





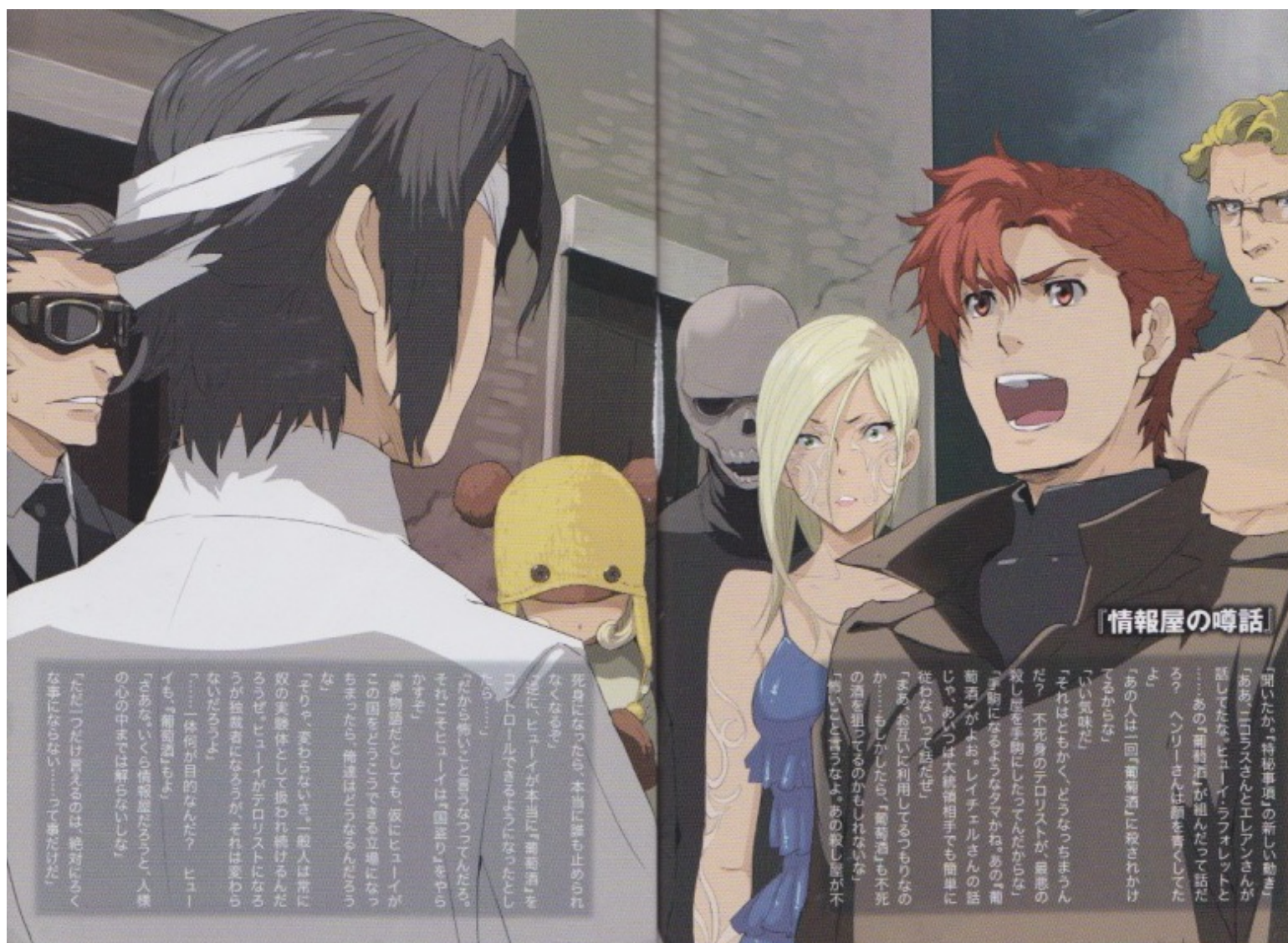
Baccano! 1935-B

Dr. Feelgood

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Rumors at the Information Agency

"Have you heard? Sounds like our 'top secret individuals' are moving again."

"Yeah, Nicholas and Elean were talking about it earlier. So Huey Laforet and...and Vino are working together now, was it? Henry almost had a heart attack."

"Well, Vino did almost kill him once."

"Serves him right."

"Anyway, what do you think's gonna happen now? I mean, what with an immortal terrorist controlling the most dangerous assassin in the world."

"But would he just become a valuable pawn like that? I mean, it's *Vino*. Rachel said

even the President would have a hard time controlling him."

"Well, maybe they're using each other....Maybe Vino wants a shot at the elixir of immortality himself."

"Don't say that! It's terrifying to even think of. If an assassin like that became immortal, he'd really be unstoppable."

"And if you look at it the other way, if Huey really can control Vino..."

"Like I said, terrifying! If Huey's really gonna take over the country, that's how he's gonna do it."

"Well, now we're getting real hypothetical, but what would Huey do to us if he could do whatever he wanted with this country?"

"Same as he always does. He'd just keep treating everyone and everything like one big experiment. Whether he's a terrorist or a dictator, that wouldn't change."

"...What in the world are they after, anyway? Huey *and* Vino."

"Who knows? No matter how good we are with information, we can't read people's hearts."

"All I can say is...it's nothing respectable, whatever it is."



Rumors among the Delinquents of Chicago

"Heheh, hey Boss! Tell me about those two again, Graham and Ladd. They're a riot."

"Don't go tryin' to be like 'em, dumbass! I only told you morons about 'em so you'd stay the hell away!"

"B-but come on, boss! They ain't around Chicago no more, right?"

"Yeah, and it's like a breath of fresh air. Honestly, when those guys were hangin' around the city, I felt like I was already dead."

"They beat ya up or somethin', Boss?"

"Dumbass. Do I look like numbskull to you?"

"I...I dunno. Sorry, Boss. Are ya?"

"...Well, let's save that for another time. Those two are sure as hell dangerous together, but it's even worse when they're on their own."

"...Huh? Ain't it the other way around?"

"Hell no! When it comes to those guys, it's way worse to face 'em on their own! Listen up, everything about that homicidal freak and the weirdo mechanic is dangerous, from their brains to every little muscle in their arms, and it's impossible for anyone to stop one of 'em from goin' on a rampage except the other! If Graham starts goin' nuts, Ladd'll stop him before things get too out of hand, and if Ladd wants to kill someone for no reason, Graham'll step in. That balance is the only reason we're still alive, ya know!"

"...So, Boss. If those two both flip out at the same time, what would happen then?"

"I've never seen that happen, but..."

"Never?"

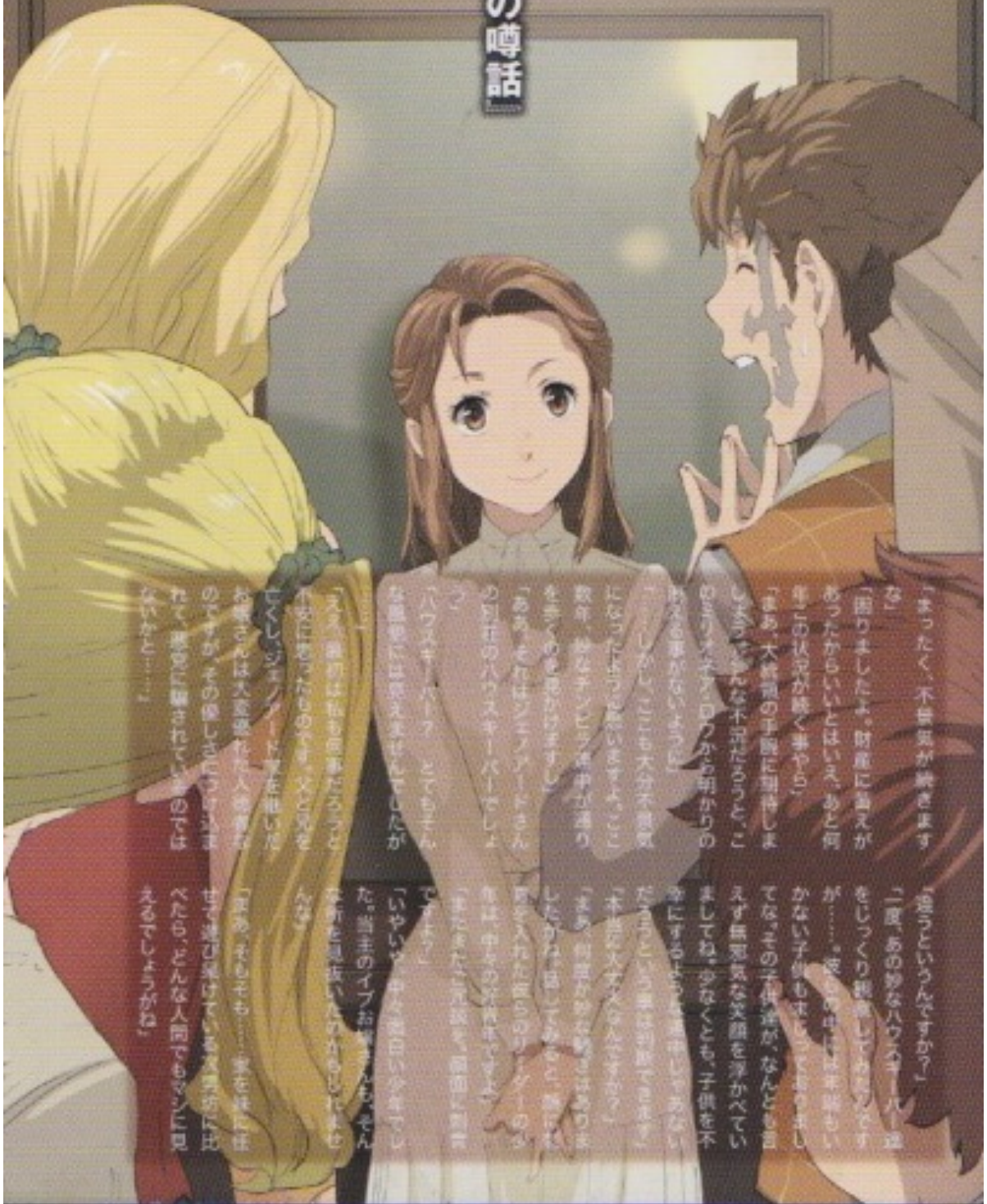
"Probably, wherever it happened would look like Hell hit by a tornado."

"Good thing they ain't around here no more, right, Boss?"

"Like I said, I'm never leavin' this city."

"As long as those crazy bastards don't come back here, that is."

富豪達の噂話



「まったく、不景気が続きますな」
 「困りましたよ、財産に替えがあったからいいとはいえ、あと何年この状況が続く事やら」
 「まあ、大統領の手腕に期待しましょう。少なくとも不況だろうと、このまじろオネオロ口から明かりの射える事がないように」
 「……しかし、これも大分不景気になったように感じますよ。ここ数年、妙なチツピラ連中が通りを歩くのを見かけますし」
 「ああ、それはジエノアードさんの別荘のハウスキーパーでしょう」
 「ハウスキーパー？ とてもそんな風貌には見えませんが」
 「ええ、最初は私も怪事だろうと不安に思ったものです。父と兄を亡くし、ジエノアード家を継いだお嬢さんは大変盛れた人徳者なのですが、その優しさにつけ込まれて、悪党に騙されているのではないかと……」
 「違うというんですか？」
 「一度、あの妙なハウスキーパー達をじっくり観察してみたのですが……彼らの中には年輩もいかないうちもまじろとありましてな。その子供達が、なんとも言えず無邪気な笑顔を浮かべています。少なくとも、子供を不幸にするような連中じゃあないだまじろという事は判明です」
 「本当は大丈夫なんですか？」
 「まあ、何事か妙な勢さはありませんが、ほしてあると、顔にも影を入れた彼らのリーダーの少年は、中々の好青年ですよ」
 「またまたご冗談を、偏面に発言ですよ？」
 「いやいや、中々面白い少年でした。当主のイブお嬢さんも、そんな所を覗いたのかも知れません」
 「まあ、そもそも……家を継に任せて遊び呆けている貴族坊に比べたら、どんな人間でもマシに見えるでしょうがね」

Rumors of the Well-to-do

"Honestly, this depression just goes on and on."

"It's truly troublesome. We may have our savings, but if the situation continues on for years like this..."

"Well, let's put our hope in President Roosevelt's abilities, so that no matter what happens with the Depression, the light in Millionaire Row will never go out."

"...Although, I think the Great Depression has already affected us considerably. These past few years, I've seen some strange hoodlums on the streets here."

"Oh, those are the Genoards' housekeepers."

"Housekeepers? They certainly don't look like it..."

"Yes, I thought the same when I first saw them, and they made me downright uncomfortable. When Miss Eve lost both her father and her brother, I thought an excellent, virtuous young lady was inheriting the family fortune, but I wondered if those hooligans were taking advantage of her kindness and playing her for the fool. However..."

"Is that not the case?"

"Once, I was carefully watching those strange housekeepers, but...there were some young children among them as well. They were just smiling innocently, without saying anything, so I decided that at least they weren't so bad as to harm children."

"But are things really all right?"

"Well, things have gotten a little noisy over there from time to time, but when I spoke to them, their leader--the young man with a tattoo on his face--was quite an agreeable young man."

"Now you really must be joking. A tattoo on his face?"

"No, no, he was quite interesting. Perhaps Miss Eve saw that in him as well, tattoos aside."

"Well...anyone is better than that middle child, when you think how he just left the estate to his little sister to dilly-dally around."

『ルノラータ・ファミリー構成員の噂話』

「おい、なんなんだ、あのメラヴィだかメロヴィだかいう野郎は」
「メルヴィか。僕も良くは知らないが、新しいディールだそうさ。今度のカジノの開行式、現場の勝負事は奴が仕切る事になるらしい」
「そんな馬鹿なー あんな新入りの若造に、重要なお披露目を任せるってのか？ あいつはそもそも何者なんだ？ どこのシマの随場で働いてた奴だ？」
「それがな、うちの人間じゃないらしい」
「……なんだと？ 余所者なのか？」
「ああ、最近M「バルトロ」が置ってるテロリストがいるだろう。どユーイ、ラフオレット、あいつがどこから連れてきたらしい」
「なんだそりや。なんでそんな奴がいきなりそんな大仕事を……」
「わざわざ捜査部に手配されてる……おっと、表向きは脱獄した事も秘密なのかもしれないが、そんなヤバイテロリストが紹介してきたくらいだからな。何かある奴なんだろう」
「納得いかねえな。そんな余所者に仕事を任せちゃ、俺達のファミリーの面子ってもんが成り立たなくなるだろうがよ」
「おい」
「……な、なんだよ。怖い顔して」
「今回の采配はM「バルトロ」の指示だ。それに納得できないってんなら、直接上申しろ。それまでさねえでただ愚痴るってんなら、それこそルノラータ・ファミリーの面子を潰す行為だぞ」
「わ、解ったよ。なんだよ、お前は、あのメルヴィって若造を信頼してるってのか？」
「俺は、ファミリーの「眼」としてボスの判断に従うだけだ。個人としては、あのメルヴィって若造は本才無いと思ってるぜ」
「それこそ、あのヒューイって奴以上にな」

Rumors among the Members of the Runorata Family

"Hey, what's the deal with this Malvi or Molvi or whatever the hell his name is."

"It's Melvi. I don't know much about 'im either, but it sounds like he's a new dealer. He's gonna be managin' the accounts at the party comin' up."

"You pullin' my leg? They're givin' a snot-nosed greenhorn like that the most important job? I mean, who the hell *is* he, anyway? What casino was he workin' for before?"

"That's the thing. I heard he's not even one of us."

"...The hell did you just say? A fuckin' *outsider*?"

"Yeah. It's that terrorist Mr. Bartolo has been hiding, Huey Laforet. He brought the kid in from somewhere."

"What the hell. Why'd the boss give him such a big job out of the blue..."

"I guess it's 'cause a terrorist of Huey's caliber came to introduce him. I mean, the feds are even doing a special search for him...oh, they might be covering up the jailbreak, though. Anyway, kid must have something goin' for him."

"I can't believe this. If we're gonna let an outsider do something so important, the actual members of the Family like us ain't gonna be able to make any money."

"Hey."

"...Why're you lookin' at me like that?"

"Our job this time is to follow Mr. Bartolo's orders. If you can't handle that, take it to the boss yourself. If you just sit around on your ass and complain, you're not worth it to be a Runorata."

"F-fine, fine. I get it. But what the hell. You're not sayin' you trust that little creep, are ya?"

"As part of the Runorata Family, I'm just following my boss's judgment. Personally, I think he's fishy. Real fishy."

"Even more than that Huey guy."

P13	接続章	流れには逆らえない
P21	余話2	想い人はあどけない
P31	八 章	不死研究者は気兼ねない
P53	九 章	殺し屋は感ぜぬ
P69	十 章	逃亡者の巣に毛布は無い
P131	十一章	役者は揃うも読み合わない
P153	十二章	寡黙な男は集らない
P187	十三章	暴力は何も生み出さない
P237	十四章	未来は誰にも解らない
P301	接続章	誰も責める者はいない



signed by Yukihiro Kaneko

Table of Contents

Connecting Chapter:	No One Can Swim Against the Tide
Extra Chapter 2:	The Lover Is Artless
Chapter 8:	The Immortal Researcher Has No Restraint
Chapter 9:	The Assassin Has No Doubts
Chapter 10:	The Fugitive's Nest Has no Blankets
Chapter 11:	The Actors Are Neither Collected nor Coordinated
Chapter 12:	The Silent Man Doesn't Lose his Composure
Chapter 13:	Nothing Comes of Violence
Chapter 14:	Nobody Knows the Future
Connecting Chapter:	There Is No One to Blame

Well now. Shall we raise the curtain on this play, Huey Laforet?

You are reckless as always, yet this time your friend isn't here to stop you.

Lay bare your desires just as you please, and bask in awareness of your own
arrogance. Don't hold back, now.

Of course...this means your friend isn't here to save you, either.

Ah, that's right. That creepy "Smile Junkie" isn't here.

Isn't it delightful?

You don't have to worry about your friend seeing such a shameful side of you--

And for my part? I just don't have to put up with the face of someone so revolting.

Connecting Chapter: No one can Swim Against the Tide

Somewhere in New York A casino

In a word, it was chaos.

At that moment, Firo Prochainezo, *capo* of the Martillo Family, had an uneasy feeling that he had been caught in a spider web, one with layer upon layer.

Whether his twenty-some years was a long time or a short one, this was the first time he had ever been involved in confusion like this, and his heart still couldn't quite come to grips with the mess before him. Although, since he had become an executive at such a young age, he was still able to force himself to understand the reality he was faced with.

If Firo's life until now were an ocean, then on that great sea were countless "whirlpools." His becoming a Martillo Family *capo* had set in motion a current in that ocean of his life, but when he became immortal, he was swallowed by a large whirlpool in the midst of that current. Firo had been caught in that whirlpool for some years now, and thanks to his visit to Alcatraz a few months ago, he had been sucked in even deeper into the storm.

And, in the course of just one day, he found himself at its very core.

The destruction of his casino.

The boy who had apparently cheated his slot machines.

Ladd and Christopher's visits.

And the young man who had appeared as his enemy, who was identical to Gretto Avaro--the younger brother of Maiza Avaro, Firo's superior both as a *camorrista* and as an immortal.

That was enough to constitute a decent-sized whirlpool, a situation he couldn't even fully take in yet, but Maiza told him that this was reality, as if to hammer the point home.

"Did you say there were planes outside? ...What are you talking about, Maiza?"

Maiza explained the situation outside to a very confused Firo. At the moment, a number of airplanes outfitted with machine guns were flying through the skies of New York, firing every which way.

However, since the city wasn't being destroyed, Maiza had suggested they were shooting blanks, but--

Another storm was added to Firo's life in that moment, and his mind was dragged even deeper into confusion and chaos.

But he refused to panic.

Thanks to his sense of duty as a Martillo Family *capo*, his pride, and the fact that two men he loved and respected were there with him, Firo barely managed to stay in his right mind. If he could just let go for a moment and scream--maybe break something nearby for good measure--his head might clear a bit. But there was no chance of that solving anything.

Firo knew that if he sank into that particular whirlpool, he would pull in those closest to them and drown them as well.

"Maiza, you look kinda pale. You alright?"

Firo pointed out something abnormal in someone else with the hope that it would help himself calm down.

Maiza started. "Do I? ...Ah, well, I'm certainly confused. About everything outside too, but I just ran into someone who looks just like an old acquaintance..."

"Yeah. **I completely understand**, Maiza." Firo nodded emphatically.

Maiza was caught in his own whirlpool. He wanted to think it was just a passing resemblance, but in this situation it was hard to call it a mere coincidence. "... Who is he? I know it can't actually *be* him, the one I'm thinking of..."

"Uh, well, it's a long story, but...long story short, he's a member of the Runorata Family."

"The Runoratas...?" The wrinkles in Maiza's forehead deepened.

Another voice sounded from next to him.

"Why don't we save that for after we've taken care of the casino?"

"Ronnie."

Ronnie Schiatto was an executive of the same rank as Maiza.

Firo looked around the casino again at Ronnie's words. "For now...I'll have the kids working for me clean this place up. Not all of the equipment is broken, and if all goes well we could be open for business again by tomorrow," he said.

Then the man next to him (who had been listening thus far) spoke up--Ladd Russo, one of the ones who had destroyed the casino in the first place.

"Sorry about that, Firo. Really. I could getcha some new equipment by tomorrow."

"Anything you brought in would probably be so ridiculous I couldn't use it anyway."

"Well, aren't you the careful one. Eh, guess a little caution ain't a bad thing. ...By the way, who're your friends there? You should introduce me," Ladd laughed, looking at Ronnie and Maiza.

Firo stiffened a little, looking unsure of what to do.

"Firo, who are these people?" Maiza asked, referring to Ladd and Graham.

Firo looked from one to the other.

"Mm, I'll introduce you later. You wait a minute, too, Ladd."

Firo left it at that for now as he thought about his own doubts. Specifically, the fact that even after all the customers had run away, there were a few unfamiliar faces left in the casino.

For one thing, what is Christopher doing here? And who are those two kids next to him? Those are quite the scars on one of 'em.

It was all completely ridiculous, but Firo decided to sort out all of his misgivings, even the little details, in order to get his emotions under control. He had told Maiza and Ladd to wait, but maybe it would be best to start off with introducing them after all.

No, hold on, those kids may not be affiliated with us. It looks like they came with Ronnie, but...

He decided the first order of business was to confirm who they were with Ronnie.

"By the way, Ronnie, do you know those...hm?" He stopped suddenly as his eyes landed on a familiar face.

"Eek!"

His gaze fixed on the tattooed boy standing next to Ronnie, although Firo had no idea why the boy squeaked when he looked at him.

"So...that tattoo looks awful familiar..." he muttered, half to himself.

"Hyaah!? I-I'm so sorry I apologize please forgive me!"

And with that shriek as the start, another young man was drawn into a new whirlpool.

Although, the young man Jacuzzi Splot had already nearly drowned in other great storms over the course of his life.

And the story began to move ever forward.

The trouble surrounding the casino was the whirlpool that drew in Firo Prochainezo.

But everyone was part of the great ocean of history. The others around Firo were already caught in their own eddies and currents.

As the swirls of their lives all amassed together, they could no longer imagine where the current would take them.

Whatever was at the heart of these whirlpools--

Or whether all of their whirlpools perhaps led to the same place at the very bottom--

They simply drifted through their lives, unable to see what lay in wait for them at the bottom.

Should they try to escape, or leave themselves to the flow and peer into the depths?

They didn't even have an answer to such a basic question.

For now, all they could do was float along with that great current.

Extra Chapter 2: The Lover is Artless

2003

Reminiscences of the Immortal Head Librarian, Dalton

Let me tell you a story from long ago.

Perhaps you already know, but I was once an alchemist. Maybe I still am, but right now my main job is as the head librarian.

How do I deceive those around me? There are all sorts of ways.

I could talk about that in greater detail, but this story will be rather long, so let's save that for another time. An immortal like me...one who has become physically inhuman, in other words, can still continue as an alchemist. It's absurd, truly.

I wonder whether my immortality has brought me joy or misery.

I've thought on it over and over, but the truth is that I do not know.

There's a saying in the East, that fortune and calamity weave the same net, and I believe that to be true. The blessings and misfortune I have experienced because of my immortality are each their own kind of experience.

Generally speaking, if you ask a normal human at death's door whether his life was happy, there are few who could answer quickly. And of course, the conclusions depend on the person. It's the same for immortals. Things like the balance of good and bad in one's life are to each his own.

Yes...

I myself have had many experiences I didn't acknowledge as happiness in the moment I tasted it, but when I look back on those times, I can call them blessings with confidence.

When I first came to be immortal, I traveled the world for a time.

I had set my sights on the deepest depths of various fields of study along with the students at my workshop. However, more than knowledge or experience, there was an overwhelming lack of the *time* we needed to arrive at the core of the subject, at

its quintessence.

When we heard of the "wine of immortality" from the sage Batutah, I thought she was making fun of us, but I became a captive from the moment we found the existence of immortals in reality.

Among the alchemists, there were those who pursued immortality from the start, but--in my case, my priorities were unusually ordered. Once I became immortal, I could obtain limitless time. I could perform experiments and wait for results after 100 or even 1000 years. I could witness my experiments with my own eyes until the very end. I believed that honestly.

After all, my hair and beard had already turned white, as you can see.

I wasn't afraid of dying and returning from dust to dust. However, I didn't even want to think about leaving the results of my research without seeing them through to the end.

As a result, I and nine of my students summoned the demon.

Alchemists summoning a demon is a joke, one that isn't even amusing, in this day and age.... That was an age where demon worship and mysticism were seen as the same, and there were those who couldn't distinguish us from conjurers.

In the five hundred years since becoming immortal, I came to see many things.

At first, it was painful watching everyone I knew and loved age and die before me one after another, but unfortunately I became accustomed to it. Although, it seems there were several among past immortals who couldn't acclimate. They summoned the demon again to have him kill them...that is, they were devoured. There were none among my students, at least.

Ah, in that long time, I really have seen it all, from the mundane--the enlightened ruler, the dictator, the moment revolution changes the fabric of society--to the grotesque, lurking in the underbelly of the world. Perhaps you cannot believe it, but I have seen werewolves and vampires on an island to the north.

There are a number of headless warriors in Ireland--when I saw a whole cavalry of them, each riding their own horse, I was certain I had fallen into a dream. No, perhaps it was only a dream, but...

Regardless, when I saw something I had never seen before...I felt the world itself expanding. I was exuberant, in a way unbecoming of one my age.

When I think on it now, that was certainly a time I experienced pure joy.

On the other hand, what made me feel the most unhappiness was when I lost most of my students.

Originally, I had an alchemy workshop in the north.

I said before that there were nine of them, so there were ten of us who became immortal, including myself.

To tell the truth, there are now only three of us left alive.

Ah, ah, yes.

I already told you that none of them chose to be devoured by the demon, didn't I, and they were not devoured by others who became immortal at a different time.

It was ourselves.

We devoured each other.

The first ten years were peaceful. Now, looking back, perhaps those days were a miracle.

We were unable to die from a thoughtless accident or illness, but one man became more terrified than anything of what was to us the only instrument of death: the right hand of another immortal.

It's a laughable story.

"I expressly became immortal, yet I don't want to die." One of my students, thinking something so absurd, devoured another of my students in order to escape that fear.

His own mother, of all people.

After that, it was over in an instant.

Well, an instant to me...in reality the battle to the death was closer to three years.

There were all kinds of reasons.

Where there were others jumping at shadows like the first, there were those possessed by greed, as well as those who simply devoured others in the name of experimentation.

At the end of that unsightly feeding frenzy, the only ones left were Renée, myself...and Archangelo.

Renée was a superior alchemist, but as a human, she was missing something.

She completely lacked a sense of danger.

As to why she survived until the end...

It's simple. She was protected by someone.

By me. ...Rather, I wish I could say that, but I cannot.

I turned my eyes away from the reality of my students consuming each other and immersed myself in my research.

At the very least, I can say that man was far more decent than me.

The man who protected Renée until the very end: Archangelo.

It is enough to say that the reason he devoured the others was love. That is all.

Archangelo held a great deal of affection towards Renée, and he devoured the remaining survivors to protect Renée from their right hands.

He is a sincere man.

At least, he is not a villain. More like a government official who doesn't accept any kind of bribe--a stubborn, straight-laced man.

And because he is so straight-laced, perhaps there was no other path for him to choose.

But...even though he went so far, he couldn't even tell Renée how he felt.

It isn't that he was too innocent or naive.

It was because he knew that there was no way for Renée Palamedes Branvilliers to comprehend love from another person.

Lacking...yes, she lacks it entirely. Perhaps she was born without it, or perhaps there was some trauma earlier in her life...I cannot say. At least, her personality was already that way by the time she came under my tutelage.

Archangelo knew that even if he loved her, there would be no reward, and that he would only hold her back as a researcher. That's why he protected Renée from one step away. By the time I realized it, he had devoured a number of his fellow students.

He came to have doubts about me as well, but I could not endure being devoured for such a reason. I made a deal with him.

That's why my right hand is a prosthetic.

As you know, in order for those who have drunk the wine to kill each other, the right hand is essential. I cut off my own right hand and nailed it to a board with the knife before it could return to my wrist.

When I held it out to him, Archangelo looked bewildered. Ah, it's quite rare to see him make such an expression. Anyway, I gave him my right hand, and let him seal it somewhere that only he knows.

All in order to convince him I wasn't an enemy.

It isn't that I was afraid of him. The truth was that I was tired of the killing between my students. That was truly a time of unhappiness.

Unlike Renée, I still had some human emotion left in me, perhaps...

Or, perhaps I was only sad to have lost help with my experiments...

Whichever it was, there is no way to determine now. And there is no need.

Whatever happened in the past, the incident passed, and I had lost the better part of my humanity.

Correct?

If I did have any humanity left, why would I have taken the time to create more immortals?

...There are many reasons why I taught Maiza Avaro and the others to summon the "demon."

Well, at this point I've forgotten more than half of them.

Yes, yes, when one becomes immortal, one's capacity for memory expands beyond that of a normal human.

What I forgot, I did so in the same way anyone else would, but when you look at the parts of your memory that haven't burst after living a few centuries, of course the true nature of the immortal system is...

Oh, I was about to spend time on a completely different topic. I am sorry. Please prepare yourself--the elderly can get long-winded at times.

Anyhow, I taught Maiza the path of immortality, considering the possibility that another battle might begin as well.

Whether what I did brought Maiza, Elmer, Huey, and all of the new students happiness, I cannot say.

It may take some centuries, or even millennia before I can know that.

I guess you could call it an experiment, one I could only perform because I am immortal.

An experiment...Hm, certainly, what I did to Maiza and the others was an experiment.

It is a trivial matter. It is nothing to use my precious students as subjects for my experiments.

...Perhaps you think I am a kind of fiend.

If so, then you are still normal.

If you can, it is best not to concern yourself with this world of abnormality.

I am praying that you will take hold of happiness as a normal human.

I don't know what you consider to be happiness, and I don't plan to take unreasonable measures to find out.

Chapter 8: The Immortal Researcher Has No Restraint

1935
Chicago

"Hey, did you find her?"

"No, she's not here. Some of her personal items are missing, too."

A number of men and women in white were rushing frantically around a well-organized laboratory. They were in the headquarters of the Nebula conglomerate, prominent throughout the West, in a department filled with even more top-secret information than Research and Development—the section devoted to research on immortality.

The members of the research team ran every which way through the halls of the tall building, faces pale and voices desperate.

"This is bad. Did she actually leave?"

"Sometimes she doesn't come back for half a year when she does this."

The researchers grumbled, their faces the definition of the term "fed up."

"Not only do we have to put up with this, but what're we gonna do about the other situation?"

The man couldn't hide the irritation rising from his impatience. He was about to continue when another researcher cut him off.

"She left a note!"

"Where?!"

"At...at the front desk. The receptionist said she didn't understand it and seems really confused..."

"Why did she leave it there?!"

The researchers all held their heads in their hands and asked the messenger.

"But how did you find it? Did she write anything about this department?"

"Uh, well..." the man began hesitantly, but suddenly an older man, who still seemed very young, popped out from behind him.

"Oh, that's 'cause the note was addressed to me."

"P...president?!"

The one who had appeared was none other than the president of the Nebula corporation, Karl Muybridge himself. The man had the most authority and money of anyone in the building, but his aged, wrinkled face was wearing the expression of a small child playing a prank.

"I took a look at it, and this letter wasn't for youse to know about. So I brought it here myself. It's as good as top-secret information for now, see, so I can't just hand it off here like any old thing."

The man's speech was affected by a slight Chicago accent, but his vernacular did nothing to soothe his subordinates.

The head researcher of this department, Renée Palamedes Branvilliers, had disappeared.

It was nothing short of a scandal.

The other researchers who worked under her were also her guards. As an immortal, her knowledge and scientific techniques were unparalleled, but thanks to that she was lacking in some other faculties.

Specifically, she was missing some things that were very important to being human.

Not only that, she could be incredibly dense at times and regularly tripped over her own feet on completely unobstructed floors. There were a number of researchers entrusted with the task of keeping her from running rampant or accidentally leaking classified information, but they were unable to do so this time. Renée's disappearance was extremely sudden, with no warning signs, at least not ones the researchers could pick up on.

