

BACCANO!

バツカーバ!

1935-C

The Grateful Bet

成田良悟

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電撃文庫

Baccano! 1935-C The Grateful Bet
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トリックスター達は災禍に集う。
彼ら自身が新たな流れを造り出し、周囲の全てを流転させる。
運命の渦というものを意図的に起こした者がいるならば、
彼らを巻き込んだ事を後悔する事になるだろう。

The tricksters converge like a natural disaster.

They create a new current themselves, throwing everything around them into flux.

If anyone purposefully creates a whirlpool in the flow of fate, he will likely regret drawing them into it.



They have their own unique "current."

No matter how violent a storm comes upon them, they will continue down the path they believe in.

Sometimes, they become a muddy stream themselves, knocking down and carrying away any and all enemies in their path equally.

Whether they carry them in their flow, or shatter them into a million pieces.

Perhaps everyone who stands in front of them will be faced with that choice.

Table of Contents

Extra Chapter 3: The Results of the Research are not Publicly Released

Chapter 15: It Doesn't Go as They Expect

Chapter 16: A Hero Doesn't Appear

Chapter 17: The Aristocrats' Splendor Doesn't End

Chapter 18: They Don't Break Their Vows

Chapter 19: The Tricksters Don't Hesitate

Chapter 20: They Can't Make it Through Without Getting Involved

Chapter 21: There's No Way Nothing will Happen

Chapter 22: Or Maybe There Is, But No One can Tell

Connecting Chapter: The Mastermind Doesn't Show up to the Fray



Designed by Yoshihiko Kamabe

Now then, it's time to gamble.

The time to place your bets has begun.

Use whatever means you want, and pour all your strength into wasting your time and money.

Waste is the proof that you're enjoying your life, after all, so live your life in opulence and indulge to your heart's content.

Will you test your luck at the roulette?

Enjoy the strategic give-and-take of poker?

Or use your best poker face to challenge the dealer in a one-on-one hand of blackjack?

Face yourself on the slots?

Entrust your fate to the dice in cee-lo?

Touch the mysteries of the Far East in *chouhan bakuchi*?

Take a look at the depths of the simple world of two-up?

Taste the excitement of a dogfight?

Amuse yourself with a horse race in the sunlight?

Or, if you are so inclined, you can think up a new way to gamble here.

If everyone thinks it up from scratch, isn't that fair in its own way?

Gambling.

Yes, it's time to gamble!

If you don't enjoy it, what will you do?

Gamble all you want, until your throats and the inside of your eyelids begin to sting.

Deceive each other, but fairly.

I'm not asking you to outwit each other by cheating.

Gambling is certainly up to fate, in part, but your job is to confuse and mislead your

opponent as well.

You can put on your best poker face, plan according to probability, and or read the dealer's expression. All are good strategies.

You should do everything you can to use the ploys you come up with.

Gambling is a kind of play, yet it is not.

Fate, courage, intellect, and human character.

The casino is a place that weighs all of these and puts them to the test.

Whom do you wish to test? Yourself, or someone else?

Well, let's enjoy ourselves, at least.

At the most basic level, you will be taking money from one another.

But you may also change something more valuable into your chips.

This may even be the last game of your life. It all depends.

You may have already changed your very lives into chips.

How about it?

Isn't it so much fun to think of it that way?

— *Words of the general manager at the casino "Ra's Lance"*

Extra Chapter 3 -- The Results of the Research are not Publicly Released

2003
Somewhere

So you wanna hear about Szilard Quates?

...Who are you?

I thought you came to make fun of me or something, looking the way I do in a bar like this.

Who told you about me?

....Well, whatever. You don't look like someone who's here to kill me.

Let me introduce myself again.

I'm Phil Nibil.

I used to be called Felt before, but I've even got a different gender now.

I think I used to be a little taller, too.

So, since you're bringing up Szilard Quates, I assume you're an immortal?

...Oh, you're not. I see. That's good.

Well, you didn't come to see "the Phils," you came to see *me* specifically, which means you must have gotten the information from someone.

If you're looking to become immortal, you came to the wrong person.

...Lotto Valentino?

No, I don't know that town. I feel like I heard something about it from old man Bild, though...

Oh, right.

That's Maiza's hometown, isn't it? Him and his friends?

Yeah, yeah. I was thinking I might go there someday.

So you're a traveler from Lotto Valentino.

Why does a regular old traveler want to know about Szilard?

Actually, how do you know about immortals in the first place?

So what if it's a long story? My story's pretty long, too, you know.

Well, if you'll treat me to dinner, I'll tell you as much as I know. I have no reason to help him out, and I have nothing to hide.

But it wouldn't it be faster if you just asked Bild?

Bild?

Bild. Bild Quates. Szilard's descendant.

Apparently he looks just like Szilard, but there's quite a few generations between them, maybe his grandson's great-grandson or something like that. I don't know how similar they actually look, though.

Well, if you go enough generations, you'll probably get someone who looks just like one of their ancestors.

If he was born the way I was, they would probably all look alike, though.

Whoops, sorry. I'm off-topic.

Alright, so what do you want to know about Szilard?

I think Bild would know more about this than me, but I'll answer what I can.

...What did Szilard Quates want to do, huh?

Hmm...I wonder.

What was old man Szilard thinking when he created the ones like me and the other Phils?

I know a little here and there about that, but his overall goal was pretty unclear.

If you want reliable information on the subject, it'd be fastest to ask the one who devoured him.

Uhh...I think it might cause some trouble for him if I told you his name.

I'll ask him soon if it's okay to tell you.

But here's what I heard from Bild.

Do you know what a homunculus is?

Sometimes people call it "the little man in the flask"?

They show up in movies and books sometimes, right?

Ah, I've never actually read or seen any of those books or movies, so I don't know how much they show up, but...I know someone who knows all about those lowbrow sorts of things.

The homunculus—the man in the flask.

They can't leave the flask they were born in, but in exchange they have all the knowledge of the universe.

Like one of those fairies from the nursery tales, the oldest one.

There are some false theories that say they're the embodiment of the universe's consciousness itself.

Yeah. That's what Szilard Quates wanted to make.

Before, I said that his ultimate goal was unclear. "Unclear" being what it is, it's hard to explain, but if I had to put it into words it would be..."everything."

The alchemist Szilard Quates wanted everything in the world, I think. Even though he had already obtained an immortal body. Maybe precisely *because* he had obtained immortality.

He lost his mortal life, so if he didn't seek after something, he probably didn't feel alive.

Well, either way, Szilard wanted to take hold of anything and everything.

Money.

Power.

Food.

Women.

Freedom.

Knowledge.

Anything.

Yeah, the only thing he *didn't* want was respect.

If he had just wanted a little respect, the other immortals would probably have slightly better memories left of him.

Or maybe he thought that he only needed money and influence, and then others would just give him respect out of hand. I guess if some guys can get unconditional respect from other people like that, that's how it is.

Oh, I'm off-topic.

Anyway, it wasn't just me.

Szilard Quates' hands were all over the globe.

He had so many students you probably couldn't count them all, and I think he had more than thirty facilities in America and Europe alone. Although old man Bild's the only one who knows.

It seems the only secret he really held close to his chest was the "wine of immortality," but other than that he left a lot of his research to others.

Yeah, that's why I don't understand everything, either.

Szilard himself may not have known everything.

He reached too far.

Even after he was devoured, some of the branches of his network were still alive. Actually, the immortal that devoured Szilard and his memories didn't even know I existed.

If an octopus is holding onto something, it won't let go so easily, even after you cut off its arms.

Szilard himself is already dead, but...

If his "arms" are still alive, they can get the jump on you easier than you might think.

Take me, for example.

...Huh? Did Lebreau work with Szilard?

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque?

Sorry. I don't know how far his reach was or who he was connected to.

But I've heard the name before, if only that much.

The other Phils heard it a lot from the Smile Junkie.

Yeah, sorry. I'll tell you about the Smile Junkie another time.

That story's a little too long for just a casual chat.

Chapter 15 -- It Doesn't Go as They Expected

Senator Manfred Beriam.

Although he was an influential and celebrated young politician, he seldom smiled in front of others. He was decidedly indifferent to social graces, and this remained the case even during election season and in front of powerful people.

A mannequin was probably more sociable, some people said.

How had a man with this kind of reputation managed to win so many elections and acquire such status and renown?

The answer was simple: he always produced results.

Beriam was originally an entrepreneur who started several businesses in his hometown, which created an exceptional number of jobs and developed the economy of the region.

When Beriam said he was going to become a politician, those who had become wealthy by his hands supported his political work. Even though they thought he was still too young to change careers, they fully anticipated that he would bring them even more riches.

Until the year 1913, senators were elected by the state legislature, but thanks to a constitutional amendment that year, they began to be elected by popular vote.

Less than 10 years after that, the people elected Beriam as their senator. He did all kinds of things in his political career, and all of it exceeded their expectations.

He was broadminded, dealing with all kinds of people, and there were even rumors that he had Mob connections. However, he had the fundamentally strong appeal of a platform of eradicating crime and destroying corruption.

If necessary, he would meet with the executive Bartolo of the Runorata Family, but not to lick his boots. Beriam was the one making the demands.

What had brought him the most power recently was how he dealt with the criminal organization created and led by the notorious terrorist Huey Laforet.

Since he had the incident itself almost completely hidden from the public, the world's interest had waned ever since Huey's arrest in 1931.

But Huey Laforet's roots spread wide and ran deep.

In Senator Beriam's opinion, this was entirely due to his own failure.

<=>

"Szilard Quates."

Beriam's surly mouth spat out a certain name.

He stood in front of a sturdy desk next to the window, in a study full of practical items, like furniture and office supplies, with few extravagant decorations. "That's the name of the first virus that started its spread in this country," he continued evenly.

"Huh. Never heard that name before."

The senator's somber words were answered with a light reply.

The carefree voice belonged to a man leaning against the bookshelves lined up against the wall. His eyes were covered by a cloth painted with a reticle, and his name was Spike.

"I see. I thought you might have heard something about him from Laforet."

"Eh, maybe. Maybe I just don't remember. It's been three whole years since I worked for him, ya know." Spike shrugged.

Without showing any emotion in particular, Beriam turned to another man in the corner of the room. "What about you?" he asked. "Do you remember the name Szilard Quates?"

"...I only heard it once, back when I was working in New York."

The man was covered from head to toe in black, like he was trying to blend into the darkness of the room. He was blond, with a black coat, black shoes, and a jet-black suit that made him look like he was in mourning. He wore a hunting cap low over his eyes, so the upper half of his face above his nose was hidden in shadow and hard to see.

As if to hide from the sunlight coming through the window, he stood with his whole body in shadow as he continued. "It seems he had all kinds of backdoor connections. He even had police officials and congressmen eating out of his hands."

"Shameful, but true." A hint of frustration sounded in Beriam's voice. "I didn't realize that immortals existed at all until I got caught up in a feud between Szilard and another

immortal in the FBI. Of course, while I was focused that, Laforet was spreading his roots even further into this country."

"Hehe, well, us Lemures didn't know how far the other organizations reached, either." Spike chuckled coarsely. "I doubt even that old bastard Goose knew how far it went. Heh, we weren't worth shit to Huey, were we?"

"...He put his own daughter in an organization that was just his sacrificial pawns?"

"To Huey, we're all the same. His daughter, us, the drunks you see wanderin' around here—we're all just lab rats to the bastard," Spike said with a self-deprecating grin.

"That man has mistaken this world for his own personal laboratory," Beriam replied. "He thinks all living things, great and small...even those who have passed and those who have yet to be born, are his lab rats. Including himself." All emotion disappeared from the senator's face as he coolly continued. "He has committed an unforgivable crime, and he must be brought to justice."

"..."

"..."

Both Spike and the man swathed in black were unable to respond to Senator Beriam's voice. They could sense the intangible force behind his words.

"This country doesn't belong to those immortal monsters. This state was built for humans, by humans." Beriam's index finger thumped his desk as he made his proclamation. "If they hide in the darkness and live like ordinary humans, I can allow them to exist. But I will never let them treat humans as their playthings."

"..."

In contrast to the man in black's stubborn silence, Spike laughed carelessly and opened his mouth. "Don't worry, Beriam, you've got the muscle to get rid of these monsters. Money is way easier to understand than those immortal stories or that Huey's ideology."

"Quite the glib one, aren't you. But, if you are going to work, let's decide on a suitable payment."

"Much appreciated."

"Although the one who'll actually be working isn't you, but your **assistant**."

Spike frantically cut in at Beriam's words. "Wait, wait. I told you, give me a break about passing the buck, okay? I have to use the kid. And I hate to say it, but if she doesn't have my orders to follow, she can't do much of anything."

The man in black, who had been silent up until now, turned to Spike. "...She's not an adult yet. How could you even think of putting her finger on the trigger instead of yours?"

"Whoa, there, Felix, or whatever you're called now. If you're looking to make me feel guilty, you're looking in the wrong place." Spike's mouth twisted into a grin. "I'm not the one who made Sonja like that. It wasn't those two ladies who're always with her, either. From what I heard, her parents were the ones that loosened her screws. And I mean *really* loose."

"..."

"That girl ain't a gun messiah or a genius. She's a gun itself. She became a gun because her mom and dad believed in guns way too much, without a thought that they could be wrong. Even I don't wanna get too close to her, and I'm a sniper," Spike said with a careless chuckle. His lips twisted into a sticky sort of smile. "But somebody's gotta pull that trigger. Right?"

"..."

The man in black just kept his silence.

Beriam watched the exchange. "It doesn't matter to me," he said.

"I don't care who does what when we achieve our goal. Results are everything. I have no right to pass judgment on you should you fail, I do have the right to deny you payment. Please keep that in mind."

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"Gahahaha, 'results are everything,' huh? Good thing our boss is keeping it so simple."

"..."

After they left the room and went into the hall, Spike talked to the man in black as they walked side-by-side.

The man in black was silent, so from one side it looked like Spike was talking to himself.

"The fact is, we're hired guns. It'd be a damn shame if we didn't have anything to show for it."

" ... "

"Alright, alright, alright! Who'm I gonna shoot when that casino opens, I wonder?"

"You won't be doing the shooting." The man in black finally opened his mouth to chide Spike.

"Whoa, whoa, that again? Like I said: that girl's like a gun itself. She's just shooting the target in the place of a guy who can't see anything."

"So she's your sniping prodigy?"

"Prodigy? No, not quite. Similar, but not the same."

"Oh?" the man in black responded, apparently interested in the ability of the "assistant" Spike was talking about.

"If you use a tool long enough, it starts to feel like a part of your own body. Like those sticks Asians use to eat. When I held my guns, they felt like a part of my arm."

" ... "

"But that girl is even beyond that. It's not just part of her arm. It's like she entrusts half her body to guns. She's made them so much a part of herself that it's hard to tell where the gun stops and she starts. But that's just from building up experience, totally different from talent or skill."

Spike's words were a bit more passionate than usual, maybe because the topic was guns.

"So by those standards, she *is* a gun. And that's why the senator doesn't need to worry about it. If I had to feel sorry for each and every one of my guns, I wouldn't be able to take it."

"Has Sonja agreed to that version of the situation?"

"Hn? Yeah, the kid doesn't think anything of it. She's a completely different kind of tool from Chane. That girl was obsessed with thoughts of Huey and nothing else. No, Sonja hasn't got a care in the world, and she doesn't worry about a single solitary detail, not even suspicious guys like me."

Spike found it all hilarious and let out a snort at the memory of the simple girl.

But then his laughter stopped abruptly, and he spoke to the man in black next to him with a bored expression.

"That reminds me, she's got a childhood friend or somethin' with the same name as a guy I used to know."

"...?"

"The kid smiled and said something to me once. 'I don't know much about good and bad, but it's okay. That's 'cause if I mess up, Neider will come stop me, 'cause he's a hero.' ...Ha! It's hilarious!"

"What's so funny about it?" the man asked, tilting his head.

Spike answered with the most amused smile he'd shown today plastered on his face.

"The Neider I know is the total opposite of a hero. He's a two-bit heel. Chane cut off his right hand and I finished him off, the idiot. I bet she'd cry like a baby if that turned out to be the same Neider as the one she's talking about!"

"..."

"Well, there's no way that's the case, right? I mean, her Neider can't be a good guy anyway, and there's no such thing as a hero in real life!"

"..."

The man in black looked at Spike with eyes full of profound dismay, but he didn't say anything.

Because he knew.

This man Spike was a lowlife, but he himself was the same kind of man. He had gotten his hands dirty killing for money, and even now was continuing in a similar profession.

And he knew that his current employer was no saint himself.

Senator Manfred Beriam.

There was no mistake that his desire to clean up the United States came from the heart.

But he also knew that Beriam planned to reach his goal by any and all means available.

Beriam was not above sacrificing his society's citizens in order to purify it from unnatural beings.

Of course he would minimize the number, but he wouldn't hesitate to make small sacrifices and throw them to the wolves.

If Huey Laforet thought of the world as his laboratory, Manfred Beriam thought of it as a herd of lambs to sacrifice for the sake of moving society. Most importantly, he himself had made a firm decision that he would offer his own life as a sacrifice to the system.

That was why he could get his hands dirty without a second thought, and without a second thought could sacrifice his own family.

Maybe, in a way, it's a pure, honest way to live, thought the man in black, the former Felix Walken. Still, he couldn't bring himself to think of Beriam as a saint.

He knew that his actions didn't come from a religious moral sense, at least.

The man in black knew someone like himself, moving at the words of such a man, could never become a saint—and once again, he hardened his resolved to solemnly carry out the job before him.

After all, he knew it was pointless to think about the future after that point.

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Near the edge of the Beriam estate A shooting range

A dull shock shook the air like a clap of thunder.

The sound had come from a large rifle in the hands of a girl who had some childishness left in her features. She was lying on the ground of Beriam's private shooting range, and the bullet she had just shot punched a hole in the center of the bulls-eye of the target.

There were two women watching her with their hands over their ears. Before the ringing in their ears had died down, they spoke to the girl holding the gun.

"Sonja! Sonja! Can you hear me?" called a bespectacled woman in her twenties.

Another woman around the same age was standing next to her. "She's wearing earplugs, of course she can't," she commented.

"You don't know that! What if my voice was louder than her gunshot?"

"Then I'd hit you to shut you up."

"You're awful!"

At first, the girl holding the gun hadn't noticed their voices as they argued, but when she sensed their presence, she slowly stood up and removed the earplugs. "Huh? What's the matter? Is it time to eat already?" she asked, adjusting the too-big helmet on her head. Contrary to what the weapon in her hand would suggest, the atmosphere she radiated was genuine and carefree.

The girl's name was Sonja Bake.

After the death of her parents, she had set off on a journey, carrying her inheritance in a wagon.

Still somewhat of a child, she had encountered some extremely dangerous things in her sojourn through the prairie, but thanks to her inheritance and her own unique abilities, she wandered across the continent without a scratch.

During that time, she had met two other women who were traveling like her: Lana and Pamela.

The simplistic, rash Lana; and Pamela, who was cautious towards everything.

The two polar opposites brought Sonja in between them, and so she started a new life.

Along with her family inheritance: more than a hundred firearms that had been gathered across east and west, past and present.

"Don't you ever get tired of those, Sonja? Day in and day out," Lana said.

Sonja tilted her head slightly. "Get tired of what?"

"Those guns. It's been more than three years since we first met you, but every day, morning 'til night, you're always waving around one of those guns. You shoot them every spare moment you have. Don't you ever feel like you've just had enough?"

"Hm..."

Sonja fell into thought at her friend's remark.

Pamela felt that she needed to supplement Lana's comment and cut into the conversation. "Of course not. If she goes a whole day without picking up one of these guns, her arms fall off and it takes three days to get them back."

"I know that, Pamela! I-I was just seeing if you did!"

"Oh, really~? I didn't know that."

"..."

Pamela silently looked away, as her follow-up had not done its job.

Lana thought for a moment, then turned bright red and blew up at Pamela. "That doesn't happen! What are you trying to pull, Pamela!? Are you trying to test me?!"

"Ahh, sorry. I was testing you on a few things, and you passed. Congratulations Lana, congratulations."

Perhaps deciding that it was too troublesome to argue with Lana, Pamela just gave an adequate reply and showered her with praise.

"Really? Hmph, well, as long as you understand."

All it took was a completely emotionless "congratulations" to send Lana into a disturbingly good mood.

Pamela gave a tired sigh.

Sonja, who had fallen even deeper into thought, spoke up from next to them. "Oh, right, right. It's because shooting guns is a prayer."

"A prayer?"

"Yeah. Mom and Dad said so. Guns are gods."

"...That sure is a bold religious view." Pamela narrowed her eyes.

Sonja smiled and nodded emphatically before continuing. "You know, if you just shoot your guns, you can live your life without worrying. Pop said that if a bad person shoots you, you can shoot him back, and if life gets too hard, you can shoot yourself. What's important isn't addition or subtraction or history or science or the Bible or law. It's guns. Mom said so, too. If I just believe in guns, my whole life will be happy! She told me every day!"

Pamela felt a chill at hearing Sonja recite her family's creed so innocently.

It had been three years since she had first heard it, but those words were so unsettling that if Sonja had said it back when they had first met, Pamela probably wouldn't have traveled with her. Now that they had spent three years together, though, there was no reason to reject her over something like that.

"So shooting is my prayer to them. Maybe that's why I never get tired."

If anything, maybe it felt the same to her as not getting tired of eating or breathing.

That's what Pamela thought, but she didn't want to complicate things by saying it out loud.

Unlike Pamela, Lana tilted her head as she listened to Sonja. "Uhh, so in other words, guns are amazing! I get it, I get it!" She nodded in approval of her own statement.

Watching her, Pamela could tell for a fact that Lana didn't understand how peculiar Sonja was. "I wish I was as stupid as you, Lana..." she said, shaking her head forcefully.

"What do you mean 'stupid'?! You're the stupid one for saying it!"

"Stop fighting~" Sonja gently stopped their quarrel and picked up the gun that was as long as she was tall. "Hup," she grunted, then smiled. "If you think of guns as gods, maybe they can't make food for us, but they do let us use their bodies."

"? Uh, yeah, I guess so..."

"All I have to do is pull the trigger, and it shoots the bullet for me, right? No matter what I do, I can't throw a bullet that fast myself."

"?"

Pamela and Lana had no idea what she was trying to say.

Sonja puffed out her chest proudly. "It's amazing! It's something humans can't imitate—like a miracle!"

Sonja was acting as if that proved that guns were gods.

Pamela stayed silent, unsure of how to answer.

Lana answered instead of her. "You have a point..." she said, nodding.

"Right~?"

"But if guns are gods, and you pray to them every day, maybe they should do a little more for us. I mean, what with our situation right now I don't really think we're that blessed..."

"You think so?"

Sonja tilted her head again at Lana's apparent discontent.

"Yeah. Ever since we picked up your gun teacher, we've had a job, so that's all well and good, but now we're just birds in a cage with no freedom. What do you think, Pamela?"

"No matter which situation you'd rather be in, it's still a rock and a hard place."¹

Pamela thought again about their current situation.

The three hadn't always had the social status to stand around and have a leisurely chat in the middle of a senator's private gun range.

A few years earlier, they had been nothing more than petty thieves.

The band of robbers, "Vanishing Bunny."

That was how they had made their living until a few years ago.

They were originally a nameless trio, but at some point Lana had given them the name. Although, Pamela would smack her to shut her up before she could use the name in front of other people, so the name wasn't actually known in the world at large.

Lana had originally been a petty thief of unattended luggage and whatnot, but when she had been captured and nearly killed by a bunch of cruel men, Pamela had saved her, and they had been together ever since.

As for Pamela, she had gotten her hands dirty stealing money and cheating underground casinos, and ended up with a bounty on her head courtesy of the Russo Family.

Afterwards, the two of them had gone around the region stealthily committing minor thefts at underground casinos and horse races, and along the way they found a strange girl carrying around a large number of guns she said were mementos of her parents—Sonja.

One thing led to another, and they started their life as a trio of robbers.

Although they never succeeded at any true "robberies"—they relied mostly on Pamela's income from cheating casinos for their everyday needs.

And when things got rough, they used Sonja's guns as their muscle to create an opening for them to slip through and make their escape.

¹ Full disclosure: Narita uses the idiom "the pot calling the kettle black" in English here, with *どんぐりの背比べ* (*donguri no kurabe*, "two acorns comparing their heights," or comparing two things that are both

Sonja herself didn't really seem to understand what Lana and Pamela were doing, but she could easily shoot without any feelings of guilt. You could say that was the only threatening thing about her.

That was how they continued their journey as small-time crooks who made no attempt to hide the fact, but then—

It was right after they had gotten involved in a certain incident.

As they were fleeing from the scene, they saved a man collapsed by the side of the road. He would throw a wrench into their lives that would change everything.

The man had suffered injuries all over his body, with his head in particularly bad shape.

Thanks to his classy black suit, Lana thought that they could get a nice sum of money out of him as a reward for saving his life, and so Pamela brought him to a nearby doctor.

The doctor said the damage to man's eyes was severe, and he had lost his sight entirely.

Even though they realized the situation was more serious than they had assumed, they stayed until he regained consciousness. They had already come this far, after all.

The loss of his sight came as quite a shock to the man, but after the chaos died down he made a proposal to the three.

—“Hey, since you already helped me out once, could you take me somewhere? If all goes well, we should be able to get a decent chunk of change...”

Lana took the bait and agreed without asking the others.

Pamela tried to stop her at first, but since the man was injured, she decided to take him where he wanted to go for the time being.

But on the way there, something unexpected happened.

Sonja was coming back from her daily shooting practice as she always did, when the man who called himself Spike spoke up.

—“Hey, was that a Villar Perosa I heard just now? That's a top-notch weapon you're using there, missy.”

The Villar-Perosa M1915.

The gun Sonja had been using this time was definitely made by a small company by that name.

He could tell which gun Sonja had been firing that day from the sound alone.

Lana and Pamela were unfamiliar with guns, and they didn't know the name of even one of the guns she carried.

That was why Sonja was so happy they had found someone she could talk to about the guns she loved so much. He was the first person since her parents that she could discuss guns in detail with, so it was a matter of course.

And that wasn't all.

Sonja was used to firing guns more than anyone, but she hadn't been trained as a sharpshooter.

Her parents revered guns as gods, but that didn't mean she was a sharpshooting genius. There were limits on the skills they could teach to Sonja.

This man Spike was the missing piece.

Unable to see, relying on sound and the results of each shot, Spike saw through Sonja's idiosyncrasies and trained her in the art of sharpshooting.

For him, it was a diversion to help him get over the shock of losing his sight at first, but he gradually became more and more serious about training her in his own sharpshooting technique.

Finally, they got involved in several incidents in the town where they had brought him, where Senator Beriam lived—

And before they knew it, they had come to settle there, too.

"Honestly. I was an idiot for letting you have your way, Lana. What the hell were you on about? Just because he's a senator, he's probably got money? We've been working as housekeepers at this estate for three years, but we haven't saved a cent."

"Heheheh, you're so naive, Pamela. Did you think I was spending this time just as a housekeeper?"

"Even working a job like this, I get the feeling you tend to slack off..." Pamela just looked at her, clearly unimpressed.

Lana just continued. "Shut up. I've been busy making friends with Beriam's wife and daughter, and I've gotten all kinds of information. And now my hard work has paid off—I got some real juicy information."

"Juicy?"

"They're building a new hotel over in New York."

"In this economy?"

Pamela was plainly suspicious of the information Lana had brought. Was there any corporation daring enough to build a brand new skyscraper in this day and age?

But even before that, she was suspicious because the one telling her this information was Lana.

Pamela decided to listen, although she thought it was at least partially fake.

Unaware of Pamela's thoughts, Lana nodded confidently. "*And* they're building a big restaurant in the basement, but it's just a cover for the casino they're *actually* building! And it's run by a big Mafia family!"

"...What? So who'd you hear *that* from, Mrs. Beriam or Mary?"

"I overheard it from one of the people who works for Beriam. He comes around here sometimes."

"Then why were you talking about becoming friends with them?!" Pamela shouted, rubbing her temples.

Lana ignored her, humming a little. "It doesn't matter what my lead-in is. More importantly, when the casino opens, there's gonna be a big event! Rich people and Mafia from the East Coast are all gonna be there! Pamela, you could make a killing with your cheating if you went! And then I could steal the proceeds and we'd make our escape! It's killing two birds with one stone! It's a flawless plan!"

"..."

Pamela had no idea what was so flawless about it, but there was no need to say so. She knew very well that Lana had never understood the meaning of the word "flawless." It would be pointless to point it out every single time it came up, so Pamela decided to shoot her plan down from a different angle.

"...Okay, Lana. Clearly, the fact that one of Beriam's subordinates was talking about it means that he's preparing to crack down on that meeting, doesn't it? After we waltz on in there, the police will end up treating us like one of them, and it'll all be over."

"What?! Really?!"

"Come on, you know how much Beriam hates the Mafia. The man is obsessed. On the one-in-a-million chance he did get an invitation, don't you think he'd give some orders to the police and have them round up all the Mafia there in one go?"

Honestly, even if what Lana was saying was true, she had no plans to go back to the casino hustling she'd done three years ago. Suspicions notwithstanding, Pamela thought she had a stable job as an employee of the Beriam estate.

Or rather, she was at the point where she was simply losing patience with Lana's dreams of getting rich quick.

"And this all sounds pretty unlikely to begin with—a ridiculously big casino in the basement of a hotel, a giant get-together for all the Mafia..."

"Oh... But it's true, I'm telling you! That new hotel is called Ra's Lance and it's going to have a ridiculous amount of money in it! If we don't steal that money, who will?!"

"Nobody has to steal it, you know..."

As Lana desperately hounded her, Pamela pressed her hands to her temples and sighed, but—

When Sonja suddenly cut in, the situation took a rapid turn.

