

バックアノ!

2002

[A side]

Bullet Garden

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫

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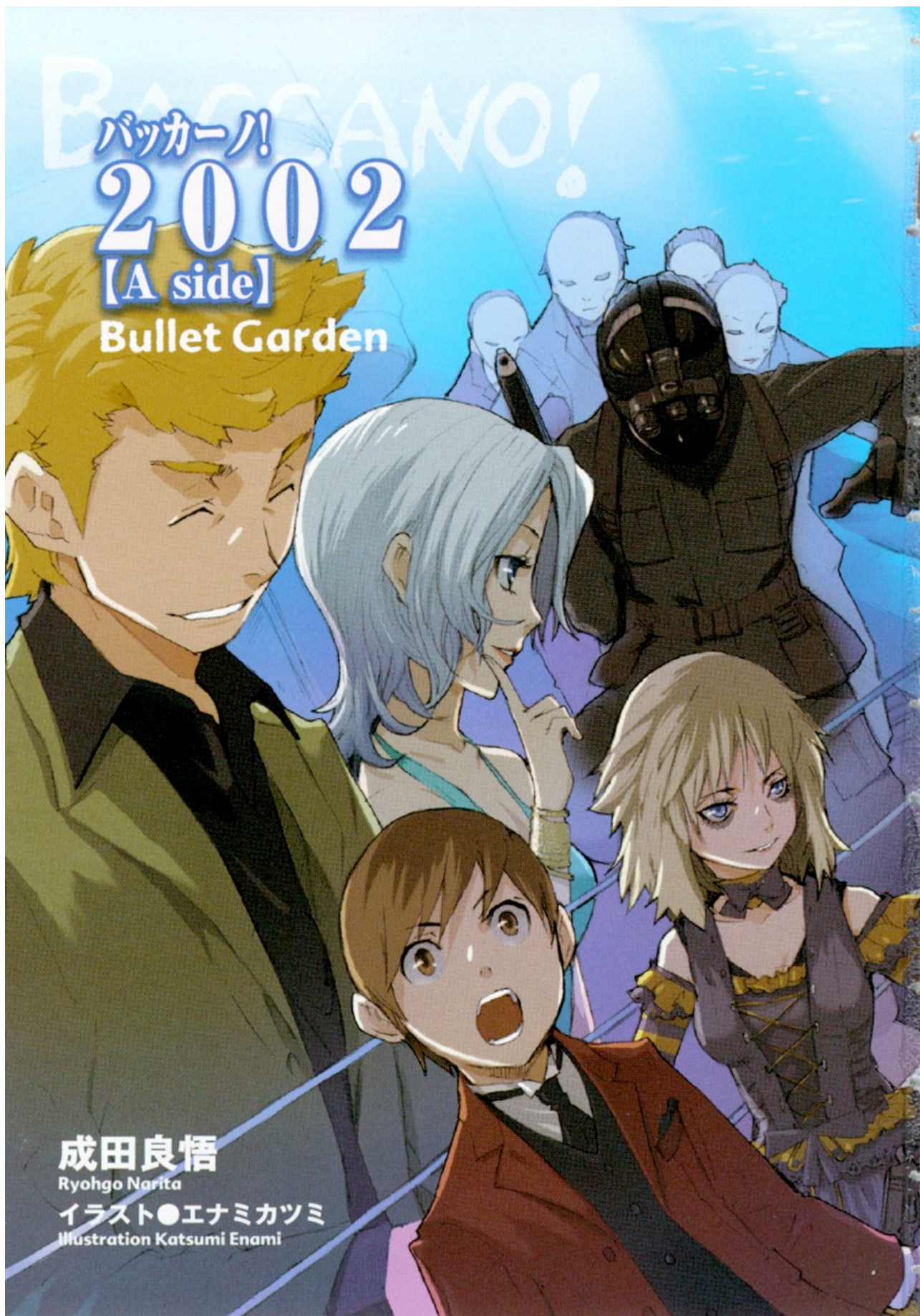
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イラスト●エナミカツミ

Illustration Katsumi Enami





「まあ、アイドルだからこそフィーロとくっついたのが妥当っつーか」

「おい、見ろ！ あの船の上に映ってるの、フィーロじゃねえかー？」

「おッ……？ ブハハハハハハ！ そうだ！ あれ絶対そうだぜ！ 見ろよ、あの格好の……似合わない事よお……！」

「いやあ、ハイビジョンテレビというのは、ああいう背景までくっきり映し出すものなんですわえ」

「ふむ……フィーロ達が映っている事自体には感慨を抱かないのだな。まあいい」
「散々本人の目の前でからかい尽くしたんですから、いない所でまで騒ぐのはかわいそうでしょう」

「ふむ……無事に帰ってきた時には、またからかってやりたいものだな」

「無事に帰ってきたらなんて、縁起でもない事を言わないで下さい」

「俺は未来は見えない事になっているからな。どうなるか楽しみでもあり、不安でもある。フィーロはファミリーの「員でもあるからな。今の俺にできる事は、ただ航海の無事を祈るのみだ……。……まあいい」

アルウチーレ

『蜂の巣』店内の喧噪

「おい、見ろよミリア！ テレビにエニス達が乗る船が映ってるぞー！」

「わあ！ 本当だ、すごいー！」

「それにしても、でっかい船だなあ！ ヤンキースタジアム百個分はあるぞー！」

「百人乗っても大丈夫だね！ 百人力だね！」

「なんてこった……つまり、一人ずつヤンキースタジアム貸し切りってわけか！」

「贅沢だね！ 大の字で寝られるね！」

「相変わらず話の脈絡がない連中だなあ。……って、船が映ってるってマジか？ お前らの事だから船と物置を間違えるんじゃないだろうな」

「あ、本当だぜランディ。こりゃフィーロが乗る船だ。なんかカメラとかたくさん集まってっけど、イベントでもやってんのか？」

「マジかよベッチョ。……ああ、マジだ。つかあー！ 本当に豪華な船だよなあ。エニスとチエスはともかく、正直フィーロにやもつたいねえ」

「そもそもエニスを嫁にする事自体、フィーロにやもつたいねえだろ」

「だよなあ、エニスは俺達みんなのアイドルって感じだったのによお」

A Lively Day at the Alveare

"Hey, look, Miria! On TV! That's the ship that Czes is on!"

"That's incredible, Isaac! Amazing!"

"It's a really huge ship! I bet you could fit a hundred Yankee Stadiums inside!"

"You could fit a hundred people! One per a hundred!"

"Good God... does that mean that one person gets an entire Yankee Stadium to himself?"

"Deluxe! You could lie flat on your back and stretch as far as you want!"

"You guys are as random as ever. ...So is it true that the ship's on TV? They're not seeing things?"

"Nah, it's true, Randy! That's definitely the one Firo's on. I see a bunch of cameras, though... Some kind of an event going on?"

"Really, Pecho? ...Whoa, you're right! That's one huge ship! It looks really high-class. Setting Ennis and Czes aside, isn't that too good for Firo?"

"If you put it that way, isn't Ennis too good of a bride for Firo?"

"No joke. Ennis was like everyone's idol."

"If you think about it, that's why she's a good match for Firo."

"Huh?! Hey, isn't that Firo up there on camera?"

"Huh...? Pffffft! Hahahaha! That's Firo, all right! I could see that... that dinky suit of his from a mile away!"

"I've been wondering what this 'HDTV' was for a while now. The background quality's quite clear, isn't it?"

"Hm. It seems no one's concerned about the fact that Firo is on television. Well, no matter."

"It would be mean-spirited to make fun of him even while he's not here with us, after all."

"Hm... I get the feeling I'd like to laugh at him again, should he return safely."

"Return safely"? Please, don't speak so ominously."

"As I refuse to know the future, I am both anxious and excited to see what will happen. After all, Firo is a member of the Family. All I can do now is hope that the cruise ends without incident. ... Well, no matter."



「完璧……。そう、完璧だな」

「あの二人について語るなら、まさに『完璧』という言葉がふさわしいだろう！」

「それぞれ癖のある人間ではあるが、その方向においてはパーフェクトと言っても十分におつりが来るだろう。しかも、二人がそろえばそれはなお完璧だ！ もちろん二人に欠損な人が無いが、二人集まれば、お互いの完璧要素が絡み合つて、別種の完

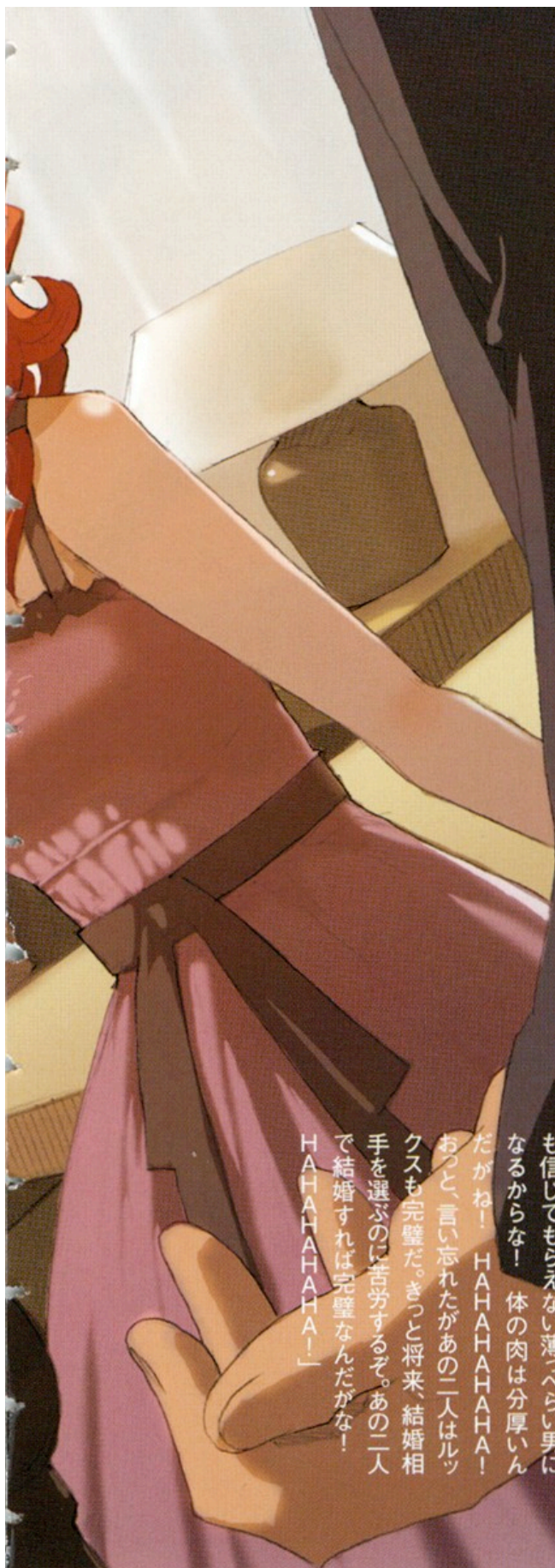
ジョン・ドロックス氏の談話

壁になるわけだ！ 素晴らしい！
完璧だ！」

「できる事ならば、私はあの二人の少年と少女の成長をフィルム越しに見守りたい。もちろん健全な意味でだ。……おいおい、今のは笑う所じゃないのかい？ 本気で警察に電話しようとするのは止めてくれ。とにかく、あの二人が死んだら私はあの二人の伝記映画を撮るぞ！ 完璧な二人の人生を描いた完璧な映画をだ！」

「しかし、あの二人は健康面でも完璧そうだからな。120歳ぐらいまで平気で生きそうだな。とすると、俺は150歳ぐらいまで生きないと駄目か。なんてこった！ 俺が死ぬまでに不老不死の薬でも見つかりゃいいんだが！ そうすれば完璧だ！」

「さて、私は今、何回ぐらい完璧って言葉を使ったかな。ちなみに『完璧だ！』って褒め言葉はあまり使わない方がいいぞ？ 俺みたいに、誰からも信じてもらえない薄っぺらい男になるからな！ 体の肉は分厚いんだがね！ HAHHAHAHAHA！ おっと、言い忘れたがあの子はルックスも完璧だ。きつと将来、結婚相手を選ぶのに苦労するぞ。あの子で結婚すれば完璧なんだがな！ HAHHAHAHAHA！」



The Statements of Mr. John Drox

"Perfect... that's right. Perfection.

'Perfection' is the only word that could describe these two!

They each have their own idiosyncrasies, but in that sense, they are more than perfect. And when they work together? Do you even have to ask? They don't have any imperfections to begin with, but when they're together, their individual perfections meld together to create a whole new level of perfection! Isn't it spectacular? Perfect!

I'd like to watch this boy and girl's growth through film, if possible. I mean that in a completely innocent way. No, no! Wait! You were supposed to laugh just now! Don't go actually calling the police! In any case, once these two die, I will film a biopic about them! A perfect film about their perfect lives!

Of course, they seem to be in perfect health as well. I suspect they'll live well into their 120s. Does that mean I will have to live to my 150s? My God! I hope they discover some sort of Elixir of Immortality before that!

Now, how many times do you think I said the word 'perfect' until now? As a side note, you shouldn't toss around the word 'perfect' too much. Then everyone will think you're some cheap guy who's swayed like a feather in the wind! Of course, I'm closer to boulder-weight than feather. HAHAAHAHA! Oh, I almost forgot! Since those two are perfect in the appearance department as well, they'll probably have trouble finding potential spouses once they're at that age. Of course, it'd be perfect if they married each other! HAHAAHAHAHAHA!"

見を言えよ！」

トロイ

「いい加減貴方の後ろにいる少女の事を無視し続けるのは止めた方がいいかと判断します。照れているのかなんだか知りませんが、お互いの為になりません」

ボビー

「うっ……」

カルネア

「あ、あの、私……迷惑でしたらもう行きますから……」

ボビー

「ま、待てよ！——[▲]で動くといけないだろ！——」

トロイ

「集団で動いている方がバレル危険性は高いと思いますが、そもそもボビーと同行している時点で危険です。無論我々も」

ボビー

「だっ……黙れよお！——」

トール

「不安だ……」

ハンフティ

「心配だなあ」

トロイ

「痛心の極みです」

カルネア

「あの……大丈夫ですよ！ 頑張りましょう！——」

ボビー


「……ありがとう。あ、足手まといにはなるなよ！——」

カルネア

「ハイ！——」

トロイ

「……ボビーは将来結婚できたとしても一生尻に敷かれますね。断言してもいい」



船の上の子供達

ボビー 「いいか、お前ら！ 覚悟はできてる
だろうな！」

トール 「何のだよ」

ボビー 「密航のだ！」

ハンフティ 「もうしてるじゃない……」

ボビー 「ばれた時の覚悟だ！」

トロイ 「私は既にできています。ボビーが計
画を立てた時点で失敗する覚悟は
必要ですから。警察に対して、貴方
に脅されて仕方なく同行したと証
言する覚悟も完了しています」

ボビー 「黙れ！」

カルネア 「か、覚悟はしてきました」

ボビー 「……。……よし！ まずはこれから
の作戦を立てるぞ！ まずは見つか
らないように船の中を歩き回る！
そしてフイーロの奴を探すんだ！」

トール 「……どうやって見つからないように
すんだよ」

ボビー 「どうにかしてだ！」

ハンフティ 「ええと、つまり、何も考えてないと
いう事なのか？」

ボビー 「臨機応変って言え！」

カルネア 「あの……大所帯のグループを探し
て、その後ろに同行者のようについ
て移動するというのはどうでしょう」
ボビー 「……。……ほら、トロイ！ 何か意

The Children on the Ship

Bobby: Guys! Are you ready?

Tall: Ready for what?

Bobby: To stow away!

Humpty: But we're already stowing away...

Bobby: I mean, what we're going to do if we get caught!

Troy: Absolutely. After all, it is inevitable that I would need to make plans for when a plan you hatched goes awry. I have already prepared the necessary documentation to claim I was under duress from you once we are caught by the police.

Bobby: Shut up!

Carnea: I... I'm ready.

Bobby:All right, here's the plan! First, we sneak around the ship without getting caught and find that Firo bastard!

Tall: How do we not get caught?

Bobby: By doing our best!

Humpty: In other words, you don't have a plan?

Bobby: Call it improvisation!

Carnea: Um... why don't we find a big group to stick with and tail them from behind to make it look like we're with them?

Bobby:Hey, Troy! Suggest something, will you?

Troy: I would like to suggest that you stop ignoring the young lady behind you. I don't know if you are just being bashful, but this is not helping us.

Bobby: Uh...

Carnea: N-no... if I'm getting in the way, I'll just leave you alone...

Bobby: W-wait! It's dangerous to go alone!

Troy: I believe moving as a large group would be much more perilous. Of course, the fact that we are in your presence is in itself an act of risktaking.

Bobby: Sh-shut up!

Tall: I'm scared...

Humpty: I'm worried.

Troy: This is a tragedy.

Carnea: Um... it'll be all right! Let's be brave!

Bobby: ...Thanks. Hey, don't get in the way, all right?!

Carnea: I won't.

Troy: I foresee that you will end up quite the henpecked husband in the future. You can quote me on that.

11 エピローグI

13 プロローグ

プロローグ1 映画好きなビジネスマン達

プロローグ2 睡眠不足の猟犬

プロローグ3 密航者達は無計画

プロローグ4 スターは世界を受け入れる

77 序章 黒幕は運命を模倣する

81 第一章 奇妙な家族はぎこちない

129 第二章 悪い奴らは忙しい

205 第三章 全ての乗客達は弾丸の庭で踊る

287 余章A

Epilogue I

Well, now...

That's right. Before we begin to talk about this series of events, we need a change of pace.

The phrase 'well, now' is both a phrase as pleasant as sugar in morning coffee and a phrase of utmost importance. To tie up the loose ends of conversations, actions, thoughts, and focuses... or perhaps it could be right to say one could give up these things. In any case, I am saying that these are the meanings contained in this phrase.

Well, now...

Let's now get to the heart of the matter.

I speak of the series of events have have just occurred.

Outwardly, this series of events may be treated as one large incident.

Of course, I can't speak for what is going to happen next.

Wasn't it a wonderful cruise?

A luxury cruise ship is a closed world of sorts that travels the surface of the sea. It is at once a hotel and a fortress, and it can even become a casket.

A world encompassing life and death--a world that needs no funeral should it sink wholly into the depths of the sea.

Well, now.

Let's review the facts.

You wound me. I've already used the phrase 'well, now' three times, yet you remain indifferent. I do wish you would show some hint of change.

Whether it's a look of despair, trying to crawl to freedom, or trying to vocalize something from your throat--I'm not picky.

Of course, nothing will be enough to change your fate.

Now.

Let's continue your interrogation, shall we?

Oh, don't feel pressured to say something. After all, I don't have anything in particular I want to ask you.

If you still need a hint, then why not let me hear a scream?

Please don't be shy. Should your screaming bother me, I need only crush your throat.

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

2002

[A side]

Bullet Garden

プロローグ

- 1 映画好きなビジネスマン達
- 2 睡眠不足の猟犬
- 3 密航者達は無計画
- 4 スターは世界を受け入れる



Prologue 1 : The Businessmen Who Like Movies

August 2002. Somewhere in South America.

Clatter clatter clang clang clatter

"You know, ever heard of a movie called *Speed*?"

"I saw the first one."

"Me too."

"Me three."

"Same here."

"Nah, I'm not talking about the first one. *Speed 2* is the relevant one."

"The one where Willem Dafoe played the villain?"

"That's the one! It takes a true movie fan like you to mention him before Sandra Bullock."

Clatter clang

The atmosphere at the table began to mellow out with the rhythmic sounds of cutlery against china.

Being at the very south of South America, this place was in the middle of winter at the moment. It was just past noon, but a chilly breeze cooled the food inside this restaurant.

There were heating systems installed on the ceilings, but there was little to be expected from them.

This was because all of the windows were open, making the interior identical in temperature to the outside.

That wasn't the only thing, though--the countless holes in the walls contributed a significant amount to the cooling of this restaurant.

Upon closer inspection, it would seem that the windows actually weren't open--they were still shut tight, with the glass panes lying on the restaurant floor in pieces.

And upon broader observation--

There were countless chunks of red scattered around the restaurant.

About a dozen men and women continued their meals and trivial conversations around the table in the middle of the room.

They seemed to be of varied races and physiques, likely ranging from twenty and forty years of age.

In contrast to them, the floor was littered with a lifeless group of people.

If the entire restaurant could be compared to a dinner table, these corpses could be described as food drenched in ketchup and thoroughly vandalized with a fork.

And the group at the table continued to eat nonchalantly, as if the presence of these corpses didn't even occur to them.

"Willem Dafoe is amazing. He was alone! Solo! He pulled off a one-man seajacking!"

"You should call him 'Geiger' if you're talking about his character."

"How am I supposed to remember all that? In my mind, all of Willem's roles are Willem himself."

"So the FBI agent from *The Boondock Saints* and the Green Goblin from *Spider-Man* are all Willem, too?"

"Of course. Also, why didn't you mention *Platoon*? That's one of his most iconic roles."

"I haven't seen that one yet."

"Seriously?"

"I've watched it."

"Don't think I've seen it yet."

"Is it good?"

"You gotta watch it!"

"Isn't that what you say about every movie?"

"Stop, stop. Getting back to Willem. So the vampire from *Shadow of the Vampire* is Willem, too? He was playing the part of an actor in a movie, so you should be calling him Max Schreck."

"Who cares?"

"What...?! A-apologise! Apologize to *Nosferatu* right now!"

"And Nicholas Cage!"

"Why him?!"

The conversation began to derail.

It was no longer possible to tell who was saying what, to whom. It was just words going back and forth across the table.

"Anyway, Willem is amazing. He managed to take over an entire luxury cruise liner on his own. You can't do that if you're not Willem Dafoe. That man is a genius."

"But in that ending... he's done, isn't he?"

"I bet Willem could have found a way out of that! With the power of leeches!"

"Leeches, huh? They're amazing. They can heal diseases."

"What do leeches have to do with anything?"

"You're the one who started talking about the power of leeches."

"In any case! What I'm trying to say is that hijacking a cruise ship singlehandedly is not a simple task. It's something to be feared and respected."

"...Huh. True."

"I guess so."

"You're right."

The man's strangely resolute words brought his fellow diners to bitter laughter accompanied by nods.

This was because what they were planning was--

"After all, we've got a **family of thirty trying to do the same thing.**"

One of them nodded with a laugh and drained his glass of juice.

"You think it'll be tough with just the thirteen of us here?"

"I bet it will be."

"Maybe if we were Dennis Hopper or Christopher Walken."

The others laughed as they drank.

Soon, the plates on the table were emptied. Each of the diners washed down the meal with a drink of their choosing.

Then, they sighed contentedly and nonchalantly continued their conversation.

"This atmosphere isn't too bad."

"I feel like we're living the intro of *Reservoir Dogs*."

"That's pretty cool."

"Then I guess I'm Steve Buscemi."

"No, I'm Buscemi."

"I wanna be Buscemi."

"Don't be stupid. How can a girl be Steve Buscemi?"

"But he's Mr. Pink, right? That means it's okay for a girl to be him."

"What are you talking about? One of those Japanese sentai shows?"