She had disappeared a few times before, and not even Karl had managed to find out what she did during that time. It was possible to force the information out of her, but they were in no position to do so. Renée was a complete immortal, after all, and they were only incomplete immortals that she could devour at any time. If they kept her under lock and key for years, it would only delay their research, so in the end all

Nebula could do was keep a close eye on her.

Although, it also seemed that Karl just enjoyed Renée's existence.

"Here's the note."

Karl pulled the sealed note out of his breast pocket and handed it to the researchers. They respectfully pulled the stationery from the envelope, seal already broken.

The next moment they were struck completely speechless.

The contents of the letter were so simple the researchers were confused.

"I'm sorry, President. I'm going to see my children and a former student of mine. I haven't seen them in a long time, so I'll be out for a few days or even a few weeks (a few months, maybe?). Anyway, please do what you can so the others in the lab don't get too angry. Please. I won't get paid while I'm gone, anyway, so there shouldn't be any problem!"

"..." A moment of silence.

"What the heck?" one researcher muttered under his breath, finally breaking the dam of complaints.

"I don't understand a word of this. She has *kids*? *Renée* has *kids*?!"

"Who's the guy?"

"What does she mean, 'former student'?"

"'I won't get paid while I'm gone, so there shouldn't be any problem'...Of course she won't! What, is she proud of taking one for the team or something? This sorta stunt would normally get you *fired*!"

"Everything that shoulda gone to her brains went to her boobs..."

"Yup." "Yup." "More or less."

"Whoever that guy is...I'm kinda jealous...."

The complaints began to take a different direction as Karl listened to them, ever smiling. Once they had finished saying what they wanted, he clapped once to regain their attention.

"Okay, okay, now you understand what's goin' on?"

"President..."

"Well, for one thing, Renée is flying to England on my orders. Right?"

"...Yes, sir?"

The researchers had no idea what he meant by "for one thing," and just stammered in response.

Karl sighed at their expressions and continued.

"It's right there in the letter. Yeah. Right here. 'Anyway, please do what you can so the others in the lab don't get too angry.'"

"Y-yeah."

"So, that's what I just did, ain't it? You're not angry, since now you know Renée's on her way to England."

"Eh?"

The researchers finally caught on to Karl's hinting.

"Well, that's the end of that. Renée and I just played a little joke on you. Pretty good one, too. Don't worry about her and go back to work. Even when she comes back, we won't say any more about it. Okay?"

"Er, um..."

The researchers looked at each other, unsure of what the old man was thinking.

"Okay?"

Karl's smile never wavered as his eyes narrowed. His voice was weighted with the reminder of who they were talking to, and the temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees. The researchers quickly swallowed any complaints they might have had.

Suddenly, they remembered that the good-humored man in front of them was not a puppet leader or a stand-in, but the extraordinary entrepreneur who had built the Nebula corporation from the ground up in a single generation.

"...Y-yes, sir. Renée is in England."

"I...I hope she brings back something for us!"

The researchers' smiles were hollow, but Karl seemed satisfied. He nodded and the heavy air around him vanished as if it had never been.

"Now that's a thought. I wonder what Renée would bring us. Be nice if it was something sexy."

He laughed at his own coarse joke and waved lightly as the researchers as he left.

After the most powerful man in the company disappeared through the door, the researchers let out a collective sigh. They looked back at the letter, as if remembering something, and furrowed their brows at their superior, the center of all this.

"...Where in the world would Renée want to go?"

"I mean, she's not even used to only having one eye yet. She's going to trip over herself even more now..."

<=>

At the same time On a train

The train tracks crisscrossed America freely, from one coast to the other.

A woman sat in a passenger compartment, whiling away the journey from Chicago to New York.

"Dum da da dum, hmm hmm...♪"

She raised her legs, still seated, and swung them back and forth in time to her humming. The carefree woman appeared to be traveling alone, but on closer inspection she had one very odd characteristic.

Underneath her glasses, one of her eyes was clearly false.

It had been stolen thanks to a certain incident, and she had replaced it with a peculiar false eye.

Instead of an iris and pupil was the image of a famous cartoon character. It begged a second glance, but the silliness of it would dispel any feeling of discomfort anyone

looking at her might have had.

Cities and the great outdoors passed by outside the window, but the woman seemed as if she had already tired of the view as her gaze wandered around the room.

"Dum da da daa, hm hmm hm, dum da da da~"

At first she was humming an actual song from memory, but perhaps it was a pain to try to remember all the notes. She switched to humming a scale, and in that moment, another change came to her idle time.

A knock sounded on the door, in perfect time with her music.

"Yes, I'm in here!"

She stopped her humming and gave a somewhat odd reply.

But, the man on the other side of the door didn't seem confused at all as he replied.

"Indeed. I realized as much. May I come in?"

"Hm? Umm, your voice sounds really familiar...oh! Elmer!"

"No."

"Whaat?!"

The man opened the door, ignoring the surprised woman, and walked in from the hall. He wore a bowler hat low over his eyes, fixed with a chin strap. Though he still looked young, his stuffy manner made him seem closer to middle-aged.

The woman clapped her hands as she saw him.

"Oh, if it isn't Archangelo! I was so surprised! Honestly, is it so fun to confuse me like that?"

She didn't look particularly surprised, but the man just gave an expressionless sigh.

"Professor Renée. I would much appreciate hearing how you could have mistaken me for Elmer."

"Hm? Oh, I thought maybe it was Elmer pretending to be you...and I thought it wouldn't be any fun if it really was just you."

"I apologize for being uninteresting. Unfortunately, I'm here to ask you about something yet more tedious."

"Ohh, really? Oh, and please, have a seat!"

Renée Palamedes Branvilliers glanced at the open seat. Archangelo closed the door gently and slowly sat down.

Renée watched him, seemingly unperturbed by his behavior. She had slipped away from the company in total secrecy and boarded this train, but the question of why he had found her on the same train never even crossed her mind as she listened patiently.

"Professor Renée. I feel I must admonish you for your behavior over the last several decades."

"Y-yes? I wonder what I did...Oh, Archangelo, you always look so scary! You should smile more!"

"You are not Elmer, so please do not speak like him. Unless you are attempting to ingratiate yourself to me, in which case I am unwilling to distort my features for your pleasure."

"Umm, well...your face is just scary. I don't like it."

Archangelo realized this conversation was going nowhere and coughed lightly before striking straight to the heart of the matter, without any compassion or mercy.

"Professor Renée, what in the world are you trying to accomplish? Departing for the New World all of a sudden, planning to push Miss Niki on Lady Lucrezia, joining together with a corporation, creating so many new immortals, and the like."

Archangelo sounded a little angry as he asked, but Renée answered with a question of her own.

"...Umm, why are you asking me if you already know the answer?"

"?"

"You asked what I'm doing, but it's just like you said. I left Niki in Lucrezia's care, and I'm researching immortality with Nebula..."

"..."

Archangelo took a deep breath and let it out, rubbing the corners of his eyes.

"Then allow me to pose a different question. *Why* are you doing these things?"

"Why...? Well, I want to advance the research in the field...oh, are you worried that people will find out about immortality? I think it should be okay. Everyone at Nebula

is a lot better at keeping secrets than me, and even if somebody found out they could cover it right up!"

Archangelo looked down, as if saddened a little by her answer.

"You never change, do you."

The emotion vanished from his face as quickly as it came, and he began to speak coldly of the past.

"It's been several hundred years since you became immortal along with me and Professor Dalton, but...you never learned to sense fear. Although one doesn't often need it after becoming immortal."

"What are you talking about?"

Renée wasn't playing dumb. She actually had no idea what Archangelo was getting at.

The immortal young man slowly stood up and placed his right hand on Renée's head.

Anyone who had obtained the elixir of immortality from the demon would know the meaning of this action instantly. It was the only way an immortal could die—"devoured" at the hands of another immortal.

But Renée just blinked in surprise and looked blankly up at Archangelo.

"What's the matter, Archangelo?"

"..."

Archangelo stood still, hand still on Renée's head for a moment, then removed it. His expression was hard.

"You really don't change. Even after all this time, I will only grow to appreciate that inability to sense danger more and more," he said calmly, sitting back down.

"Umm, why didn't you eat me just now?" Renée questioned.

Archangelo was speechless for a moment at Renée's total nonchalance.

Silence fell over the first-class compartment, with only the sound of the train running along the tracks to break the tension. They might have sat there forever in silence if the train hadn't suddenly shaken.



Archangelo finally spoke.

"...Did you want to die?" he asked coldly.

Renée remained as unperturbed as ever.

"Hmm, not really. Dying hurts and everything."

"Then you may want to have more of a reaction when I try to kill you." It was an incredibly obvious suggestion.

Renée rubbed her jaw and thought for a moment, then answered slowly.

"We~ll...this is just my opinion, but to me 'dying' is different than 'being devoured' by an immortal."

"How so?"

"I think the significance of my life--my existence as an individual--isn't my will, but the sum of my memories. Although, it isn't my scientific opinion, and as an alchemist, it's even heretical. ...Umm, well...hm, what I'm saying is...even if you devoured me, from my point of view, I won't really be dead at all. I'm not talking about the soul or anything like that...The sum of my memories is all still me, isn't it?"

Renée made herself clear, although she was stumbling and awkward.

"Sometimes, after I wake up from a deep sleep, I wonder about whether I'm the same existence as I was before I went to sleep, you know? You could that say I am, or that I'm not. Maybe the me who wanted to eat cake yesterday and the me who wants salad today are different people. If you think about how your cells are changing every second, then really the only thing that stays the same is the information you've built up in your memory until that point."

"What do you want to say?"

"That's all it is to me, devouring other people, and being devoured. Even if my memories mixed with yours, Archangelo, it would be a new experience, that's all. So, you would be you, and you would become me at the same time, kinda...ummm...I'm not really sure how to put it into words..."

"No, I understand more or less."

Archangelo sighed loudly, expression still blank, and spoke, various emotions threading through his words.

"Just as I thought, you're still Renée. While I am relieved, now I have new doubts. Whatever you do, oversights and setbacks are rarely far behind. Thus, I can

understand how matters may take a turn for the worse. But I never expected you would surround yourself with evil of your own accord."

"Evil?"

"Forgive my rudeness, Professor Renée, but after seeing what you've done for Nebula, I cannot say otherwise."

Archangelo said straight out. Renée tilted her head to the other side, a little confused.

"Oh, I see... everything I've done for Nebula is bad according to the current moral standards, huh."

"I think it's unacceptable by the moral standards of any age..."

"I see what you mean. I guess so. If what I'm doing is so wrong, the police and **some other people might get in the way, won't they**. Oh my, thank you for coming all this way to warn me, Archangelo! If I hadn't realized it..."

"..."

Renée smiled as she thanked him, but Archangelo just narrowed his eyes.

He looked out the window at the passing scenery and muttered half to himself.

"I was planning to do away with Nebula if you were being forced against your will to do what you did, but I have judged that is not the case."

Taking down one of the biggest corporations in the world was nothing to sneeze at, but Renée didn't think he was bluffing for a moment. She just listened.

"It is fortuitous indeed that I shall not have to make Nebula my enemy. If there is anything else, I shall be happy to listen. Now, then."

He sounded as if he were concluding a business meeting as he slowly stood up. As he was about to leave, he looked again at the scenery rushing past on the other side of the window, and said something else while he had the opportunity.

"Also, I have a message from Professor Dalton."

"Professor Dalton! I haven't heard from him in so long! How is he?"

The young man ignored Renée's question and passed along his message.

"'Be a little greedy,' he said."

Archangelo's expression didn't change, and it was unclear whether he understood the meaning of those words or not.

On the other hand, Renée blinked once, then smiled a little.

"But I have desires. Like right now, I'm looking forward to seeing how my two daughters are doing."

Archangelo's expression clouded at the word "daughters," but Renée didn't notice. He still stood in front of the door and slowly looked at Renée's face.

"...I heard that Huey Laforet gouged out your right eye."

The cold expression on his face carried with it a clear intent. The way he said Huey's name was filled with undisguised loathing, but of course Renée didn't notice at all.

"Well, we had to even the score some way. But he didn't have to be so mean about it!"

"If he's dangerous, shall I take care of him for you?"

Archangelo had just been chiding Renée for her wrongdoings, but this time he himself was threatening to do something less than civil.

"Huh? Why would you do that?"

"Oh...I merely believe that any student who turns on his teacher should be severely punished, Professor Renée."

His expression had been stiff the whole time, but now all emotion had vanished.

But Renée rebuked him herself.

"You shouldn't do that, Archangelo. Huey is your student, and Dalton's, too, isn't he? No matter what happens, we should look out for him," Renée said, as if she were scolding a young child. Archangelo's expression softened.

He nodded once—slowly, respectfully—then opened the door and left.

<=>

As soon as he exited into the hall and closed the door behind him, Archangelo's peaceful smile tightened and he muttered to himself.

"Huey Laforet..."

If he had hidden it at all before, the hatred filling his voice was palpable now.

One of the students he had taught at the Third Library, at the top of his class.

An alchemist who had become immortal, same as him.

And the man who had laid his hands on the woman Archangelo had sworn to himself to protect, and done so without a hint of love.

The man who only saw her as an experiment, of course without any affection towards her.

Let me probe a little deeper. Let me find out who among those skulking immortals is harmful to Renée.

I pray that Huey will be included among those I must eliminate.

Archangelo had decided he would protect Renée, no matter what it took. For that very reason, he had put distance between the two of them.

Therefore, the truth that Renée had borne children was a shock.

He knew that to her, it was just an experiment, but he couldn't accept it so easily.

If...

If I had left my hand on her head a little longer, I might have given in to my desires.

I might have mistaken the desire to have her as mine and mine alone forever as a desire to devour her.

Huey...

How dare you...how could you have such restraint.

His drive to protect Renée had not dulled in the slightest.

But his personal envy of Huey did not diminish, and his complicated emotions swirled through him as he walked through the train.

Along with his deep regret that he wasn't able to step forward himself.

<=>

After Renée watched her old alchemist acquaintance go, she resumed her humming and pulled out a cloth-wrapped package from her bag.

From inside the cloth appeared a small bottle.

Inside the glass bottle was a transparent liquid and a human eye, wriggling like a jellyfish in water, pressing itself against the front wall of the bottle.

"Dum da dum dum dum hmm hmmm ♪ Yup, looks like we're going to New York."

She watched the motion of the eyeball and turned her thoughts to what she was going to do from here on out.

"Plus, I can kill two birds with one stone and gather some data on the subjects from the Mist Wall!"

Her tone when she talked about going to see her daughters was no different than the one she used when gathering data. The alchemist didn't discriminate between feelings of duty for work or personal desires. She smiled a little and stared at the eyeball as she hummed.

Without even realizing herself that her smile was meaningless.

Chapter 9: The Assassin Has No Doubts

It had been some years since the death of Claire Stanfield.

At the end of 1931, the conductor aboard a transcontinental express called the Flying Pussyfoot had been brutally murdered by terrorists, along with his fellow conductor. The faces of both corpses had been completely ground off, although how this was accomplished was never determined.

That part of the police reports was true, at least.

But in reality, the corpse in the conductor's compartment was a different person altogether, and Claire had inherited a new name from a female assassin he had happened to meet. Now, he was living as "Felix Walken."

The name "Felix" had originally belonged to an assassin, who had handed over all of the traces of his existence--his name and his residence, along with his reputation and notoriety--to another upon retiring. The name had been handed down from person to person for dozens of years now.

But, to the new Felix, none of that mattered.

As the man who was once the infamous assassin Vino, he just thought of it as a stroke of fortune, a new place to settle and turn over a new leaf.

But that didn't mean he thought it necessary to spread the name around pointlessly, either. Those who knew that Claire was Vino were extremely limited, so even now he could continue to work as the mysterious assassin.

That's all it was, but--

"Felix Walken, is it."

An unfamiliar voice addressed him from the street. Felix--that is, Claire stopped and turned around, his face touched with displeasure.

He had told those he knew like Firo over and over again to stop calling him Claire, but of course he wouldn't yell out his own name to someone he didn't know.

It was early in the year 1935, half a day before the mess in Firo's casino.

Only a few years had passed since he changed his name, and he had done very little to draw attention to himself in those years. He wasn't famous enough to be recognized on the street, so anyone calling out to him was likely going to start some sort of trouble.

Claire looked at the owner of voice without a hint of fear, only annoyance. Just as he thought, he had never met the man standing there.

To be more precise, he had never met any of the group of men standing there.

They were dressed in dark suits, and a glance was enough to tell him they were tough. It didn't take much observation to see how brawny they were, either, from the way the fabric stretched to cover their muscles. Their appearance seemed calculated to intimidate.

"I think you have the wrong guy. See ya."

Claire waved a hand lightly and began to walk away, but one of the muscle-bound men gripped his shoulder.

"You know a trick like that won't work here, don'cha?" the large man snorted.

"Sounds like you know quite a bit about me..." Claire said as he turned slowly to face the large man, removing the hand from his shoulder. "But if so, you oughta know that brute force and cheap threats won't work on me, yeah?"

His words weren't meant to threaten. To Claire, it was just a warning. He figured if this guy actually knew much about him, he would know that trying to force Claire to do *anything* was an exercise in futility at best.

If the men changed their tune and showed him a little respect, he would at least listen to what they had to say.

That was Claire's thoughts on the matter, but the men chose a simpler route.

"You'll be coming with us now." The voice of the man who had first put his hand on Claire's shoulder was filled with a clear menace.

"I'm not exactly the type who likes being surrounded by other men, you know. Where are you thinking of going?"

"That's not for you to know."

The men's attention was directed toward a number of vehicles parked around Claire and on the corner of the street. It looked like they were planning to force him in.

"I'll let you know now, it's pointless to resist."

"Aw, but don't you get tired of going through life only doing things that have a point?"

Claire sighed nonchalantly, smiled at the large man before him, and swept the man's giant ankles out from under him before he could blink.

It wasn't a terribly powerful kick, and it was too light to trip him up by itself, but then Claire's left hand delivered a powerful push that sent the man off-balance into a forward flip due to the combination of forces.

The next moment, Claire's leg caught the man's head in midair and kicked down.

"Buh...gah..."

The speed of the man's rotation doubled and his head slammed into the ground.

Claire didn't even spare a glance at the man as he spasmed and passed out. He just turned his gaze toward the others.

"Sorry about that. It looks like you didn't get it the first time, so I'll say it again. Brute force and cheap threats don't work on me, you understand?" Claire nodded in approval of his own declaration and continued. "Well, seeing as I'm the one who actually threw the first punch, it's only fair for me to let you live. But I'd strongly suggest you run along home before you get hurt."

"...!"

The muscle men realized their situation instantly.

They'd heard this was a man who could do anything, even kill them, but he had just swept a man's legs out from under him and used the same leg to drive him into the ground before he even landed. That was not something an normal person could do.

They all held their breath and instinctively turned their attention to their own jackets, wondering whether they should pull out their guns or not.

That moment, their target, Felix, opened his mouth in anticipation of their next move.

"Ah, just so you know, if you want to use guns, I can't go easy on ya. I mean, I could if push comes to shove, but I don't feel like it right now."

The men's hands stopped halfway to their jackets.

Felix was smiling cheekily, but they could sense a murky black intent to kill lurking in his words. As they began to sweat in fear, the freelancer shrugged lightly and looked toward the cars.

He noticed a number of figures through the window glass. He extended a hand towards them and flicked his index finger towards himself, like calling children.

"Hey, there, you wanna come out, too? You don't want your precious underlings to die in a place like this, do ya?" Claire taunted.

A few seconds later, there was movement inside the one of the cars in the formation.

One of the rear doors opened, and a man appeared. Most of his hair was tinged with white, but his face didn't look that aged, and he was wearing aviator goggles. He called off the men with a single motion of his hand.

The men frantically fell back to the curb, and Claire realized something unsettling.

There's nobody here.

They were fairly distant from the center of Manhattan, on a road with only a few passers-by, but right now there was no sign of life anywhere. In fact, in the moments before he was addressed, there should have been a number of regular people walking on the road. In actuality, there had been no trace of anyone.

A normal person would sense that something was wrong and try to get out of there, but Claire was unperturbed.

I see. Looks like they're the type who can clear people out, even here in public.

If they could pull off something like that, maybe they worked with the government or one of the big Mafia families. Imagining a number of possibilities, Claire turned to the white-haired man before him.

"So, you the boss?"

The white-haired man arched his hunched back, his vertebrae popping one after another as he straightened his posture.

"The boss? Me? Preposterous. I'm just a mid-level manager, Mr. Felix Walken."

"I told you, you've got the wrong guy. I've never met you, so how do you know my name?"

"I heard it from one who knows who you are."

"I see. I can accept that. Sorry for lying to you, I actually am Felix Walken. I didn't like their attitude with me, so I knocked one of 'em out."

Claire's tone was suddenly much more respectful as he apologized. Even the white-haired man was temporarily at a loss for how to answer. He coughed once and finally spoke.

"I see. It's difficult to understand whether you're an honest man or a liar. Regardless, it's an honor to be able to meet you, Felix."

Claire smiled a friendly smile, turning towards the white-haired man. "The pleasure is all mine, Bartolo Runorata," he replied respectfully. "I never would have thought I'd meet the great head of the Runorata Family here."

"..."

"...""...""..."

The white-haired man fell silent, and his subordinates on the sidewalk glanced at each other.

After a few moments of awkward silence, the white-haired man answered hesitantly. "Er...I'm not Bartolo..."

"..."

"...Hello?"

"Oh, sorry. I was getting frustrated trying to guess your name, so I wanted to be respectful. Well, since there's no need to be polite anymore, would you mind telling me just who the hell you are?" And just like that the politeness was gone.

The white-haired man was caught off guard for just a moment. "Salome," he answered expressionlessly. "Salome Carpenter."

"Sorry, never heard of you. You look kinda old, so maybe I should be more polite? Respecting my elders and all."

"No need. I don't plan on paying you any respect, either." The man let a little of his hostility show and scowled at Claire's entire body from his head to the tips of his toenails. "...No matter how I look at you, you look like a completely normal human. Did you really defeat Christopher Shouldered?"

"Christopher?"

He wondered what the older man was talking about for a moment, but the name

sounded familiar. He thought for a moment.

The next moment, he clapped his hands together in recognition. "Oh, I remember! That guy! Yeah, the one with the red eyes and crazy teeth!"

"...Yes. I heard you defeated him at the Mist Wall when he was fighting at full strength."

"I dunno about that! Well, what about him?"

Salome smiled a little at Claire's unbelievably energetic answer--and ground his already clenched teeth together. "Why, he was one of the most capable of **our creations**...of our Lamia. I cannot believe that he was defeated out of hand."

"Well, you should believe it. If you don't you end up like him." Claire looked down at the unconscious muscle man at his feet.

"No, no, I am such that I cannot believe anything until I witness it with my own eyes."

As he spoke, the other muscle men took another step back, beginning to disappear from Claire's field of vision.

"...?"

Claire wondered what was going on, but the question lodged in his throat.

That was because he had already figured out the answer for himself.

Seven...no, eight of them?

He could sense the presence of an increasing number of others surrounding him.

As for how, he didn't have superpowers that could allow him to see around corners. He had judged based on the slight sound of footsteps. Although a normal person would probably put the ability to hear such a small sound from five meters away in the "superpowered" category anyway.

He slowly turned and looked around. Sure enough, there were now eight people standing on the once-abandoned road.

"What's goin' on here? Compared to those personality-less guys from earlier, you seem... aggressively expressive."

The group that appeared were a little removed from the norm, at least in terms of their appearance. They weren't monstrous, but the atmosphere surrounding them felt even less trustworthy than the men in black from earlier.

There were all kinds: a man in a tailcoat like he was going to a dance party; a man naked from the waist up; a woman in an elegant dress with a beautiful tattoo on her face and arms; a girl dressed in thick clothes with a knit cap worn low so it hid her eyes. There was another with a mask covering their entire skull, so their gender was unclear.

Claire didn't look nervous at all, nor did he jeer at the unusual appearance of the strange men and women surrounding him.

He just remembered something from long ago.

Yeah, they're just like those guys at the circus. Although, this feels more like a freak show than a normal circus. I wonder how everyone's doing.

As Claire immersed himself in his past, Salome spread both arms wide and opened his mouth.

"They are Lamia, same as Christopher. I believe they have particular feelings towards someone like you, who forced their companion Christopher to his knees."

"Huh. It certainly looks like it."

"Do you have anything to say to them?"

Perhaps believing in his own absolute superiority, Salome's voice didn't falter in the slightest.

Claire knew himself that they were not just oddly dressed. They were probably the top of their field, whatever that might be. That was another reminder of his old friends at the circus.

That was why there was a little affection in Claire's voice as he smiled. "Let's see...your friend Christopher, was it? I did beat him black and blue, didn't I?" He scratched his cheek, almost shyly, and told them straight out. "I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but if you praise me it'll be very much appreciated."

"...?" "?" "?"

Claire spread his arms before the perplexed group of peculiar individuals, and spoke, friendly as can be, without intending to provoke them in the slightest.

"So, **praise me all you want.**"

<=>

An old apartment building Roof

A pair of figures stood on the top of a six-story building, watching the Lamia, the freelancer, and the researcher.

"Is that the guy who took down Christopher?"

"I believe so."

"From what Sham and Hilton said, I thought he'd look a little more monstrous. He actually looks pretty normal."

A man with black hair and golden eyes appeared to be enjoying himself as he watched the redhead below him. He was wrapped in a mysterious aura, in part thanks to his sterile white clothing and bandages wrapped around one eye.

The man--Huey Laforet, stood next to a man with a bandana covering his head.

"I guess you shouldn't judge a book by its cover," said the man in the bandana. "I think Liza was traumatized. His name is Felix Walken, but that might be an alias--"

"Claire Stanfield," murmured Huey.

"...I'm sorry?" Tim, the leader of the group Larvae, furrowed his brow.

"That is his true name. However, as he is officially deceased according to public record, it may be best to simply call him Felix."

"..."

That sneaky bastard already knows more than me! Tim thought unhappily, but he merely sighed instead of outwardly protesting. He looked down at the Lamia.

"...There are a few down there I don't recognize."

"Yes, because they are not a part of Larvae yet. At some point I will introduce them to you as your new subordinates."

"It's not like I can say no, since I don't have any actual authority anyway." This time Tim couldn't keep from voicing his discontent.

"That is not true. If you dislike them for any reason, they will be fired immediately,

although it pains me to think of dismissing them in the midst of this Depression." Huey didn't look pained in the slightest, which only irritated Tim further.

Well, maybe I should take this as an improvement. Except for the whole threatening to fire them bit.

Tim decided it was pointless to hold this against Huey and slowly let his anger fade. "So what do you plan to do with him?"

"I wonder."

"Are you trying to give me a hard time, sir?"

"Of course not. He is not one of my subordinates, so it is presumptuous to think of 'doing' anything to him. I may hire him, but as for what happens next...hmm, in a way observing his response in and of itself has some merit with regards to my research. I suppose one could say that is true of most things," Huey said with his cold, faint smile. "To be honest, I would rather Adele, Frank, or Chi were with them as well. If they were all destroyed, you would be in a bind, would you not, Tim?"

He didn't give a damn about what happened to the Lamia on the ground.

Tim furrowed his eyebrows again at his heartless boss, and said something most wouldn't dare.

"What the hell are you even after?" he asked bluntly.

Huey didn't seem put off at all at the disrespectful language of his subordinate and answered just as directly. "I only want to know. All kinds of things." Then quieter, as if to himself, "Like that uncooperative 'demon.'"

"... 'Demon'?"

"Nothing of concern. Regardless, the principle guiding my actions is nothing more than a desire for knowledge," Huey said, still smiling.

Tim shook his head a little. "No. There's something beyond that."

"Oh?"

"It's like you have a more definite goal, and you want to know everything you can in order to reach it. That's what it feels like, anyway."

"I do not dislike such perceptiveness, but..."

Huey shrugged his shoulders and praised his subordinate, then dodged his inquiry without the slightest hesitation.

"That is a personal matter. A secret, if you will."

He sounded like a young boy hiding the existence of a secret lover.

Normally the man's expression was completely devoid of any emotion whatsoever, but for that moment Tim noticed a flicker of warmth in his smile.

That was when he knew it was pointless to enquire further and returned his gaze to the scene unfolding below.

And with perfect timing, things began to move.

<=>

On the street

Let's return to a few seconds before Tim looked back down at the street.

"...I'm surprised. I never thought you would throw such cheap insults around at a time like this," Salome said, shoulders slumping.

The dumbfounded group of misfits--the Lamia began to show clear anger on their faces.

Claire looked around at them, and tilted his head to the side, a little mystified. "No, that's not what I meant," he said.

"...Then what *are* you saying, Felix?"

"Oh, well, when that Christopher guy picked a fight with me, I asked him why. What was the point of picking a fight with me? What was in it for him if he won?"

Claire seemed dissatisfied, as if he hadn't been expecting their anger at all. He unapologetically continued to tell them about their past agreement.

"So, he said I could brag to the Lamia if I beat him. Since he told me that, it's only natural to expect you to praise me when I brag, right? I mean, that's the payoff. And I don't want you to get mad when I brag, I'm not into that kinda thing."

" .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. " .. "

The other nine fell silent together.

Is this man an idiot?

Many of them looked at him with that question in their eyes.

As their representative, Salome frankly shared his thoughts on the matter.

"I suppose Christopher is Christopher, after all... Is that the reason you fought to the death?"

"Hn? Oh, well, he was trying to kill me, but I didn't really need to kill him, so calling it a fight to the *death* is a little off. Ah, sorry, I'm nitpicking. Anyway, to be perfectly blunt, that's the reason I beat him in the first place, so having everyone get mad at me like this is kind of upsetting."

The Lamia had remained silent up until this point, but finally one of them--the tattooed girl had to ask. "You fought Chris so we could praise you, even though we've never met? Are you serious?"

Claire spun to face the voice, spread his arms wide and made a declaration to everyone there. "Of course! I love it when people praise me! Even when it's flattery, or lies! I even accept backhanded compliments! You should at least pretend to praise me. You're Christopher's friends, so you don't wanna make him out to be a liar, right?"

Claire rambled on effortlessly like a professional orator.

Then, as if he had suddenly remembered something, he pointed straight up into the air and added to his speech. "Oh, but be careful--I hate being called a genius. I didn't get my strength from anything like 'talent.' If you call me a genius it's like I'm lazy and got strong by doing nothing, which isn't the image I want. You see what I mean, right?"

He talked on and on, giving them pointers on how to praise him as if it had already been decided that they would do so. The Lamia fell into confusion, wondering what the heck he was.

Salome sighed deeply, then spoke to the Lamia. Claire's words were already drawing them into marching to his peculiar tempo.

"That's enough. Let's begin the experiment. However, you must not kill him. The order we have received is to bring him in, no matter what it takes," Salome spoke as if there was no room for argument.

Claire shrugged. "You know, you could just ask politely. You wouldn't get hurt that way."

"It wouldn't be an experiment otherwise. Plus, depending on the circumstances, we may end up working for the same man. It wouldn't hurt to determine which of us is of higher caliber."

As Salome finished speaking, the atmosphere changed. Apparently, the bewildered Lamia had remembered their mission, and once again acknowledged Claire as an enemy.

"You're pretty a self-centered guy, aren't you. It must be a pain for you all to work for someone like him. I sympathize," Claire said. "So while I'm feeling this way, let me make sure of something. You okay with this?"

"?"

"Looks like the old guy wants to test my ability, but if I do you in, it's just gonna end with you thinkin' you put up a fight without actually accomplishing anything. This is a little unusual for me, but I'm gonna give you a chance to live--join with me. How's that?"

Claire calmly tried to estrange them from their boss, right in front of him.

Never expecting to receive such a proposal, a few of them showed expressions of bemusement, but the rest of them just showed clear hatred.

The tattooed girl spoke up. "You're getting pretty cocky since you beat Christopher, aren't you?"

"Am I? I was like that before I thrashed Christopher, too, you know."

"...Looks like you really don't think much of us. Did it not occur to you there might be someone among us who's stronger than you?"

"Ah, I guess that might be a possibility. I am extremely strong, that's for sure, and I'm confident I won't lose to anyone. Most importantly, I have to become stronger than anyone for the sake of my love Chane...well, I won't deny the possibility, at least," Claire said, as if he were telling his life story.

"But, if, for argument's sake, you are stronger than me, huh..."

He "hmm"d and looked around at the others, and his eyes took on a scornful glint.

"Isn't it embarrassing to gang up 8-on-1 against someone weaker than you?"

<=>

On the roof

"...Why aren't they doing anything?"

Tim watched the others on the ground in confusion. He had expected all hell to break loose, but nobody was moving, and his already dour expression grew even more severe.

"This is interesting," Huey commented from next to him. "He does not appear to be a mindless savage, at least."

"It's not just that. He might even be desperately pleading for his life."

"That would be interesting in itself. I don't mind."

Huey's reply was completely aloof. Tim raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to protest, but realizing it would be useless, just returned his gaze to the ground instead.

<=>

On the ground

"Hey, Salome. Can we kill this guy? We can kill him, can't we?" The tattooed girl's voice was heavy with murderous intent as she answered before Salome had a chance to.

"Calm down now. I have another reason I don't want to fight you 8-on-1."