"Ra's Lance? I know that place~"

"Huh?"

"I might have a job there soon. My teacher said so."

"..."

The one Sonja called her "teacher" was Spike.

Since he was teaching her sharpshooting, Sonja innocently called him her "teacher." But even though Sonja adored him, Pamela just couldn't bring herself to like him.

She knew he didn't work an honest job.

He was probably a sniper for some gang—maybe even a hitman or something similar.

She wanted to avoid any ongoing connections to a person like that, but by the time she felt that in a substantial way, they were already too deeply entangled.

What's more, she knew that he and Beriam would sometimes take Sonja somewhere for her to "work."

At first, Pamela had panicked, thinking they were making her do something indecent, but somehow it didn't seem to be anything of that nature.

Still, Sonja had returned with a brilliant smile on her face, saying, "Today I got to shoot from on top of a building~" and Pamela realized that they were making her to do another kind of unsavory work.

She had pressed Beriam for answers, but he had just told her, "Don't worry. It's a job for the sake of the state. And I don't plan to have her kill anyone." Thanks to the pressure rolling off of him, she was unable to question him further.

But seeing Beriam's ice-cold eyes, Pamela was certain.

He was taking his time, but he was probably planning to turn Sonja into a killing machine.

A young girl could enter all kinds of places without arousing suspicion.

If there were no eyewitnesses, no one would ever suspect her as a sniper.

Pamela was anxious at the idea that they were planning to raise such a useful assassin, and Sonja's situation weighed on her mind, but she had never expected Lana's idle gossip to be connected to Sonja's "work."

"What kind of work will you do there?"

"Hm~ I don't know yet. They said we'd play it by ear." The girl who thought that shooting guns was the only thing worth living for answered while loading her next gun. "My teacher said he'd tell me that day when and what to shoot."

"..."

There was no way they would have her snipe one of the rich people or Mafia when they were all gathered together...was there?

If he was going to go that far, someone with Beriam's means should just hire a normal assassin, right? Pamela thought. Even so, she couldn't deny it completely.

She had experienced it many times in her life until now. That things she thought would never happen, actually could.

Only three years ago, she gotten into a very unusual situation where she had kidnapped the grandson of a certain big-time Mafia, and then encountered terrorists and a giant grizzly.

Maybe nothing was impossible in this world.

At least, nothing bad was impossible.

Pamela's heart was overcome by an unpleasant premonition strong enough to make her think so.

Sonja had finished reloading and was once again carrying her gun to the firing range.

Pamela called out her frantically. "Can't you say no?"

"Huh? Why?"

"If...I'm just saying, but what if they told you to shoot a person? Could you do it?"

"Of course. Unless I wasn't using a gun; then I couldn't shoot."

Pamela shook her head at how easily the girl had replied.

"No, that's not what I meant... I'm not talking about the gun. What about you, Sonja? If they told you to kill someone, what would you think?"

And then Lana piped up behind her with a gratuitous comment. "What are you talking about, Pamela? When we were running from the Mafia, Sonja and her guns flat-out saved us, didn't they?"

"...! I know, but! That was legitimate self defense, and...!"

From the very beginning, she did everything she could to make sure the only times Sonja fired her gun were the warning shots when they were on the run, and Sonja's bullets had never clearly killed anyone.

Pamela believed this firmly, but what if Sonja had killed one or two people that she didn't know about?

She didn't know everything about Sonja, so she couldn't say for certain that Sonja would never kill anyone.

That was why Pamela was relieved at Sonja's hesitant reply: "Well, I don't really like it when someone dies~. When Mom and Dad died, I really hated it." (Although the phrase "*don't really like it*" bothered Pamela a bit.)

Still, that didn't mean the problem was resolved.

"But they might force you to shoot."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Worst case scenario, they might even try to pin it all on you..."

No, the real worst-case scenario is if they decide to shut her up for good right then and there. ...I don't really know what Beriam is thinking, but Spike might be able to do something like that.

Maybe she should take Lana and Sonja and run for it, away from the estate.

Pamela started to come up with a plan.

But the girl in the helmet ignored Pamela and her worries. She put her earplugs back in and picked up her gun.

"...!"

"...!!"

Pamela and Lana were too late in covering their ears, and the echo overwhelmed their sense of hearing.

The two silently pressed their hands to their ears, but when their hearing started to come back, they heard Sonja's quiet voice.

"It's okay~"

Still looking at her target, Sonja smiled a simple smile, and spoke almost as if to herself.

"If that happens, I know Neider will come save me."

Her childhood friend would come to save her.

On first listen, it sounded like an absurd way to dodge the question.

Someone who heard her say that for the first time would probably feel that she was turning her hope into an excuse to avert her eyes from the choice.

But Pamela and Lana, at least, had heard this over and over again.

When the Mafia were chasing them, and when the police were chasing them, Sonja had always said it with a smile.

Of course, Neider had never once come to save them.

Most of the time, Sonja was the one who saved them with her guns.

Even so, she believed in her childhood friend even more than she believed in herself and her guns.

What a reprehensible man.

Pamela had never met him, but she held some complicated feelings towards Sonja's friend. Even so, she herself held a certain kind of resolve.

"...Whether we run or get involved, we need more information."

"Like what?" Lana questioned.

Pamela smiled defeatedly. "We've been getting soft here for three years now. I guess I'm saying it's about time to revive the Vanishing Bunny."

Lana furrowed her eyebrows. "What vanishing bunny?" she asked in confusion.

"The name *you* gave us back when we were thieves!"

"O-oh, really?! I-I was just testing yooooouuu-gah."

Pamela grabbed Lana's neck with a look that could kill.

Lana put on her best show of bravado even as tears were forming in her eyes.

Watching them, Sonja said what she always did, looking troubled.

"You shouldn't fight~"

And so they once again threw themselves into the great whirlpool of fate.

In order to join the fray, the hustling and being hustled that was like gambling itself, in a casino where malice and hope swirled together equally, whether those who held it were saints, heroes, or nothing of the sort.

They would treat their lives as their chips—and no one could tell whether those chips were worthless or priceless.

Chapter 16 -- A Hero Doesn't Appear

There once was a man named Neider Schasschule.

He originally made his living as a con artist, a two-bit heel if there ever was one. He would join all kinds of gangs, and use each one as a stepping stone to worm his way into an even bigger one.

Neider was a man who would offer up his former comrades as sacrifices to continue gathering power little by little, and who, from an outside perspective, would probably get himself murdered someday.

Naturally, he was once a child, too.

If you thought he had a twisted childhood that turned him into a villain, you'd be wrong.

He was a normal boy as a child, like one you'd find anywhere. He wasn't abused by his parents, nor did he suffer any sort of trauma. Neider grew into his villainy naturally.

It was back before he first began to develop his treacherous ways.

Of course his childhood wasn't perfect, but it lacked any major twists. During that time, he had once, only once, told another person that he had a dream.

To become a hero.

It was a truly innocent, childlike dream.

The boy had faced his friend, a girl younger than him, and announced his dream to her.

That tiny little declaration— "I'm gonna become a hero" —was the start of everything.

The boy had seen that his young neighbor was unusually downhearted, and it had slipped out in an attempt to cheer her up.

And that was all.

But the girl had reacted with over-the-top delight. "You can do it, Neider!" she had said, grinning from ear to ear and making it impossible for the boy to take it back.

And at some point while he was talking, his fervent, spur-of-the-moment speech became his true dream.

He would become a hero, and he would protect her smile.

It was a simple dream, even a pure one.

That was why when the boy grew up, he ended up forgetting that dream.

But Neider's drive to gain more and more power was a remnant of that dream, perhaps. If he didn't have power, he couldn't become a hero, after all. Neider had **always** known that from childhood.

And now—

He didn't have the strength worthy of the title "hero."

And if he didn't have the courage to overcome his weakness, then he didn't even have basic human goodness, either.

Now he was just a loser.

Now that he knew that he couldn't gain power, even as a villain—now that he knew the truth—Neider's heart reawakened the dream he had told the girl back then.

Bound by his current situation and his own past, he still didn't know that his childhood friend had been counting on him numerous times.

That she was currently involved in the same whirlpool of fate as him.

And, that his own blunders were about to catch up with him in the form of a desire for his death that could not be swayed by reason.

<=>

The middle of the night
Manhattan
A housing facility somewhere

"How did things turn out like this...?"

Neider returned from making his contract with Eve Genoard, headed straight into the cafeteria at the housing facility, and collapsed on the nearest table.

Roy Maddock, the manager of the facility, noticed Neider. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked. "I guess it didn't work out?"

"No...we made the deal. I'm going to the casino party as one of the gamblers..."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"No, dammit! What person in their right mind would trust someone like me so easily?!"

Neider had gotten involved in all sorts of things and lost control of his life.

Should he fight against his fate? Should he keep running? He didn't know.

Even so, the whirlpool of fate seemed to be drawing him into the center of something huge.

That was why Neider had decided.

If he had one more thing to push him forward, Neider would trust the so-called "current of fate," and step into it of his own will.

He would fight against Hilton and the rest of Huey Laforet's sect head-on.

—"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."

But there was no way that would actually happen. Neider had set those conditions to provide a reason to run away.

It should have been impossible to even contact a rich person in the first place. He was then introduced to a wealthy person through a series of coincidences—Eve Genoard.

But there was no way a girl who had inherited her parents' estate would go to a Mafia casino.

Neider was confident—certain, or perhaps hopeful—that his struggles would end there.

—"...I understand. I have some conditions."

—"I don't need your money. Instead, I want you to help me persuade my brother to come back."

Neider could never have imagined that his troubles would actually increase, and he sank deeper and deeper into the mire under the weight of it all.

"I mean...why was she able to trust a deadbeat she'd just met, like me?"

Neider, unaware of the fact that Eve's deadbeat brother was far more of a lowlife than him, found the girl confusing.

"That's the kinda girl she is. She's a good kid, but she has to go through a lot," Roy said, as if to himself.

Neider wanted to protest, but he knew Roy was just talking to himself, so he just kept his face pressed into the table. "Now that it's come to this, my stomach's all tied in knots and I can't do anything."

"Don't be so negative. I put my life on the line and did something pretty stupid before, too, but it went miraculously well. Although I don't really remember what it was I did," Roy said. His eyes dropped to his wrist.

Neider lifted his head a little and noticed a large scar on Roy's wrist.

A scar like that must have come from an attempt to kill himself. Neider didn't know what had happened, but he could tell Roy must have had a checkered past.

"...Put your life on the line, huh." A self-deprecating smile appeared on Neider's face, and he again buried his face in his arms on the table. He could feel the cold sensation of his prosthetic touching his head just above his eyes. "I can't do this. I just can't."

His voice filtered like a draft through the gap between his head and the table.

"I decided I would put my life on the line if things went well until now, but now that I'm here I'm so scared I don't know what to do! Shit, what do I do?" Neider continued to complain to himself.

"I can't say I don't understand the feeling," Roy said, scratching his cheek. "I got away from the drugs, but at the time it was hell."

"Well, I didn't do any drugs, and I'm already in hell, dammit. There's no way I could become a hero after all. There never was."

"A hero, huh." Roy sat down in a chair a little ways away. "You know, you keep using that word 'hero' out of context. There's all kinds of heroes. Did you have some idea of what kind of person you wanted to become?"

"Huh?"

"You talk about 'heroes,' but there's all kinds. Some people become the kind of hero that just complains and complains and runs away, and in the very end he only pulls through thanks to a stroke of luck and gets the credit for being a 'hero.' I don't know what you're ultimately trying to do, so even though I want to give you advice I don't know what kind of advice to give."

"...Why's a stranger like you giving me advice in the first place?"

It was a very natural question.

"I'm the manager here, for one thing..." Roy answered. "Plus, the doctor told me to take good care of you. I can't just let you go off and die, 'cause it'd be on my conscience."

"...Whatever the reason, why bother caring about *me*?" Still facedown, Neider continued to hurl abuse at himself. "...You're wrong, it's all wrong. You shouldn't be so nice to a guy like me... You probably know from what Upham told you—what kinda scumbag I am..."

"..."

No matter what he said, Neider would probably only reply with more negativity, Roy thought. He decided to stay quiet for a while, but then...

"...There was this one guy," Neider muttered with a slightly different tone.

"Huh?" Roy responded without thinking. Neider was still facedown, so he couldn't see his expression.

"He was a hero, and he felt like one, too. Not like a longtime soldier, just a guy I met in passing. One of those showoff-y types, with a girl on his arm."

"What are you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter. Basically, I got into some trouble, and some guys from the Russo Family started chasing me...and he saved me, even though I was just passing by." Neider's voice was so quiet it was almost inaudible. He was half talking to himself. "He had nothing to do with me, but he jumped right into their line of fire and risked his life to save mine. The damned idiot wasn't even looking for anything in return, either."

"...That's pretty admirable, in this day and age."

"Honestly, I'd only just met the guy, but I started wanting to be like him. I mighta even cried."

He smiled a little as he remembered.

And then the smile disappeared as suddenly as it came, and he began to hurl scorn at himself.

"Ah, it really got to me back then. Heroes aren't just in fairy tales, you know? Even that guy just passing by over there could become a hero if he wanted." Still facedown, he clenched his left hand into a fist and weakly pounded it on the table. "And even after all that I can't become anything!"

"Hey, hey, calm down, now."

"Why...why am I like this? Why can't I become like that, dammit!"

"Hm... I don't know. People like that are pretty incredible."

Neider kept making small noises that sounded like sobs.

Roy looked up at the ceiling, seemingly at a loss for a moment. He finally ventured a comment—one that was not meant just to pacify Neider.

"Well, you can't become a hero just like that. If you rush into an early death in the name of courage, you're just an idiot. You might be surprised how many idiots survive something thanks to pure dumb luck and then get called heroes."

"..."

And then he denied Neider's thoughts at their very root.

"Do you really **need to become a hero** in the first place?"

"...What did you say?"

"Do you want to become a hero so the world will praise you?"

"Are you making fun of me?" Neider looked up slightly and scowled at Roy through his dyed bangs.

But Roy continued with a serious expression, contemplating it himself.

"Maybe that's not it. I guess the important thing isn't becoming a hero in and of itself, but **who you're becoming a hero for.**"

"..."

"If you don't have anyone to protect, can't you just fight your way through this pitiful life for your own sake? You don't have to worry about how you look. You can show off someday, just after you've found someone to take care of," Roy said with a self-

deprecating smile. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be saying that. I had a special woman right by my side, but I wasn't able to do any showin' off for her, no matter how long we were together."

Neider was silent for a little while in reply.

Roy hadn't offered a clumsy attempt at consolation by saying something like "If you just try you can do it." He had said something that Neider was far more grateful to hear.

And that was why so much guilt weighed on his heart.

Neider probably couldn't even do that much for someone else.

"...I appreciate you telling me how you feel. I'm grateful."

Neider was finally calm again, but he still hadn't cheered up.

"But I can't even do that," he muttered darkly to himself. "Maybe if I became goddamn Davy Crockett."

When Neider mentioned the name of a famous hero from the Alamo, Roy offered a gratuitous comment.

"Well, he never gave up, but even Crockett died in the end like a normal person."

"..."

"Ah, sorry, sorry. But your situation isn't as intense as the Alamo, right? It doesn't look like you're surrounded by 1500 Mexican soldiers."

Back when Texas fought in a revolution for independence from Mexico, the Alamo became famous for being the site of a fierce battle.

The Alamo garrison, not even 300 men, was wiped out by a Mexican battalion of over 1500. The battle went down in history for its intensity.

The men fought to the last and inflicted a terrific amount of damage, dealing more casualties to the enemy than the number of their own entire army. Afterwards, many books and movies were based on the battle.

In the end, the garrison was annihilated, so Neider's prospects of survival were indeed quite high, compared to that. He knew that himself.

But that didn't mean he could see himself surviving this, either.

"...I wonder what that must've been like, surrounded by 1500 soldiers."

"Maybe it wasn't what you think. They coulda been totally confident they'd win. I don't know." Roy shrugged, then continued. "If he really was a hero from a fairy tale, he probably woulda won. You and me, we don't have that kind of strength. We just have to accept that."

"True or not, hearing that is like a punch in the gut."

"Hey, I'm including myself in that, so deal with it. I guess if you're powerless, just do what you can. Compromise, and live your life. There are plenty of people in this world who die of hunger or cold, even if they aren't being targeted by terrorists like you are." Roy smiled and confronted Neider with the truth. "If someone's gonna be a hero, he should start by saving them."

A cruel truth he knew himself very well.

"A real hero would be too busy to save guys like us."

"..."

"Just struggle on and live as best you can. It's too early to be thinking about what we can do."

And so everything began to converge.

While the hero to save the masses didn't get a chance to appear.

Chapter 17 -- The Aristocrats' Splendor Doesn't End

House Dormентаire was definitely in decline—at least, compared to its heyday.

The Dormentaires were an influential European aristocratic family that peaked around the year 1700.

They had a strong influence in Spain and the Italian peninsula, and although they didn't reach the heights of the Medici family, they boasted a considerable amount of glory themselves.

Even now, after the age of aristocracy had passed, they skillfully navigated the waves of industry and drove the economy in a new way so as to keep hold of their family's power.

However, they certainly didn't show their desire to control the world up front. They were discreet about it, but there was no mistaking the hand they had in the world economy.

It was as if they were trying to seize anything and everything they could and pull it towards themselves.

And now—

A man who bore the name "Dormентаire" was attempting to stretch the long arms of their influence into America.

Not for the sake of House Dormентаire, not at all—just his own paltry desire for revenge.

<=>

Somewhere on the East coast

There was a room in a building near the harbor that served as a base for the FBI, and in that room was a man who was thoroughly upset.

"Shit! Shit! Goddammit, what the fuck is happening?!" Victor Talbot roared, rubbing his temples. "Why the hell are the Dormentaires involved here?!"

Victor remembered what he had seen around noon as he shouted.

During his investigation of the seaplane attack over Manhattan, he had found the Dormентаire crest on some suspicious vessels he had been looking into.

House Dormентаire was the aristocratic family Victor had worked for before he became immortal, as one of their private alchemists.

The 1711 ruckus was what eventually resulted in Victor drinking the wine of immortality.

In a way, it would be fair to say that the Dormentaires were part of the source of everything involving the immortals.

This boat, belonging to House Dormентаire, had appeared in New York with the exact same hourglass motif as 200 years ago.

This was both completely outside the scope of everything Victor had assumed, and so important that it could overturn all of their theories.

"If we're unlucky, this'll undo all the theories we've put together... If they end up being connected to this, then we aren't dealing with just a domestic incident anymore."

As his angry shouts turned into groans, another man's voice came from within the room.

"Ah...it isn't definite yet that they're part of the same case..." said one of his subordinates, Bill Sullivan. Even he seemed almost certain that the Dormentaires were involved, but he needed to calm Victor down first. He said what he did to console him, but—

"There's no way it's a coincidence. Plus, it would be hell itself if they *weren't* involved in all this."

"Mm...what do you mean?"

"Look, when they start showing off that hourglass mark is when they're about to do something big, nine times out of ten. And nothing good, either!" Victor declared to his subordinates, holding his head in his hands. "If this *doesn't* have to do with immortals, we're gonna have ten times more bullshit to deal with. Our department wouldn't be able to handle it alone. Shit...I thought they were going downhill, so why are they showing up *now* of all times? It's like they're making fun of me..."

Victor suddenly got a serious look on his face as he regained control and started muttering to himself.

"...Actually, they really might be making fun of me. If anyone would do that it's the Dormentaires."

"Ah...it looks like you're thinking of someone specific..."

"Don't you go prying into my past," Victor said, frowning deeply.

Just then, the door to the room opened.

It was another of Victor's subordinates, Donald Brown.

"Vice-President, we talked with the other departments and a name came up. There's a guy with the last name Dormentaire."

"I knew it! Which group?"

"The Runoratas. They might have some connections with Huey, too."

"What the..."

Victor was speechless at the announcement. He had guessed that it could be Huey Laforet's group, thanks to his connections with the Dormentaires from long ago, or the remnants of Szilard's group, or even Maiza, thanks to his deep ties with them in Lotto Valentino.

He even hoped that was the case.

But it was the worst possible outcome—they were connected with the Runorata Family.

The Runorata Family, regardless of its lineage, was currently rooted in America.

Even if they traced Bartolo's ancestry, there was no semblance of a connection to the Dormentaires or Lotto Valentino.

The fact that a large independent Family like the Runoratas was joining forces with influential European aristocrats like the Dormentaires—recent decline notwithstanding—was nothing short of a nightmare for Victor.

A domestic crime family now had a direct line to Europe through the Dormentaires, and that was before adding immortals to the mix.

Victor imagined the worst possible scenario, sure that this could not end well.

"Hey...there's no way they're connected to other families besides the Runoratas, is there? To the Cosa Nostra....?"

The Cosa Nostra.

It was Italian for "our thing," and the name of a giant criminal organization. Italy and America each had their own versions.

Unlike the gangster Al Capone, whose name had made waves all over America, Lucky Luciano's Cosa Nostra hid themselves quietly underground.

Without drawing unnecessary attention to himself, Luciano had built a rock-solid gang in the shadows, using all kinds of tricks to persuade those involved.

Thanks to that, the FBI was more or less unable to do much to the gang anyway. If the Dormentaires had formed connections with them on top of that, it was clear that Victor's small division would not have nearly enough people.

But Donald shook his head at the idea of a connection to the biggest gang in America. "We're still investigating, but as of now, we've only confirmed someone with the name Dormentaire in the Runorata Family."

"Well, why didn't we realize this until now?! What's his connection?!" Victor sounded fairly relieved, as his tone had regained its force.

"It seems he only contacted them recently. Even within their organization, he's not that well-known," Donald said, holding out the data.

Victor looked through the documents and suddenly his eyes narrowed. "Melvi Dormentaire...so he's a dealer?"

"Yes. He was recently given the position, and he'll be filling the role of the Runoratas' dealer at that casino party."

"I was positive Carlotta was gonna be the main dealer, though."

"Ah...that pretty dealer from the Runorata's base casino?"

"Yeah. One time I went in undercover, but she saw right through me and tossed me out then and there. She's a real dynamo," Victor said seriously.

Bill and Donald just looked at each other, then spoke apologetically.

"Uh...I don't think it's that she's so brilliant, sir. I think it's more that you don't have what it takes to go undercover."

"...And we got a lot of complaints from the other departments about us messing around in their jurisdiction...."

"Shut up! If this casino party is happening because the Runoratas and Huey's gang are in cahoots, it's absolutely our jurisdiction! ...I mean, back then it was a false lead, but this time it's for real."

Victor thumped the documents on the nearest desk, grinding his teeth as his subordinates picked him apart.

"Anyway, find everything you can on this asshole Melvi Dormентаire. I wanna know everything. I wanna know what he thinks about his first girlfriend and how hard his pillow is! Everything!"

After giving his orders, and after his subordinates had left the room, Victor looked back at the stack of information.

"Melvi Dormентаire...wonder if he's descended from her..." Victor said, remembering a woman from the Dormентаire family he had once had feelings for. He frantically shook his head back and forth. "Dammit, you can't let your personal feelings get involved here. You know that."

He clapped both hands to his face and muttered to himself.

"But...that casino party at Ra's Lance..."

He had gotten hold of information on that party a little while ago.

Under normal circumstances, they would send a police squad into the casino and round up the most notorious gangsters they could all in one fell swoop, but they couldn't do that this time.

The party was an opportunity for the FBI to learn more about the immortals and how they were connected, so they wanted to collect any information they could. Still, even if that wasn't the case, there was pressure from all sides to leave the Runoratas alone.

There was also the fact that several wealthy people would be there. They still held power despite the state of the economy, and they probably had ties to government officials and the police.

Victor was irritated by this pressure, but he was planning to accept it, prioritizing the work of the organization as a whole, but—

"If the Dormentaires are involved, that's another story."

Something with immortals was going to happen at the casino party at Ra's Lance. It was no longer a hypothesis, but an indisputable fact. Or so Victor took it.

There were no coincidences when it came to the Dormentaires. They had definitely sent that dealer to the Runorata Family with some purpose in mind.

"I don't give a damn about their ties. I don't care if it's Huey, the Mafia, the Camorra, and the Dormentaires.

"I'll teach them a lesson they'll never forget about what it means to disturb the peace around here."

<=>

Somewhere in New York A warehouse basement

This place on the outskirts of New York had been quite important until a few years ago—a basement built in a certain warehouse for the purpose of storing bootlegged liquor.

There were three small tables placed on the floor that had turned half of the warehouse into a speakeasy during the latter part of Prohibition. As far as bars go, the atmosphere was quite tasteless, and the ceiling was so low a tall person's head would scrape the top.

The underground room was equipped with a counter, although it was just for form's sake, and a few naked bulbs.

Now that Prohibition had been lifted, a number of now-empty barrels were stacked up against the wall, and cobwebs stretched across the space between the barrels and the ceiling.

Thanks to the Depression, the company that owned the warehouse had closed their doors, and the dusty cellar should have been forgotten until the economy recovered, but—

Now, a faint light illuminated the half-ruined basement.

Immediately below the flickering lightbulb was a young woman wearing a black suit.

It was Ennis, Firo's roommate, and a homunculus created by Szilard Quates.

She was sitting in a chair, with her hands cuffed behind the back, and her legs were bound with barbed wire so she couldn't struggle recklessly.

The barbs of the wire bit into the cloth of her black slacks and pierced the flesh underneath, but because of her immortality, there was no blood on the floor around her.

But, although her body was uninjured, her clothes were torn here and there and scorched all over.

She appeared to be fully conscious as she stared up from her chair at the young man standing before her.

More than hatred or disdain, her eyes were filled with intense caution.

The young man opened his mouth with a scornful smile. "Oh, aren't you scary. Please don't look at me like that."

Right now, the only ones in the basement room were Ennis and the young man.

Until the man had come, a number of muscular guards had been watching her.

But they had cleared out the moment he arrived, and right now they were on standby in the upper level of the warehouse.

There was only one door. Ennis figured they had been cleared out in preparation for this young man to say something to her that others couldn't hear.

Having decided this, Ennis asked the man before her. "...Who are you?"

This wasn't their first meeting.

They had first seen each other at Firo's casino, by virtue of being in the same place at the same time.

But this was the first time they had exchanged words.

"I introduced myself at Firo's casino, remember? I said my name was Melvi, and I was a casino dealer for the Runorata Family." Melvi's shoulders slumped.

"If you are who you say you are," Ennis said, "I cannot think of a reason that would explain why you abducted me."

"Oh, really? You'd be surprised how many explanations there might be. For example, what if the Runorata Family took a member of a Martillo *capo's* family hostage in order to take the Family down?"

"I have some memory that the Runorata Family is a large organization. I don't sense any need for them to take such roundabout measures."

Ennis could not imagine that her abduction was part of a mere Mafia war.

When the thugs had first attacked Firo's apartment, they hadn't hesitated to use explosives at all. If they had meant to kill her with them, she would understand, but if their intent had been to kidnap her from the beginning, the attackers must have known that Ennis was immortal.

That was why she suspected that her current predicament was related to immortal affairs, but—

Melvi spit the answer to her question out directly.

"You 'have a memory of it,' huh? Is that really your own memory? Or a memory Szilard Quates gave to you?"

"....!"

"Oh, or maybe it's a memory from someone you once devoured?" Melvi's tone had become quite flip.

"I knew it...you..."

Ennis was about to question him more closely, but Melvi cut her off.

"Is my face familiar to you?" All politeness had disappeared from his voice.

Ennis digested his words, and once again looked at his face. She had a feeling she'd seen it somewhere before, but she couldn't remember it clearly.

Had she seen him in a movie or something? Was he a regular customer at the Martillo Family's restaurant?

As Ennis began to seriously mull over the question, Melvi clicked his tongue in boredom.

"...Looks like that alchemist you devoured didn't pay much attention to people."

"What do you mean?"

She had devoured an alchemist.

That memory was the key that awakened the guilt that ate away at her conscience.

She couldn't run from it, and she didn't expect to be forgiven, yet she didn't receive any punishment.

Back when she was nothing more than an emotionless tool, she had committed the sin on Szilard's orders.

Firo and the others had told her over and over that she had done nothing wrong.

But, now that Ennis had gained emotions and knowledge, to forget about it was an incredibly grave matter to her.

That was why she didn't really want to talk about her past, and Firo didn't go out of his way to bring it up, either, but—

This man before her marched right into that part of her heart without a care in the world.

"It's simple, really. If you devoured an alchemist who was aboard that ship, my face should be somewhere in his knowledge. But, I guess that alchemist just didn't remember all the details of what I look like. They only knew each other for a couple of months, after all."

"A couple of months...?"

"Although, the face those alchemists saw was the real one, not mine. I don't actually know how identical we are, myself."

Seeing Melvi's self-deprecating smile, Ennis fell even more into confusion.

What in the world is this man saying?

A couple hundred years ago... Is this one of the alchemists from the Advenna Avis?

But there's something strange about him.

Ennis furrowed her brow.

"Well," Melvi said, "it has nothing to do with a newly-born homunculus like you. It doesn't matter whose face you remember."

"Who are you? What is your connection to Szilard?"

Melvi's answer came easily, without a moment's hesitation.

"I *am* Szilard Quates."

"...?" Ennis' mouth dropped open at Melvi's strange words.

"Or I should have been, technically speaking."

"What...do you mean?"

"My full name is Melvi Dormентаire. Does the last name ring any bells?"

"House Dormентаire...!" Ennis gasped instinctively.

The name of the Dormентаire family was in Ennis' knowledge—in her own memories, where had heard about them many times from Szilard.

— "They're nothing more than my stepping stones. Still, don't let down your guard. Once we have control of this country, we'll crush them without any obstacles in our way."

