him, we'll have a headliner for sure!"

"...and a man like that, one who would calmly dine with mafia members...you wouldn't stop to consider whether or not chasing after him would be dangerous at all?"

"Ah, well...but...he seems nice enough?"

"Well, I suppose in some matters, your judgment is sound enough..."

Appraising Carol coolly for a moment, the Vice President shook his head.

"I certainly won't stop you, Carol, but you should know...I have a suspicion this won't be as simple as you believe it to be."

“Y-you, think what? Of—of course not! A...although he is very handsome...so when the time comes, there’ll probably be a lot of other girls trying to get his attention too. Ah, I guess that *could* make my job harder...”

I don’t believe that’s quite it.

The Vice President considered telling Carol what he knew about the man with the eyepatch, but decided to keep quiet, not wanting to further agitate her.

Deciding thus, the Vice President began almost idly talking.

“These recent events...they have Sham and Hilton’s touch all over them...”

With this assessment, the Vice-President smiled.

“Well, no doubt Sham will be in touch soon, then.”

Beside him, however, Carol heard none of this—

Because at present, the only sound resounding through the room was that of her empty stomach.

The mind of Ricardo Russo

The moment Sham truly gained freedom...was in fact, the same as the moment he failed to overcome a vessel.

Before then, it was true that he had possessed many vessels—but no matter what, all these resources were turned definitely towards another’s goal.

No matter how much power he accrued, Sham had still been Huey’s tool, faithfully following his orders and unable to dream of doing anything else.

In his mind, however, Sham remembers the moment when this began to change—

The one and only time he had miscalculated and thus failed to take over a vessel.

Searching to infiltrate the ranks of a mafia organization, Sham had aimed to take possession of the heir, the grandson of the current leader.

Although his target was merely a child, Sham felt no guilt in taking the boy’s life.

But then—

Just as Sham was about to truly take over, he discovered a thoroughly unexpected fact.

He isn't...this isn't Ricardo Russo. This is...she is...

Lydia Russo.

A girl.

What kind of joke is this? My job is to take men, not women...if Leeza finds out I've taken one of Hilton's rightful vessels, would she consider it a betrayal?

At the moment, he decided to stop fighting. Better, he supposed, to let the girl devour him instead.

Another surprise, however, was in store for him.

The moment Sham decided to yield—

He realized that Lydia had already made the same decision.

Chicago, outskirts

Car interior

“Since then, because neither of us were willing to lead, Sham and I have led an odd existence. While we share the same mind, I continue to have my freedom.”

“Huh, so that’s it, then...you must have *really* thought the world was useless back then.”

“I suppose.”

Driving slowly on the outskirts of Chicago, Ricardo was currently fulfilling her earlier promise to come clean to Christopher.

“Hm...well, what does Sham want out of all of this?”

“Concerning that...”

Though possessing knowledge beyond the scope of any individual, it was through encountering Ricardo that Sham, for the first time, had access to another’s thoughts.

As a result, he began reevaluating what how he had affected the lives of his other vessels—until one day, he was filled with an undeniable unease.

Though Sham had previously found nothing wrong with obeying Huey's orders, doubt now began to rise in his mind.

In the presence of this new, more typical view of the world—

Sham began to realize how truly abnormal his existence had been. .

“Since then, against Huey's instructions, Sham has continued expanding his consciousness in order to increase his knowledge of the world.”

“Huh...but what about feeling guilty about killing?”

“On that...technically, Sham doesn't consider what he does as “killing” his host. However, he does seem to have been feeling some guilt lately, so he's started curbing the number of vessels he takes.”

Though Ricardo's words were calm, Christopher was keenly aware that every word of their conversation was also reaching Sham. It was the kind of situation that would have driven anyone crazy—but rather than mentioning these thoughts, he merely changed the subject.

“Then what was this about?”

“Ultimately, Sham wants to surpass Huey—to become a being greater than his master. In terms of his recent actions, Sham was trying to stop Huey from carrying out an experiment. To be more exact...it's the type of experiment that, if carried out, would result in many deaths...”