Claire folded his arms and nodded in assent of his own idea. "I'm just gonna run you over. Simply put, you're gonna get trampled, and if you just lose to me by myself, you all won't be able to save face."

"...?"

They all stared at him, the question *What the hell is he talking about?* written all over their faces.

But the freelancer just continued. "So let's do it this way! If we include the old guy

with the goggles over there, we can fight five-on-five! That way it's fair, no matter who wins...Then you can say you fought fair and square! Yes!"

He smiled with satisfaction at coming up with such a good idea, and the others around him finally realized that this man wasn't saying strange things again to provoke them.

He was being completely heartfelt.

It was as if he were stating the fate that must happen after this point, just to make the situation more fun for himself.

He wasn't speaking as the ruler of the world. He was speaking as a man with the arrogance to believe he was able to decide his own fate, purely and absolutely. And even though his words could only be taken as the ramblings of a lunatic, if there *were* some substance behind them, the implications changed completely.

At the very least, he wasn't using cheap shock tactics.

They thought it would have been better if he was really just a stupid daydreamer, but the previous information that he had defeated Christopher eliminated any possibility of that entirely.

The freelancer wasn't thinking too little of them. They were thinking too little of themselves.

Until this moment, they had thought Christopher's loss was some sort of coincidence, or that maybe he even allowed himself to lose on a whim. They themselves had never considered the possibility that this man was a truly powerful enemy.

If they were trained soldiers, perhaps they wouldn't have been so unprepared. But, the Lamia--especially the ones here--had never fought an opponent who outstripped them in combat skills or physical ability.

At least, if they had others like Chi and Sickle who had experienced defeat, maybe the story would be different--

"Unfortunately, they aren't here. Chi might just say 'that's all' and end it there."

Starting with the tattooed girl who clicked her tongue, their anger at the freelancer began to fade, and in its place their sharpened intent to kill him spread out over the street.

Now they knew for sure.

The man in front of them was an enemy unlike any they had ever faced before.

Their bloodlust thickened and coiled around Claire.

He smiled, differently from before, and addressed the Lamia. "Well, then, you, you, you and...you. You're on my team."

He pointed at the first four to catch his attention, as if he were really planning to split them into teams.

He chose the man in the tailcoat, the one in the skull mask, the girl in the knit cap, and the most hostile of them all, the tattooed girl in the dress.

But the Lamia were no longer confused by his words. They just waited for their orders.

Salome lifted his hand expressionlessly. He had likely observed that it was already too late to keep them from trying to kill him. His emotions had evaporated without a trace, and he resolved himself to serve as an observer to whatever would unfold before him.

He made his announcement.

"Commence the experiment," he muttered calmly.

Before he could even finish a number of the Lamia had already sprung from the ground--

And the abandoned street broke out into a frenzy.

Claire spread his arms in response to their passionate hatred raging towards him. He opened his mouth not with murderous intent, but affection.

"Welcome to my world."

He smiled, a feral smile that chilled to the bone.

"...Welcome to the show, extras."

<=>

On the roof

"Finally, they're starting," Tim sighed, watching the scene unfold below. "I just hope nobody dies down there."

"Are you saying that the Lamia are at a disadvantage, Tim?"

"Can't say. It's not like I know them, at any rate."

"You seem to hold that against me. Please, take this as an opportunity to get to know them."

Huey lightly brushed off Tim's sarcastic reply and looked down at the fray beginning to unfold below them.

And then he noticed it. He realized it the moment he judged the scene to be a "fray" in the first place.

"Oh."

"Hm? ...What is it?"

A few seconds after Huey, Tim noticed it, too.

The eight of them, excluding Salome, should have been going after Felix alone, but the situation was somehow more complicated.

"Did they have a fight among themselves...? No, that's not it..."

The scene had Tim completely baffled. The freelancer was fighting the Lamia, but for some reason he was only fighting four of them.

His birds-eye view from the roof allowed him to understand what was so strange.

The eight Lamia were definitely all attacking Felix, but Felix simply dodged or parried their powerful attacks and only actually tried to attack a particular four of them.

If you included Salome, who was standing a little ways away, maybe it was five against five and the Lamia were attacking their own--

Tim had muttered what he did thinking this might be the case, but even if there was a split, there was no way in hell some of them would side with the freelancer, especially since he wasn't one of them to begin with.

Tim ignored Huey, who was watching the street intently with a hint of amusement,

and realized again that the freelancer was an uncanny one. The furrows between his eyebrows deepened.

"What the hell is happening down there...?"

<=>

On the ground

Although Tim was confused, anyone who heard the conversation would find it quite simple. Claire had chosen four of the Lamia to be on his side.

Of course, those four attacked Claire as well, but he skillfully dodged them and only counterattacked the four he had chosen as his enemies.

And of course, the Lamia's moves were not limited to mere punches and kicks.

Some of them fought with foreign hand-to-hand techniques that were almost unknown to America at the time. One man wielded his unusually long legs like another set of arms, and one with unusually sharp vision read Claire's movements and threw several kunai into his path.

But Claire outstripped all of them--his movements and judgment were off the charts of normal understanding.

Claire dodged the blades that came flying, as if he could read the very air in front of him. He would even catch one every so often and throw it at one of his enemies.

On top of that, once he had dodged the attack himself, if the kunai were headed towards one of the allies he had chosen, he would knock that member of the Lamia to the ground to protect them.

He wasn't just avoiding attacking the one he had chosen as allies; he was conscientiously protecting them as real comrades.

The freelancer's actions were completely destroying the Lamia's pride, but they didn't even have time to worry about that.

Am I really only fighting one person?

The tattooed girl's back was stained with cold sweat.

It was less than a minute since the fight had begun, but she was unusually fatigued, as if she were fighting an entire group of brawny martial artists at the same time. The mental pressure was more of a shock to her will to fight than her physical exhaustion. She was even taken by the delusion that what was in front of them was a predator in human form.

Shit. If Sickle were here...

Ashamed at unwittingly thinking of one of her absent companions, the tattooed girl twisted her upper body. Her unusually flexible muscles and tendons gave her a wide range of motion that allowed her to twist more than 180 degrees. She reversed her grip on the blade in her hand and used the momentum of the revolution to whip around and drive it into Felix's back.

But the freelancer disappeared completely, before she had time to wonder if he had barely managed to dodge.

"!"

Where is he?! The tattooed girl was the first, but the Lamia all looked around wildly for their enemy.

They found him behind the girl in the knit hat he had chosen as an ally, with his hand on her shoulder.

They thought maybe he had grabbed a muscle or a pressure point. Her arm was frozen in the air, trembling slightly, even though he was only he was lightly touching her shoulder.

The freelancer smiled gently. "No poison, now," he said.

"?!"

"If you spread that around, you'll hurt your friends, won't you?"

"...!"

They couldn't see her eyes because of her hat, but anyone could tell she was shocked.

And it wasn't just her. The other Lamia who knew her specialty were equally surprised.

Her forte was spreading the poisons hidden underneath her coat.



But the only ones who knew that were the research team Rhythm, under Salome's supervision, and her comrades in the Lamia. Huey Laforet may have known as well, if the information had been passed on to him, but there was no way the freelancer could know, to say nothing of how she hadn't even made any definite moves yet.

"...How...did you know?"

"Eh? Well, for one thing I could tell from your body type you don't fight hand-to-hand or use guns, so I thought maybe you used bombs or poison. And, the whole time you looked like you were trying to stand upwind of me, so I thought maybe that was it!"

Salome's eyes changed as he watched them from a little ways away, hearing what the freelancer had said.

It had been less than a minute, but in the midst of the turmoil he had managed to focus on such a detail, and he had blocked her movements the moment she had chosen to use the poison.

Salome was now sure that the human subject before his eyes was completely different than any of the unusual beings he'd ever met.

A perfect human.

The words sounded cheap even to him as they floated across the researcher's mind, but he couldn't dismiss it out of hand as an erroneous delusion, either.

But, he couldn't help but verify what exactly it was about him that separated him from a normal human.

Christopher is my masterpiece. The ones here are also inferior in terms of basic physical strength and reflexes.

But...a human fighting eight of them...no, he surpasses even that accomplishment by further imposing special conditions on himself. Impossible--he destroys the very definition of "humanity"!

Once the girl in the knit cap was immobilized, the Lamia surrounding Felix had stopped moving as well. They hadn't been raised as ruthless assassins, so they had never learned to abandon a friend to bring down the target. Rather, as test subjects, the Lamia had a stronger sense of camaraderie than regular humans, so it would be meaningless to teach them such a way of fighting to begin with.

Salome pushed down all of the thoughts floating through his chest and calmly offered a cynical accolade.

"Honestly. You must be the most troublesome test subject I've had until now. Like a

vampire come to life."

Claire laughed and answered with his own half-praise. "Back in the circus, there was a would-be vampire, too, but even he didn't look as weird as you. He only wore a sparkly hat and suit."

Claire rambled like a gossipy chatterbox, even as he was surrounded by people who clearly wanted to kill him.

Even Salome smiled slightly. "I don't know anything about dressing up as vampires for fun. Well then...I was on the team fighting against you, wasn't I?"

Salome turned his faint smile toward the ground--and slowly spread his arms.

"If I don't join this game now, I could be accused of cutting corners."

And, looking around at the Lamia, he shook his head in disappointment.

"However... while this only concerns me, I appear to have made an error in the selection of instruments. It seems I should reset the experiment for the moment."

<=>

On the roof

"There's no way we're going to be able to kidnap him...wait. Wait, what the hell, Salome...!"

Tim watched Salome's movements below him and raised his voice in uneasiness.

Is that crazy researcher planning on using that!? Why does that moron think we cleared everyone out of here!

As if he understood what Salome planned to do, Tim began to get angry at the result his actions would bring.

Do you plan on destroying the Lamia, too, you bastard? And what are you going to do if that handyman is the only one who gets out unscathed?

Even though in his head he was shouting, Tim figured saying it would mean nothing to Salome at this point. He quickly turned to face Huey, deciding to advise his superior to get out of here as quickly as possible.

"This is bad. If Salome does what I think he's going to, the police are going to get

wind of..."

But there was nobody there, only the dreary scene of rooftop upon rooftop.

"Huh?"

Did that jerk just take off?!

Tim's face twitched as he glanced around wildly up, down, left, right, and a moment later realized his guess was incorrect.

He spotted a figure out of the corner of his eye, and his gaze followed it until he realized it was a person, falling between this building and the one next to it.

"Hu...Huey!"

He leaned forward frantically and saw Huey lightly falling from the top of the building.

In fact, his descent was so light he wasn't so much falling as "drifting," like a feather. He kicked off of windows and uneven bricks jutting from the walls to slow his momentum with perfect skill as he descended.

Tim realized he wasn't falling, but going down to the street in the fastest way possible for himself and looked up at the heavens.

Wasn't he just going to watch what happens!?

Thoroughly exasperated, Tim grit his teeth and opened his mouth.

"I mean, what are you going to do down there on the front lines, anyway?!"

<=>

On the street A few seconds ago

"!?"

The Lamia stiffened when they noticed what Salome was doing.

Claire was still holding the shoulder of the girl in the knit cap, and he could feel her entire body begin to shake in fear.

He's going to do something, he thought, narrowing his eyes.

The tattooed girl shouted, ignoring Claire.

"Hold on, Salome! What are you trying to do!"

Salome's eyes blurred with tears of regret within his goggles. "It's alright, I love all of you...ah, I truly love you all! So don't worry!"

This looks bad, like something worse than the poison.

Of course, the thought that he would die here never crossed within a mile of Claire's mind. He had only determined that it would be difficult to protect the four members of the Lamia he had chosen to be on his team.

Whether they were originally enemies or not, he would be ashamed to follow any rules other than the ones he himself had decided. That was just how Claire thought. Thus, he found of a way to rescue his four teammates.

And he decided in only a second.

I should take him down before he can do anything.

His movement was extremely quick. He removed his hand from the girl's shoulder and gently took her arm, then curled his fingers around the small bottle of poison she had been about to use earlier.

"Ah..."

The girl gave a small gasp, and Claire apologized quietly.

"Sorry if this is deadly."

He wasn't planning on using it on the girl herself, but depending on the circumstances he could end up killing her boss.

Claire apologized for that unfortunate possibility, and the girl, still frozen in fear, couldn't argue as he deftly plucked the bottle from her hand. It was filled with powder, perhaps to be scattered in the air.

Claire moved to throw the bottle directly at Salome's face with ungodly speed, but--

His unparalleled vision and reflexes stopped him in his tracks the instant before he could do so.

He had realized that Salome wasn't moving, instead looking above Claire's

shoulder. Specifically, he was staring at in shock something behind Claire and a little above.

Claire wasn't exactly sure what the best course of action was, but he was certain that something was happening behind him. He spun around, still holding the bottle.

And his eyes landed on a delicate-looking man who had suddenly appeared on the street, a mechanical smile fixed on his face.

"Wha..." "No way!" "What is he doing here?"

The rest of the Lamia turned, following Claire, and all responded in shock simultaneously.

The man looked gently at each of the Lamia in turn, then spoke to the man farthest away from him.

"Salome, this kind of recklessness is not allowed."

The man's tone was pleasant, but Salome's eyes widened as he gave a flustered apology.

"I...I apo...I *deeply* apologize, sir!"

The man's heretofore completely composed attitude vanished as his face paled and he began to sweat.

Claire realized from the man's attitude that this newcomer was some kind of mastermind behind the whole incident, but before he pursued that matter he asked a more immediate question.

"Did you...jump down from up there?"

"Yes...A long time ago, I used to wear a mask and make believe to be an acrobat, so I am accustomed to this sort of thing." With a mild but rational voice, the man made his apology. "As their employer, I must apologize for their actions. Please forgive our rudeness."

Hearing their boss apologize, the tattooed girl began to tremble, and the rest of the Lamia followed.

His voice was clear and fluid as always.

But, anyone who knew the terrorist Huey Laforet, enemy of the state, could feel nothing but uneasiness, that behind that smile was a hollow, endless void. The more Huey spoke in his calm, gentle voice, the more they sweated in cold terror, like being subdued with the chill of a cool autumn breeze.

The freelancer was a man with sharp intuition, and not particularly normal himself. He could probably see right through Huey instantly.

But...no matter what Master Huey is capable of, it's impossible to control someone like him. The tattooed girl was positive.

This freelancer, this Felix, was an anomaly. The man believed from the bottom of his heart that the world belonged to him. Threats wouldn't work here.

She even thought for a second that he could find a way to kill the indestructible Huey once and for all, as the man defining the pinnacle of humanity.

The autocrat and the immortal.

No matter who won, it wouldn't end so simply. It was about to begin, the gamble between them to win everything from the other.

No matter the outcome, it would be burned into their memories forever.

The human and the inhuman.

Perhaps the conflict that would begin here would lead them to find the key--how they should live as incomplete immortals.

The Lamia swallowed and took a step back away from Felix, deciding to watch the outcome.

An uncomfortable breeze blew between the buildings through the street.

And--

As if he had been waiting for the wind to die down, Felix finally spoke.

"Your eyes, and your face..."

"?" "?" "???"

Claire broke the tension in a way they never expected. Salome and the others watching were completely confused.

"You wouldn't be...Chane's brother, would you?"

And he did it with a sudden name.

Chane was Huey's daughter.

The tattooed girl knew this, so she became even more confused.

Huey's subordinates were completely bewildered, but Huey just calmly pointed out Claire's error.

"No, I am her father. I look quite young, but...being immortal, there is little I can do about it. I apologize."

The freelancer's reaction was almost theatrical. He snapped into an upright position and offered his right hand diplomatically, like greeting a foreign dignitary.

"My name is Felix Walken. It's an honor to meet you, sir."

His arrogance completely vanished, and, like a man you could find anywhere, took the hand of the man before him--the man who would become his father-in-law.

"Oh, man...Thank you so much. Thank you so much for bringing Chane into my world!"

Rather, his level of excitement was somewhat higher than a normal man's. The handshake was stiff, but the words of gratitude were warm and cordial.

"I'm a close acquaintance of your daughter. Actually, I'm thinking of marrying her."

"My goodness. She is inexperienced, so please take care of her," Huey answered with a smile, and, emotionless as always, moved on to the next topic. "By the way, I have a job request for the generalist Felix..."

"Oh, my. Shall we discuss it now?"

Felix went straight into business negotiation mode, still in high spirits. Huey looked around and informed the others.

"Since we are currently on the side of the road, shall we change the location first? You are my daughter's first suitor. Please, allow me to treat you to dinner."

"With pleasure!"

"Well then...Salome, can your car hold two more people?"

Suddenly part of the conversation, Salome realized where he was and straightened his shirttail and goggles. He coughed once, completely changed his attitude, and turned to the car with clean, neat steps. He opened the back door, and, with a courteous expression, prepared to welcome them into the car.

"Well, then, if you would take us to a restaurant, please."

Without waiting for Salome, who had turned into their butler, Huey and Felix walked toward the car.

They walked by the frozen Lamia as if it were nothing, but--

Felix stopped next to the girl with the knit cap, and placed the bottle of poison he had taken into her hand.

"Thanks for this. Poison is dangerous, so be careful how you use it, okay?"

"Huh...? ...Um, I will..."

Apparently satisfied with her answer, Felix walked away with Huey, humming to himself.

"What do you like about Chane?"

"Everything."

"I'm impressed."

And with that peaceful conversation, the two entered the car--

And leaving most of the others behind, they disappeared from the scene without a care in the world

"..."

"....."

".....?"

"? !? ??? ? ...!?"

The Lamia's minds were completely blank.

After Huey and Felix had gotten in the car, Salome had taken the passenger's seat and disappeared without another word.

All they could do was stand in silence, abandoned at the scene. Completely unable to parse out what had just happened, they couldn't even move for a few moments.

A voice sounded from next to them.

"Hey there, I'm the one in charge of Larvae. I'm Tim. Nice to meet you all."

A man in a bandana pushed his glasses up on his nose and told them.

"As your new boss, I'm only gonna tell you one thing about the results of today's tactical operation."

It was as if it was what he himself wanted to hear.

"Just think of everything involving the redhead as a bad dream and forget it. That's all."

Chapter 10: The Fugitive's Nest Has no Blankets

America, like any other country, has many faces: one lovely and radiant, and another stricken by poverty. Even before the unprecedented Great Depression, the rotting underside of society carried its influence far and wide. The government continued fighting the slump with proposals like the New Deal, but the state economy wouldn't recover for a while yet.

It had been a few years since the Depression began.

There were riots all over by those trying to find food, but it was better that they could still make a disturbance at all. In some states, those who had lost their jobs continued to go hungry, unable to even make a demonstration, or so it was reported. More and more were unable to pay for electricity, and in some city blocks there was not a light to be seen during the night.

The rich lived surrounded by dazzling light, keeping the cold at bay in their warm rooms. But though the poor looked and looked for jobs, they could not find something that didn't exist. They had no way to escape the cycle. A number of almshouses went under in the midst of the sorrow and gloom, and the streets of the cities swarmed with vagrants.

As many of the people's lives were at a standstill because of the Depression, the government expanded the establishment of welfare-based housing as part of its arsenal against the Depression.

Here on the outskirts of New York City, there was a makeshift lodging facility built not thanks to the government, but the contributions of a certain doctor. This facility was surrounded by a completely different air from Millionaire Row where the wealthy lived. This was where those who had lost their homes and their families came to live, huddled together.

A doctor named Fred had bought a hotel that had gone out of business and used it just as it was. Apparently he had originally intended to repurpose it as a hospital, but instead he was using it as a housing facility until the end of the Depression for the jobless masses to ward off the cold.

The tenants paid the lowest rent possible, but it was far less than the cost of upkeep. The place would never make a profit, only breaking even or staying in the red.

But, even in the Depression, they could come and go here without fear of starving to

death, and until a few days ago, they had been working for hourly wages.

On the shore near Manhattan Island, they had constructed the narrow, pointed skyscraper nicknamed "Ra's Lance." The completion of construction had flushed out a lot of the people living on that land. Although, while the unveiling ceremony for the multipurpose office building was already happening, the underground floors were still under construction.

Many people had come from this housing facility to work at the construction site, too. Now, many of them had left with the money they had earned for the construction to find a better home, and some of the rooms began to open up, depending on the day.

And today, a man slipped into a room that happened to be available.

The room was little more than a literal "room," with only the cheapest bed and furniture.

There were spiderwebs in the corner and places where mice had chewed the wall, and he could hear angry shouts, sobs and sometimes screaming from every direction.

"...Well, it's better than the last one."

"The last one" was a hive of thugs and prostitutes who had exhausted their savings, a residence only in name where most of the lights didn't even turn on. People ended up using candles for light, resulting in fires. Even though people often died from these, nobody did anything about it.

Compared to a place like that, this was downright pleasant. The man sat down on the bed, exhausted.

Yeah. Those angry shouts and shrieks means they still have energy to make a fuss. I'm the one without enough strength to shout and cry, even though I want to.

...Well, there's a ton of guys sleeping without a roof over their heads. Wonder if they're actually happier than me...

Now, maybe they won't come after me...

The man--Neider Schasschule, looked back on where he stood.

He had been virtually kidnapped by Ladd Russo and dragged here to New York. When he thought about it, maybe that was how his feet had been swept up by this inauspicious current.

If only I hadn't gotten involved with that Ladd guy, right now I...

I...

What would I be doing right now?

And then Neider remembered that he hadn't even wanted to be released from prison in the first place.

The investigators had persuaded him to leave. He had thought that the remainder of the Lemures would have no reason to come after him, being remnants of a failed organization, but now Neider was forced to realize what a naïve assumption that was.

Who was tailing me right after I got out?

First, his mysterious pursuers, then the trouble at the casino, and then--

Even that girl, a regular old waitress, was one of that organization's...one of Hilton's allies!

He had met the girl by chance outside the casino. He had watched her still-girlish face become dyed with murderous hatred just from looking at him.

Even though half a day had passed since then, the image wouldn't leave his head.

After he fled from her, mind blank, he had slipped into a group of hobos returning from work, and finally came to rest here. When he asked a worker in charge of food distribution, the man had said that a room had just opened up, and they were accepting new tenants.

Perhaps he had given in due to Neider's appearance as a man pushed to the brink. Perhaps it was when Neider shoved a number of paper bills into his hands, saying it was to help with the food distribution. Either way, he had secured himself a place to stay.

He bought a pillow from a nearby store, pulled out the cotton from inside, and stuffed it with the cash he had won from the casino.

Neider sighed, looking tired as he worked.

What a joke.

Before, I just lied and deceived my superiors and in the end, I...

I have to pretend to be poor in a place like this, even though I have money. I have to lie to everyone around me again.

Neider Schasschule was a con artist.

Even so, he had only conned a rich person with an investment scam once. It wasn't so much a job as a way of life.

He would find someone powerful and use their strength as his own, deceiving them and gaining their favor, until he destroyed that same organization in favor of another. And once he felt that he had gone as far as he could go in the next group, he would look outside for an even stronger group and sell himself to them without a hint of hesitation.

Betrayal after betrayal, he climbed his way up into more and more powerful groups.

But he was unable to use the Lemures, under the command of Huey Laforet, as his next step. Instead, his foot slipped and he fell from the ladder entirely. After his life was prolonged by a miracle, he had remained in this state of ruin ever since.

How in the world did I come to this? he thought again as he stuffed the pillow with money.

Why had he decided to become a deceiver?

What was his first scam?

Even when he was in prison, as he sat in fear of retribution by Huey's subordinates, he had wondered the same thing the entire time.

If there had been no beginning, he wouldn't have met such a fate, and he would be working his father's cornfields. He didn't know if he would have been happy there, but at least he could have lived in peace and security.

But the more he thought about it, the more he kept arriving at the same answer. Even now, as he sewed up the corners of the pillow, that unchanging answer rose to his mind.

The nostalgic image of his hometown, and the first con he ever pulled, on his childhood friend--an innocent girl considerably younger than him. A lie.

—*"When I grow up, I'm gonna be a hero!"*

—*"Like Wyatt Earp and Jesse James!"*

—*"You watch, I'll become super strong! You'll see!"*

—*"And when I do...can I protect you, too?"*

It was to comfort a little girl who had been bullied until she cried--a little white lie to bring her peace.

Neider dropped the money-stuffed pillow onto the bed. "But I didn't...mean to lie," he mumbled to himself.

At the very least, he didn't feel he was lying in the moment he put those words to voice. He really would become a hero and protect her. That was Neider's dream.

But instead he became a clichéd con man, unable to even pull off a big scam to win tons of money. He was just a traitor to a group of terrorists, and now he was hiding in a poorhouse.

On a scale of hero to villain, someone on the hero's side should be honest, keeping his integrity intact, even in the face of starvation. Not someone like him, winning the lottery at a casino.

He had thought so from childhood, but his declaration then was nothing but lies now.

—*"That's amazing!"*

—*"It's incredible! You're so cool, Neider!"*

—*"You can do it, Neider! I know you can become super strong!"*

—*"It's a promise, Neider!"*

He remembered his old friend smiling happily--innocently. His heart was beset by feelings of guilt.

She smiled precisely because she believed it from the bottom of her heart.

But now, after around ten years had passed, his memory was a little blurry in places.

He had to remember her face clearly.

Neider wanted to lose himself in memories of his hometown to calm his own fears, even if just a little, but the girl's face suddenly warped with hatred as she spat a curse at him.

"Death to traitors."

The twisted face belonged to the waitress.

"Ngahh!?"

Neider's entire body jolted and he tumbled from the bed. As the pain of hitting the floor shot up his back, he realized that he had fallen asleep at some point sitting on the bed.

"I...I was dreaming...?"

He panted as if he had just finished an all-out sprint, his entire body covered in sweat.

In a moment, his memory of his friend had been erased and rewritten with the memory of that waitress.

Shit!

What the hell... Those bastards...tried to kill me...killed all the other traitors...after that, after all they did to me, can't she just let it go?!

"..."

After he righted himself on the bed and took about a minute to calm his breathing, he thought about that girl, that co-conspirator with Huey.

Or rather, what he should do from here on out.

She didn't seem to be expressly looking for Neider. They had met purely by accident, but that itself was the problem.

That meant that the man's followers were so rampant in the city that Neider could run into them by chance.

Perhaps Huey only had a small number of subordinates in Manhattan, and he really had just encountered one by accident. Of course he couldn't rule out the possibility entirely, but that didn't change the danger he was in now after running into one of them.

He thought of leaving the island as soon as possible, but it was possible there were scouts watching the bridges.

Plus, even if he ran away by himself again, his situation would only get worse. So, right now he had to think.

What to do to save himself?

What could he do to make it as if none of this had ever happened?

If he joined a group of tramps or hobos wandering all over the country in search of food and work, he could fade into the shadows, to some extent. Actually, if he didn't have his accidental winnings from the casino earlier, it was very likely he would have done so, fugitive or not.

But, he now had a small fortune, thanks to a strange encounter with fate that had gotten him triple sevens on a slot machine. He wouldn't have to worry about food or shelter for a while, and if he played his cards right he could even build up some new enterprise in the middle of the Depression.

But if he were attacked by a robber, it would all be over.

He could take it to a bank, but if he just put that much money straight into the bank the FBI might wonder about its origins. Most of all, he was afraid that he might get caught by Huey's information network.

Dammit.. What should I do...what the hell can I do?

Why, why are they chasing a low-level grunt like me after all these years...what's the point?!

Anger started to well up within him, but not enough to overcome his fear.

"Shit..."

I'll rest for now...then I'll think about all this.

His mind wasn't working as well, simply because he hadn't gotten enough rest. Neider figured he should take advantage of the room he had managed to get, and lay down on the bed.

"...Isn't there a blanket?"

Even though this time of year was so chilly he could freeze to death, he didn't have the courage to go out again and buy a blanket.

He had only just stuffed his pillow with the money, and if he wasn't careful when he left it alone, a pillow thief might come along and steal it without even realizing what he was stealing. On the other hand, it would look very strange if he went out hugging his pillow.

"And anyway, now that I think about it, none of the stores would be open at this hour, would they..."

The eastern horizon was only just turning grey with light. It was still dark, on that

cusps of change from night to dawn.

...If there's a manager or someone, I could ask if there's a blanket I can borrow...

As he thought, a knock sounded.

The sound of rapping on the shabby door echoed loudly through the small room and seized Neider's heart.

"...! ...!!"

He frantically hid the pillow behind his back and stared at the door, holding his breath.

Who is it?! There's no way it's a normal tenant at this hour!

The lock on the door was simple enough that anyone who wanted to break it could probably smash it with a single blow of a hammer.

If it was one of Huey's subordinates come to kill him, his luck would end here.

No no no no it can't all end here dammit!

Still holding his breath, he turned around and looked at the window.

He was on the third floor, but was it possible to jump down?

But as he thought, an unexpectedly relaxed voice sounded through the door.

"Hey, you alright in there? There was a loud noise from up here. Thought I'd check."

"..."

The noise he was talking about was probably when Neider fell off the bed. Given how loud it was, he probably should have assumed someone heard it.

"...Yeah, I'm fine. I just fell. Sorry if I woke you up."

"Nah, no problem. ...Uh, I'm in the room below you, but I also help out with management around here. You're the one who came in today, aren't you? I thought I'd say hello."

"..."

What do I do? Is it a trap?

But if I say no and he breaks the lock it'll just end up the same...

Plus, if he was wrong, it would make it harder for him to use this place as his home base.

After a few moments' hesitation, Neider hid the pillow under the bed and slowly unlocked the door.

He peered through the crack in the door at the man on the other side and sighed in relief.

He had never seen him before, and the man didn't look particularly strong. In fact, he looked rather unhealthy. Even Neider could easily take him down in a fight.

...? He seems pretty normal now, but...

Maybe he used to be a junkie?

His complexion had a characteristic pallor to it, but his eyes were sharp and alert.

The man didn't seem to be on any drugs at the moment, so Neider opened the door wide, checking behind the man to make sure no one else was there.

"...I'm Goose. You?"

Neider gave an appropriate alias. The young man's sunken cheeks bent into a smile as he gave his own name.

"I'm Roy Maddock. If you ever have any trouble, just say the word."

<=>

A few hours later
The housing facility
Cafeteria

Before, Neider had been so sleepy he could have fallen asleep instantly, but now that feeling was gone. He ended up unable to fall asleep at all.

Then the appetizing smell coming from downstairs reminded him that he hadn't eaten anything since lunch yesterday, and so he staggered in the direction of the smell.

The cafeteria looked like the repurposed lobby of an abandoned hotel. A number of people had already arrived, most of them apparently residents, but there were also a number of tramps who had wandered by and stopped in. The smell of alcohol wafted from them, indicating that several of them were definitely drunk even though it was morning.

Drinking in the morning? In this Depression? he wondered. From the smell, though, the liquor was cheap, and he even thought he could smell the rubbing alcohol used by doctors and construction workers. He decided not to think any more of it.

Where do I pay?

Neider hesitated, wondering what to do, when he was addressed by the assistant manager from earlier.

"Hey, Goose. Did you just stay up after all?"

For a moment he was confused at being called by the fake name he had given earlier, but he didn't let it show and just feigned a smile.

"...Yeah, I was completely awake. Uh, Roy, was it?"

"Yeah. For now, breakfast is free. It's included in your rent. Go ahead and eat."

Roy brought his portion along with Neider's and set them down on a nearby table.

"You're lucky the cafeteria is so empty this morning. I'm not really sure what happened, but there were a bunch of planes flying around yesterday. Some people were making a racket yelling about how we were at war until the middle of the night, so they're probably sleeping now."

"Really. ...Anyway, this free breakfast thing is pretty good service."

Speaking of, they were serving food late last night, too.

Figuring there was no harm in knowing more about his hiding place, Neider sat down next to Roy and asked for more details. "Whoever owns this place must be doing pretty well."

"Well, he's a skilled doctor, and he has a surprising number of rich clients. ...I'm really grateful a guy with so much money is looking out for guys like us, down and out with nowhere to go."

"Sounds like he's just good by nature."

"I feel the same way. He gave a former junkie like me an honest job. This place is mainly run by volunteers, but about half of us are staying here thanks to the

doctor." Roy took a drink of the milk in his cup to quench his thirst a little and continued. "It isn't just the doctor's money, though. In Chicago, some of the big Mafia families supported a lot of people by giving out money in the shopping centers and distributing food. You heard about that, right? Some of the local gangs are doing a joint investment like that here, too."

"Joint investment...?"

"The owner of this place is pretty famous because of that all by itself. From the gangs' point of view, the people can blame their hunger on the government, not them, so they get something out of it, too."

Roy casually put his food in his mouth as Neider looked down at his prosthetic hand.

"Well, they can't serve thousands of people like the big shots in Chicago, but the doctor here is especially nice to people who've been injured or sick. ...Actually, the main clerk probably let you in so fast because he saw your hand, there."

"...Oh, this?" Neider tapped it on the table, using his arm to move the stiff-fingered hand. "Well...I'm already used to it, though."

"It's better than me. Sometimes when I was coming down from a high, I couldn't move my entire body. In this day and age, it must be hard to find work with a fake hand."

Ah, so he was on drugs. Although he looks clean now.

Neider surreptitiously observed Roy, but the assistant manager watched him as well.

"So, those burns on your face. Was there an accident or something?" Roy asked.

"I"

Shit. I forgot I washed my face earlier. Or...maybe I already sweat it off?