"Of course."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

Although the tone of their conversation was unchanged, their surroundings had done a 180 from earlier.

But the conversation continued as if in blissful ignorance.

One of the men turned around to speak to a man standing behind him.

"What do you think?"

The man who was spoken to did nothing but stand there.

He stood with an immovable expression, arms crossed in the midst of this strange space of corpses and strange group of satiated eaters.

"Hm. I'm also fond of *Reservoir Dogs*."

The dark-skinned man mumbled in a fluent, if curt English.

"That's pretty awesome."

"But I can't say that this situation is a perfect match for the film."

The man was a giant, towering at two meters. He had brown skin and a moustache that was common among the locals.

Standing in a line around this man was a group of men who seemed to be local residents. But the way they carried themselves spoke of something far removed from honest work. They all held weapons like guns, knives, and hand axes as if to emphasize this.

There were about forty of them. The men surrounded the group at the table with a human barricade.

The tall man, arms still crossed, cracked his neck and mumbled.

"Let me ask you first... are you the ones who got rid of these bastards on the floor here?"

The man being questioned fiddled with his empty glass and replied cheerily.

"And if we are?"

"Why did you kill them?"

"It's our job."

"...You've been hired by some organization?"

"I guess you could say that. It just happened to be our mission to pick a fight at this restaurant. We only actually needed to off the boss, but we ended up going a tiny bit overboard."

"..."

The carefree response was followed by a bitter silence.

Despite the rapid rate at which the atmosphere in the restaurant was icing over, the man continued brightly.

"Anyway, does this town serve any fish but cod? You know, back when we went to Japan, they had an aquarium's worth of seafood dishes."

"You got a problem with that?"

"Nah. I don't like fish. Meat is the best. That's why I like this country--there's plenty of quality meat to go around."

"Glad to hear that. Anything else you wanna complain about?"

"Yeah. Could you guys maybe lower your guns?"

This response, accompanied by a shrug, sent the people at the table into uncontrollable fits of laughter.

In contrast, the air around the men surrounding them froze.

Passersby would occasionally glance into the restaurant, but they warily stepped away as soon as they noticed that the people inside were not to be trifled with.

The police were not coming.

It didn't seem like they would come at all.

That alone was enough to show what kind of an organization these men were part of, but the people at the table showed no sign of fear.

The man who seemed to be the leader of the barricading men grit his teeth as he spoke, not letting down his guard.

"...Why don't you first join us on a little picnic?"

Realizing that the air around the men surrounding them had gotten even colder than before, the man at the table quietly laughed.

"What if I say no?"

"Since you're completely surrounded, I'd say about half of us will end up dead."

"You mean we're gonna have to go all out? Sounds great."

"After all, I don't think we'd be able to get rid of you without going that far."

He refused to let down his guard. Should a gunfight break out, he would not hesitate to pull the trigger, even at the death of his allies.

"...My goodness, you couldn't do better than that stupid resolution?"

The man at the table wiped his mouth, dumbfounded.

"If you were so scared of us, why didn't you finish us off with a sniper or a bomb?"

"Unfortunately, our sniper and Demolisher are taking a little siesta."

"That's a pretty good reason. Do they turn into demons if we wake them up?" he mumbled, and raised his hands in forfeiture. "So are you the boss of the local organization?"

The man at the table sighed at the leader, who remained silent.

"I guess not. I guess a boss who personally barges into dangerous places like this wouldn't be alive to be threatening me."

The large man stoically and quietly glared at the table, unaffected by the sinister chuckling.

"Is that all you have to say? Then decide now. Come with us or die."

"Oh, right! One more thing. Looks like we've had a misunderstanding."

"What?"

As the large man frowned suspiciously, the man at the table put his elbow on the table and calmly pointed out the misunderstanding.

"You know when you asked us if we're the ones who killed these guys? Remember I answered 'And if we are'?"

"..."

"'Cause it actually wasn't us."

The man chuckled and looked around the men surrounding them with a look of pity.

"...'Illness'. 'Death'. **Don't hold back. Spread yourselves among them.**"

Suddenly--

Two shadows descended from the northeast and northwest corners of the restaurant respectively, sandwiching the barricading men.

"What..."

Before the men could even brace themselves--

And before they could even realize that these 'things' hanging from the ceilings were human--

The two shadows used the black masses in each of their hands--

And pumped the dumbfounded men full of lead.

"Hey, that was a bit overboard, don't you think? That was a total massacre."

The first to break the following silence was a man sitting at the corner of the table.

"Dual-wielding guns while hanging from the ceiling? That reminds me! Ever watch *Tomb Raider*?"

"Yep."

"Yeah. It was pretty good."

"You only watch popular stuff, huh?"

"I've always thought, ever since I first played the game, that Angelina Jolie should play the lead."

Just as the trivial conversation was about to begin anew, the two people on the ceiling spun around and silently landed on the floor.

No one had noticed the hole in the ceiling, which was wide enough to fit a grown man. It seemed these two had been hiding in the ceilings for an ambush.

The two newcomers were, in some sense, dressed much more appropriately for the setting.

As opposed to camouflage, they wore black combat suits--the kind worn by special forces in movies--and covered their faces with masks and goggles.

They were not likely night-vision goggles, as it was still daytime. However, it seemed they were there for a reason--the two were not taking them off.

The assassins in black were completely covered, with the exception of their mouths.

A merciless operative team that would erase those who learn state secrets--

Heartless murderers who would spare neither women nor children--

Or perhaps heroes of the military who protect the people from behind the scenes.

These were the kinds of impressions normal people might get from these two. Of course, this was setting aside the matter of whether they looked 'cool' or 'scary'.

One of them had the build of a full-grown man. The other, from the ill-fitting curves, seemed to be a woman.

The woman lowered her guns, cocked her head, and spoke in a lovely voice that did not match her clothing whatsoever.

"Hm. Can I please? Can I say something?"

"What, Illness? Feel free to blab."

"Okay. Uh, I don't really like this smell of blood and gunsmoke. I feel like I'm going to throw up. Actually, can I throw up?"

Just as she finished, the woman called Illness--who could probably still be called a girl--sprayed vomit all over the floor with a sickening noise.

"Aaaaack! This bitch threw up!"

"Argh... dammit, we just ate!"

"You've totally messed up our cool victory!"

"Why does your fighting skill not match your mental state?"

"You're not that sheltered, are you?!"

"Kids these days!"

As the men and women, who seemed to be her allies, began scolding her, Illness waved around her arm, still holding the gun, and pouted.

"What am I supposed to do, then? *You* guys are the weirdos for being able to kill people so calmly!"

"Whoa, hey! Don't point your gun at me! You're weird! You're really a weird girl, ya know?!"

As her allies hurriedly took cover under the table, the special operative-like girl puffed her chest in anger.

"Hmph. You're the weirdos for being able to eat normally with all the corpses arouuuunargh..."

"She threw up again!"

"Why did this bitch stuff herself full right before a mission?!"

The girl barely managed to calm herself amidst the shower of complaints and mumbled in her cute voice.

"You know? You know? Back there in the ceiling... I saw a whole bunch of roaches and rats and bugs I've never seen before. Isn't this place pretty bad in terms of hygiene?"

Pfffffft.

Several people spat out their drinks.

"That's nasty! Was that your idea of revenge, Illness?!"

"Hmph. It's all fair and square if you guys throw up, too."

"What are you, a kid?"

"Aha! Now we know why your codename is 'Illness'!"

"Go back to the hospital!"

The other assassin in black ignored his chatty allies and silently kept watch.

The air around the man was infinitely cold and heavy. It would be impossible to notice his presence without seeing him, and anyone who did glimpse him would be frozen in fear.

The others at the tables expressed their wonder as he stood uninvolved in the conversation.

"Wow... just what you'd expect from 'Death'. He's like a real pro."

"That's 'cause he *is* a pro. Don't wanna sound cheap, but he's the strongest in the organization."

"Illness, Death, Life, Aging... He's still the best of our **4 Great Weapons**. The four strongest... In Japan, they call it the Four Heavenly Kings, right? In any case, Death is the best."

"In comparison, Illness is the kind of person who'd get killed first--and Death or Aging would say something like 'She was the weakest of our team' or 'Don't get cocky just because you killed some little girl'."

As her allies continued chatting, Illness hung her head in discontentment.

The man at the corner of the table ignored her feelings and cracked his neck.

"In any case, all we have to do is off the boss... since we've already massacred them all, why don't we either split before the cops get here, or go ask the cops where the boss is?" He asked.

His attitude was extremely laid-back, but he was completely serious as he rambled on about whether or not to face the police.

Even in the midst of this commotion, the man called Death calmly radiated bloodlust, as befitting for his name.

That is, until several seconds later--

When the bullet that entered his mouth shattered the back of his head.

Prologue 2 : The Sleep-Deprived Hound

"Huh?"

As the people at the table looked around at the source of the gunshot, they saw their ally fall to the ground.

The 'weapon' they had all believed was the strongest of them all had been turned into an occasionally twitching mass of flesh.

"D-Death...?"

Because it took them so long to process what had just occurred, they were unable to even aim their guns at the man who ran into the restaurant.

"Wh-Who are you?"

At first glance, the man was empty-handed.

He had brown skin and wore relatively unkempt clothing.

Upon closer inspection, he was holding a large pistol in each hand.

These weapons on their own pointed this man's allegiances to the corpses lying on the floor.

He was perhaps thirty years of age. Although he didn't have a moustache, he had stubble growing along his jaw.

He was a gunman.

He was neither wearing a ten-galleon hat nor holding a guitar case full of firearms, but he was a gunman--this aura he gave off made the cluttered restaurant almost look like a film set.

Having been asked for his identity, the man lowered his guns and replied in a low voice.

"I am a sniper."

He stepped into the danger zone without hesitation.

Of course, the people at the table were not unarmed, either. Several of them had already reached for their pistols in their jackets.

"A sniper...?"

"I've been **taking a nap** until just now."

"..."

The people at the table recalled the words of the giant who had been shot down.

"Unfortunately, our sniper and Demolisher are taking a little siesta."

"Ohhhh, so they weren't joking around."

The cheery tone of voice cloaked the suffocating atmosphere.

"So you're a bodyguard? Don't know if you'd qualify to be a guard dog, seeing as your bosses are dead and all."

Meanwhile, the gunman widened his sleepy eyes and spoke in a clear voice.

"I am not a guard dog."

The strange man did not brighten his dark expression as he replied in clear English.

"I am a hound."

Two gunshots rang throughout the restaurant.

"Even should my master die, I will still tear out the throats of my prey."

The gunman's hands were still relaxed and pointed at the floor.

However, the bullets had definitely been fired. The smoke coming from the barrels of his ground-pointed guns were proof enough.

Two thuds echoed from among the people at the table. From the look of the hands of the two newest corpses, they had already drawn their weapons when they were killed.

They were shot because they had drawn.

It was as simple as that.

A straightforward rule.

The 'Businessmen' were quick to react to this information.

They kicked their table in the direction of the gunman and dived behind it like an avalanche.

That is, with the exception of Illness, who was just standing off to the side.

'What is that idiot doing?!'

"Uh..."

As it was obviously impossible for Illness to hear the thoughts of her allies, she just stood there in thought. She then widened her eyes in realization and puffed out her shapely chest.

"Ehehehe! Death was actually the weakest of our team, so don't get cocky just because you killed him!"

"..."

The men and women behind the table simultaneously shut their mouths and decided to treat Illness as a dead woman from that point on.

They righted their grips on their weapons, wondering if Illness was really that angry at them.

The gunman gave a "hmpf" and spoke to the girl.

"...The man I killed earlier. He was dressed the same as you. Wasn't he one of your allies?"

"He was."

"You don't seem to be too troubled."

The man asked expressionlessly. Illness thought for a moment. She then smiled sadly and looked around at the corpses around the floor.

"Welllll, in this line of work, it's not strange to be killed at any time, so since we always live like we're dying, I guess I don't really feel sad, or... ... Hey, how am I supposed to react to something like this? What am I supposed to saaaaaay?"

Illness aimed her gun at the gunman. Her lips were curled into a smile, but the gunman had no way of telling if the smile sustained all the way to her covered eyes.

"I think I understand what you're saying. I apologize for asking such an insensitive question."

A barrage of bullets went off at the same time as gunman's response.

Just before the shots could land, however, he crouched low and took shelter behind the salad bar counter near the entrance.

His movement was smooth like a haze, but his speed was not even close to normal.

His form disappeared into the shadow, shaking off the bullets flying towards him.

At the next moment, he poked his head out from behind the counter, which was assaulted by a hailstorm of bullets, and coolly fired two shots.

He could hear them find their marks. And two death cries.

However, neither of these cries belonged to Illness. They were the cries of two of her allies who had poked their head out from behind the table with their guns.

In their hands were held simple handguns.

Illness, who had believed that she would be the second target after Death, lowered her gun at this unexpected turn of events.

Realizing that drawing a gun would get them killed, the people behind the table held their breaths and decided to watch.

Illness asked a question of the gunman, who had again hidden behind the counter in that short silence.

"Hey, why didn't you shoot me just now?"

"Don't you get it?"

The voice that replied from behind the counter was a low voice that sounded like a worn-out piece of leather.

"I don't kill women and children."

Hearing this simple yet unbelievable answer, Illness spoke to her allies behind the table.

"What do I do? This guy's kind of cool!"

"How am I supposed to know, you idiot?"

The reply was a dumbfounded insult.

Maybe Illness should have been glad that someone had answered her at all.

"Please, at least figure out you've been insulted and get angry or something!"

"That damn gunman's totally sexist!"

"This is ageism!"

Although the gunman ignored all of their complaints--

"Goddammit! Stop acting like you're Chuck Norris in *Hitman*!"

This comment got a reply out of him.

"I think I'm more of a John Wayne."

When their enemy played along with their movie talk, the film-loving "Businessmen" escaped reality for about three seconds and tossed out comments.

"Did John ever say that in a movie?"

"I haven't seen all of his stuff yet."

"We should go to the rental store sometime."

The group began to feverishly discuss the Western star. The gunman raised his voice again.

"I don't know if Wayne has ever said this. However, even if he's never said such a thing on the silver screen--he might as well have. Am I right?"

The Businessmen simultaneously grinned.

"I think we'd get along pretty well, gunman."

"You're right. It's unfortunate we have to be enemies."

"But you're not John Wayne. I'd say you're probably more of an Antonio Banderas."

With this sentence, the Businessmen looked at one another in signal and simultaneously threw what looked to be concealed hand grenades.

"Hm...?"

The Businessmen had thrown a specialized type of smoke bomb.

The white smoke completely obscured their vision, even in this room without window panes.

In this white smoke, the gunman came to a conclusion.

That in this situation, the biggest advantage would belong to the girl with the special goggles.

"I'd like to say things are getting interesting, but--"

He sighed with an icy expression, then focused to hear the distant sound of a rumbling engine.

"Apologies. It seems our Demolisher is now awake."

The gunman immediately dived out of a nearby window.

And he was greeted by the sight he had been expecting.

The restaurant that he was in, up until just a few seconds ago--

Was being destroyed from the outside in by a gigantic, unmanned truck.

The gunman ran without turning back.

After running stoically for about a hundred metres, he hid behind a nearby building.

All this, to escape the great explosion that ripped through the truck and the restaurant mere seconds later.

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"...They got away."

The gunman was convinced of this fact despite the fact that they had not counted corpses.

[Yo, boss Angelo. How ya feelin'?]

When the walkie-talkie at his side crackled to life with a cackle, the gunman called Angelo brought it up to his face and spoke.

"All clear. We've accomplished our main mission."

[That thing 'bout kickin' 'em outta the restaurant? Anyway, Boss wants to talk to ya.]

As the Demolisher's coarse laughter faded, the Boss's voice came over the walkie-talkie.

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Several days later, somewhere on the North American West Coast.

It was a bar, far removed in atmosphere from the crude restaurant that had been destroyed earlier.

Though he was unarmed, the air around the gunman was quite different from that of those who were there with friends and family. He was quite a conspicuous sight.

The modern-day gunman, however, expressionlessly looked out from his window seat without a care for his appearance.

His eyes were focused on a gigantic castle.

The wall of white that towered over the sea looked down upon the nearby buildings.

It was one of the greatest cruise ships in the world.

This ship, used for overseas travel and world tours, was less of a floating hotel and more of a 'castle'.

"..."

And as someone who would be **infiltrating** this castle, the gunman quietly focused.

The cell phone in his breast pocket then vibrated, almost as if to throw off his concentration.

[Yo, how ya feelin', boss Angelo?]

Angelo's ears were greeted by a familiar, boorish voice.

The Demolisher.

The gunman quietly sighed at the voice of this man, who was, unlike himself, a freelance killer.

They had rarely seen each other face-to-face, and they had only helped each other out a few times when they were in trouble, but he kept in contact with Angelo surprisingly often. Of course, 'often' in this case constituted something like once every two to three months.

This man, whom Angelo had gotten to know by coincidence after clashing against this mysterious group before, had provided Angelo with all kinds of information--all because 'it wouldn't be the first time I saw these goons'.

And as a result, he had found out that this strange armed group had planned on keeping a low profile by taking a ship to Japan.

It would be nigh-impossible to find them once they set foot in Japan.

[Feels kinda weird, saying this as a freelancer, but this organization of yours? Ain't gonna last much longer. With all the beatings you guys took, ya can't even go bribing the cops. And it'd be kinda sad to say "we tried to reorganize, but our HQ's been turned into a parking lot", ya know?]

"...That changes nothing. My mission... is to pursue them. Nothing more."

[That's some pretty moving stuff for a hound to say! Guess I'll be helpin' ya out, since I got my down payment.]

The voice on the line sounded like he was truly enjoying this situation.

[Heh! I'm going on board too, so cut your worrying. We'll turn 'em all into fishbait.]

"...Don't do anything that might harm civilians."

[Oh? Ya think I'm gonna go and blow up the whole freakin' ship?]

"Our mission is to find their leader and their employer. There's no need to start a war on this tiny boat." Angelo scolded. He then asked his ally an obvious question.

"Why don't you at least show your face if you're going to board?"

[My lifespan can't handle bein' around people who stand out so much. Quit worryin'! I'll hook ya up with your toys once we're on board. And if ya toss 'em in the ocean with the corpses, ya won't even leave behind evidence. Ain't the ocean great?! Like some great fucking pimp!]

"Don't litter in the ocean."

The gunman hung up with these half-serious words.

Though he didn't know how they could smuggle weapons onto a ship bound for another country, the Demolisher had a great track record for things like this.

Angelo returned his sights to the ship and quietly thought about the target.

According to the Demolisher's information, they weren't the opposing organization itself--they were mercenaries hired by either an individual or a group of people.

It was a huge organization. Some dubious rumours claimed that they handled everything from murder to civil war.

It wasn't the kind of an organization he could defeat single-handedly.

After all, he couldn't guarantee that they were unarmed, even on a cruise ship.

Thinking of the one-in-a-million chance--which was statistically closer to fifty-fifty--that he would die, Angelo remembered his family, far away back home.

"I guess Carlos is turning three this year."

Thinking of his son, whom he had yet to meet, Angelo returned to thinking about his enemy.

It was a criminal organization. This was a very broad term, but they were literally a group of Businessmen who lived off their crimes.

Their symbol was a mask.

They were a strange organization that would always wear white masks for luck when they did something big.

And as he recalled this organization--the "Mask Makers"--the gunman quietly mumbled to himself.

"...Maybe I should head over to Spain after this.

I'll get my wife and kid one of their masks for a souvenir and go on vacation to Venice with them."

Prologue 3 : The Plotless Stowaways

He's coming after me.

No, he's not *coming* after me--

He's there in the blink of an eye, like he's always been around.

Until he appeared, we were invincible.

After all, we had no trouble shaking off the cops. And we knew that the organization in charge around here was puny.

Mom, dad, grandma and grandpa, and even my eyepatch-wearing great-grandma always told me not to mess with the Martillos, but that didn't matter to us.

I thought they were just lecturing me so I wouldn't do anything bad. I always thought: all we had to do to get them off our backs was to catch those mafia guys in a trap and get them caught by the cops.

But--

This was beyond my expectations--no, my wildest imaginations.

We were seriously psyched when we snatched the bag from that dense-looking Japanese guy and found an expensive-looking camera inside.

But--

This wouldn't be the first time we mugged someone.

We've had nothing but success so far. That's why we weren't afraid.

But--

We thought we were invincible. We didn't think anyone could even try to oppose us.

But--

But--

But, but! But!

But *he* appeared. He just appeared.

That bastard appeared in front of us, and... and...

Right now, I'm running away from him.

I don't know how this could have happened.

I could tell what he was instantly.

He called himself Ronnie, but that doesn't really matter.

He suddenly appeared in our HQ, which was locked from the inside.

It wasn't like he was hiding out there to begin with.

He literally appeared out of nowhere!

We were just excited, discussing who to sell off the camera to, and what we'd do with the money--

And suddenly, he appeared in the middle of the room and spoke while we were still reeling in shock.

"Nice to meet you... or perhaps not. After all, I've known of your existences for some time now."

"Wh-what? What the hellll?!"

When I shouted at him, the bastard narrowed his demonic-looking eyes and replied.

"Hm...? My name is Ronnie, but no matter. What is important, however, is the fact that you have stolen something from a tourist in our Family's area--something that he values second only to his own life. And unfortunately for you, that tourist has asked us for assistance."

Revision. He wasn't "demonic", he was a demon. He must have been a demon.

There's something dangerous about this guy.

Not dangerous, but **terrifying**.

He was just **terrifying**.

And that was why--that was exactly why I pulled a knife on him without hesitation.

"Hmph. Children like you should go back to playing with toys. It's not as if you are even dying of starvation... well, no matter."

In the next instant, the knife was in *his* hand.

I suddenly felt the knife in my hand disappear into thin air, and before I knew it, *he* was holding it.

We ran.

"Run for it!"

I shouted at the others in the room, and made a beeline for the window with the camera bag.

I ran out to the balcony from the window and jumped out onto a flower bed from the second floor.

My feet hurt like hell, but I forced myself to keep running.

If he catches me, I'm done for.

I'd actually felt like we'd been finished a lot earlier, but I tried my best to ignore this feeling.

But now I realize that was a mistake.

One of my buddies said, "We should have just apologized and handed over the camera".

I think he was right. No, I *realized* that he was absolutely right.

I turned a corner and ran straight into the bastard--

So I turned away to run from him, but he was blocking my way again--

He was there in front of me, no matter where I went--

He was just *there*.

He then lifted me by the arm and--

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"AAAAARGH--Mph...!"

Multiple hands shot out to cover the mouth of the boy who woke up with a scream.

(Bobby, you idiot! Why'd you scream?!)

The tall boy whispered angrily, curling up.

(I thought you were being a bit quiet. So you fell asleep?)

Following the pudgy boy's comment was a cold, calculating mumble from the small African-American boy.

(I suspect that you were having a nightmare about the incident in which the camera was taken away. It's not surprising, as being locked up in a small space like this should be reminiscent of how you holed up inside a drum canister for a full day after the incident.)

"Uh.... ugh..."

Cold sweat running down his back, the boy called Bobby remembered what kind of a situation he was currently in.

(Right. Sorry. Y-you think anyone heard that just now?)