They were the words of a megalomaniac, but at the time they had sounded very real to Ennis.

Szilard certainly had the power to make those words reality.

When he succeeded in producing the complete elixir of immortality rather than the incomplete version, he should be able to turn his ambition into reality—or so Ennis had thought. She was truly glad that things hadn't come to that.

Szilard was a dangerous man, dangerous enough to make a homunculus like Ennis feel this way.

But the man before her now had told her that he should have become him, that man with such menacing ambitions.

"I do not understand what you are saying." Ennis, bound in her chair, shook her head.

But Melvi lifted her chin with his hand and brought his face close to hers.

"Okay, then, homunculus. Consider this. Do you think that alchemist you devoured is still alive inside of you?"

"...! What..."

"It's an important question. You inherited that alchemist's knowledge and memories in their entirety. You stole all of them—what he felt and when, who he loved, who humiliated him—all those memories."

Melvi had intended to say all this in a cool, collected voice, but here and there a hint of emotion would rise in his voice, and he couldn't hide the stirring in his heart.

"What do you think? Are you the same 'you' you were before you devoured him? Can you hold your head high and say you have the same personality...the same soul as before? Perhaps that's a better way of putting it."

"..."

"...Ah, sorry. Guess I won't be able to get an answer out of you, even if I do ask. You won't even look at me."

Melvi eased up on the pressure in his words, and continued with an unpleasant smile in its stead.

"Take your time. Think about it however many days you need. We have plenty of time."

"..."

"A conversation is like a game of catch, you know. If you answer my questions, I'll answer yours."

He took a few steps towards the staircase up, then stopped and said in an emotionless voice:

"I was born as Szilard's spare."

"Spare...?"

"Yes, his spare. Or maybe 'new vessel' is a better way of putting it."

Still unable to understand what he was saying, Ennis was about to ask further, but—

When Melvi turned around, and his eyes met hers, the words died in her throat.

There was none of the levity of exultation that had been there until now. They were stagnant pools filled with a bottomless darkness.

It was as if he despised everything in this world, but his hatred was focused on one man.

"Firo Prochainezo stole my future. He killed me."

"What are you saying?! Firo didn't..."

"He devoured Szilard. That's all there is to it. I was positive Maiza did it, though; I never thought Firo would've been the one responsible."

"Why...?"

Melvi answered calmly. "I was far more concerned about you than I should have been, but... there's all kinds of reasons." Emotion filled Melvi's voice again, and he continued with a faint smile. "How many years do you think I spent investigating you?"

"Huh...?"

"How many of my colleagues do you think snuck into that little dive, Alveare? How many days do you think they spent watching you?"

"What...!"

Ennis' face openly drained of color as she was shaken from a different angle than she suspected.

It felt like her memories of the place where she had lived out her everyday life were suddenly dulling to grey.

Seeing Ennis's face, Melvi's lips twisted with satisfaction.

"We have a much longer reach than you think. If you're thinking of power on the level of the Runoratas, think bigger."

Melvi again began to walk towards the staircase, tossing a threat her way as if he was enjoying himself.

"You have an immortal body, too. That's why I can cause you as much pain as I like, and let me tell you, the only reason I haven't done so already is because I am a gentleman."

"Wait, we haven't finished talking..."

"I told you, didn't I? A conversation is like a game of catch. A give and take. If you want to ask me something, think long and hard about your answer. It'll help me continue to be kind to you."

And then, as if he had just remembered something, he added:

"Ah, right. Tomorrow you will be moved somewhere else. A better place than this. You'll even be free to use the toilet and shower."

"...?"

Ennis was doubtful.

If her arms and legs were free, there would be countless more chances for escape, and Melvi didn't seem like the kind of man who would treat her confinement that lightly.

Her misgivings were soon answered. "If you run, I'll kill everyone I captured with you. Whether they're immortal or not."

"!"

Her roommate Czes' face immediately rose into Ennis' mind.

In her current position, she couldn't even make sure if he was safe or not, and she felt an unpleasant sweat on her back.

"Czes has nothing to do with this! Let him go!"

"You are an idiot, aren't you. I said I would only kill 'someone who has nothing to do with it' if *you* ran away, didn't I?"

And he shoved an even bleaker fact in her face.

"And if you're thinking Czeslaw Meyer won't die because he's immortal, you're sorely mistaken. I told you, didn't I? I would kill him, whether he's immortal or not."

"What...do you mean?"

"I have the power to kill an immortal in my hand, too. That's what I'm saying. **And you know the way to kill an immortal quite well, don't you?**" Melvi said with a smirk.

Ennis froze completely.

She knew the reason for the tightness in her throat.

If she were to believe his words, he was a true immortal, not an incomplete one, or he was close with someone who was.

However, Ennis couldn't decide how much she should believe.

In reality, Czeslaw Meyer hadn't even been kidnapped.

Even so, her inability to deny the possibility felt like a far stronger restraint than handcuffs and chains.

Because of the way she was now, she wasn't allowed the freedom to know the truth.

And, because Ennis had realized.

Whether those words were true or a lie—this man Melvi could kill anyone without mercy.

That point alone was certainly just like Szilard.

That was the one thing Ennis did know, watching Melvi laugh as he ascended the stairs.

Fear that Firo, Czes and the others could come to even more harm, along with frustration at herself for being unable to do anything, bore down on her as if to crush her.

And all she could do was watch his retreating back.

Chapter 18 -- They Don't Break Their Vows

It was the day after Ennis had been kidnapped.

There was a sign in the window of Alveare reading "Temporarily Closed," but there were more people than usual inside.

The Martillo Family was a faction of the Naples-born Camorra—gangsters who had evolved in their own unique way within the United States.

Although they held a small territory in a corner of New York, it was unusual for an independent gang to be operating in Manhattan in the first place. Some were puzzled by the fact that the Martillos (and the Gandors) even existed, and many others laughed at them, saying that they were only allowed to exist because they operated on such a small scale.

Alveare was a restaurant they ran as a legitimate business; although, until the repeal of Prohibition, it had been a well-known speakeasy that could hold its own.

A large number of nervous-looking young men were gathered in that store—members of the Martillo Family, as well as some of the picciotti.

There were about thirty of them, including a few who didn't normally come to the Alveare because they were intimidated by the executives. It was a considerable number, considering the size of their territory. A few of them appeared to be perfectly respectable people, too, turning the group into a somewhat jumbled congregation.

Most of the members had been called there, even the young people who worked at Firo's casino, but none of the executives were among them. All of the camorristi were gathered around the round table in the basement.

The executives mainly gathered downstairs for their regular meetings and for the ceremony when a picciotto was promoted to the position of full-fledged camorrista.

But the picciotti knew that today's meeting was neither of those.

The Runorata Family had come after them at the Martillo Family's underground casino.

Maiza and Yaguruma, executives in the Family, had been attacked.

On top of that, Firo's housemate Ennis had been abducted.

The young men had heard about the incidents that were happening one after another.

They put on a stouthearted façade, but inside, almost all of them were afraid.

The Martillo Family had always operated on a small scale, but recently, since the Five Families had taken control of New York, they had barely experienced any conflict.

Once, only once, they had nearly gotten into a fight with the Gandor Family, but both families had calmed down right as things were about to explode, thanks to a meeting between Molsa Martillo and Keith Gandor.

Since then, they had been bound by a truce with the Gandors, and they hadn't broken it.

However, that was why the attacks this time substantially unsettled the Family.

This time, their opponent wasn't a gang on the same scale as them, like the Gandors. It was a prominent gang in the American East, the Runorata Family. Of course they reacted.

They didn't even know why they were being targeted to begin with. They could only wait for the response from the executives meeting in the basement.

The weak-hearted ones even thought for a moment to betray them and join the Runoratas, but then they realized they didn't even know what the Runoratas were after or who to betray, and changed their plan to escaping the city entirely.

"Goodness, this is pitiful. So unsure, all of them," Sena muttered from the counter, watching the picciotti and their mixed reactions.

Lia Linshan, the waitress, answered from next to her. "Yeah..."

They knew the circumstances, too.

Of course, they had considered the possibility that they could be attacked themselves, but even so, they kept their calm.

They knew that the situation had spun out of control, and it wasn't going to just fix itself.

"Tch, honestly. This is why we haven't had a new camorrista in four years. I thought Firo was still wet behind the ears when he made capo, but he was far better than these boys."

Grumbling and complaining, Sena continued preparing the food with Lia.

Even though it was a temporary holiday, Sena and Lia took care of the shop the way they

always did so that the Martillos who had gathered there could eat.

The restless, anxious young men probably didn't hear Sena and Lia complaining about them as they continued their discordant murmuring.

And while the picciotti were starting to fall apart, the capos began their separate meeting in the basement.

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Alveare Basement

Alveare was originally a speakeasy during the age of Prohibition.

Until a few years ago, the large underground room was kept locked and off-limits. It was a space only used for special occasions, such as the promotion of a new executive.

But after Prohibition ended and they started to run the restaurant as a legitimate business, the space where the camorristi originally met was overtaken, little by little. As a result, they started to use this room.

They used it when they had a visit from a "customer," for the meetings when they gave regular reports, and for promotion ceremonies, as before.

Although there had been no new camorristi added to their ranks since Firo Prochainezo.

There were ten or so men gathered in the room: the executives in charge of the Martillo Family and their boss, Molsa.

Even Randy and Pecho, who were always joking back and forth cheerfully in the restaurant, were as silent as if they were attending the funeral of a loved one.

As the silence grew more and more acute, one person stood with a tightly clenched fist, fighting back an urge welling up within him and threatening to burst out.

Firo Prochainezo's roommate, Ennis, had been kidnapped.

Firo may have been the youngest one there, but he had climbed up to the rank of executive.

In a situation like this, it would be understandable to abandon the meeting and run out

right now, but he managed to withstand the impulse thanks to his characteristic determination.

Although if he did run out, he wouldn't have anywhere to go in particular, and it would inevitably end with him starting a fight with some Runoratas.

His better judgment told him that there was no way he could attack the Runoratas as a capo of the Martillo Family. To Firo, Ennis was his beloved family, but at the same time, so were the Martillos.

There was no way he would expose the entire Family to danger because of his own fury.

Firo chewed hard on his lip, just trying to suppress the rage boiling up from the pit of his stomach.

They were all assembled. Once Molsa Martillo was sure that silence had settled over the room, he spoke.

"I don't think an explanation is necessary, but we do need to be of one mind, so I'll state the problem before us again." Molsa's voice was grave, and the rest of the executives tensed just from hearing it. "Right now, there are some who are clearly hostile towards us." He let out a deep sigh and narrowed his eyes a bit. "Simply put, someone's trying to pick a fight with us."

His chair creaked as he shifted, calmly laying out the facts of the situation.

"The one who started this fight is a young dealer at the Runorata casino. It appears he will be in charge at this celebration coming up."

The Runorata Family.

It was all information they had already heard, but the executives felt its full weight as they heard the reality directly from their boss.

"However, I don't know if it was on orders from his Family or not. It may very well be a personal grudge on the part of the dealer."

Firo chewed even harder on his lip at that.

Melvi was an immortal, and he wasn't just threatening and harassing him in the interest of the Runorata Family.

Melvi's last words over the phone hit Firo again like a blow to the chest.

[It's simple. You devoured Szilard Quates.]

[...You stole my future. I'm just taking it back.]

That was the reason he despised Firo.

But Firo had no idea what that meant.

As loathsome as it was, he had searched through Szilard's memories. He didn't find Melvi's name, and the only thing he found of his face were memories of Gretto, Maiza's younger brother.

Shit...Even after all this time, that old son of a bitch is still haunting me.

Firo had only met Szilard for a few minutes.

In those few minutes, he had felt Szilard's desire to kill him, held his own resolve to do the same, and finally devoured him through his newly-immortal right hand.

If they hadn't both been immortals, the time he had known Szilard would have barely qualified him as a passing acquaintance.

He was a villain who had tried to kill him, and Firo had responded with justifiable self-defense.

If that were the end of the story, it would have been no different than the everyday reality for a gangster.

But to Firo, Szilard had felt like a bitter enemy for many long years now.

Within Szilard were the memories of the many alchemists he had devoured, and their hatred for him as they died remained in Firo, clear as day.

Firo usually kept those memories locked away in the depths of his heart. If he accessed them over and over, they would break him.

However, he didn't have the ability to banish from his mind all the memories of lives other than his.

Sometimes, he would suddenly remember something he had never experienced, or a memory of being devoured by Szilard would come back in his nightmares.

Every time, Firo would think the same thing.

Unfortunately.

The question would well up inside him, the one question he should by all rights never have to ask.

Who am I?

The doubt that shook the very foundations of his own identity.

To inherit another's knowledge was to inherit their memories.

And within those memories was a disposition different from Firo's, one who found pleasure in completely different things.

Within those memories was Szilard's intense thirst for power and destruction.

Firo couldn't understand this man, who felt pure joy at stealing and trampling everything that belonged to another person.

But there were several among those Szilard had devoured, both alchemists and those who had drunk the incomplete elixir, who agreed with Szilard's frame of mind.

Szilard had devoured far too many people.

Sometimes, Firo even wondered whether the decisions he made were his will or someone else's.

While it wasn't a constant thing, he would sometimes start to interrogate himself, examining the discrepancies between what he considered to be common sense and the others' memories.

Conversely, Szilard Quates had clearly managed to hold onto himself in the swirling currents of other people's knowledge and ethical standards. When Firo took a quick peek at Szilard's memories, the man didn't seem to have been worried by any sort of guilt.

How greedy was the old bastard?

The problem was that the memory of that man's greed was now inside him, too.

How could anyone feel so much joy at running other people down?

Had it become a part of him?

As a test, he had once knocked down the dominos Isaac and Miria had set up and ruined them. Right afterwards, he had been overcome with guilt and wanted to hit himself.

The moment he felt that sense of disgust, he had been relieved.

He was different from Szilard after all. The man's memories hadn't corroded his own heart.

Or so it should have been, but Szilard's memories had brought about a disaster for him in a different way.

Melvi had said that they would gamble with Szilard's memories on the line.

Szilard's memories were a source of nothing but worry for him. If Melvi wanted them, Firo would gladly hand them over.

But "stealing that knowledge" meant devouring Firo through his right hand—that is, killing Firo himself. There was no way he could consent to that.

But why had Melvi proposed that they gamble?

He could have just said, "If you value Ennis' life, let me devour you."

Firo had been filled with rage at the time, but now that he was back in his right mind before Molsa and the others, that question circled in his mind.

Maybe it was just to make him suffer more.

Or maybe he wanted to force him to join the casino party, using his Runorata Family support as much as possible.

— *[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?]*

It reminded him of what Melvi had said.

He could create a homunculus like Szilard had, using cells from his own body.

Szilard had created that particular kind of homunculus using knowledge from another alchemist he had devoured.

This homunculus, born from the cells of his immortal body, was a peculiar being that could truthfully be called part of the immortal himself.

Whether it was because they shared the same body, or by a whim of the "demon," the master could transfer his own knowledge into the homunculus through his left hand.

In other words, Melvi was telling him to create a homunculus he could devour in Firo's stead.

But Firo didn't have that option. To him, there was no difference between homunculi and humans.

And if he went through with it, Ennis would be devastated to find that he had created the same kind of being as her and offered it up to save her.

Firo believed that without a doubt.

She probably wouldn't attack him in a fit of anger or hatred, but he could imagine all kinds of ways that she would be saddened.

There was no way he could make her bear that sadness for eternity.

The homunculus was bound to the same eternal fate as her master; the only difference was that for Ennis, there was a way to die other than being devoured.

She was essentially immortal, but if the immortal who was the source of her life determined that she was no longer useful, the beating of her heart would instantly weaken, ushering her into a gentle, quiet death.

After Firo had devoured Szilard, he could feel the mysterious link between him and Ennis. It wasn't so much like a thread between them, as it was that there was another one of him nearby.

And he could feel the presence of something like a switch.

Of course it wasn't like a physical switch. If he truly rejected Ennis, that switch-like component would automatically flip itself and bring the link between him and Ennis to an end.

Actually, Firo also had a memory of the moment Szilard had flipped that switch, a few minutes before Firo had devoured him. That memory also left the sensation of flipping the switch in Firo's mind.

That was why if he wanted to do it again, he could. Easily.

Even from afar, he could kill Ennis.

But of course, Firo never once thought of doing that to her again.

Their relationship was not that of a homunculus and her master. Although Firo wouldn't say it out loud, he had a pure affection for Ennis.

Although their relationship was so platonic that Firo's friends always teased him for his innocence, Ennis was even worse, as she didn't pick up on the fact that Firo's feelings for her were romantic love.

But even though his feelings were unrequited and unrewarded, abandoning Ennis was not an option for Firo.

Maybe Melvi was testing him to see how he would react.

Ennis had been taken hostage. If Szilard were in his shoes, he would easily cut Ennis off and let his enemy know that hostages would be useless.

Or rather, maybe he was waiting for Firo to actually start making a homunculus to sacrifice.

Maybe he was trying to know Firo more deeply, to tip the scales of the gamble in his own favor.

He could think of all sorts of possibilities, but Firo decided to forget all of them for a moment.

No matter how much he thought about it, it was all speculation at this point.

The young camorrista quietly steadied his breathing, and just honed three of his feelings.

His animosity toward Melvi. His desire to save Ennis.

And his awareness that he was a member of the Martillo Family.

I can't cause trouble for everyone. I need to settle this one-on-one...

But how? Is there a way to deal with this son of a bitch without taking on the Runoratas, too?

Just as he thought this, Molsa addressed him.

"Firo. Do you remember the oaths you swore at the ceremony?"

"...Yes, sir."

Of course he was referring to the ceremony where Firo was promoted to the rank of capo.

In order to make sure, Molsa asked him the vows from memory.

"Your right foot is in a prison, and your left in a grave. You swore this, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And that you would take your own life with your left hand for the sake of the Family."

"Of course."

Even if that option was no longer possible because of his immortality, Firo's resolve hadn't changed.

He was who he was now because of the Martillo Family. He would fight whatever battles it took to repay that debt.

Although I have to think of Ennis. I can't die that easily.

As Firo amended his thought, Molsa continued.

"Firo Prochainezo. You also said that if your own father killed one of our men, you could kill him in revenge for your comrade."

A cold sweat ran down Firo's back.

"...I did, sir."

The word "father" might better be replaced with the word "family."

Firo's parents were both dead, and he had no living relatives.

But now, in a way, he did.

In a way, he and Ennis, as homunculus and master, had the same blood in their veins. It was close to a blood relationship.

They weren't telling him to abandon Ennis, were they?

If they were, what would he do?

The moment his nervousness became fear, Molsa spoke.

"Yes, you swore that here in this room."

"..."

Firo had stopped breathing.

But Molsa's next words were not at all what Firo expected.

"You aren't the only one who made that oath. Everyone else here swore the same thing."

"...?"

Since it was part of the promotion ceremony, it was only natural. Even Molsa himself had probably sworn the same thing somewhere before he created the Martillo Family.

"To put it another way, as long as your fathers don't try to attack us, they are not our enemies. They are the blood relatives of the members of our Family," Molsa calmly said to the executives. "Ennis is a member of Firo's family, and Firo is one of ours. An attack on his family is not only a clear act of aggression towards us, but an insult."

"...Boss."

"You also swore to reach out your right hand for glory, and hold the resolve to end your life with your left."

Molsa silently looked at the other executives. His sharp gaze endorsed his words.

"I'll ask again. Do you have the resolve to save Ennis, reclaim your honor that was taken, and risk your life to do so?" Molsa asked calmly, ever so calmly.

Firo's mind went blank for a moment—

Maiza was the first to speak, and then the rest of the executives followed, with serious faces.

"Of course."

"Naturally."

"Definitely."

"Miss Ennis is like our family, too, you know."

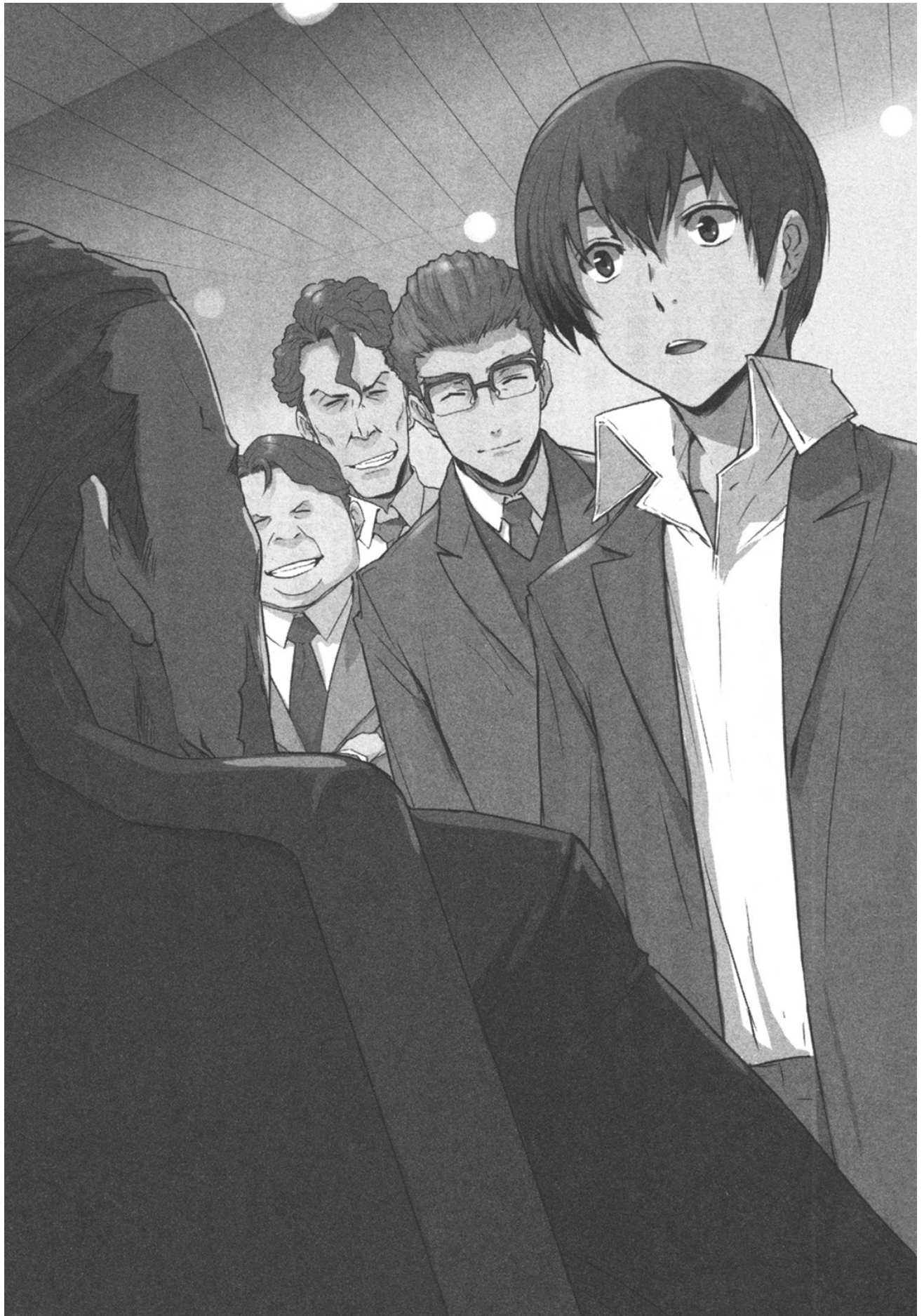
"That's right."

As he listened to them all, Firo finally realized the situation. "Guys..."

"Your family is our family, too. Right, Firo?"

"Boss..."

"If you plan to shoulder this burden by yourself, Firo, you may as well slap us in the face now."



Firo hung his head. He was deeply grateful for Molsa's words, and ashamed of himself for doubting. For fearing that they would tell him to abandon Ennis.

He was nearly speechless as all kinds of emotions welled up within him, but he managed to say one thing in response.

"...Thank you...so much, sir."

And Firo remembered.

He had joined the Martillo Family in the hopes of becoming a man like this.

And he remembered something else.

Molsa Martillo wasn't a man who was just being nice to his capos.

He was also a gangster who had created a gang in New York and kept it alive until now.

"Now, depending on the situation, we may be making enemies of the Runoratas. They're an East-coast gang a hundred times stronger than us just in terms of numbers." Molsa began to explain the basic threat of their opponent to the capos. "Even in this day and age, they have connections to the police, the newspapers, government officials. They could easily frame us for crimes and call society down on us if they wanted. ...Worst case scenario, they could turn the country itself against us."

Firo held his breath again at the description of how formidable their opponent was.

Just because he was immortal didn't mean he could let down his guard. In fact, facing the Runoratas brought with it a high chance of a fate worse than death.

The possibility that they could be fighting America itself certainly wasn't a joke.

In the quiet room, he could hear one of the executives swallow hard, suggesting that everyone was tense thinking about the scale of the Runoratas' power.

But Molsa Martillo showed them a fearless smile. "See, even the worst-case scenario isn't so bad." He slowly stood, but not to make a speech. He spoke in a natural tone, as if he was asking them to set the table for lunch. "They spat in our faces, so we're gonna give them hell. A hell far worse than turning the world against them."

And then, mentioning the name of the one executive who was absent, Molsa closed the meeting.

"Ronnie is doing some investigating right now. I'll give you more detailed orders shortly."

The executives couldn't sense a single iota of false bravado or bluffing in their don's voice, and they began to believe from the bottom of their hearts.

Even against the Runoratas, maybe they could come out on top.

Even if it was wishful thinking, there was one thing that was certain.

They were no longer afraid of the Runorata Family.

It could be the greatest weapon for all of them, including Firo.

No matter what outcome it might bring.

<=>

An hour later
Somewhere in New York
An apartment

The stone apartment building was about a 15-minute walk from Alveare.

Firo Prochainezo knocked on the door of a room on the fourth floor. At first, there was no response. After waiting for a moment, Firo called out and knocked again. "It's me, Firo. Are you in, Annie?"

He heard the sound of movement from inside.

He waited a little while longer, then put his hand on the doorknob. The door was unlocked and swung open easily. "I'm coming in."

Firo entered cautiously, letting her know what he was doing. He really didn't want to see her if she was in the middle of changing or something.

Annie was in her bedroom, not wearing her work clothes as a waitress at Alveare or a nightgown, but normal street clothes.

"...Yep, I was right. You came after all."

She didn't speak like Annie normally did, but more like a child.

Firo knew why.

On the one hand, she was a waitress still learning the ropes from Lia, but on the other, she had a completely different person living inside of her.

It wasn't that she had multiple personalities.

After all, the personality of Hilton had already assimilated Annie's consciousness.

Since Annie's memories and personal values were still technically there, you could say she was essentially both Annie and Hilton.

However, Firo addressed her not as Annie or Hilton, but as Hilton's first vessel—the one who could be called her "true vessel."

"Liza."

"What is it, Firo?"

Liza Laforet.

She was Huey Laforet's second daughter, and Chane's younger sister.

She had first met Firo in Alcatraz. She had tried to kill him at one point, and he had also saved her from Ladd. They had a complicated relationship.

Since he knew her real self was only in the first stages of adolescence, Firo first apologized.

"First off, I apologize. For walking into a lady's room without permission."

Annie stared blankly at the apology and replied. "Ummm...yeah, well, I just thought you might come, so it's okay."

"Then you know why I'm here."

"Mmhmm. It's Ennis, right?" Annie said, looking away.

Firo didn't notice the conflicting emotions in her voice as she said the name, and fixed Annie with a serious look. "Did your father...did Huey kidnap Ennis?"

Annie's eyes widened as she protested. "No! Daddy didn't do anything like that! If he did, he wouldn't go through Melvi, he'd go after you directly!"

Firo could hear from her voice that she was genuinely angry, and he apologized again. "I see. I'm sorry for suspecting your father."

"Huh? U-um, sure, I'll forgive you this time." Annie, puzzled at being apologized to so

honestly, forgave him without even thinking.

Firo turned his eyes to her and asked again. "Thanks. ...But that's the thing. Do you know anything about this Melvi guy?"

"...Yeah."

"Sheesh, don't tell me all at once."

At Firo's look of disappointment, Liza replied. "You know, I'm surprised. I thought you would break in and attack me, try to choke me or something."

"I wouldn't choke you, but I was planning to come ask you earlier, and I was gonna be a lot scarier about it." Firo sighed and leaned against the nearest wall. "But I'm calmer now, thanks to Don Martillo. Plus, taking down Melvi isn't going to be easy. I won't be able to do it if I let my emotions get in the way."

And looking at Firo's eyes, Liza realized.

He wasn't calm because he'd given up.

He was doing everything he could to contain all his feelings, even though he wanted to let them out with a scream. He was devoting all his strength to actually saving Ennis.

...

I guess Ennis really is special to him.

In her heart, Annie was jealous. Still, she couldn't bring herself to hate Ennis, either.

It had been a little while since she had started working at Alveare as Annie.

At first, Ennis was nothing more than a homunculus she was supposed to keep under surveillance.

She even thought it was ridiculous how Firo, her master, was so captivated by her.

But ever since the incident at Alcatraz, she found Ennis to be significant in a different way.

And then, when she had first contacted her as a human—as a woman—Liza was surprised at her extraordinary honesty and simplicity.

She was far too pure and simple for a person. Still, she wasn't an emotionless doll. She had all emotions—joy, anger, and sadness—and she knew both the light and dark sides

of human society.

On top of that, she didn't have two faces, an inside and an outside. She was sincere with everyone.

The only thing she hid in her heart was probably the guilt she felt for the things she had done on Szilard's orders in the past, but even then, only a little time with her was enough to make that clear as well. It was as if she wasn't even trying to hide it.