Neider's burn scars came from when the Lemures tried to kill him in an explosion. He had used the corpses of the other traitors as a shield, and since he was saved by a passing doctor who saw the explosion, he had miraculously made it out alive.

He had worn makeup to hide the burn scars from Hilton and the other surviving Lemures. However, if he thought about it, the face the Lemures knew (with the exception of Hilton) was the one he had before the scars. Wouldn't it be better not to hide them with makeup?

"If it's hard for you to answer, don't worry about it," Roy said apologetically.

"...Oh, it's just, a while back...some guys from the Mafia tried to kill me."

Neider decided to tell him only half of the truth. If he tried too hard to hide his secret, it would make him seem suspicious. Plus, it would be wise to take advantage of the man's goodwill, at least in part.

"They tried to kill you? Seriously?"

"Yeah. They might still be after me, so...if you can, try not to let it get out that a man with scars and a fake hand is staying here."

"I'm tellin' you, don't worry. There's no one like that here."

"No, you don't understand. They might put a bounty out or..." As he said it, Neider imagined a situation where Hilton and the others might have actually put out a bounty on him, and he was taken by a hopeless chill.

But Roy just took it as the fear of a man on the run from the Mafia, as Neider had said.

"I told you, don't worry. If anyone like that shows up, there're some tough guys here who would take them out first."

"Tough guys?"

"Like I said, the doctor here is a good man. He'll take care of anyone the same way, black, white, yellow, rich, poor..."

So he's either just a huge hypocrite or got a few screws loose. Wonder which it is?

...Or maybe he's a real hero...

Halfway through his derision of the doctor, Neider's mind instead began to disparage itself. He pushed the thought down, thinking this wouldn't lead anywhere.

"...That's really something," he replied nonchalantly. "And then what?"

"All races, men, women, young, old, rich, poor...not just that, but he doesn't split hairs over jobs or good and evil either. He doesn't discriminate at all and treats everyone, from broke junkies like me to gangsters injured in a shootout to assassins wounded by a hit gone wrong."

Roy glanced around and lowered his voice, smiling bitterly.

"So there's quite a few guys like that living here, too...There's an implicit understanding that we never saw each other here. If anyone talks...you know what'll

happen, right?"

"...I'll keep that in mind," Neider answered, thinking in his heart.

I see...maybe my luck has turned. Huey's subordinates are pretty well-off financially. Maybe they won't come around here.

In a way, the fact that I can hide among all these washouts is my lucky break.

Neider chuckled at his own thoughts and ate hungrily with the spoon in his left hand.

The chili didn't have much ground meat, but it had tomatoes and even beans, mixed well with a spicy kick that whet his appetite the more he ate.

"...This is really good."

"Isn't it?"

Roy shrugged and smiled. Neider smiled sincerely this time and continued eating.

It was perfect for the first meal since his release.

His hometown came to mind, his heart at ease, perhaps thanks to his hunger.

... ..?

Neider was disgusted with himself. What the hell was he on about, thinking the doctor who offered him food like this was a crazy hypocrite? On the other hand, he was also a little surprised at himself for feeling that way. It was ridiculous that a man like him, who had spent all his time until now betraying people one after another, would be disgusted with himself over such a minor offense at this point.

Maybe there had been too much since then.

Everything in his life up until now had come to nothing, and the debt of his past followed him wherever he went. He couldn't even run away. It was only now that he was a slave to his own karma, the fear of being pursued a collar around his neck, that he understood.

He had definitely made a mistake somewhere along the way.

I...why...where...

Regrets circled around in his head, and it seemed as if he would never be able to think about anything else.

Realizing this wouldn't lead anywhere, Neider tried to take his mind off of it and focus on eating.

That's right. I should relax for now. I've finally made it here, this is a new place, and my past hasn't caught up with me here yet.

Neider repeated this to himself and continued eating the chili.

But he had forgotten.

He hadn't decided to run with all his strength.

He hadn't escaped, He had just been brought to this place by a current of events.

If one was drawn into the curious whirlpool that surrounded the immortals, even only a little, they would all be carried to the same place eventually.

He hadn't struggled to escape, and so he had only one fate before him.

One could call it an endless coincidence or an inevitable destiny.

"No, I mean...this is really, *really* good," Neider said again.

"Tell it to the one in charge of food today," Roy laughed. "The cook has some special circumstances, too, and he was injured a while back. He makes breakfast here and works during the day. He said he wants to save up enough money to be a musician."

"Wow, he's working pretty hard."

"Yeah...Oh, speak of the devil, here he comes now." Roy looked over Neider's shoulder and raised his hand. "Hey, come here a minute. I wanna introduce someone new here."

Neider heard a voice from behind him, sighing deeply in answer to Roy's call.

"What do you mean, 'introducing someone new'? People are always coming and going. That's kinda strange, Roy."

"Well, this newbie seems to like your cooking."

"Oh, well thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying it," the cook answered politely.

Neider thought he should at least show his face and say hello and started to turn around. At almost the exact same time, Roy shared Neider's name.

"Let me introduce you. This's Goose."

For a moment, Neider paused.

...

...Oh, right, that's my fake name.

He had only come to the cafeteria a few minutes ago, but he had already forgotten his alias again. He would have to get a hold of himself.

Even so, I had to use "Goose"...

Using the name of his boss who had tried to kill him as his alias was an error on his part, he thought. He turned just as Roy asked the cook curiously.

"What's the matter? You look surprised, Upham."

Upham.

Neider's upper body froze again at the name.

"Uh, no, it's just the name of my old boss."

The cook was clearly smiling from the sound of his voice, and Neider felt an unpleasant sense of foreboding.

He wasn't sure if he recognized the voice or not. He wasn't sure if he would have been able to tell who it was back then, either. He didn't remember the voices of the comrades he had planned to betray from the beginning. They were just stepping stones.

But he remembered the name Upham, and that the man who belonged to it had once worked for a man named "Goose."

Neider could feel his spine creaking from apprehension.

Should he run? Or try to lie?

In that moment of hesitation, the situation got even worse.

"...Huh?"

Upham had come up beside the table, and furrowed his eyebrows at seeing Neider from the side.

"You're not...Neider, are you...?"

It was over.

Neider was starting to think the phrase quite frequently.

He was just a ridiculous buffoon, to the bitter end.

Why...why is he here!?

He recognized the cook out of the corner of his eye. The young man was one of the lower-ranking Lemures who had spent much of his free time looking at Chane.

Neider had figured the timid man would be easy to control--one of the first ones he had approached with his proposal of betrayal.

But in the end, he was the one betrayed, and he had lost his hold on his life, along with his right hand. It would be a lie to say he had no lingering anger about it, but Neider wouldn't be seized by such small details now.

But if one thing was true, that slight sense of relief he had felt when he was eating breakfast was just a trifle that had completely disappeared, like a mirage in the desert.

That instant, Neider dropped his spoon and picked up a fork. Upham jumped back at how violently Neider knocked over his chair.

"Hey!"

By the time Roy's voice echoed through the cafeteria, Neider was already pressed into Upham's back, the tines of the fork at his neck.

Neider decided he would stab the fork into Upham's throat if he had to.

"...Did Hilton tell you to come here? Are you going to kill me?" he asked testily.

If he thought a little bit, it would be inconsistent with what Roy had told him earlier, but at the moment Neider couldn't see Upham as anyone other than a member of the Lemures who had come to assassinate him.

Of course, Upham had only just realized it was Neider, so for him this came completely out of nowhere.

"What?! C-calm down! First of all, why are you still alive, Neider?!"

Neider was confused as well, but he ground his teeth and shouted, trembling.

"Don't play dumb... There's no way a member of the Lemures would just be hanging around here without orders from Hilton!"

Neider clearly had the advantage with the fork pressed to Upham's throat, but he was far more terrified than Upham.

His deranged behavior communicated this plainly, so Upham shouted desperately.

"Wait! I'm not with the Lemures anymore! I quit a long time ago! What about you? Why are you using Master Goose's name here...!?"

"Shut up!"

Neider was so shaken he couldn't handle the situation anyway, much less answer questions about it. Unsure of what to do next, Neider was exposed to the stares of everyone else in the cafeteria.

"Alright, put the fork down, Goose...Neider, okay? Put it down anywhere you want."

Roy raised both his hands to calm Neider down as he spoke.

"Look, fighting is strictly forbidden here. I don't know what happened between you two before, but while you're living here, forget about your past. It's not an issue. I'm not gonna add to your troubles, and neither is he. Understand?"

"..."

Still breathing heavily, Neider met Roy's eyes and fell silent.

Upham couldn't move now, but Neider had no plans after this point.

In fact, wouldn't it be safer to kill Upham here and go back to prison? Sheer paranoia caused him to entertain more and more ridiculous delusions, and he began to apply pressure to the fork at Upham's throat, little by little.

"H-hey, stop it, Neider! Cut it out!" Upham cried in a voice approaching a scream.

Neider was about to yell at him to shut up, but those words were forcefully shoved back into his throat.

He felt a cold sensation on his temple--and judged it to be the business end of a high-caliber firearm.



Neider had even stopped breathing. A low voice addressed him from the side.

"You must be quite insane to defend yourself with a single fork."

"...ah...uah..."

The man pushed the barrel of the shotgun onto Neider's head as he gaped.

"I don't dislike your insanity, but you don't have the capacity to obscure mine," he said, eyes sharp. "Don't fill this cafeteria with such a fearful resolve to kill. It just reduces the purity of my own."

Next to the man who said one nonsensical thing after another was a blond-haired boy with some childishness left in his features. He looked sidelong at the man with the gun and spoke.

"Master, wouldn't it be better to just say straight out 'Don't cause trouble when we're eating'?"

"Be quiet, Student Number 1."

Listening to their exchange, Neider felt a sticky sweat all over his body. Right next to his head was certain death, and if he believed what they were saying, they had nothing to do with Hilton or the Lemures. He was staring down the barrel of life and death for disturbing breakfast.

This is a joke, isn't it? I didn't go through all that misery to run away just to die here over something like that!

Neider was about to cry, but his entire body was so frozen in fear of the gun at his head that not even his eyes were able to produce tears. They remained dry.

He couldn't stab Upham with the fork pressed to his throat, nor could he throw it away. He was so stiff it was like he had been turned to stone by a curse.

"Don't make this any worse, Smith! Put the gun away, I'm not kidding!" Roy shouted, but Smith just shook his head coldly.

"Listen here, I need two kinds of respect to resheathe my insanity, once it has been drawn. One is respect towards the world that permits the existence of myself as a worthy vessel of insanity. The other..."

Neider could do nothing but listen to the difficult man weave his words like an awkward troubadour, but--

That moment, the air around him was filled with the stench of alcohol.

"...?" Neider looked toward the source.

An old man was standing up across from Smith. Alcohol stained his face, and he couldn't hide the smell around him.

"Jus' lemme...drink in peace. A'rite?"

The old man took a swig straight from the bottle of whiskey in his hand. Neider looked back at Smith, thinking he didn't have time to deal with a drunk--

Suddenly a powerful blow landed on his face.

For a moment he thought he'd been shot, but he wouldn't still be conscious if that were the case.

Completely confused, Neider's vision swam with pain. He let the fork fall and crumpled to the cafeteria floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

"...Hey, Alkey. I was in the middle of my speech."

"Look, pal, I'm hungover. I need yer blockhead speeches like I need a fryin' pan to the head." The reeking old man and the man with the shotgun faced off on either side of Neider, surrounded by the remains of a smashed liquor bottle. "An' that ain't somethin' a man who ambushed my friends the Gandors should be sayin', anyway."

"Bastard...you're gonna bring that up now?"

Smith was clearly in a bad mood, but the old man showed no signs of caring.

"I remember it like it was yesterday. Plus, that great big scar on yer mug is proof enough how *that* went." The old man scoffed and put the bottle to his lips.

Smith rubbed his temples at the old man's attitude, but Roy and the boy stepped between them, calming them and pulling them away from each other.

Neider watched the exchange going on over his head and felt his consciousness begin to fade.

Ugh...what is this.

They're not gonna finish me off?

Both the man with the gun and the drunk old man already appeared to have completely forgotten about him.

Now that Neider was convinced these two weren't assassins, Roy spoke. "Hey, you okay, Goose...I mean, Neider?"

Even Upham voiced some concern, rubbing his neck. "Honestly, I have no idea what you were thinking, misunderstanding like that...Hey, you alive?"

It's just as I thought...

Neider realized he was just a hopeless clown, and a smile crept onto his face unbidden.

No matter how much I struggle, I'll never be able to become a hero.

And then he blacked out completely.

As if to run away from the embarrassment of having his weakness before his eyes.

As if simply averting his eyes from the truth: no matter how much he struggled, he could never become a hero.

Chapter 11: The Actors Are Neither Collected nor Coordinated

Millionaire Row

Half a day had passed since the riot at the Martillo Family casino.

The sun dawned over the Genoard villa, the delinquents woke up and gathered in a large hall--

And there they saw something quite strange.

"...What is this?"

They all reacted the same way, huddling around for a little while.

"What, what you all crowded around for? ...What is this?"

Fang Linshan had been headed to the kitchen to make breakfast, but he stopped still to take a look at the middle of the hall.

There were several tuxedos and dress coats arranged neatly side-by-side, along with various kinds of dresses on hangers. The ten or so dresses on special hangers in the middle of a room was surprising enough, but the quantity and quality of the dresses was the most shocking of all.

They were right in the middle of the Depression, yet the fabric was of the highest quality, with nothing cheap-seeming about it. The designs were fashionable, probably the top of the line right now. They even smelled brand-new. The formal wear fulfilled every requirement for "high class."

It certainly wouldn't be unusual to find something like this in the Genoard villa on Millionaire Row, but its current delinquent inhabitants had never seen this before in their entire lives.

"Umm..."

What confused them even more was their leader Jacuzzi Splot, huddled in the corner of the hall-turned-fashion store with his arms around his knees.

"Jacuzzi? What happened, Jacuzzi?"

"Did a salesman show up at the door and make you buy all this or something?"

"Nah...I don't think one person could lug all this around with 'em."

"I woke up early this morning, and when I walked through here 6027 seconds ago there was no sign of all these clothes anywhere~"

"Did Jacuzzi carry all this here?"

"Wow, Jacuzzi's pretty strong!"

"Hyahha?"

"Hyaha!"

The delinquents continued to talk to each other, but Jacuzzi didn't react. He just let out a loud sigh, still hugging his knees. Even though he was still half-asleep, he seemed adept at making his depression clear.

Unable to pay their tribute to the Martillo Family, Jacuzzi had gone out to beg for a job. He had finally returned at some point, and this was the result.

Wondering what on earth had happened, the gang didn't go to shake Jacuzzi awake, but began to spout their own irresponsible conjectures.

"Whoa... So, did Jacuzzi get a job or what?"

"Maybe his job is to sell these?"

"Who would he sell it to in a depression like this?"

"...Eve, maybe?"

"But this is all tuxedos and dresses for adults. She wouldn't be able to wear them."

"Maybe they could sell it to that guy Dallas? Him?"

"Well, if we got in good with another rich family, we could sell it to them."

"Hyahha!"

Some thought the clothes were merchandise, but others thought they were stolen.

"Oh, Jacuzzi...now that our money's gone, you finally cracked, didn't you."

"...All the same, I dunno how good an idea this is, robbing a real clothes store for...clothes."

"If he was driven that bad into a corner, he shoulda asked us for help, at least..."

"I mean, where would we even sell this?"

"Hyaha."

The group threw out idea after random idea, but Jacuzzi still didn't react.

As if he were trying to escape reality by staying asleep.

"What's all the fuss about, every...one...?"

Nice entered the room a little late and reacted with the same surprise as everyone else. She heard the discussion going on around her, decided they had no idea what they were talking about, and took the initiative to shake Jacuzzi awake.

"Jacuzzi, Jacuzzi! Wake up! Pull yourself together! What happened?!"

"Uh...mm...? Uwaah! Nice?! H-huh? Was I asleep?"

"Yes, and you looked pretty upset. What in the world is all this?"

Jacuzzi frantically looked around at the room. When his eyes landed on all the evening wear in the middle of the room, his lips began to tremble.

"Aaaaaaaah, I knew it...I knew it wasn't a dreeeeaaaam!"

"Calm down, Jacuzzi. What are all those clothes for? Did you bring it here from somewhere?"

"Er...ah...yeah, um..."

Nice rubbed his shoulders gently to soothe him, and Jacuzzi began to regain his calm, little by little.

But for some reason the calmer he got the paler he became.

"What do I do... I wanna explain the clothes, but on second thought...oh, we're really in it deep this time..."

"What is it?"

"Th-those clothes are...borrowed."

"Borrowed? ...From who?"

Nice thought it was more important to ask "from whom" before she started asking "why."

She figured she could decide exactly how deep in it they were based on the name he gave her, but--

"From the Martillo Family...from Ronnie."

When they heard the answer, it was like sinking into a bottomless swamp. Nice froze, and Jacuzzi continued, telling them what kind of despair was waiting in those depths.

"And...everyone's supposed to wear these and go to a Mafia casino..."

<=>

A few hours ago

"So...that tattoo looks awful familiar..."

"Hyaah!? I-I'm so sorry I apologize please forgive me!" the tattooed boy screeched, jumping away from him dramatically.

Firo furrowed his eyebrows. "Wait, what are you apologizing for?"

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry!"

"I just told ya not to apologize, didn't I?"

"Eek! S-so...no, um, a-aaal'm not apologizing so please forgive me!" The boy looked like a woodland critter caught in a forest fire.

What's wrong with this girly-- ...Actually, I shouldn't call him that. He's such a pansy that calling him girly would be an insult to actual girls. Firo didn't let his thoughts show on his face, though, and just pressed Jacuzzi with more questions.

"Okay...so I've met you a few times. A few years ago you got off a train, dragging your leg like it was injured...and you were there on top of the Mist Wall, too, weren't you?"

"Th-there?!"

"I heard it from Ronnie earlier, but you were--what was it again? Can't remember your name, but you were the leader of some gang around our turf...ah..."

"Ja...Jacuzzi. Jacuzzi Splot."

Jacuzzi had no idea Firo had seen him at the Mist Wall, much less when he got off the Flying Pussyfoot. He became even more nervous, thinking Firo had a frightening ability to find things out about him.

"Right. I'm Firo, nice to meetcha. So, Jacuzzi, what are you doing here? It looks like you know Ladd..." Firo glanced at Ladd from the corner of his eye, but the other man looked like he was talking to Graham (who had finally calmed down) and Lua about something. They weren't listening.

"I...I uh, well, the Russos have a bounty on me...and then I ran into Ladd on the train but we put it off for later and Mr. Molsa told me to and when I came with Ronnie Ladd was here..."

Thanks to his terror Jacuzzi's thoughts became a mess in his mind, and his explanation of the events that led up until now became incomprehensible.

And with that explanation didn't sound like an explanation at all, Jacuzzi did his best to force a smile as he finished.

"So it's very nice to meet you, too!"

"...I did not understand a word you just said," Firo said, narrowing his eyes.

"Eep!" Jacuzzi stiffened.

Nooo! I couldn't explain at all! Bu-but I really don't know what Ladd's doing here...!

A-and why...how does he know Ladd and that scary guy with the red eyes?!

This baby-face was friends with Ladd and Christopher, and close with Ronnie Schiatto and Molsa Martillo. To Jacuzzi, if you ignored his youthful appearance, Firo seemed like the king of Hell himself, who could order any of these demons to do his bidding.

W-wait...I'm sure I've heard his name before... Isaac talks about someone named Firo a lot, I think...

"U-um...do you know Isaac and Miria?"

"What? What the hell does Isaac have to do with it? ...And where do you get off asking me questions? I'm the one doing the asking here, got it?" Firo narrowed his

eyes even more, and his face hardened.

"Uwaaaa, I-I'm really sorry! I am! Please don't kill me...!"

"I *told* you to stop apologizing for every little thing!"

This was going nowhere. Firo sighed and turned to Ronnie instead. "Ronnie, who the hell is this guy?"

"Mm...So you put off introductions for those related to yourself and tell me to introduce Jacuzzi for you. Seems you're quite demanding today. Well, no matter."

"...I'm sorry, sir."

Firo remembered with self-directed frustration that he had just decided to put off asking about Jacuzzi's connection with Ladd.

"I told you it didn't matter. Don't apologize for every little thing." Ronnie repeated what Firo had just told Jacuzzi.

"..." Firo remained silent, embarrassed.

"I'm joking. Don't worry about it. ...In any case, I brought these four: Jacuzzi Splot, Rail, Ricardo Russo, and Christopher Shouldered."

One of the ones Ronnie had just named reacted.

"Hm? Did I ever tell him my full name?" Christopher started to interrupt, but Ricardo cut him off, grabbing his shirt.

"Does it matter?"

Ronnie noticed this in his peripheral vision, and continued. "Firo, they're here to help you with your work."

"... ..wha--?" Firo had been listening quietly, but he looked up and responded to that last part without even thinking. "I mean...Ronnie...what did you say?"

"You have a special event coming up in the middle of February, don't you? You'll have their help for that. Actually, including the rest of Jacuzzi's gang and Rail there, you'll have quite a few helpers."

"...What?!"

The event he was talking about was likely the grand opening of a casino hosted by members of the Runorata Family, who had been here just a short while ago. Firo was pretty sure that this was some sort of ploy, part of a bigger plan, but thanks to the

boy who looked just like Maiza's brother--Melvi, he wasn't sure what to think anymore.

These guys are going to help me?

The wimp...a couple kids...and Christopher. You gotta be kidding.

"It's fine, Ronnie. I can take care of everything without help."

He actually thought they would get in the way, but he didn't say it outright out of consideration for Ronnie. He had brought them here, after all, and Firo didn't want to embarrass him.

But Ronnie himself didn't seem to care for Firo's attempt at being discreet.

"Sounds like you think they'll just get in your way."

Firo tried to make up another excuse. "N-no, I just...that's not what I..."

"That's so mean, Firo," Christopher said, having come up behind him at some point. "I just wanted to be helpful to the first friend I made here in this city! You!" he protested, grinning broadly.

Everything Christopher said and did made Firo's head hurt, and he couldn't ignore him anymore.

"...I can't trust you. Frankly, you're the type that'd just march into the casino and shoot the place to hell."

"Wow! That's amazing, Firo! You know me so well! I knew we were friends!"

"Shut up."

Looking at the exchange between the two, Jacuzzi was a little relieved.

Oh, good. If Firo thinks we're a burden, maybe I won't have to do anything dangerous. But then I'd have to find another way to get the money...

While Jacuzzi thought, Firo finally spoke his mind, apparently fed up with Christopher.

"But, Ronnie. Tell me honestly, what can these guys do? I know Chris can hold his own in a fight, but the rest are all kids."

"Really? You look about the same age as them," Christopher chuckled.

The light in Firo's eyes sharpened more than it ever had before, and he gave Chris a warning. "...One more word out of you and I swear I will grind off every one of those teeth with a iron file."

If Maiza hadn't been standing next to him, Firo would have probably already tried to punch him.

But for some reason, Jacuzzi apologized instead of Christopher. "I...I'm so sorry!" The air around Firo was so dangerous that it made him shake, and he blurted out the apology from instinct.

"...I told ya, why are you apologizing?"

"Eek," Jacuzzi squeaked, like a mouse cornered by a cat.

What is wrong with this guy? I can't imagine he'd be the type with the guts to get a tattoo on his face. Maybe someone bullied him into getting it, or they forced it on him or something.

As tears welled up in Jacuzzi's eyes, Firo furrowed his eyebrows and spoke to Ronnie.

"...I can't do this, Ronnie. I can't imagine this wet blanket could do anything at all. And any of his friends are probably all a bunch of..."

"Firo."

Maiza moved to rebuke his subordinate, but Ronnie held him back with his hand and spoke.

"Firo Prochainezo," he said quietly.

"...?! Y-yes, sir."

Firo froze, not just because he had suddenly been called by his full name, but because Ronnie had erased his ever-present, imperturbable smile in favor of an expressionless mask.

"If you continue to insult the young ones here, it will be taken as a slight against the *capo societa*."

"Wha..."

"The one who decided that they would be useful to you was the don, and no one else. If you insult them, then that means you doubt his judgment. Am I wrong?"

"..."

Firo couldn't say anything as Ronnie calmly told him.

Molsa Martillo was the Family's law, pure and absolute. To doubt the quality of his decision was nothing short of a betrayal.

"...I apologize, sir." Firo apologized from the bottom of his heart to Ronnie, and to the absent Molsa. Then he turned to Jacuzzi and apologized honestly. "I'm sorry. Not only was I rude to you, but I was about to insult your friends, too. Please forgive me."

"Er, ah, um..."

Apparently, Jacuzzi couldn't figure out how to respond to such an honest apology. To him, the man was the very symbol of fear. Jacuzzi cowered, the same as always, and a strange silence fell over the floor.

The one who finally broke the silence was Ricardo, who Firo hadn't been paying much attention to until now.

"No, it's only natural to have some misgivings about how the job will go, based on our appearance and behavior. However, we'll do all we can to do our job well, and not tarnish the Martillo name. Please, judge us based on our performance."

He didn't seem the least bit timid, and his speech was smooth.

Pretty level-headed for a kid, Firo thought. "Uh, okay... I understand." Ricardo seemed far more mature than him, enough to catch him off guard. That moment, he heard Ladd's voice from across the room.

"You'd never guess he's related to me, would ya! I was surprised, myself." Ladd laughed and looked at Jacuzzi. "And I'll vouch for the tattoo kid, too. He's got guts. He's even got the highest bounty the Russo Family's ever offered on his head. I knocked around one of his friends a bit, and he looks me right in the eye, and what do ya think he says to me? 'I'll make you pay for this someday,' he says!"

"...!"

Firo watched Jacuzzi as he trembled like a leaf, screaming silently. Firo's eyes said that he still didn't believe it, but Ladd wasn't the type to make a joke like that.

As if to drive the final nail in the coffin, the man in blue at Ladd's side began to speak in the sonorous voice of a storyteller as he spun his wrench around and around.

"So sad...let me tell you a sad, sad story... it seems that Jacuzzi, a man like my own younger brother, is being unfairly underestimated. Hey, you! Person over there who seems to be a friend of Boss Ladd! Let me tell you a hundred of Jacuzzi's good

points--and if I run out along the way, I'll imagine what he'll do in the future and tell you all about that!"

"...Uh, no, that's gonna take forever so I'm gonna have to decline."

It was as if the man with the wrench had been struck. "What?! I never thought I would be refused! What do I do, Shaft?! I feel like the meaning of my existence is being denied! What do I do at a time like this!" he shouted at a man who seemed like his underling.

The man sighed deeply and answered tiredly. "Maybe you should just shut up?"

"Okay, understood! I'll shut up! But I want to tell everyone here one thing! You shouldn't take Jacuzzi here lightly. If you do, when worst comes to worst...you'll die."

"No they won't!! *I'm* the one who would die!!" The one who cried in response was none other than Jacuzzi himself.

The man in blue brandished his wrench, acting again as if he had been physically attacked. He was actually just deeply touched.

"I can't believe it...you say you yourself would die... You would take the fate of death brought to those who look down on you onto yourself...?! How nice *are* you?! And how heroic! What is one so kind and so valiant! How do I express the wonder of Jacuzzi!? A fearless hero, yes, a man of valor, and nothing less!"

"No, uh..."

If they overestimate me, there'll be trouble, too...

As things got more and more out of hand, Jacuzzi himself was the one having the most trouble keeping up. Thoughts whirled around in his head that he had to deny the assertions before they got completely ridiculous, which they surely would at this rate.

But it was already too late.

Firo had his doubts at first, but now he turned to Jacuzzi and nodded forcefully.

"I don't really understand what the guy in blue is sayin', but I see you've got a lot of people that like you a lot. Other people's trust is a pretty powerful weapon. I'm counting on you, Jacuzzi Splot."

"No, um..."

"No need to be so scared. If anything goes wrong, I'll be the one held responsible, so..."

I-is it really that serious?!

Jacuzzi felt even more pressured that Firo would be holding the responsibility instead of him.

He thought that it was extremely bad that he still didn't know what job he would be asked to do after this. He raised the question, also trying to change the topic.

"Um...what should we do on the day of? Mr. Molsa just said we would be gambling, so..."

Firo nodded in understanding at that word. "I see...it sounds like the boss wants you to be my *risacca*."

"*R-risacca?*"

"It's a special term we use within the Family. Other Families probably have a different word for it. It's kind of a weird job, not exactly *sacra*, but..."

Firo thought for a moment, and chose his words as best he could to explain it to Jacuzzi.

"The word means 'riptide,' so basically you're going to be like a current that moves the mood in the casino. You get people excited so they raise their bets, or lower them. You control the atmosphere of the whole place. It's not cheating or anything like that, but the mood is really important."

"In a way, it can be more important than the dealer or the manager. I'll leave it to you, Jacuzzi."

<=>

Now Millionaire Row

"...And that's how it is. From now until the real thing, we have to study how to gamble, how to behave and all kinds of things... Mr. Ronnie let us borrow all those clothes...I don't know how, but when I got back they were all laid out here in here..."

He looked away from Nice and stared at the ceiling as he absently told them the situation.

He pulled out a note from his breast pocket that had been left in the entryway when

Jacuzzi got home.

"We'll need you to at least act like you're rich at the casino. I'm lending you this formalwear so you can get used to wearing them, starting now. Delinquents from the street are quite noisy, after all, and the rich and gang executives won't be easy to manipulate.

I'll be waiting for you.

Oh, and I paid your tribute for this month and the next for now.

--Ronnie Schiatto"

"...Basically, we can't refuse," Jacuzzi mumbled after he showed the note to everyone. His expression was hollow, as if his very soul had been sucked out.

And so the delinquents of Millionaire Row were completely swallowed by the storm.

There were no mafiosi or immortals among them.

However, simply by being nearby, they were drawn into the current of a great whirlpool.

The scale grew even greater as their own lives' eddies and currents were added to the mix.

The bonds that tied them all together continued on--whether tragic or hilarious.

And one more castaway adrift in this maelstrom of immortals and Runoratas appeared before Jacuzzi's gang.

"By the way, where's Rail?"

Nice wasn't trying to turn away from the despair awaiting them, but she wanted to ask about something that had been bothering her for a while before she went ahead and brought up the casino incident again.

Jacuzzi readily answered the simple but important question.

"Oh, she ran into an old friend, so she said she's staying with them tonight..."

As they were about to discuss the matter further, they heard a noise from the front hall.



"Oh, maybe she's back."

They all clamored down to the door--but the one standing there was a man some years older than Rail, although he was still familiar.

"Hey, there. Lookin' poor as ever, ain'cha, ya saps."

With a greeting made his poor upbringing clearer than anything else, the one who appeared before them could be called their landlord, or something like it.

"...D-Dallas?!"

Eve Genoard was the current head of the family.

Her older brother was a stereotypical deadbeat who spent all of his time playing around, selling their inheritance of antiques and paintings, instead of taking over as the family head.

He was quite blatant about looking down on Jacuzzi and his gang, but since everyone except his sister considered Dallas scum anyway, they couldn't be upset with him at this point.

Unaware that Jacuzzi's gang actually almost pitied him--

The man you could say was the definition of a lowlife delinquent laughed coarsely and spoke.

"Well, I'm comin' to you with some good news today," he said, taking his own first step into the whirlpool.

"So, do ya know about that casino party at Ra's Lance in February?"

Chapter 12: The Silent Man Doesn't Lose his Composure

Somewhere in New York The jazz hall "Coraggioso" Basement

"So you're sayin' it'll turn into an all-out brawl?"

Berga Gandor, one of the bosses of the Gandor Family, muttered in surprise in response to his younger brother, Luck. He grinned broadly. "Bring it on! Let's smash that flimsy little building to bits!"

The jazz hall was where the Gandors carried out the business of their small New York mafia. However, the basement was their office--essentially their inner citadel.

In the middle of the room, the youngest of the brothers in charge, Luck Gandor, told the others about what had happened the previous evening. Although he himself had been awake for the entire night, Luck didn't show any signs of sleepiness as he logically and coherently related everything that had happened at Firo's casino, as well as his own predictions as to what would happen next.

"Let's get 'em all together in a trap! Only trouble is runnin' outta bullets! The only thing those Runorata bastards got goin' for 'em is numbers, anyway!"

In stark contrast to his even-keeled brother, Berga filled the room with his violent mood as he listened.

"Calm down, Berga," Luck chided the middle brother. He turned to the oldest. "Somehow, I think this has to do with immortals. Firo's attitude towards Melvi was a little...strange. At first it was normal, but then Melvi passed by Maiza when he left, Maiza said something after that, and Firo's complexion completely changed."

"What? Does that mean Melvi knows Maiza?" Berga asked.

Luck shook his head. "Not exactly...judging from their attitude afterwards, it didn't seem to be that. ...But there may be some connection between them. And immortals."

"Doesn't matter whether he's immortal or not. If they come and pick a fight with us, we'll bash their heads in, right, Keith?"

"..."

Keith was silently listening to their conversation, but his eyes sharpened like a blade. Those eyes alone would be enough to make an ordinary delinquent shrink back, even forget how to move. Keith answered in neither the affirmative nor the negative, but Berga was overwhelmed by the pressure coming from his brother. His temper naturally cooled.

"Aw, don't look at me like that, Keith. I get it, I get it, I'll listen to the whole story."