(Nah. Thankfully, no one's around right now. I think the ship's gonna leave port soon.)

The four boys were lying side-by-side in the dark.

They were currently inside a lifeboat on a certain luxury cruise liner.

The lifeboat, an incompressible type, was stowed in the ship's interior. They had created a fake floor and hidden themselves under it all this time.

The ship was checked meticulously in order to prevent exactly this sort of thing. After hearing that the lifeboats would be switched out, the boys took a leap of faith.

As a result, they found themselves stuck in their little space for over twenty-four hours.

(Dammit... this ship better be the one he's on!)

(Of course. The Daily Days has never been wrong. Of course, I had to give them one of my best computers as payment for this intel.)

(Don't act so cheap! You've got seven of them!)

(Ohhhh. B-but, you know? What are gonna do once we run into the guy? You said we're looking for someone else, not that Ronnie guy, right?)

Their goal was an extremely personal act of vengeance.

"We're going to show those Martillo bastards who's boss!"

Someone should have tackled this idea out of Bobby as soon as he had declared this.

The other three deeply regretted it, but there was nothing they could do at this point.

Though they were a group of delinquents, they had finally been targeted by a local gang.

The Martillo Family.

It seemed like they were *camorra*, not mafia, but that didn't really matter at this point.

In an endeavour to erase his fear and humiliation, Bobby had elected to make enemies with a criminal organization with the attitude of a supposedly fearless child adventuring into a haunted house.

If one thought about it, mugging a tourist meant that they had made enemies with a gigantic organization called the police--and although Bobby used this example to say that things couldn't get worse anyway--

(At least the police won't kill us if we get caught...)

The pudgy boy's words angered Bobby.

(Don't be such a coward! It's all good. All we have to do is grab this guy's cash and go into hiding in Japan when we make port! This should be a pice of cake! I hear Japan's a pretty lax place.)

The pudgy boy and the small boy both decided to shatter the dreams of their leader.

(Didn't they say something about over 50% arrest rates?)

(I believe it's currently at over ninety percent. It seems I'm the only one of us who understands a word of Japanese. Setting sneaking onboard aside, how do you suppose you'll get through immigration?)

Even the tall boy joined in on the complaining.

(Seriously... do you think this is actually going to work? I mean, the Martillo capo definitely looks weak, but... he's still a capo.)

A Martillo Family capo would be boarding this ship.

For these boys, who had been half-joking when they planned to stow away, this was like fate. Of course, this was just their conclusion.

The capo was a baby-faced, weak-looking guy with glasses.

They had heard rumours about him, but they realized upon seeing him from afar that he didn't look that much older than themselves. From this point on, the Martillo Family became "an organization we have a chance of defeating".

Setting aside the sharp-eyed man, the boys decided for themselves that a weak-looking capo like that would be easy to defeat. And with their childlike plotlessness and decisiveness--

They found themselves cramped in this tiny space.

(I wouldn't have planned like this if that guy was on his own!)

Bobby then lowered his voice from this shout, and--

(I hear his family's aboard too. A girl around his age and a kid about ten years old.)

(His family?)

(Hm. I guess the girl's the capo's older sister and the kid's his younger brother. It must be a siblings' trip to Japan.)

In the middle of this conversation, they suddenly heard a large *BANG!*.

The boys instantly paled.

The African-American boy sighed and put on a face that read, "It seems it's game over for us".

However, the boys still remained silent and focused on trying to hear what was going on outside--



When they heard a voice.

A voice reached their ears.

"A hiding place... I need to find a place to hide..."

It was the voice of a young girl.

'Huh?'

Before they could finish processing the thought, however--

"Huh? This floor... I think I can open it..."

Light then shone on the boys as the fake floor opened.

As the boys gave their shocked attention to the open floor, they saw an equally surprised white girl with long blond hair.

The girl, who seemed to be about the same age as or a little younger than the boys, looked around desperately for a moment.

Then, she hurriedly pushed her way into the space in the floor as if she had spotted someone.

(Huuuuuuuuh?!)

(I'm sorry. Please let me hide here for a bit!)

The lovely young girl suddenly squeezed herself in beside Bobby and shut the floor.

Blushing like a tomato, Bobby asked the girl a question amidst a storm of indescribable emotions.

(Wh-who are you?!)

The girl smiled and introduced herself.

(My name is Carnea.

...and as you can see, I'm a stowaway!)

Prologue 4 : The Star Who Acknowledges the World

The girl was running as fast as she could.

She could practically hear her legs giving out.

But she just ran and ran and ran through the sunset streets, her knees occasionally shaking.

Her legs just kept moving forward but her head kept checking behind her, as if her mind and body had been disconnected from one another.

To be precise, she wasn't checking--

She was just terrified.

She wasn't running towards a specific destination.

She was simply in flight.

A primal fear borne of both instinct and logic.

She was pushing her legs beyond the limit, all in order to get even a millimetre more away from the 'thing' chasing her.

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything in her line of sight.

But her body reacted before her mind.

Before she could even think about fleeing, before she could even scream--

The girl was being driven forward by 'something' that was coming for her from the sunset sky.

"Ugh..."

The girl tripped on something and was thrown to the ground.

"Oh... ouch..."

She got up without even taking the time to dust off her clothes and began running at the same pace as before, not even checking to see if she had gotten hurt.

But she ended up looking at the thing that she tripped over as if in realization.

And she saw--

The lower body of what was probably a soldier, the upper body of whom was messily torn off.

"...!"

She cringed, but she did not scream.

This was because this was a sight she had become too used to in the past few hours.

From a bird's eye view, scattered around the girl were countless red splotches.

She knew the truth--

That they were all detritus from a feeding frenzy.

The girl began to run again, trying to escape this immovable reality--

But she was too late.

She had been too late to begin with.

Because the girl's thin legs--legs that could do nothing but run across the ground--

They were no match for the free-flying 'creatures'.

The girl then caught sight of it.

She saw the great white shark flying straight towards her from the distant skies, blood dripping from its jaws.

"Hah..."

The girl just stared with unfocused eyes as if she couldn't accept that this creature could even be considered a fish.

The shark was flying.

This unbelievable fact was what stunned the girl, leaving her to be consumed by the terror of death.

The shark lunged with its mouth wide open.

And as the gigantic creature of fear charged at the girl, whom it could swallow in one gulp--

It suddenly turned its titanic body upwards.

'He' was standing between the girl and the sky.

The silhouette that was standing atop a third-floor rooftop tossed itself into the air without a word.

The shark cut through the air as it rushed towards the free-falling shadow. It moved like a torpedo, or perhaps a missile.

The moment the shadow seemed to overlap with the shark's jaws, the shadow reached out an arm and grabbed a streetlight decoration, changing the direction of his movement.

Creak creak creak.

Creak creak creak.

Creak creak creeeeeeeeeek

As the sound of metal rang out through the streets, the shadow crossed the shark's path and coolly landed in front of the girl.

"Huh...?"

When the girl looked at the shadow in front of her, she had to doubt if he was even human.

Metallic. That was her first impression of him.

Layers upon layers of gears folded together created a lifeform of their own.

That was, at least, her first impression.

The gear-demon had the build of a relatively small human. On his face was a mirror-like mask without eyes, a nose, or a mouth. As for the rest of him, it was as if gears were clicking in rotation between his metallic joints and frame.

The gear-demon wordlessly gave the girl a thumbs-up.

The gears in his arms and wrists simultaneously began to spin, and the girl took this powerful sound as a word of reassurance. She sank to the ground with a nod.

This was the first meeting between a girl and "The Gear", a gear-man from another dimension.

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"OK--!!!! Great! That was great!"

An obnoxious male voice rang out through the sunset city--or rather, the film set decorated like one.

At the same time, the astonished girl broke out into a smile and looked around at the people around her.

Many men and women gave her applause, their warm smiles directed straight towards her.

The smiling girl did a quick spin on the spot.

Flailing over her head was an extremely intricate and detailed animatronic shark.

"Excellent..."

The African-American man who had shouted "OK" earlier took off his glasses and pressed his hands to the corners of his eyes.

This chubby man dramatically gestured with his arms, walking over to the girl and the gear-demon.

"It was really, well... Excellent! I could shout this without hesitation!" The man loudly declared his overwhelming emotions.

"I can't do anything but shout! It's already *beyond* excellent... That's right! Marvellous... **That was maaaaaaaaaaaaarvellous! No, PERFECT! That's right! PERFECT is no exaggeration!**"

The dozens of men and women on set cheered in agreement. The cheers turned into one large bravo and swept over the girl and the gear-demon.

"Great work today!"

"It's a wrap, right? For real this time?"

"John keeps going on about doing reshoots of the opening..."

"This is pretty perfect."

"Aw, man. Anyway, how does Claudia get back into character so quickly? It's been a month since she was last on set."

"That's what's so great about her."

"Apparently she takes meticulous care to maintain her weight until the end of postproduction."

"Wish John was here to hear this." "But Claudia looks her best when she's smiling, right?"

"Marry me, Claudia~" "What are you, a pedo?!" "Somebody call the cops!"

As the crew members joked around among themselves, the chubby African-American--the director--gave a slap on the back to the still gear-demon.

"That was stupendous, Charon! You *are* the God of Gears! We're already done cutting all the other scenes, but... that was some fantastic movement! I don't know if there are a lot of people your age who are capable of things like this! Your face may not appear on screen, but your movements are in themselves magnificent! What do you think? Maybe you should follow your older sister into the spotlight--"

"..."

"Oh, my mistake. I promised you I wouldn't bring this up, didn't I? Sorry about that! In any case, what I'm trying to say is that you have gone above and beyond the call of duty in your work! That is the truth, or my name isn't John Drox!"

"...Thank you."

In contrast to the excitable tone of John Drox, the director, the answer from behind the mirror-like mask was extremely terse.

The director nodded in satisfaction and turned around to praise the girl's acting in an even brighter tone.

"And I will also declare this! This is true art! Claudia! The fact that you exist on this earth--no, universe--is the greatest art that could ever exist!"

The girl's reply was accompanied by a bright smile.

"Thank you, John!"

There was still a bit of childishness left in her smile, but it was truly genuine.

The next day, an article in a celebrity magazine would go on to say, "This girl, acknowledged by the entire world, smiled confidently--as if displaying her smile to the sunset skies."

In other words, this was the kind of person she was.

She was a famous child actress who would not be picky about her roles despite her popularity.

Claudia's smile brought joy to not only the director, but the entire crew as well.

<=>

Thirty minutes later.

"Good work today! That must have been tough!"

It was inside a green room in the studio.

The girl walked into one of the most well-furnished of these rooms and spoke to the silhouette waiting inside.

The gear-demon, whom the director had called 'Charon', was sitting there. He was no different than the way he was on set.

"How long are you going to stay dressed like that, Charon?"

"...."

"Haha! I guess you can keep it on since it looks so cool!"

The gear-demon began to remove his mask as the girl giggled.

"Oh, so you're not going to wear it anymore? Too bad~. You know what? You think they'll let me take the costume if I give back some of my pay?"

"..."

From behind the mask emerged a black-haired boy.

The roots of his hair were red, hinting that he had dyed his hair.

However, their extremely similar gold eyes were testament to the fact that these two were related.

They were both in their early-to-mid teens.

This duo--who could easily still be called children--had been left alone in this unfittingly gigantic green room.

"..."

The boy stoically scanned the room as he removed his gear costume.

The girl called Claudia spoke as if she was speaking in his place.

"I *told* them we were fine with a smaller room. It's so empty now that the makeup artists aren't here."

"..."

The boy remained silent, but the girl continued without hesitation.

"Anyway, can you believe they actually got such a realistic shark to swim through the air like that? Technology these days is amazing! I really like that shark. How much do you think it'd cost to make one of those?"

"...They could have just CGI'd it."

The boy mumbled. The girl shook her head as if he had just said something ignorant.

"The fact that there's something tactile there to see is what's so great about it. And they're going to use CGI to get rid of the wires, anyway. Oh, I want to hang that shark on my bedroom ceiling!"

Claudia spun around and around with her hands clasped over her chest. The boy--Charon--ignored this and picked up a pamphlet off the table.

"..."

He silently skimmed the contents.

[They devour the skies!

Kari and her daughter Aisha arrive at California in search of her missing father, and discover a notebook he left behind. Its contents are pages full of strange runes and a single gun without a trigger. As the mother and daughter embark on their search, the Flying Sharks suddenly appear! And appearing in front of their eyes is a strange hero covered entirely in gears!

Directed by John Drox

From the critically-acclaimed [Mode Gears] comic series comes the second film adaptation--[Shark Flight]!

Coming Worldwide in Spring 2003. Distributed by the McDonnell Company.]

Charon pressed his hands to his temples and sighed.

Claudia tapped him on the shoulder despite not knowing what this sigh could mean.

"Anyway, good job! Why don't you go take a break?"

"..."

"You know how you were working in this suit for the first movie, too? I knew you were just doing the actions with someone else doing the voiceovers, but... I honestly didn't realize you were doing all the physical acting."

"..."

The girl chattered, but the boy remained silent.

Yet Claudia continued on this one-sided conversation.

"And I honestly thought they'd be using a lot more CGI. I only realized after I signed on that *you* were doing all the acting, and you're not using CGI or wire action, either! You should take better care of yourself, since you're practically the lead."

"..."

The boy quietly shook his head. The girl's expression darkened.

"You know, little brothers should listen to their big sisters. I know you're a stuntman, but if you get hurt, I... well, I'd be troubled!"

"...Sorry."

The boy apologized sincerely to his sister.

Though there wasn't a hint of fear or cowering in Charon's eyes, the apology was a clear-cut response to what he deemed was a wrongdoing on his part. Claudia couldn't ask any more of him.

"Don't apologize with that look. ...I can't get angry at you like that."

Claudia's expression darkened even more. However, she soon regained her energy and looked up, playing with her brother's face.

"You really don't want to be an actor, Charon?"

"..."

He wordlessly bowed his head.

There was no hesitation or argument in his eyes.

When his gold eyes looked straight at her, Claudia laughed.

"Well, I guess this is just like you, Charon."

She then turned to a nearby movie magazine cover.

Her face was printed on it, and a caption read, "The girl who is acknowledged by the world". One of the crew members had probably left it there for her to see.

But Claudia cocked her head as she read the caption.

"This is all wrong. Though I guess I'm happy they're trying to compliment me."

Claudia flipped through the magazine as she smiled confidently.

"After all, it's not the *world* that acknowledges me. *I'm* the one who acknowledges the world!"

"..."

"Because **from the moment I was born, this world's belonged to me!**"

The boy did nothing but quietly stare at his sister, who spoke words that were clearly abnormal.

And Charon knew that her words were neither a bluff nor a joke. To Claudia, this was an absolute truth.

As Charon looked at her with eyes of neither disdain nor respect, Claudia confidently turned to him.

"Get it? Everything in this world goes the way I want it to! All I have to do is believe! And if it doesn't work, I'll make it happen! Nothing is impossible!"

"..."

"Say something. I'm going to give you a special front-row seat in my world, so at least try doing something cute!"

"..."

The boy thought for a moment at his sister's forceful words--

He then looked his sister in the eye and gave her his answer.

"...Meow."

"Whoa."

Claudia was taken by surprise at this unexpected display of cuteness.

"Uh... hmmm... That's pretty adorable. You pass."

Claudia was blushing, but Charon was as expressionless as ever.

"Geez, I bet they could make *robots* more expressive than you... Don't just say cute things, try making a cute face."

At his sister's request, Charon began to look around. He then picked up the magazine that she had been holding, and--

He rolled it up like a telescope, put it to his eye, and began to stare at Claudia.

"..."

Of course, his face hadn't gotten any more expressive.

"...I... guess this counts as cute?"

Seeing Claudia at a loss for reactions, Charon moved the rolled-up magazine to his mouth like a blowdart.

"Oh, geez! Now I'm even more confused, but I guess this kinda makes you look like a cute puppy, so you pass!"

Claudia gave him a thumbs-up. Charon put on a faint smile in relief.

"...! Hey! Th-that's cheating! That smile just now was way too adorable!"

Taken completely by surprise at this smile, Claudia took the rolled-up magazine from her brother and tried to smack him on the head with it.

Charon dodged it as stoically as ever.

After several misses, Claudia's face became redder and redder--

until she suddenly noticed a certain chubby African-American man out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh, John."

As she stopped without thinking, both siblings gave their attention to the intruder--

And without warning, John Drox--the director of [Shark Flight]--fell to his knees and howled like it was the end of the world.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"...?"

"What's wrong?"

"Ohh... The mature little Hollywood Star regains her childlike innocence in her brother's presence!!"

As the siblings widened their eyes, the director interrupted whatever the girl had to say, stomped on the floor and expressed his regret.

"How could I...?! Why?! Why did I not bring a camera when I stepped into this room?! What I've just seen... was greater than any scene I had shot before! True realism! Delightfully natural! To think I would be caught without a camera at a time like this... has the God of Filmmaking abandoned me?! God, oh God! Why must you test me so?!"

The siblings looked at each other at this display of grief, and wondering if they should be embarrassed by this, decided to remain standing in place.

"Um. Sorry you had to see something that embarrassing, John."

"...Sorry."

Although there was logically nothing for the siblings to apologize for, they decided to try and console the director anyway.

"Well... no, sorry. I'm okay now.... In any case, that was sly of you two, to do all that with the door wide open. If you'd at least given me the chance to knock, I could have just not seen this scene full of your lovelinesses...!"

The director, having calmed down some, recalled what he had seen just moments earlier.

"...Maybe next time I'll try for a comedy... forbidden love between siblings. And their relationship will bring tension to their parents..."

"That's more of a suspense than a comedy, isn't it? And there's no 'forbidden love' between me and Charon, so if you say anything of the sort to the paparazzi, I'll terminate our contract."

"..."

The director shook his head in surprise as Claudia smiled and Charon nodded coldly.

The director slapped his own face--a cuddly combination of a bear and a piglet--and returned to his original reason for coming here.

"Anyway, we'll talk about the next movie later! I wanted to talk about promoting [Shark Flight]--remember what I told you about going to Japan as a part of the publicity campaign?"

"Yes. I've booked off the entire month, so I should be free..."

The director nodded satisfactorily, slapped his potbelly, and laughed loudly. He handed them a pair of planning proposals.

The font on the cover was bolded and easy to read. The format did not at all resemble any sort of official proposal.

[About the Great Shark Flight Publicity Campaign aboard the Twin Luxury Cruise Liner 'Entrance' (better shoot the DVD extras here too~)]

Preface : The Mastermind Imitates Fate

My name is Copycat.
I'm just a simple imitator.
I'm just a lowly criminal.

Now, let's repeat, repeat.
Let's repeat that incident.
First, let's gather the playing pieces.
Then, let's throw them in a pot.
Let's put a lid over the pot.
Boil them in water, not fire.
They'll burn and drown and bloat.
Let's copy that incident.
To see what I'd wanted to see.

My name is Copycat.
I'm just a simple imitator.
I'm just a lowly criminal.
What I have to copy isn't an individual.
What I have to duplicate isn't an action.
What I have to replicate is malice and coincidence.
If I replicate coincidence, do I become a replica of god?
If I'm god, let's create a world.
Let's recreate, recreate.
Let's recreate a world.
Let's recreate the transcontinental.
Let's recreate a closed world.
If it succeeds, let's clap quietly.
All for myself, all for myself.

LALALA LALALA

LALALAAALAA
AAA
AAAFDAIJDAIOSIJAI
OJFIAIHDSFA
UGYAWGYUAJINJFDJKLHF0QWAIJSDA9-
WQAI@ASKDKAOJDJIOPGADOP3Q9-0-0KO@ADAYGWYGAUHAJIOJIODSAIJIDJ
ASIJOS
AJIOADSK@

I'm so excited my heart's racing.

Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum

I'm getting so excited just by typing this out but it's embarrassing, so let's erase this.

<=>

One month before the 'incident'--

The shadow that had been typing away at the keyboard quietly smiled.

Pressing down the backspace key with a smile.

Again and again and again. Again with force.

Again and again with mirth, despite knowing that it was easier to just hold down the key.

Clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack

The shadow concentrated on rhythmically tapping the backspace key--and kept going with a euphoric laugh, even after the screen had been wiped blank.

With truly sincere glee.

Clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack

第二章 奇妙な家族はぎこちない



Chapter 1 : The Strange Family is Awkward

"It's huge...!"

That was the baby-faced young man's first impression.

However, he immediately shut his mouth reflexively and hurriedly looked around.

He then cleared his throat and squeezed out an unnecessarily elegant tone of voice in order to cancel out what he had just said.

"Hm... What a sight to behold. It is a most fitting match for the cerulean ocean and the azure heavens."

And though this bespectacled young man smiled coolly as he said this--

A completely contrary snort of laughter could be heard from behind him.

"Pffft... I-I can't take this anymore! Ahaha! Hahahaha!"

The young man froze at this outburst of childish laughter.

"Wh-what's wrong, Czes?"

"It's... It's just...! You're trying way too hard, big brother Firo!"

The boy called Czes held back his laughter and looked up at the young man in front of him.

"And besides, big brother... You're just not a tux person...!"

"Uh, um... really? Is it really that bad of a fit...? Actually, why're you telling me this *now*?"

As if acknowledging the bad fit, the young man in the tuxedo--Firo Prochainezo--took off his non-prescription glasses, put them in a case, and looked over his own appearance.

"Hey Ennis, what do you think--"

Firo froze on the spot as he turned to his right.

The woman standing beside him was extremely familiar to him--**they had lived together for 70 years now, after all.**

Firo had been living with her ever since becoming immortal during an incident in 1930. A year later, a fellow immortal--a boy named Czeslaw Meyer--joined them, and they gladly took him in like a little brother.

They had lived together for a period of time that was an entire lifetime to mortals, and nothing but a passing second to an immortal.

And when about fifty years had passed, Firo worked up the courage to propose to this woman--and she continued to stand by him to this day.

Ennis.

Ennis Prochainezo.

In terms of appearance alone, Firo's wife seemed to be about the same age as he. However, her calm demeanour sometimes made her look older than her husband.

And this husband--Firo--had frozen at the sight of his wife.

She was wearing a plain strapless dress, the simplicity of which drew out the beauty of its wearer.

Unusually for Ennis, who preferred to wear suits, her arms were bare--the air around her was completely different.

Of course, it wasn't as if Firo *hadn't* seen her arms and exposed shoulders.

After all, she always wore relatively light clothing to sleep--he'd also seen plenty of pictures she had taken with Czes at the pool or the beach.

However, seeing her under the bright sunlight, wearing a dress he'd never seen before, was far more enticing that Firo could ever have imagined.

Ennis herself, realizing that Firo's gaze was locked on her, shyly bowed her head.

"Um... is it... a bad fit...?" She mumbled bashfully.

"Wha--?! N-no, that's not it!" Firo gesticulated wildly at his wife and shook his head.

The way he treated her was like an innocent boy talking to his first crush--nothing about them suggested that had had been living together for over seventy years now.

Although Firo could still pass for a "young man" when he was wearing his glasses, this action just now was enough to label him a "boy".

The baby-faced young man then turned his gaze to the object standing in front of them.