Since Firo was such a late bloomer, Ennis apparently hadn't caught on to his feelings for her, but what would she do when she did?

She would probably be bewildered, unable to comprehend feelings of romantic love, but she would at least try to answer Firo sincerely.

That was exactly what frustrated Liza so much.

That Ennis, this created human, was a far more noble being than her.

Although, the fact that Liza felt that way at all showed that a change had occurred in her as well.

She had originally been born only for the sake of her father. All she needed was her father's approval, and her world was complete. That was why she didn't care how much anyone hated her when she moved in the bodies of the birds and the humans she had taken over as Hilton.

However, ever since what had happened at Alcatraz, she had been growing aware of her connections to people other than her father, without even realizing it was happening.

She was still mostly dependent on her father, and if she had to choose between Huey and Firo she wouldn't hesitate to choose the former. Even so, even if it was only a tiny bit, the fact that another person had come into her heart was a clear change in her.

That was why her way of looking at Ennis had changed, too.

She had become conscious of Ennis' humanity, even though before she hadn't even thought to look at her.

She was jealous of Ennis on the one hand, but on the other, she admired her, even aspired to be like her.

With those complicated feelings within her, Liza had waited for Firo to come to her apartment.

She had even resigned herself to the possibility that he would kill Annie in a fit of rage,

but Firo was much calmer than she expected.

However, that didn't mean he wasn't thinking of Ennis. Liza's complicated feelings overtook her again as she realized that it was, in fact, the opposite.

Unaware of the storm in Liza's heart, Firo asked her again, his face serious.

"I'm desperate, here. Please, tell me what you know about Melvi. I won't tell Huey or anyone else that you said anything. I just want to help Ennis."

After a few moments of silence, Liza spoke through Annie. "Is that it? You really just want to save her?"

"Huh?"

"After you save Ennis, will you be able to let Melvi go? You don't want to kill him?"

"..." Firo thought for a moment, then answered. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't hate his guts. Honestly, I want to pound him into the ground. Over and over and over. But if that meant I couldn't save Ennis, I'd put her first."

"Hmm..."

"Plus, he isn't just my enemy anymore."

"Hm?" Annie tilted her head.

Firo continued. "The whole Martillo Family sees him as an enemy. Even if I decided to let him go, I'd kill him if the don told me to. And the opposite is true, too. If I wanna off him but the boss tells me to let him walk, I'd leave him alone." Suddenly remembering the actual age of the girl he was talking to, Firo added hastily: "Ah, sorry, that's not stuff I should be sayin' to a kid."

"Don't treat me like a little kid. Plus, I hate him, too. I'd be kinda happy if you took it out on him instead of me," Liza said, then looked away. "...But you know, just speaking hypothetically, if Mr. Molsa told you to kill Ennis, could you do it?" she asked.

That moment, Firo's face darkened with sadness—and after a much longer period of thought than before, he shook his head. "...I dunno. I don't know what I'd do. But I know Don Martillo isn't a man who would make me kill Ennis for no reason. That's why I swore my loyalty to him in the first place."

Seeing his expression, it was Liza's turn to fall silent.

His face as he stood with his shoulders slumped made him look like a child, even without

any help from his naturally youthful looks.

Blushing slightly, she tried to manipulate him with a question. "...If it were me instead of Ennis, though, you'd kill me without a second thought, wouldn't you."

"Hey, come on. I'm sorry for treating you like a kid, so don't pick on me, alright?" Firo sighed and looked Annie in the eye. "Plus, you shouldn't say stuff like that. Don't measure the value of your own life against someone else's just to test people."

"..." Annie flushed an even deeper shade of red and turned away so Firo wouldn't see. She rested her hand on the windowsill and looked out through the glass. "Melvi Dormентаire."

"Huh?"

"That's his full name. Have you heard of the Dormentaires?"

"Uh..."

Firo was bewildered at the sudden change in topic, but he soon remembered the meaning of the name "Dormентаire."

A moment later, he recognized that the knowledge wasn't his, but drawn from the memories of Szilard and the other alchemists.

"The Dormentaires...do you mean House Dormентаire?"

"I think you know more about them than me. 'Hilton' doesn't have any vessels directly connected to them."

"Why...now...?"

Certainly, in Szilard's memories, as well as his life, House Dormентаire sometimes appeared as an important factor. Apparently, the two factions were using each other, but in recent years Szilard's work had revolved around America, so they almost never made contact. At least, that was what was in Szilard's memories.

House Dormентаire was deeply engraved in the other alchemists' memories as a family of less-than-upstanding aristocrats, but in the end there were no memories that would link them to the current incident.

Now, not only did Melvi look just like Gretto, but he was connected to him, in a way.

The city of Lotto Valentino was Maiza and Gretto's hometown.

The Dormentaires had essentially taken possession of the city, and Maiza had left his

family there.

Was there some sort of connection?

Firo thought desperately, but he couldn't make any conjectures beyond what he already knew.

Liza supplied some additional information to the troubled Firo.

"He approached Daddy pretty recently. He said he was a messenger from the Dormentaire family. Then he stole Time from the people in Croquis. They were supposed to be in charge."

"Croquis? Time?"

"Umm, wait just a second...More importantly, Mr. Prochainezo, is Czes doing alright?"

Firo was a little confused at why she had suddenly started speaking to him as Annie again, but it didn't seem like she was trying to change the subject, so Firo just responded to the new direction in the conversation.

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. Czes is with Maiza right now, so he's probably fine."

"I see... I hope Czes is okay... Oh, hi, Firo, I'm back! Daddy said it was okay for me to tell you about Time!"

Firo blinked in surprise as right in the middle of talking, Liza went back to her normal way of talking.

"...Wait. Were you asking Huey over there while you were talking to me?"

"If I couldn't do that, then I couldn't do my job as Hilton."

"...Come to think of it, you could manage dozens of birds at the same time, too."

"Hilton" was the general term for Liza and all the other females that were attuned to her consciousness. In order to live their lives at the same time, she couldn't just speak in one body while another was silent, of course. If she had trouble with that, it would limit the number of lives she could live naturally.

Maybe, while Liza's consciousness had been elsewhere, she had instinctively been talking using Annie's original personality.

Immediately after he thought of that theory, something hit Firo.

Wait, then what? Does that mean the girls that Hilton has taken over are dead?

Or are they still alive as a part of Hilton?

He also thought it could be an issue that had something to do with him, too, but it seemed like that could get complicated. He decided to focus on the information about Melvi for now.

"...So who's Time?"

"Mmm, well, the people in Rhythm are supposed to make things like new machines and homunculi. The ones who take care of the actual mass production of those things are Larvae and Time. Larvae is in charge of the ones like Christopher and Chi, aaaand, umm, Time are the ones that take care of the systematic mass production of new planes and weapons and stuff."

She was using a fairly adult vocabulary, but she still spoke like a child.

Firo furrowed his eyebrows at the odd-sounding explanation. "...Planes? Don't tell me those planes flying around while Melvi was at the casino..."

"I don't know anything about that. Hilton doesn't have anyone around him..."

Looking troubled, Liza switched to some other information.

"Apparently, they kinda hate him in the Runorata Family, too. He took the job of this lady named Carlotta. So the people who don't like him are planning to kill Melvi."

Firo pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered. "Of all the pointless, uncalled-for..."

A plain old Mafia wouldn't be able to kill Melvi. Forget immortality—with Claire Stanfield as a bodyguard, they wouldn't even be able to touch him.

More importantly, Firo would be devastated if Ennis got involved in the shootout and got hurt. As an immortal, she wouldn't die, but they didn't mean she couldn't feel pain. Even if it was only for a few seconds, he wanted to keep her from suffering.

Worse, Melvi might mistake the attackers for police or members of the Martillos and do something violent to Ennis.

Claire...is there some way I could get in touch with him...?

Enemies though they were right now, the essence of Claire's job was as a bodyguard only.

There was a possibility that he would cooperate if he asked him to help save Ennis without compromising his contract as Melvi's bodyguard.

It was laughably absurd, but doing something absurd without a care in the world was Firo's friend's specialty.

"Ooh, I *hate* that redhead assassin! ...Huh? Oh, hey, wait a sec!" And Liza's tone of voice suddenly changed. "Hey, Firo! Daddy said something to me just now that he wants me to ask you."

"What does he want?" Firo's guard went up at a question from Huey.

He had gouged out one of Huey's eyes back in Alcatraz.

There was nothing he could do if Huey hated him for it, though, so he just strengthened his resolve and waited.

Then—Liza said something much more straightforward than he expected.

"Hey, so, Daddy says: 'Will you meet with me in a little while?'"

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As Firo was wondering whether he should meet with the mastermind himself, Huey Laforet—

Another unusual event was happening in the Martillo Family.

Ronnie Schiatto, who should have been investigating about Melvi, had disappeared.

He had only contacted Molsa to say one thing.

— *[It seems I won't be able to come back for a little while, boss.]*

— *[I've gotten involved in some personal trouble that will keep me completely away from the Martillo Family.]*

— *[I'm prepared for any punishment or rebuke you may have for me for being late with my assignment.]*

— *[However, I can tell you for certain that I cannot currently return.]*

After hearing about Ronnie's apologetic phone call, Maiza left Molsa's office and made a

complicated face. "...Ronnie's having trouble?" he muttered.

Maiza knew the truth of who Ronnie was. He puzzled over what kind of trouble could possibly detain him, but he couldn't come up with an answer.

The one called a demon by many was truly omnipotent, and Maiza had planned to ask him a favor concerning the incident with Ennis as soon as he got back: "This may go against your way of doing things, but could you please just guarantee her safety?"

If Ronnie used all his abilities, the Martillo Family could probably become the biggest gang in America overnight. But Maiza knew the reason he didn't was that he had some degree of respect for human independence, and because he enjoyed it. Maiza thought that was fine, too.

That was why he couldn't imagine what kind of trouble he could have gotten involved in.

It was definitely disconcerting.

A disaster that a demon couldn't handle was an unnatural thing—and if it was instigated by this man Melvi, this man with his brother's face, the story would completely change.

If Melvi was directing that catastrophe not at Ronnie, but the Martillo Family or Firo personally, he couldn't imagine how they could handle it.

The most important thing was that the capo Ronnie Schiatto, the most powerful man in the Martillo Family, had withdrawn from the front lines of the battle.

He didn't know when the trouble that Ronnie was in would clear up.

But Maiza knew.

The Martillo Family wasn't a gang that would only rely on Ronnie's abilities.

Even if they didn't have the demon, even if they didn't have the power of immortality, the Martillos would go on being the Martillos.

Maiza believed that for a fact.

The camorristi Molsa Martillo had chosen with him had that strength.

He remembered how he had avoided making connections with others, and how he had gone so far as to distort his own principles to join their gang.

And Maiza, the Martillo Family's *conta è oro*, summoned a quiet conviction.

It didn't matter if there was a man with a face that looked like his brother's.

He would join the fight without any hesitation, not as an immortal alchemist, but as a weapon of the Martillo Family. Perhaps its shield.

And it wasn't just Maiza.

Ronnie Schiatto's absence had shaken the capos, but—

Conversely, it only strengthened the foundations of the Martillo Family.

Now that Ronnie was gone, many of them had the same intuition.

Whether it became a fight or not, the pivotal moment would be the casino party at Ra's Lance.

And they hardened their resolve towards the casino party.

To bet their own lives as chips.

And to reach out their right hands and seize glory as the protectors of the Martillo Family.

Chapter 19 -- The Tricksters Don't Hesitate

Some day
Midnight
Little Italy

There was a jazz hall a little ways away from Mulberry Street.

It contained the office of one Gandor Family, a small gang about the same size as the Martillo Family.

The shop was named "coraggioso," meaning "courageous one" in Italian, and the basement currently contained a gathering of people whose strength was certainly worthy of the description.

However, in terms of their personalities, they were about as far from the traditional image of "courage" as you could get.

"So, *amigo*, is this everyone you wanted to get together today?" a woman asked with a chuckle. She was dressed like a somewhat masculine saloon girl, with two katana at her waist.

The man called "amigo," Luck Gandor, replied calmly. "I had planned for one more to be here, but it's getting late, so I'll go ahead and start explaining."

He looked around at those in the office.

There was a section of the office where the Family usually met with "clients," with a billiard table in the middle.

Several people were sitting around that billiard table now, creating a kind of odd atmosphere in the office.

The other members of the Family were sending them furtive glances from afar, but Luck figured that was to be expected as he remembered how strange this group was.

Luck's two brothers Keith and Berga were sitting to his immediate left. Keith remained silent as always as he fiddled with the cards in his hand, and Berga was eating and drinking by himself, oblivious to the atmosphere of the room.

The brothers formed a rather striking trio, but no more so than normal. Their subordinates didn't pay it any mind.

However, the "guests" they had today were far more distinctively odd than the brothers.

There was hardly any sense that they were upstanding citizens.

They were the hired killers the Gandors had gathered for extra muscle as part of their preparations for the casino party at Ra's Lance.

First was the bodyguard who belonged to the Gandor Family, Maria Barcelito.

Normally, she dressed like a saloon girl in the bar and danced with her swords, but she was also an actual swordsman with no small amount of skill who held a prominent position in the Gandor Family. In fact, the unusually powerful woman handled her swords Murasamia and Kochite so adeptly that, in a small space, she could hold her own against several gangsters armed with guns.

The one shooting periodic glares her way was Raz Smith, the self-styled "Gunmeister."

Even though they were inside, he hadn't taken off his thin coat—and Luck knew why.

Inside his coat were dozens—countless—guns of all sorts, and he was an expert with every single one of them.

Luck didn't know Smith's abilities that well, but one of his subordinates had witnessed him in a fight to the death against Maria, so that assessment had been his reference point when he approached the assassin.

However, there was one thing that troubled him. When he had hired Smith, for some reason a boy around 15 years of age had come with him. He was the only one among them who did have the sense of a respectable person, and he attracted attention whether he liked it or not.

However, even after the boy had caught their attention, he caused some double-takes for another reason.

The members of the Gandor Family were looking at the boy next to Smith from afar and whispering to each other.

"...Hey, isn't he that kid? The one who came here in that fight with that newspaper reporter a while back?"

"During the Icepick mess?"

"Oh, yeah, what happened with that idiot?"

"He's buried under the floor for now. Tick said when he thinks of a new torture he'll try it out on him..."

Luck didn't hear their whispers, but he had already heard about the boy before from another subordinate.

The boy in question had been involved in a certain incident involving the Gandors, immortals, and a serial killer.

He had no idea why he was with Smith now, but Smith had told him, "This is my student, who has taken a step into my world as well as my assistant," so Luck had no choice but to let him come, too.

He knew Smith wasn't an honest man, but was it wise to trust an assassin who brought a young boy with him?

The doubt crossed Luck's mind, but for now he just decided to watch it play out.

Although, he had only hired Smith in passing—

The youngest Gandor had been after the one sitting in the middle of Maria and Smith's glaring contest—an old man reeking of alcohol. He was called Alkins, but Luck wasn't sure if that was his real name or not. Raz called him Alky, since he was an alcoholic.

He appeared to be in his late 50s or early 60s, but the alcohol abuse lent him a worn-out atmosphere that made him look even older. Anyone around him would judge him an "old man" easily.

However, Luck and his brothers thought quite highly of this old man.

He was a well-respected assassin, so much so that even Claire Stanfield would take his hat off to him.

He normally looked like just another drunk, who couldn't possibly be an assassin. But to those who knew his ability, even that image was an act for the purpose of deceiving others.

As proof, although he was usually drunk, and he could down bottle after bottle of liquor, there was never any sign that he was actually completely wasted.

"...Hey miss, ya got any liquor? Doesn't matter what, 's long as it's got alcohol in it."

"Yes, we do."

Edith had come in to serve their table. Although she was cautious towards the gathering, she did her job efficiently.

Edith was Roy Maddock's lover, and she often worked for the Gandors as a waitress to help him pay back his loan. Now she could see for herself why her pay for today was so much higher than normal.

The bunch gathered here were characteristically odd—at the very least they clearly didn't do honest work.

Even so, she remained undeterred as she calmly waited their table with the same attitude she used with the more honest customers. She didn't realize that the three customers gathered in the hall were deeply involved in the dispute that she and Roy had been drawn into.

Maria, Smith, and Alkins.

This wasn't the first meeting between the three killers and the Gandor brothers. They had once been hired by the Runorata Family as assassins, targeting the three brothers.

It was dangerous to hire them, but that was why Luck figured they would be easy to control.

At the moment, their biggest threat was the Runorata Family, and the Runoratas' raw power was alarming enough even without the added complications of Melvi, an apparent immortal among them.

From the Runoratas' perspective, the assassins they had once hired were now allied with their former targets. They would have every reason to think that anyone who would change employers so easily couldn't be trusted.

Even if Raz or Alkins decided to betray the Gandors, the Runoratas wouldn't trust them so easily. It was another way he had planned to keep them in check when he decided to hire them, but—

Now there were two more, and he wasn't sure how they would move.

These "volatile factors" were sitting in the seats farthest from the entrance.

One was looking askance at Luck, with his metal arm propped on the table. The other was waving around a giant wrench at a tower of cards he had built.

Suddenly, the wrench-wielding man in work clothes—Graham Specter, began to speak.

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story...I just built a five-story house of cards, carefully, oh so carefully...but what's the right way to deconstruct a house of cards? What should I do?"

Should I take them off from the top, one by one? Should I knock it down all at once? If I knock it down, it'll only take a moment, but that's destruction, not deconstruction!"

The members of the Gandor Family watched Graham with frowns on their faces as he trembled and shouted.

"Hey, Luck. That kid over there's been making an awful lot of noise," Berga said, head tilted to the side.

Luck lightly rubbed his forehead and replied quietly. "It's best not to pay too much attention to him, Berga."

Even while they were talking, Graham was continuing his bizarre monologue.

"Now that it's been constructed, there must be a reverse. There should be a proper way to take it apart. ...What is it? I remember my sister saying long ago that if I couldn't build something I shouldn't break it, and then hitting me with a hammer...so deconstruction and construction are two sides of the same coin! The front is the back! My sister could also tell me *not* to build something I couldn't break, and then hit me again! Ack, but she shouldn't!"

Graham was completely lost in his own world, but one man stepped briskly into that world.

The man with the steel arm, Ladd Russo.

"So just make it so there's no heads or tails to begin with."

"Wha—?! Boss Ladd, is that even possible?"

Graham's eyes widened behind his thick bangs.

Ladd chuckled and reached into his jacket, pulling out a matchbox from the inside pocket.

"Set it on fire, to hell with heads and tails."

"...! I get it...! Boss Ladd, you're incredible as always! While I was trapped in the valley of doubt between construction and deconstruction, you destroyed common sense itself to find a new answer! Boss, are you trying to touch the face of God!? Yes, if the tower of Babel was struck by lightning and burned to the ground, then this tower of cards, as the first step towards God himself, should be burned, too!² *That* is the correct way to take it apart!"

² The Tower of Babel did not burn to the ground.

To express his joy, Graham took a match from Ladd and went to light it.

"Excuse me, don't set fires inside."

Luck chided Graham and let out a long, long sigh.

Ladd Russo and Graham Specter.

They had come in passing to the housing facility where Raz and Alkins were, but then they had eavesdropped on the conversation and asked to join in on the job.

Although Luck was hesitant, he had seen Ladd's strength at Firo's casino, so he had hired him as part of their muscle.

Still, he had also seen the wildness of his personality, so he had no intention of letting down his guard.

As for the man in blue work clothes, he had come along with Ladd all on his own. One of his capos, Nicola, had told him, "I can vouch for him in a brawl, but I can't guarantee anything else." That didn't seem too different from Ladd, so Luck had decided to add him to the group as well.

As a result, the underground room was brimming with an air of chaos.

Looking again at the gathering, Luck wanted to hold his head in his hands.

He had thought he was used to weirdos thanks to Tick and Maria, but having so many of them in the same place at once was quite a sight.

Keith glanced at the one who looked like the most decent person in the room—the boy standing quietly behind Raz.

Luck knew what his brother's glance meant, and quietly explained.

"We know him. Do you remember the Icepick Thompson incident?"

"..."

Apparently Keith recognized the boy now, but the look he gave Luck in response clearly asked if he was planning to involve him this time, too.

Ladd had been watching them and spoke to the three brothers.

"Does it really matter? It's just one kid. And whether he's listening or not, everyone dies when it's their time. Kids, women, old men, too."

"..."

Keith shot a glare at Ladd, who just shrugged it off and continued.

"Whoa, that's a mean-looking stare you've got there. He may have been a Mafia don, but my uncle had nothing on you. But you know, boss, I might have just met this kid—haven't even talked to him—but I can tell you that's no ordinary boy."

Ladd glanced at the boy behind Raz.

The boy returned the look for a moment, but quickly returned his gaze to Luck.

Ladd didn't care that the boy had looked away and gave his one-sided evaluation.

"That kid's eyes tell me he already died once. Plus, he's got the resolve to kill or be killed. I don't know what kinda life he had to lead to get there, but he'd be a hundred times more useful than the wannabe gunman over there, even at the worst of times," Ladd chuckled.

Raz Smith slowly stood from his chair.

"Oh? You have an awfully big mouth for a tramp who was only hired on a lark in the first place..."

"Oh, come on, don't hurt yourself just because I said that in front of your follower and my honorary brother." Ladd jabbed at Smith, his eyes filled with clear contempt.

The "follower" was the boy, and the "brother" was Graham.

Graham seemed quite attached to both Ladd and Smith as his own brothers, but Ladd and Smith themselves were completely incompatible, or so it seemed to Luck. He began considering what to say to shut the two up, but—

The boy soundlessly stepped forward and stood between Ladd and Smith. He turned to Ladd and slowly spoke.

"I apologize, my master was quite rude to you."

Then he turned back to Smith and told him in a quiet voice.

"You can't do that, sir. You have a unique kind of bloodlust, and if you reveal it here the purity of your insanity will go down."

What the boy whispered into his ear was strange enough to make anyone else wonder what kind of nonsense the boy was spouting, but the effect of those words was dramatic.

"...I see. You're right. No, I know that. I knew that already. I was merely testing this boorish barbarian."

Smith had been radiating bloodlust, ready to draw his gun, but in an instant the knifelike light disappeared from his eyes, and he sat back down in his chair as if nothing had happened.

The boy stepped back, also as if nothing had happened, and returned to his original place.

Now that things were calm, the time for hostility had passed. Ladd's shoulders relaxed as he muttered to himself.

"Well, well. It's hard to tell who's the older one."

As if deciding that it would be pointless to challenge Smith any further, Ladd turned to Luck.

"So, you're gonna explain our job now, right? Who gets the axe? I'll climb into the Runorata mansion and bring back the Don's head right now, if you want."

He said it so nonchalantly, but Luck didn't take it as a joke.

Whether it was even possible or not, Ladd Russo would actually break into the Runorata estate if he got the chance.

But he wasn't just a courageous fool, either.

The fact that a man like that had managed to live this long meant that he had something going for him.

Maybe it was just luck, or an unparalleled ability to plan ahead—or maybe he, like Claire, had the strength to render reckless courage meaningless. Luck didn't know the answer yet.

I'm going to have to be extra-careful with this one.

Luck once again redoubled his caution towards Ladd.

Keith had also noticed the dangerous air around Ladd the first time they had met, and hadn't let his guard down since.

Although, only the brothers themselves would notice that, having lived together as long as they had. The members of the Gandor family had always figured he was just a terrifying man who was always braced for anything.

Luck nodded lightly to Keith and took a deep breath before speaking.

"I see. Now then, Ladd, this will partially answer your question, but depending on the situation, we may actually order you to do just that. To kill Bartolo Runorata."

Ladd gave a low whistle.

The members of the Gandor family who had been watching from some ways away had apparently heard that, too, as almost all of them stiffened.

Killing Bartolo Runorata?

There was reckless, and then there was going too far. Even if they did succeed—on the one-in-a-million chance—all that would await them was a massacre when the Runoratas decided to take blood for blood.

Luck continued, in an effort to calm his subordinates who were silently looking at each other.

"However, that is an absolute worst-case scenario. We know the size of our organization, and I want to avoid any option that will waste the lives of my men at all costs."

"Ah, I get it. So what you're saying is that in the worst-case scenario, you're prepared to throw yourself into an all-out, no-surrender fight to the death?" Ladd said teasingly.

"No," Luck replied tonelessly. "That's out of the question."

"?"

"If we're going to do this, we'll plan to crush the Runoratas. There's nothing worse than picking a fight with the Runoratas if we plan to lose. There's no reason to add that as an option," he said coolly.

"You believe you can win?" Smith asked. "You don't think the Runoratas are all like Gustavo, do you?" Smith said, mentioning the name of a Runorata Family capo who had once employed him.

"That's why we can't make any moves until we put together a plan to take them down," Luck replied. "And are you saying, Mr. Smith, that you've agreed to join a side that has no chance of winning?"

"...!"

"When I was in a difficult situation, you were the one who spoke to me, as one also fighting the Runoratas."

Luck's shoulders slumped a little. Smith adjusted his hat low over his eyes and shook his head.

"Certainly, there may be no way to win. Shall we not recognize it, our weakness? Yes, an assassin must have humility, but we are also destined to face a great enemy while still holding onto that humility..."

Ladd frowned. "Has he gotten even stupider...?" he muttered to himself.

Apparently, Smith didn't hear him. His disciple had just whispered, "Just as I would expect, Master," so he was in a good mood. The boy's cold expression made his praise sound like more like delivering lines from a script, but Smith didn't take much notice of that.

"May I continue?" Luck coughed once, then continued the matter at hand.

"Honestly, I don't know who our enemy will be. There's a chance that we could get pulled into some trouble that involves many different organizations. We already have the police and the feds to deal with...and it's possible that terrorist Huey Laforet or other Mafia might become our enemies as well."

Huey Laforet.

The moment he said that name, Ladd's smile warped a little.

But the only ones who noticed were Keith, Alkins, and Smith's disciple. Luck missed it as he continued.

"The reason we hired you is so that we can handle any enemies we end up facing. I'm going to make this clear now: it all depends on the situation. This may end without us needing you at all, or we may end up fighting a big Mafia family and putting your lives at risk over and over. This job is a gamble, but I hope you'll take it on."

"So you're leaving it up to chance, basically." Ladd chuckled as his shoulders slumped.

Luck didn't confirm or deny, just calmly continued explaining the job.

"We'll figure out who our enemy is based on the situation. No matter who it is, I want you to carry out your job dependably. That is all I ask."

"No matter who the enemy is, huh?"

The nature of Ladd's smile changed.

"Does that include your friend Firo?"

It was a mean-spirited question.

But Luck replied easily, without missing a beat.

"Of course."

But there was no cold emotion in his eyes.

Even if his childhood friend was like family, he was willing to cast him off for the sake of his Mafia Family. On the other hand, he was sure that he wouldn't have to turn against Firo.

Those calm words were filled with a powerful will, due to both faith in his friend and responsibility towards his Family.

"Excellent! Sounds like you've made up your mind. I can't complain about that." Ladd chuckled. "You New Yorkers are an interesting bunch. The Russo Family was a lot bigger than this gang, but I was so bored I thought I would lose my mind. Here it looks like I'll be able to have a little fun."

"We'll have a problem if you act completely without restraint. If you and Firo Prochainezo were in the same position, please don't forget that I would prioritize our alliance with the Martillos and my feelings towards my friend over you."

"Haha, you don't mince words, do ya." Ladd's expression warped a bit, before he continued. "Well, as long as we're shooting straight with each other, there's one thing I need you to make clear."

"And what is that?"

"That redhead bastard—Claire, Felix, whatever you're calling him now—he's your friend, isn't he?"

That instant—

There was a clear change in the atmosphere of the room.

Nobody said anything, but every single one of them except for Smith's disciple thought of one assassin when they heard "Claire" and "Felix."

Vino.

There wasn't a freelance assassin around who hadn't heard of him, and that included Alkins, Smith, and Maria.

His real name was known—and completely unaffiliated with his work as an assassin—and yet he had never suffered retribution or been arrested. That fact alone made him an unusual figure in the underworld.

"...Yes, well."

Luck then remembered something else.

When he had been destroying Firo's casino, Ladd had shown his unique brand of hatred not just toward Melvi, but the disguised Claire as well.

Looks like we won't be able to avoid this after all.

Either way, Luck had witnessed a loathing for Claire that went beyond mere bloodlust, intense enough to make the man pick up part of a broken baccarat table and hurl it at him.

"Speaking of, he said he did something to you, didn't he? You and your girlfriend?"

"That doesn't matter. It doesn't affect what's he's got coming. I'm gonna kill him first of all, as soon as I get the chance. I'll strangle him to death even if I *don't* get a chance. It's what I live for, or part of it."

"..."

"What'd he say? Hey, Luck, this guy got a beef with Claire?"

The silent Keith and confused-looking Berga looked to Luck.

Luck himself considered how he should handle this. Claire was his friend, and they had even grown up together like family, but he wasn't a Gandor.