Luck waited for the right moment to warn his brother himself. "Remember, Berga, immortality is a fairy tale. If we stir up trouble with the Runoratas, we won't be able to explain to the mafia around us. We can't just say we're fighting because of immortals."

"...This is such a pain in the ass."

"It could be worse. Even if we became the biggest mafia in the area, we couldn't just go out and take revenge on whoever we want."

At this point in time, the criminal organizations of America had adopted a policy of carrying out business completely underground, thanks to the arrest of Al Capone. As a result, they had developed a strong bond with one other as fellow mafia, and the network known as "Cosa Nostra," founded from a large gang with its fair share of charisma, was growing bigger and bigger. Any fight between organizations was strictly watched. There were cases where even if a member of one of the two families was killed, they would need the permission of the surrounding families to repay in kind.

The Runorata Family had been powerful from the beginning, but the continued existence of small families like the Gandors and Martillos was extremely unusual in such an environment.

"In fact, it's the opposite. I *don't* want to fight with one of the five biggest families in New York. Well, you could call it a fight, but I would call it getting dumped in the Hudson. Plus, if a family without any allies like the Runoratas or a small family like us draws attention, I can easily imagine the police coming in and sniping us instead. The FBI is the enemy of the Mafia, so of course they'll take the easiest foothold they can to wipe us out."

"..."

Berga looked between the long-winded Luck and the silent Keith. He ground his teeth together.

"Then what do we do?"

"Our only option is to make the best of the cards we have. That's what we've always done until now. When we fought with the Runoratas back then, too," Luck said, looking away a little, as if to hide his own uncertainty.

The cards we have? Our greatest loss is that the joker--Claire--is with the Runoratas.

Luck knew he would have to tell his brothers sooner or later, and his heart became heavy.

Not only was their childhood friend now their enemy, but the most powerful card they knew of had been taken. He was forced to acknowledge the dire straits they were in. But, he couldn't remain silent. He resigned himself and spoke.

"By the way, I have one more thing. Something important."

"..." "Yeah, what is it?"

The two brothers pressed with their words and gazes, and Luck began to explain. "Melvi has a bodyguard that's gonna be a problem..."

And that moment, a knock sounded on the door.

"Boss, can I come in?"

It was the voice of one of their underlings on standby inside the main office.

He had been told they were in the middle of a meeting, so if he cut in, it must be an emergency.

"What is it?" Luck put back the mask of calm he showed everybody except for his two brothers.

The junior timidly made his announcement. "Yeah, there's someone here to see you, boss... Says he's a messenger from the Runorata Family. Can you give him a minute?"

The brothers all looked at each other at the news.

"...Is he alone?"

"Uh, well, if you include his bodyguard, there's two of 'em..."

An unpleasant sense of foreboding rose in Luck's mind at the word "bodyguard."

And on top of that, their junior's complicated expression turned that sense into certainty.

Before Luck could say anything, the junior put his unpleasant premonition into words.

"And the bodyguard is...well...someone you know..."

A minute later.

"Hey, there, long time no see, you two. Luck, it's been what, six hours? You don't look so good. Did you not get any sleep?"

Claire's smile was bright and hearty. Luck rubbed his temple with his finger.

"If I do look unwell, it's because you are completely unbelievable, Felix." Half-glaring at Claire, he told him the situation, a little wryly. "I was about to tell Keith and Berga about you." He turned his eyes towards the young man behind Claire, who was smiling agreeably.

Melvi bowed courteously, his expression unchanged from the day before.

Claire seemed unconcerned about the one behind him and replied, as if the sharp tone of Luck's reply had nothing to do with him.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, Keith, Berga. Right now I'm with the Runorata Family. In other words, I might be your enemy, depending on how things go."

"..." Keith was silent, as if he had anticipated it the moment Claire appeared.

Unlike his brother, Berga shouted in rage, veins visibly pulsing. "What?! What the hell are you thinking, Claire, you asshole?! You know our relationship to the Runoratas, don'tcha?!"

"Just hold on a minute. I was working for that big guy Gustavo once before, remember? Just to look for someone. Plus, you aren't picking a fight with the Runoratas at the moment, are you? And it's Felix, not Claire."

Claire spoke with absolute freedom. Berga pressed his right hand to his own forehead.

"Fuck...You've always been impossible to figure out, ya bastard."

"Well, if you were able to figure out what I was going to do, Berga, I think that'd be the end of me."

"Ha..."

"Hah hah ha"

They shared a laugh at each other--

And then Berga threw a punch at Claire. The next moment, the two childhood friends broke into a violent brawl.

"This may take a while, so please come in."

Ignoring the rampaging duo, who had already flipped over a desk, Luck invited Melvi into the meeting room.

"Should we stop that?" Melvi glanced at Claire and Berga as they fought.

"I'm used to it," Luck answered coolly. "You have no cause for concern, even if your bodyguard is involved. Even if we turned a gun or knife on you to kill you, he would do something. That's how he is."

"It seems you really believe in Mr. Walken, then."

"I don't know of anyone I can believe in more when it comes to raw ability, whether he's an enemy or an ally. Although, that's on the condition that we're ignoring the issues with his personality..." Luck wasn't joking in the slightest.

"Is he even worth your trust as a friend?"

"I don't like to measure old friends simply by how much I trust them."

Keith sat at the round table with Luck and their guest Melvi as the two engaged in a verbal duel.

Luck observed Melvi again, but nothing about him seemed particularly out of the ordinary.

He didn't have the hardened appearance or any particularly powerful aura around him that the people on this side of society tended to have, but his quietness itself was unsettling.

Well, you wouldn't be able to tell Firo was a camorrista by just looking at him, either.

And I can't really talk, myself.

In contrast to himself, Keith had a sharp air around him that established his presence as a powerful mafioso, and Berga was the very appearance of a fighter type.

Luck, envious of the other two, broached the topic at hand.

"So, what are you scheming, Melvi?"

"...Scheming? That's quite a thing to say on first meeting someone."

"I remember meeting you at the Martillo Family casino last night."

"I don't believe we spoke, though."

Apparently Luck hadn't completely escaped his notice.

The young man was still smiling pleasantly, but Luck guessed from experience that the smile was for the purpose of masking his true feelings.

"I apologize if I seem rude, but based on the exchange I saw between you and the manager, Firo, I can't help but have some doubts toward you personally and everything you have to say." After his roundabout remark, Luck narrowed his eyes and continued. "You may be part of the Runorata Family, but you didn't come as a representative of Bartolo Runorata, did you? I think that's enough to warrant some level of caution."

"Why do you say I'm not a representative of Mr. Bartolo?"

"Because 'Mr. Bartolo' isn't a dumbass. He wouldn't go parading around someone as important as a dealer in his special casino party."

"...I see." Melvi smiled wryly at Luck's words, crossed his legs, and arched his back.

"Well, since you're absolutely correct, I won't object," he continued, his words respectful as ever but his attitude now haughty. "Certainly, I did not come on behalf of the Runorata Family, but for my own purposes." He confessed easily, but there was no agitation or restlessness in his eyes. "I apologize for waiting so long to introduce myself, Keith, Luck. My name is Melvi."

As if he had intended to tell them from the beginning, he introduced his own topic with his composed smile.

"Let's make this brief. Will you make an agreement with me?"

"...Agreement? With you personally, not the Runoratas?"

"Yes, between the Gandor Family and me alone."

"You don't appear to be jerking us around. May we hear what it is, exactly?"

Luck calmly pushed the conversation forward, and Melvi's expression changed for

the first time.

Although that only meant the corners of his mouth fell a little, making his smile ever so slightly shallower.

"That certainly was fast."

"Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just that a Mafia Family making an agreement with a youngster like me individually is a rather ridiculous topic to bring up. I imagined you would be more indignant, turn a gun on me, yell at me not to mess with you, something more along those lines."

"You should expect to get shot. More than that, in fact."

"Oh? Then what should I expect?"

Luck calmly gave Melvi a swift reply. "Simple. You should imagine a pair of rusty scissors."

"...Rusty scissors?"

"Do your best to imagine the most painful way those scissors could bring suffering to the human body. Imagine the pain you never want to experience. I think that would be enough," Luck told him smoothly.

"Oh, my. I admit, I was planning to bluff with 'Oh, is that all?' no matter what you said. I didn't think you would give me such specifics to imagine."

"Yes, I determined that was the kind of person you were, so I decided to be a little mean about it. I apologize."

Luck gave a mechanical apology that contained no remorse whatsoever. Melvi didn't seem especially displeased, and just continued, smiling.

"Well, well, Mr. Gandor, it seems we're birds of a feather. That's for the best. You aren't as blunt as Mr. Prochainezo."¹

"Don't forget that someone can hate a person just like them. Now, what is this agreement?"

"Oh dear, it looks like we got off-topic. My apologies."

¹ In the Japanese, Melvi refers to Luck and Firo with the *-san* honorific. I normally just leave off the *-san*, but given Melvi's personality and the context, I decided to go with the more respectful Mr. Prochainezo.

His calculated friendliness made him seem like a con man bearing a recommendation for a sketchy insurance policy.

Luck and Keith didn't let their guard down and took Melvi on as their opponent as the sound of Berga and Claire's fight echoed from outside.

They had already realized.

Melvi had introduced himself as a Runorata, but he didn't belong in their world at all.

He was an "outsider" that had gotten himself lost in the bloody underside of society, although he certainly wasn't on the straight and narrow, either.

Even now, Luck was unable to figure out this man who spoke as if he were watching everything around him from afar, removed even from the world itself.

Melvi looked up at Luck, meeting his eyes.

"It's a simple agreement. A truce."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. My own personal position, not the Runoratas, is that of an enemy of Firo Prochainezo. But I have no ill will towards you."

"That's--"

"I know the relationship between you and Mr. Prochainezo quite well, of course," Melvi interrupted. "And it seems, judging by last night, that you are acquainted with my bodyguard as well."

Melvi's eyes were confident, as if he could see through everything.

However, those like Luck, who normally associated with Claire, had no reason to quail at eyes like that. "If so, then this will be brief. Please go home."

"Don't you think it might be best to hear me out, for the sake of your subordinates?"

"If it involves my subordinates, then there is already nothing to talk about with you personally. Otherwise it would become an issue for the Gandor and Runorata Families."

"...But I'm not talking about the Runorata Family."

Melvi glanced sidelong at the oldest brother, but Keith remained silent, without any

indication that he intended to join the conversation.

Luck answered instead, as if speaking on behalf of his brother.

"Private matter or no, your affiliation with the Runorata Family does not change. I don't know your true nature or your goal, but that alone is a grave matter. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. This is the world you're standing in now, and if you're too stupid to understand that much, there's no value to speaking further with you."

"Allow me to propose the reverse, Luck Gandor," Melvi said, eyes narrowing slightly. "You're the one who has mistaken where you stand."

"How so?"

"Your little Mafia customs? *Omertà*? Revenge? Family? Please. All of those things are for *humans*, is what I'm saying--"

And there his speech came to an abrupt end.

In the middle of his rant, Melvi's eyes had flicked towards the exterior of the room.

As if drawn by his gaze, Luck looked in the same direction, and in that moment, Melvi sprang up, knocking his chair over behind him. With the movements of a predator having cornered his prey, he kicked off the floor, the table, and even the wall of the small room to noisily cut around the table and land behind Luck.

Luck reacted to the sound and moved to match him.

"...!"

But whether by accident or by design, the table Melvi had shoved into him blocked Luck from standing up.

As if sneering at Luck, too late to make the first move--

Melvi reached out his right hand towards Luck's head.

That moment, Luck turned around and met Melvi's eyes.

He realized the once skillfully concealed bloodlust in those eyes was now plain and clear.

But Luck was already unable to do anything.

<=>

In the past

A conversation between Firo and Czes

--"Hey, Firo...Um, do you know that guy Felix? Or Claire, whatever his name is. The redhead?"

--"Hm? Have you met Claire, Czes?"

--"Kinda."

--"Hmm, well, he grew up in the same building as the Gandor brothers and me. He's not a bad guy, but...I mean, yeah, if you think about what he does for a living I guess he is... Eh, I'll just introduce you sometime soon."

--"N-no, no, that's okay! Please don't introduce us, I'm begging you!"

--"?"

--"Um, anyway, are the Gandors you mentioned the same ones from the Gandor Family around here? You sure know a lot of important people, Firo."

--"I dunno about that... and anyway, I'm a Martillo Family *capo*. That's something, right? Uh, I mean, I'm not trying to brag at a kid or anything..."

--"... Oh, well, don't worry about it. Go on."

--"Mr. Gandor did a lot for me, so of course I tried to join the Gandor Family, but...well, when I was out on the streets, Yaguruma knocked me out, and then Maiza and Ronnie helped me a lot...then I first met Don Molsa, and I was so scared I was shaking. And then a bunch of stuff happened after that, and I decided to devote myself to the Martillo family."

--"So that's what happened."

--"Keith and them were against it at first, too...but Claire really stuck up for me, and they all ended up giving me their blessing."

--"...I didn't know a guy like that could be a mediator..."

--"? Did something happen, Czes?"

--"No, nothing. Or maybe you meant...he beat them up?"

--"Ah. Well, Claire is definitely good in a fight, but he's not the type to force us to listen to him. Although he and Berga were always beating each other up over something. Berga always lost."

--"No surprises there."

--"..."

--"What is it?"

--"Czes. Claire is definitely strong. He's got nerves of steel and a body to match. But I know someone else whose strength isn't just fighting or killing, but who he is as a person."

--"Huh?"

--"Back when Claire and Berga would fight, sometimes they'd get a little too into it and hit me or Luck. It happened a lot, actually."

--"Sounds like a real mess."

--"But back then, when they got all worked up, there was only one guy who could stop 'em."

--"Whaat?"

--"Yeah. There's actually someone who could do it."

--"He may not be able to beat Claire in arm-wrestling, but he's incredible. He could break 'em up, just like that."

<=>

**Right now
The jazz hall "Corragioso"
Basement**

"!" "...!"

Luck and Melvi.

Their eyes widened at the same time.

Between them stood a man with eyes that shone like a knife.

" ... "

Keith Gandor was silent as always.

What he had done was extremely simple.

He had grabbed the wrist of Melvi's outstretched hand, a split second before his finger touched Luck's forehead.

"Ugh..."

Melvi's smile vanished without him even realizing it at the pressure on his wrist, and he let out a small sound.

His wrist wasn't actually being grabbed with much force, but Keith was holding it with his left hand. Melvi's delusion that his wrist was being crushed was probably because he was being overwhelmed by the pressure coming from the older man.

And the next moment--

Still perfectly silent, Keith reached out his own right hand towards Melvi's head without a hint of hesitation.

"?!"

Realizing what would happen to him, Melvi tried to kick at Keith's torso to get away, but Keith just lightly turned to avoid it.

" ... "

Keith still did not say a word, but the sharp light in his eyes made his purpose clear far more eloquently than words.

It was pure revenge.

An eye for an eye.

A tooth for a tooth.

A blade for a blade.

A lie for a lie.

And a life for a life.

Melvi finally realized this time.

The one he should beware of was not Luck, the one he had judged to be the wisest, but the oldest brother. He had never let his guard down for a second, never saying a word.

But by the time Melvi realized it was already too late.

The intent to kill him, purer than anything he'd seen until now, coiled around his whole body.

Thin as a spider's thread, tougher than steel, the thread of death wound around him, as if to tear his soul apart. Melvi was seized by the illusion in the space of less than a second.

He was certain he would be killed by this counterattack. It was almost comical.

But right before that could happen, the sound of glass breaking interrupted that thought.

A heavy marble ashtray broke through the window from outside the room towards Keith's right hand.

Keith's hand stopped moving towards Melvi's head and instead caught the ashtray.

It was a strange situation--Keith held Melvi's wrist in his left hand and the ashtray in his right.

A carefree voice addressed Keith from the other side of the window.

"Alright, stop, stop, stop. I'm gonna ask you to leave it there, Keith."

Claire had briefly paused his battle with Berga and waved his hand, visible through the broken window.

"I'm this guy's bodyguard right now. I have to protect him so he doesn't die, y'know?"

"Hey, Claire! Where're you throwin' that ashtray...huh?" Berga moved to grab Claire from behind and finally noticed the unusual situation in the inner room. "You fuckin' pig, whaddaya think you're tryna to do Luck and Keith?!"

He rushed as fast as he could into the room, but Claire deftly swept his legs out from under him.

"Whoa...!"

Berga did a flawless half-flip and faceplanted straight into the floor.

"I'm tellin' ya, just calm down. See? He didn't do anything to them. Just hear him out."

"Guh...Claire, you bastard!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, geez. And it's Felix, not Claire." Claire answered without a care in the world as Berga lay on the floor, hands pressed against his face. He looked back into the room. "Melvi."

"...What is it, Felix?"

"You should apologize to Luck and Keith."

"...What? What did you say to me?"

Claire was still smiling pleasantly, but Melvi's smile wavered a little.

"I don't know the particulars, but if Keith was making it that obvious he wanted to kill you, you musta done something. My job is to protect your life, and I'll do it like I'm supposed to. But their my family, so I'm gonna say this, too." Claire's face became expressionless. "You apologize to those two."

"..."

On the other hand, Melvi restored his normal bold smile, and opened his mouth after a few seconds of silence.

"I am incredibly sorry. It was only a bit of fun to test you, but it was extremely rude of me. Please forgive me."

Melvi's apology was surprisingly frank. Luck and Keith knew it was bullshit.

There was not a doubt in their minds that he had tried to kill them just a moment ago.

And the fact that he had tried to put his right hand on Luck's head along with that intent cleared up one of the many mysterious surrounding Melvi.

An immortal...

Luck's gaze instinctively became grim.

He was positive that he would be dead if his older brother had not saved him, but he

spoke to Melvi without showing a hint of uneasiness on the surface.

"Whether we forgive you or not, with Felix as your bodyguard all we can do is to send you home quietly. However, since you will not be able to save face if we simply let you run, allow me to say this: 'Don't worry about it. It was just good luck.'"

"...I accept the favor. I'll leave. My bodyguard is like a double-edged sword, and there's nothing I can do about it. The walls between enemies are too thick for me to interfere with."

His lips still bent into a smile, Melvi shot a glare Claire's way, bowed politely like a butler to Luck and Keith, and turned away from the room.

The Gandor Family members who had been watching from a distance stood to block Melvi's way as he headed towards the stairs, but they let him through at a gesture from Luck.

"I'm looking forward to our banquet in February, Mr. Gandor."

Melvi left them with just that and disappeared up the staircase with that smile still on his face.

"Huh? He's leavin' just like that?"

Claire turned to the stairs to follow him, but then turned back to Keith and the others.

"Sorry you had to put up with him. He's a real pain in the ass, isn't he?"

"If you're going to apologize, then don't agree to be his bodyguard in the first place."

"Ahh, I really am sorry. But it's all for love, so bear with me a little."

Still apologizing, Claire started up the stairs, and muttered a parting shot.

"After my contract is up, I'll make sure to show him what hell looks like."



<=>

**One minute later
In the meeting room**

"...So what did he come here to do, in the end?" Berga asked, out of the loop.

Luck couldn't answer.

If he didn't answer correctly, Berga could very well go and attack one of the Runorata Family's establishments. He knew that much from his brother's personality.

Melvi.

That boy didn't come to talk. He came to kill us. That must have been his goal.

In the end, who had Claire saved? The boy? Or them?

Keith had ultimately been about to devour him.

If that boy was able to devour Luck, that meant that he wasn't an incomplete immortal like Dallas, but had drunk the true elixir of immortality.

The oldest brother was silent as always. His excessive silence had only gotten more so in these past few years.

In any case, Luck thought it would be pointless to try to guess the answer, and muttered one thing to himself.

"...We may need to strengthen our forces."

Berga reacted. "What's that? What are you sayin'? You've got me, that's enough."

"If you're all we have, Berga, then if he attacks two places at once, we won't have enough men for both." Luck calmly denied his brother's point of view and said his thoughts so that Keith could hear them. "Of course, I know our members aren't soft. And I'm sure the Runorata *picciottos* are no slouches, either. But...we're not used to fighting with outsiders like that, who don't follow the Mafia ways. In short, if anyone else like Felix shows up, we'll be exposed for a Family of sissies."

"C'mon, I'll be damned if there's another Claire running around."

"It would be nice, but he's fighting against us. That's a fact."

"Tch...that son of a bitch..." Berga smacked his fist into his palm.

Luck knew that was the signal for him to stop his brother's train of thought. He contemplated a little more, and continued to tell the other two.

"Our best fighter among the *capos* was Nicola, but he's still recovering from getting shot to hell year before last. We can't push him too hard. And if that's the case, our best fighter now is..."

Luck hesitated. He didn't want to acknowledge the truth. All he could do was stop speaking right there and not say what he was thinking.

And at that very moment, a cheery voice sounded from the top of the steps.

"I'm ba~ck! That job was so easy, *amigo*! I only had to cut off two of his fingers before he started crying and gave back all the money he took! He's not such a bad guy, is he, *amigo*?"

As Luck listened to the woman tell her story in all its violent glory, he rubbed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

"...There's something strange about a mafia whose best fighter is a woman..."

Having said that, Luck suddenly fell deep into thought.

He remembered the past and mumbled as if to himself.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess..."

<=>

The street

"We weren't there for long. Did you do everything you needed to?"

"Yes, Felix, and it was a completely pointless visit thanks to you."

"Good. It's good to take a breather and do something pointless once in a while," Claire smiled and nodded, with no indication that he was putting up with (or even aware of) Melvi's sarcasm.

Melvi looked at him from the corner of his eyes and thought for a moment.

That was unexpected.

I thought they had become immortal without even realizing it themselves, but they even know about the right hand. It seems I can't deal with the Mafia using the normal methods, it seems.

He then sighed a little, and gave an order to his bodyguard next to him. "I'm returning to the villa. Once we get there, you may return home for the day."

"Really? If you've got some free time I can show you around the city."

"No, that's not necessary. Personally, I want to see as little of you as I can."

"How about that. If I weren't on the clock, I'd be about to grind you to pieces on the railroad tracks."

Their smiles never wavered as they threatened each other.

They were silent after that, and just got into the car waiting for them outside.

And after the car was gone--

A few men appeared from the shadows of the street.

"...You're sure that's the Gandor Family office, right?"

"Yeah, we made sure back when they were fighting with Gustavo."

"...You gonna let that newbie kid off, even after he's gone to negotiate with another Family?"

"Nah, he's just a dealer. Them two-bit dealers don't have the pull to--"

The man was cut off by a hand around his neck. "Gah...gck..."

"'Two-bit', huh? You sayin' Carlotta's a two-bit dealer, too? Huh? Could *you* do it? Could you rip off a single cent from a dumb sucker at the casino? Couldja?!"

"Gah...s-sorry..."

The man flung away his companion with his teary apology, and spoke in a voice filled with hatred.

"Thanks to him showin' up, Carlotta lost her spotlight as the big dealer at the party!"

That shiftY rookie bastard think we're gonna put up with that? That he can do whatever he wants?!"

"But you know...the boss is the one who made the decision."

Another one spoke up in support of his comrade.

"...Yeah, that's right. That's why we're tailin' him out here waitin' for him to screw up. ...Didn't think he'd show his true colors so quick, though."

"Are we gonna tell the boss?"

"Nah, we'll just have him disappear for us. Maybe at the bottom of a river, maybe in the bellies of the dogs." The man's smile was tinged with loathing as he voiced his threats. "And once the trouble starts, we can say we saw him goin' in an' out of the Gandor Family office. We can trick 'em into thinkin' he was a spy all along."

And then he added one more thing, thanks to lack of information. A statement as foolish as challenging God himself.

"And then, we'll let his redheaded escort there take the fall for it."

<=>

In the car

Blissfully ignorant of the dangerous conversation that took place after he left--

Melvi was thinking something even more dangerous than the men keeping an eye on him.

So the Gandors were impossible. There's no way around it; I'll have to take care of them at the casino party. Nice and slow.

He turned his face to the window and closed his eyes so the bodyguard sitting next to him couldn't see his expression.

Behind his eyelids, he saw the face of the young man he had just met yesterday.

Firo Prochainezo. He didn't seem like much, he scoffed.

Hatred began to seethe within him.

I can't believe someone that unimportant got his hands on Szilard's memories. And he's just letting them rot uselessly in a place like that?

The reason for his hatred was ironic--he was in a similar position with the Runorata Family.

It won't be much fun to just devour you, Firo. I'm going to take everything from you, little by little, right up until the day of the party. And after I devour you, I'll get to experience your suffering in my memory, as an added bonus.

In the midst of his perverse daydream, he smiled at the window.

That in itself sounds delightful.

And unlike his usual forced smiles, this one was very real.

Now then...I wonder how many will disappear today?

Chapter 13: Nothing Comes of Violence

It had been over two hundred years since Maiza Avaro lost his brother. Since Szilard Quates had devoured him with his right hand.

The brothers' hometown was a port town in Southern Italy called Lotto Valentino.

Gretto had wanted nothing more than to escape the curse of his father and the town steeped in the traditions of aristocracy, but his very existence was stolen from him before he ever set foot in the New World.

For Maiza's part, the reality that he had lost his younger brother was thrust upon him for dozens, hundreds of years--the reality that he couldn't get him back. In the worst way possible, he was forced to taste the truth that immortals were not omnipotent.

Even now he remembered his brother's face perfectly. At the very least, his brother's memory had to live on forever in the one still alive; there was no way he would forget.

That's what he had believed--until he met that young man at his subordinate's casino.

That must have been Gretto's face...

The more he thought back on it, the more Gretto's face distorted until he could no longer tell him apart from the one he met yesterday. It was like his real brother's face was being overwritten by the other Gretto's, and Maiza was tormented by feelings of guilt.

Photography didn't exist back when his brother had been killed, so Gretto's face remained only within the memories of the immortals who remembered him.

If only they had at least commissioned a family portrait, he thought with chagrin, but there was no way a portrait would paint itself now, no matter how much he regretted it.

If there was someone on that ship who could draw... Victor said he was confident in his own memory, but...

Unsure whether his old friend had enough skill to draw a likeness solely from

memory, Maiza mused as he ate his breakfast, the same as always.

He was in his apartment, on the outskirts of Little Italy.

Little Italy was originally a slum, where many penniless immigrants gathered together, and within it stood an apartment building that was relatively new, but built before the Great Depression.

Maiza had enough money buy a house on the outskirts of Manhattan, but he had no reason to live in such a big place by himself, and instead moved from apartment to apartment.

Before, he had also been trying to hide from Szliard Quates by not living anywhere too extraordinary--but for these past five years he had lived in the same place.

After his biggest threat died in the fall of 1930, there was no more need to hide, after all.

But, having grown accustomed to this way of life over many years, he felt no urge to move anywhere bigger at this point.

And if he had to give one more reason: living in a house far beyond what was necessary would remind him of the aristocrats' manors back in Lotto Valentino.

Maiza suddenly wondered what had happened to them after he had fled in 1711. He couldn't say he had no memories of them, but they were all unpleasant. His father had been obsessed with power, and a number of tragedies had befallen the town thanks to him. On the other hand, it was also thanks to those incidents that he could eat breakfast in another country 200 years after the fact.

I never thought I would remember him this way.

Instead of a dessert, he put a few pieces of cheese in his mouth. He then slowly stood up and headed to brush his teeth, all the while meditating on his past.

He made his preparations, same as always, and once he had donned his suit for work at the Martillo Family office, he had already mentally transformed into the camorra's *conta é oro*.

Now, the first order of business is to figure out how to cover the damages from the casino...

He opened the door as he usually did, dressed as he always was.

There was a sewing business that made some knockoff handbags they wanted us to

buy, but they're selling them to us so cheap, I wonder how many we'd be able to sell in this economy...

And with his usual expression, he continued calculating in his head.

In spite of the incident at the casino the previous night, right before the mysterious airplane attack on the city, he continued towards the office, same as always. If an executive like him lost his head, the entire Martillo Family would be thrown into disarray, and that was unacceptable.

Maiza knew this, and so acted the same as he always did.

He walked down the hall, same as always, and descended the stairs, same as always.

The only thing that was different from normal was--

The moment when he descended from the third floor, where he lived, and passed the landing--when a figure appeared from the second floor hallway and swung a steel pipe at Maiza's back.

<=>

Inside Fred's clinic

"Hey, Isaac!"

A woman wearing an old-fashioned nurse's outfit asked--

"What is it, Miria, my dear?"

The man who answered, Isaac Dian, was wearing white clothes, but he couldn't possibly be a doctor.

"Why are we dressed like doctors?"

"Well you see, Miria, that's because we're *helping* a doctor. So we have to dress the part."

The woman, Miria Harvent, asked another question.

"But we're not actually helping anybody get better."

Isaac puffed out his chest proudly. "Don't worry, Miria! I've had plenty of colds before, but I always got better!"

"Oh, yeah! When I've had bruises that swelled up, I got better when I put ice on them!"

"See? If I can make *myself* better, than I must be a pretty good doctor!"

"You're right! Wow, that's amazing!"

Isaac and Miria were the same as always, but a man behind them spoke, his cheeks twitching.

"I think you need to get your heads checked out..."

"What?! Really? But my head doesn't really hurt, so..."

"I'm fine, too!"

The pair had no idea they were being mocked. Their eyes widened as they stared blankly, and then--

"But you must be a really good guy for being so concerned about us!"

"Like Florence Nightingale! Or Hippocrates! Or Hideyo Noguchi!"

--they just began to thank him.

"Huh? Uh, no...sorry."

The man was suddenly assaulted by a feeling of guilt and apologized without thinking.

"Why are you apologizing, Who?"

"How come?"

"Uh...forget about it."

The man called Who sighed and returned to his work.

But seriously, we got a coupla weirdos this time. They just put on those old uniforms out of the blue. Well, I guess Fred did say they could, and he's the boss. And they don't seem like bad guys, anyway.

Isaac, Miria, and Who were in a clinic operated by a doctor named Fred. Right now, the three were working to assist with the transport of materials from the doctor.

The doctor was running both a clinic and an almshouse, but the turnout of workers

for the latter wasn't enough. When Fred had asked around among his supporters for workers he could trust, a restaurant owner named Molsa Martillo had sent him this pair.

--*"Oh, you must be..."*

--*"Oh! You're the magician from the train!"*

--*"The grey man!"*

--*"I see...This must be fate. If Mr. Martillo is introducing you, that is one more reason I cannot refuse."*

After that conversation, he employed them readily.

Most of the goods transported to the facility was food, so they had encountered workers who just took it and ran. It was the Depression, after all.

The situation being what it was, then, the job that needed people with a reliable background to do it, but--

Well, they don't look like the type who'd run off with food, Who thought.

Fred's helper was completely ignorant of the fact that until a couple of years ago they were a pair of thieves who had caused trouble all over the US. He just thought of them as a big-hearted duo, pure and sincere as children.

"Well, after we do a little more, the doctor will show you the apartments, so help me load this stuff until then. Lebreau and I will do something else while you're out."

Lebreau.

As soon as he said the name, the door to the clinic opened and the man himself appeared.

"Oh, has Dr. Fred not returned yet?"

"Hey, good, you're here."

"Oh! Lebreau, was it? It's been a few hours!"

"It's good to see you again!"

They all greeted him in their own way, and the man--Lebreau Fermet Viralesque, showed them a breezy smile.

"Good morning. I look forward to working with you from now on, Isaac, Miria."

After meeting Fred the day before, he had come to work alongside Who. Since he had some medical knowledge, he helped out at the clinic here and there as Fred's assistant.

Who had started work as a novice and had picked up some expertise along the way; in contrast, this man had a vast amount of medical knowledge. He even seemed accustomed to using a scalpel, so he was invaluable for surgeries and other procedures.

"Well, now all that's left is to wait for the doctor."

Just as Who finished packing the food rations into boxes for transportation, a shadow appeared in the entrance to the clinic.

He thought the darkening glass was Fred returning, but the shadow grew larger-- and somehow there seemed to be a car parked in front of the clinic.

"The hell? If you park a car there it'll be in the way..."

The entrance to the clinic was a simple door, but whatever it was had stopped right next to the frame. Now nobody could go in or out without going through the car or over it.

Who scrunched his eyebrows together.

Lebreau looked at him. "I'll go ask them to move it," he said, walking to the entrance, but--

The moment he opened the door, a man suddenly appeared and punched him in the stomach.

"Guh...!?"

As Lebreau cowered, the intruder kicked him to the floor. Four more men climbed out of the car after him and came into the clinic.

There were five of them in total. At a glance they were indistinguishable from honest men, but their characteristic aura made Who imagine they were connected to the underside of society.

"Wha--who are you?!" Who asked as he rushed over to Lebreau to help him up.

The men completely ignored him and asked their own question. "Well, there's only

one broad here so that's gotta be Miria. Now...which one of you is Isaac?"

"Huh, me? A-and what did you do to Lebreau?!"

"We're against violence, you know!"

Isaac identified himself without realizing it as his name was abruptly called, and then protested along with Miria in a sudden show of stubborn indignation.

The men looked at each other and whispered.

"...Looks like that's them."

"Doesn't matter. We'll just snatch all of 'em."

"All of 'em?"

"Yeah, it'll work better if we get a couple of 'em who aren't involved, too."

They were speaking in low voices, but Who was close enough to hear them directly. A cold sweat broke out over his back.