The object would be best described as "gigantic". Although it was also elegant, luxurious, splendorous, and majestic, there was no better descriptor than "gigantic".

The luxury cruise ship *Entrance*.

A seaborne royal palace that was like a vacation destination hotel set afloat on the water.

It was one of the greatest cruise ships in the world, built several years ago in a joint venture by corporations from the U.S. and Japan.



With all kinds of events prepared onboard and every luxury in the world available to its patrons, it was a special vessel that held a cargo hold big enough to take a drive in.

It had played host to events like international motor shows in the past--*Entrance* was, in some ways, better known as an event centre than a cruise ship.

However, there was one curious thing about this ship.

The sister ship *Exit*.

This ship had an identical twin. The two ships were each named *Entrance* and *Exit*, meaning "Entrance to Paradise" and "Exit from Reality" respectively.

This special feature was used to great advantage in the "Meeting" event during the crossings of the Pacific or the Atlantic, where the two ships would pass by one another at visible distance and shoot fireworks to bless the voyage of the sister ship.

"Huh... Is it really that fun to watch an identical ship pass by?"

That was what Firo had said when he first read the pamphlet, but he found himself compelled to nod in agreement when he finally saw the ship with his own two eyes.

'It might actually be pretty cool to see a ship this size.'

It was 306m in length, 55m in height, and 52m wide.

Because of the cargo hold and the event stage, the capacity was relatively small in comparison to other ships this size. However, it could still hold over 2500 passengers and over a thousand crew members.

Most skyscrapers wouldn't be this large if they were set flat against the ground.

"They call it a 'seaborne castle', but... How many castles are actually this big?" Firo asked in amazement, not even trying to sound more mature than he appeared.

Ennis also looked up at the white wall.

"I never could have imagined that technology would improve so rapidly in less than a century." she reflected, drawing on the knowledge from her long life.

"You think so? Personally, I was more impressed by the 19th century. They were laying down railroad tracks like no tomorrow."

Czes didn't seem to have been quite so shocked by the sight of this cruise ship.

It was only then that Firo then reminded himself that the young boy standing in front of him was actually over two centuries older than Ennis and himself.

"We can't exactly tell, y'know? We weren't even born back then."

"Now you feel like respecting your elders?"

As Czes smirked triumphantly, Firo used his left hand to mess up Czes's hair.

"Don't get too smug!"

"Ack!"

Czes, hair in a mess, escaped Firo and hid himself behind Ennis.

Ennis watched them both with a smile.

And as Firo took in this heartwarming situation--

'Wow. This feels great.'

He quietly took the moment to appreciate this family-like atmosphere.

'Looks like Czes's brightened up some since he came back from the trip with Maiza... I wonder if something good happened.'

Maiza and Czes had returned only two weeks ago from their journey to search for their fellow immortals.

For the past several decades, Firo could tell that Czes had built up an invisible wall around himself and pretended to act like a child.

However, that wall had completely disappeared by the time he returned to New York.

Before, Czes had never behaved as if he were older than Firo. However, he had now begun to make jokes about his age as he had just done earlier.

Out of nagging paranoia, Firo asked Maiza about this, but the only answer he got was a "I suppose we should be thanking Elmer".

Elmer. Not even Szilard's memories contained much information about him. In a way, this was expected of Szilard, who almost never concerned himself with others. However, this person called Elmer was quite the eccentric, even in the memories of the other alchemists.

'I guess I'll eventually run into him one day.'

Firo made a mental note to thank him later, and decided to focus his thoughts on making Czes feel at home with them as their older little brother.

He would do so as a normally calm and collected *camorra* capo.

And also as an awkward man who, in front of his family, had not changed a bit in the past seventy years.

"Anyway... looks like everyone here's got more than enough cash to spare."

The people around him were of varied races, but each and every one of them had the air of someone who would never be in want of money.

Having read the guideline that said, "We ask that all passengers dress in formal wear for the departure ceremony", Firo had been about to go in his usual suit. However--

"Firo, the guideline means you need to wear a tuxedo. Your suit's closer to semi-formal." the Don, Molsa Martillo, advised him. So Firo decided to get a tuxedo fitted for himself.

Czes laughing at him earlier wouldn't have been the first time. He had worn the tux to the Alveare as a test run, and was nearly laughed out of the restaurant by Randy, Pecho, capos and underlings alike, and even the ordinary customers.

"Damn it. Even Maiza was laughing... At least Isaac and Miria said 'looks great!', but is that supposed to be a good thing, considering what kinda people they are?"

Currently, the Martillo Family's business was much smaller than it had been in the past.

Although the increased police presence was a contributing factor, another reason was that gambling just wasn't as popular as it used to be.

And as the Martillo Family had resolved to keep their hands off any drug trades, their only stable line of income was the revenue from a spice import business that had been set up as a front for the rest of their organization.

However, that was just until a few years ago.

Though their scale of operation was much smaller, they had never been lacking in funds.

Several years ago, Molsa Martillo used his own funds to invest in futures trading. This yielded huge profits that allowed them to create a chain of Alveare restaurants, which in turn gave them enough stable income to turn the Martillos' Camorra business into a secondary source of income. Some of the Alveare employees these days didn't even know about the truth behind the Martillo Family.

'I wonder if we'll slowly end up becoming honest businessmen.'

In the past, Firo would have been completely opposed to this change.

However, the long time he had lived with a family of his own made him consider that it wasn't completely necessary to be working in the criminal underworld.

'Still, I vowed to be loyal to the boss--to the Martillo Family. No matter what happens, all I have to do is keep my word.'

'I'll follow them to the end. I don't know when that might be, but until then--I'll at least cherish everyone and everything within reach.' Firo thought, and was caught by surprised at his own line of thinking. He hurriedly looked around.

'What am I doing? Why am I thinking like this?!'

Firo took deep breaths and figured out the reason he was so anxious today.

'I guess it's not surprising to be nervous.'

He glanced sideways at Ennis's face and clenched his fist.

'After all, it's supposed to be our honeymoon.'

<=>

Everything started with an ordinary conversation between Isaac and Miria.

"Say, Isaac?"

"What is it, Miria?"

They were in the Alveare.

The TV was showing a special on the wedding of Marie Antoinette, when Miria suddenly spoke up with stars in her eyes.

"What's the time limit on a honeymoon?"

"None! A honeymoon is the first vacation you take together after the wedding."

"Really, Isaac? No matter how long it's been?"

"Of course, Miria! After all, two people in love will never run out of new things to discover together."

"Amazing!"

This conversation wasn't very far removed from their usual fare, but Firo decided to spare them a glance.

'What's with them? Just because it's on TV...are they finally thinking about getting married?'

Firo was quite surprised by the fact that these two, who seemed to always be perfectly happy together regardless of marriage or a home, were discussing this topic. He decided to continue listening.

However--

He would soon regret being in that place at that time.

"I get it! So Firo and Ennis are still good to go!"

"Of course!"

Pfffffft. Firo spat out the liquor in his mouth and decided for himself that he would consider their statements just now hallucinations caused by the daytime drinking.

However, the air in the restaurant was not so easy.

"Huh? Don't tell me you two haven't gone on your honeymoon yet, Firo!"

"I *thought* it was weird they didn't have any kids!"

As Randy and Pecho burst into laughter, the other regulars at the store joined in.

"What? Wait. Don't tell me he's still a..."

"What did you expect from him?"

"He's so timid it's less of a curiosity and more like a challenge to his male DNA."

"Maybe he lost all his reproductive instincts after becoming immortal..."

"No, I believe he's just being shy... well, no matter."

"Seriously? You're supposed to be ninety, right?"

"I feel bad for Ennis."

"At least tell me they've kissed."

"Yeah. We all saw that."

"Oh right! Come to think of it, some weirdos crashed the wedding. They made such a big impression I forgot the rest of it."

"The entire church was a bloody mess, remember?"

"Ah, the memories."

The flies slowly gathered around Firo with hearty laughter.

"Tell me, Firo. Whether or not it was a honeymoon, have you ever taken her on vacation somewhere?"

"Well... no. I couldn't just leave my post."

"Then I'll take over the bookkeeping duties again. Don't worry."

"Not you too, Maiza!"

Firo was peppered with questions from his pleasant yet unpleasant friends. He did his best to change the subject, but--

It was a surprisingly serious Miria who landed the critical hit.

"Ennis might not say anything about it, but whenever stuff like that comes on TV, she's always watching really closely."

Miria's words had given Firo no small shock. Once he had returned home, he looked Ennis in the eye and cleared his throat.

"S-say, Ennis."

"Yes?"

Ennis seemed to have realized that something was different about Firo's attitude today. She waited for him with a serious look in her eye.

"..."

Silence. Looking at Ennis's face, Firo could not work up the courage to say, "Let's go on a honeymoon".

"What is it, Firo?"

"W-well..."

Their relationship had scarcely changed since getting married.

Ennis had stopped using honorifics when addressing him, but she still spoke politely to him. This probably wouldn't change even if they were to have children. Firo had no intention of telling her otherwise, as this was Ennis's most sincere form of expression.

And though her polite words still made him anxious, Firo remembered the frantic night of their wedding, and Ennis's soft smile of joy at having gained the surname 'Prochainezo'. He then quietly drew out the right words.

"...Let's go. On vacation."

"A vacation?"

"Y-you don't want to?"

"I'd love to go anywhere with you."

"...!"

Firo was taken by surprise at Ennis's surprisingly quick answer.

Ennis just looked into Firo's face, wondering what was wrong.

"But why so suddenly?"

"W-well, uh. You see..."

Firo's stuttering face did not have a trace of the dignity of a camorra capo--he was merely a boy who was too embarrassed to say, "it's our honeymoon".

However--

"I'm home."

Czes entered in the nick of time, prompting Firo to spit out an absurd answer.

"A-a family vacation!"

"?"

Czes looked over at him in confusion as Firo began rambling awkwardly.

"Uh, you know! Well, you said that this 'Denkuro' guy might be in Japan, right? See, I made friends with this Japanese cameraman earlier this month--the same day Czes and Maiza came back, actually! He said I could come visit sometime, but it'd be kinda weird to go on a trip by myself!"

Firo found himself rambling on, jaw twitching.

And in the end, he was unable to say what he actually wanted to say.

"So, what I'm saying is--let's all go together! All three of us!"

The next day.

Having heard about the gist of things from the men, Molsa gave Firo three tickets to a Japan-bound luxury cruise ship with a "Come to think of it, I don't think I've given you a wedding gift yet".

Although Firo received them with an enthusiastic cry of thanks, he looked up the prices on the internet and found himself, having been bookkeeper for thirty years, nearly losing his mind.

The suite room prices fetched over ten thousand dollars per person.

He managed to stop himself from going up to Molsa and asking, "Sir, where in the world did you get all this money?!", realizing that he might hear something terrifying in response.

'If you think about it, I guess it'd be weird for a criminal organization to be too cheap to afford thirty grand...'

Firo found himself certain that he would be indebted to Molsa for life, and soon set off for the Pacific with his wife and their older little brother--as a strange sort of "family".

It had been two weeks since.

As he finally boarded, Firo desperately tried to calm his nerves by checking his passport.

For immortals like himself, who could not use pseudonyms, there was one part of the passport that had to be falsified.

It was his age.

Some time ago, Firo had gone to Italy on another business. He found himself detained for a full day because of the age recorded on his passport--over seventy years of age. He had been scolded over an international call from Victor Talbot: "Why didn't you discuss this with me earlier?! How much more do you plan on bothering me like this, huh?! If you do *anything* there that causes me trouble, I'll bury you back in the Alcatraz dungeons, tourist spot or not!".

Of course, it was partially Firo's fault for saying, "Ask a guy named Victor at the FBI. He'll vouch for me."

This time, they made sure to prevent such a scenario by falsifying just the age section of their passport.

Although the Elixir's rules forbade them from falsifying their address and names, it seemed that age could be changed in official documents with help from a third party. This was probably because age didn't really matter when it came to looking for fellow immortals.

Czes and Ennis also had their ages altered so as to avoid trouble.

'*Yeah. It's perfect.*' Firo thought, as he confidently stepped over to immigrations--

"Is liquor available for purchase on this ship?" he asked in a mature tone, clearing his throat. The attendant's reply was accompanied by a small chuckle.

"I'm afraid it is illegal for minors to drink, even aboard the ship."

"...If you'll check my passport again, please."

"Oh?! Twenty-five--? I'm so sorry, sir. I was so sure you were--!"

Firo couldn't even get angry as he gloomily passed through the gates into the ship.

<=>

"I think twenty-five is pushing it, big brother Firo." Czes chuckled, as Ennis was busy asking an attendant about checking in their luggage.

"Shut up. I can at least say I look a bit more mature with my glasses on."

As Firo gazed at Ennis with a sigh, Czes laughed meaningfully and shot him a glare.

"Anyway... that was quite the stunt you pulled, using me as an excuse."

"What are you talking about?"

"You called it a 'family vacation', but this is actually supposed to be your honeymoon, right?" Czes whispered softly so Ennis couldn't hear. Firo froze.

"Wha-?!"

"Don't worry, Firo."

Czes whispered into Firo's ear with a somewhat sly, mature grin.

"Once we get on board, I'll avoid you two as much as I can so I won't bother you. I'll go watch movies at the theatre or something at night."

"!! !!!...!"

Firo gaped, grasping for a witty response. However, he fell into silence as Ennis returned to their side.

"What's wrong, Firo? You don't look so well."

"Maybe he's seasick." Czes laughed. Firo was struck by a sudden realization.

That the boy in front of him was someone far more world-weary than he had ever been.

Of course, Firo was currently in a state in which he could probably be easily tricked by any ordinary child.

<=>

After passing through immigrations without trouble, the three of them looked down at the harbour from the ship.

Firo had gone into their room earlier, but found himself dizzy at seeing the sheer luxury of the suite--far more decadent than any hotel room--and dropped off the luggage before practically fleeing to the deck.

Having been the bookkeeper of the organization in the thirty years that Maiza was absent, Firo could tell at a glance just how much this suite was worth.

'Ennis and Czes aside... I guess this tux isn't really flattering on me.

I'm glad Ennis looks so beautiful, but... Why does Czes have to look so good in a tux, too?'

Firo looked over the railings in an effort to remove these complaints from his head, and found himself struck by the sheer scale of this cruise ship.

From his perspective, at a height that was at the rooftop of most tall buildings, people were moving around on the ground like little ants.

He found himself wondering, 'Is this ship I'm standing on really going to cross the ocean?', and looked back at the *Entrance*.

They were currently standing on the deck at the bow of the ship, but this deck was only halfway up the full height of the vessel.

The majority of the space on the upper level of the ship was near the centre of the ship, higher up than this deck.

Firo hadn't checked yet, but it seemed there was a flowing-water pool and a tennis court up there.

'Maybe I should check it out--?'

'What's that?!'

Firo's eyes widened as he looked up at the upper deck from the bow.

A gigantic object was being hoisted towards this deck by a gigantic crane beside the ship.

It was an enormous shark, over ten metres in length.

"Wh-what's a shark doing here...?"

It wasn't only Firo--the other passengers began asking one another as well. However, their whispers were closer to cheering than panic.

"What in the world...?"

The gigantic shark was slowly lowered onto a decorative platform in the middle of the deck.

Workers soon began to attach the shark to the platform, and passengers around them began snapping pictures.

"Oh, so that's what it is..."

"It's amazing to think that it's a robot."

"A-a robot? That thing?" Firo asked Ennis and Czes, who seemed to know something he didn't.

"Oh? Didn't you know, big brother Firo? This ship's going to host a publicity event once it gets to Japan."

"I've heard about it too. That's why they're transporting the animatronic shark. They might be holding all kinds of events during the cruise itself, too..."

"I see... I didn't know any of that."

After the explanation, Firo looked back up at the shark.

"That aside, robots these days are amazing. It looks completely real. ...What movie's this for? Something like *Jaws 5*?"

"I don't really know, but... it should be in the pamphlet."

Firo recalled that he had with him an information brochure that was mailed to him earlier. He took it out and unfolded it, and discovered a piece of paper with the words [Mode Gears Series] and [Shark Flight].

"Huh?"

Something about this struck Firo as familiar, and he began to read through the pamphlet, when--

"Uncle Firo!"

He heard a girl's voice calling his name.

When he turned, he saw a red-haired girl with sparkling eyes. Behind her was a boy with a somewhat mechanical expression.

"...Claudia! Charon!"

The expression on Firo's face went from surprise to delight.

"Haha! It's been too long! What, a year now? Oh! So *this* is the movie, right? The one you did the stunts for, Charon? And Claudia, you told me you were going to be in the sequel, right? Wow! Looks like you're both doing great!"

"Thanks! You look pretty good yourself, uncle!"

Claudia twirled on the spot and curtsied lightly, holding a side of her dress with each of her hands.

"Why'd you spin around?"

"I wanted to twirl my dress!"

Firo laughed and sighed at this straightforward answer.

"It's been a while, Claudia."

"Wow! It's nice to see you again, Ennis!"

Claudia's expression brightened upon seeing Ennis, whom she had already met before.

Although she always called Ennis by name only, she would call Firo "uncle". As Firo was almost never treated his actual age, he was very fond of the way Claudia addressed him.

The girl smiled at the elated Firo and asked him a question.

"But I can't believe it! You two are on this ship, too...? Are you on vacation?"



"Two of us'? Nah, Czes is here too--huh?"

Firo looked around, but could not find Czes.

He then saw a tiny figure in a tux near the entrance to the hull.

Claudia seemed to have spotted him too, as she pouted and complained.

"That Czes! He's always trying to avoid me!"

"Don't know why, but he's always been scared of redheads."

Then, Firo recalled something and asked a question of Claudia.

"Are your great-grandparents doing okay?"

"They're both doing great! Great-grandma is as healthy as ever, and **great-grandpa Felix** is salvaging a shipwreck in the Caribbean. He says he's going to find a pirate's treasure sword to give great-grandma."

Firo laughed bitterly as he listened to his best friend's great-granddaughter, recalling his face.

"...That Claire, past 90 and still going strong..."

<=>

Just as Firo was exchanging words with his friend's descendant, a group of people a slight distance away began to make a commotion.

"Hey, look over there."

"Huh?"

"That's Claudia! Claudia Walken, right?!"

"...If that's supposed to be a joke..."

"You said before that you saw John Travolta in South America, right?"

This group of people was not wearing tuxedos and dresses, but relatively casual clothing. Of course, the casual clothing was still high-class suits and jackets, so they didn't stand out too much in the crowd.

These people were the very same "Businessmen" who had caused a stir in South America only a few days earlier.

Though it had not been long since they lost their comrade, they talked just as cheerily as they had back in the restaurant.

"Never mind that! Look over there! That little kid!"

"Huh... ..?!"

"Seriously?!" "No way!" "Somebody pinch me!"

The movie-loving team got worked up as they realized who the girl they were looking at actually was.

"I told you so! It's Claudia! What's she doing here?!"

"I get it! That shark! They were talking about her signing on to the new [The Gear] movie!"

"No way! Claudia is appearing in a B-movie series?!"

"Didn't you know? Look over there. That boy behind her. That's her brother Charon Walken, right?"

"Whoa!"

"Yeah! You know how Charon plays 'The Gear', right? That's why they brought in his sister to play the lead. That must be the flying shark she's supposed to be running away from."

"So that shark is playing opposite Claudia?"

"I guess in a morally literal sense, yeah."

"Cool... Why can't she be a bit more picky about her roles? And what's she doing on this ship?"

"Maybe they're promoting the movie in Japan? With that huge shark doll over there..."

"No one told me they were going to Japan on a ship!"

"Hey, anyone got a camera? Anyone?!"

Even setting aside this particular group, Claudia had actually been surrounded by camera flashes since before she had boarded.

Now that she was on the ship, a helicopter from a magazine publisher was flying overhead.

Claudia Walken.

She was a fourteen-year old who had appeared in countless hit films. She was a child actress who even propelled several movies to popularity by virtue of her presence alone. Her expressive performances in everything from serious dramas to B-horror and even slasher flicks had earned her the attention of countless people. Claudia's future in Hollywood was bright, and she was already better known than many other stars.

Although there were rumours around the time of her debut that her father, a famous comic book artist, had backed her generously, she was able to crush these criticisms by skill alone.

She consequently had some anti-fans, but by the time her annual income had surpassed that of her father, people were silent on the rumour that her father had pulled strings to get her roles.

There was another person who had been propelled to popularity alongside her.

Charon Walken.

Although he did not stand in the spotlight as his older sister Claudia did, he was practically a household name among film enthusiasts.

The boy, who was a year younger than his sister, made his debut as a 'child stunt actor' at the same time as his sister.

Thanks to his amazing athletic skills, he also worked as a suit actor alongside being a stuntman. His work as "The Gear", a boy hero made of gears, in last year's film [Mode Gears], was critically acclaimed for its eye-catching, live action sequences.

However, he adamantly refused to set his foot into acting territory. He had always been the 'action', but never an 'actor'. Even 'The Gear' was voiced by another child actor.

His face was pretty enough to pass for a girl if he remained silent, and his straight hair was a contrast to his sister's curls.

There were many producers who had wanted to bring him to centre stage for the female audience, but he would always worm his way out of such situations by claiming that dialogue was too difficult for him. However, the fact that he would never miss out on things like photo shoots suggested that he was still quite fond of movies themselves.

The Businessmen could not hide their excitement at being in the presence of these two stars--one in front of the camera, and the other behind. Although many of the other passengers cheered at what they supposed was celebrity presence, no one was walking up to ask for autographs or the like.

In other words, although the crowds at first seemed only mildly interested, they were actually just awestruck but the presence of these stars.

"Seriously! Anyone have a camera? Or a permanent marker! I gotta get an autograph on my shirt, or something..."

"Why're you suddenly acting like a deluded fanboy? Oh, right!"

One of the Businessmen remembered something.

"I'm pretty sure Illness has one of those new cell phones with a built-in camera."

"Just *had* to be you, Illness, huh--wait. Where'd Illness go?"

"Huh? She was here just a second ago..."

The Businessmen then all froze on the spot.

Some of them could probably hear their own spines creaking.

This was because--

The girl they were looking for was just walking up to the eye-catching movie star without a care.

<=>

"Hey there."

"?"

When Firo turned to the source of the sudden voice, he was greeted by the sight of a girl in a strange dress.

She looked older than Claudia but younger than Ennis, but the girl looked strangely lifeless for being at such an age.

Her gothic dress was black and yellow, and she held a parasol in her hand. The pattern on it was, eerily enough, that of a gigantic eyeball. In contrast, her own eyes looked droopy--there were even what seemed to be bags under her eyes.

Upon closer inspection, it was apparent that her eyes weren't actually baggy--it looked like she was just wearing dark eyeshadow.

'A *Major Leaguer*?' Firo wondered for a moment, confused by the fact that the girl was wearing what looked very much like baseball players wore on their faces to protect them from UV rays.

The girl looked more like a gothic-style vampire than gothic lolita, but the overly bright yellow on her dress suggested otherwise. It looked vaguely like a mourning dress, but it was overall very jarring for this setting. The dress was short enough for its wearer to move easily, and the girl wore knee-high boots with safety pins on some of the shoelaces.