“Sounds like fun!”

Seeing Christopher's wide grin, all Ricardo could do was shake her head.

“If Sham was of the same opinion, then I suppose Rail would have long since reduced this city to rubble.”

“So...does that make you Chicago's unsung hero, then?”

“This is a serious matter—don't joke around. But...it is rather ironic that it's only because I thought the world was worthless that Sham and I came to share a mind...”

Ricardo's expression remained unchanged.

For a while, no one said nothing, the hum of the engine the only noise in the silence.

A silence with which, to be certain, both Ricardo and Christopher were already well acquainted.

As Ricardo stared quietly out the window, lost in thought, Christopher spoke.

“So, right now...you still think this world’s worthless?”

A distinctly abrupt question, despite Christopher’s casual tone. After a moment of quiet contemplation, Ricardo seemed to decide on the simplest answer that came to mind.

“Right now...not completely, no.”

Hearing the reluctance in Ricardo’s quiet words, Christopher grinned.

“Well, great! Nothing’s more natural than respecting human life, so glad you could come around!”

Christopher’s words couldn’t have been more cheerfully if he had been speaking about himself.

Still gazing out the window, Ricardo’s reply was almost inaudible.

“...or, maybe, you’re the one who changed me.”

“Huh? What? Sorry, don’t think I caught that.”

Even before Ricardo had finished, Christopher was already speaking. Ricardo, glancing at Christopher’s face, caught the edge of knowing smile that said he heard everything perfectly.

When Ricardo spoke, her tone were rather more heated than usual.

“Your hearing’s perfectly fine...you idiot.”

“So...any plans after this?”

“Well, to start, I’d like to revive the Russo family.”

Just as the silence between them was beginning to become awkward, this small exchange reinitiated the conversation.

“Ugh, that’s such a *boring* answer.”

“I may be convinced into singing and enjoying nature, but there are still limits to what even you can do.”

At Ricardo's reference to their earlier conversation, Christopher gave a wry, almost surprised laugh. A small smile played over Ricardo's lips, as though she had intentionally spoken to elicit exactly such a reaction.

Still smiling, she now gave voice to what she had thinking since the day before.

"According to Sham, there seems to be a very intriguing organization in New York....I was thinking we ought to pay a visit."

"Well, that sounds much more fun!"

"Would you consider coming along? With luck, there's the chance that we'd stumble across Rail or the Poet, or even Graham, come to think of it."

Such words were spoken not as simple speculation, but rather as knowledge gleaned from Sham's network of informants.

After a moment of pretending to ponder the question, Christopher spoke, giving the answer he had decided on since the beginning.

"If it makes you feel better, I plan on making the most of the trip."

After setting their course east, Christopher spoke once again.

"Oh, and that's right...while we're at it, you should think about recruiting Rail into the Russo family."

"If you think so, then certainly...still, I don't really see how Rail and I could get along."

"Oh, that—don't worry about that. Actually, I think the two of you would actually understanding each other quite well."

"And what, exactly, makes you think this?"

Though his words seemed to differ little from his usual nonsense, Christopher shook his head with surprise, a peculiar, mischievous smile lighting his face.

"Well, the two of you...I mean, you *do* have a lot in common."

"We do?"

Seeing Ricardo's blank expression, Christopher mentally patted himself on the back.

And, with the wide grin of someone exposing a magic trick, he turned against to Ricardo—

“So...you’re telling me you really don’t know?”

Transcontinental Train to New York Car Interior

“...and then, this is what I told him: tough! Luck!”

“Wow Isaac, you’re so amazing!”

“You know, I feel like I’ve heard this story a while back...”

Even as Jacuzzi’s words seemed to throw the conversation for a loop, Isaac was undeterred in his enthusiastic reply.

“That’s riiiiight! I’ve been telling it for years!”

“Wow Jacuzzi, you must have a great memory!”