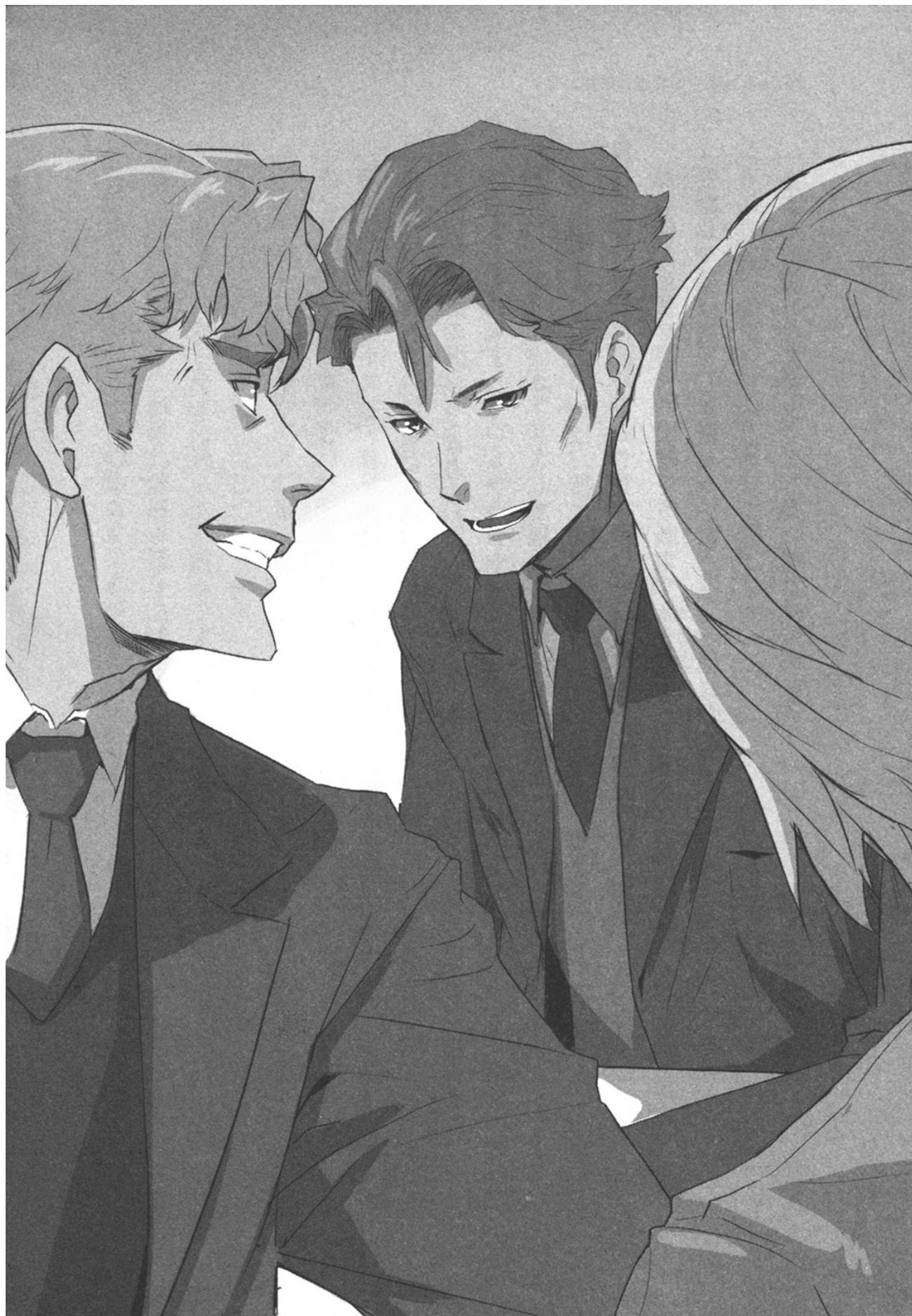
Ultimately, Claire was a freelance assassin like Ladd and Maria here, but at the moment he was actually employed as Melvi's bodyguard.

"I won't ask what kind of history you have. He's an assassin. It's no surprise that he's made enemies, and it's not our job to protect him from them." Luck glanced down for a moment, then spoke decisively. "However, if I may speak as your employer, I don't recommend going after him."

"Because of your little friendship?"

"Of course not. Because **losing one of our guns** will cause problems for us," Luck stated matter-of-factly.

There was a clear implication in his words.



Berga's smile vanished at the epithet. He narrowed his eyes and began to stand up.

The next moment, as Luck went to hold them back, Graham nudged Ladd's shoulder with his giant wrench.

"Wait, boss. We are punks, so what Berga said fits. And since he was able to use an accurate expression to describe you on first meeting, maybe he actually knows you better than you think...like a fan...wait, does that mean Berga Gandor is a fan of ours?!"

Graham's eyes widened as if he had just seen the end the world.

Ladd's shoulders slumped, and he just sat back down.

The moment for Berga to explode in anger had also passed. "...Hey, Luck, are these guys okay?" he asked in confusion.

"At the very least, Nicola can attest to the strength of the one in blue."

"I miss Nico...oh, let me tell you a nostalgic story!" Graham shouted excitedly. "I haven't fought him one-on-one recently, but sometimes I remember our glorious battles, six losses and one win, and my blood boils and my flesh sings and it feels like even after I've become a pile of bones I'll keep dancing, but then I imagine *that*, and it's terrifying! If I ever met someone who'd keep dancing as a skeleton, I'd be so scared I might dislocate all their joints!"

"...Hey, Luck, are these guys okay?" Berga asked, exactly the same as before. The only difference was that his eyes were filled with even more doubt now.

Luck heaved a deep sigh and muttered half to himself. "Probably."

Then, he spoke in a low voice to lead him in a different direction.

"Berga, don't you have something to take care of with Smith, too?"

Luck had noticed how Smith periodically shot glances at Berga, filled with hints of anger and fear.

Of course he did, given that Berga had given him the large scar on his face.

But Berga himself just tilted his head and looked at Smith. "Huh? Who're you again?"

"....Uh, well, I'll explain later."

Once again sure of how complicated the mess he was in was, Luck was ready for another big sigh, but he hastily swallowed it before it escaped.

He was their boss, after all, and it was a bad idea to show weakness in front of them. Hired guns could betray their employer at any time, and that certainly was a possibility for the ones gathered here.

20-30 minutes later.

Once he had explained what they would do and how they would be paid for the time being, one of his subordinates came down the stairs.

"Scuse me boss, but someone's here to see you," he whispered into Luck's ear.

Luck gave a slight nod.

"I understand. Bring our guest in, please," he said.

After his subordinate had disappeared up the stairs to bring in the guest, Luck announced to the assassins.

"I'm glad our last member could join us before we break for today."

"Huh? Is this who you were talking about earlier?"

"Yes. Quite a few irons in the fire, this one."

The next moment, they heard ever so quiet footsteps from the stairs.

They all looked towards the stairs: the Gandor mafiosi, Edith, the assassins (and follower), and the mechanic.

And the one who appeared at the top of the stairs was—

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A few days later

Evening

The Runorata Family villa was outside of the city, and the grounds were enormous—more like a small palace.

In a corner of that extensive property, there was something that would seem quite out of place.

A giant tent, like the ones used in show business for a small circus or exhibition.

It wasn't dyed in garish colors like a circus tent, but it was about as big as a small one-story house—a little bit out of balance with the modern estate.

There were two people in that tent, a young man and a boy.

Bartolo Runorata's grandson Carzelio was chatting innocently with the redhead next to him—although there was nothing innocent about the conversation itself.

"Oh, so they call you Vino because the blood everywhere looks like wine!"

"Well, looking back on it now, it was because I was got nervous, being so young. I couldn't relax until I was absolutely sure they were dead. ...Yeah, I think I was too focused on doing my work perfectly."

"Do assassins make a lot of money?"

"Money? Hmm...I've made quite a bit for a hitman, but there's probably some people who don't earn enough for risking their lives. There's all sorts, I guess."

The redhead, Felix Walken—formerly known as Claire Stanfield—was incredibly open about his work as an assassin.

He was enjoying his free time after work was over for the day, unaware that the three Gandor brothers, whom he'd known for a long time, were meeting with several assassins he knew.

Whether he believed Claire or not, the boy listened to him intently, eyes sparkling.

"So, do you want to be an assassin, Cazze?"

"Oh...I'm not sure what I want to be, yet, so I want to ask about all kinds of jobs."

"Hey, that's dedication! You should ask a doctor or something next to balance it out. Jobs where you help people are supposed to be pretty good, too. You'll get all kinds of compliments."

"Okay!"

The boy in his early teens, nicknamed Cazze, wasn't looking to live out a story from a pulp magazine. He was just innocently enjoying hearing about a world he didn't know.

Even if Claire was a conductor or circus performer rather than an assassin, his eyes would likely sparkle the same way.

Cazze's eyes were always shining, even when he descended further into the world of crime, of life and death. "Strange" was definitely a fitting word for him.

Although Claire was pretty odd himself, shamelessly telling the boy about the world of assassination (albeit from a biased standpoint).

After they hit a lull in the conversation, Claire asked Cazze a question. "So are you bringing Cookie with you to the party?" His gaze focused on the tent.

"Yeah! We'll put up the big tent next to the hotel, and we'll have Charlie standing on a ball!"

"Ah, that's right. He was good at that. But his name is Cookie, not Charlie."

"But Charlie makes him sound neater!"

"But Cookie's a cuter name."

Cazze and Claire exchanged a serious look for a moment, then they both burst out laughing.

"Then let's compromise. We'll call him Charlie Cookie."

"How about Charkie?"

The two smiled at each other: the naive but level-headed boy and the adult who had never grown up.

Psychologically speaking, they weren't that different in age, making them a good match as they cheerfully called out to the bear in question.

"Okay, Charlie! It's time for dinner!"

"You look great, Cookie. I'm glad."

And as for the one they were talking to—

The great beast was entertaining himself by shredding a truck tire, but when he heard them he tilted his head, tongue lolling, and gave a happy-sounding growl.

Although, if anyone who didn't know him heard that sound, they would fear for their life.

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In the Runorata mansion

"..."

Several men heard that roar and shivered.

"Dammit...that monster..."

They continued their poker game around the table, albeit now with a sheen of cold sweat.

"Master Carzelio tamed him well..."

"More importantly, when are we gonna take care of that brat Melvi?"

"We'll need to time this carefully. It's worse than I thought, that redheaded bodyguard of his doesn't leave any openings."

They were supporters of the dealer named Carlotta, and they were none too happy with Melvi for suddenly showing up and stealing her position.

"Supporters" though they were, Carlotta's own feelings had nothing to do with it. She hadn't made any indication that she resented Melvi. It was possible that Carlotta might have some hatred for him underneath the surface, but she had shown no external signs of it. Their careless, blind devotion left them unable see the reality that she was trying not to make things worse. (Incidentally, they were also blind to the fact that Carlotta herself was indifferent to the men who believed in her so much.) These men were planning a way to eliminate Melvi, not just from their midst, but permanently.

Melvi was surprisingly busy with his personal errands. They had evidence that he had gone to the Gandor Family on his own, and he was making contact with the other Dormentaires that shared his name.

They could take him down by using that information to ruin his reputation, but they were looking for a more direct method.

In other words, they would frame him as a spy sent from another gang, and then murder Melvi directly.

"I heard a rumor that he's keeping a woman somewhere."

"A woman?"

“Yeah, I got the information from a broker. Cost an arm and a leg, too.”

“...We could use that. Which estate?”

The leader leaned forward in a show of interest towards some important information.

But the man who brought the information shook his head slightly.

“She’s not at any of the houses.”

“What?”

“It’s not an easy place for getting in, but it’s a real easy place for cleaning up.”

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Somewhere

“ ... ”

Ennis was thinking in her room.

Was there anything she could do?

Several days had already passed, and she couldn’t come up with an easy answer.

At the moment, her arms and legs were unbound, and she was free to move around inside her room.

It was like a first-class cabin on a ship, complete with a toilet and bath, but it didn't change the fact that she was a captive with some very large men standing guard outside at all times.

But the men weren’t the main obstacle for her.

Melvi had told her that if she tried to escape, he would kill someone who had nothing to do with any of this.

That one statement bound her more than any chains.

But, just being captured like this had already put a heavy burden on everyone, especially Firo.

That man said he sent people into Alveare pretending to be customers. I had no idea...

Ennis suddenly remembered the child she had met in Alveare before she had been kidnapped.

The girl named Rail who was covered in scars had commented that Ennis “wasn’t like Szilard.”

But she had a feeling that the girl wasn’t the spy.

She had approached Ennis directly, for one thing, and from the way she talked with Christopher, it was a safe bet that she probably had a different connection with the immortals.

But she should have thought harder about what that meant.

If she had realized that something involving immortals was going to happen here in the city, maybe she wouldn’t have gotten into this mess.

If only I had been more careful.

Even as she thought about her own weakness, she couldn’t think of anything she could do, anyway.

To be precise, there was one thing she could think of, but it would be difficult to go through with, in more ways than one.

If that man is an immortal...I could...put my hand on his head and...

Her eyes fell to her right hand.

At the same time, she thought back to the first time she had “devoured” another, and a cold sweat stained her back.

Could she devour another person again after such a traumatic experience?

Besides, she couldn’t imagine that she would even get her hand to Melvi’s head in such an uncertain emotional state.

The man’s utter confidence in himself didn’t come from nowhere.

She couldn’t help thinking that going against him required the same level of caution—perhaps even more—as challenging Szilard Quates himself...

Suddenly, a knock sounded on the door.

Before she could answer, the door opened anyway.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd be in the middle of changing. Too bad."

Melvi appeared with a vulgar joke, but he didn't appear to actually have any sexual interest in Ennis. He just gazed at her as if he were looking at a tool or a guinea pig.

"So have you thought of an answer?"

He was probably talking about the question he had asked in the underground cellar.

"I'll ask you again. It's an important question. For me, and for you, too, from now on."

As if wary of Ennis' physical ability, Melvi kept a fixed distance from her as he asked.

"So? Are you the same person you were before you devoured another? Can you look me in the eye and say that you have the same personality as before? The same 'soul,' for lack of a better word?"

He asked her the exact same question as when they had talked in the cellar, word-for-word.

Ennis hadn't been able to think of an answer a few days ago, but—

Now, she had derived her own answer.

"I didn't have a soul, by its traditional definition. I have become a different kind of being from before, after absorbing that alchemist."

"Hah, so you admit it. Your past self died, then."

"That may be so. But I'm a different being today than what I was yesterday, too."

"...?"

Melvi smiled a little and tilted his head. Ennis calmly continued.

"People change thanks to an accumulation of knowledge, experience, and the things that result from those. And we observe phenomena like the human heart and soul in others, not ourselves. If there is no one there to observe us, we may as well be dead."

"What are you trying to say?"

"By absorbing that alchemist through my hand, I gained a link to the world through his knowledge. However, the time I truly connected with this world was...the day Szilard

died. The day I met so many people...when my world expanded.”

“ ...”

Melvi remained silent as Ennis continued telling him her answer.

“People can change in solitude, too. But I think that’s because they know what it’s like to not be alone. ‘Life’ is a well-defined concept, but the soul is more ambiguous. So, while this is my personal philosophy, I believe that the countless connections I have to the world are what forms the thing you call my ‘soul.’”

Ennis only spoke of her own soul, not “human souls.” She still hadn’t classified herself as “human.”

Whether Melvi noticed that or not, he silently waited for her to continue.

“What makes me myself is the people who acknowledge me. As I continue to meet those people, I will continue to change into a different being.”

“That’s...an awfully convenient answer for you. Do you think that since you’re a different person now from the time when you didn’t know right from wrong, you can be forgiven for the things you did?”

“Not at all. The result of what I did is that I am connected to the world here and now. If someone who knew the alchemist I absorbed blamed me as a murderer, I would have nothing to say in my defense.”

“ ...”

Melvi looked hard at Ennis with a faint smile.

But Ennis didn’t feel like it was a smile that showed his actual feelings. It was so devoid of humanity that it was probably a desperate attempt to stabilize his expression and hide his emotions.

“By that logic, does that mean you don’t care if Firo calls you a murderer? He killed Szilard, anyway.”

“That case was justifiable self-defense!”

“Ha! ‘Self-defense,’ she says! He’s Mafia, isn’t he? You want to claim ‘justifiable’ *anything* for someone who’s probably committed more crimes than you can count?” Melvi sneered.

But the next moment, his smile weakened a little without him realizing it.

"I have one correction."

It was because he had noticed something. Up until this point, Ennis had been on the defensive, but now her eyes were shining with a noticeably strong will.

"He isn't Mafia. He's Camorra. They may both have their origins in Italy, but he is a member of a group with its roots in the Neapolitan Camorra, not the Sicilian Mafia."

"...No need to be so pedantic. Nobody cares..."

"He cares. It's very important to him," Ennis said decisively before continuing to refute Melvi's earlier words. "And I won't deny that he is a member of the Martillo Family. I will acknowledge that he has participated in illegal gambling and committed crimes. It's certainly true that Firo's work is not legitimate, but that's a completely different matter from the Szilard incident."

"Is it? In the long run, don't you think it would have been better for the world if Szilard had wiped out an organization like that?"

"...Firo is my benefactor, but you're right. I can't say that he is a good person in terms of society at large. I know that he lives his life prepared and willing to do certain things, but I don't believe he will have to act on that resolve."

After Ennis had given her honest thoughts on Firo's work, she continued to contradict Melvi.

"However, the Szilard Quates I knew was incomparably evil, and he had a will to take action to match. If he were alive, he would be turning the world itself on its head."

"I see, I see.... He must have been a true monster if the homunculus he created himself is speaking of him that way."

His smile twisted even more, and the man who had introduced himself as the "the once who should have become Szilard" spoke to Ennis.

"Szilard's knowledge and experience are all inside of Firo. You don't know what that will do to him. Don't you ever think that those memories will just drag him down the same path? Turn him into the same kind of monster?"

Ennis shook her head at Melvi's mean-spirited question.

"Firo is stronger than I am."

"...Well, you sure have a lot of faith in him," Melvi said drily. He cracked his neck and headed for the door. "Well, whatever. I didn't come here to argue with you. I was running an errand for work and decided to drop by."

"Wait!" Ennis called out to stop him. "Who are you...really?"

It was the same question as in the cellar, but this time she got a different response.

"I guess I did promise that question and answer was like a game of catch. Alright, then, I'll tell you something about me."

He stopped near the door and continued blandly. "My name is Melvi Dormентаire, but I don't actually have any Dormентаire blood."

"...?"

"I'm an incomplete homunculus created by the Dormентаire family. Same as you."

"...?!"

As Ennis' eyes widened in shock, Melvi continued.

"House Dormентаire got its hands on some of the elixir, but only enough for a few people. One dose was for the greedy woman, and one dose was for her little toy, the injured girl. The last dose was for the head of a ruined aristocratic family. They experimented on him for 200 years to eventually create me, although he didn't know they would do that when he drank it."

Melvi smirked at Ennis and patted his face.

"Apparently Maiza took after his mother, and Gretto looked just like his father when he was young."

"No..."

"See you, puppet. It won't be long before *I'm* human."

Ennis was at a loss for words as Melvi once again turned his back to her and headed for the door.

"Just like I promised before...I'm going to be reborn as Szilard Quates."

After he left, Melvi's tone returned to its normal polite one. "Has she tried to escape at all?" he asked the guards standing outside.

"No, she's been quiet, " answered one of the Dormentaires' private soldiers.

"I see. Good."

Melvi looked around with an airy smile.

"I thought she would put up more of a fight. Well, I suppose she's satisfied with a first-class cabin. It even has a bath."

He looked out at the wide open sky, the blue sea, and the horizon running between them.

They were on a private Dormentaire ship, floating in the Atlantic Ocean.

"Although, I don't know what would happen to her if she did escape."

There was no sign of even a small island, much less the North American continent—just water in every direction, all 360 degrees.

But there were several other boats surrounding it at a fair distance, apparently about the same size as this one.

"Immortal or no, I don't know how many days it would take her to reach land," he continued, as if enjoying himself. He nodded in satisfaction. "But you certainly shouldn't let down your guard," he emphasized to the sentries.

With that fresh smile still on his face, he continued heartlessly.

"If anyone hijacks this ship, the others will sink it, after all."

Melvi left the men. He walked across the deck, looking around at the boats.

He knew what was aboard those five ships: the float planes that had attacked New York about a week ago.

On top of that, there were flying boats hidden inside those large, specially-made ships.

One flying boat and seven seaplanes in each.

It was enough firepower to ignite a small war, but in fact the planes and boats belonged to different people.

The Dormentaires owned the ships built to conceal the planes, and the planes themselves belonged to Huey Laforet's "Time."

"Now, then...I wonder how much Huey has figured out. I can't imagine him thinking the Dormentaires would merely serve as his partners in crime."

House Dormentaire, Time, and the Runorata Family—this man was a member of three

different organizations.

It was as if he was a puppetmaster, and they were all marionettes dancing at his fingertips.

Even though he knew that wasn't the case, he inhaled the salty sea breeze and let himself be drunk on the idea for a moment.

"Huey Laforet...I'm looking forward to it," Melvi mumbled to himself, immersed in that drunken delirium that couldn't completely satisfy his heart.

"When I become Szilard Quates, my first little diversion will be betraying you."

He whispered quietly, so no one could hear.

"Next, I'll kill Elmer C. Albatross. **Just like my master wants.**"

Chapter 20 -- They Can't Make it Through Without Getting Involved

A few days later
Evening
Millionaire Row

This Manhattan neighborhood was called Millionaire Row, a street of mansions that housed the ones who had weathered the storm of the depression with their wealth intact.

An extremely gloomy voice sounded from a corner of one of those houses.

"This is bad...really bad..."

Jacuzzi Splot was crouched in a corner of the Genoard mansion's great hall. His arms were pressed to his stomach, thanks to stress-induced gastroenteritis.

"Come on, Jacuzzi. This isn't a time for whining. We only have a few more days until the casino party," said Nice.

"B-but..." Jacuzzi replied, his tattoo wet with tears. "I mean, I memorized the rules for the casino games and stuff, but if I screw up they'll pull out their guns and kill me..."

"It's not like we're cheating. It's fine. We won't go anywhere dangerous, and we'll be okay as long as we stay around Firo's room. Nobody's gonna accuse us of any funny business or try to shoot us at a Martillo Family table, right?"

"But...I've been thinking. They told us to go nuts with the decoy act, but...what if we get too wound up at Firo's table and go all in, and then we win...? The Martillo Family would lose a lot of money, right? What if they get mad and pull out their machine guns and start shooting at us...?"

"It's fine. The Martillo Family isn't like the Russos, I told you."

Nice kindly admonished Jacuzzi, who had gone pale from his visions of impending disaster.

A visitor spoke up from behind them with an apology. "My grandfather really caused you a lot of trouble back then, didn't he?"

"Ah, oh! No, not at all! I'm sorry! I..."

"No, don't apologize." The current Don of the Russo Family himself, Ricardo Russo, continued without any apparent concern. "What my grandfather did was unforgivable."

"Ah, n-no, *I'm* sorry! Please forgive me!"

Jacuzzi frantically returned Ricardo's polite apology. "We aren't mad at you for anything. You're even paying for our food..."

"It's only natural to pay rent, if we're going to stay in such a beautiful house."

Ever since he had come to the Genoard mansion, Ricardo had been feeding Jacuzzi's entire gang out of his own pocket, calling it "rent." Jacuzzi was uncomfortable with the arrangement, as the amount was disproportionately large, but Ricardo didn't seem to be particularly strapped for cash.

Ricardo knew his grandfather was already dead. When he had left Chicago, he had taken a good chunk of his inheritance from the house, in the form of jewels and the like. He had learned thanks to Sham's knowledge that his grandfather had hidden other valuables off the property to avoid paying taxes on them, so he had unearthed all of those and taken them as well.

That was why, in terms of wealth, Ricardo was the most qualified person in the mansion to be here on Millionaire Row, depression or not.

But he wasn't prideful about it, nor was he afraid of the delinquents. Ricardo just calmly helped with the chores and organized meetings for the casino party.

Normally, the delinquents themselves were prone to pestering people with money like Ricardo to share the wealth, but they left him alone even without Jacuzzi and Nice telling them to.

The reason for that was the man always at Ricardo's side, Christopher Shouldered. He gave off an air that made him exceedingly difficult to approach.

Christopher himself didn't seem to mind this. He just made fun of Jacuzzi day in and day out, cackling all the while. Even now, he seemed to be enjoying himself watching Jacuzzi holding his stomach on the floor.

"Good, excellent! It's natural for anxiety to make your stomach hurt. It's only been about ten years since people started researching chronic intestinal pain, but I wonder when people started getting stress-induced stomachaches in the first place? Do monkeys and horses get stomachaches the same way? Humans always worry more than they should, and that's why it happens to them, I suppose."

Christopher walked over to Jacuzzi as he rambled on and on, then suddenly brought his face in close, eyes dyed red and teeth all sharpened into canines, and made a proposal.

"How about this? Just stop being human. You'll feel better, and you can bid all that pain farewell. Just follow your instincts, leave yourself to nature's whims! Now, what is the first thing you want to do as a non-human creature?"

Christopher grinned, wide enough to show his teeth.

Jacuzzi stared at him, trembling violently. "W-w-well, um, right now I just want to run...away...um..."

"Hehehe, you can run, but can you escape?"

"Eep!"

"In the natural world, the strong prey on the weak. It's a part of natural selection, after all, the weak get eeeee—"

Ricardo had been watching Jacuzzi's teeth chatter long enough and gave Christopher's hair a good hard tug.

"...My apologies for his behavior," he sighed.

"Wow, my boss had to apologize because of me. That'll weigh on my conscience for sure," Chris cackled unapologetically.

Ricardo was about to apologize again to Jacuzzi, but—

At that very moment, the doorbell rang.

"...Who could that be? It's—it's not a hit man from the Runorata Family, is it...?"

Visions of doom filled Jacuzzi's mind, but his fear was instantly erased by the voice he heard a moment later.

"Hey, Jacuzzi! Are you there? Answer if you are!"

"And answer if you're not!"

The two voices were innocent enough to belong to children, although they actually belonged to adults.

Nice went to the door and opened it to see a duo wearing innocent smiles to match their

voices.

"Oh, Nice! Long time no see! How have you been? We've been well, I think!"

"Health is most important, after all!"

When he heard those voices, Jacuzzi wobbled away from Chris over to the doorway.

"Oh, I'm so glad! I hadn't seen you in a while, and I started to worry that something happened..."

"Oh, we've been helping transport some things. It was pretty tough. Some crazy guys even attacked us!"

"They hit Who and Isaac!"

"What?!" Jacuzzi cried in surprise.

The two recounted the events of a few days before, almost affectionately.

"I don't know what would have happened if Ladd hadn't showed up."

"Eh? Ladd?" Jacuzzi was confused, hearing Ladd's name from Isaac's mouth all of a sudden.

And the two just kept on confusing him.

"But I wonder what those guys were up to, anyway, trying to kidnap us all of a sudden. They threw a smoke bomb... Maybe they were ninjas?"

"What do we do if they were *monsters*, Isaac?"

"Monsters?! Y-you don't mean the Rail Tracer..."

"Hyaaa! I'm scared, Isaac!"

Completely lost in the fast-flowing stream of words, Jacuzzi zeroed in on one name in particular.

"The-the Rail Tracer?!" he screeched, shuddering.

Nice clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Jacuzzi. That's not what we need to worry about!"

"Huh? Ah, oh, um, o-okay. I'm okay, Nice. I mean I'm not but I am."

All kinds of thoughts ran through Jacuzzi's mind. He was completely confused.

"*Transporting*"? *Transporting* what?

If they got the job from the Martillo Family, did that mean they had to transport something bad?

Were the attackers after the goods?

Jacuzzi didn't know they were just transporting food to a housing facility, and his mental image grew more and more exaggerated.

"Ah, that sounds dangerous! You should quit..."

"Huh? You think so?"

"Yes!"

He was grateful that he had been lucky enough to get them away from a perilous situation, but—

"What about your job, Jacuzzi? Is it dangerous?" Miria asked innocently, causing Jacuzzi to remember that he was in a more danger than them.

"Argh, that's right... we're the ones in danger..." Jacuzzi held his head in his hands.

"I don't know what's going on with you, but don't worry, Jacuzzi! Even when you're worried, if you *shintomekki* even fire feels cool!" Isaac volunteered unhelpfully.

"So cool!"

"Um...what does that mean?" Jacuzzi asked.

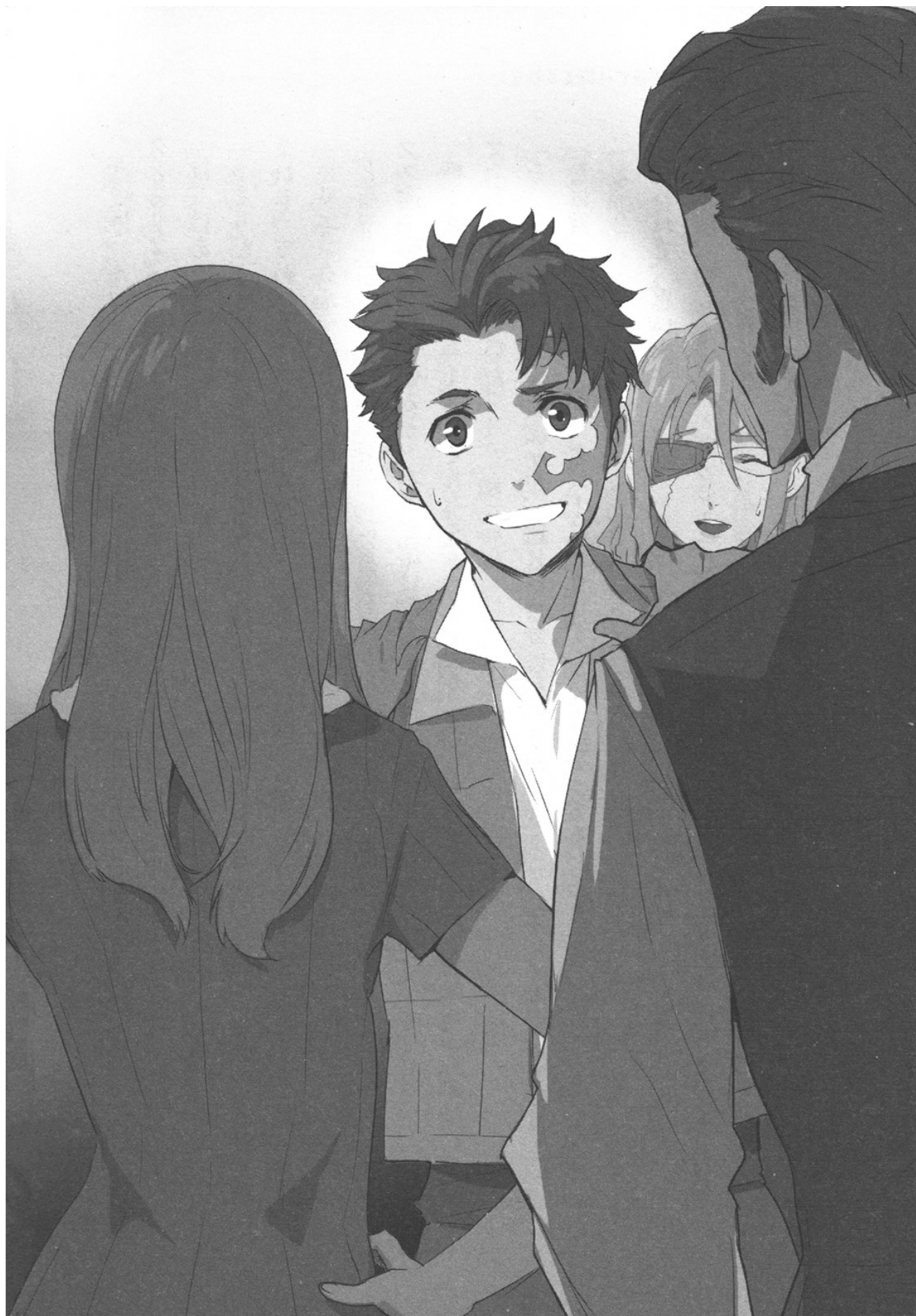
"Well, uh, it's an Asian proverb, see... In Japanese, *mekki* means 'plating,' and *shinto* means 'mind and body.' It means a bunch of other things, too, doesn't it, Miria?"