Her long blond hair was so beautiful that it made even her baggy eyes seem quite elegant. However, her pale skin against the dark eyeshadow, her strange style of dress, and her sickly skintone made her quite an unusual sight on this ship.

The vampire-like girl, weakened by the bright sunlight, spoke to Firo and the others in a surprisingly bright tone.

"That shark's really cool, huh?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah. It's pretty well made."

"It's really really... cute, right?"

The girl giggled. Firo cocked his head in confusion.

"...I don't know about that."

'Is she a friend of Claudia's? Maybe she's a cast member...' Firo thought, which was why he had answered the girl's questions so vaguely. However--

"Thanks for calling Sharky cute! ...I don't think we've met before, have we? Are you a friend of Uncle Firo?"

"Huh?"

Firo realized that his guess was wrong.

'So she was just a random stranger, huh... maybe she's a fan of Claudia?'

Firo then thought about complaining that Claudia would associate such a strange person to himself, but--

"Oh, no? I thought for sure you must be, since Uncle Firo has a lot of friends who have an amazing sense of fashion..."

"Uh."

Firo recalled the appearances of people like Isaac, Miria, and Christopher, and decided to stay quiet.

"Well, I've been curious about that shark for a while now. Then people started saying you were a friend of the shark, so I was wondering if I could pet it... um... sorry. Everyone says you're someone great, but I don't know you. So, um. Sorry."

'We didn't need to know that much.'

Firo kept an eye on Claudia and the rambling goth-loli girl, worried that she might bother Claudia.

Rather than get angry, however, the movie star got a look of delight in her eyes.

He stared at the other girl for a moment, then grinned as she took the arm of the older girl.

"What does knowing me or not matter? Your outfit looks great, and you've said that Sharky was cute... so you must be a good person!"

"Uhhhh."

Claudia dragged the goth-loli girl by the arm over to the shark.

"Come on! I'll let you ride on his back!"

"Oh... C-could I, really? Y-you think I could, maybe... hug its fin?"

"I can let you kiss him!"

"What?! No way! That's too much! Uh, um... Th-thanks!"

Claudia took the strange, blushing girl over to the shark.

Firo, who had been watching all this, mumbled to himself in astonishment.

"Wh-what's that all about...?"

'Kissing and hugging...? That shark?'

Though Firo could point out a lot of strange things in Claudia's declarations, he kept quiet knowing that she could laugh it all off with a certain series of words.

'Claudia... she's grown up to be the spitting image of Claire.'

"And... 'Sharky'?"

"...That's the shark's name. ...Claudia named him that."

"That so?"

"..."

Firo sighed again, twice-astonished. The boy standing beside him had not moved an inch since nodding his head.

"You should try and talk more. I know there's been a lot of quiet ones in your family since your great-grandma, but... You're probably second only to Chane herself."

"...Uncle Keith is even quieter."

"Keith doesn't even qualify for 'quiet' anymore. But then again... he talks quite a bit over the phone."

"That's not Uncle Keith... on the phone... It's the telephone fairy." Charon declared confidently. Firo broke out into cold sweat and decided not to question him.

'Charon doesn't take after Chane. He's taking after Keith.'

Firo had heard that Charon had been left in Keith's care when he was younger.

Keith Gandor was the boss of a small mafia family, and also a very close friend of Firo and Claire. He didn't understand what it was about the silent Keith that Charon respected so much, but Charon had grown up to be a very stoic boy.

Although Firo could never tell what Charon was thinking, he was just glad for his presence-- Charon, after all, was the last line of defence against a rampaging Claudia.

"It looks like it'll be a lively cruise." Ennis laughed. Firo found himself conflicted.

Although he liked the liveliness, it made things seem no different than they usually were.

Ideally, Firo had wanted to spend the trip with Ennis alone, but he wondered if that was just too unlike themselves.

Firo could not figure out an answer, but he smiled at his wife just the same.

"You're right."

And an announcement came on to inform the passengers of the ship's setting sail, as if it had been waiting for Firo's words.

<=>

Ship hallway.

'Of all people... Why'd I have to run into Claudia?'

Czes wandered the ship alone, listening to the announcement.

"That family always makes me uncomfortable..."

Every glimpse of that red hair made him recall the terror he felt seventy years ago.

Claire Stanfield.

A legendary assassin, nicknamed 'Vino'. Thanks to this man, Czes had been traumatized with pain and fear surpassing death.

Even after he changed his name to Felix Walken (for reasons Czes could not fathom), quite a few of Claire's descendants had similar personalities to him. Running into one of them would always rekindle that fear within Czes.

Claudia was one of them. Even when she was younger than his perceived age, she would often visit the Alveare and drag him around to play.

Although he had increasingly grown wary of her personality, which was becoming more and more like Claire's with each passing year--

'Who'd have guessed I would end up running into her in a place like this?'

Walking through the halls reminded him of a certain incident.

The terrible things that happened aboard the Flying Pussyfoot.

'Looks like I'm just not so lucky when it comes to trips.' He thought as he walked along, but he suddenly felt an impact and realized that he had bumped into something.

When he looked up, he saw a lone man.

He was wearing a black jacket over a white shirt, and he seemed to have an air of coolness to him that wouldn't let him sweat a single drop. His white shirt stood out greatly in contrast to his black pants and tan skin.

He was more likely Spanish than South American.

He had the eyes of a man who had imprisoned his fiery passion behind a punishing wall of ice.

'He's dangerous.'

Czes could tell in an instant.

That the man in front of him was different from normal people--he lived a completely different kind of life.

He was different from other immortals, however. If he had to say, Czes could best compare him to someone from the criminal underworld, like Firo.

Over his sharp eyes were a pair of blue sunglasses, and his expression was a slightly different shade of stoicism from Charon's.

'Do I make a run for it?!' Czes found himself thinking, and instinctively took a step back.

And as if he had noticed Czes's fear, the man faintly smiled and spoke--

"Apologies, boy. I'm not used to being on a ship... I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Oh, uh... No, I'm the one who should be sorry!"

Czes hurriedly apologized, but the man told him, "Don't worry about it", and walked over towards the stairs.

Czes breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the man walk towards the lower deck, which housed the cheaper suites.

'What was that all about?'

'I hope my intuition's wrong about this.'

Czes could tell at first glance that the man was far from normal. He was strongly reminded of a certain image in his memories.

'That incident also started when I bumped into Jacuzzi.'

The transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot.

Immortals.

Mad killers.

Terrorists.

Delinquents.

And--the Rail Tracer.

As he recalled the strange incident with vivid clarity--

Czes's heart trembled.

'It can't be. I'm just thinking about it too hard.'

That incident was the result of multiple coincidences piling in one place at one time.

One such incident was more than enough for a century--or rather, three.

'I must be just nervous about going on a long trip in a sealed transport.' Czes concluded, and decided to forget about the man he had just run into.

Even before forgetting the man, however--Czes had forgotten something else of importance.

The fact that there were many people around him who would get involved in such incidents--not once a century, but every year.

And the fact that he had become embroiled in this fate as well.

Whether or not this was coincidence--or intentional.

Interlude

[How're things on your side?]

"This ship's really comfortable! What about you, Misao?"

[Haha! Same here. After all, my ship and your ship are the same model, Hiroko.]

"Anyway, too bad our timings got crossed like this. I would've treated you to dinner if I could be in America when you arrive."

[This might be for the best, though.]

"Why do you say that?"

[Because I still have some lingering feelings about you.]

"...Don't worry about it too much. In America, it's pretty normal for divorced couples to get together to eat."

[Let's not talk about this. Anyway, I hope I get to see you during the Meeting event.]

"I guess you really do have a lot of lingering thoughts. Maybe it's destiny we're just missing each other like this."

[Maybe you're right. Geez... that cameraman buddy of mine won lotteries two months in a row, but he sold me the ticket because he's having guests from America. What's with this guy's timing?]

"By 'cameraman', you mean the one who got attacked by a bear? I didn't think he'd have any American friends... wait, so the first lottery you mentioned was the trip to New York, right?"

[Yeah. He's not much of a spendthrift, but he gets real lucky with stuff like this. I almost thought he might have been demon-possessed when I heard he won the department store lottery.]

"Yeah... anyway, too bad he couldn't make it onto the ship."

[Anyway, are there any weird people on your side?]

"There's an actress and a movie director. I think they might be holding some kind of an event. Are there celebrities on your end too?"

[Don't know about celebrities, but I saw a guy wearing some kind of tribal mask.]

"What do you mean?"

[There were some other weird people, too... someone built like a pro wrestler, a magician... I also saw a bunch of slightly eerie people, but maybe they're comedians from abroad. Good grief, this ship's departing from Japan, but most people here are foreigners. It's really hard to communicate.]

"That's why you called? Kinda weird, how you can call me, but you're not willing to eat out with me."

[Listening to your voice calms me down, but I start getting teary-eyes when I see you.]

"You're such a kid."

[Oh, sorry. I'm going to hang up now. Didn't mean to bother you on your trip.]

"Don't worry about that. Anyway, how's the phone bill?"

[I have to use the ship's satellite system, so even ten minutes costs a lot, but...]

"Then I guess I'd better hang up soon. You just started work, so you don't have a lot of extra cash, do you?"

[Do you mind if I call you again tomorrow night?]

"Go ahead."

[I want to talk to you before... the night after. Before the Meeting event.]

"I'll do the calling for that one. I feel like you'll end up chatting until the event finishes."

[Thanks. Looks like I'll have something to do on the long trip.]

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow... oh, wait, there's a time difference. How about we talk in 24 hours?"

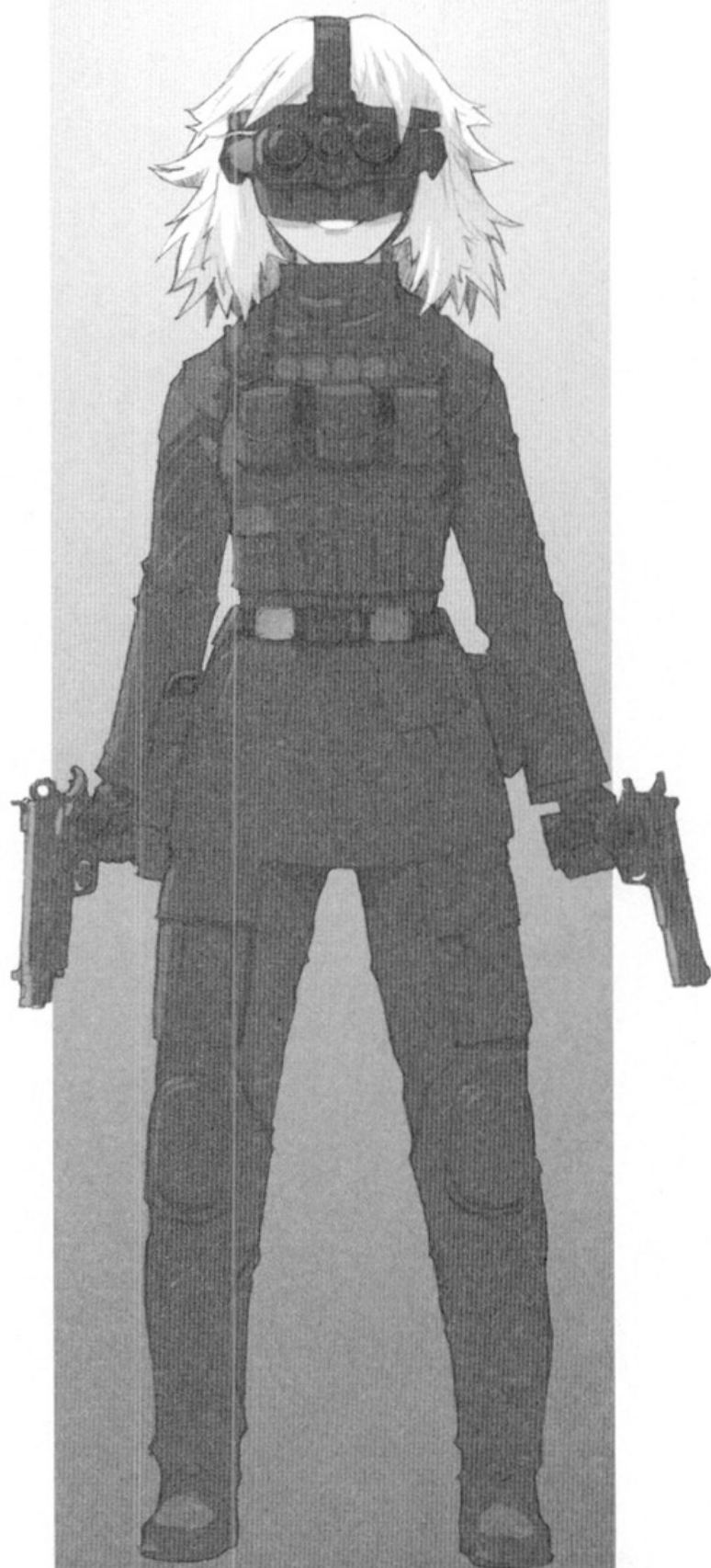
[24 hours is good with me. I'll see you then, and again in 48 hours. Oh, just one more thing.]

"What is it?"

[Have a great trip.]

"...Bon voyage."

第二章 悪い奴らは忙しい



Chapter 2 : The Bad Guys are Busy

The first night of the cruise.

A small ship made its way across the sea.

"Small" in this case, being in comparison to a certain luxury cruise ship.

This vessel, which was on the larger end for a private cruiser, was making its way at a brisk speed.

There were no other ships in sight.

All around it was water.

The only thing of note was a starry and particularly beautiful sky that made the world look like a natural planetarium.

The ship continued towards its destination in this space, which almost looked like all the land in the world had sunken beneath the waves.

Soon, the ship locked on to a shape in the distance.

Visible in the distance was a sort of light slightly different from the stars.

As the ship approached closer, the light became bigger and more numerous, almost like an island.

Once they had arrived at a point where it was easy to identify this object as a luxury cruise ship, the ship shut off its lights and slowly crept towards the cruise ship.

Normally, the cruise ship would be moving faster.

The smaller ship was reading the cruise ship's trajectory and moving ahead of it.

And finally, once they had reached a point where the ship could potentially collide with the cruise ship, a lone shadow left the smaller vessel.

It was a dark shape.

A person covered all in black, wearing a diving suit, and holding some sort of propulsion device in each hand quietly made his way towards the ship.

Like a mine in the pitch-dark depths of the water.

From up close, it was easy to see that the cruise ship was travelling at extreme speeds.

The gigantic mass was propelling itself through the ocean at speeds of up to 50 kilometres an hour. Colliding with such an object would leave the victim a pile of dust, and dodging would do little good as the enormous screw propellers would turn him into mincemeat before anyone could notice.

However, the shadow approached the cruise ship without a moment's hesitation.

And he clung to the side of the hull as if it required no effort.

Perhaps he was carrying some sort of suction cups on his arms.

Although it was impossible to tell for certain in this state, the shadow repeatedly stuck and removed the suction cups and climbed the side of the ship like an insect.

Having finally climbed a height equivalent to a tall building, the shadow finally arrived at the balcony of a cabin on the lowest level.

On the *Entrance*, the semi-suite rooms concentrated at the bow of the ship were each equipped with a balcony.

Having set foot on one such balcony, the man silently got to work.

He took out a small winch from the case on his back and connected it to the rope that ran from his waist and over the surface of the water.

And as he made to pull up the container that was connected to the rope--

He heard the glass door leading into the cabin open.

The figure in the cabin gasped upon seeing the man on the balcony.

The man on the balcony was wearing a pitch-black combat suit like some sort of covert military agent. His face was completely covered in a silicone mask, and he wore a pair of night-vision goggles over his eyes.

And seeing this obviously suspicious man on the balcony--

The occupant of the cabin let out a sigh and spoke.

"Don't scare me like that, Life. You could've at least knocked."

Then, the man who was covered head-to-toe, not showing an inch of skin, replied flatly.

"I have arrived exactly as scheduled. In fact, I was surprised to see that you had left the balcony unsupervised."

It was a calm, mechanical tone of voice. Thanks to the muffling effect of the mask, it was only barely possible to figure out that the voice belonged to a young man.

"If I just stood around there the whole time, the other passengers might get suspicious."

"I believe the fifteen rooms surrounding this one are all being occupied by us or our associates." Life pointed out coldly. The occupant of the cabin stepped onto the balcony and spat into the water.

"Don't be so anal.... that Death was still the best of you lot."

"And I agree that he was the most skilled of us all. Now that he is gone, I don't believe we will last much longer."

"Stop being such a downer."

"Isn't it absurd to lose our most powerful weapon before things have even begun? I joined this mission as the boss had instructed, but in all honesty, I see very little chance of success."

The Businessman sighed in annoyance at his ally's unpleasant laying out of the facts.

"Shut up. All you 'Four Agonies' have to do is keep your mouth shut and do as we say. You brought the goods?"

"If you want to know, I ask that you assist in the recovery of the 'goods' as soon as possible."

"Tch..."

The Businessman began helping Life with a look of dissatisfaction.

Several minutes later, the Businessman opened the two containers they had dragged up.

"...This is perfect, Life."

He grinned, his earlier irritation having dissipated completely.

Inside the cases was a veritable mountain of 'Merchandise'.

One large mass that seemed to be firearms and grenades fused into one.

And there were even objects that were unrecognizable at first glance. The equipment in the cases looked like they were about to be used to wage war.

And these people were actually planning such a thing.

"You've gotta be kidding me! You actually brought an RPG? You planning to sink the ship or something?!" The occupant of the cabin laughed in astonishment, taking out a particularly eye-catching container.

"If it comes down to it, yes."

"Whoa. Did you know? Villains who smuggle in weapons like this always end up getting blown up in their escape chopper because the hero gets his hands on these things."

"And I ask that you take care that such a thing does not happen."

"Tell that to Illness."

The man turned his back to Life.

"I'll call the others over. Illness is probably holed up in the theatre, so don't worry about her."

"..."

"Hey, I don't know what kind of a face you're making there, but just chill. We're the only ones with weapons on this ship. The security guards might have, at best, crowd-suppressant shotguns or guns for clay pigeons. And with all the anti-terrorism measures these days, it's not possible for any of the passengers to have brought in weapons."

And he laughed, having become a monster who could destroy the ship--

"After all, causing devastation should be fun! Just like *Alien*!"

"I feel a twinge of remorse, as if I'm cheating in a video game." for the first time, Life replied in a joking tone. The man snorted in laughter and left the room.

Having been left behind, Life systematically checked the contents of the rest of the containers as he mumbled to himself.

"Causing devastation, is it...?"

Although there was a joking tone in his voice, it was impossible to tell if the face under the mask was smiling.

"I should only hope we are not defeated by the heroes in the finale."

The next container he opened contained something that was very far removed from weapons or seajacking.

"After all, you are not Jason or Freddy... you are just villains who are here on a seajacking plot."

Inside the container was a pile of white masks straight out of some Italian carnival.

"We are only mindless villains who steal away the futures of others for business, after all. That includes myself."

The masks looked almost like a corridor of mirrors, reflecting Life's covered face.

He took out one of these masks and spoke with a sense of embarrassment.

"...I talk too much. Even *I'm* feeling sick listening to myself."

<=>

At the same time, at the Trevi Fountain in the ship's casino.

"What is all this...?"

Firo gulped silently as soon as he set foot into the space.

Once the grandiose departure ceremony, complete with fireworks and doves, had ended, he had changed out of his tux and into a more comfortable jacket. Firo was walking through the ship with Ennis and Czes.

Put simply, the ship had everything.

Although this might have been an oxymoronic statement, the ship still had everything Firo could imagine wanting to find on a ship.

In terms of restaurants alone, there were five-star eateries and cheap burger joints, Italian food, Chinese, Japanese, and even places that served live honey ants as an indigenous Australian delicacy.

In terms of shopping, it was like a gigantic shopping mall had been transplanted onto the vessel. Though fresh food was unfortunately limited, there was everything from high-end boutiques to sporting goods stores, bookstores, toy stores, hair salons, and arcades. At the centre of the ship was a gigantic hall, and the stores were lined up on floors in a circular formation around this centre. The ceiling of the hall was made of clear acrylic, and mirrors would be used in the daytime to light up the hall with sunlight.

But most varied above all were the leisure facilities--though things like ferris wheels and go-carts were absent, Firo was unexplainably awestruck when he saw the wave pool on the ship.

And once he saw facilities like tennis courts and clay pigeon shooting galleries, Firo's impression of *Entrance* had gone from "a floating castle" to "a floating city".

For the first day, he decided to try and get used to their room and ordered room service for dinner.

Afterwards, Ennis went to a beauty salon as Czes advised, and Firo had decided to pay a visit to the casino.

Having been the manager of a gambling parlour, Firo was struck by a certain impression of the casino on the ship.

Opulence. It was splendour incarnate.

Though *Entrance* was a classy vessel, Firo had still expected the casino to be a lot more materialistic.

However, his predictions were blown away the moment he set foot into the casino.

'This is practically Vegas.'

There were numerous chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. The lights shone down onto the chips and the cards, creating an atmosphere of luxury.

This casino was equipped with tables for basics like poker and blackjack, and even roulette, slot machines, and baccarat tables.

Of course, what was at stake here was much more valuable than any token in an arcade. It was chips--the true and absolute master of the casino.

When he heard that he could pay for chips with a credit card and pay in cash later, Firo decided to trade in a hundred dollars for chips, just to see if this place would be a useful reference to the Martillo Family's own casino.

Money changed hands, and minuscule twists of fate changed entire lives.

Having once peeled off the fingernails of a particularly impudent patron, Firo had always considered casinos to be like a microcosm of life. However, he could not spot the heart-racing thrills that were usually present in casinos.

"All right! I'm betting everything on this hand!" One gentleman shouted, as he brought in chips that seemed to be worth about thirty times more than the amount Firo had.

"I'm gonna stick with this till I drop!" One lady kept betting \$1000 chips on "00" at the roulette table.

"Oh, too bad! Looks like I lost this round!" A man who had just lost all his chips in a last-minute reversal of fortunes smiled at his opponent.

Of course, this didn't mean that everyone here was rolling in cash. There were naturally some patrons who staked everything on \$10 bets. However, these people were seated quietly and uncomfortably around the fringes.

'Oh, I get it.'

Firo came to an understanding as he watched the gamblers break out into smiles at defeat.

'To these guys, these chips are just arcade tokens.'

Watching these people enjoy gambling without a care for the cash involved, Firo found himself affirming his belief that this was indeed a microcosm of life.

And so he decided that it might be the right place for him to test the experience he had gained in these past decades.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to see how much of this mountain of cash he could win just through betting.

Firo grinned and stepped forward.

At the same time, on deck.

Though the night grew late, people were still crowding on the deck near the bow.

There were people there to take a look at the gigantic shark, some who had come out to get some fresh air, and others who had come with plans for stargazing.

With the exception of the occasional shaking due to the location of the deck, it was little different from any park at a beach. There were even some couples embracing on the side.

Watching all this, Bobby anxiously clicked his tongue.

"Damn... where is this Firo guy?"

"I doubt our chances of finding him by mindlessly wandering a place akin to a gigantic shopping mall. ... Might I suggest we just steal the passenger list?"

"Shut up, Troy. That smart-ass voice of yours is really annoying me."