Hey, hey, hey, hey! What the hell is happening here?!

What the hell have I been dragged into all of a sudden?!

That car...did they block the door so we couldn't get out?! Did those two do something?!

Question mark after question mark rose in Who's mind, but it seemed that the relevant parties hadn't grasped the situation at all, either. They continued to yell warily at the trespassers.

"Wh-who are you guys?! Kidnappers?"

"A kidnapping ring! The N'drangheta!"

"But unfortunately for you, we're broke!"

"We're just working!"

The ruffians didn't say anything or show any reaction in particular and started their job indifferently, pulling out leather bags filled with sand from their breast pockets--blunt weapons commonly known as blackjacks or saps.

One of them raised his weapon high overhead, aiming at Who's forehead for a quick, efficient knockout.

"H-hey, wait! I get it! I'll come quietly, so cut it out with the violence, alright?! Okay!?"

Who pleaded, falling on his behind, but the men simply couldn't hear Who's voice.

They raised their weapons and brought them down without a hint of mercy or hesitation,

And neither Who, nor Isaac, nor Miria, not even the men realized it.

Lebreau, clutching his stomach on the ground, had turned his face turned so noone could see him snickering to himself.

<=>

At the same time The restaurant and bar "Alveare"

"Huh? Not a lot of people here today."

After giving orders to his subordinates to clean up the casino, Firo went to report to Molsa, Maiza, and the others, but the restaurant felt a bit more deserted than normal.

Ronnie would tell Molsa about yesterday's incident. Firo's concern had been that he would receive new orders from Molsa today, but the desolate atmosphere made him even more nervous.

"Oh, Firo. Yeah, Annie's not even here yet for work today."

"Huh, now that's unusual."

As far as Firo knew, Annie had never been late or missed a day once.

The shopkeeper, Sena, was worried that she had come down with a sudden illness or something along those lines, but Firo knew better. His concern was of a different nature.

Maybe she has some work to do for Huey?

Hilton was a female hivemind that shared her joint consciousness with Huey's daughter, Liza Laforet. Hilton's knowledge and will was part of Liza in its entirety, and the girl's personal will had already been assimilated into it and disappeared.

If Annie was doing something different than usual, he couldn't help but guess that she was carrying out some order from Huey as one of Liza's vessels.

I wonder if it has something to do with yesterday.

He tried to think of how they could be connected--the heart of the trouble with Melvi revolved around immortals, after all. It wouldn't be strange in the slightest for them to be connected at all.

A strange uneasiness stirred in his chest. Firo sat down and decided to wait at the restaurant until Maiza and Molsa showed up.

And when about five minutes had passed, the door opened.

It was a high-ranking executive, Kanshichirou Yaguruma.

"Good morning, Mr. Yaguruma!"

"Oh, Firo! Looks like you're okay. Good, good. Did anything happen to you?"

"?"

Firo tilted his head in confusion at Yaguruma's unusual greeting.

"Did something happen? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Eh, maybe it's the Depression. Everyone's all worked up over that mess with the planes yesterday. Some people were saying we were in a war or it was the end of the world, and there were even some girls saying aliens were attacking."

"Oh..."

Firo had a feeling that the planes had something to do with immortals as well, and all the different thoughts made his mood even more complicated.

"When I was on my way here, some of them were so keyed up they even attacked me."

"?!"

"Yeah, one came at me from behind with an odd weapon. I think he was trying to catch me completely unaware, but when I grabbed his shirt and threw him, the others turned tail and ran," Yaguruma laughed.

Firo didn't think it was a laughing matter. One of his organization's executives had

been attacked, right after what had happened yesterday.

He had never thought for a moment that nothing else would happen until the day of the casino party, and he couldn't help but be suspicious at one incident right after another.

And then, his premonition came true in the worst way possible.

The next moment, a few shady-looking men appeared in the door of Alveare. They didn't appear to be affiliated with the Martillo Family, though.

They gathered together and approached the shopkeeper, Sena, and the one who appeared to be the leader was the first to speak. "Hey, there a guy named Firo Prochainezo here?"

"What do you boys want all of a sudden?"

Sena glared at them suspiciously, but they just plopped down at the counter as if they owned it.

"I know this is the Martillo family dive. If you try to hide him, things might get ugly."

"Hey, you have somethin' to say to me?" Firo called from the end of the counter.

The men looked at each other and approached him. "So you're Firo. Just like the picture. I see what he was sayin' now, seein' you in person."

"...Would you mind tellin' me what he said, and who said it?"

"'Got a face like a little girl,' 's what Detective Noah told us."

Firo's face contorted with loathing, for two reasons.

Edward, that shithead.

And that means these guys are feds, too.

Edward Noah was a lawman who had always been at odds with Firo, but if the young capo did anything rash it would cause problems for the Martillos. Firo just did everything he could to avoid him.

Regardless, they had run into each other quite a few times on various occasions, making the man his inescapable nemesis.

"Yeah, well tell that asshole something for me. Tell him he better watch his back,

'cause one day somebody might pound his face so bad nobody can tell if he's a girl or not."

He was trying to be as sarcastic as possible, but the detectives looked at each other.

"...Well, it's a little late for that."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Detective Noah has severe injuries from an attack this morning."

"...What did you say?" Firo's eyes widened in shock at the news, and he seized the shirt of the detective nearest to him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Some tramps saw the whole thing. According to them, someone attacked Detective Noah as he was leaving his apartment this morning, and knocked him down. Then a whole group of 'em beat him to a pulp."

"Somebody got it in for him or something? I mean, the guy is definitely an asshole, but..."

"...It'd be best if you didn't pretend you had nothing to do with it."

Firo furrowed his eyebrows as the man glared at him. "What are you talking about now?"

"There was a hat just like yours at the scene."

"What?! Whoa, whoa, hold on a sec, you're not thinkin' *I* did it, are you?!"

Firo was upset, but also flustered at the possibility that he had been caught in some sort of trap.

But the investigator shook his head. "No, nobody thinks you're responsible. The vice-president determined that much."

"?"

"The hat was ripped in half, and there was a note on it: 'You're next.' He figured that was directed at you," the detective said.

"Hey...wait, just wait a minute!" Firo said in confusion. "That doesn't make any sense! Directed at me? In the first place, Edward is a shithead. He's no friend of mine. Hell, we hate each other! Why'd they go after him?!"

"That's what we want to know." The hatred in the detective's eyes was clearly visible to Firo, directed at both the perpetrator and him. "All I know is that Detective Noah got dragged into whatever you scum are up to. We don't even have a guess as to why they targeted an enemy of yours," he spat.

The group of investigators told Firo the minimum information he needed to know and turned away from him.

"Listen up, Prochainezo. If you find out anything, let us know right away. You're nothing more than a pawn to Vice-President Talbot, and don't you forget it."

"Well I ain't *your* pawn, and don't *you* forget it."

"...If so, do your best to keep your head down."

The detectives left the restaurant with one last parting shot.

"You don't want to walk down Broadway naked again, do you?"

Firo glared at the entrance after they were gone.

"My, my, if they're the same ones who attacked me, I shoulda captured one of them, at least."

Firo used Yaguruma's words to calm down a bit and turned to Sena. "Where is Don Martillo...and Maiza?" he asked seriously.

"...Come to think of it, Maiza hasn't come yet, has he. The boss came in today, same as usual. He's inside. And I think Ronnie is organizing some documents in the office."

Relieved that the *capo societa* was safe, Firo's expression clouded at the fact that Maiza still wasn't there.

"I'm gonna go look for him."

"Wait, Firo," Yaguruma chided. "What are you going to do, wandering around?"

"But I'm worried..."

"If you're worried, you should go see if Annie is all right first. You don't need to worry about Maiza."

"What do you mean, 'don't worry,' he's..."

It was true. If Edward had been attacked because of his connection to Firo, then he

should also be worried about Annie and Isaac.

However, after what had happened yesterday, when he thought about the boy who looked just like Maiza's brother--he was concerned at the high probability that Maiza was the most deeply involved of all.

Firo couldn't hide his uneasiness.

"Don't worry, Firo," Yaguruma said, to calm his fears. "The *conta é oro* may only work with the accounts, and your knife technique may already be better than his...

"But Maiza is tougher than you in a brawl, many times over. I can guarantee you that."

<=>

Little Italy
Maiza's apartment
Stairwell

"Wha..."

The one who shouted in surprise was the man with the steel pipe.

As he swung it forward with all his strength, his target had disappeared.

Of course, he hadn't disappeared into mist. Maiza had merely stepped into a blind spot just as the attack was about to land.

"Excuse me."

The moment he heard his target's voice from next to him, the attacker felt a shock in his jaw.

"Agh..."

The attacker imagined the end of 2x4 (or something of a similar shape) breaking into his face.

The image of his jaw being ripped off even came to mind for a moment. The pain ran through his spine, and before it reached his fingertips his rattled brain stopped all thinking completely.

Actually, his jaw had only been dislocated, not sent flying or pierced. His senses were just overwhelmed by how fast the heel of Maiza's hand had hit him.

He collapsed to his knees, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Maiza didn't look at him, but calmly stepped into the second floor hallway.

As he did, the two men there widened their eyes in surprise and glared at him. Apparently, they hadn't expected Maiza to come out completely uninjured.

Maybe they're amateurs? he thought. The men seemed to have assumed everything would go according to plan, but that didn't mean he was about to let them go just for being unprepared in a situation like this. Maiza wasn't an overly confident person, anyway.

Maiza tried to feel out who they really were, one of the men pulled a gun from his jacket. "...Don't move."

Maiza obediently halted his steps and slowly raised his hands. "Please calm down. I am unarmed, and I don't plan to resist."

"..."

"Your first man attacked me with a weapon because a gunshot would attract onlookers, which would be a problem for you, right? Let's resolve this peacefully while we still can."

The men looked at each other at Maiza's proposal.

They waited a moment, and then the man holding the gun spoke.

"...Turn around and get on the floor."

"Understood." Maiza slowly turned his back to the men and bent his knees.

The attackers nodded at each other, and the one who was unarmed approached Maiza, who had placed his hands on the ground. The man pulled out a blunt weapon from his jacket and raised it into the air.

And the moment he took his next step forward in the narrow hall--

The man with the gun realized he had made a huge mistake.

His line of fire was blocked by the other man who had stepped forward.

He couldn't see his target thanks to his companion's shadow, and the man with the gun had a vehement sense of foreboding--his hesitation as to what to do essentially

dulled his thinking.

"Gah..."

It was already too late by the time he heard his companion shout, and he felt a sharp pain in his right hand.

And the man holding the gun realized that his trigger finger had fallen to the floor like the remains of a cigar.

Let's go back just a few seconds.

Maiza sprang up from his position going down to the floor using just the strength in his arms, kicked the man nearest to him in the stomach, and pushed the groaning man in front of him as a shield.

At the same time, Maiza drew his knife and reached under his shield's armpit to cut off the other man's trigger finger.

"Gah..."

Maiza made sure of the fallen finger and the man's scream, then went for the followup attack.

He cut the man's hand a second time with the bloody knife, and the gun dropped to the floor.

"Guwaaaaahhhh!!"

After the gun was gone from his opponent's hand, he grabbed his shield's ear and pulled it down as hard as he could.

"Yii--!"

The man shrieked as his ear was torn from his head with a *crack*. Unable to bear the pain, he tipped in the direction his ear had been pulled, as if he had cried out reflexively before his brain even understood what was happening. Maiza knocked his feet out from under him, sending him to the floor, and mercilessly put his foot on the man's throat.

"...! ...!?!gk!"

The sounds from the man's throat indicated his larynx was being crushed as he lay on the floor, and he spit blood from his mouth.

The remaining man leaned over thoughtlessly to pick up the gun in his undamaged

left hand.

And that was how he took Maiza's knee full in the face.

"Buguh!"

The attacker's nose broke, and blood spurted from it as he bent forward.

But Maiza didn't stop the attack, kicking him into the wall as hard as he could.

The attacker's back slammed the wall with enough force to knock the breath from his lungs.

"Gahah..."

His groan was garbled by the blood in his mouth. The next thing he knew, there was a knife point at his chin.

"Now, let's talk peacefully."

There were two men with eyes rolled back into their heads, unconscious, in the landing and the hallway, a man with copious amounts of blood spilling from his nose and mouth with a knife to his throat, and a finger at Maiza's feet.

"Peace" was about the last word anyone would use to describe the situation. And what the attacker was more terrified of than anything was that Maiza's expression was truly calm and quiet as he said it.

His already narrow eyes became even narrower, like a parent scolding a child who was a bully.

It was the same expression when the gun was pointed at him, when he cut off the man's finger, and now.

The attacker, still in pain, felt a chill run down his spine at the thought.

"Now...what were you trying to accomplish by--No, that's too roundabout..."

"...?"

He was concerned that the man had labeled a question that called for a direct answer "roundabout," but the man, taken completely by fear, had no composure to think about it too deeply.

"Which side are you on?"

"...? ? ?"

"Did you attack me because of immortals, or something else?"

"...!"

The man's complexion changed a little. His eyes watered, but he didn't open his mouth.

"...Silence is the most foolish answer of all," Maiza said, expression calm as ever. "If you remain silent and uncooperative, I will have no choice but to make a judgment call."

He leaned closer to the man, pressing the knife to a vital point, and picked up the finger from the hallway.

"That you are fighting not with me personally, but with the Martillo Family."

The next time the assailant looked up at Maiza's face, a tremendous shudder ran down his back.

All emotion had vanished from the face of the man about to torture him.

His face was not contorted with hatred or sadism--the only expression in his narrow eyes was a deep, frigid chill.

"..."

The man's lips and knees trembled, but he did not say who he was.

The next instant there was a flash, and the finger was pinned to the wall next to his head with the knife. The two halves of the finger fell from the wall, but Maiza caught them before they hit the ground.

It was an ideal opening for the assailant, but ever since he had been driven to the wall his body wouldn't move well enough to run.

Maiza held out the two pieces before his eyes and spoke mildly.

"Now, I'm going to push these into you so far you won't be able to remove them without surgery. Which would you prefer, your nose or your ears?"

"Ha-hahya?"

Unsure of what it was saying, the man's pulse pounded and rushed in his ears.

Maiza spoke plainly. "If you can't decide, shall we go with your eyes?"



Without waiting for an answer, Maiza moved the severed finger towards his eye. When his fingernail brushed the man's eyelashes, the man began to shake his head violently like a spring-loaded doll.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaahhhh! Ha...fa-no! No! I don't knowwww! I just-they just--they gave me orders an'--"

"Who is 'they'?" Maiza calmly continued his questioning.

The man's mouth snapped open and shut as he tried to answer, and then--

"Wha...duhnonononoaaaaahhhh..."

And his eyes rolled back into his head. He was out for the count.

"Damn...looks like I questioned him a little too hard..."

Maiza realized the man had passed out from fear and quietly chided himself for his error and let out a deep sigh.

"He wouldn't last two seconds with Tick Jefferson..."

There was nothing he could do about it, so he decided to wait until he woke up. He was walking to work, as he always did, and he couldn't exactly drag an unconscious man through the street.

Maybe I should take him to my room for now...

As he looked at the unconscious men, trying to figure out which one of them was likely to know the most, there was a sound from a corner of the hallway.

"?"

When Maiza turned around, there was a small pipe on the floor on the boundary between the hallway and the landing with a dense smoke pouring from it.

"What the...?!"

Maiza jumped back, fearful of an explosion.

But instead of an explosion, a huge amount of smoke billowed out as the sound of multiple footsteps sounded from the stairs.

"!"

Reinforcements?

If they planned to attack from the smoke, it would be best to assume that they had some way of making a move even though visibility was bad.

Maiza was on his guard. He first considered the possibility that the gas was poisonous and put some distance between himself and the smokescreen by hiding in a corner of the corridor.

But in the end, nobody appeared from the smoke.

A few minutes later, when the smoke cleared, there were no traces of blood or fingers in the hall, and he could hear some onlookers from downstairs.

The owners of the footsteps had not come to attack him, but to retrieve their unconscious comrades, Maiza realized. He sighed deeply, unable to believe that he hadn't thought to bring one of the men with him outside of the smokescreen.

"...Looks like I won't be able to brag about *this* to Firo..."

<=>

Fred's clinic

"Rrraaahhh!!"

As the man swung his weapon at Who's back, Isaac came between them.

He had intended to take the blow himself in his back to cover Who and Lebreau, but he was a second too late, and the sand-packed leather bag slammed into his wrist instead.

"Gyah...!"

The momentum carried him forward and he shouted as he fell.

"Whoa?! Wa...owowthisreallyhurtswhatamIgonnado?!"

Isaac writhed, clutching his right wrist with his left hand as it went numb.

"Waah, Isaac!" Miria cried.

But the men responded to the woman's frail scream without mercy.

"It'll be bad if anyone hears the screaming outside. Start with the girl."

"Got it."

Another man pulled out the same kind of weapon as the first and approached Miria decisively.

"H-hey, run for it! Don't worry about us!" Who yelled frantically as he watched, even though he couldn't think of a way to escape himself.

Even if Miria knew about the back door, she would be caught before she reached it.

Who hurriedly stood up, thinking that if he could pin one of the attackers she might have enough time to run away and get help, but yet another man brandished his weapon and chased him from behind.

And as he aimed a ruthless blow at the back of Who's head--

A piercing sound of impact reached their ears.

It was a completely different sound from sandbag on flesh--the piercing screech of metal on metal.

"?!"

Nobody in the room could figure out what the sound was. The only thing they understood was that the sound was from the outside of the clinic, near the door.

It wasn't just once, either. They heard it again two, three times, rhythmically, with the period between each screech growing shorter and shorter.

"What is it...?"

The attacker closest to the entrance doubtfully opened the door.

And what he saw was--

A man in blue work clothes, dismantling the car they had parked to hide the entrance from prying eyes with a giant wrench. The car's parts were already scattered all over the ground.

"Wha...?! H-hey, asshole! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Faced with a sight beyond his wildest imagination, any calm the attacker may have had until now went out the window, and his anger revealed itself in full force.

But the man in blue didn't appear afraid or apologetic at the man's angry yell and just spun his wrench around and around.

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

"Huh...?"

"Ladd told me to go see if this clinic was open today while we were eating breakfast at the restaurant, but I found a fated trial blocking my path...This car is parked right in front of the clinic so I can't see what's inside..."

The man in blue brandished the wrench in his right hand and smacked it into his palm as he continued.

"However, if I step on top of the car, and put the soles of my shoes on the belongings of someone I've never seen or met, it won't just be my reputation hanging in the balance. Boss Ladd's character and the quality of his friends will be called into question... But I'm not strong enough to carry it out of the way with my bare hands, and I don't have a key to drive it away. Ah, what do I do! How to overcome this trial from God?! And what is on the other side of this trial?! Yes, the clinic!"

The attackers looked at each other at the man's nonsensical cries but--

As Who heard that characteristic manner of speaking, he widened his eyes and muttered to himself.

"Oh...that's gotta be...yeah, that guy's part of Ladd's crew...Graham, was it?"

Speaking of, didn't he say something about Ladd a second ago?

Doubts rose in Who's mind as he watched.

Graham Specter just looked up at the building and jabbed his wrench with a snap of the wrist, his energy suddenly coursing in a completely different direction.

"Yes, this clinic! If someone destined to save the world were on the other side, then he couldn't enter on account of this car! In other words, this car has put the world in danger! What should I do? How do I save the world? I must remove this car and save the world! Yes! *I'm* the one destined to save the world! And now, I can't get into the clinic! There's your proof! This car was an enemy of the Earth all along!"

As he spoke words only he could understand, the man put the wrench around the front part of the car and pulled off the bumper.

"This is fun...let me tell you a fun story! If I'm meant to save the world, I can do whatever I want to the enemy of the world! To this car!"

Oh, I remember now.

He was a moron, wasn't he.

Who raised an eyebrow as he recalled a few things about Graham. He helped Lebreau to his feet and moved to another corner to get away from the attackers.

And as he did so, Graham's self-arbitrated debate continued.

"If so, it's quite simple...if I can't carry this car, then I should just take it apart, down to the last screw! Then I can put it back together and save the car, too! It may be an enemy of the world, but it's also part of it...in other words, a savior of the world like me should save even the world's enemies, like this car! Right?"

He tossed the wrench high into the air, and as he caught it he turned to face the thugs.

The thugs were struck dumb for a moment by the ridiculousness of the situation, but--

"Wow, Miria! He says he's going to save the world!"

"Does that mean he's going to save us, too?!"

"I hope we count as part of the world!"

"What do we do if he thinks we're Martians?"

They came back to reality at the sound of Isaac and Miria behind them. Somehow Isaac seemed to have recovered from the pain in his hand, and he was holding Miria close to protect her.

The leader of the thugs yelled at the others, face red as a lobster.

"Alright, somebody shut up that asshole by the car before any rubberneckers show up to see what's goin' on!"

Plus, there were a more police out than usual thanks to last night's airplane attack. If they kept making a racket like this, the cops would be all over them in no time.

The leader made sure two of his companions were climbing over car toward the man with the wrench. "We're leaving the car," he said. "We'll take Isaac and Miria out the back door or a window."

He glanced at Who and Lebreau.

"Today just ain't your lucky day, you two. You're gonna disappear nice and quiet."

"What?! Why?!" Who shouted in protest, but the leader ignored him and drew a

knife from his jacket.

But, the upper hand he had gained in terms of physical violence stopped there.

As the man with the knife started to approach Who, screams and sounds of a struggle echoed from behind him.

Realizing the shouts belonged to his companions, he whirled around--

One of his companions had been thrown on top of the car, his limbs splayed out in all the wrong ways. Next to the car was his other companion, with his nose and front teeth bashed in.

"Yeah, here we go..."

A man took off the door and appeared inside the car, as if to crawl through the partially deconstructed vehicle. He cracked his neck and looked toward the door of the clinic to see the three remaining attackers and a man he knew well at knifepoint.

"Hey, there, Who! You in the middle of somethin'?"

Hearing that voice, Who looked away from the knife towards the entrance. A complicated expression rose on his face at seeing the man there: two parts shock, one part uneasiness, and one part relief.

"La...Ladd! Ladd, is that you?"

"You never change, do ya, always gettin' yourself into trouble."

"Wha--why are you here..."

"Well, yesterday there was a sign up saying you guys were closed. I sent Graham over to check it out, but I heard all this banging and clanging all the way over at the restaurant, like he was takin' a car apart. I thought there might be a party over here so I ran right over. Looks like I was right!"

Ladd shrugged. All kinds of doubts came to Who's mind, like what Ladd was doing in New York and where he'd been until now, but he remembered that there was still a knife in front of him, and began to slowly back away so as not to provoke his attacker.

"What are you doing? You wanna die?" the attacker shouted, but a drop of nervous sweat ran down his face.

Ladd ignored him and looked further into the room and his eyes widened a little at seeing a certain person.

"Aa...? Hm? Oh? Isaac? Well, if it ain't Isaac!"²

"Uh...oh! Ladd, it's you!"

The two seemed surprised to see each other.

"Oh, do you know each other?" Who muttered.

Ladd chuckled and answered Who, as if he couldn't even see the man with the knife anymore.

"Yeah, we were together a little bit in Alcatraz."

"A...Alcatraz?"

What is he talking about now?

Alcatraz? The prison Alcatraz?

Ladd aside, there's no way Isaac could have been in a place like that.

Who decided he must have missed something, or maybe it was some sort of code. In either case, he wasn't bold enough to approach the knife and ask further.

On the other hand, the thug with the knife felt a pang of fear at the word "Alcatraz."

Did he say "Alcatraz"?

The man in front of him seemed to be responsible for one of his two unconscious companions.

He knew that much, but not who this man was, surrounded by such a dangerous air. If he had been incarcerated in Alcatraz, he was most likely one of the most dangerous criminals in America.

And, although he couldn't be sure, the man could be a member of a well-known Mafia. If so, he wanted to avoid foolishly getting into a fight with him here. Thinking this, he put away his knife and slowly put some distance between himself and the others around him.

"Hey, what do you think you're doin'? Puttin' away your weapon when we've got such a great party going," Ladd chuckled, sounding a little unsatisfied.

In contrast, Who breathed a sigh of relief.

² Ladd calls Isaac "Isaac-chan" in Japanese.

"Good, you changed your mind. I dunno what you're after, but let's just talk it over, okay?"

But the thugs ignored Who and wordlessly signaled each other with their gazes.

Ladd didn't appear to pick up on this and stepped forward to finish off the remaining three attackers, but--

The man who had put away his knife pulled out a hand grenade from his jacket instead.

The moment he pulled the pin and threw it to the floor--

An unusually powerful smokescreen billowed from the device, completely obscuring the inside of the clinic and the vicinity of the door with a white shadow.

Afterwards, when the smoke had cleared, the thugs had already vanished. Not even the men Graham and Ladd had laid out were to be seen.

"Ahh, damn. They ran away." Ladd didn't seem particularly surprised or upset as he looked around. "Well, they seemed boring anyway."

"A-are we safe?" Who looked around timidly, but he was still confused. "Hey, Ladd, what are you doing in New York, anyway?"

But Ladd had already started talking to Isaac by the time he heard Who.

"Hey there, Isaac, buddy! It's been a while! I knew you were friends with Firo, but I never thought I'd find you when I came lookin' for Who!"

"Aw, we just met Who yesterday ourselves."

"Hey, Isaac, is this a friend of yours?"

"Oh, this pretty dame here must be your girl, Miria!"

And as they conversed amicably, Who completely lost his chance to ask.

Lebreau came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It looks like you all know each other. I would probably be in the way, so I'll go check on the patients. And the back door."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Be careful. Those guys from before might still be around."



"Of course. If I see them I'll scream as loud as I can," Lebreau said. He disappeared down the hallway into the clinic.

Left to his own devices, Who could hear Ladd and Isaac's lighthearted conversation and the banging from outside as Graham continued to dismantle the car.

He had never been more confused. He silently shook his head and muttered to himself, smiling bitterly, as if to drive away the unpleasant chill running up his spine.

"What the hell is happening around here...?"

<=>

Somewhere in New York
A major hospital
Room

It was that time of day where it's hard to say if the sun has reached its peak or not.

A man lay on a bed in a hospital room reserved for VIPs, even though he was only a detective. The DOI had negotiated this hospital room for him, as if they were going to carry on a top-secret conversation about an investigation.

"...I'm really sorry, sir."

Edward Noah's face was covered in bandages as he lay on the bed and spoke to the man who had appeared in the door to his room--Victor Talbot.

"Don't hurt yourself."

"No, it's no problem to talk. Although if I breathe deeply or cough I can feel it in my ribs."

"Then don't talk yourself hoarse."

Beneath the blanket, Edward was probably covered in bandages as well.

They had beaten him all over, and he had numerous broken bones. The doctors said it would take at least half a year for full recovery, and he had been unconscious until twenty minutes ago.

It wasn't initially an incident for a face-to-face meeting, but, thanks to Edward's own wishes, Victor had rushed here from the New York branch of the DOI under his direction.

"So? Are you regretting not drinking that elixir we confiscated from Szilard's crew?"

"No way." Edward smiled and answered immediately, even though he was filled with pain. "If I was immortal, I wouldn't get to rest like this at all. Vice-President, you sure *you're* not jealous?"

"...I might be." Victor looked out the window.

Edward couldn't see his superior's face, so it was hard to tell whether he was just giving an appropriate response or if he actually felt that way.

They were silent for a little while before Edward finally brought up the topic at hand.

"Vice-President...about the guys who attacked me..."

"Sorry. We have some eyewitness information, but nothing's confirmed yet."

Victor looked down and told him as much as he could.

He told him that a hat just like Firo Prochainezo's was left at the scene, but there was no evidence he was behind it, and that it seemed like a message directed at Firo.

The moment he heard that, Edward let a bitter smile slip. "And they chose me of all people. We both hate him. Hell, we're on the same side."

"Yeah. Pretty stupid messengers, ain't they," Victor joked. Then, he erased the emotion from his face and made a declaration. "Don't you worry. We'll send these bastards trying to fuck with us to the chair."

"You're not a judge, boss. You can't make that call."

"*That's* what you're givin' me shit about?" The boss looked away awkwardly.

It was Edward's turn to assume a serious expression as he approached the incident from another angle. "Any progress on the airplane attack?"

"No. If it's come to this, I wish I'd made you work all night without letting you rest at all."

Actually, most of Victor's subordinates had investigated through the night. However, a few of them, including Edward, were ordered to take a nap before they would go to the harbors around noon today.

Since the investigation headquarters was in chaos at the moment, he had sent Edward to his apartment to sleep because it was nearby. Right now it was the mistake he regretted the most.

"Do you think Prochainezo was involved in that, too?"

"If you'll forgive me for going just from my gut, maybe."

"Yeah, I think so, too. And then there's the immortals...Huey's here in this city, too, for one thing. He might be involved with it, whether it's his main goal or not. Although, thanks to old man Szilard there aren't as many immortals around anymore."

Hearing the hint of loneliness in Victor's voice, Edward put forth an inquiry.

"Sometimes, when you talk about Quates, I almost start to think you respect him, but..."

"..."

"You don't have to answer if it's too difficult."

"No. I'll be honest. It was a shock back when Szilard started the devouring on the ship, but...I also just thought 'Of course.' I don't know anyone greedier than the old man. Knowledge, money, power--he'd take everything he could."

Victor faced the window, and his face changed back and forth between a strained mask and a smile two or three times as he spoke. Perhaps he didn't know what expression to make.

It wasn't clear whether he was actually trying to hide or not, but the outside of the window was a little dirty, making a light reflection that rendered his expression completely visible.

However, Edward didn't dare to point it out, and just listened as his boss continued.

"But you know, uh, I guess I do have some appreciation for a boundless greed like that. I even respect it. Somewhere along the line, I gave up on the things I wanted for myself. But obviously I'm not gonna say he was right. Hell no. Greed may be honest human instinct, but we came up with law and order to keep it in check. It's all we have, and it's a damn good thing we do. That's what I thought about it all, anyway. I never thought some mobster punk would be the one to eat the old man."

"The same goes for him. If the kid ever gets greedy, we'll take care of him. Business as usual."

"Awful serious, there." Victor let a little smile slip, but remained facing the window instead of showing it to his subordinate.

Edward smiled wryly himself as his boss let a little humanity slip through the façade. Then, realizing he hadn't finished sharing his thoughts, his expression tightened as he continued.

"Who do you think those guys were? The ones that attacked me?"

"We don't have enough information, but... probably some of Huey's underlings, like Larvae or Time, or maybe some of the Runorata Family grunts. There's rumors going around he's working with them, too. And it's a long shot, but it might have been some of the delinquents involved with Senator Beriam."

It wasn't good to make a judgment just yet, but Victor's subordinates were following that lead because it was a strong one. But since there was no reason for the senator to hate Firo so much personally, the investigation was unable to latch onto any clues.

"We looked into people who might have it in for the kid, but Szilard's old organization has basically given up, and I think they think Maiza's the one who devoured him anyway. Then there's the fact that he's roughed up quite a few of the delinquents around here. Apparently this one guy Dallas keeps goin' on about how he's gonna beat Firo into the ground one day or something."

"Dallas...Yeah, he's a nobody. I haven't seen him since I started work with you, though."

"No way he'd attack a detective like you."

Edward nodded in agreement and put forward his own idea. "...I only saw it for a moment, after I was on the ground but before I passed out, but they were wearing unusually expensive-looking shoes. And it didn't feel like they were in charge of the delinquents around here, either."

"Yeah, they weren't regular gangsters. According to the witnesses who saw 'em run off, they were strangely well-dressed. That's where the theory that it was Beriam's delinquents came from."

Edward thought for a moment and continued. "This is just a gut feeling, but..."

"What?"

"The day before yesterday, you listed off a bunch of connected organizations at the meeting...but I feel like the guys who attacked me may not belong to any of them."

"...Can I ask what makes you think that?" Victor didn't say he was thinking too much,

just pressed him for more.

"A hunch is just a hunch, but...it didn't seem to fit with any of their MOs. I'm not sure if 'pointlessly provocative' is the way to put it...I haven't met him personally so I can't say for sure, but I didn't get the feeling they were way off in outer space like Ladd Russo or the Lamia. They seemed most like people from Nebula, but I don't feel right concluding that's it."

A dark light shone in Edward's eyes, filled with anger at himself for withdrawing from the front lines in a time like this. He spoke gravely.

"It could be...this case goes a lot deeper than we thought."

Chapter 14: Nobody Knows the Future

Sometimes we have lucid dreams, when we know we're dreaming even in the midst of sleep.

In most cases, the moment anyone realizes it's a dream, the change in blood pressure and level of consciousness causes the whole body to wake.

Perhaps it was because he had been knocked out directly, or because fatigue had built up from lack of sleep, or maybe some other force was at work--he would probably never know the answer. Regardless, Neider Schasschule knew full well that he was in a dream.

He could see a swing he remembered well, and beyond it stretched the cornfields of his hometown, as far as the eye could see.

The roof of the barn had already burnt off, so seeing it still in pristine condition confirmed to Neider once again that this was definitely a dream.

skree

skree

skree

Neider wasn't particularly surprised at the sudden sound of iron creaking behind him. He knew exactly what it was.

He turned around and saw the same scene behind him, reflected backwards like a mirror image, and a swing squeaking as it swayed back and forth.

And on the swing was a young girl.