"Shintoism! Penetration! A new sword!"

Miria listed off all the different meanings of the word 'shinto' that she had heard from Ronnie and Yaguruma.

"O-oh..."

"In other words, if you wrap your body up in metal, God will pierce your heart and create a new you, with a katana in your hand! For you, fire will feel cool and ice will burn! You'll be a samurai!"



"It's Oriental magic!"

Apparently Isaac thought that "metal plating" meant actually coating an object with molten metal, and he was explaining with such fervor he seemed to ready to try the process on Jacuzzi right then and there.

Nice was a little worried, listening from next to them, but Jacuzzi himself seemed to be getting swept up in their energy.

"I guess you're right...I wonder if I could become someone new..."

"What are you talking about, man? You already became a samurai, didn't you?"

"Huh? ...Oh, right."

He remembered that he and Isaac had had this conversation a few years ago, on board the Flying Pussyfoot.

"But I don't feel like I've gotten all that strong..."

"Jacuzzi, that's not..."

Nice began to deny Jacuzzi's statement, but Isaac beat her to the punch.

"A samurai shouldn't worry about little details like that! You can just get stronger now!"

"It's part of growing up! Like Jack and the beanstalk! It's Spring-heeled Jack's Spring-heeled Jump!"

"Alright, Jacuzzi! Now let's *mekki* your *shinto*!"

"Wow, Isaac!"

Miria clapped as Isaac nodded dramatically. Jacuzzi's eyes welled up with tears of happiness. "Thanks, you guys."

Nice sighed, but she was smiling, too.

And then, still smiling, Isaac and Miria returned to the topic at hand.

"So, Jacuzzi, what's dangerous for you now?"

"What kind of job are you doing?"

After Jacuzzi's face returned to its previous shade of white, he started explaining his situation.

Christopher watched their exchange from a little ways away and commented to Ricardo next to him.

"My, those two are interesting. Don't you think?"

"I don't make a habit of labeling people according to how interesting they are," Ricardo said coldly. A moment later, he added to himself: "But..."

"They look like they're having fun, and you're jealous. Right?"

"..."

Ricardo answered with silence. Apparently Chris' words had hit the mark.

"You know, Ricardo, you should make more friends, too. You should meet someone your own age, chat like friends, fight over silly things, try to kill each other..."

Right after Chris added his final worrying item to the list, he began to look around as if he had just thought of something.

"Speaking of which, where did Rail go?"

"Out, apparently," Ricardo answered dully.

"She saw something in the newspaper a few days ago, and it looks like she's been doing a little investigation."

<=>

Somewhere in Little Italy Firo's apartment

Firo lived with Ennis and Czes in an apartment in an old stone building, but at the moment the place didn't look livable for anyone.

There had been an attack here a few days ago. A bomb had suddenly gone off inside, and Ennis had been abducted by some of Melvi's men.

The door and the furniture had been violently destroyed, and there were scorch marks

here and there. The sturdy kitchen table had been blasted to smithereens. Given the force of the explosion, it was a miracle that the outer stone wall wasn't damaged.

The one standing there looking at the terrible mess wasn't the owner of the apartment, but he had been directly involved in the explosion. Czeslaw Meyer.

The police and some detectives had come, but thanks to Victor apparently pulling some strings, they didn't question Czes and Firo in too much detail.

Czes was currently staying at Maiza's apartment, but he had returned here several times afterwards.

Of course there was the danger of another attack, so he was as careful as could be, but ever since Ennis' abduction there had been no attacks on any of the Martillo Family or their associates.

It bothered him a bit that he hadn't seen the capo Ronnie Schiatto at all, but he figured he was probably working something out in the shadows.

Czes didn't know that Ronnie had actually disappeared, so he wasn't particularly concerned.

He stared at the disaster from the entryway—the door had been blasted off—and pondered the situation.

He had run into the other people who lived in the building a number of times, but they hadn't hounded him for any information.

It was probably because the Martillo Family was in charge of the building, including its landlords and residents.

Maybe the Martillos had assumed that this sort of thing was a matter of course and created a procedure for everyone to follow. Maybe they had given enough bribe money to shut up anyone who was unhappy after what happened. Maybe the residents simply felt it was their duty towards the Martillos. He didn't know.

But instead of being comforting, their silence was painful for Czes.

Dammit, I should have known better. I really owe Firo and Ennis for this.

In all honesty, even if Firo and Ennis weren't already worried about Czes, they weren't the type to make him feel responsible for the situation. Czes knew that, but that was why he couldn't allow himself to be spoiled by their kindness.

The thought put Czes in a bad mood.

Before he came to this city, he probably wouldn't have worried so much over something like this.

Quite the opposite—before, he had taken advantage of his child's body, using his appearance to turn people's kindness against them and manipulate them.

But ever since the Flying Pussyfoot, a definite change was rising up inside of Czes.

Although, that didn't mean Czes himself distinctly recognized that change for what it was.

He entered the room and looked around at the broken furniture—

And after about half a minute, he heard an innocent child's voice from the doorway.

"Hellooo...oh."

"?"

Czes turned around to see a child standing there. He suddenly reacted, as if the child looked familiar. "You're the kid who was with Ronnie at Firo's casino, aren't you...?"

"Huh? Have we met before?"

"No...I just saw you from a distance."

He had only seen the kid from afar when he had seen Ennis following Ronnie's group.

But he remembered the characteristic facial scars very clearly.

At first glance, the child appeared to be a boy, but something seemed off to Czes.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" he asked directly.

"Either one, I don't really care. Oh, and my name's Rail. Nice to meet you," the child said, playing innocent, before walking right into Firo's apartment. She looked about the same age as Czes. "So, do you live here, or are you just a local kid coming to see what all the fuss is about?"

"...I'm kinda like Firo's little brother."

"Oh, I see. Then you're in a real mess, huh? Me, I'm just nosy passerby," Rail said with a completely unsympathetic smile. After a moment, she seemed to remember something else. "Wait....you live with Firo and Ennis? You're Czeslaw Meyer?"

Czes kicked his caution up a notch at hearing his own name. He carefully began to feel out the newcomer, doing his best to play the part of the innocent child.

"Huh?! H-how do you know my name...?"

But his performance ended up being unnecessary.

"Haha! You don't need to act like a little kid around me. You're over 200 years old, aren'tcha? You're an old man!"

"..."

He's exactly right. Is he connected to immortals? If so, there's no reason to act like a child, Czes decided.

After letting out a deep sigh, he narrowed his eyes. "So, what, then? Who paid you to come here? Are you one of Szilard's?" he asked.

"I'm just me. And I don't work for anybody. If anything I'm Chris's...Christopher's friend."

"Christopher...Oh, the one helping Firo with work."

"Yup, so for now, just think of me as a friend of the Martillos, okay?"

Rail hadn't actually said anything about who she was, so Czes continued cautiously. "Who told you about me?"

"...That doesn't matter, does it? Ah, don't worry. I'm not immortal, and I can't devour you."

"You're asking me to trust you?"

"I'm telling the truth! And don't do something stupid and try to test it by killing me or something. We don't need the police getting involved," Rail snickered. She waved her hand as if to brush away Czes' doubtful gaze. "I'm telling you, calm down. I just saw there was an explosion in the newspaper, and I was interested in what kind of bomb they used." She hummed to herself as she observed the room. "So it only blew up the inside, not the outer wall, huh. If it was one of mine it mighta brought the whole place down."

"...One of yours?" Czes frowned.

Rail reached into her coat pocket and pulled out something that looked like a small egg. She rolled it around between her fingers. "Yeah, one of mine," she said with amusement. "What do you think? Wanna see what it does that body of yours?"

"That's a bomb...?"

"Yeah. Hold on...here, this is what's inside."

Rail pulled something else from her pocket. It was a tiny bottle about the size of her pinky finger tip, and inside was a powder dyed a faint shade of pink.

"You don't want fire anywhere near this. If I set this off, it'd probably bring down the whole building."

Rail shook the little bottle in her hand, but she stopped for a moment and tilted her head as she noticed that Czes' complexion had clearly changed.

"That's...an explosive?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"Did you make it?" Czes asked with a taut expression.

Rail was slightly taken aback at how adultlike he sounded and answered seriously in turn. "No. Unfortunately, I didn't. I bought it in Hollywood, but I heard it was originally stolen cargo from a train."

Nice was the one who had given her that information, but she didn't mention Jacuzzi's name, perhaps out of a sense of duty, or camaraderie.

"It's totally different from other explosives on the market. I don't know what it's called, though," Rail shrugged.

Czes looked down. "...Ice Pop."

"Huh?"

"'Strawberry Ice Pop.' That's what it's called."

Ice Pop.

That was the name of the stick-shaped frozen treat created in 1924, later introduced to Japan as "Ice Candy."

"What...are you saying?"

"How much do you know about me?"

"Uhh...well, you're an immortal who looks like a kid and you live with another immortal named Firo and a homunculus named Ennis. You're one of the guys from the Advenna Avis...and that's about it."

"I see. So you really only know the surface."

Czes gave a big sigh and looked up at the ceiling.

"I may have been just a child when I boarded the Advenna Avis, but I'm an alchemist over 200 years old. I'm not on the level of my father or Begg, but I can make a few things myself."

"..."

"That powder doesn't just explode. It gives off a certain kind of flash, doesn't it?"

"How do you know that?"

Rail had half-guessed the answer already, but she asked just to make sure.

Czes answered with a self-deprecating smile. "Because explosives are my specialty."

The immortal in the form of a child looked long and hard at the pink powder in Rail's hands, as if reminiscing on his youth from only a few years ago.

"Because I'm the one who made it."

<=>

One day In front of Fred's clinic

Fred's helper, Who, was talking to another man in front of the clinic. Some parts from the car that Graham had taken apart were still on the ground next to the door.

"It's a real shame you have to quit today."

The other man held a large bag filled with clothes and other things and shook his head.

"No, no," Lebreau answered. "I'm terribly sorry to leave you shorthanded all of a sudden."

"Don't worry about it. Your dad's sick, isn't he? Go on home."

Lebreau had to leave his job so suddenly because he had gotten word that his father had collapsed at his home in Florida. Now, he had to return to take over the family business.

They hadn't known each other for long, but Who was a little sad that Lebreau had to quit so suddenly. He didn't show his feelings on the outside, though, and sent him off with a smile.

"All that's happened lately is those freaks attacking us, anyway. I have no idea what they were after, but I think it's the right choice to stay away for a bit."

"Will you be all right, Who?"

"Eh, it's not like I have anywhere else to go... Plus, that sort of thing used to happen to me all the time. That's what every day is like, when you're with Ladd."

Who shook his head with a sour look at the memory.

"Ladd...oh, the one who saved us yesterday, right? I wanted to give him my thanks, but..."

"Nah, I'll tell him for you. It's best not to get too involved with him."

Who looked away and took the topic in another direction.

"Don't worry about work. Fred's back, and the newbies are working pretty hard for us, too."

"But those two are going to take the next three days off, aren't they? Starting tomorrow?"

"Yeah...sounds like they have to help a friend with his work. But they've taken enough goods to the welfare house to last a little while, so there's no problem."

After a bit more conversation in that vein, Lebreau left the clinic behind with a polite goodbye.

"..."

He walked for a little while silently, but as soon as he turned the corner, he erupted into laughter, unable to hold it in any longer.

"Haha! My father collapsed? Really?"

What a load of nonsense. It's not even subtle. I can't believe I got away with it.

He imagined what he must have looked like to the others, playing the role of a dutiful son. Lebreau couldn't stop laughing.

Take over the family business, huh?

Well, as much as I would love to continue my father's little witch-hunting shows, it's best to save that for another time.

Anyway, that couple Isaac and Miria...

If they're going to take the next three days off, does that mean they're going to attend? Sounds interesting.

Lebreau's eyes narrowed behind his dense bangs, He chuckled, his mind racing as he thought about what would happen next.

Honestly, it's gotten even bigger than I imagined. That's why life is so interesting. The best. I'm so glad I became immortal.

I got Czes, Huey, and Maiza all up on stage without a hitch, and that crazy Smile Junkie isn't here, either. It really is perfect!

Lebreau thanked his fate, looking up at the night sky.

He didn't believe in God, nor was he an atheist.

"If a God exists, that's fine, and if he doesn't, that's fine, too. Things I can't see with my eyes are all the same to me."

That was his motto these days.

This is great. The Dormentaires, the Runoratas, Huey, and even the Martillos are all nicely entangled now. The only ones I need to be careful of are Victor and Beriam. They could ruin everything.

Well, even then it could turn into an interesting show.

Now, let's go give Upham a little push, shall we?

Lebreau was considering all kinds of things, but he wasn't planning to manipulate the entire flow according to some grand master plan.

He was just scattering seeds.

And as for the next three days, the casino party at Ra's Lance, he didn't know what kind of influence he would have, or even if his seeds would sprout.

But he just wanted to see.

He wanted to see them all—the people being tormented by fate, the pure boys and girls, and his favorite "actors." He wanted to see every moment as they laughed, cried, despaired, and believed in hope. He wanted to see it all.

That was the only thing inside him.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

He had temporary goals and desires, but no overarching ambitions.

That was the big difference between him and Huey Laforet.

They both schemed to embroil many people in a certain "something," and they would both accept the results in their entirety. But while they appeared similar, their natures were completely different.

Huey wanted to know all kinds of things for a specific purpose.

Lebreau wanted to watch all kinds of things for his own pleasure.

Huey had a master plan, and Lebreau wallowed in his own ill-defined pleasure.

To Huey, people were nothing more than experimental subjects, and to Lebreau, they were his beloved actors. Huey held no malicious intent towards his guinea pigs, but Lebreau held a great deal of it towards his actors.

Regardless, they were equally obnoxious for everyone involved.

What would happen from now on to New York now that these two liabilities had set their sights on it?

Not even the culprits themselves could say.

And, the time for gambling began.

Chapter 21 -- There's no Way Nothing will Happen

One day in February In front of Ra's Lance

It truly looked like a spear piercing the heavens.

A short ways away from Manhattan, on the coast of New York, a building majestically towered over the commercial buildings surrounding it.

It was a "cutting edge" high-rise in two ways. The building got sharper and sharper the higher it got, and its design was certainly novel for a Manhattan skyscraper.

It was even more pointed than the Empire State Building, and it included a hotel and facilities for various businesses. Although at the moment, it was surrounded by a vaguely tense atmosphere.

Some people with connections to the building knew the reason why.

This building, nicknamed Ra's Lance, would host an illegal casino party whose guests would include many wealthy locals.

Of course, strict law-abiding citizens and people who weren't interested in gambling would not attend. But they wouldn't carelessly inform the police, either.

An Eastern Mafia Family, the Runoratas, would be hosting the party, and several other gangs would be in attendance. There was no way anyone would casually poke their noses into the matter and incur the wrath of those kinds of people, so they mostly kept their mouths shut.

Admittedly, there were several rich people who seemed likely to inform the police, but the Runorata Family didn't send them any invitations in the first place, thanks to whatever standards they used to assess their neighbors' moral sensibilities.

Furthermore, the tension surrounding the building wouldn't go away after just one day, because the casino party would last for three.

Initially, the party had been planned for the day of the casino's grand opening only, but it

was suddenly changed to three days in a row. Maybe it was because they had so many attendees.

Of course, it was fine to attend on only one day, and many organizations refused to come for all three days, wary of police intervention or traps, but about half of them chose to come for the full scheduled event.

The Martillo Family and the Gandor Family belonged to the latter category.

The Martillos especially had no reason to back down, now that Melvi had picked a fight with them.

Several other gangs took the risk of accepting the Runoratas' invitation, with their own expectations of the consequences, but—

In the end, gangsters and millionaires were not the only ones who gathered there.

It was almost evening, and the beginning of the event was approaching.

Those who had been drawn into the current and the ones who created their own current, all with their own expectations, were gathering around Ra's Lance.

As if they believed they would take hold of the great spear rising toward the sky and plunge it into their prey.

<=>

Behind Ra's Lance Parking lot

"A blade sharp, yet dull, piercing the eardrums of the very heavens, eviscerating the clouds... God himself cries out, condemning this frenzy of greed! Applaud! A standing ovation! Desire will take the place of God, and God will return to pure chaos...!"

"..."

"Man has made his testimony, as only man can do! And we have cried out accordingly, our strangled cry that we shall not allow heaven to exist! Shall we not rise? Shall we not ascend the stairway into this hell in the heavenlaa—ghuh!"

"Shut up."

The bearded man, wearing a hat and speaking in an unsettling way, was called Poet.

A beautiful woman wearing a green dress, Sickle, stabbed her fingers into his temples.

"Why can't you just say 'What a weird-looking building' like everyone else?"

"Ugh...such honesty may seem a virtue at first glance, but it is nothing more than deceit posing as innocence, nothing other than a sentimental gaze on all the world! Distrusting no one, they shout with hearts unsullied! 'This world is exactly as I expect! There is nothing to doubt! I am grateful to myself and the blessing of a tepid fortuitous turn!' And they resolve to coerce the others of the world. They wield the power of candor, and give no quarter! Truly, just like the aristocrats earrrrr—"

Poet shouted from the ground until Sickle dug her heel hard into his back.

"Maybe you shouldn't trust everything your brain tells you."

In a corner of the parking lot behind Ra's Lance, among row after neat row of expensive cars belonging to the Mafia, there was a group that gave off an unusual air.

They were the Lamia, a subgroup of Huey's organization "Larvae."

The dialogue between Poet and Sickle broke the ice for the other, previously silent members to raise their voices.

"But, w-we're pretty out in the open where people can see us. Do you think we'll be okay?" asked Frank, a 6-foot-tall boy who looked like a young child. Although he had been severely injured during the incident in Chicago, he seemed to be back in action, looking around nervously. "I w-wonder if Rail will come, too," he mumbled.

"Whatever he's doing, he's doing it with Chris," answered Chi, the Asian man. "That's all."

"Oh. Well, that makes me feel better," Frank said, a bit relieved.

A girl wearing a knit cap pulled so low it covered her eyes and a heavy coat looked down sadly. "But...Christopher might not ever come back," she said.

"I dunno about that," replied a woman with a beautiful pattern tattooed on her face. "Either way, Master Huey said to leave it alone. There's no problem."

There were all kinds gathered there—a man in a tailcoat, a muscular, bespectacled man naked from the waist up, and one with a skull mask that made its wearer's age and gender impossible to tell.

Thanks to the circus tent erected in an open area nearby, people who passed by just thought they were part of the circus troupe and didn't pay them much heed.

Even though the Lamia themselves didn't know what the circus tent was for.

<=>

In the tent

There was a giant tent erected next to Ra's Lance.

However, at the moment there were nothing installed inside, and it was just a deserted empty space.

There were a few scattered people in that space, including two small figures standing in the middle: Bartolo Runorata's grandson Cazze, and Senator Beriam's daughter Mary.

"What do you use this tent for?" Mary tilted her head to the side.

Cazze grinned cheerfully. "It's a house for my friend!"

"?"

"Eheheh, Mary, you'll be so surprised when you meet Charlie!"

Two men stood a slight ways away, watching the children.

Their faces were identical, and they wore matching pairs of goggles on their heads.

The twins Gabriel and Juliano were serving as Cazze's bodyguards on Bartolo's orders.

Originally they were Bartolo's bodyguards, and as guardians of the boss' family they kept a low profile.

But, on Bartolo's orders, they had served as Cazze's bodyguards exclusively for the past month or so.

"Now, then, the question is when Charlie will arrive," Gabriel commented.

"Should be sometime tonight," Juliano replied.

Gabriel spoke like a gentleman and Juliano spoke like a gangster, but they seemed to get

along quite well, and they referred to each other in the first person, giving their speech an odd flavor.

The two wouldn't hesitate to put their lives on the line for Bartolo and Cazze, but this time they had quite a few thoughts of their own. They looked around with more caution than normal as they conversed.

"But...why is Senator Beriam's daughter here today?"

"Hell if we know. There's no way she's gonna go gambling at the casino. Maybe the Don and Beriam have some kind of deal."

"Indeed. If this is Mr. Bartolo's intention, there is no use in enquiring further."

"Yeah, no reason to question it."

The two narrowed their eyes and nodded, then glanced at each other.

"What shall we do if Mr. Beriam is scheming something?"

"Maybe we should cut off the kid's ear and sent it to her dad?"

"That is out of the question. She's a friend of Master Cazze. We shouldn't make him sad."

"Aw, yeah, he would be sad."

Then, looking away, they smiled.

They were bodyguards, but at the same time they were the Runorata Family's number one "hunters." As they watched over Cazze, deep down they were chomping at the bit.

Waiting for Bartolo, or even Cazze to tell them the name of their prey.

And the hounds just waited in silence.

<=>

The parking lot

"By the way, boss, what happened to Adele and Liza?" asked the tattooed girl.

"Don't call me your boss," Sickie answered. "We're all equals here."

She wasn't trying to be modest; her words were heartfelt. Actually, even though Sickle had a violent temper, she had the leadership skills and initiative to get things done, so she was quite respected within the Lamia.

"Adele is still Tim's bodyguard, like usual. Liza seems to be looking for someone."

"Looking for someone?"

"Yeah, some guy who betrayed the Lemures way back when."

<=>

Along the coast

"...Hell of a lot of birds flying around today, too."

Spike could hear them cawing from outside the window and muttered to himself in the backseat of a car driving down the road.

He was blind, so next to him Sonja looked out the window at the sky instead.

"You're right! There's lots of birds flying around. I've never seen this kind before~"

There were countless birds circling around, although she couldn't see them well from here.

They weren't in formation like a flock, but scattered all over the city, as if they were flying around looking for something.

"Nice, nice. Now imagine shooting all those birds down. It'll be good experience, even if it's just in your head."

Sonja replied to Spikes' violent order without any apparent doubts. "Roger!"

Pamela narrowed her eyes in the driver's seat. "...I certainly hope you aren't making her imagine killing a living creature because you want to make her kill a person."

Spike answered Pamela's cautious words with a smirk. "I dunno. It depends, sometimes you gotta shoot people. Who or what you shoot changes with the situation. If you don't want her killing people, take it up with Beriam, not me."

"..."

Pamela was silent, but Lana piped up from the passenger's seat next to her.

"Hey, I just thought of something."

"It probably isn't anything worth saying, so shut it."

"Birds like to gather around shiny things, right?"

"Yes, and I more or less know where this is going, so shut it."

Pamela, still driving, tried to keep Lana from speaking, but to no avail.

"So if we trained birds to pick up jewels and things that people dropped, we could make a killing!"

"Maybe, if we lived in a country full of absentminded, clumsy millionaires who drop their jewels everywhere and apathetic citizens who just leave them on the ground."

"If we sent them into a casino, I wonder if they'd take the chips..."

"No, because that's when people actually would shoot them."

She was tired of arguing with Lana, but it was probably better than talking to Spike, so she played along with Lana's naïve idea.

But then Spike cut in, ignoring Pamela's attitude. "So what brought this on? You don't wanna get in on the casino party, do you?"

"...Not really. A while back I won big at a casino, so I thought I'd try my luck again. For old time's sake."

She didn't tell Spike about the cheating part.

There was no way she could tell him that she actually wanted to get enough money to escape from Senator Beriam, so she planned to talk her way out, but—

"Hey! What do you mean, you won big?! Pamela, were you gambling behind our backs?!"

"..."

Set upon from an unexpected direction, Pamela started trying to figure out how to cover Lana's mouth and drive at the same time.

"Well, I don't know what you're thinking, but there's nothing I can do about it. There's gonna be a swarm of Mafia, not just the Runoratas....and a hell of a lot of guys who don't

think much of Beriam. I wonder what would happen to Beriam's housekeepers if they found them at the party?"

Spike smirked sarcastically, but Sonja was the one to reply. "Don't worry~"

"Huh?"

"If anything happens, I know Neider will come save me," Sonja declared innocently.

Spike's mouth dropped open for a moment—then he remembered the Neider he knew, along with how he had died, and he burst into a flood of laughter.

"Ahahahahaha! Oh, that's a good one! Your boyfriend Neider's gonna come swooping down into a building filled with Mafia, takin' 'em out left and right like a goddamn hero of justice!"

"Mmhmm~" Sonja nodded with a smile.

Spike laughed even harder at that.

"Heheheh, ahahaha! That's great! Nothing like the guy I know!"

After he had laughed for a while, Spike thought.

Oh, but if it is the same Neider, he'd never show up somewhere that dangerous in the first place. ...Well, maybe he would. He always was good at sniffing out the heavyweights and then kissing their asses.

But a two-bit loser like him wouldn't even last the night.

<=>

Ra's Lance, 3rd floor Restaurant

"Um...why are you hiding your face like that?" Eve Genoard asked.

"So people can't see my face, obviously," Neider answered confidently.

At the moment, Neider was waiting in the restaurant with Eve, gearing up before they joined the fray at the casino party.

Eve's servants Benjamin and Samasa had expressed their disapproval of her being alone with an unfamiliar gambler, but Eve's passion towards bringing her brother back finally got through to them, and now here they were.

It was a classy restaurant in its own way, but Neider kept his hat low over his eyes even after he sat down. He didn't try to take off his heavy scarf, either.

"Your face?"

"Yeah. We need to think like the gambling's already begun. The best gamblers will pick up on all kinds of tells and use them against you, like your expression, where your eyes are, how your lips tremble. The girls will use their sex to their advantage, too. Even now, anyone who knows I'm gambling for you probably came here to figure out my tells."

Neider smoothly constructed a sensible lie, and Eve apparently went for it hook, line and sinker because she nodded enthusiastically and even apologized to him.

"Oh, I see! I'm sorry, I don't know anything about—"

"No, don't worry, don't worry! This is basic stuff for a gambler, but I'm sure it looks pretty strange to a layperson like you. It's not your fault."

Neider shook his head shamelessly, but inside he was filled with anxiety, even fear, of when Hilton would find him.

He thought about all the lies flowing from his mouth to cover up that fear, how easily he had tricked Eve. He really did have a gift for conning people. He began to feel guilty.

Then he started talking calmly to Eve in order to keep a lid on that guilt. "We'll be here for three days, so first for today we'll check out the playing field. We'll see if your brother's here or not."

"Okay!" After her energetic answer, Eve looked hard at Neider again. "...Neider."

"What's the matter?"

"Thank you so much for indulging me. I'm really being quite selfish."

"...It's an official contract. You don't owe me any thanks."

Neider instinctively looked away from the girl's earnest eyes.

He knew he wasn't worthy to meet that gaze. Not the way he was.

Still...who would make a sweet girl like this suffer? This Dallas guy sounds like a real asshole, he thought.

Sonja's face appeared in his mind.

Ah, shit. Like I have any room to point fingers.

He'd left her behind and gone off to do whatever he wanted in his career as a con artist.

Did he have the right to call anyone an asshole at this point?

Neider decided to hold off making any judgments about Dallas until he at least met the man in person.

...He might end up being surprisingly similar to me.

<=>

Ra's Lance
2nd floor lobby

While Neider was hiding his face—

Another man's scowl was plain as day, although the rest of his body was hidden.

"Shit...no doubt about it, that's them..."

His eyes were filled with hatred towards the group—and also intense fear.

The man was disguised with a false beard he had bought at a general store and a pair of fake glasses.

He wore a hat low over his eyes, thoroughly hiding his face.

Dallas Genoard hid behind a pillar in the lobby and ground his teeth together.

He was looking at the three men descending the stairs of the lobby—the Gandor brothers.

Dallas had once killed their subordinates, and even shot the brothers themselves.

In return, they had sent Dallas to the bottom of the Hudson River to spend a few years drowning over and over.

Even after he had regained his freedom, Dallas had continued his self-indulgent life without repenting of his own past wrongdoings, but, unsurprisingly, he stayed away from the Gandors.

He had never in his wildest dreams imagined that the Gandor Family would show up at a casino party hosted by the Runoratas.

What the hell are they doing here?! Didn't they fight with the Runoratas?