Bobby turned down the request of the African-American boy beside him and turned to the rest of his gang.

Troy, who collected malware known as Trojans.

Tall, the tall one.

Humpty, the fat one.

They were all nicknames coined by Bobby, and he liked them very much because they were easy to say. Although the recipients of these names were not very happy about them, they would pretend they hadn't heard anything when Bobby called them by those names.

These boys were currently at a bit of a loss concerning the girl standing with them.

"What's wrong? Are you looking for someone?"

"No, well... I need to know something, before we say anything."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Who are you?"

After several hours of self-enforced silence, the boys and girl had finally managed to sneak out of the lifeboat. The girl bowed her head, still apologetic about having been responsible for the hours of cramped darkness.

"I'm sorry. I'm a stowaway, and my name is Carnea."

"I forgot that! But you already said that!"

The boy spat, and added quietly.

"So why were you stowing away?"

"I'm just like you... I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"I know for sure that he's on this ship... you see, he's like a father to me..." The girl confessed with her head bowed. She seemed to be a bit of an introvert, despite her sun-tanned skin.

"Like a stepdad? What, he left you behind when he left on vacation and you're here to get back at him?"

"No, that's not it... I'm here to stop him."

"Stop him?"

"Yes. He's--"

The moment Carnea made to explain, Bobby covered her mouth with a "wait a sec".

"Mphh--"

"Sorry, I'll listen to what you have to say later."

Bobby directed the others to hide behind a wall as he scanned the deck.

There was a boy wearing a child's tuxedo, looking up at the animatronic shark.

This boy, who looked to be much younger than himself, seemed to be wandering the ship alone.

"It's him... That's Firo's little brother."

"It's unmistakable. I commend you for accomplishing a feat that you could not normally have managed with your mental capacity, Bobby."

"Right? Keep the compliments coming, Troy."

The boy grinned, not even realizing he had just been insulted, and decided to begin following Czes.

"All right, let's tail him."

"Um... what are you going to do to that boy?" Carnea asked nervously. Bobby put on a villainous smile and turned to Troy, Tall, and Humpty.

"Well, what do you guys think?"

"I would suggest taking him hostage, but my lack of faith in your negotiation skills tells me otherwise."

"Sides, what do we do after we take him hostage? It's not like we have an HQ to lock him up in."

"Wh-what if the crew catches us before we can even catch the kid?"

Bobby's evil grin froze in the face of his friends' lack of enthusiasm.

Then, he ended up asking Carnea.

"...What do you think?"

"Um... are you going to hurt that boy?" Carnea asked hesitantly. Bobby quickly shook his head.

"No! That's not it... His big brother's an evil mafia exec. We're just going to take revenge on them for what they did to us!"

Bobby declared confidently, despite not completely being in the right himself.

"They're a pack of bastards who stole our hard-earned stuff with brute force! That's why we're going to make them realize that we're not just a bunch of livestock to be used. We'll show them that we're strong and smart enough to take them on!"

Bobby glorified his actions, completely omitting the part about stealing a tourist's camera.

"I see..."

Carnea didn't seem to be affected by Bobby's declaration as she muttered quietly.

"Everything's the same, no matter where you go."

Her voice only reached the ears of the boys other than the excited Bobby.

They put their heads together and decided to wait and see how things worked out.

And their biggest problem of all, the leader, began trailing the "younger brother" of their enemy.

"Don't just sit around, guys! We gotta go after him!"

<=>

"...Maybe I went a little overboard."

It had been about two hours since Firo had entered the casino.

His little self-challenge had yielded overwhelmingly positive results.

Of course, he had played by the rules. He just acted according to the moods and expressions of his opponents, taking logical steps in each game.

And as a result, he found himself holding about a hundred thousand dollars in chips.

Upon further observation, Firo spotted several patrons who were both rich in cash and experts in gambling. As such people were beasts with financial backing, Firo did his best to avoid them.

He would then pinpoint those who would be laughing at their own defeats, and repeatedly win and lose some smaller matches. He would then find an opportunistic chance to raise the stakes.

After several repetitions, Firo ended up with a mountain of chips in his possession.

'That was too much.'

Now that I think about it, I'm just sweeping the entire house.'

If Firo were the manager, this would be the kind of timing where he would go up against the patron himself or covertly check to see if the patron was not cheating.

However, the casino employees, other patrons, and even his defeated opponents did nothing but congratulate him on his victories.

Out of guilt, Firo wavered between stepping down or challenging the expert gamblers he had seen earlier--

When a man took a seat beside him.

"You're pretty good. How about a one-on-one match?"

Asked the man in the black jacket and black leather pants.

Firo could tell at a glance that this man was not the kind who lived by the law.

It wasn't just a matter of appearance. The air around this man practically screamed that they were cut from the same cloth. And perhaps this man was even deeper underground than himself--he had the dark sharpness of people like Claire, Keith, or maybe even some of the senior executives of the Martillo Family.

Although Firo found himself wondering why such a person would be on a ship like this, he remembered that he was in no position to talk himself, and decided to have a listen.

"Not at all. It looks like I just got lucky this time. I don't think I'm that worthy of being acknowledged."

He spoke in his normal "capo" tone and waited for the man to react.

"Don't be so humble. Whether it's luck or skill--well, I'm not saying you were cheating, but it's not hard to tell if someone's an experienced gambler."

"..."

"And here I was, thinking this place was just for entertainment. I couldn't have imagined that people like you would be around."

He was perhaps Spanish, or of Latin American descent. He had dark skin and defined features that made him look like the type who would be popular with women.

As Firo remained in thought, the man began to personally shuffle the deck he received from the dealer.

And Firo very briefly caught a glimpse of something.

He spotted the man slip in a single card from his sleeve into the deck as he shuffled furiously.

No one else had noticed, and it would be impossible for the dealer to have seen from that angle.

The man skillfully continued to shuffle, finishing off by moving the card he slipped in to the top of the deck.

'He's pretty good.'

Firo simultaneously admired the man's skill and wondered what this action could have meant.

As far as cheating went, this was a rather meaningless action. After all, they had yet to even decide on a game.

Firo knew that a man of this caliber would be able to perform such a trick without him even noticing. However, the fact that he let the action be spotted must have meant that he intended for this to happen.

Of course, none of this would have been perceptible to a normal person.

'Is he testing me? To see if I can see through that trick?'

Firo laughed bitterly and took the deck the man had placed on the table.

"Well, I suppose it's my turn."

He took out his non-prescription glasses from his breast pocket, put them over his eyes, and grinned.

And he began to shuffle with skill rivalling the other man's.

Flip flip flip. The cards flew back and forth with a satisfying noise.

And--

"Whoops, excuse me."

One of the cards fell out of the deck mid-shuffle and fell directly in front of the man in black.

Firo laughed sheepishly and put the deck on the table in front of the man, not even picking up the card he had dropped.

The man took the card from the floor, grinned, and began shuffling again.

In an instant, the card that Firo had intentionally dropped made its way back into the man's sleeve.

After this display of skill, the man smiled.

"Well then, what shall we play?"

To start with the conclusion, the game of blackjack ended in Firo's victory.

At first, it was a neck and neck battle of wits.

However, the moment they really raised the stakes, the man had absurdly gotten a bust (over 21).

"That was a total loss on my part. What can I say? You were excellent. A calculated effort to the end."

"...Thanks."

Although Firo was smiling, he still had some questions.

'No matter how I look at it, it seems like he lost on purpose...'

As Firo put on a smile despite his suspicions, the man offered a handshake.

"Please let me introduce myself. My name is Angelo. I work with international exports."

"Firo Prochainezo. I'm a restaurant manager."

Firo accepted the handshake, and the man called Angelo shook his head apologetically.

"It seems your winnings in the last round are higher than the amount of chips I have... If it's all right with you, I'd like to buy you a drink back in my cabin as an apology. What do you say?"

"If it won't take too long."

Firo could tell that this was the man's intention from the beginning.

'Huh...? Did I ever make enemies with Spanish or Latin Americans?'

Firo, along with Luck Gandor, had once destroyed a small organization in Mexico. However, this was over half a century ago. He didn't find it too likely that someone would be out for vengeance at this point in time.

In the end, despite all the questions still floating in his head, Firo decided to accept the stranger's invitation out of curiosity. After all, if he were to shrug off this person's intentions, he could potentially end up getting shot or something in Ennis and Czes's presence--and he'd never be able to face them if such a thing were to happen.

"Thank you for the offer. I'll be dropping by to pay you a visit."

After getting an employee to get his chips exchanged for cash, Firo slowly got to his feet.

He was nagged by a worry that even eclipsed the fact that he had just made more than enough money to pay off their tickets.

'How do I escape if he just turns out to be gay...?'

<=>

As her name implied, the girl named Illness was sick.

That was what everyone decided, and that was what she herself wanted.

Because she was sick.

Because I'm not normal.

She believed that she could allow herself to do what she did only because she was a sick person.

And she also knew that this was just wishful thinking.

That is why she wanted to be human, but those around her denied it.

No matter what she did, they would tell her, "You're weird", "You're not normal", or "You're crazy".

And because she knew she was supposed to get angry at these statements, Illness got angry.

But no one accepted her actions as 'normal'.

She had thought that calling herself sick was just escapism. She thought she was running away.

But as she listened to the reactions of those around her, a certain fear took root in her heart.

'Maybe I really am abnormal?'

From the point of view of the others, the answer to this question was a resounding "yes".

However, the answer wouldn't be so clear-cut from a much wider perspective of her situation.

She remembered.

She remembered the fact that she was abnormal, from the moment she was born.

But that abnormality wasn't in her--it was in the world around her.

And it was in the purpose for which her parents had created her.

Covered under her clothing were countless scars.

They weren't injuries from having been hit or cut--they were closer to wounds from "being carved out" or "ripped".

However, her parents said that this was the right thing to do.

And everyone else said the same thing.

"You haven't done anything wrong." Her parents said to her, "so don't worry."

It was not long afterwards that her smiling father tore the skin on her back.

This was a fairy tale in the woods.

A terrifying fable inside a manor in the forest.

A story from a long, long time ago.

An old-fashioned tale from seven years ago.

The story began with a little girl's screaming.

Most of the vocalizations weren't even words--just a primeval howling.

Although she could occasionally call out for something, no meaning was given to her words.

She could scream, *It hurts It's painful I'm tired It itches It's hot It's cold cold cold cold cold*, but the people around her just kept praying.

They prayed and prayed--not for her relief, but in reverent worship towards her screaming itself.

They prayed for their own happiness--"I was happy today, thank you so much".

And as the girl continued to writhe in pain, they would continue to pray towards her suffering.

Yet the girl never said, "help me".

This was because she had been taught that the act of helping was something *she* did for others.

The girl, who didn't yet have the name of 'Illness', did not even know what the words "help me" meant.

That was why she never knew the meaning behind the things that were being done to her.

She didn't know of a world in that didn't hurt, burn, or torture.

She didn't know about a world in which her nails didn't have to be peeled away.

She didn't know about a world in which her flesh didn't have to be gouged out.

She didn't know about a world in which letters wouldn't have to be carved into her removed rib and place back in her body.

That there was a world where she didn't have to starve for two weeks and be given a feast containing just enough poison to keep her alive.

That there was a world where she wouldn't be ordered to kill a girl her age that she had been friends with for a year.

The girl would be rescued by the people just before Illness could kill her.

And now it would be Illness's turn to be tied up.

The girl, fully recovered, would then appear in front of her.

She didn't know about a world in which she didn't have to be beaten by a friend out to avenge herself.

She didn't know anything, and never tried to know anything.

Because she had already lost the ability to reason that a better world could potentially exist.

That is, until the year she turned nine--when she met several children slightly older than herself, who had snuck into the 'castle'.

Until she had become friends with them.

Until they told her that she was 'strange'.

Until they told her that they could 'never forgive' the adults around her.

Until they tried to save her.

Until they showed her a new world.

Until they were caught by the adults just before they could escape--and were killed in cold blood.

'I'm the one that killed them.'

It was all because I told them.

Because I thought I wanted to be a part of a world where I didn't have to suffer.

Because I asked them, "help me".

That was why those kids tried to save me and all ended up dead.

But those kids tried to help me until the very end.

My dad asked the last of those kids:

"This is my beloved daughter. If you carve out one of her eyes, I will let you live."

But that boy--

That boy told me to escape and cut my dad with the knife he was given.

Dad was holding a gun.

That was the end of his story.'

But the fairy tale didn't end there.

'Dad talked to me. I was crying when dad spoke.'

"We have done something terrible."

Still covered in gunsmoke, the father apologized to the girl and apologized to the people.

The girl was then brought to know the world.

She saw a world beyond the forest--all kinds of things.

She watched TV, read picture books, and even read Japanese comics.

Through music and movies, she learned about the hope that filled the world, and how other children her age lived--

"We understand now. Ignorance dulls the pain."

And she continued to suffer as she had before.

The people continued to pray, thanking her.

That she was not human.

That she was the child of a god.

One year later.

Her parents were killed by a group of men who had suddenly assaulted the manor.

She was later told that the boy who was killed by her father was the son of a powerful corporate executive. The "Mask Makers" had been hired by him to do this job.

The man who found the girl, whose limbs and tongue were chained, pointed his gun at her.

"...You look like a victim, but this is a problem... Our orders were to kill every person here..."

The girl then felt a sense of relief, realizing that her parents, the other adults, and the kids were all dead.

She just kept thinking that she was relieved that they died peacefully, without the kind of suffering she experienced.

Even though she knew what it meant to hate--even though she was upset when the boy was killed--she still did not think badly of these people. The girl thought herself abnormal.

"Any last words?" The man with the gun asked.

The girl replied.

"Hey, I have a question. Am I a person? Or a god?"

The man then laughed.

"I see. They told me to kill all the people, but no one ever said anything about gods."

This was how she was brought out of the manor.

This is the end of the fairy tale.

Illness knew that the continuation was not much happier.

As a member of the organization called the "Mask Makers", she learned all kinds of things in order to live among them.

It was a different kind of pain from the suffering in the manor.

She trained to kill people.

Although she was out of the forest now, this was still different from the "new world" she had known about.

However, she didn't want to just die here, so far away from home when she knew what she wanted was still out there.

If she said she didn't want to kill, she would likely be killed herself. Even if she didn't say anything, the girl felt like she would die if she were to be driven away from these people.

Whenever she wondered whether or not she was sick, Illness would remember this past.

And she reaffirmed that she was an abnormal person.

She had faith in the fact that she was sick.

She had faith that normal humans would not kill others out of fear for their own lives.

She had faith that, should a human be placed in her situation, they would not hesitate to die instead.

All because she saw the children who tried to save her--the children who had been her only salvation--and she saw their deaths.

To her, those boys symbolized the world.

And because her actions were not in line with the actions of those children, she must be an abnormal person--because she chose to live.

And reaffirming that she was a sick person, Illness got to work without enthusiasm.

<=>

Entrance, movie theatre.

"Sniff... sniffle..."

As her name implied, the girl named Illness was sick.

That was what everyone who knew her thought--

And that was probably what the people around her now would say if they could see her.

She was at a gigantic multiplex near the stern of the ship.

There were seven theatres in all, and for the duration of this particular crossing, every screen was reserved for the "Shark Flight Special Features". They were showing some of the films Claudia starred in, as well as past works by John Drox.

Illness was watching one of Claudia's most famous works--

[Attack of the Killer Edison]

The Ghost Realm Communicator that had been developed by Thomas Alva Edison in his old age has returned to the present day! However, the Communicator was possessed by the terrifying Demon Queen! Edison's inventions are taken over by evil spirits and begin attacking humans! Watch out, the lightbulb is your enemy!

Although it was obviously a third-rate B-movie, the world was shocked when Claudia was revealed to be playing a major role. In the role of a childlike Demon Queen, at that.

This had happened in the direct aftermath of her celebrated step into the path of dramatic acting with the film [The Wild Dog], where she played the role of a girl whose parents were killed by the police.

However, her stylish performance as a villain in this trashy film led to her being given the confusing nickname "Jack-of-All-Trades".

In any case, this film became a cult hit. Among diehard fans of Claudia, it became something of an initiation ceremony to watch this film over ten times.

And in the climax of this cult hit--when the soul of Nikola Tesla sent the Queen of Demons hurling into the depths of hell, and the Queen declared that she had taken the people watching this film hostage--Illness began crying.

"Sniff... Sniffle..."

The other people in the audience, who could not see anything tearjerking in this particular scene, wondered if this girl was sick, but no one could bring themselves to speak to her because of her outlandish appearance.

The movie soon ended, and Illness clapped as hard as she could as the credits began rolling.

The confused audience members began getting out of their seats one by one, but Illness could not take her teary eyes off the screen.

Soon she was alone, and silence fell over the theatre. Then--

"Are you okay, Miss?"

Someone spoke to this unusual girl.

"Sniff... Who--?"

Illness asked back, wiping her tears. The boy in front of her grinned and replied.

"My name's Thomas--or rather, I'm Czeslaw Meyer. Call me Czes."

Czes handed her a handkerchief as Illness wiped her face and smiled back.

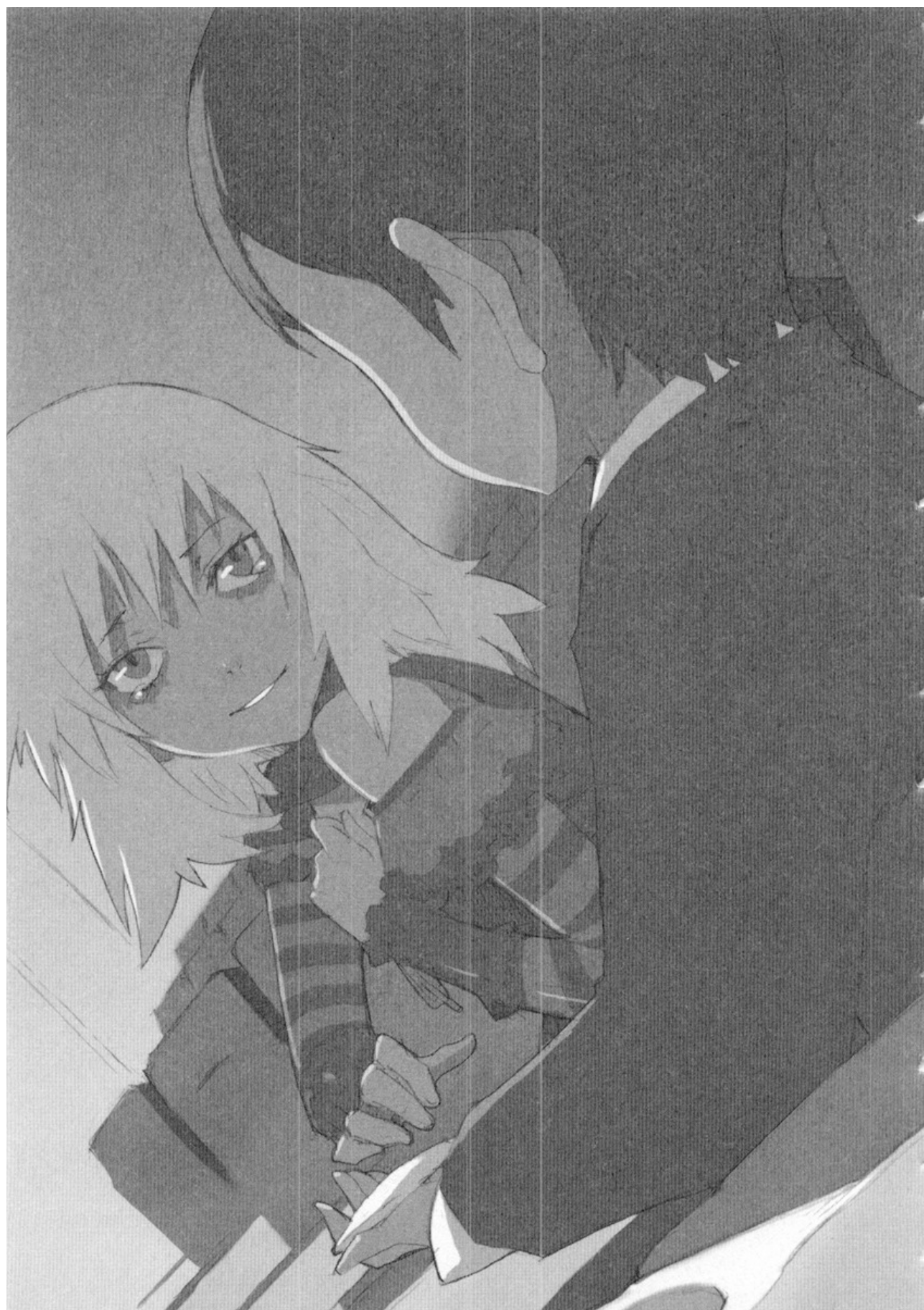
"Sniff... Thanks, Czes. Though I don't know why you called yourself Thomas and corrected yourself."

"Force of habit. Don't worry about it."

"?"

Illness wiped her tears with the handkerchief and cocked her head.

Although it looked like her eyeshadow would be wiped off, the tears didn't seem to have had any effect.



Seeing this, Czes wondered if those were actually bags under her eyes, or if they were tattoos--but he managed to keep from asking.

"Why were you crying?"

Czes's question prompted Illness to try and recall why she was shedding tears.

But she couldn't figure out why.

As she began scouring her brain, she recalled the conversation she had with a certain movie star that evening.

<=>

'You must be a good person!'

Illness felt a mix of thanks and guilt at the movie star who told her this without the least bit of hesitation.

But at this rate, Claudia would be pulled into trouble.

The trouble *they* were going to cause--she would become a part of their seajacking incident. This was an undeniable fact as long as she remained on board.

'Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. What do I do? What am I supposed to do?'

Things like this had happened before several times.

However, she would be stopped each time by Death or Life, who would say, "You have to act professionally".

'Hmph. I'm not a pro. I'm an amateur.'

'So if I want to save someone, I'm going to save them. Hmph.'

Although Illness had considered more radical methods, in the end she was never able to defy the boss. She always ended up prioritizing her own life, and ended up despising herself.

But today was different.

The boss was not on the ship, and Death was dead. Aging was **on the other ship**, and Life was going to come soon, but he was not here yet.

'Then I guess it'll be fine. Right?'

And it was out of the blue and without a thought that Illness--a member of the mysterious organization that plotted to hijack this ship, and one of the most powerful fighters of the group--confessed.

"Say, Claudia?"

"What is it?"

Claudia smiled energetically, in stark contrast to Illness's lifeless pallor.

"Could you get off this ship right now?"

"? Why?"

"Um... I can't say, but something bad might happen. If you can't, then you should at least try and stay near the lifeboats."

Illness uttered these shocking words to the girl who had called her a "good person" and spoken to her without prejudice.

Technically, this was an act of betrayal against the organization, but this didn't matter to Illness.

'Hmph. I never said anything specific.'

This feeble excuse had long become a legitimate justification in Illness's mind.

"Huh. Are you some kind of a psychic?"

Claudia cocked her head. Illness turned away awkwardly.

If the other Businessmen were around, mocking laughter would be the last thing Illness would have to worry about, but Illness decided not to care. She just gave Claudia a warning, without mentioning any specifics.