“Wh...what?”

In the third-class car heading for New York, Isaac and Miria were as cheerful as ever, seeming unaffected by the recent events.

Amidst the whirlwind of their joyful reunion, Miria still hadn’t confronted Isaac about going to jail without telling her. Just being together, it seemed, was enough for the couple to return to their usual carefree cheerfulness.

These two people...they’re like two puzzle pieces made for each other.

...how lovely.

As these thoughts passed through his head, Jacuzzi glanced next to him, where Nice was sitting—

“Woah...and with just a few bombs, the whole place’ll come crashing down?”

“Exactly! For this to work though, you have to make sure the explosions happen*just* so...”

“Oh, okay. And if you put *that* inside *there*, then it’ll be even more effective than blocking the pipes...”

Currently, Nice and Rail were in a deep discussion Jacuzzi found incomprehensible. Watching them, it seemed to him as though Nice never quite looked this animated during their conversations.

No...that’s can’t be true...can it?

Just as Jacuzzi began to feel uneasy sense, the other gang members crowded towards him, faces full of mischevious intent.

“Hey Jacuzzi...don’t tell me you’re getting *jealous* over that little punk?”

“O-of course not!”

Seeing Jacuzzi frantically shaking his head, his companions pounced once again—

“Ooh, so it’s true then! It is!”

“Hey, I think he’s gonna cry again!” “Ugh, enough already—start acting like a man!” “That, or start crying pearls instead!” “And then give them to me.” “Hya-ha! Hyaaa—”

“Q...quit it!”

Still shaking his head, Jacuzzi was now visibly blushing.

Observing their leader’s reaction, an odd feeling came over one of the delinquents. Eyebrows raised, he spoke—

“Hey....wait a minute, don’t tell me you’re *actually* jealous?”

“Wait, are you saying....”

“No, it can’t be...can it? Don’t tell me no one told you?”

“?”

Unsure what to make of this reaction, Jacuzzi glanced between his companions in confusion.

“Ah...well, see...when the doc got to the factory, he hadda look at Rail’s body....and, well...”

And, at his next words, Jacuzzi and the other shocked delinquents could only silently gape.

“Rail’s a girl.”

Car Interior

In response to Christopher’s revelation, Ricardo’s eyes only widened.

A few moments ago, Sham too had received the revelation about Rail’s gender.

That the information was clearly new to him as well was evident, and so Ricardo found it difficult to mask her surprise.

“I never even suspected...”

“Well, the only people to know were me, Huey, and some of the researchers from the Lamia. Personally, I really wanted to see what’d happen if you walked in while Rail was washing up, see if she’d scream and all...”

“You’re disgusting.”

Narrowing her eyes, Ricardo glared at the man who called himself her “friend.”

In response, Christopher only laughed, stepping on the gas pedal as they sped forward.

“Well, in this world, there are lots of things we don’t know yet, huh?”

“...”

“So! If you want to give up on the world, first you have to see a little more of it! That’s what I just realized.”

“Is that so...well, perhaps you’re right.”

And so again, the car fell into silence—

And, unable to stop herself, Ricardo began to laugh.

The sound of Christopher’s voice soon joined here, and soon the car vibrated with both the sound of the engine and the sound of laughter.

As the sun slowly set in the west, the car headed east.

And so full of laughter, this sleek car headed unwaveringly towards its destination.

In this way, the pair headed towards New York.

Closer, ever closer...

Transcontinental Railroad Third-Class Compartment

Though traveling together, Jacuzzi's companions occupied several different train compartments.

In one of these small spaces, Graham now sat, idly spinning his smaller wrench.

Apparently, even he wasn't foolish enough to attempt the same trick with the larger wrench there—or so thought Shaft, sitting beside and watching him.

"Oh, right, I heard something recently..."

"Hm?"

"So that Ricardo kid, apparently he's heading to New York to set up the Russo family there."

"..."

In reality, this was a decision Ricardo had only just made. As part of Sham, however, Shaft could relay this information immediately.