"...Sonja..."³

He mumbled the name of his childhood friend, but the girl's face on the swing was blurry.

Even as he feared the moment it would turn into Hilton's face, like in his last dream, he took a step towards the swing.

³ I'm going with the spelling "Sonja" since Neider's community is probably German.

--"Neider. Neider."

--"Hey, hey."

--"When are you gonna become a hero for me?"

Neider was relieved that it was only a dream as he looked at the girl speaking to him. If his friend had asked him in reality, he knew his heart would surely break.

"...Stop it."

Neider shook his head and denied that she existed, but even though he knew it was a dream, his exhausted heart couldn't control how it played out.

--"Oh! Hey, are all those people behind you your friends, Neider?"

--"Wow, Neider! You really must be a hero now!"

Neider slowly turned around.

But somehow, he already knew what he would see--

Or rather, they appeared *because* he thought of them.

A group of men in black suits with Tommy guns. The Lemures.

He had betrayed Huey Laforet's followers and made them his pawns.

Or so it was supposed to be.

But the reality was--

The innumerable gun barrels were turned toward him.

His thoughts froze; although, since it was a dream, in a way you could say they hadn't. The one faced with the dozens of guns on him was not himself, but the girl on the swing, so perhaps Neider's various mental states were all affecting him at once.

"...Stop it...hey, guys, cut it out..."

--"What are you telling us to stop, Comrade Neider?"

"...!"

The moment he heard the voice from his feet, the color of the sky completely changed, and the scenery as well.

The cornfields were blotted out and replaced with a vast wasteland.

But the swing and the girl on it remained, hovering alone over train tracks that stretched out left and right all the way to the horizon on either side.

--*"This is what you wished for, isn't it?"*

Heedless of his own volition, his eyes were forced to look at the direction of the voice--at his feet.

A man in black was crawling along the ground, his tongue torn out and dangling loosely as bright red blood poured from his mouth--Goose Perkins. After the events on board the Flying Pussyfoot, the man had bitten off his own tongue to commit suicide before Neider's eyes.

There was no way he should be able to speak after losing his tongue (along with so much blood), but his voice reached Neider's ears perfectly.

--*"That girl is just in the way, isn't she?"*

"No...no..."

--*"What's wrong? You say 'no,' but you know exactly why she's in the way, don't you, Comrade Neider?"*

"Shut up. You're dead...and this is all a dream anyway!" He tried to shout, but the voice that came from his throat sounded more like a squeak.

--*"If only she weren't here. Then there wouldn't be any promises to keep, and no reason to feel so guilty."*

Goose's voice grew louder, and Neider could sense that the swing was beginning to quiver.

The train was coming. Of course it was, since it was a dream.

He was sure what would happen next. And it appeared just as he had imagined.

He could see two gigantic trains barreling this way, one from the left and one from the right.

--*"If only she weren't there, you could do what you've always done, taking advantage*

of other people to further your reasonably pleasant life."

"That's not true...I wouldn't...you're lying..."

The force behind the approaching trains was incredible, but if he ran toward her now he could still save the girl on the swing.

She seemed not to have noticed the trains and just sat on the swing, smiling at him.

Even as it came to this, Neider couldn't recall her face in the dream.

But even so--

Neider kicked Goose as he crawled towards his feet and dashed forward with all his might.

--"It's pointless. You won't make it in time. You're only pretending that you did all you could," Goose said, still lying on the ground.

Neider ignored him and continued to drive forward in his dream.

Unable to feel the soles of his feet, just making his way forward--slowly, hazily.

--"Then, isn't a con man like you just deceiving himself? You've done all you can, Comrade. You just lost to fate."

"Shut up...just shut up!"

Neider ignored Goose's voice and reached out his right hand.

He would reach her with one more step.

Right now, he could still reach her.

He believed if he took her hand and held her close before the trains crushed her, he could remember her face.

But then--

A flash of silver light took his outstretched hand. His right one.

"Ah..."

And then he remembered--the right hand he had reached out to her was already gone.

As blood spurted from his wrist and dripped to the ground, a woman appeared in his peripheral vision. Unlike his childhood friend, he remembered this woman's face perfectly.

The look in her eyes was that of one observing a scrap of garbage. She adjusted her grip on the bloody knife and went straight for Neider's throat without a moment's hesitation.

And the trains came from both sides, crushing Neider's world itself--

<=>

"UwaaaaAAaaaaa!"

Neider sat straight up in bed, screaming. He looked at his right hand, breathing heavily, and there was his cheap-looking prosthetic.

A dream.

That's right, it was a dream...

Lucid or not, he was deeply relieved that it was only a dream. He closed his eyes and stilled his breathing, when a voice addressed him from a little ways away.

"H-hey, I don't mean to startle you, but...you okay?"

Neider cracked an eye open and saw the blurry figure of Roy. Behind him was Upham, watching silently, but none of the drive to attack him bubbled up like it had earlier before he was knocked out.

Somehow he was back in his room, but he didn't know how long he had been there. Judging from the light peeking through the window, it was a little after noon.

"Are you alright? Listen to me, first order of business is just to calm down. Okay?"

"...Yeah, I'm fine. I won't go crazy again."

Roy took a few deep breaths, then got to the heart of the matter. "Upham told me while you were out. About you, and the, uh, what were they called...the 'Lemures.'"

"...Oh."

Neider hid the trembling in the depths of his heart and, still sitting up in the bed, acted as bold as he possibly could. "So why am I still alive, then? Is there a bounty from Huey for capturing me alive?"

Upham, silent until now, let out a huge sigh. "Look, I told you, you've got it all wrong. I'm kinda in the same place as you."

"Huh?"

"I left the Lemures, too. I abandoned the others on that train and ran for my life. And I've never heard of this Hilton person until you brought it up. Actually, I'm lucky nobody's found me so far."

"You're telling me to believe that?" Neider asked doubtfully.

Upham shrugged. "I think the fact that you're still alive makes it plausible enough."

"..."

He still didn't believe him at all, but Neider remembered how Upham had acted concerned about his well-being before he lost consciousness, so after a moment of silence he spoke.

"...Sorry about earlier. You betrayed me before, so let's just call it even."

Neider remembered the group in black from his dream. He had tried to betray them, but he was betrayed instead, and the few who had gone along with him were all killed.

Even though Neider did still harbor some resentment about it, Upham relaxed a little at the phrase "call it even."

"I'm honestly glad you said so. Frankly, I thought you still hated us from beyond the grave."

"...Goose already took care of any lingering feelings of resentment, if that's what you're worried about."

"What do you mean?"

"It means I don't have a grudge against you anymore. From what I heard, the Lemures got wiped out on that train, didn't they? And that asshole Goose burned to a crisp by the tracks. It was pathetic."

Neider told him, remembering the past, but as he remembered the creepy image of Goose from his nightmare, he blanched a little. He took a few deep breaths.

"So now what?" he asked Roy. "Are you gonna throw me out?"

"I already told you, most people here have some kind of story. If you think we're gonna sell you out, then at least change out your lock with a deadbolt," Roy joked. "You'll be paying for it, anyway."

"You heard the story. What do you have to gain by shielding a terrorist?" Neider asked doubtfully.

"You pay your rent, don't you?" Roy said to both Neider and Upham with a self-deprecating smile. "Well, whatever. I'm not the police, and I don't exactly want the cops finding out about my past either."

Oh, I guess because of the dope.

Neider guessed from Roy's appearance, but he didn't dare question him about it. At a glance the man looked unhealthy, but the way he spoke suggested that he was no longer addicted.

After his assessment, Neider thought about what to do from here on out.

What should I do? Should I just hide out here? Leave that bitch Hilton alone?

...For how long? How long can I hide?

Is she everywhere? I hid in prison for three years, but that girl...actually, what the hell is up with them, anyway?! How did she know my face? Is she giving out pictures or something?

Now that he was calm, all kinds of doubts welled up inside him.

If his meeting with the waitress was a total coincidence, why did Hilton look like that? Was she spying as a waitress?

Neider thought so and asked Roy about where she worked, giving him a description of her characteristics.

And--

Though he was prepared from the beginning that it would turn up nothing, Roy answered readily.

"Oh, if she's dressed like that...Alveare, probably."

"...Alveare?"

Upham continued where Roy left off. "It's the biggest restaurant in Little Italy. I'm pretty sure it's run by a small gang, the Martillo Family."

"Martillo?"

The casino yesterday...

...

...What? What is going on?

As a human, Neider wasn't particularly able. But he had risen up in the world as a con artist in just a few years, and his brush with death, nearly falling into its depths, had awakened a strange sense of unrest from within.

A cold sweat spread across Neider's back as he sensed a mysterious connection between the series of events. However, he knew he was not at the center of these connections. It felt more like he had passed by them, purely by chance.

Had his frantic attempts at escape blurred his view of some great current right next to him?

He wanted to think it was just his imagination, but he couldn't get that chilling premonition out of his head.

On a personal level, Neider had a persistent sense that there existed a kind of "flow," one he couldn't explain logically, as a man who had been a member of the underside of society for many years as a con artist.

It was the great current of fate, different from trifling matters like winning streaks or hopeless losing streaks at the casino. To put it briefly, he could sense the current whether it led up from one organization to the next or headed for ruin.

Once, he had felt that flow and ignored it. The result was the loss of his right hand and the miserable life of a fugitive.

This was the same kind of current. He couldn't say if it was enough to move the entire country, but he couldn't help but feel that he was on the verge of a current bigger than the ones from before, the ones that led him to destroy other organizations.

Neider's back quivered at the feeling of a rushing torrent he had never sensed before, but he didn't know whether that bode well for him or not.

It was a fateful current so huge he couldn't even determine where it led.

If my intuition is correct, what...should I do?

Should I run away so I don't get caught up in it? Or could I get away by riding it out?

The question was what this meant for Hilton--or anyone associated with Huey, really. That was important, but if he wasn't careful looking into the matter he could very well end up dead.

If there was some sort of dispute between the Martillo Family and Huey's party, maybe he should just hope Huey's organization would be crushed. But he couldn't imagine a small New York group like the Martillo Family could take down Huey Laforet's network.

Ah, shit. What do I do?

He was silent for a few moments. Roy smiled kindly and spoke to him.

"I don't know what you're worrying about, but...do you have any family?"

"...No."

"A girlfriend? An old friend?"

"...Uh...well..."

The one that came to mind was the girl from his dream just a minute ago.

"It's good to appreciate the bonds you have with other people. They can be the ones to pull you out when you wander off the straight and narrow and end up in a bad place. That's how I was able to get off the drugs."

"...Relationships can also be what makes you a pothead in the first place, though. A guy can live his life by himself."

"If you say so. In any case, I'd advise you to think of me and Upham as your friends. That's all I was thinking."

"Oh...oh, okay. Sorry."

The topic should have ended with that, but Neider was wondering about what his childhood friend was up to these days. She wasn't there when he had returned to his hometown that one time. There was no way Hilton could have done something to her, was there?

Yeah, you should go look for her. If you see Sonja...maybe something might change.

But if he saw her now, wouldn't she just be dragged into his life as a fugitive?

That's right, so there's no need to see her.

No, that's just an excuse.

Two conflicting thoughts rose in Neider's heart, but he knew it wasn't anything as noble as the proverbial angel and demon on his shoulders. It was just a battle of deplorable self against self, unable to land on the side of good or bad.

He unconsciously started to look at his fake right hand.

He wanted the courage to reach out for something. Anything.

To pull her close. Or to push her away. Either one.

Whether he rode along the great swirling current surrounding him or fled from it, nothing would start if he didn't make a move.

He wanted just a small, tiny chance.

Even if it was just a small current, like a ripple that causes a frog to jump.

If only there was a current at his back to push him forward.

No, that's not right.

I'm still just looking for a reason not to move.

Neider had lost the willpower to make his own currents. He began to imagine himself staying in limbo for the rest of his life, living but rotting away.

And that vision had already begun to come true, but--

Neider had forgotten.

Four years ago, he had already been brought into this stupid commotion.

Neider started to feel uncomfortable after his conversation with Roy and Upham had come to a halt, and he smacked his own head to wake himself up completely. Then he noticed something.

Huh? Are these bandages?

On his head and face were bandages neatly wrapped around his already-healed scars.

There were places it hurt to touch, so he probably had some cuts from back when he was knocked out.

"Did you treat these for me?"

"Huh? Oh, no, not at all! We just put pressure on the wounds. The doctor's the one who looked at your injuries properly and applied the bandages! He came to introduce a few new people in charge of loading and unloading things around noon. He came at just the right time, so I asked him for help."

"I see...I'll have to pay him for the expenses."

"I'm telling you, it's fine."

"There's no way it's just 'fine.'"

Neider didn't want to rack up any unnecessary debts. He thought about getting out a few bills from his pillow when the other two weren't around.

But Roy shook his head. "No, no, you don't need to. He said it was just an additional service."

"?"

"Honestly. If you know the doctor, just come out and say so."

"Huh?"

Neider's eyes widened, though he still didn't understand. *What is he saying? How would I know a doctor...*

And his thoughts led him to a realization.

No, I do know one. Just one, though. There's no way...right?

The creak of a door opening sounded next to a very confused Neider.

"Oh, Doc! Neider's awake!" Roy called cheerfully.

Neider automatically looked where the voice was directed.

Miraculous reunion or no, a man wearing very dull colors was standing there.

"Well, well, how are you feeling, Neider?"

"!!"

Neider stared at the man, at a loss for words.

The man was covered in grey cloth, and even his face was covered with a grey turban and scarf.

A grey magician.

That was the first impression most people had upon seeing him. Neider himself was a part of the majority who held that impression.

Although, when he had first met him, the situation had brought another image to mind.

He had lost a lot of blood and was burned badly from the explosion that day. He was going to die.

As he crawled across the dry plain and saw the man appear, he truly believed that none other than the angel of death had appeared.

Of course, maybe an angel of death had appeared to Neider.

Not to take his life, but to tell him it wasn't yet his time.

And he remembered.

He hadn't forgotten the memory, but it had sunk to the depths of his heart.

He had should have already died once.

Thanks to a simple coincidence passing him by, he had been able to pick back up the life he had thrown away thanks to mistake after stupid mistake.

"My, my, perhaps some things are written in the stars," the grey magician muttered.

And Neider realized tears were welling up his eyes.

"Why...are you here..."

He didn't know why he was crying at the reunion. It was just a coincidence.

The one thing he did know was that right now, *he was getting that push to move forward.*

Is this...it? Does this mean I'm not done yet?

Once, he had thought that he could feel all of fate flowing in his direction. Such childish hubris had once driven him to his own death, but now that disposition was a driving force to bring him up from rock bottom, and decisively pushing him to face forward.

No, I should believe. What am I gonna do if I don't?

This great flow was something he could use, no doubt about it.

Here and now, he had a certain feeling that no matter what he did, it would go well.

This age was his, wasn't it?

Neider had begun to believe, but cold water was thrown on it just a few seconds later, when a face and voice he remembered came from behind the grey magician.

"Hey, there, Neider! It's been what, half a day since I saw you last?"

Neider made sure of the feral grin on Ladd Russo's face from behind Fred. He thought that maybe he was still dreaming--

But unfortunately, no matter how long he waited, the moment when he woke up never came.

<=>

30 minutes later **The cafeteria**

Neider felt like he was back at rock bottom again. Roy and Upham had left the room a while ago, and he listened as Ladd rambled on and on.

According to Ladd, the clinic his friend worked at belonged to the grey magician, too--to Fred.

--*"I was surprised. Never thought Who got off the train with that magician safely."*

--*"And not only that, I ran into an old buddy of mine from prison. It really is a small world!"*

--*"And then here you are!"*

Ladd gave a rough explanation in this manner, but Neider's main worry was the money Ladd had given him as his sponsor.

It turned out to be a needless fear.

--"Oh, money? Eh, don't worry about it. I gave it to ya, didn't I?"

Neider felt weak in his knees at Ladd's impossible indifference towards such a large sum of money.

After that, Ladd started talking about the Flying Pussyfoot incident he'd shown an interest in earlier.

In other words, this time, Neider told Ladd what Upham had told Roy. It would have been easier to tell the story if Upham was there, but since he was also working in maintenance he had gone to do that instead.

And now, having heard his story, Ladd grinned and spoke.

"Huey, huh. Good. Didn't think he'd have connections in a place like this. ...Anyway, there's no way a low-level grunt like you would know where Huey's hidin' out, would you?" Ladd's tone was half-happy, half-discouraged.

Neider silently sighed with relief.

I thought he might kill me if he saw me again...

So he knows the doctor, too? Maybe Ladd's a better guy than I thought.

His followers, too. Setting aside that guy in the jumpsuit...the two with him today are kind of a breath of fresh air.

After his spectacular overestimation of Ladd, Neider looked out the door.

The door to the room had been left open, and he could hear a conversation between two people out in the hall.

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

Graham's prelude was the same as always, but the two next to him raised their voices in protest.

"What?! You shouldn't tell sad stories!"

"If you tell sad stories, all your happiness will run away!"

"Tell a fun story!"

"Or a funny one!"

Graham "hmm"d thoughtfully, faced with a response he had never experienced before.

"To tell a happy story when I'm feeling so very sad must be an impossible trial sent to me by God...but wait...you're the ones who are giving me this trial, so you must be...gods?!"

As Graham continued his crazy zigzagged train of thought, the couple--Isaac and Miria raised their voices in surprise.

"What?! Is that true, Miria?! Are we gods?"

"Oh my God!"

"I see...I had no idea...but what are we the god of?"

"What if we're Japanese gods? Yaguruma says they have 8 million of them!"

"What the hell," muttered the young man next to them. Shaft was watching the two in disbelief as they discussed the matter seriously, but the conversation was soon be directed at him anyway.

"A fun story...what story is fun enough to present to a god...? Certain countries and religions give sacrifices to their gods to appease them, but the only one I have to sacrifice is Shaft...so, I will tell a story that will absolutely make Shaft over there die from laughing."

"That's ridiculous!"

"If it isn't funny, then can I make your arms and legs point in funny directions?"

"No, you can't! And why the hell am I the sacrifice in the first place!" As always, Shaft passionately played the straight man.

Isaac pointed his finger into the air. "Don't worry, man! Think positive! The ones offered as sacrifices to a god are treated very well! Like sons and goats!"

"Abraham had seven kids!"

"Sons and goats are completely different!"

"Don't worry, Shaft...Even if you're actually a goat, I'll treat you the same as I always have. As my underling."

Neider heard a bit of the conversation in the hall and envied them from the bottom of his heart.

Ah...

I kinda...wish I could be that stupidly carefree...

They lived their own lives their own way, unaware of the suffering that had befallen the country because of the Depression.

Neider's thoughts turned uncharacteristically sentimental. Perhaps what made him feel this way was the man and woman's carefree atmosphere. It was somehow similar to his childhood friend.

Neider filled his mind with memories of his hometown while Ladd fell into thought, muttering "Well, what should we do now?"

In an atmosphere like this, maybe he could remember her face clearly now.

But his test was ultimately interrupted by a commotion from the first floor.

<=>

Housing facility

First floor

Everyone in and around Neider's room headed down to the first floor, drawn by the angry shouts and laughter they could hear from the hall and the clash of metal on metal.

What in the world is going on? Neider wondered, peeking into the cafeteria first.

When he saw the faces of those there, he frantically hid his face in the hall again.

That was definitely...

He hadn't spoken to him, but he remembered those eyes, sharp as a knife.

That's the guy who was in the casino with the owner--Firo, or whatever the kid's name was.

"Please calm down for a minute, Smith," said Luck Gandor.

The man called Smith replied without looking at Luck. "Tell that to the girl."

The reason he wouldn't turn his eyes was the woman facing off against him only a few inches away.

She looked like a dancing girl from a saloon, but the katanas in her hands, poised to tear Smith apart from top to bottom, were blocked by Smith's revolver as he held it in both hands.

"You were the first to draw, Smith," Luck told him coolly, faced with an inevitable scene.

"That's true. The only reason you would come here is to kill me, after all," Smith replied dourly.

The sword woman--Maria laughed.

"Ahahahaha! Stupid as ever, huh, *amigo*! Luck doesn't care about a weakling like you anymore!"

"You...!"

"What's goin' on here? Looks like things are getting interesting...hey, is that Smith? The idiot?"

"Let's make this a fun story...That is unmistakably Boss Smith. I see...Katanas were made as offerings to gods...in other words, Boss Smith is trying to take those swords as a sacrifice to a god, all for me and Shaft! What a happy story!"

"An' the one over there was at Firo's casino yesterday."

Ladd and Graham peered into the cafeteria and continued their conversation, but Neider was hiding in a shadow in the hallway and couldn't see inside.⁴

As they did, Roy, who was also peeking into the cafeteria, whispered to Neider.

"Hey, that's Luck. Luck Gandor."

"...Who?"

⁴ I think there may be a mistake in the Japanese, because it actually says they peered "from" the cafeteria, but that doesn't make sense to me.



"One of the investors in this place. He runs a jazz hall on the surface, but it's actually a front for a small mafia called the Gandor Family. He's one of the bosses. Actually, my girlfriend works there, at the jazz hall, so he's done a lot for me. He's not a total lowlife... Or at least I wanna think so, but the Mafia is the Mafia after all."

"Another gang..."

What the hell! It's just one after another!

Indifferent to Neider, who was silently screaming, the man called Luck in the cafeteria coldly continued talking.

"Miss Maria."

The katana girl didn't turn around as she answered.

"What, *amigo*? Where do you want me to slice him open?"

"Please apologize for calling him a weakling."

"Huh? But..."

"No 'but's." He spoke as if scolding a child, but within his voice lay a knifelike, sharp-edged pressure.

Maria pouted and *hmph'd*, then lowered her blade, and her head. "Mmm...sorry, sorry, *amigo*. You definitely weren't a weakling at all."

"You...your appropriate apology stills my insanity, but..."

Smith complained, but the boy next to him whispered "This is where you should show your generosity, too, Master..."

Next to them, an old man took a gulp of liquor, seemingly unperturbed by the commotion as the scent of alcohol wafted around him.

Luck remained unaffected as he spoke not only to Smith, but also to the reeking old man in the chaotic atmosphere.

"Mr. Smith, Mr. Alkins, I have a job I want to ask you to do. I am completely serious about this."

Smith furrowed his brows at Luck's even, metered tone, and the old man called Alkins just widened his eyes a fraction, never removing the bottle from his lips.

Then, Luck gave them a brief overview.

He told them about the casino party that would take place at Ra's Lance some time around the middle of February.

That the Runorata Family was behind it.

That it was possible things would get violent, and that some people who could move freely, unaffiliated with any gangs, had been hired, although he didn't reveal the details.

After he finished giving them a general idea of the situation, one voice raised some complaints.

"...This makes no damn sense. Why don'tcha hire some of the riffraff around here to even out yer numbers?"

Even though his breath smelled of alcohol, Alkins' logic was sound. Luck shook his head quietly.

"If this were a normal Mafia war, I might do that. No...actually, the members of our own Family would be enough."

"Well, there you have it."

"However...this situation is rather unique. There's a reason I spoke to the two of you..."

Luck paused for a moment and glanced at the boy next to Smith.

Perhaps guessing the meaning behind the gaze, Smith explained about the boy. "This is my first apprentice...an entity who will eventually inherit my insanity in full. There will be no trouble, no matter what he hears. If you do not believe in him, it is the same as being unable to trust me."

"...I suppose that's fine. This isn't something a normal person would believe." Luck decided from looking at the boy's eyes, more than Smith's words. "...This upcoming event may be connected to immortals."

The boy twitched, a reaction Luck was not expecting.

He didn't know that this boy had come into the Gandor Family and broken a bottle of the incomplete Elixir. Of course, he knew the facts of the incident itself, but because he was not directly involved, as far as he knew the boy here was unconnected.

Although he was concerned, Luck kept up his poker face and continued.

"...This is nothing more than a possibility, but...it's also possible that the terrorist

Huey Laforet may become involved."

He had muttered the information he had heard from Firo, but the ones who reacted were the onlookers peering into the cafeteria.

"...'Huey Laforet'?"

Neider's spine bent with a crack.

Huey's organization...is gonna be involved in that casino party, or whatever it is?

Could that be it...?

Is that what's causing that strange premonition I've been feeling?

"...'Huey Laforet'?"

Ladd's teeth ground together.

I never thought I'd hear that name here.

A casino, huh...and the redheaded bastard and that little shit Melvi are definitely gonna be there, too.

So that means if things go the way I want, I can kill all three of 'em at once!

"Wait. More importantly, are you thinking we'll take a job for the Gandor Family?"

"'S long as it pays for my liquor, I don't give a damn. I want a chance to go at it with Vino, but I'll leave that for another day."

"Guh...I'll agree with you this time, old man."

Listening to Smith and Alkins' exchange, Luck figured he should keep the fact that Vino was their enemy under wraps for now. He sighed and continued.

"Certainly. To take on a job from someone who was once your enemy is insane. I wouldn't expect to find any assassins who would take this job if they wanted to continue living from day to day in peace and stability."

"..."

Smith's nose twitched.

He heard the boy next to him who saw it say "Don't take it, sir," but Smith remained silent.

"That's why I came to ask you, Mr. Smith. I've heard that you have a sense of aesthetics, more than the norm, toward your work as an assassin. It would be best if you thought that my respect is not directed at you personally, but towards your conviction in the insanity of your work."

"O-oho..."

Smith had been planning to give a curt reply, but his mouth turned up a bit, apparently happy. He pushed down the corners of his mouth with his hand, still holding the gun, and answered.

"Indeed. You seem to have some promise. However, it isn't enough to make an impression based on hearsay. Once you've seen my work, you yourself will be won over by my insa--guh!"

And, in the middle of it, he took a kick in the back and pitched forward.

"Ugh, shit, who are you?!"

Smith's anger was on full display as he turned around--and there was Ladd, standing there with a feral grin.

"Wha...Ladd?! What are you doing here?!"

"Tch, the way you talk always manages to piss me off. Like you think you're so damn special. Like you think your life is gonna last forever." Ladd jerked his thumb at Graham behind him and directed his naked intent to kill at Smith. "You're still alive because my boy Graham likes you so much. You follow?"

"Very interesting...now, this life I was allowed to keep will lead you to the death of a buffoon. Shall we?"

Smith slowly raised his gun, but Ladd ignored him and turned to face Luck. "I caught a little of your conversation. You're lookin' for some muscle, am I right?"

"You're..."

Of course, Luck knew Ladd.

Setting aside the fact that he was Firo's friend, there was no way he could forget how the man had trashed the casino the previous night.

"I'm lookin' for work, too. I think I could give you a hand. You're Firo's friend, right? I'll give you a discount. I'll take half of whatever you're paying that idiot Smith."

"..."

Luck was silent for a moment.

In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought. He had come here to recruit a former enemy, but--

He never thought this man would be here.

He already understood enough from the mess yesterday. This man was strong, but dangerous. Rather than in for a pound, he was in for the entire bank.

But, after a few more seconds of deliberation, Luck formed a certain kind of resolve and broke the silence. "...Then don't forget this, please. If I decide you are unmanageable, I will not hesitate to deal with you even if it puts my own life at risk."

"...Ha! Good! You look like you're ready to face death! I like it!"

Luck smiled a little in his heart at Ladd's words. *Resolved to certain death? An immortal like me? I thought I had lost that...but I can't say this man is mistaken. Maybe it's because someone tried to kill me only a few hours ago. Maybe my old senses are coming back a little.*

Luck took a deep breath and spoke to all of the hitmen, Ladd included.

"For now, please come with me to the Gandor Family office.

"Just don't forget: once you set foot there, there's no going back."

<=>

Night
Millionaire Row
The Genoard villa

"Although...even if our tribute to the Martillos is taken care of, the problem is our everyday expenses..." Nice said.

Jacuzzi smiled self-deprecatingly. "There's nothing we can do," he replied. "I feel really bad about it, but we have to look for someone to sell this wine to."

Jacuzzi was holding the expensive wine Eve Genoard had given them the day

before. He felt awkward selling a gift, but sometimes sacrifices had to be made.

"Since we've already got connections, I'll go see if the Martillos' restaurant will buy it."

"I'll go this time. I want to see what kind of place it is, anyway.."

They conversed as they reached the doorway, and--

The doorbell rang, and a familiar voice sounded from the other side.

"Excuse me, is anyone home?"

The two looked at each other at the familiar voice--and Jacuzzi hurriedly hid the wine behind a flowerpot before the door opened.

Nice kept calm as she opened the door, ignoring Jacuzzi's instinctive, suspicious behavior.

Standing there was a sweet girl who matched her lovely voice.

There was a car outside next to the gate, and next to it an older man dressed like a butler and a plump black woman serving as a maid.

"Oh, Jacuzzi, Nice! It's been a while! I hope the wine I sent you wasn't a problem!"

"N-not at all! There's no way it wasn't at all! Yeah!"

Jacuzzi's voice trembled and his eyes watered from nervousness and guilt, but Nice again ignored him and greeted her cordially.

"Long time no see, Miss Eve. We're thankful for all you've done for us."

"Ahaha, please don't be so stiff, Nice." She smiled. The girl was surrounded by a completely different air from Jacuzzi's gang--she fit into the high-class air of a resident of Millionaire Row perfectly.

Her name was Eve Genoard.

She was the real owner of this villa, and a kind of proprietor for Jacuzzi's gang, who she allowed to live there in exchange for their service as housekeepers.

As she was the original owner of the house, Jacuzzi was flustered at her sudden arrival, but he noticed her smile was a little cloudy. "U-um...is something the matter?" he asked timidly.

Eve glanced around and asked Jacuzzi her own question.

"Um...I'm sorry to ask so abruptly, but Dallas hasn't come here recently, has he?"

Jacuzzi and Nice looked at each other again.

Just as Eve had guessed--

Dallas was here only a few hours ago.

--*"Give me a little investment. If I win at the casino, I'll pay ya back an' then some."*

The master of the premises suddenly appeared like a tyrant, demanding money from them.

Although, from the perspective of Jacuzzi's gang, the house actually belonged to Eve, so they treated Dallas more like a burden.

Once they shared that they were all broke, his mood soured instantly.

"What?! You're broke?! Shit, you're fucking useless! God, just lookin' at you poor suckers kills my luck. See ya."

With that bad attitude, he had taken a number of clocks, dishes and other expensive-looking things from inside the villa to sell them.

They told her this without hiding anything.

Eve sighed deeply. "Oh dear...I'm so sorry for the trouble my brother has caused..."

"Uh, no no no! It's no trouble, we're used to it!"

"Jacuzzi!"

"Aah! No, um, th-th-that's not what I meant!"

"It's all right. I know my brother has caused trouble for a number of people. I've asked him to stop over and over..."

Dallas was a chump, but he cared about his sister. Perhaps he only pretended to be reformed in front of his sister to deceive her.

Jacuzzi thought so, but he kept his mouth shut about that and raised a simple doubt.

"But, why is Dallas going to the casino party, too?"

"Too?"

"Er, no, that was a slip of the tongue. Ignore that."

It was probably best if they didn't say they were going to the casino's grand opening too. Eve was already a worrier, and they couldn't draw her into any unnecessary trouble.

Jacuzzi dodged her question appropriately and urged the conversation to continue.

According to Eve, it seemed that other rich families, especially those with connections to the Runorata family, had received invitations. Instead of just one invitation per family, each person received them individually in a show of lavish hospitality.

"They killed my father and my oldest brother...and they still sent us invitations...I got so angry and sick out of pure instinct. They sent just two of them, one for me and one for Dallas. Even though they know there are only two of us left in the Genoard family, they still sent us those invitations."

"That's...awful."

"I was so indignant, but my brother was very eager for some reason... He said that it would be easier to win since they want to secure regular customers at the opening, and then he left with almost all the cash in the house..."

"Wow..."

Jacuzzi and Nice had the same thought at the same time: "What a lowlife. He never changes." But they didn't voice it.

Afterwards, Jacuzzi's gang saw her off with a promise to contact her if they saw Dallas.

They looked at each other in silence for a few moments. Finally, Nick, unable to stand it anymore, asked hesitantly.

"Hey, uh...so Dallas is gonna be there at that party?"

Once he broke the ice, the rest of the gang began to whisper to each other.

"...What do we do if we run into him? We didn't give him any money, but we'll be there gambling. He's gonna make a scene."

"We can just say we borrowed it from the Martillo family."

"But Dallas hates one of the Martillos, that guy Firo. He said he's gonna kill him someday."

"Hey, hey, we can't just go around sayin' we're helping Firo, either."

"He might stab us."

"If he tries, we'll fight back and take him out."

"But isn't he immortal?"

"It's alright~. If that happens we can just bury him alive~."

"You're pretty scary sometimes, Melody."

"But if we bury him, Eve'll cry."

"I'll become Eve's big brother instead."

"Shut up." "Go die." "Get lost." "Go away."

"Hyahha?" "Hyaha!"

His companions got into the same rhythm that they always did. Jacuzzi looked even more tired than usual and complained so only Nice could hear.

"...I'm sorry, Nice. It looks like there's even more to worry about now."

"Don't worry, Jacuzzi. If push comes to shove, I'll blow it all away for you," Nice said with a wink, but thanks to her eyepatch it just looked like she was blinking with a little smile.

"...Well, that doesn't actually make me feel better...but thanks anyway, Nice."

They had had this conversation countless times over the years, but that sense of familiarity was what made Jacuzzi happy.