"N-no, that's not it. But, um... Oh... I can't say. I can't say it, but... anyway, something bad's going to happen!"

She gesticulated, and turned to the shark so she could forget the rest.

Illness then started rambling and petting the shark as if she had never said anything.

A short pause.

The movie star took a breath and broke her thoughtful silence.

"Illness, are you a good person? Or a bad person?"

As Illness marvelled at the shark moving in front of her eyes, Claudia looked directly into Illness's face.

"H-huh...?"

"Are you saying you're going to do something to this ship?"

'Wow, I've never seen anyone with such an amazing sixth sense! I haven't even told her anything!'

"N-no, that's not it! Hmph. I don't know anything!"

This was technically true. They were going to hijack this ship, but she was not told of the specifics of the plan.

All Illness had been told was: "You're our Plan B. It's your mission to take care of the police if they manage to use helicopters or speedboats to get on board the ship. In other words, you don't have to do anything if everything goes well."

Illness was so surprised by Claudia's question that she could not bring herself to look her in the eye.

"Then just answer this for me. Are you a good person, or a bad person?"

Illness was unnerved by this question--it got straight to the heart of the matter.

But her nervous answer turned out to get even closer to the heart of the matter.

"Well... If killing people makes me a bad person... I guess I'm a really really bad person..."

"..."

'Huh? Did I say something wrong just now?'

As Illness regained her calm, she began to realize the gravity of what she had just said and began trembling.

"W-wait a sec. You see..."

It was over.

Although Illness could not pinpoint what ended things, the result stood out clearly in her mind.

She must have just said something that was completely abnormal.

She had proved herself an abnormal existence.

And she cringed, her face contorting to levels beyond its usual sickly pallor.

However--

"Hm..."

Claudia was an even more "abnormal" girl.

"It doesn't really matter if you're a good person or a bad person. I like honest people."

"Huh...?"

"Besides, you were worrying for me, right? Then to me, you're a good person! Killing people is a bad thing, and I wouldn't be able to forgive you if you killed someone I care about, but **my great-grandpa is a legendary assassin**. And that was how he ended up marrying my great-grandma! So I can't really say anything about that, since I wouldn't exist if they didn't get married."

The redhead laughed confidently and declared to the older girl.

"So have confidence! Even if the entire world rejects you, I--Claudia Walken--will accept you! Since you're a good person to me, I'll let you into my world! It's decided! Oh, but just to let you know, you can't do anything bad from now on. I don't want a part of my world to be killed by the police, after all!"

"B-but..."

"If you need to kill someone, I'll kill them for you. So don't do anything rash."

The girl nodded as she proclaimed these words that seemed to be either great pride or extreme foolishness.

<=>

'That's the first time anyone's said something like that to me.'

Illness had come to watch these movies because she wanted to know more about the girl whose words still echoed in her mind.

She had already watched three films, but each of them showed a different Claudia.

It was like Claudia was everything Illness wasn't. It was like she knew everything. She was just acting--she performed all kinds of roles. Illness knew this.

And yet--

Everything about this girl on screen was bathed in light.

Whether she was a villain or a tragic heroine, each had their own colour--sometimes light, and other times dark and sharp. Perhaps the only flaw with her acting was that she shone too much even she was playing a bit part.

The world smiled upon her.

She had everything--influence, talent, and a bright future.

And she had likely worked hard for all of this, too.

So why was Illness crying?

Was it because she had been accepted by such a talented person?
Or was she crying out of self-pity, having realized that she was someone to feel sorry for?

Illness could not find the answer.

She could only recall the light of the girl she saw on screen and met in person. Tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Uh... Wh-why are you crying again, Miss?"

Czes hurriedly tried to console Illness, unable to follow her emotional line of thought.

Although Czes was quite used to seeing crybabies, this girl seemed to be somewhat different.

Czes wouldn't usually try and cheer up a girl crying in a movie theatre, but this time he had noticed something and decided to get close to this girl.

"Let's get you to your room. I'll come with you."

The girl wiped her eyes and looked at Czes, laughing softly through her tears.

"Hehe. You've still got another ten years to go until you can start picking up girls."

"Then how about I try again in a century?"

Czes responded to the girl's joking comment.

"That is, if you're still alive."

This was how Czes came to accompany Illness to her room.

As her cabin was in the lower deck at the bow of the ship, it was a surprisingly long trip.

Czes had taken several turns to lengthen the trip as much as he could, and confirmed his suspicions around the time he had stepped down a flight of stairs,

'I'm being followed.'

He couldn't tell the numbers and builds of the people following him, but he was certain that there were at least two of them. They followed him from afar in crowded places, and at a closer distance in quiet places.

Czes had noticed his tail from before he had gone to the theatre, so he had decided to use the crying girl in order to find out who these people were. He would be able to safely ascertain the situation once he had arrived at her cabin.

Of course, Czes could have just as well gone to his own cabin, but he felt uneasy about letting his pursuers know where he was staying.

And although he had ended up getting an unrelated girl involved, Czes was certain that things would be fine once he had managed to find out who his pursuers were.

Czes's line of thought was quite cold and calculated, but he was, at the centre of it all, driven by fear.

A feeling of unease had been dogging at him ever since he had run into the man in black in the halls earlier that day.

And for some reason--for some unexplainable reason--he was reminded of the train.

Of course, Czes had gone travelled by trains and ships many times since. At first the trauma made things somewhat difficult, but over time his aversion dissipated.

This time was different.

Even though he was in a much bigger space than the transcontinental, and even though he was with his trusted family members Firo and Ennis, something bothered Czes.

In terms of sheer eeriness, it was most comparable to, but even greater than, the secluded European village he had visited last year.

'What is this chill...? It's almost like I've run into a laughing Victor Talbot on the street.'

Victor Talbot was an immortal whom Czes was uncomfortable around.

Although Victor hadn't personally caused Czes any trouble, he had the unfortunate tendency to pry into Czes's painful past with zero sensitivity. This was still, in his own twisted way, probably for the greater good--but it still wasn't pleasant for Czes.

Would he end up having to face himself again?

Or would he end up face-to-face with true fear, like he had on that train?

Or would it be both?

'Stop, stop. Let's not think about this too hard.'

Besides, I have to do something about those people following me...'

As Czes tried to figure out his plan of action, Illness suddenly stopped in place.

"What is it?"

"Ohhhh... Sorry, Czes. It's just that I've been waiting for when we got to a deserted place."

"H-huh?!"

'Is this girl going to jump me?!'

Czes's imagination ran perhaps a bit too wild. Whether or not her should be happy or scared would depend on the flavour of being jumped, but Czes was worried about what his pursuers would do to him in the aftermath.

And as Czes fretted with his not-quite-childlike worries, Illness's eyes shone sharply.

"Sorry, Czes. Looks like we're being followed."

"Huh?"

"Hm... they're all small. Maybe they're kids. Four boys and a girl? But there are some boys these day who walk like girls, so maybe not."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Czes asked in confusion.

Illness sniffed the air and replied, "I don't think there's any sort of gas. Don't worry."

And at the very next moment--

"Since there's no one around, I'm gonna go and catch them."

Czes came to a realization.

He finally noticed that they were far below the lowest of the cabin decks--they were at the stairs to what looked to be the engine room.

'That's strange. I thought I was the one leading us around.'

At the end of the staircase was a door with a sign reading, "no unauthorized entry".

'Did that girl trick those people into following us here? Did she... trick me too?'

As soon as Czes began forming these questions in his head, the girl jumped.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that she launched herself off the ground.

She balanced on the narrow handrail and kicked off the wall to instantly propel herself to the top of the stairs. By the time the confused Czes had run up the stairs after her, Illness had already reached the hallway at the top of the stairs.

She stomped up the hallway like she was running along the wall.

This kind of movement wasn't human.

This was what Czes was thinking, but he soon corrected himself.

This kind of movement was not possible for **normal** humans. Czes personally knew people who could move like ninjas in movies.

Nile, Denkuro, Christopher, Charon...

Among the list of names was one that Czes tried very hard not to recall.

"Ahahahaha... Haha...?"

She launched off the walls.

She kicked off the doorknob.

She did a 180 degree turn in midair to jump against the ceiling.

She launched herself off the opposite wall to return to the hallway.

There was no coherence to her movement.

She left the hallway with gravity-defying jumps and launches. Czes wondered if all that movement was even necessary. Her movement--no, course--was so unpredictable that it almost looked like it was meant to counter against an opponent armed with a gun.

With this, Czes finally ended up recalling the name he never wanted to remember.

'Just like...

The... Rail Tracer...'

A chill ran up his spine as he muttered the name.

The trauma instantly eclipsed all his thoughts. Czes desperately shook his head and tried to get his head in order.

'No, she's not the Rail Tracer! She's not at his level. Maybe closer to Nile...'

And as he began rambling incoherently in his head--

"...Huh?"

It finally rationally dawned on Czes that there was more to Illness than meets the eye, and he heard screams and a half-minded voice echoing from the hallway.

"Czes~. I managed to get all three~!"

"...You got rid of them?"

And it dawned on him at this point that he had once again set foot into an abnormality.

<=>

At the same time, ship hallway.

As Illness wandered the floor of the semi-suite cabins, Angelo was leading Firo to his own cabin, which was a good distance away.

"So you're in a suite room, Mr. Prochainezo? I'm quite jealous."

"Actually, we think it might be a bit too luxurious for our tastes."

"That's a rather superfluous worry. Perhaps you'd consider a trade?"

And as they reached the cabin, Angelo's phone rang.

"...Excuse me."

Angelo stepped away and took the call. He was greeted by a boorish voice.

[Yo, boss Angelo. How ya doin'? Gotta say, I was pretty damn shocked to see you at the casino just now. What with you playing cards with some suspicious punk and all.]

"...Oh, yes. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

[Whoa, that punk's there with ya, huh? Don't panic, just play along. That was some sense of timing, gotta say. Anyway, I left ya a little present in your cabin before I dropped by the casino. Good thing you left the door ajar before you left, like I told you to.]

"Yes. I'm glad you're doing well. Actually, I'm on a ship at the moment. Are you all right with the phone bills?"

Angelo continued on stoically. The recipient of his words--the Demolisher--cackled and added something unnecessary.

[Ya just had to remind me, huh? What gives, making us use a satellite when we're on the same fucking boat? Might even be cheaper to just talk to ya face-to-face.]

"Of course, I would love to see you again."

[And seriously? Ya didn't even bring a tux after everything I told ya? Those people at the casino thought you were some kinda movie star! Apparently there's some sort of event goin' on. And I refuse to walk around with some guy who looks like Antonio Banderas and get my face engraved into someone's brain.]

"Actually, I'm entertaining a guest. I'll call you back later."

Angelo hung up and laughed bitterly.

"Apologies. It was an uncle of mine--we're not on very good terms."

"Of course."

Firo responded with a smile. There was an awkward moment of silence. Angelo opened his door, and invited in his suspicious guest.

"This place is pretty nice." Firo exclaimed as he stepped into the regular cabin.

In terms of price, it was worth about 1/10th of Firo's suite.

However, this room looked just like a decently luxurious hotel room in miniature. It looked quite comfortable for one person.

There was no balcony; only a window to enjoy the outside view, but watching the ocean pass by from an air-conditioned cabin didn't seem to be too bad.

On a table at the corner of the room was a wooden liquor box.

"If you'll let me pour drinks. I made quite a nice find at the shopping mall not too long ago, you see." Angelo laughed amicably. Firo tried laughing heartily.

"Then I guess I'll just drink enough to make up for the short change."

They sat on opposite sides of the round table, and Angelo reached for the crate.

'Liquor in a wooden box, huh...'

The sight jogged Firo's memories of when he had first become immortal. It was quite awe-inspiring to think that his taking an interest in that wooden box all those years ago was the reason he was the way he was.

Although Firo was in a silent moment of remembrance--

"Actually, Mr. Prochainezo..."

Firo snapped out of his thoughts as Angelo spoke to him.

"It's about your restaurant business."

"Yes?"

"...By any chance, is it known by the name 'Mask Maker'?"

'What's that?' Was the question in Firo's mind, but the moment he made to answer--

His memories stopped him.

'Mask Maker'.

Normally, it was a self-explanatory phrase.

Someone who makes masks. That was all.

But alarm bells were going off somewhere in Firo's memories.

'This is a special phrase. Beware, beware.'

Whose memories were these?

Was it one of his own experiences from his long, long life?

'No.'

Was it a memory from the life of Szilard, whom he had devoured?

'No.'

It was much deeper than that.

Of his memories, organized like the branches of a tree, these were coming from the tiny branches that split off from the greater branch of Szilard's memories.

The memories of those devoured by Szilard, or those who were devoured by someone who was later devoured by Szilard.

serial killer Italy a womanizing count
the drugs that Father ordered to create a mysterious man
the children are being killed Rotten Eggs big brother Begg Garott

'Gretto. These memories belong to... Maiza's younger brother.'

As Firo strained to read these foggy memories, another person popped out in his mind--

The phrase "Mask Maker" held a special meaning to another in his memories.

the tragedy of little children two boys two girls
Monica Niki a criminal organization mercenary team
money money money death money money money one yet many

'Lebreau.'

The moment Firo realized who these memories belonged to, he cut himself off from recalling anything further.

'No.'

I must not look into Lebreau's memories.'

Firo felt a strong sense of revulsion at reading the memories of Lebreau.

Perhaps it was because Lebreau was eaten by an alchemist who was himself later devoured by Szilard--there were much fewer memories to read than other immortals. They felt similar to Firo's own memories from when he was three or four years of age.

Although Firo might have been able to recall things more clearly if he delved deep enough, he had the nagging feeling that he should not know this man called Lebreau too well.

'That's right. I can't make this bastard's memories mine. In any case, Lebreau is--'

That was as far as Firo got before he snapped back into reality.

Though Firo had been lost in thought about the Mask Maker for likely no longer than a few seconds, it was more than enough time for Angelo to grow suspicious.

"So you *do* know something."

His shuffling the cards earlier looked like child's play in comparison to how quickly he drew a black handgun with red and gold decorations.

It was a scene right out of a movie--

The gunman stoically brought Firo back to reality.

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you could tell me about the 'Mask Makers'.

About your boss--and the bastard who ordered our boss's killing."

<=>

At the same time, the bridge.

The captain.

This was a word used to describe the being who oversaw everything about a ship as its leader.

However, unlike the captains of normal fishing ships, ferries, or pirate vessels, the captain of a luxury cruise ship needed all kinds of skills--from navigation and engineering, to charisma to lead and oversee the countless employees and workers under his command.

A gigantic hotel-style system of housing, a shopping mall filled with all kinds of stores, and countless forms of entertainment facilities.

All of this was ultimately under the command of the captain.

As the man who was responsible for the safety of the passengers, he had to be a public figure on the cruise--sometimes even having to acquiesce to unreasonable requests. Assistants such as the first mate or hotel managers were there to lighten some of the burden from his shoulders.

In some movies, captains entertain the passengers and drink with them--this was part of his duties. However, no matter how much he toasts with the passengers, he must never get drunk himself.

This was the philosophy of the captain of the *Entrance*, Falk Corner, as he looked over his duties.

Having been contacted by the bridge, he opened the door with professional dignity.

"What is it--"

Suddenly, he could feel the barrel of a gun at his back.

"Thank you for all your work."

The captain then realized that there were about a dozen 'outsiders' on the bridge, excluding the one who had a gun trained on him.

They were all dressed differently, with the exception of the beautiful masks over their faces that were straight out of an Italian carnival.

Although the captain wanted to think they were drunk passengers from a masquerade ball, no such event was planned on the ship.

And as if confirming that these guests were not just a group of drunk delinquents, each masked person held guns in their hands with the expertise of professionals. Having sensed that these people were serious, the captain froze in place and spoke calmly.

"I had been told that a large, unidentified vessel was spotted on the radar."

"Wrong. That vessel only exists in the lie we told the first mate to tell."

The captain could now see that another man was holding a gun to the first mate's head.

"I see. Then I'm glad we are in no danger of collision."

Captain Corner grit his teeth and desperately held back his anger, and spoke in a strained voice.

"The bridge is off limits to unauthorized personnel. I would appreciate it if you would leave."

"Captain, I would think you'd know better than that."

One of the masked intruders laughed and walked over to the captain.

"I don't like having to make people despair at the end, so I'll let you in on a little secret. We started our takeover from the communications office, so you might have a bit of trouble sending out an SOS."

"..."

"C'mon, don't give me that look. We're not gonna do anything outrageous, like telling all the passengers to assemble in the main hall or something. In fact, we'd like our passengers to all enjoy their cruise without an inkling of what's actually going on! That's right! After all, if we tell the passengers about the seajacking, some special operative who happened to be aboard might show up and make a hero of himself. And at the end of the day, we'll be found by the media or dogged at by the cops." the seajacker recited with a frivolous laugh.

Of course, no ship would set sail without preparing for the possibility of a seajacking. And as the *Entrance* was carrying multiple VIPs, they had taken great care to ensure security onboard.

"Now, here's a little quiz for you."

The seajacker spread his arms wide as if mocking all of this.

"How many personnel and weaponry do you think we've brought on board to make such a huge job work?"

"..."

"The answer is a secret. You can try searching the passenger list, but we actually *bought* our tickets, you know? But let me give you a clue--one of us boarded much later. I'm not telling you how, though."

The captain ground his teeth as the seajacker rambled on, obviously enjoying the situation.

"And also, our weapons are all 100% real. You know how they beefed up security, with what happened last year? We went through a lot of trouble to get heavy firearms onto the ship here."

The man held up an assault rifle as if to show off their work. The captain spotted a spare handgun at his waist, but he gave up on trying to take the gun by force after considering his situation.

"I'll get straight to the point. We haven't set up bombs in the engine room, and we haven't bound and gagged all one thousand crew members. Truth be told, the only ones who know about the hijacking are the people in this room and our buddies in the communications office."

"What do you mean?" The captain asked.

The masked men snickered and revealed a certain fact.

"No, well--what I'm saying is that the greatest asset currently under our control is the ship's air ducts and ventilation system."

"What...?"

"This is an amazing ship, I'll give you that. We can sit in our cabin and control everything from entertainment facilities to storeroom temperatures. And you even have a forced ventilation system installed, too."

The man put down his rifle and took out a small bottle from his pocket.

It was a bottle of men's eau de cologne. A brand-name product that was sold on board. When the man turned the cap, a strange *click* sounded from inside the bottle.

"I think a little demonstration is in order."

And as soon as he finished his sentence, the man sprayed the cologne directly onto the face of the first mate.

"What the--ugh... g-GAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH! AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH! Gah... hah... argh..."

The first mate slid onto the floor and began flopping about, crying out like an insect.

He trembled on the floor like a small animal dying of suffocation. Although he did not die, it took a very long time for him to stop shaking.

"Now, as you can see, this is what happens when you take in just one breath of this stuff. Two breaths have a mortality rate of 90%. Add that to the stuff about the ventilation system, and you get the gist of what we're saying, yes?"

"You bastards...!"

The man ignored the captain's outrage and quietly turned away.

"So let me put this plainly. Since the passengers don't know a thing, you just have to cooperate with us and they'll all get to their destination without a hitch. But I hope I don't have to tell you what happens if we get interrupted somehow. Capiche?"

"What are your demands? Is it money you're after?"

"Money? Yes. After all, we're Businessmen. Of course, I think **there's a bit of a grudge from our boss's end mixed in with this job.**" the man stated, and burst into laughter with his comrades.

The captain, annoyed by the sound, bravely raised his voice.

"You think our company would pay up so easily?"

"I see what you're saying..."

The seajacker clicked his fingers and pointed at the captain's head.

"But no. That wouldn't do. That wouldn't do at all. If we contact your company, the cops are going to get wind of what we're doing. We can't do that. No, no. We're not really planning on extorting cash from your bosses. We're just taking over your bridge to make sure **the other side believes us when we're negotiating.**"

"Wh...what...?" the captain asked incredulously, but the representative of the seajackers just continued rambling on.

"You know, I always wonder about this when I'm watching movies. Why do seajackings and hijackings like this always fail?"

"Because evil will never will."

"I guess that's correct too, but you're pretty damn calm, captain. ...Anyway, I think the answer is because the hero is always within the villain's reach."

"...?"

The captain just stared at the seajacker's strange words. The man shook his head at the ceiling and calmly continued on.

"I'm saying this 'cause we don't have anything to hide anymore, but you see, the other side in this little negotiation of ours... he's a so-called "hero"-type of guy. Not saying he's some kind of warrior of justice, but he's got some special powers up his sleeve. There's a bunch of guys who'd throw themselves away to save hostages. In any case, only our boss knows who they are specifically."

The man chattered, gestured dramatically, and turned to face the captain directly.

"But you see, this isn't possible unless we use these sister ships."

"It can't be..."

"It is. **If we take both sister ships hostage...**"

The man paused theatrically and continued as if being entertained himself.

"If we take both ships hostage, there's nothing the hero can do, since he's stuck on his one ship, right?"

The seajackers began laughing. Their representative's eye glinted as he deepened his voice.

"Now... here's a very important question for you, captain."

"Wh-what is it?"

The seajacker looked the captain in the eye, both deadly serious about this moment.

"Seagal(The Undefeatable Cook)and Van Damme(Former Universal Soldier) aren't aboard this ship, are they?"

<=>

Firo's cabin.

'Where could Firo have gone?'

Ennis had returned from her skin treatment at the beauty salon. Unfittingly for her beautiful skin, however, her face was fraught with worry.

'Czes hasn't come back, either.'

Today was Ennis's first time going to a beauty salon. As she was a homunculus, skin treatments or health concerns weren't a very high priority for her. However, Ennis was somewhat curious to see if human treatments would also have the same effects on a homunculus.

Perhaps the professional consultants would notice the tiny differences in the makeup of her skin and say, "You're not human, are you?". However, Ennis's worries never came to pass. The masseuse would only say things like, "You have such clear skin! I'm so jealous.". They spent the next three hours working their magic.

Although Ennis couldn't tell if there were any internal changes brought about by the treatment, her skin was shimmery and her hair looked shinier than usual.

'What if I look strange?'

Because her skin felt completely different, Ennis had decided to ask Firo or Czes for their opinion. However, they had not yet returned to their room.

Czes had told them, "I'll go watch movies at the theatre or something at night", and Firo had said that he was going to visit the casino.

That was why Ennis had dropped by the casino on her way, but Firo was nowhere to be found. She waited a while after returning to her room, but neither Firo nor Czes contacted her.

'I'd better go find them...' Ennis thought. But the moment she stood up, she heard the card key beeping at the entrance and the sound of the door opening a moment later.

Seeing Firo at the doorway, Ennis breathed a sigh of relief--and immediately drew back her breath upon seeing what seemed to be bullet holes on his clothes.

"What happened?!"

"Oh... no, well, I took care of it, so don't worry. For now."

"What in the world..."

"Well, you know. I'm pretty much used to this by now."

Firo laughed bitterly, and took out his mangled glasses from his breast pocket.

"Oh... oh. These were expensive..."

The head of a household shrugged with a tired expression on his face.

"It's really difficult to clear up misunderstandings, you know?"

As he buried himself on the couch, the internal phone line rang. Ennis hurriedly took the call and spoke briefly to the caller.