At this news, Graham's wrench lurched to an abrupt stop, a thoughtful expression coming over its owner's face—

An expression that was, in the next moment, replaced by a manic grin.

"...how wonderful! Oh, give us a wonderful, wonderful story now!"

"...again?"

"Placido Russo is still missing, and his grandson is here to take his place...there's something suspicious about it all. And such a young child, too—could this boy really have the daring and cunning for this position? Certainly, master Ricardo is an extraordinary child – but is he the type of leader I can follow? Oh, what to do, what to do...? As if that has to be asked! Right now, our job is to prepare a proper place for Ladd to come back to! If master Russo is incompetent, my first action will be to help Ladd regain his place...if he turns out to be brilliant, I'll wait to confer with Ladd...ah, so many possibilities! It seems...truly, the world is nothing but a series of roiling waves! Oh, such waves! And those who cannot keep up are doomed to be swallowed by others'

waves. And so...we must go forward, like Moses parting the stormy seas! Am I right or am I right?"

"I'm pretty sure your nonsense will drown us all before that."

Shaft's glare had no effect on Graham, who merely twirled his wrench before addressing the woman sitting across from him.

"And so that this lady can peacefully stay there, we'll wait for Ladd."

"..."

Hearing these words, the woman said nothing, only responding with a faint, smile.

Cheeks flushed, her eyes gazed into the distance, her whole being somewhere far away.

Right now, all she could think of was the man who had promised to kill her—the murderer who was also her dear, beloved finace.

And so, with such passengers aboard, the train hurtled ever forward.

Heading ever, ever closer to New York City—

January 1935
New York City
Central Station

"...alright."

So he'd returned.

Left eye covered by an eyepatch, the boy in the train station took a deep breath of the New York air.

Although it only been two months since he left the city, it had been enough time to induce a deep longing for the city.

While Victor had been furious at the news of Huey's escape, he had nonetheless let Firo go, contented with Firo's information on Sham and Leeza.

I didn't tell him about what happened to my left eye...but it's not like it would make any difference.

Remembering Victor's evident annoyance at finding himself outmaneuvered by Huey, Firo's mood lightened and his steps were almost cheerful as he stepped into the station.

Once in the station, however, Firo's memories turned darker as worry began to weigh him down.

"...how do I even *start* to explain..."

If he told everyone Victor had taken him hostage, would they believe him? Cowardice could only be tolerated so far, and it was all too plausible that he might be put to death.

If that happens, I wonder who'll devour me?

The only way to execute an immortal, after all, was to have another immortal devour him. If that was so, then he hoped the one to "eat" him would be Ennis—that way, in Firo's overtly idealistic thinking, at least she would still be able to live on.

In the world he lived in, however, even such small comfort was useless. Fully understanding this and fighting with the urge to vomit from fear and anxiety, Firo walked forward.

Suddenly, a cry interrupted his train of thoughts—

"Firo! It's Firo!"

"Huh?"

Turning around, he was met by the sight of a young girl carrying a paper bag. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, and gazing at her youthful face, Firo felt a memory stirring in his mind—

"Wait...Annie?"

Heading towards him now was Annie, a waitress at Alveare, the Martillo family's bar. From what he could recall, she'd been working there for less than half a year, but her diligence and attention to detail meant that he remembered her clearly.

Huh...to think I'd run into someone I know on my way back.

Unable to take her presence as a positive omen, Firo gave her a stiff smile.

Seeing it, Annie's face broke into a wide grin, and she grabbed Firo's hand and began talking excitedly.

"Hey, where are you going? Everyone's been so worried!"

“Um, well...there’s just some stuff I need to do...”

“Oh, that’s right! I have something to give you, Mister Firo!”

“What? Wait, why would you—”

—*huh?*

Something felt off.

Annie’s surprise at seeing him, he could understand. And yet, she hadn’t blinked an eye at seeing the eyepatch he now wore.

Could the news already have reached them?