At least he wanted to pass the night together with his friends, in peace and quiet.

Just a few minutes later, Jacuzzi's modest wish was shattered by the piercing sound of the doorbell.

"I'm back."

When they opened the door, there was Rail.

If Rail were the only one there, there would have been no problem. The one standing behind her, however, was a big problem.

"Hello, there! I haven't seen you in one whole day! Have you been well, Tattoo Boy? Wonderful, you've made yourself an open enemy of nature by rebelling against the body your parents gave you with that tattoo! Fascinating!"

Jacuzzi didn't get swept up in Christopher's buoyant energy and instead turned to look at Rail.

"Oh, they don't seem to have a place to stay, so put 'em up for a while, would ya? We're on the same job after all, so it'll make meetings a lot easier. Pretty handy," Rail said easily.

Jacuzzi, on the other hand, looked like he wanted to disappear to somewhere far away.

However, his only salvation was what Ricardo said as he appeared from behind Christopher.

"I apologize. I know it looks like we're barging in on you all of a sudden.

"Instead of rent, please allow me to cover food expenses for everyone who lives here."

<=>

Night

In front of the Runorata villa

"Well, I guess that's all for work today."

After accompanying Melvi back to the Runorata villa, Claire had chatted with Huey about Chane until evening, since Huey was there for some sort of meeting with the Runoratas. Now, Claire was headed toward the gate.

*I'm concerned about how a terrorist like Dad--er, Huey and the Runoratas are joining forces, but I guess I'll ask Chane later.*⁵

Chane appeared to have her own separate assignment, and he hadn't seen her since

⁵ Claire actually calls him "Father-in-law Huey," but that sounds pretty strange, so I did my best equivalent...

she'd reunited with Huey. Just now, Huey had told him that he found it interesting how her expression wavered back and forth when Claire came up in conversation.

Oh, I want to find her and see her right now. I have to tell her I asked her father for her hand in marriage, after all.

Well, I have to guard the shithead for a few more days, if I want that to happen.

Thinking this, he decided to check the outside of the walls and then go home. He was off the clock, but he would just check for anyone suspicious as a quick extra service.

Although, there probably wouldn't be anyone reckless enough to come close if they knew the villa belonged to the Runorata Family.

That's what Claire thought, but his expectations were quickly betrayed.

When he came to a small path in the back, some trash and rocks were piled up nearby, and he saw a woman who appeared to be trying to get over the wall.

"Whoa."

A small noise escaped his throat despite himself. He didn't think there would be anyone acting so blatantly suspicious. He approached, half-astonished.

The woman was stylish, and her clothes fit her perfectly, but she looked nothing like someone associated with the villa. She didn't appear to be a member of the Runorata family who had broken curfew, either, judging from her age.

"Uh, excuse me? Miss?"

He was pretty sure she wasn't an assassin after Melvi, but she was certainly suspicious.

"This house belongs to a Mafia, you know, and they're pretty scary. If you're trying to steal something, it might be better to go after some undiscovered ancient ruins or sunken ships. There won't be anyone there to report you, anyway."

Claire gave some off-the-mark advice to the suspicious woman, but--

"Huh? Really? But I'm not trying to steal anything. It just looks like someone I'm looking for is in here..."

The woman turned around, not looking flustered in the slightest. When Claire saw her face, he froze.

"Hm?"

"Yes?" The woman stared blankly.

He looked closely at her face, just relying on the light from the moon and a faraway street lamp. "I just noticed the shape of your ears, and the way the bridge of your nose slopes..."

"Huh?"

"You wouldn't be Chane's sister, would you?"

He said something so crazy that a person who knew the truth, even a little, would doubt their own hearing.

"Um, by 'Chane,' do you mean Chane Laforet?"

"Yes."

The woman answered him in her own way, same as she always did.

"Umm, in terms of our relationship, I'm not her sister. I'm actually her mother, so..."

"So you're her mother! My, you're quite young!" At the incredibly sudden chance meeting, Claire did the exact same thing he did when he met Huey. "My name is Felix Walken. It's an honor to meet you, ma'am."

"Oh. I'm Renée."

The woman cocked her head to the side, wondering why this person was suddenly introducing himself, when Claire took her hand and thanked her. "Oh, wow...Thank you so much. Thank you for bringing Chane into my world!"

"Whaaa?"

"I'm a close acquaintance of your daughter. Actually, I'm thinking of marrying her."

Chane and Huey gave off a similar vibe, but there was little resemblance between his love and the woman before him.

The one thing that *was* certain was that Claire was a different kind of person altogether.

However, Renée didn't seem surprised at all, confronted by someone so strange, and just observed him curiously.

She stared at Claire as if he were some type of rare mushroom, then spoke as if she

had suddenly realized something. "Huh? Oh, um...so, if you marry Chane, are you going to live with her?"

"Of course. I'm thinking about building a house by the sea."

"So you're going to be together all the time."

"'Til death do us part'...nah, I'm planning to stay with her even after we're dead." He wasn't joking at all.

"Hmm. That's strange," Renée said, a little troubled. "Huey said he would give me one of them. I wonder if he meant the other one we made?"

"?"

"One of the reasons I came here was to collect Chane, but...um, Felix, was it? Does Huey Laforet know you're planning to marry her?"

"Yes." Claire nodded emphatically and told her about his contract with Huey. "If I help Dad--Huey with this job, he said he would happily give his blessing to my marriage with Chane."

"What? Oh, I see... Hmm, that's a problem...Oh, what is Huey thinking, just doing as he pleases...so maybe the other one..."

Oh, must be a disagreement over who raises the kids. Claire thought, watching her mumble to herself. I wonder if they're divorced. Although Chane is already on her own.

While this was reasonable by normal standards, Claire was nowhere close.

Come to think of it, I've heard a lot about her father from Chane, but nothing about her mother.

It seemed her family situation was rather complicated, but of course his feelings towards Chane didn't change because of that.

The woman worried for a moment, looking concerned, before asking Claire.

"Then let's do this. It's fine if you do it while you're working for Huey, but could you help me with a job, too? If you do, it's a shame, but I'll hand Chane over to you."

He was a little concerned about how she bluntly referred to her daughter as if she were an object, but maybe she just thought of the child she'd given birth to as a part of her own body.

He was caught in between, but Claire had no common sense when it came to other people's hearts. He accepted his own explanation and said to the mother of the

woman he loved, brimming with confidence.

"Leave it to me. There's nothing I can't do."

<=>

Night
Somewhere in New Jersey
The Genoard manor

"Dallas..."

Eve had returned home, continuing to worry about her brother.

He was always out of the house, but this time the Runoratas, who had killed her family, might be involved.

He wouldn't die, but if he were sealed up in a barrel and dropped to the bottom of the river again, she might never find him.

What she was most certain of was the invitation in her hand, and that she would go to the party to find him herself.

But, thanks to her brother, who had taken almost all of the cash in the house, she wouldn't even be able to pay the cost of admission. She may have an invitation, but if she couldn't even buy any of the cheapest chips, she would get thrown out.

And even before that, she didn't even know the basics of how casinos worked. Could she even find her brother there?

She was allowed to bring guests with her invitation, but she didn't know anyone who knew casinos that well, either.

To be exact, the only one she did know wasn't someone she could invite.

Luck Gandor.

He was probably very knowledgeable about casinos, and with him it would be a simple matter to find her brother.

However, Dallas had done something unforgivable to him.

She couldn't imagine he would cooperate with her, for one, and Eve was neither

shameless nor callous enough to depend on Luck's help.

She had thought she could at least receive some advice, but she didn't even have the nerve to do that.

From the start, I wonder...what Dallas would do if he ran into the Gandors? It's possible they'll come, since it is a Mafia gathering, but...

Eve knew firsthand that the Gandors and the Runoratas had once had a dispute, so she figured they would probably not attend.

She knew that nothing was certain in this world.

Be that as it may, the well-known truth that everyone must die someday had been turned upside-down a few years ago.

Having said that, Eve didn't have the strength or the weakness just say he deserved what he got and have done with it, disregarding whatever trouble had occurred.

What on earth could she do on her own?

She wanted something to cling to, even if she was just grasping at straws.

Just as she thought that, the butler Benjamin knocked on the door to her room.

"Miss, there's a strange person here to see you..."

"For me?"

"He says it has to do with the Runorata casino, but...shall I ask him to leave?"

"! No, please show him in! Tell him that if he's just here to talk, I'll listen."

She quickly changed out of her nightgown into regular clothes and came downstairs to see her guest.

There was a tall man in an expensive-looking suit sitting on the sofa, with a briefcase next to him. "Oh my, it's nice to meet you. It's a honor to meet the young head of the Genoard family."

"Oh, um, I'm...not that special."

The position of family head didn't suit her. It should have been turned over straight to her brother Dallas, but Dallas just thought that being the head of a ruined family was a pain, and evasively continued to deny it.

That was actually Dallas' own way of showing kindness to his sister, but it had the complete opposite result.

Eve, knowing nothing of her older brother's consideration, answered as if she genuinely had no idea the words were directed at her.

Her guest shook his head and continued. "No, you certainly have the grace of the family head. I may be wrong...but you aren't the type of girl who would go to a casino run by a Mafia like the Runoratas."

"So you know...about the invitation."

"I thought they might send them to the wealthy families around here. I would like to say that I chose the Genoard family at random...but I thought a young lady like you wouldn't have any ties to a professional like me."

"...Professional?" Eve tilted her head in confusion, wondering what kind of "professional" the man might be.

"I'm a professional gambler, of course," answered her guest. "In short, I'm a specialist."

"A specialist? In gambling?"

"It's only natural that you've never heard of it. That's because you've never had anything to do with casinos. Rich families who have gotten tired of playing will hire someone like me to win more efficiently, or to help them have more fun gambling."

The man pulled a deck of cards from the pocket of his tuxedo, withdrew them from the box and deftly shuffled them.

He held them in his left hand and bent them so they would fly neatly into each other.

This method of shuffling, commonly known as the "riffle shuffle," was generally disliked because it was easy to damage the cards.⁶ But to Eve, who had never touched cards to even play with them, the flashy technique was like magic.

The guest showed the surprised girl another fancy shuffle and spoke.

"...Someone like you might think you don't need a professional gambler. You may not even be planning on going to the casino. However, I didn't come to you today to market my skills to you."

He stopped shuffling and placed a suitcase on the table.

⁶ The literal term for this in Japanese is the "machine gun shuffle," but people don't call it that in English to my understanding.

"There will be all kinds of dealers there at the Runorata casino. One of the biggest casinos around. Of course, there will be others like me there as well, so...I just wanna test my skills there!"

His voice grew stronger as he threw open the suitcase, revealing stacks and stacks of cash.

"I'll provide the bankroll, too. If I pull off a win, I'll give you all the profits. If I lose, then that's that, but...please. Please, let me join the casino party with you as your guest."

The man picked up a stack of bills from the suitcase and held it out to Eve.

"I'm a little late in saying this, but my name is Neider Schasschule. I'd like to buy the privilege of accompanying you to the casino party."

After he said this, Neider felt an uncomfortable sweat running down his back.

I'm an idiot. The kid's not gonna believe this crap about professional gambling.

"I want to buy the privilege of being your escort"? Really? I sound like I'm trying to buy a whore.

Even as he beat himself up mentally, Neider didn't let a hint of it show in his expression or bearing.

He should be lying low back at the housing facility. What was he doing here?

It was the consequence of nothing but his own cowardice.

<=>

5 hours ago
The housing facility
First floor

Ladd and the others had gone, and the facility was quiet.

"Good grief, what was that all about?"

Roy was relieved that the storm had passed, but Neider was still shaking

What was that...? What the hell is happening? What kind of "flow" is this really?

Are there any advantages for me? Do I have any chance of destroying Huey's organization?

I have to...I have to confirm the flow.

Confirm the flow.

It was a strange way of putting it, but if he revealed what it really was, it would be nothing more than an attempt at finding a reason to run away.

It was an expression Neider used frequently when he ran away from an important decision.

For instance, if he rolled a 1 on a die, he would place a high-stakes wager because fate was on his side. At first it might seem quite optimistic, but it was a calculation with a 5/6 chance of failure.

In other words, there was a 5/6 chance that he could make an excuse to give up. After all, it had failed, so there was nothing he could do. Even on the 1/6 chance that a 1 did appear, he would look for another reason. "If it only hadn't rained until night" "If I had won three games of Klondike solitaire in a row" "If the dog over there hadn't started barking when I threw a rock next to it"--he would make all kinds of symbolic bets and give up when he lost, assuming his luck today was bad.

He would ride the current this time, march into the Runorata casino, and crush Huey's organization.

And then, he could make a triumphant return to his childhood friend as a hero.

He thought it was an absurd future, but he would never be able to face his friend or his past self if he completely denied those kinds of thoughts.

He thought it was presumptuous to think he would be able to face either of them at this point, but he would put forth the challenge for now, if only to convince his own half-assed psyche.

He set up a goal that was next to impossible, making it easy to give up.

--"If I can deceive a rich person with an invitation to help me sneak into the Runorata casino, I'll do everything I can to see this through--even put my life on the line." In other words, it was an incredibly foolish trial.

Of course it was impossible.

To begin with, he had no connections with any rich families in the East. Plus, he didn't know which ones were connected to the Runoratas. And who would listen to a man they'd never seen or even heard of before in this depression?

If a genuinely advantageous current were coming, he would be able to overcome all of those difficulties, and everything should go well.

Today, this day, he would look for someone rich while hiding from Hilton, and if it didn't work out he would give up.

Even as he thought himself a coward for preparing an escape route, Neider had no courage to overcome his nature.

However--

He hadn't realized yet.

He thought he was resisting the current with all his might, but he had already been drawn into it a long time ago.

Perhaps ever since the moment he had discovered that Huey was immortal.

"Hey, Roy. You don't know of any rich people that might be connected to the Runoratas, do you?"

A worker at a welfare facility (and a former junkie to boot) probably didn't have any rich acquaintances.

It was just a comfortable first step for his investigation, but he got a surprising answer.

"Hm? Uh...now that you mention it, I do."

"...Huh?"

"Eve Genoard. Her family actually has some pretty deep connections to the Runoratas, in more than one way."

"You-you wouldn't...know where they live, would you?" Neider asked timidly.

Roy shook his head apologetically. "Nah, I wouldn't know that. I just know it's somewhere in New Jersey."

"Oh, okay."

Neider was somewhat relieved and was about to change the topic as fast as he could, but--

An unexpected ambush broke into their conversation.

"The Genoards? We know them, don't we, Miria?"

It was the strange couple that had been introduced to Roy and the others as Fred's new delivery helpers.

"Yeah, Isaac! We cased that joint so many times I remember it perfectly!"

<=>

Genoard house Parlor

And so here he was.

Although he was concerned by Miria's use of the term "casing the joint," he found himself sitting here in front of Eve before he had recovered from the shock.

He had said he didn't want to go out into the city because it was dangerous, but Graham had offered him a ride courtesy of Shaft, and he finally made it here.

Having nothing to lose, he had told the butler that he wanted to talk about the Runorata casino, but he hadn't thought she would actually have an invitation.

But that was where the coincidences ended.

There weren't many who would believe such a suspicious story.

Perhaps she was in great need of money, or otherwise a blithering idiot.

Regardless, he ignored the procedures he normally followed to swindle others and instead followed his stream of consciousness, leaving it all to chance. He was so thoroughly guided by his mental instincts that even he was startled when he started shuffling cards.

Afterwards, Eve would become exasperated with this suspicious man and ask what he was trying to do, and that would be the end of it.

And when she called the police, who would blame him for making an escape? He thought lightly, but--

"I understand. I have some conditions."

Eve's reply was more solemn than he had imagined, and her voice was filled with earnestness.

"...Huh?" Neider responded without thinking.

Eve paid him no mind and continued with her conditions. "I don't need your money. Instead, I want you to help me persuade my brother to come back."

That moment, Neider finally realized.

He wasn't on the verge of a current. He had already stepped his foot into a giant whirlpool.

And, he was certain that the girl Eve Genoard had just created a new whirlpool that would swallow him as well.

The whirlpool that enveloped the immortals made that current more and more furious.

All the while, the whirlpools swirled around the Mafia, the Camorra, and even their own individual selves.

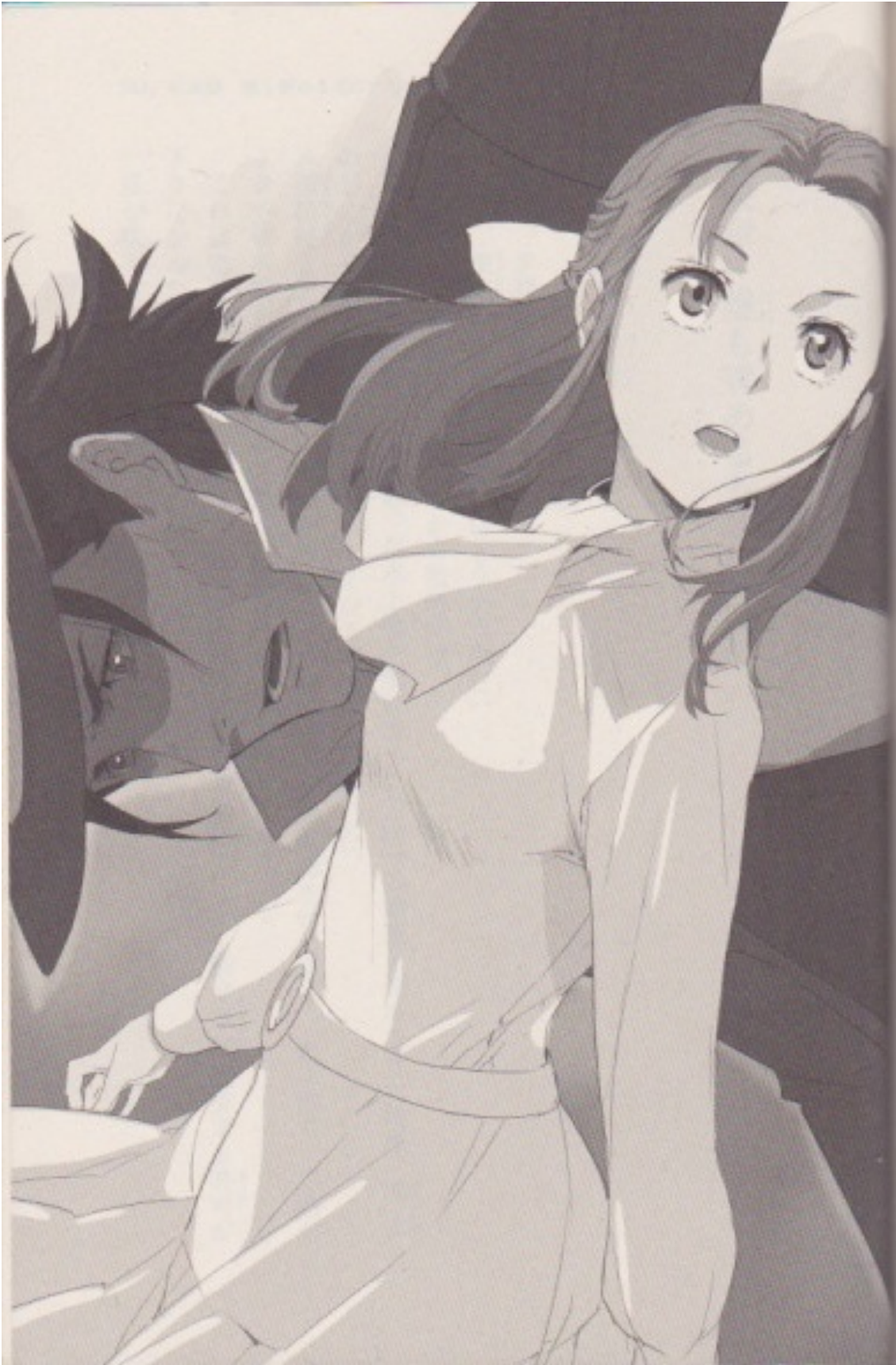
And none of them knew what waited for them in the darkness at the bottom of the rapids.

And so Neider Schasschule simply continued to sink toward that black darkness.

Unable to reverse that flow, or even create his own tiny eddy--

Simply sinking, sinking into that deep, cold darkness.

Unable to hold onto even a simple desire for his own sake, just like the others.



Connecting Chapter: There is No One to Blame

Somewhere on the American East Coast A harbor

Let's look back to the evening.

"Hey, what do you mean, we can't investigate?"

It was a few hours after he had gone to visit Edward.

When Victor investigated where the seaplanes had gone the previous day, he had discovered the likelihood that their headquarters was mobile, somewhere out on the ocean.

He had narrowed down a few port cities that appeared to serve as a supply line, and in one city, after an investigation of ship arrivals and departures, he found a boat that was hiding its cargo and departure log.

Victor, positive that this was it, headed for the front lines himself--only to be denied permission to search.

The wind blew fiercely on the wharf.

Bill, the one who had brought him the news, scratched his cheek as Victor's veins began to throb.

"Ah...well, that's because it's a foreign vessel. There's all kinds of problems."

"There were a bunch of idiots flying all over the goddamn city with goddamn machine guns! I don't care if it was only blanks, this is not the time for red tape just because they're from another country!"

"Uh...it's not just that it's a foreign ship...Anyhow, it's not unrelated to our department, so I think we should be careful."

"What's that?" Victor asked.

Bill handed over his binoculars and pointed out the ship offshore. "The ship just left port, and now it's stopped out on the water. Maybe it'll be easier if you take a look yourself."

"Stop beating around the bush. Of course words are faster. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a good report can do more than a hundred pictures--"

Grumbling at his subordinate, Victor looked through the binoculars at the ship.

That moment, his entire body stiffened--and instead of complaining at his subordinate, he let out a small groan of surprise.

"No..."

<=>

Night Alveare

"So they attacked you too, Maiza?!"

Thanks to the police interrogation about the smoke bomb incident, Maiza didn't show up at the restaurant until it was already evening.

Firo had responded with surprise upon hearing the details from Maiza. "Shit... it's that bastard Melvi screwing with us..."

"We don't know he was behind it yet."

"But who else would it be? I can't think of anyone else!"

"Even if it is him, throwing a fit about it without any proof is just what he's expecting."

Maiza kept completely calm, even though he was the one who had been attacked.

Firo realized how immature he still was, watching him. As he tried to calmly surmise the particulars of this event, he thought about how he needed to learn how to control his emotions better.

But only ten minutes later, that came to an abrupt and forceful end.

"Firo, phone for you," Sena called.

"Me?"

Firo took the phone in the back of the restaurant.

"Hello, this is Firo Prochainezo."

The voice on the other end was familiar.

[Hi, there. Are you doing well?]

"You...Melvi?!"

[Oh, good, you remember my voice! What an honor. How are you? Are Yaguruma and Maiza well?]

Melvi mentioned the names of the two who had been attacked earlier today. He was obviously trying to provoke him.

Firo felt the rage boiling up, but he remembered what Maiza had said. Yelling was just what Melvi wanted him to do. He suppressed the anger in his voice as much as he possibly could.

"You don't have to explain anything. Just think about what part of the ocean you want to drown in. Anything you'd like to have in the concrete with you, too."

[Oh my. You aren't saying you're going to devour me?]

"There's nothing in it for me."

[That was troubling me, you know. My personal gamble with you. Since I want Szilard's knowledge inside of you, I was thinking that you would devour me if I lost.]

Firo's anger seethed more and more at Melvi's mocking voice, and his voice nearly trembled as he answered. "I see. That shithead's knowledge certainly would go well with that brain of yours."

[Yes. But, I don't think that in itself would be very interesting.]

After a moment's pause, Melvi said something strange.

[...Firo Prochainezo. It should be right about now...don't hang up, okay?]

"'Right about now'? The hell are you talking about?" Firo asked doubtfully, and that moment--

The front door burst open, and Czeslaw Meyer dashed in, clothes in tatters.

"Czes?!"

He nearly dropped the phone and ran to him, but the voice from the receiver stopped him in his tracks.

[Don't you dare hang up! You stay right there, right where you are, Firo.]

Melvi's polite tone disappeared in favor of a more forceful one, but his voice was still filled with that unpleasant smile.

Maiza and Sena called out to Czes, but the boy ran straight to Firo. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Firo..."

"Czes...? What is it, what happened?!" Firo asked, the phone still to his ear. The only reason he hadn't ignored Melvi and hung up was the violent sense of foreboding that held him as he looked at Czes' clothes.

And that sense was absolutely correct, in the worst possible way.

"The apartment suddenly blew up...and Ennis...some weird guys came and...and...!"

Suddenly, Firo's mind went blank.

Completely blank.

As if his mind was trying to escape reality, in a way.

It was only a second, but to Firo it felt like a long hour--

But the silence was broken by the roaring laughter from the other end of the line.

[Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahahahaha! Bingo! This is excellent, the timing on this call was absolutely perfect, Firo Prochainezo!]

There was not a trace of the courteous attitude Melvi had shown to him yesterday when they met.

He made his declaration in a sonorous, theatrical voice to a silent Firo, like a child whose prank had just succeeded.

[Now, our stakes are even! If you win, I'll return Ennis to you unharmed. However, if I win, I'll take all of Szilard's knowledge that's inside you. And you know what that means, right? Well, you could cheat and create a homunculus, share the knowledge with it, and give that to me instead. It should be easy, using what Szilard knows, right?]

He gave Firo another option, then scoffed and added:

[If you can manage it before the casino opens, that is.]

"Hey...wait..."

Firo had begun to return to the real world from his blank mental state, but it was all he could do to wring out those words.

But Melvi showed no mercy as he continued to verbally pummel him.

[Relax! I don't plan on devouring Ennis. But if you try anything...if, for example, you run to the newspapers or the police, I can't guarantee what will happen. Even if I don't devour her...no, *because* I won't, I can bring her pain and humiliation for all eternity if I want. Hahahahaha!]

He laughed coarsely, but behind it was unmistakable hatred.

Not knowing the true form of that bottomless hatred, Firo mumbled in a trembling voice.

"...Why?"

He wanted to scream at him to give Ennis back. He wanted to curse him.

But he was a camorrista. His bonds to the Martillo Family, the same familial bonds he had to Ennis, helped him barely keep the dam from bursting on his emotions.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

It was a question seeking the honest truth. The answer was surprisingly straightforward, yet incomprehensible.

[It's simple. You devoured Szilard Quates.]

The laughter in his voice faded, and the voice on the other end was truly emotionless.

[...You **stole my future**. I'm just taking it back.]

"...Huh? What does that even..."

Before he finished his question, the line was already dead.



Firo looked around in a daze.

He could see Maiza and Sena watching him worriedly, and Czes staring at his feet. His body was uninjured but his clothes were burnt here and there.

And seeing this made him sure of the reality that Ennis had been kidnapped.

That was all Firo's reason could take.

Instead of shouting, Firo smashed the phone as hard as he could with his fist.

He didn't care if it broke his hand. With one blow the phone was shattered to pieces.

Whether they saw his expression or sensed the situation from the aura coming from him, neither Sena nor Maiza said anything about the broken phone--

Only the silence assaulted Firo Prochainezo.

And it made Firo attack himself, for his own carelessness--that he hadn't rushed to Ennis first of all the moment he heard Yaguruma had been attacked.

<=>

The Runorata villa Melvi's room

"Now then, all that's left is to seal the demon."

Melvi hung up the phone with a strangely cold expression and left his room. As soon as he stepped into the hall, he heard a voice behind him.

"I wonder what kind of magic you used to get your own phone in your room."

He turned around, and next to the door to his room was a woman looking coldly at him. Her blonde hair was tied back in a bun, and she was dressed in the garb of a casino dealer. It was the woman who was the Runoratas' top dealer before he had showed up.

"...Oh, Miss Carlotta. Were you eavesdropping? That hobby is generally frowned upon, you know," Melvi said sarcastically. "Plus, I can't say your dressing like a dealer outside of the casino is much of a hobby, either."

Carlotta's eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't show any anger. "I don't care who you are, so you shouldn't worry about what I wear, either," she replied indifferently.

"If that's what you think, could you ask your little followers to stop tailing me?"

"Tell them yourself. I didn't ask them to do that."

"Then what brings you here? Don't tell me you ambushed me just now to snark at me?" Melvi said, as if mocking her.

"Yes, that was all," Carlotta answered. "The one who will manage the new casino is you. As that is the decision of Don Bartolo, begrudging you would be betraying the Family."

Melvi smiled bitterly at that. "...The loyalty of the Runorata higher-ups towards Mr. Bartolo never ceases to amaze," he replied. "Well, I'm also working hard to be of use to Mr. Bartolo myself, as much as possible."

"I see... Then I have just one bit of advice for you." Her expression icy, Carlotta narrowed her eyes and muttered at Melvi. "**You should get a little greedy.** If you don't, you'll end up having the rug pulled out from under you."

"...Oh my. Even if you didn't understand all of it, you did eavesdrop on my phone conversation. You should know that I am filled with greed, shouldn't you?"

"...If those are actually your own feelings, it doesn't really matter."

Carlotta smiled slightly for the first time--and Melvi's smile disappeared a fraction.

She turned away from Melvi, lifted her hand, and left him with one last parting shot.

"I hope you'll realize what it is you really want, **Melvi Dormентаire.**"

<=>

3 hours later Somewhere along the East Coast

Victor saw through the binoculars a symbol he could never forget.

The characteristic family crest of an hourglass, emblazoned on the side of the ship.

House Dormентаire.

A great aristocratic family, in charge of an enormous fortune that had once employed Victor and Szilard as their personal alchemists.

Their influence had been declining since the modern era began, and Victor well understood that they were only economically active in one region in Europe.

In actuality, he had not received a scrap of information that the family was involved in any of the incidents concerning immortals in America.

"Why...why the hell are they showing up now?"

Victor was frozen in place, creating a contrast with the ship bearing the Dormентаire that rocked back and forth on the small waves.

As if it were laughing at Victor--

Or perhaps the entire country.

Afterword

Thank you, much appreciated. This is Narita.

And so, here is the second volume of 1935.

Originally, I planned to make the first act of the story the first volume, but thanks to the page count it became two volumes. I apologize...Anyway, the "first act" is more like the "first and second acts."⁷

Next, the story will move forward with the casino party as the second (or third) act, but--before that, like *1932-Summer*, another side story volume will come between.

Like *Summer*, the second part of the special stories released with the *Baccano!* anime DVDs will be combined and revised into one volume.

I'm sure there are various opinions on this, but in the author's own opinion, turning the DVD specials into a volume is the same kind of thing as watching movies that are out on DVD for free on TV.

Of course, there's no need to turn it into its own volume, but--I do have one very big reason for turning it into a novel, and that is that some important characters who will appear in the next part of the story are already solidly sketched out there.

I wasn't sure what kind of technique to use, but 1935 is the culmination of the 1930s arc, so I want to bring in as many characters as I can. I hope you can take it as if I am presenting another episode so you can enjoy the stupid commotion to the fullest.

Since this is part of the flow towards the finale of *Baccano!*, I think some may have criticism, but please wait until it is finished to make that call.

After the side story volume, *Durarara!!* will come in between, then we'll break into 1935-C. That's the plan as far as it goes, but please enjoy my next works!

I'm getting closer and closer to my 10-year anniversary as an author. I'm happy, but at the same time I feel my strength declining these days. Back when I debuted, I pulled all-nighters all the time, but now when I stay up all night just once I get so groggy I'm useless for the next two days.

⁷ Narita references two traditional story structures, one that is comparable to "three-act" (in Noh theater) and one that is comparable to "four-act" (in Chinese literature, I believe).

I'm old, aren't I? That damn passage of time... or that's what I thought, but on second thought, I haven't been moving around enough since I became an author. The culprit isn't the passage of time, it's insufficient exercise. I have made a serious false accusation against time, but I want to think that the reason was that my brain has gotten a little rusty after living this many years. That damn passage of time... (repeat on a loop)

If I may write about what I've been up to recently, I spend all my time off of the battlefield playing video games, as always. It turns out there's an indoor Airsoft field nearby, so I'm stumbling my way through some games there, but even though I'm moving my body it's still a game. Games are a great cultural item, so I want to study them in order to produce fun stories that won't lose to games like this.

The reason that last part was so serious was because I realized "Huh. I have nothing else to report other than games." and frantically tried to cover it up, but for now I would be happy if you think of it as me having so little stress that I can even play games.

I cleaned my room, and my air conditioner with humidifier capability was installed with no trouble, and I can continue gaming...*coughcough* I mean writing manuscripts.

I'm thinking about doing even more things from next year on. I hope to continue with you, my readers, for months and years to come, so I hope you are able to welcome a happy new year.

And so, I look forward to seeing you next year and beyond!

November 2012, Ryohgo Narita

Translator's Notes

First and foremost, thank you for taking the time to read this!

I was so blown away when I finished one volume, and now I've finished two. In a way, I decided to translate because of this volume, so it holds a special place in my heart.

As always, I struggle to find the balance between a literal translation and one that flows well in English. I'm not terribly familiar with common conventions of Japanese writing, but I know that Narita's style organizes information in a way that is very difficult to preserve in English without it sounding strange.

Thank you so much to everyone who reads this, and to everyone who comments-- I'm not very good at replying, but I get super excited every time I get feedback. Every comment makes my day. I'm still amazed that I've been able to do this, really.

I hope you enjoyed this volume, and I'm looking forward to doing more.

On to *1931-Winter*!