To Dallas, this casino party was just a way to get some fast and easy cash.

His sister had been outraged by an invitation from the ones who killed her father and brother, but Dallas wasn't distressed in the slightest about the deaths of his family. In fact, he was quite pleased with the Runoratas for taking care of the ones who had shunned him as incompetent.

That was why he went to the Runorata party without a hint of shame.

Actually, he was even planning to blackmail the money out of them. *"I'll make it so my dad and brother never happened...you follow?"*

Guns and knives couldn't kill him now that he had drunk the wine, incomplete or no, and that unique trait made him a bit more daring with regards to the Runoratas.

But the Gandors were a different story.

For Dallas, they were a much bigger problem than the Runorata Family.

Dallas broke into a damp, cold sweat as he remembered the chill of the bottom of the river and the feel of water entering his lungs.

Dammit...but this is my big chance.

For the past half month or so, he had been raising money in his own dishonest ways. There was no way he could give up now.

Plus, his pride as a delinquent wouldn't allow him to run from the Gandors with his tail tucked between his legs.

After Dallas had seen them in the parking lot, he had run to a general store in a panic and bought a disguise, and now here he was.

Well they'll never figure out it's me.

Oddly enough, that disguise was exactly like the one preferred by a certain redhead, but—

Dallas had no way of knowing that.³

<=>

On the other hand—

"Alright...let's start getting ready," Luck said, checking his watch after he had come down the stairs into the lobby.

"..."

"Yeah, let's hit 'em first and hit 'em hard!"

Luck found the silence of his oldest brother and the violent shouts of the middle brother reassuring in their predictability. Then he shifted his gaze to the others.

"Hey, Luck, if any weirdoes show up, can I kill them? Can I, *amigo*?"

"No."

"Aww, come on...."

"Today, especially. Do not, under any circumstances, draw your swords unless I give the signal."

Maria was currently the only one of the assassins accompanying them.

There were quite a few of them; it would be a hindrance for them all to stay together.

Ladd and the others were currently scattered around the area near the hotel. They would serve as backup, should the need arise. If anything unusual happened, they had made a plan to assemble here at Ra's Lance.

Although they aren't exactly the type to do what we want them to... Luck thought.

"Hmph," pouted Maria. "You're so mean, *amigo*."

"He has to be~ There's a lot of people here at the party today. They'll get mad if you cause trouble~"

³ lit. Neider. Pretty sure this is a typo.

The one cautioning Maria was the Gandor Family torture specialist, Tick Jefferson. Although his scissors weren't in his hands like usual, several pairs still dangled from his belt in special sheathes.

"Fine...I get it, *amigo*. I'll behave if you say so, Tick."

"Thanks, Miss Maria~"

Luck looked at the man smiling like a child and Maria reluctantly obeying him. He sighed quietly.

Ever since an incident two years ago, Maria had started obediently listening to Tick for some reason.

Tick was a fairly broken person in his own way, but given how helpful he was in the chain of command, he was far better than Maria and the others.

This time, he had brought Tick for several reasons, including putting the brakes on Maria.

He had imagined many situations, prepared to accept whatever results they brought, but Luck still wanted all of his precautions to end as needless worries.

<=>

Near Ra's Lance A warehouse on the harbor

"Alright, kids, listen up. First and foremost, there's no way this is going to end with nothing happening. That's a fact."

This warehouse served as a temporary branch of the DOI.

Victor, the vice-director of the subdivision that dealt with immortals, was currently giving a speech to his assembled subordinates.

"If nothing happens, that's the worst-case scenario. It means that something *did* happen, and we just missed it." Victor rapped his pointer on the corkboard and turned his eyes to the documents pinned to it. "At the very least, do *not* take your eyes off the Dormentaires."

Drawn on one of the documents was the Dormentaire family crest—an hourglass.

"The point is that they chose now to show up. They've been keeping themselves out of sight up till now, and the fact that they're suddenly showing their faces probably means that they've got their shit together enough that they can afford to be visible."

One of his subordinates raised an objection.

"But Vice-Director. Didn't the higher-ups say we weren't allowed to investigate that ship?"

"Just the ship, right?"

"Well, actually, the whole Dormентаire family..."

"If you go up the chain from the ship, you can't tell who's a Dormентаire and who's a mafioso in the wrong place at the wrong time, right? Or at least I can't. And I can't expect you to tell if I can't tell. Right?"

The investigators' eyes widened as their boss suddenly started spouting nonsense, but—

Bill, the one who had worked under Victor the longest, calmly explained.

"Ah—...what the vice-director is trying to say is that he'll take full responsibility, so use that excuse to pretend you're keeping an eye on the Mafia."

"Don't just say it! When you just go and explain it right in front of me, it makes me look bad!"

"Hmm...I don't think there's much we can do to make your image worse, though," Bill said.

Victor ground his teeth. "...You're right. Up until now we've just been running around playing catch-up, and all we have to show for it is Agent Noah in the hospital. We're at the bottom of the pile."

While admonishing himself, Victor spoke again to his subordinates.

"That's why we're gonna climb out of this well. Those guys think they're gonna win? Well, we're gonna take them by the ankles and drag every last one of 'em off their high horses. Let them taste the dirt. Right now we're the ones on the ground, so that's all we can do.

"Let's show 'em it doesn't matter if you're high on your throne or down in the mud; there's no difference in the eyes of the law."

<=>

Near Ra's Lance
On the roof of a hotel

On top of relatively new hotel, across the street from Ra's Lance, two girls were looking up at the red-tinted sky.

One was still a young girl, and the other was a young woman around the age of twenty.

Liza, the younger one, sighed. "Why do I have to patrol with you?" she asked moodily.

The woman who looked so much like her, Chane, looked down with a troubled expression in response. "..."

She looked at Liza's back and thought to herself.

My little sister... I can't believe it. It's so sudden...

After Chane had reunited with her father, the girl had been introduced as her sister.

Liza certainly looked just like her father and Chane herself, but Chane had been completely unprepared for the news. Plus, there had been no further explanation, leaving Chane confused and bewildered.

The thought had hardly crossed her mind that her father might have family besides her.

Speaking of which, she could only vaguely remember that the woman who threw chakram at her on the Mist Wall was also named "Liza."

Although, that "Liza"'s voice was completely different, so she didn't think any more of it.

It was possible that her father or someone else had insinuated that she had a sister before, but Chane prioritized her father so much that it may very well have gone in one ear and out the other as irrelevant information.

Therefore, now that she was seeing her face to face, Chane was confused, unsure how to relate to this "sister" of hers.

Regardless, Liza had apparently known about Chane for quite some time.

—"So, how's your boyfriend, the redhead?" she had asked on their first meeting.

Chane's eyes had widened instinctively, and Liza had puffed out her cheeks in mild annoyance at the faint blush on her sister's face.

—*"Yep, you're just like I thought!"*

Why does she hardly ever look me in the eye? Chane thought. *I must have done something to make her hate me.*

Chane didn't know her sister's own complicated situation and began to brood, certain that it was something wrong with her.

But she knew this matter and her orders from Huey were two different matters, so her heart was not in so much turmoil that it hindered her work.

Still, she wasn't satisfied with the situation.

The moment her heart wavered, even just a little, was the moment she failed as the flawless pawn her father wished for.

She didn't mind being a pawn, and she couldn't stand the thought of losing her edge, no matter how little.

At least, until four years ago.

I have to go back. Back to the way I was then. Father has returned. If I can't go back, my life has no meaning.

As she thought, Liza turned around to face her. "Hey."

"...?"

"That guy Firo Prochainezo came here to meet with Daddy, didn't he?"

"..." Chane nodded silently.

It was a little after her father had returned.

Firo Prochainezo had come to her father's hideout, at her father's apparent request, and they had discussed something in private.

Chane recognized his face a little, but that was the extent of their relationship.

He seemed to be an old friend of Claire's, as his name frequently came up when Claire told stories from his past, and she saw him in the city from time to time. Back when the Mist Wall incident happened in 1933, she remembered that he happened to be there as well.

But she had almost no memory of spending much time with him, just enough for Claire

to exchange pleasantries on her behalf.

She was rather surprised that he had come to visit her father.

She didn't know how they knew each other, but from Huey's attitude it seemed that they weren't enemies, at least.

Or so Chane had decided, since Liza had made no attempt to tell her that Firo was the one who had gouged out her father's eye.

"I wonder what they talked about."

"..." Chane shook her head to say "I don't know."

In fact, even after they had finished talking and come out of the room, there had been no evidence of a conflict between them, although Firo did have a bitter grimace on his face the entire time.

"Say hey to Cla—Felix for me," he'd greeted Chane, albeit tiredly, and left. Huey seemed to be in a good mood, so from the perspective of his daughters there was no cause for concern.

That meant they didn't have a hostile relationship, and there was no problem, or so Chane had determined.

Her father was probably putting together some kind of scheme, but that was no different from usual, and she didn't concern herself with that.

So why was her sister so concerned with him now?

Chane wondered, head tilted.

"So, Chane...." Liza responded. "What if your redhead started fighting with Daddy? Whose side would you be on?"

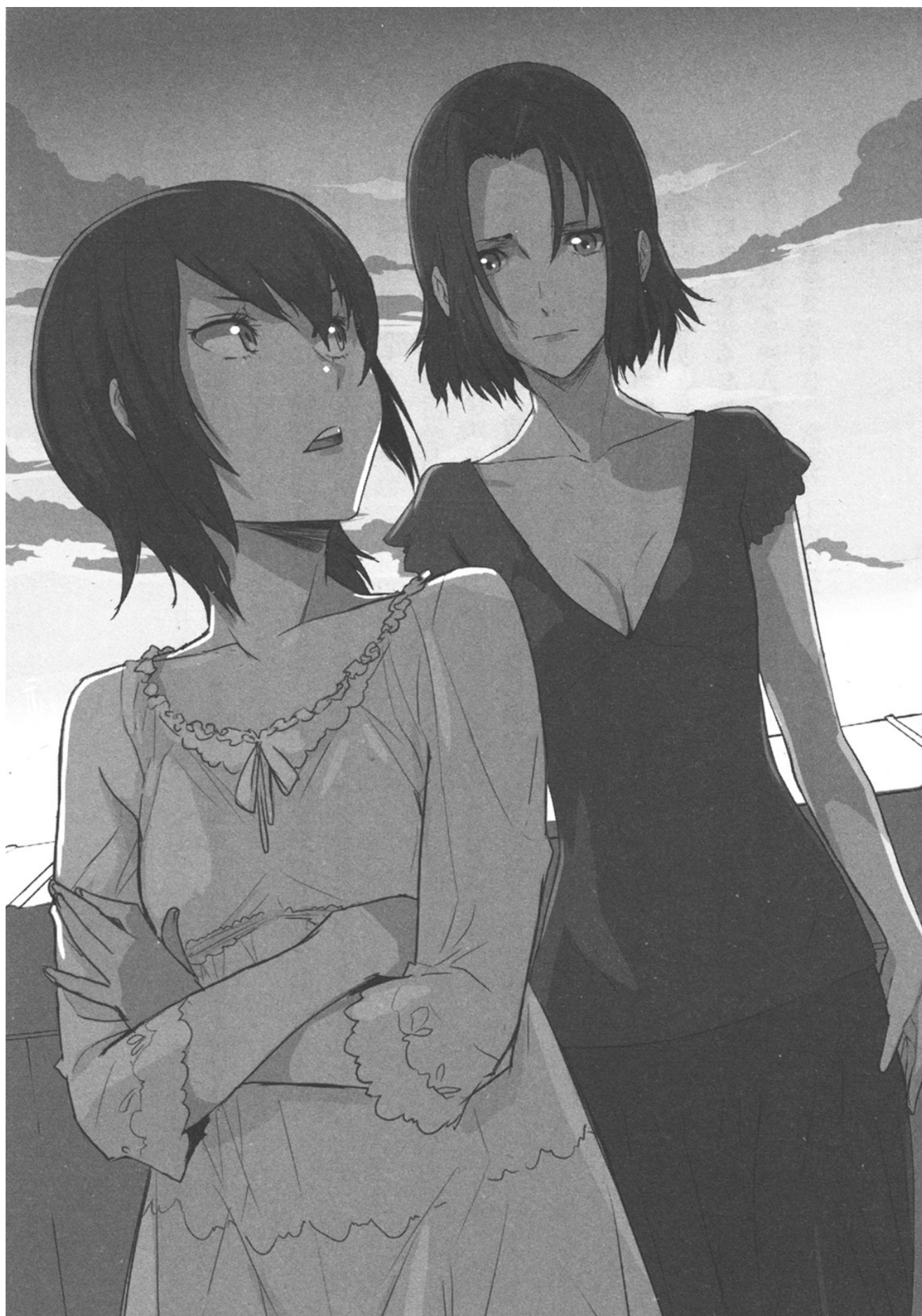
"...!"

Chane's expression froze. It was the question she didn't want to be asked.

And she remembered.

1933.

Back at the Mist Wall, the member of the Lamia with the same name—Liza—had asked her the same question.



Just a moment ago, she had thought they only had the same name, but perhaps they were connected somehow?

But she couldn't imagine this small girl throwing chakram at her on top of a building.

"Still can't answer, huh?"

"..."

Chane generally tried to steer clear of that question, and when she had been asked at the Mist Wall, Claire had been the one to answer.

—*"You can follow your orders and still pick me."*

—*"If your father orders you to kill me, then you don't even need to think twice about it. Try as hard as you can. I'll just avoid everything, and we can just keep on loving each other. Ahhh, this must be what they call true love."*⁴

Even now, she could remember it perfectly.

Chane had been relieved at his answer; it was so very *Claire*.

Still, it wasn't something she wanted to think about on her own.

She thought back to her contemplations in the shower, right before she had reunited with her father.

If it really did come down to that, what in the world should she do?

If such a situation really arose—she would probably choose her father after all.

Maybe she would attack Claire.

The reason she could decide to do so even in the face of her hesitation was because she believed in Claire.

Claire, with his inhuman strength, could probably evade all of her attacks.

At the same time, she didn't truly think that answer was good enough.

Wasn't she just relieved because she knew Claire wouldn't die?

What if her father ordered her to poison his food? Claire would eat anything she gave him, no questions asked.

⁴ These lines are from Anonspore's translation of 1933, for consistency's sake.

Or maybe he would be able to tell from her complexion?

I can't do this. When I think about it, I just... I...!

Her entire being up until now was slipping away.

Her new self was eroding her identity, or so it felt, and the sense that she was losing herself waged enough of an assault on her mind to make her a bit lightheaded.

Even now, if either Huey or Claire were there, her heart would be calm.

Perhaps she would be frank with them and tell them everything.

But right now, neither one was there.

For the next three days, Claire would be at Ra's Lance with Melvi. Her father would be carrying out his "true objective" a little ways away from here.

That was why she only had herself to steady herself.

Remember.

Remember.

Who you were then.

When you were just your father's blade.

Remember the sensation of piercing human flesh.

Remember the moments your blade thrust between someone's ribs.

Remember the moments you take a life.

Remember the moments you returned dust to dust.

Remember the moments you judged and executed Father's enemies.

Remember, remember, remember—

"Chane, what's the matter?"

"...!"

Chane suddenly came to at Liza's voice.

"..."

She should probably write her answer.

As she thought about whether she should carve it into the floor nearby, Chane suddenly froze.

The atmosphere around Liza had clearly changed.

"...?"

Chane tilted her head to ask what the matter was, when Liza muttered to herself.

"...Found him."

"?"

"That man...he's here...!"

A moment later, Liza said a name—and a wind blew through Chane's entire body from head to toe.

There was no longer any hesitation, any emotion at all on her face. With eyes like a doll, or a machine, she carved the following words into the wall next to Liza.

"I will kill him."

<=>

"? What the matter, Neider?" Eve asked.

"Hm?" Neider answered, nonplussed. "O-oh...sorry." He continued doubtfully, glancing out the window. "Look...see that bird sitting on that window?"

"Oh, yes... It's unusual to see that kind around here."

There was a single bird sitting on a tall lamppost outside the window.

The bird was staring at him, and looking at it gave Neider a strange chill.

"It feels like...it's glaring at me..." he muttered. "Like it wants to kill me..."

<=>

"Y'know, I thought there would be a bit more murder in the air during this job," Ladd muttered dully, wandering around a harbor near Manhattan Island on a path that ran along the river. Ra's Lance was clearly visible nearby. "Dammit, this is kind of a letdown."

Who glanced around timidly before answering. "Come on...there's enough murder in the air as it is. Gang after gang keeps coming by, and all of them look tense, like somethin's gonna happen any minute."

"That doesn't count. I was imagining somethin' more along the lines of a firefight around an intersection, Tommy guns blazing, bullets flying in all directions..."

"That's not 'murder in the air,' that's something else entirely."

Who had been cleaning up the clinic at work until Ladd had half-kidnapped him.

Ladd had told him to tell him about the New Yorkers because he had some time to kill, and then Fred had interjected helpfully, "We're done with examinations for today, and this is a special reunion. Take some time to catch up with your friend."

And so Who found himself reluctantly walking along the harbor next to Ra's Lance.

"It's about time for me to meet up with Graham, so you can head home. The other assassins are hanging around here, too."

"What about Lua?"

"She's in the building. There's a restaurant or cafe or something in there."

"...! Wait, wait, isn't that the most dangerous place?" Then Who remembered what Ladd had done in the past and gave up with a sigh. "Right, I forgot. You're the guy who brought her along for a train robbery. But what *are* you and Lua gonna do after this?" he asked Ladd again.

"Whaddaya mean, what are we gonna do? What we always do—love each other. We don't think about anything else."

It was a perfectly Ladd-like answer.

But Who took it a step further and asked another question.

Normally he wouldn't worry about something like this, but Who sensed a powerfully unpleasant presence around the city. This could be their last goodbye.

"Like you did with Leila?"

"..."

Ladd's only answer was silence.

Leila had been Who and Ladd's childhood friend.

And, some years before Ladd had met Lua, she had been his girlfriend.

Although she wasn't here anymore.

Back when they could still be called kids, she had eloped with Ladd—and lost her life along the way.

"..."

"..."

Unable to stand the silence, Who let out a sigh.

So he won't answer after all.

Just before he could say "Sorry, forget I asked," Ladd opened his mouth.

"I've thought about it. I thought too much back then. I was a stupid kid who couldn't tell the difference between pining after a girl and being in love with her. That's all."

"...Do you mean the elopement?"

"I'll tell you this: I didn't kill Leila."

"...I see."

Who nodded as if he was satisfied with that. He didn't say he was relieved or ask if it was true.

Ladd hadn't forgotten about Leila.

It was enough for Who to know that Ladd wasn't pretending the past with the three of them had never happened.

"Then I won't ask any more about it."

"...I'm sorry, Who."

"Cut it out. An apology from you just gives me the creeps."

Who didn't know what kind of expression Ladd was making.

But he thought it was okay not to know.

That was just his personality. Perhaps that was why Who had been able to survive so long with Ladd.

"So, is there anything else you want to know about the power structure around here?"

"No, I think I get it, more or less."

After Who changed the topic, Ladd turned back around wearing the same feral smile as always.

"Plus, there's only two gangs I need to remember, besides the one I'm working for."

"Two?"

"The Martillo Family and the Runorata Family."

Ladd mentioned the two gangs of completely different sizes, and twisted his lips into an excited grin.

"If a fight breaks out, I want it to get as rowdy and loud as possible."

"...Why?" Who asked, even though he was sure he knew.

And the answer he got was just what he expected.

"The bigger the mess, the easier I can slip into the fray, and the more I can kill."

But then, Ladd added one more thing so quietly that Who couldn't hear.

"And after that... I just have to figure out how to beat an immortal to death..."

<=>

And then, they arrived.

Several fancy cars parked right in front of the main entrance, and the men of the Runorata Family stepped out in their expensive suits.

Although Don Bartolo Runorata wasn't among them, each and every member had a notably dignified presence about him. They put enormous pressure on everyone who saw them, just by standing together in formation.

"Let's indulge in a little gambling, now, shall we?" said Melvi Dormентаire, a man conspicuously younger than his fellow Runoratas.

The main dealer led the others into the hotel, the group embodying the definition of underworld authority.

The moment the Runoratas entered, the other Mafia in the lobby fell silent as if on command.

The members of smaller gangs parted fearfully to give them a path, and gangs that rivaled the Runoratas in size watched them like hawks, carefully sizing up whether they were enemies or potential targets.

But the group with the least amount of power in the whole room remained where they were, blocking the Runoratas' way and refusing to move. The Gandor Family.

Since most of their men were getting things ready downstairs, the only ones in the lobby were the three bosses, plus Maria and Tick.

But they didn't appear to be cowed by the dozens of Runoratas in the slightest.

"...Oh, what a nice surprise. I should thank you for the other day," Melvi said courteously.

"Likewise. I just wish I could have been a better host," Luck replied, expressionless.

A red-haired man gave them a cheerful wave from behind Melvi.

"Hey, there! You look like you're all fired up for the party!"

"Ah! It's Vi—mph!"

Tick quickly covered Maria's mouth with both hands before she could finish calling out the name of the legendary assassin.

Luck ignored the struggling Maria. "More like we're ready despite the party," he replied. "Some gangs may end up disappearing entirely because of these games."

Melvi narrowed his eyes. "Don't worry, we aren't going after you this time." His gentlemanly facade didn't waver as he acted for all the world as if he had not tried to eat Luck a few days ago.

"'Going after' us? I don't know who you're targeting, but I don't think it's wise to consider this a one-sided hunt."

"Oh, no, not at all. After all, Mafia hunt each other down and devour each other all the time, don't they?"

Melvi's sarcastic words made Luck even more certain that this man was not a Runorata Family mafioso.

If he were a member of a Family, he wouldn't talk about the Mafia with such contempt.

This wasn't self-deprecation.

He saw them as beings different from himself, and his eyes were filled with blatant scorn for them.

"You're no different from the Martillos. You're all going to get swallowed up, anyway, so you might as well hope for a spot further down the list."

"What'd you say, you son of a—"

A vein throbbed in Berga's temple as he took a step towards Melvi. Things were on the brink of an explosion.

All of the Mafia in the lobby envisioned a bloodbath—perhaps a massacre in favor of the Runoratas—about to occur, and the tension in Ra's Lance was so thick you could almost touch it for that one moment.

But—

A voice came from behind the Runorata group, tangling those tense strings into a knot.

"Leave him alone, Berga. He's not worth it."

"Huh?"

Berga stopped at the familiar voice, and the gazes of the Mafia all shifted to its source.

Standing there was a group that had come in behind the Runoratas.

There were about a dozen of them. It was a rather large group to be moving all together, but there were still fewer of them than the Runoratas.

The young man at the front of the pack tipped the brim of his hat up with a finger. "I got a lotta things I wanna say to you, but for now I'll just tell you one."

He faced Melvi with a fearless smile.

"We're not Mafia. We're Camorra."

"Well, well, if it isn't Mr. Prochainezo. Welcome."

Firo Prochainezo was at the helm of the Martillo crew.

Since they were a small gang, like the Gandors, many of the other gangs were wondering who the hell they even were.

Even though they had no information, they could tell one thing for sure.

Neither the Gandors nor the group of Camorra who had just entered were intimidated facing the Runoratas.

"You're awfully relaxed."

"I have to be. You can't gamble if you're a nervous wreck." Firo shrugged. There was no sign of the fury he'd shown when Ennis was abducted.

He's strangely calm.

Melvi didn't like this cool, collected Firo.

He didn't give up on Ennis, did he?

That was the first idea in his mind, probably because that's what he would do in Firo's position.

But Firo continued, still smiling valiantly. "I'm looking forward to our game."

"...Oh, dear. You aren't planning on winning, are you?"

"It wouldn't be a gamble if there was no chance of winning."

"It could be—to a fool."

The air between Melvi and Firo grew tenser and tenser.

Even the ones who had no idea what was going on could tell just from looking at them that one of them was going to lose everything very soon.

The lobby froze again and the three groups, including the Gandors, seemed like they would keep glaring at each other for a while.

Then, the atmosphere was instantly shattered.

"Hi, Firo! Welcome!"

The innocent, but intelligent voice of a child rang out in the lobby.

Carzelio Runorata descended the red-carpeted staircase.

"Oh, you remembered my name. I'm flattered," Firo said politely.

"I'll show you the way to your venue, so please come with me!" Cazze's eyes were sparkling.

A quite murmur ran through the crowd around them.

(Hey, that's Bartolo's grandson.)

(Are they high up enough for him to show them directly?)

(They said they're Camorra.)

(I know them. That's the Martillo Family.)

(The one that's as small as the Gandors?)

(What the hell?)

(I heard about one of their capos, this guy Ronnie. He's supposed to be a real terror.)

As all the doubts and rumors came together into a dull roar, Firo and his group began to head out.

Behind Firo were Randy, Pecho, even Maiza, but this time everything was in Firo's hands. Nobody opened their mouths unnecessarily; they walked forward in silence.

Even Maiza only spared a single glance Melvi's way. He didn't try to talk to the boy who shared his brother's face.

...Interesting. So he's ignoring his personal feelings on the matter?

Sensing the gang's resolve, Melvi murmured to Firo as he passed. "...We'll settle this on the third day."

"Fine. I can't wait."

"...I suggest you make the most of your last two days with your friends, at the very least," Melvi scoffed, intending to provoke him, but—

Firo responded with a completely emotionless voice, sharp as a knife and cold as ice.

"You've taken this a little too far."

That was all he said.

He had made no concrete threat, or made any mention of death.

But, that voice alone—

The moment he heard those words, so quiet no one else could hear—a fear that welled up from the deepest part of him triggered his reflexes, and Melvi's right hand moved like a spring-loaded machine.

He's going to kill me.

I have to kill him before he kills me.

His instincts spurred him to perform the simple action, and the immortal's right shot out towards Firo's head at an unusual speed.

But, the instant before, Firo's hand shot out with the same speed to catch Melvi's hand in his.

"...!"

Clasping Melvi's hand, Firo lightly shook it.

"Regards."

To everyone else, it looked like a plain old handshake, and the Mafia around them relaxed a little.

But even after Firo and his entourage had gone, Melvi couldn't move for a little while.

The three Gandors apparently noticed, because they were smiling a little as they descended into the basement level.

"..."

Melvi took no notice of them. His gaze dropped to the palm of his hand.

There was an unpleasant sheen of sweat on it, the kind he might find after waking up suddenly from a nightmare.

"Looks like you really pissed him off."

The voice from behind was his bodyguard Felix.

"..."

Felix chuckled at the expressionless Melvi.

"No matter what kind of competition it is, he's tough to beat when he gets serious."

He gave his friend the highest possible praise for Melvi's benefit, as if this had nothing to do with him.

"Enough to even give me some trouble."

<=>

Unaware of the sparks spreading that could set the whole city ablaze—

Even more people were coming to Ra's Lance.

The wealthy ones invited by the Runoratas.

People with Mafia connections.

Bribed politicians.

The party would be full of clever, formidable people, but they wouldn't be the only ones in attendance.

"Wow, look, Miria! It really does look like a lance!"

"Like Gungnir! Or Gáe Bulga! Or Amenonuboko!"⁵

The innocent voices came from Isaac and Miria as they looked up at the tall building, wearing their respective tailcoat and dress.

"Oh, no... We're here... I could have gone forever without coming here..."

Jacuzzi was dragging his feet behind them, and behind him was his crowd of delinquents, chatty as always.

"Whoah! This is gonna be my castle!"

"What's that supposed to mean? You finally losin' it?"

"Of course not, moron. When I finish gambling today, I'm gonna be rulin' the whole world."

"I predict that in 3423 seconds you'll be sobbing because you lost everything~"

"Cut it out, Melody."

"What's gonna happen to me?!"

"Hyahhaa!" *"Hyahhaa~"*

"Uh, are all of us gonna be able to get in?"

"Right now, we're just guests of the Martillo Family."

"There's no problem once we get in. We'll split up and do what we can to pull other people in."

"I'm serious, everyone. Do not, do *not* pickpocket anyone, cheat or do anything of the sort. I'm looking at you, Melody."

⁵ Miria's spears:

Gungnir: Odin's spear

Gáe Bulg: The spear of Cúchulainn of Irish mythology. Known as Geiborg/Gabolg to Castlevania fans.

Amanonuhoko: the spear in Japanese mythology used to raise the primordial land-mass from the sea. Miria mispronounces it here.

"I left all that behind 839, 200 seconds ago~"

"That's...not that long ago, is it?"

"I'm kidding~ Don't get mad, Nice."

"Hyahhaa." *"Hyahhaa!"*

"Huh? Where'd Rail go?"

"She said she'd attract too much attention, so she's doing something else."

"She's not any worse than Jacuzzi or Donny, though."

"I guess she really does worry about those scars on her face..."

"Hmm. Listening to these kids talk, I can't tell if it's natural or unnatural. It feels like it could send me into a trance. What do you think, Ricardo?"

"Not much of anything."

"You should try yelling 'hyahhaa' or something, too. It might change your whole outlook on life."

Christopher brought up the rear, conversing with Ricardo. He looked overhead.

"My, my! This is like an enemy of nature! It looks like it's trying to shatter the sky, nature's greatest creation, into a million pieces. But it also looks like it's waiting for lightning to strike."

Giving an appraisal of Ra's Lance that only he could give, Chris muttered to himself with a feral smile.

"Now, if *I* were the lightning, things might get interesting."

Although he heard it, Ricardo didn't respond.

He knew from the knowledge of Sham.

When they stepped into this building, they would be stepping into Hell itself.

Or maybe they already had. Maybe the description was true for the whole area.

The expectations of all different organizations tumbled together into a tornado.

They were here.

That was enough to put them all—Jacuzzi's gang, Firo's group, and Melvi's group—together in the same company.