This explanation briefly flashed across his mind. In the next moment, however, Annie was taking a glass jar out of the bag, and Firo was confronted by sight beyond his wildest theories.

“Huh....?”

Seeing the gyrating object inside the jar, Firo’s remaining eye widened. And then, without a hint of hesitation, Annie opened the jar.

The next moment, a red-and-white blur came hurtling out towards his face—

Barrelling towards his eyepatch and underneath it.

There was a strange feeling as it squirmed towards his eye socket—

And then in his left eye, the sense of darkness came flooding back.

Unlike before, this was not the darkness of a total loss of sensation, but rather of simply having something obstruct his vision.

“...!”

Hastily, Firo lifted the eye patch—

Bright light flooded the left side of his vision.

As Firo began to comprehend what had just happened, a barrage of thoughts ran through his head as he whirled toward the girl responsible for restoring his sight.

“You...”

“Oh do, it isn’t like *that*—I didn’t take over this girl just to do this. Actually, I’ve had this body for several years ago so I could infiltrate your organization.”

“That’s not actually better—no, wait, let’s forget that for now. Why...why did you give me my eye back?”

Hearing this wary question, Annie—or, to be more precise, the vessel of Hilton and Leeza called Annie—slowly turned her back to him and, after some hesitation, spoke.

“...because...that time, you saved me...so I decided to give it back.”

....huh? Wh-what kind of explanation was that?

Hearing her shy explanation, Firo still found it impossible to understand what she had done.

Obviously, such a gesture signaled that her feelings towards him had dramatically changed. Firo, however, could only see her as a child. Ennis might have been slow at interpreting emotional cues, but outside of his own romantic feelings, Firo was just as clueless.

And so it was that, with Firo oblivious to all of it, Annie laid out the feelings in her heart.

Finishing, she said nothing for a moment. Turning to gaze at Firo, she seemed to be waiting for something, but after several minutes of heavy silence, spoke again.

“So...right now, just so you know, I don’t hate you anymore.”

“Wh-what are you saying?”

“Because right now...what I have to focus on is how to purge that traitor.”

With these words, all traces of her earlier bashfulness disappeared. In her words, Firo heard a hatred that went far beyond her enmity towards him in Alcatraz. Just listening to her, he felt as he would break out in a cold sweat.

“And that traitor is...?”

“Oh, you’ll find out. Ah—but right now, let’s hurry back, yeah?”

Seeing the girl before him put on the guise of “Annie” again, Firo felt an odd queasiness. However, realizing that there was nothing he could do now, he only followed after, deciding to ignore for now the unease in his chest.



Alveare

“Everyone! It’s Firo! Firo’s back!

“Hey...”

The moment they arrived at the bar, Annie barreled inside announcing Firo’s return.

As a result, he didn’t even have the time to mentally prepare for the situation.

Walking inside, a flood of silent worries filled his mind—what if, out of nowhere, a dagger came flying at him? Or, maybe, the killer would look him coldly in the eye as they stabbed him—

At the sight of the first person to rush out of the store, however, all his thoughts fell apart.

His thoughts, his emotions, his entire mind—all completely fried, with nothing left behind.

“Firo...!”

“Ennis...”

For a moment, seeing the woman in the suit approaching him, all Firo could do was gape, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. But then, composing himself slightly, he smiled awkwardly and said what he had yearning to say—

“...well, I’m back.”

And with tears in her eyes, Ennis said exactly what Firo had longed to hear—

“Welcome back.”

These simple words—

They were all Firo needed.

Behind her, the figures of Maiza, Czes Isaac and Miria were coming closer. Seeing them all there, Firo felt in that moment that no matter what the future held or how much suffering in store for that—

Whatever happened, he was already incredibly lucky.

And thus, another character in this ruckus returned home.

Back to the city that was both the starting point and end point for all that had happened.

And so, in the bustling streets of New York, a new story began to weave itself—

Extra Chapter: The Police Arrive Too Late

Let's return, then, to half a month before.

“Ah, fuck, fuck no...shit shit shit, I'm late!”

Angrily cursing, bespectacled man in a suit stepped out of a Chicago taxi.

Victor Talbot: FBI agent, immortal, and a man eternally one step behind Huey Laforet.

“Eh, if I'm late, I'm late. What matters is that I'm here, and all the criminals better watch out! Just a bit, and Huey'll be rotting in his cell, cursing his powerlessness...ooh, I can't wait to see that...”

Adjusting his glasses once more, Victor strutted inside the station, radiating smugness.

For all purposes, he looked like a conqueror descending upon the city.

Thirty minutes later, after receiving the news of Huey's escape, a very drunk Victor would be found with his men, crying as he cursed his luck—

That, however, is a story for another time.

New York Outskirts

“So...that's what they've been doing that in Chicago, then.”

“Sir, what should we do?”

Shades pulled down, the room was dim in which three men now stood and spoke.

To be accurate, two men were speaking. While the man formerly known as Felix Walker kept silent, the real conversation was occurring between Senator Manfred Beriam and Spike, the sniper he had hired.

“Should we start for Chicago now, then?”

In response to Spike's suggestion, Beriam only shook his head.

“No, not now. I doubt it would be any use anyways.”

“What? But...”

“Originally, Huey planned to use New York as a smokescreen while he carried out larger experiments in Chicago. But now...with this recent chaos, it’s likely he’s decided to change plans.”

Berian paused, quietly pressing his cigar into an ash tray.

“Right now, there’s no need to take the initiative or begin to set traps. Whatever they try next, we’ll meet and thwart it, that’s all.”

It was difficult to say whether Berian truly believed his words or was merely. Gaze somewhere far away, his eyes narrowed as he spoke in the tone of a practiced politician—

“If we seize this opportunity, then we have the chance to solve all our problems in New York in one sweep.”

Transcontinental Railway

Second-class cars

“Sham, please inform everyone to put a pause to the experiments in Chicago.”

“Understood, Huey sir.”

“In another year, we can start again.”

As if waiting for these words, the train began to move. Gazing wistfully out at the receding city, left eye socket aching dully—

Huey smiled.

As his right eye roved over the landscape before him, no thoughts of what had happened in prison were in his mind—only plans for the future.

Glimpsing of Victor’s angry countenance as he stood on the platform, Huey spoke his next words happily.

“Under the new lights of New York City...we have a new ground to test our experiments.”

Saying this, he lightly shook the jar in his right hand.

Inside the jar, an eyeball spun wildly, its owner nowhere in sight.

Sitting there with the gains of his revenge, Huey spoke calmly.

This mute eyeball as his only witness, his thoughts turned to his daughters—

“Professor Palmer, I wonder...how would you like to see your daughters again?”

A few moments later, the train was hurtling forward.

Towards New York City it sped, carrying dreams, desires, ambitions, and a million other aspirations towards that illustrious city—

And mixed within all that, the first fatal spores of poison.



「バッカーノ!1934」完

Afterward

Hello, all! Narita here—it's been a while, hasn't it?

Right now, we've completed the arc of the 1934 events.

This book, in addition to being the longest volume of Baccano! so far, was also the most difficult for me to write. For the sake of both time and page count, I had to condense much of the plot, cutting about one hundred fifty pages. I plan to put to use them in the 1935...which means when that arc is finished, who knows how long it'll be? Ah...I think I'm beginning to get excited again! An excitement tinged with the expectation of pain, but an excitement nonetheless.

In the past, I took turns writing Durarara!!, Vamp!, Etsusa Bridge, and my other stories with the hope that doing so would keep my interest fresh in them. This year, I tried to be more focused; besides Baccano!, I haven't worked on any of my other stories. Writing like this still feels a little odd...though if there's any downside, it's that between Baccano!, Durarara!!, Vamp!, 5656, and all the new other stories in my head, I'm full of ideas right now. Vamp! alone currently has almost over a hundred characters—enough to start a separate series about them. But of course, writing and publishing in addition to everything else would be basically impossible.