Here, they would likely put their destinies on the line.

Ricardo thought, hoping that this would at least be meaningful to his life—and entered Ra's Lance with Jacuzzi, of his own free will.

<=>

And the whirlwind of fate spun out of control.

Each and every individual's whirlpool came together into a complicated confluence so that nobody could tell the difference between them—

One with enough force to wash away the building Ra's Lance itself.

However—there was one great current encircling this event.

The one who had created it was Huey Laforet.

And **he would not be appearing here.**

The incident surrounding the immortals was missing a major piece that would complete the whole picture—

And the die of fate was ruthlessly cast in a city that had become a gambling den itself.

Chapter 22 -- Or Maybe There Is, But No One can Tell

To start with the conclusion, the first day of the casino party ended peacefully.

The party began with a speech from the one in charge of Ra's Lance—proving once and for all that the building belonged entirely to the Runoratas. However, virtually everyone already knew the Runoratas were involved, so nobody acted surprised at the fact.

The casino party was three days long.

Almost everyone spent the opening day watching and waiting—and not just the flow of the gambles.

Was the Runorata Family planning something? Would the police actually keep their hands off the party the whole time?

Or was this all part of some bigger plan, perhaps?

Still, they kept betting their chips one after another, even as they harbored all kinds of doubts.

There weren't many, but there were some who tried to gain some inner peace with hopeful pleas to God—*If I win this little bet, that means nothing will happen*—but the dealers fed off of those modest wishes to create a new current.

Namely, a current of money that moved with even greater desires.

Both the Runorata Family and the Martillo Family created a favorable monetary flow for themselves.

The room given to the Martillos was far from the best. They had been relegated to a corner of the basement, but they knew well how to bring in customers to a place like that.

After all, the location was similar to the casino Firo managed, cornered within their small territory.

As the first day's games brought a fair amount of success to all the gangs in attendance,

some of the people who didn't know what was going on behind the scenes began to wonder.

What if the Runorata Family really is just doing this with no strings attached?

The thought would bring them nothing but harm.

On the other hand, the ones who were keeping a close eye on the Runoratas figured that the true confrontation would begin on day two.

The important players and the big money hadn't come into Ra's Lance.

Tomorrow evening, the real showdown would begin.

And just as they all thought, the first day ended peacefully.

But—

That day, destiny undoubtedly began take its course in a major way, but not with the gambling on center stage.

In the middle of the night, the fates of many began to creep forward—almost as if the Runoratas had been gunning for this when they decided to make the event three days long.

And, ironically, the greatest turn of fate was caused by none other than the man who had fought the hardest to escape the torrent carrying him forward.

Namely, Neider Schasschule.

<=>

Neider devoted his first day to observation.

He watched the flow of money around the room without making any big wagers himself.

From what he could see, the flow of money didn't seem particularly tumultuous. The winners won, the losers lost, and the bookkeepers made a respectable profit. It was nothing out of the ordinary.

Neider had spent many years haunting places like this as a con artist, and this was no social gathering where everyone made a show of throwing their chips around. This

scene was more like the monochrome sketch before color was added.

After Eve had shown him a picture of Dallas, they split up to look for him, but today they hadn't been successful. Maybe he was disguised, or maybe he wasn't even here today and was planning to come another day.

There were no signs of Huey's organization yet, either. It seemed that nothing would happen today, and he would spend the whole time watching.

But then he noticed something.

There were some "points of interest" developing in the cash flow.

There was an oddly energetic couple that kept placing high bets regardless of the overall flow, but Neider was most interested in a woman who kept winning one game after another, but inconspicuously—just "watching," like him.

Now this could be the start of something.

Neider smirked and began to observe the woman.

Just to make sure she didn't notice him watching, he kept to small bets and faded into the background himself.

Neider made no waves. He blended into the dull playing field as just another man in the crowd, and silently began to look for the source of the odd feeling he got from her.

Ever since he had stepped into Ra's Lance, little by little, Neider's past self had begun to return.

A performance for success in the enchanted atmosphere that filled the gambling den.

And, the conclusion he arrived at was incredibly simple.

*No doubt about it. She's **cheating**.*

Midnight Near the harbor

"Hey, there, miss. Can I ask you something?"

When Neider called out to her, the woman slowly turned around.

"...What do you want?"

Her eyes were filled with intense doubt and a strong sense of caution.

After the first day of the party was over, and after Neider and Eve had separated, he had started following the woman.

And she had begun to alternate between abandoned roads and roads filled with people, as if to see if she was indeed being followed.

Neider had realized this and decided to go for it before he could be found out. As soon as she reached a deserted street, he had called out to her.

"I'll tell you now, I'm not working for the Mafia or the police. I'm just a guy hired by a rich guest here to take care of the gambling for her."

"...So what does a gambler like you want with me?"

"You wanna team up?"

"...Huh?" She frowned.

Neider continued. "You're pretty good, I'll admit. Nobody else noticed, except for me."

"...!"

As if she guessed what he was getting at, the distrust in her eyes grew even more intense.

"You sure have guts, pulling that off in a place crawling with Mafia, and you've got top-notch skills to do it with. You just win until you're on the verge of arousing suspicion, then go somewhere else. It's a neat trick, and it's one you can only do in a place with so many gangs around."

"...I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, if you wanna play dumb, just keep playing your part then."

Neider smiled confidently, but he was faking it. In his heart was the fear that if he made one wrong move, it could all be over. His hands and back were stained with a thin layer of sweat.

But Neider really was taking back his old con artist self. None of that emotion showed on his face.

"I'm not trying to blackmail you—think of it as more like seduction. I just want to work together with you. No catch."

"Well, I'm not saying I know anything about whatever it is you think you've 'figured out'...but what's your goal? Just money?"

"...Well, that's close, but it's not the whole story."

"?" She tilted her head.

"You're not what I'm after. It's whoever's backing you. The one who gave an invitation to an expert like you."

"...!"

"I don't know which gang it is. I'm just a guy working for one of the rich attendees. I'm not with any gang, and my relationship with my employer ends as soon as this three-day-party is over. But whoever you're with, if they're sharp enough to hire a fascinating woman like yourself, maybe they'd give me a shot, too."

Without an invitation from the Runoratas or one of the other gangs at the party, you couldn't get into the underground casino in the first place.

There was a group he had seen that felt like they had been dressed up, probably cheap hires for one of the gangs to keep the place lively. They had an odd sense about them—for example, one had a tattoo on his face and always looked on the verge of tears—but he decided they weren't worth much attention.

But this woman here was different.

Casino hustling was clearly her specialty.

If a woman like that could get in, she must have been hired by a softhearted rich sucker like him or backed by someone powerful with an ulterior motive.

The former option was too unlikely, as he doubted there would be another person in the same situation as him, so he had gone with the latter.

He didn't care if it was Mafia, or an ambitious businessman, as long as he could worm his way into their good graces.

He'd just do what he'd always done.

They'd take him in, he's gain power from them—and then maybe he could take a position that would allow him to oppose Huey Laforet's organization.

It was too late to save himself any other way.

He redoubled his determination, and after a deep breath, Neider told the woman his name.

"My name is Neider Schasschule. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He took the plunge and gave her his real name. There was just one thing he needed to make sure of while the two of them were alone.

And then—

"Neider...Schasschule?" The woman gasped at hearing his name.

"!"

Her reaction clearly showed that she recognized the name, and Neider's face stiffened.

Shit! Oh, man, I'm glad I said my real name to be sure. I completely miscalculated!

If she knew his name, she was probably one of Huey's.

She hadn't reacted upon seeing him, which meant she wasn't one of Hilton's, but there was a strong chance that she knew her.

"...Forget you ever saw me, okay?"

"Huh? Hey, wait a second!" The woman answered in confusion, but Neider turned on his heel right then and there.

His scheme ended here.

They knew he was in New York, and he couldn't even shut the woman up. That would only risk making this mess even bigger.

Sorry, Eve, but I'm gonna have to bow out.

The bag in his left hand contained his winnings from Firo's casino.

He had barely lost any of it today, so he had enough to run.

He had chosen the wrong person.

His gamble had failed.

Now it was time to accept defeat and graciously withdraw.

If he went in even deeper he'd just keep losing.

All kinds of excuses came to mind to form a pretext that would allow him to run.

But then, Neider's fate took a large change in course, as he would find out in the next moment.

It was neither a major miscalculation nor a major victory.

He had taken hold of something much bigger than either of those and placed it on a dangerous roulette.

The woman's voice reached his ears to stop him.

"Don't tell me you're..."

"..."

Her words reached him just as he was about to break into a run.

"...Sonja's friend?"

"..."

...What?

"...?"

This woman is...what?

His legs had stopped thanks to his confusion.

Sonja...

Sonja...?

"...?!"

It took a moment for the shock to reach his brain, and when it did he spun around like a spring-loaded wind-up toy.

"What did you just say?"

"...I knew I recognized that name."

"You...you said Sonja's..."

All the excuses he had for running away disappeared from his mind.

Neider approached the woman, ready to give her the third degree—

But he was cut off by another voice behind him.

"...Found you, traitor."

"?!"

He spun around in a panic, but there was nobody there.

He had definitely heard a woman's voice, but there was nothing but an empty street.

The casino hustler had apparently heard it, too, because she was looking around wildly.

"What...? Who is it?"

Traitor.

The voice had called him "traitor."

No.

The bead of sweat running down the con man's cheek told of the unease rising in his chest.

"Hilton...?" he barely managed to squeak out.

"Oh, very good! But you can call me Liza now." The voice's delighted reply sent Neider into despair.

"..."

As shiver after shiver ran through him from head to toe, Neider kept turning around and around, looking for the voice.

But he couldn't find any sign of the person it belonged to.

But—

The casino hustler noticed something else strange. Her eyes widened. "What...the...?"
"...?"

Neider realized that she was looking up, and he tilted his head up, following her gaze.

And he saw countless birds, illuminated by the faint light of the street lights.

On top of buildings, on the power lines, and flying through the sky--dozens of birds, all staring at him.

"Aah...!"

He hadn't really noticed at first because of the darkness, but the instant he did Neider let out a squeak at the incredibly unsettling sight.

They were relatives of hawks or kites, perhaps, but at the very least they were a type that didn't live around here.

However, Neider remembered these birds perfectly.

They were the same kind as the one staring at him through the window of the cafe when he was with Eve.

"What the..." Neider gaped.

Liza continued, wherever her voice was coming from. "But you know, I'm not the one who's gonna kill you."

"What...?"

"There's someone who's says it's her mission to kill you, and she's just dying to do it."

The voice in his ears was sultry and sticky, but the words themselves couldn't be farther from sensual.

The next moment—

The sharp *shing* of metal on stone sounded from down the road.

Neider and the casino hustler looked in the direction of the sound at the same time.

They could see something standing in the darkness.

It was probably a person, but at this distance it was hard to see. Whoever it was appeared to be dressed in black, blending into the darkness.

But the next instant—the figure crouched low to the ground and rushed toward him.

"!"

The casino hustler gasped at the speed of the approaching figure.

Less like a black beast and more like a giant bullet.

The woman in black ran down the street at an angle so as to avoid the casino hustler, then ricocheted off the wall and closed in on Neider.

And Neider realized.

He realized what he never wanted to.

Even in the darkness, he recognized the movements of an inhuman killing machine.

"Cha—"

The woman who had thrown away her humanity for Huey Laforet.

"Chane..."

He couldn't even shout, just mumble in shock.

The glinting blade approached his neck.

Am I going to die? Here?

Why is Chane no

How did I get here? shit shit shit shit

Sonja.

All kinds of questions and fears swirled through Neider's mind, and last of all, he remembered his childhood friend, whose name he had heard only a moment ago—

And finally, his body moved.

He couldn't hope to run or dodge. He just moved to knock the blade away with his hand.



The woman in the black dress, Chane, didn't pay that movement any mind and moved to cut off his hand itself.

But the moment Neider's hand made contact with the knife, there was a sharp metallic sound.

The metal hand blocked the knife.

"..."

But Chane wasn't worried.

There was no need to waste time trying to cut the prosthetic.

It was only a question of whether she should cut the hand from his wrist or avoid his hand entirely and slit his throat. A prosthetic hand was hardly an obstacle for someone of Chane's skill.

"H-hih—!"

Neider frantically tried to run, but Chane remained emotionless and simply closed the distance between them.

The difference in their speed was clear, as Chane was at Neider's back in only moment.

But then, she instantly checked her movement.

She had seen a strange object come flying from down the street, shaped like an egg with a small timer on it.

"Chane, get out of there!"

As Chane heard the voice, one of the surrounding birds dove down suddenly.

"...?"

Chane wordlessly leaped back, and the bird grabbed the egg-shaped object and flew up into the sky with it.

A few seconds later—

The object exploded, taking the bird with it, sending out a flash and a boom that echoed into the night.

"...!" Chane gasped,

"What was that?! What the hell was that?!" Neider shouted, still clueless, and pressed his hands to his still-ringing ears.

The casino hustler was already running away.

Two, three more "eggs" came flying into the street without giving them a moment to take in the situation.

But these weren't bombs. When they went off, an immense amount of smoke spread into the road.

"Smoke bombs... That has to be..."

Liza's grudging voice echoed around the street.

"Rail! What do you think you're doing?!"

But nobody answered her shout. Instead, the smoke grenades that had exploded one after another shrouded the entire area.

The only ones left in the smoke-filled alley were countless birds shaking in anger and an emotionless woman who hadn't yet let down her guard.

"...Are you okay, Chane?"

Liza's manner of speaking had gone back to normal, but her alluring voice remained the same.

But Chane didn't answer. "..."

Liza didn't sense a shred of frustration or unrest from Chane at having lost her prey. On the contrary, it made her so uneasy that all of her bodies gave a collective shudder.

<=>

What? Who's holding my hand?

Neider ran through the smoke.

Who was grasping his prosthetic hand?

They didn't feel very strong. It really felt like a fairy had pulled him by the hand to wander in the white darkness.

At long last, when his hearing came back, Neider heard a small child's voice.

"Hey, Mister, can you hear me now?"

Neider squinted into the smoke to see a small child's figure.

From a little ways away, he heard another child's voice.

"How could you be so reckless!"

Although the voice belonged to a child, there was an unsettling adult sense to it.

"Ahaha, don't be mad, Czes! Liza's a bunch of birds! It was just classic; I couldn't help it."

The first child, whose exposed arms and neck were covered in stitches and scars, turned to talk to someone else.

"...Hey, seriously, how did you know that? Um...Shaft, was it?"

Then Neider heard a young man's voice from a little ways down the road.

"Eh, well, you know."

Both the name "Shaft" and the voice that belonged to it were familiar.

"?! Hey, aren't you one of Ladd's boys?"

"Well, I'm really more Graham's than Ladd's," replied the voice from the smoke with a sigh. "Sorry. Looks like you've just got one thing after another piling up on you."

"!?!?!?"

Unaware of the identity of the child holding his hand, or who Shaft really was—

Neider internally screamed the question he had thought over and over since his release from prison.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?!

<=>

"..."

Melvi stared at the scene—dense fog filling the streets, illuminated by streetlights and other sources of light—from a window in one of the hotel rooms in Ra's Lance. He frowned slightly.

"We didn't do anything today that would cause such a ruckus, as far as I know..."

He didn't know yet.

His magnificent scheme was nothing more than a small part of the magnificent *baccano* that had begun in this moment.

<=>

10 minutes or so later...

"This is quite a wreck."

"The driver's unconscious, but it doesn't look like there were any major injuries."

"Geez, what were they carrying this time of night?"

The police were standing on the side of the road where the explosion had happened, sighing and working on their report for a traffic accident.

A truck driver, surprised by the sudden smokescreen, had turned suddenly in a panic and flipped over.

"Seriously, where did this smoke come from?"

Fanning away the faint haze that still remained, the policeman looked into the back of the truck. He frowned, looking at the torn-up canopy on the back of the truck.

"...? Hey, this wasn't damaged because of the accident, was it?"

"...It's like something jumped out of it."

At the same moment, the policeman noticed that the smell of smoke was tinged with the smell of something like a wild animal.

"What the hell was in that truck...?" muttered one of the policemen, breaking into a slight sweat.

Lumbering along through the dark night, "he " quietly raised his head.

Surprised by the sudden impact, "he" had instinctively jumped out of the truck and was now slowly looking for his friends.

Even though there had just been an accident, nobody saw him because he blended well into the smoke.

What did this mean for the bear and the city? Did it bode well or ill?

Unable to make even a guess about the future, he just let out a small roar at the thought of his friends.

Of Claire, who called him "Cookie," and Cazze, who called him "Charlie."

The grizzly bear, well over 3 meters tall, sent a lonely howl into the city.

The entire city was now a casino for fate, with Ra's Lance at the center.

Like an unmistakable signal that registration to join this great gamble was now closed—

The great creatures' howl permeated deep and spread far into the darkness of the city.

Connecting Chapter: The Mastermind Doesn't Show up to the Fray

Huey Laforet stood on top of a tall building in the darkness of the night.

It was quite high, but not as high as the sharp-pointed building in front of him in the distance—Ra's Lance.

He smiled quietly, watching the night scenery from atop the Manhattan skyscraper. Nobody knew the meaning behind that faint smile; perhaps everything was going according to plan, or perhaps he was pleased at an unexpected turn of events.

After Huey had watched the nightscape for a little while, he addressed the man behind him, hair speckled with white—Salome Carpenter.

"How are the preparations going?"

"They are proceeding smoothly." The leader of Rhythm answered Huey politely before asking his own question. "But...are you sure this is a good idea? I'm not concerned about the man from House Dormентаire, but using your daughters as decoys, too?"

"Both Chane and Liza agreed to it."

"What did you tell them?"

"I did not tell them the plan in its entirety, but I did tell them that I want them to serve as decoys. Of course, I included the risk of death," Huey replied coolly.

"And they accepted that?" Salome said, eyes sparkling. "I hate to say it, but it's rather hard for me to think of those two as a pair of siblings. Miss Chane and Miss Liza have completely opposite emotional dispositions."

"Not at all. I sense that recently, both of them have begun integrating unfamiliar emotions into themselves. Now that two of them have begun to deepen their interactions together, some change would be welcome."

"Amazing...! As expected, you and Reneé Palamedes Branvillier created a pair of masterpieces! Raised as humans, yet as simple as homunculi. They could become excellent samples for the homunculi we create with Rhythm, no matter what emotions they take on!"

After saying all of that in one breath, Salome's emotions disappeared in an instant.

"By the way, which one do you plan to give to René?"

"To be perfectly honest, I haven't decided," Huey answered, his faint smile not wavering in the slightest. "I think that the answer may change depending on how this integration plays out during these upcoming events. Circumstances may lead me to give them both to René, or to break my promise and give her neither and let that be that."

Huey's gentle smile was completely at odds with his ruthless words.

"I see..."

"It all depends on the results of this experiment," Huey said, then reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a rather large bottle.

In it was a single eye.

Huey observed it, wriggling as if trying to return to its owner, and continued. "After all, it seems she has come to the city as well."

Hearing this, Salome inclined his head respectfully. "I see... I'll be sure not to embarrass myself in front of such a great pioneer. ...I'll return to the preparations now."

"Yes, please do. I will go myself, after I've felt the breeze out here for a little longer."

A few minutes after Salome had gone, Huey paced along the roof, still looking out at the city.

He was less a man enjoying the feel of the wind, and more an astronomer, looking at his constellations in the lights scattered throughout the city.

"..."

Suddenly sensing someone's presence, Huey turned around.

And his eyes landed on a lone man standing in front of the door to the rooftop.

The man was hard to see in the faint moonlight. How long had he been standing there?

"Hey, there. Long time no see," said the man, as if greeting an old friend.

But when Huey saw his face, his shoulders drooped before he returned the greeting.

"It has been a while. I thought you might be here in the city."

To Huey, it was not an old friend...

"Are you scheming again, Fermet?"

...but more like a bitter enemy, one who had tormented someone very dear to him, and eventually murdered her.

"Oh my, what an awful thing to say... I'm not the one scheming, here. Isn't that *your* area of expertise?"

Fermet grinned unpleasantly and silently walked forward.

He passed by Huey and placed his hands on the railing, staring out into the night. He twisted his long bangs around one finger.

"I'm not scheming anything," he told Huey with some amusement. "I just live to see the things I want to see. Would you call a child who likes watching ants a 'schemer' just for putting a piece of candy on the ground?"

"If that candy were poisoned, I think it would be an exceptional scheme."

The man who had killed his love was standing right behind him, but Huey spoke to him the same way he did to everyone else.

Fermet shrugged at Huey's sardonic remark and changed the topic, apparently unable to respond.

"So, would it be too much to hope that Elmer isn't here?"

"I wonder. Nobody can tell what he's going to do."

"I ran into him once, on a train on the way here...that was a real pain in the ass."

Fermet was genuinely upset, shaking his head, and the nature of Huey's ever-present smile changed ever so slightly in response.

Although the change was so slight, even he himself didn't notice.

"We've lived for a long time. It isn't surprising that you would meet by chance. He would probably tell you to smile in celebration of such a coincidence."

"..."

Fermet clicked his tongue lightly at the memory of that certain immortal.

"Well, whatever. If he shows up, I'll bow out. I'm just here to watch the show."

"Like the audience?"

"Yeah. Like the audience."

Fermet's unpleasant smile returned, same as it was a moment before.

"I'm looking forward to it. You've been working on these preparations for the last few years, but will they succeed? Or will they all come to nothing? And how will you react? Will all the innocent boys and girls involved fall into despair, or hold on to some shred of hope? I can't wait! Just imagining it gets me all worked up!" Fermet said, his words bordering on the perverse.

Huey shook his head, his faint smile still ever-present. "You never change."

He kept his back to the other man, without moving to turn around at all, and asked him a question.

"Were you smiling like that when you stabbed Monica, too?"

A hollow silence fell over the rooftop, and the night wind blew across them both.

Fermet's laughter had cut off abruptly, but then he broke the silence.

"What are you trying to accomplish with a question like that? What, you wanna avenge your lover now? Defeat your nemesis?"

"Not at all. I just wanted to know a little more about what kind of life Monica led."

"Too bad. I don't remember. What about you? What kind of expression did you have for all the people you've messed up with your experiments?" Fermet chuckled and turned around, leaning back against the railing. "What kind of expression are you gonna have for **the seven million New Yorkers** that are gonna get caught up in your big 'experiment' now?" he asked Huey's back.

"..."

After a moment of silence, Huey responded with his faint, never-changing smile.

"I doubt it will be any different than it is now. For me, it is a false smile that I wear with no further meaning."

"So not even seven million people can change it."

"You say that as if I'm planning to drown the city in poison gas."

"Am I wrong?" Fermet taunted, grinning even wider. "I have no idea whether this experiment has a point at all. It's no different from ending the lives of perfectly healthy, normal people."

"..."

"I never expected you to put the wine of immortality in the municipal water supply. Not even Szilard Quates thought of that. Making seven million new immortals is an experiment that will change the world."

It was an astounding thing to say, but Fermet said it with complete indifference.

He seemed to be enjoying this—envisioning the tragedy that would unfold from this experiment, and the revolution that would overtake the world.

"You've done your homework." Huey looked down and smiled, and then shook his head slightly. "But I'm rather disappointed. You aren't entirely correct."

"...What?"

"The water supply is indeed my target, but I do not plan to put the elixir in it. That was a plan at one point, but René did something similar at the Mist Wall."

"Then you are planning on spreading something in the water? You aren't going to poison it, are you? That isn't like you. That's something a real terrorist would do," Fermet said, thinking for a moment. "Not like I care about that." His lips warped into a smirk.

"...You know about Sham and Hilton, of course," Huey replied.

"Of course. After all, I helped you make..."

Suddenly, Fermet stopped.

He had finally figured out what Huey was planning to do.

After a moment of silence, Fermet exploded into laughter, as if a dam had burst inside of him.

"Haha...gahahahahahaha! Ahahahahaha! I get it! I see! You aren't satisfied with becoming immortal, you're trying to become something else altogether, aren't you!"

After laughing for a while, his tone suddenly calmed and he asked seriously.

"Are you planning to become a god?"

"That is not my goal, and I do not think I will be able to become more than human from this incident, but...well. It is an experiment. An experiment, and nothing more. You understand, I'm sure."

"But you're doing those experiments for a goal, right?"

"My goal has not changed."

Huey turned around slowly to face Fermet. There was no hint of emotion to be seen in his golden eyes.

"Not since the day you took Monica from this world," Huey said softly.

Fermet shrugged again and laughed. "Ha...awfully tenacious, aren't you. That's a good way to make enemies."

"Is that something a man like you should be saying?"

"I don't care if anyone likes me or not," Fermet said brazenly. He pushed off of the railing and passed by Huey again, heading for the door. "Okay, fine, what I'm really interested in is the mess at Ra's Lance you're using as a distraction. I'm just wondering what you're gonna do, so I have no reason to meddle in that."

"I appreciate it."

"There's only one of me, after all, so I'm gonna go somewhere more interesting. If that freak of a Smile Junkie shows up, it'll be a different story, though," he said, half to himself.

The man who could be called the culprit behind everything placed his hand on the doorknob.

Huey watched him go until he disappeared into the building, the faint smile that had been there from beginning to end never wavering.

Without taking his eyes off of him for a moment.

"Well, well, I never thought *that* was what he was up to," Fermet muttered to himself as he descended the stairs. His depraved smile hadn't changed a bit in 224 years.

"...Of course I'm going to 'meddle,' who do you think you're dealing with?"

<=>

New York

A major street

After Fermet left the building and disappeared into the darkness--

There was a woman walking and looking every which way.

"Hm...he should be somewhere around here."

Reneé Palamedes Branvillier was walking through the Manhattan night with the bottle containing Huey's eye in her hand. Even though she was clearly lost, there were no hoodlums accosting her.

Of course, from time to time muggers did in fact approach her from behind with a knife, planning to pull her into the darkness—but each time, they were dragged into the shadows and knocked out with a sharp blow to the head.

Unaware of any of this, Reneé walked blithely through the city at night.

Her guardian in the shadows, Archangelo, sighed as he watched over her from afar.

"She really has no sense of danger."

<=>

On top of that, a few minutes later, after Reneé and Archangelo had moved to a different street—

"...This...building....should do....I think..."

The man's speech was slow and halting as he headed up to the building where Huey was.

In his right hand he held a large bag. A periodic clinking of glass sounded from inside.

After sparing a glance at the bag, the man, Begg Garott, looked up the stairs.

"...Huey...you...bastard," he muttered. "Are...you...serious. Making me...make...this..."

Even compared to the other passengers of the Advenna Avis, Begg possessed considerable knowledge and skill when it came to producing drugs.

He was carrying a bag full of some substance he had concocted, apparently to fulfill a contract with Huey.

There was no mistaking the mixture.

Still, it hadn't yet been tested. It couldn't be tested, not even on a marmot.

The question of who would be first for this particular drug was that important.

Rather, the substance was more than a drug—something in the same realm as the elixir of immortality.

"I'm sorry...Maiza, Czes."

Begg smiled quietly as he said the names of his old, old friends.

"I'm...not an...ethical...research...er...after...all..."

"I...want...to see...my...drug...change...the world..."

That night, the immortals began to move in the darkness.

In a world full of humans, the fellow "anomalies" began to draw together—although it was impossible for them to form a peaceful community.

<=>

And the dice continued to roll.

Ra's Lance and Manhattan Island.

Fates would awaken at these two nearby places, and the chains that bound them together began to move at almost the same time.

With the giant whirlpool he had intentionally created as a decoy, Huey Laforet began to cause an even bigger storm.

His subordinates, his daughters, the alchemists who were once his companions,

powerful gangs like the Runorata family, even Victor and his crew at the FBI—

Huey placed them all as his wager on fate's table, without allowing a chance for their own wills to intervene.

But Huey hadn't realized it yet.

The complicated mess of gears at Ra's Lance had meshed with the gears of Manhattan Island.

Not even Huey was a part of that interconnection as it twisted fate in a strange direction—and right now, nobody had noticed it yet.

And the gamble continued.

The time to place their bets had begun.

To squander everything they had gained, by any means available.

To take hold of proof that they were enjoying life—as proof that they were alive.

And so the immortals would continue their gamble, with their eternal time as their wager.



Afterword

Hello, thanks for reading, this is Narita.

And with this, the third novel of the 1935 arc is complete.

If this arc has a four-act structure, this is the third act.⁶ Finally everyone is all together, and everything is about to start rolling, but—it's only just started to move forward, so as the author not even I know where it's going to end up. 1935-D (or if things move too far forward, 1935-E) will wrap up the 1930s arc of Baccano for good, and 2003 will be like a shorter epilogue to wrap up the story of the immortals, so I hope you'll join me for the last little bit of this stupid commotion.

Even though the end is approaching, I'm running out of things to say in the afterword.

Normally I would have a lot of things I want to tell you about Baccano, but I have this strange feeling that if I tell you here and now, that really will be the end of it.

I myself have realized that I'm a little baffled as to how I should feel about the climax of the Baccano! series.

So I've been thinking that I'll put all those feelings into my works, and then maybe I'll be able to feel them again when everything is finished...so I've been overwhelmed with some intense emotions these days.

September 2013, Ryohgo Narita

⁶ This is the same "four-act" structure from Chinese literature Narita referenced in 1935-B's afterword, 起承転結. It means roughly "introduction, development, twist, and conclusion."

Translator's Note

Oh, man, it's over...

Not really, I guess, but after nearly two years and no 1935-D in sight, there's something that feels oddly final about this volume. It's like Narita said, it really does feel like it's going to end.

I was really hoping 1935-D would be released before I finished this volume, but I guess all that's left now is to wait.

And when 1935-D comes out, I will definitely be back to translate it.

As always, thank you so much for reading, for your comments, and all your support.

See you on the other side!