Baccano! has the same issue, in that the number of its characters keeps on growing and growing...

Recently, the producers of the anime have been casting characters, the question of “are there too many characters in my story?” has started to worry me. At the time of writing this however, about ninety percent of the 1930s characters should appear. In just a little while, we'll be able to yell, “all the players are in attendance! And now, for the grand finale of the 1930 arc!”

In terms of 1930s story, all that is left to cover are “the Runorata grandson,” Neider's childhood friend, and the Kurokii (1) family—so for those thinking “I can't remember the names of all these characters,” this news should come as a relief.

...anyway, concerning the above statement, these are all developments I couldn't have imagined both before and during the writing of 1935.

In other words, Baccano! will continue on, so look forward to that!

As will the 1705 arc, recounting the adventures of teenaged Elmer and Huey.

Denkuro Tougo, Nile, Victor, and the Avaro brothers will then appear in 1710.

Baccano!'s final (???) and most chaotic arc will then occur in 2002.

And of course, there's 1935! Right now, I'm still discussing with my editors what to write first.

In other news, Durarara!!, 5656, and Vamp still haven't been cancelled (and with luck will continue not to be!) There should be more news about them when the weather turns cooler, so I hope those readers will bear patiently until then.

All in all, with both the manga and anime adaptations coming out this year, I will do my best to focus on Baccano! The anime's air date is still unknown, but when the time comes, I'll put my all into promoting it!

Even though my writing schedule is different from before, I've found I'm more motivated than ever. Really, it's all thanks to the wonderful staff and storytellers working on the anime!

Each time there's more news about the anime, my heart leaps a little; and whenever I see the tremendous work coming from the studio, I think, "no, I mustn't let them one-up me!"

When scripts from the anime or storyboards from the manga come back, I always take care to thoroughly review them. Whenever I see material from the anime, my thoughts are always, "woah—this is fantastic! Perfect, continue!" The directors and editors, however, will then say, "no, this could be still be better," and everything will begin from scratch once more. Likewise, whenever I see images from the manga, all I can say is, "amazing! It's exactly how I imagined it!" The editors of the manga, however, will say, "no, it needs to be drawn with more passion." And when the corrected image comes back, practically bursting with passion...well, what else can I do but say yes? Aaah, and now the anime and manga are being created more quickly than the source material...basically, I'm currently in a breakneck competition with the anime and manga. "All...all right! If you're going to do better than the source material, then I'll aim one step higher above that!" In this way, my motivation has continued to surge.

The names of the animators will be announced this month, so for readers who've already seen the promotional video, stay tuned for even more!

Speaking of which, this month's issue of Dengeki hp has more news concerning anime, including a conversation between director Omori and me, which I hope you'll all be able to read! The editor's postscript is also a must-read. Katsumi Enami designed the cover art, which is a wonderful picture of Chane, so for fans of her, pick up a copy today!

As usual, there are many people I need to thank.

To dear, overworked Mariko-san who oversaw this project, Suzuki-san, and all the other members of the editorial staff, I think I should start by first apologizing for all the trouble I've caused you...!

Much gratitude goes to the editors, jacket designers, and publicity staff at ASCII Media Works, who continue to do great work despite my slow pace.

Thanks to all the friends and family who have supported me, especially my good friend S-shi.

I'm very grateful to Katsumi Enami-san who, despite being incredibly busy, was still able to produce incredible art for the world of Baccano!

And last of all, to all my readers—

Truly, thank you for your support.

March 2007

(originally, I'd wanted to use this afterward to talk about my favorite games, but when that got over ten pages, it was back to the more traditional acknowledgements—)

Ryogho Narita

(1) I agonized for a ridiculously long time over who this could be, but I'm finally going to call it a day and just put in the romaji Narita uses.

(2) Thanks to jorgelotr from WordPress for help with this!