"Firo?"

"What is it?"

"It's Czes... He says he'll be staying with someone else tonight, so we don't have to worry about him..."

"Someone else?"

Firo thought for a moment, wondering who it could be.

Perhaps he had been caught by Claudia or Charon, or perhaps Czes had simply run into an old friend they didn't know about. Czes had lived a very long time--it wouldn't be strange for him to know someone he never told them about.

"Hah... And this was supposed to be a family vacation." Firo mumbled, but suddenly recalled what Czes said to him when they were boarding.

"Once we get on board, I'll avoid you two as much as I can so I won't bother you."

"I'll go watch movies at the theatre or something at night."

Firo nearly spat out his soul from the shock and began breathing heavily, face flushed.

"Firo! Are you ill? Let me see..."

Ennis moved closer to him out of worry, but this just made things worse for Firo. As his face grew redder and redder, Ennis became more and more concerned.

"You're completely flushed! Even immortals can get temporarily feverish if they're poisoned or infected..."

"N-no, that's not it!"



Firo quickly shook his head and desperately tried to calm down.

Ennis cocked her head in confusion, but the sight of her husband calming down seemed to have calmed her worry as well.

And Firo spoke.

"Now that I think about it, your face and arms look really soft." he said, gazing into her face.

"Oh!"

This time, it seemed that Ennis was the one who was surprised. She looked away nervously.

"Um... is it... strange...?"

"No. You're beautiful."

Firo merely gave his honest opinion. Although he was in mortal peril not very long ago, Firo felt like he had been saved by the very sight of Ennis's shiny skin and hair, and her shy expression.

"You... really think so?"

As Ennis's cheeks turned pink, Firo thought, '*She's so cute even when she's blushing*'. He decided that this was good enough for him.

And the first day for the shy husband and the innocent wife ended in what an outside observer might call nothing.

Without even realizing what could be quietly happening under the surface of it all.

Interlude

The second day.

"Hello? That was early, Misao. It's only been 20 hours."

[O-oh. Sorry, Hiroko. I just got a bad feeling is all.]

"What is it? Are you homesick?"

[No... say, is everything all right on your end?]

"Huh? Everything's fine here. It's a really nice morning."

[I-I see... That's a relief.]

"What's wrong? You sound so tired."

[W-well... you see... something's bugging me.]

"What do you mean?"

[It's the other passengers... I guess it's kinda vague, but there's a lot of strange people around.]

"Like that mask guy you were talking about yesterday?"

[N-no, not those people... I'm talking about the normal passengers.]

"Like how?"

[Like I said, it's vague... Sometimes I hear some strange songs, and there's a lot of people who look like the life's been sucked out of them...]

"And they're all foreigners?"

[Oh, yeah. The foreign people. And it's strange, since a lot of them are crew members.]

"You're just feeling strange because you're surrounded by a lot of foreigners. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

[I hope you're right. But if anything happens, call me right away.]

"Oh, you're such a baby."

[Anyway, thanks. I feel a bit better now. Oh right! There's something else I thought was strange.]

"What now?"

[Well... There's a lot of people dressed similarly. Wearing black and red coats or something.]

"Maybe they're boy scouts? But it'd be weird to see them on a luxury cruise ship."

[Right?]

"Maybe there's some kind of an event going on? They were going on about doing some movie promo stunt on this one. Oh! Maybe it might have started already."

[Aren't you going to watch?]

"You know I don't like crowds."

[Come to think of it, th-----]

"Hello? Hello? Misao? Misao?"

...'out of service area', huh? That's strange. I thought this was a satellite connection.

I'm getting the chills. Is Misao rubbing off on me?

That sound...

Couldn't have been a gunshot, right...?"

Things had begun some time earlier than this phone call.

第三章 全ての乗客達は弾丸の庭で踊る



Chapter 3 : All the Passengers Dance in a Garden of Bullets

The second night of the cruise, sunset. A semi-suite room.

Czeslaw Meyer spent the night in the room of a very cute girl.

This might sound very risque, but what he was actually doing was keeping watch over the boys she had captured and bound. It was just a night of great fatigue and worry.

Upon seeing Illness capture the boys with frightening skill, Czes realized that he had just drawn the worst possible lot. But he decided that, since he had already gotten so involved, he should at least try and see this through to the end.

If this had happened on the city streets, Czes would have no problem running for it--but that was impossible in a closed space like this ship. He concluded that it was best to try and gain an understanding of the situation.

'I'm sick of being caught up in things I have no idea about.'

And it was with this thought in mind that Czes decided to ask the girl outright.

"Who are you really, Miss?"

But the girl just laughed in an adorably creepy way and replied,

"It's a secret. I'll get in trouble if I tell!"

"With who?"

"The boss!"

"Of what?"

"Our company!"

For talking about a secret organization, Illness was strangely confident in her replies. Asking even further would only prompt her to answer, "It's a secret!", or "I don't know either!". Czes decided to change the topic before they could even begin going around in circles.

Three boys had been captured earlier.

Their remaining accomplices seemed to be a boy and a girl. Illness left with a "I'll go find them!", to wander the ship.

Czes was dying of boredom, but he couldn't just take his eyes off their prisoners.

'Seriously, it's all Mr. Ronnie's fault for getting these kids involved.'

At first, the boys attempted to plead the fifth.

However, Illness laughed, "I can probably torture the info out of them. The boss said that I just had to do what people used to do to me!", and suddenly raised the skirt of her dress towards them.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

As he stood behind Illness, Czes's eyes turned into dinner plates as the girl raised her skirt almost up to her chest.

However--

It seemed that the boys in front of her had seen something far more terrifying than her underwear.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

The tall boy and the chubby boy trembled with pale faces, and the short one looked on with a logical glint in his eye.

"...It seems we will be better off just telling the truth. Bobby and Carnea may face a terrifying fate should we refuse." The boy mumbled, and confessed everything about their reasons for stowing away.

'In any case, even those little kids thought they could take him on...'

The boys were known as Tall, Humpty, and Troy.

Although he knew that they were members of Bobby Splot's gang, which had been causing trouble on the Martillo Family's turf, Czes was surprised to see how childish they actually were.

He also set aside his own situation for a moment to marvel at Firo's baby-face--the face that could make *children* see him as someone to be trifled with.

'I guess I shouldn't tell Firo.'

Czes sighed loudly and spoke to the boys on the floor in front of him.

"Anyway, you guys are finished now. Maybe that Bobby person got caught by the crew already?"

"Sh-shut up, kid! Don't act so high-and-mighty!" The tall boy yelled at Czes, but he wasn't very convincing, considering his current state. Meticulously enough, the boys' thumbs had been tied together in order to prevent them from untying the ropes.

"I have every right to lord it over you. Only the little kids have the privilege of boasting about beating an older kid."

"You're really getting on my nerves, kid! Trying to act mature *and* talking down to us?!"

Tall struggled to free himself, but Humpty seemed to be resigned to his fate.

"Oh... it's all because Bobby always charges in without a plan." he mumbled.

Troy followed up on Humpty's comment. "I'd already given up from the moment Bobby declared that he was going to do something."

'Why are these kids sticking with Bobby so much?' Czes wondered, but Bobby's ancestor Jacuzzi had been incomparably more foolish and popular in inverse proportions. In that sense, it might be natural for a headache like Bobby to attract such a following of peers. After this analysis, Czes quietly waited for Illness to return.

These boys turned out to have nothing to do with Illness. However, she had gone off to search for his several-times-removed acquaintance Bobby and his tagalong, saying, "It's all right! **Looks like everything's going according to plan**, so I have nothing to do right now!"

"Anyway, something about that girl bugs me." Czes mumbled, and the boys began chattering.

"Same here."

"Th-that Bobby didn't even look back at us. He took her hand and ran for it."

"I suppose it can't be helped. After the long time he had spent pressed up against her in our hiding place, it seems he had been quite taken with her. In some ways, it's quite nice to see. I thought he'd never be the same afterwards when he was mercilessly teased by a local prostitute who likes younger men. I'd say that they make an excellent stowaway couple."

After going over the boys' opinions, Czes put to words the first thought that came to mind.

"...Troy, was it? Aren't you just giving me info I could use to threaten Bobby?"

"Oh, please. It was merely a decision to force His Royal Idiocy to learn more about the real world. I suspect that he was in a hurry to tail you yesterday because he wanted to show off to her."

"Uh huh..."

"He claims to be uninterested, but it's written all over his face. Miss Carnea's tanned skin is a dead ringer for those of his favourite models on dirty magazines."

Czes began to wonder if these boys really had any loyalty towards Bobby and decided to continue waiting for Illness.

'Come to think of it, I left Ennis and Firo alone with each other since early yesterday... I hope they've gotten closer now.'

Czes felt slightly apologetic out of worry that his presence had slowed down the progress of their relationship. He smiled bittersweetly and turned on the TV, hoping they had at least made some progress.

<=>

Shopping Mall.

"Wow~. I slept so well last night, Ennis."

"Me too. I was worried that it might be difficult to fall asleep in an unfamiliar environment, but I never imagined that the quality of the bed and pillows would make things so comfortable."

Firo and Ennis mumbled to each other with satisfied looks on their faces, sitting on a bench and watching the people pass by.

It was the kind of conversation that would make Czes sigh in disappointment, but he would probably be cheered up if he could see how happy the two looked regardless.

Currently, they were sitting in front of the fountain on the lowest level of the circular shopping mall.

The fact that there was a fountain inside the ship was quite strange, but aside from the shaking of the ship, it was not much different from any old shopping centre on land.

And as they looked around the many stores and signs--

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Nah. We just got here ourselves."

Firo laughed and sat up to greet the man in black, Angelo.

"Let me introduce you. This is my wife Ennis. Ennis, this is Angelo. I told you about him yesterday."

Ennis and Angelo greeted each other.

"Um, it's very nice to meet you..."

"How beautiful. I must admit, I'm a bit jealous. Almost enough to want to trade for my wife. ...I was only joking, so don't look at me like that. Although I am still somewhat envious."

"O-oh! You're too kind."

"No, no. I'm sorry for the bullet holes in your husband's outfit yesterday."

Although the tone of the conversation was lighthearted, the subject matter wasn't so ordinary.

"You can say that again. Feels like it's been years since I last got shot."

"I ended up wasting bullets, too. Why don't we call it even?"

"...You're actually a pretty funny guy, you know?"

Firo laughed bitterly. Angelo laughed as well, but the tension never left his eyes.

"But is this really all right? I'm not so certain about getting your wife involved..."

"Ennis won't be in any danger. Those guys have women on their team, right? I just need her to check places that only women can go to. Besides... we're not too happy about being on the same ship as these creeps, either."

"I suppose..."

Angelo hesitated. Firo decided to reassure him.

"In any case, we're only going to help you with the reconnaissance. We're not getting involved, even if a fight breaks out. I'm not in a position to go around starting fights with other organizations."

"I understand. You have a family to take care of, after all."

Firo nodded and continued.

"Of course, even I'd get involved if they threaten to sink the ship."

"I'll tell our Demolisher to try not to do anything of the sort."

With the friendly banter out of the way, Firo and Angelo began discussing their course of action.

And Ennis fell into thought as she watched them speak in a serious tone.

Ennis wasn't told of the specifics about what had happened to Firo last night.

And she didn't ask.

Firo had told her up to the point where he found a gun pointed at him after a misunderstanding about the 'Mask Makers'. However, he stopped there. From the state of his clothing, Ennis could tell he was shot at least four times.

But Firo didn't disclose any of the details, nor did he tell her how he managed to get out of that misunderstanding.

All she knew was that the trouble was resolved, Angelo found out about Firo's immortality, and that Firo asked her: **"I couldn't just *not* help, after everything he said...** So, that's how it all turned out! I'm really sorry! Can we help him, just for tomorrow?"

But this was reason enough for Ennis.

As a Camorra capo, Firo always tried to maintain a sense of objectivity and distance. But in a lot of ways, he still acted impulsively. Although Ennis couldn't figure out what might have happened when Firo was shot, she didn't have any intention of prying or getting angry as long as he could forgive the culprit with a grin.

'You always try to take on too much by yourself.'

Ennis had known this about Firo ever since he was imprisoned in Alcatraz in 1934 in exchange for her crimes--no, even since he showed his outrage at Szilard when they met.

She also knew that this was what drew her to Firo so much.

So Ennis wasn't angry. But she had resolved to do whatever she could to ease the burdens Firo took on for himself as they lived on together, and this was something that made her happy.

This was why she followed Firo here today to help, but something occurred to her as she watched Firo conversing with Angelo.

Firo was good at using people without telling them the important things.

It wasn't manipulation--rather, he had a knack for making other people think, 'I want to help too'.

Although Ennis didn't know if this was all a calculated effort on Firo's part, or if he was just unaware but skilled, she felt that this was something that Firo was exceedingly adept at.

Maybe this was a good talent for a member of the criminal underworld.

But no matter what the case, she liked Firo--the man who needed her, and stood at her side even when he didn't need her help.

When she had told all this to Czes, he laughed and replied: "You know, Firo's probably thinking the same about you. Like husband, like wife, huh?"

'Is that what it means?'

Ennis decided to go over the thought more and recalled the moment Firo had told her, "Let's get married"--

"What's wrong, Ennis? Your face suddenly got all red... are you feeling okay?"

There was a reversal of the events of the previous night.

<=>

The ship's event use storage facility.

"A-all right. We can probably take a breather here."

Bobby breathed a sigh of relief as he walked through the dimly-lit storage facility filled with machinery, tightly grasping Carnea's hand in his own.

"O-ouch..."

"O-oh! Sorry!"

Bobby quickly let go of her hand and looked at her apologetically.

"Oh, I'm all right. I'm sorry for calling out all of a sudden."

Carnea quietly apologized. Bobby almost ended up blushing.

But he told himself that it would be low of him to get embarrassed over a girl in this situation, and quietly let out a response.

"Anyway, you have to be careful. Listen up. If you get in the way, I might have to leave you behind."

"Oh, of course."

Carnea replied remorsefully.

Internally, Bobby repeated the phrase "I'm such an idiot" twenty-three times.

They had been fleeing through the ship without a moment of rest, and were finding it difficult to even walk at this point.

After finally confirming that they couldn't feel the presence of anyone else, Bobby and Carnea plopped down behind a large set.

"I hope... **they** don't end up following us this far..." said Bobby, and he sighed wearily.

Carnea nodded and sighed in agreement, but she still seemed to be reeling from fear. Her breathing was slightly quick.

The object of terror that was chasing them was not the eeriness of the girl called Illness.

Nor was it the fear of being caught by the crew and being handed over to the police.

This was because they were currently being chased by someone--not Illness or the crew, but a third party.

<=>

Several hours earlier.

"All right. All right. All right. We'll be safe here for now."

Having evaded Illness and the crew members, Bobby and Carnea ran into a linens room that was marked "out of service".

Rather than laughing at the fact that there was a malfunction in a self-proclaimed luxury cruise liner, Bobby was thankful that there was a deserted place like this they could hide in.

But they couldn't just hole up in here forever.

As he looked around to see if there were any other options, Bobby spotted a small lattice door near the ceiling.

It connected to a ventilation shaft that could fit a person inside. The opening was probably made to fit a maintenance worker in the case of a ventilation problem.

"In that case..."

Bobby looked around and spotted a ladder lying in a corner of the room.

"All right!"

The stowaway boy thanked God for his good fortunes and took the ladder without hesitation. He went up with Carnea and they made their way through the ventilation shaft--

Until they found a strange device with a flickering red light.

<=>

Bridge.

"Huh...?"

The man watching the laptop terminal frowned. The man sitting beside him turned around.

"What's up?"

"Check it out.... I think someone might have messed with one of Life's set-ups."

"...Hold on a sec."

One of the seajackers--the Mask Makers--took a radio from his pocket and adjusted the frequency.

"Life? Can you hear me, Life?"

[What might be the matter?]

"Where are you right now?"

[In the central area of the vents. Block 3.]

Having confirmed Life's location, the masked man asked a serious question.

"So you're *not* at #53?"

[I am not very far from it, but it is still a bit of a distance away. What is the matter?]

"...Looks like some rats got into #53."

[...I understand. I shall pray that it really *is* just a rat getting into the systems.

I will report back in a moment.]

<=>

Inside the vents.

"Huh? What's this?"

Bobby discovered a strange device in the middle of his crawling escapade.

"What is it?" Carnea asked from behind him.

"I found something weird." Bobby replied, and tentatively poked at the device. After all, he couldn't risk crawling over it and triggering an alarm.

He stared at it for some time, but the more he looked at it, the less sure he became of the function of this object.

As it was not attached to any wiring, it seemed to be a self-sufficient device. The lack of any power cables also suggested that it was not for permanent usage.

Installed in the device was a tiny plastic bottle, and some sort of liquid swirled inside it.

"What's wrong, Bobby? Is something the matter?"

"...Uh..."

After a good, long look at the device, Bobby cocked his head and came up with a conclusion.

"I bet it's some sort of gas device to keep rats away!"

"And of course, these 'rats' would be the two of you."

Suddenly, a slow voice echoed from within the darkness ahead of Bobby.

"Ackkk?!" "Huh?!"

It seemed that even Carnea, who was behind Bobby, had noticed this presence in the shadows. She screamed and moved back.

The voice's speaker was illuminated by the faint red light on the device--his face was covered by a mask and a pair of night-vision goggles. From Bobby's experience watching movies and cartoons, this man's appearance was quite suited to a cramped location like this.

But there was no time for him to be thinking like this.

"What impudent children you are. I'm afraid I will have to punish you."

Bobby hurriedly tried to move back, but the masked man's hand reached out to him even faster.

"Bobby!"

The moment Bobby heard Carnea's voice from behind him, Bobby resisted by pushing the mysterious device towards the man as fast as he could.

"NO!"

The masked man caught the device with both hands to make sure the bottle would not make impact.

Bobby quickly retreated and dove back into the linens room.

Having spectacularly failed to catch the children, Life confirmed that the device was still secure, sighed, and headed towards the exit they took.

He turned off the switch in his goggles, which then switched from night-vision to camera mode. He could see the boy fleeing the linens room, holding the hand of a white girl with tanned skin.

Life stood in place for a moment, lost in thought.

"Now. Would those children be the 'heroes' we must fear? Or would they be mere victims...?"

He mumbled to himself again, and took out his radio.

"Yes, it's me. The rats were both children. And I apologize, but they managed to get away."

[What?! You think you can just get off with a flimsy apology?!]

"...Although I cannot be sure if the rats will be reporting me to the security guards."

[What?]

The man on the other end asked sharply. Life calmly explained the conclusion he had reached.

"From the fact that they were sneaking around in a place like this... I suspect that they were likely stowaways."

[...]

"I believe it may be best to take them into our custody and quarantine them before they decide to blab about us at their own expense."

[Describe them.]

"A short-haired boy about fourteen years of age, and... a white girl with styled blonde hair and wonderfully tanned skin, likely around the same age as the boy or slightly younger. I believe it will be simplest to just search for the combination of a tanned blonde girl and an ordinary-looking boy."

And with this, the two eye-catching stowaways suddenly became a target of the ship's Mask Makers.

<=>

It was back at the storage area.

Bobby recalled the events of the past few hours as he calmed himself.

They had been in unprecedented danger from the moment they had crawled into the spy-like man in the ventilation shaft.

The people chasing them were not the girl in the gothic dress, nor was it a particularly vigilant crew member--it was a group of ordinary-looking passengers who exuded an air of danger.

Bobby and Carnea found themselves beset by men charging towards them just as they were watching out for the man in goggles.

Bobby's prior experience dodging police officers in Manhattan proved to be extremely useful for this situation. The years he spent in delinquency had taught him to spot plainclothes officers and victims out to retrieve their stolen goods, even in places like Broadway.

It wasn't a talent to be proud of, but it was practically a godsend in this situation.

When they thought they had finally lost their tail, other passengers began to come after them. It was as if the entire ship had become their enemy.

If they were caught by the crew as stowaways, Bobby and Carnea would merely be turned over to the police.

They didn't know what the goth-loli girl was after, but it didn't look like she was after their lives.

But these men were dangerous.

Bobby's (short) life experiences, coupled with his instincts, began setting off alarm bells in his head.

'Those guys are going to kill us.'

It seemed that Carnea had gotten the same impression. The moment they found themselves in a deserted place, relief finally returned to her face.

"We'll be safe here. For now, anyway."

"R-right... Kyaaa!"

The moment Carnea looked up and screamed, Bobby froze in place.

He reflexively followed her line of sight, and spotted a gigantic, gaping maw.

It was a great white shark, over ten metres in length--or at least, an animatronic one.

"Th-that scared me..."

"This is that robot shark from the deck, right...?"

They found a full-body costume of the main character of the [Mode Gears] series, The Gear. Although there were a lot of metal parts and cogs, it seemed to be little different from a regular full-body costume.

There were other props and large set pieces from the [Mode Gears] series gathered here. It seemed this storage area was reserved for a publicity event for the film.

"It was outside until yesterday... What's it doing in here?" Bobby asked, intending to direct the question at Carnea.

"...The fountain event is coming up."

The terse response once again turned the stowaways into stone.

When they turned around, they found a boy with icy golden eyes.

"Wh-who are you?"

He didn't seem to be a pursuer, but the girlish-looking boy looked at Bobby and Carnea with a powerful gaze.

"...No unauthorized entry..."

Although the boy's voice trailed off, it was clearly backed by powerful intention.

'It's like he's staring right through me.'

Deeply unnerved by the newcomer, Bobby loudly pulled a switchblade from his pocket, as he usually did in New York.

"B-Bobby!" Carnea shouted with a mix of fear and scolding, but he couldn't back down now.

"Stay quiet. It's gonna be all right. Keep your mouth shut, and I won't hurt you."

It was an awkward threat. Normally, Bobby would mug tourists by shouting at them loudly to make them panic. His usual tactic would not work in a situation like this.

Showing no indication of what he was thinking, the boy stepped towards Bobby without hesitation.

"D-don't make a fuss-"

Bobby raised the switchblade to use as a threat.

"... You're the one who's making a fuss."

The boy crossed his arms and brought them down, as if to use them to cover the knife.

"What the-"

Bobby's knife-hand was stopped in place by his opponent's crossed arms.

The blade was guided to slice through the empty space between the boy's arms and torso, and Bobby found himself unable to even twitch.

And in one fluid movement, Bobby's wrist suddenly began being pulled towards the boy, and the boy stepped behind Bobby's back.

"Huh?"

If he resisted, his arm would break.

His opponent's body disappeared behind his back before Bobby could even consciously realize this fact. And before Bobby knew it, the boy was twisting his arm behind his back.

"...Agh... AAAAAHH!"

'Pain.'

The moment Bobby's nerve cells sent this message to his brain, Bobby relaxed his grip and tossed his switchblade into the air.

The boy silently took the switchblade, and folded and pocketed it as if nothing had happened.

"Ah... ah..."

As the recoil sent Bobby kneeling to the floor, something in his heart broke with a loud noise.

'It's over.'

If he were alone, Bobby would have spoken these words out loud--without even knowing if his opponent was a friend or enemy.

But right now, Carnea was with him. He *had* to find a way out, no matter what the cost.

And as if mocking Bobby's efforts to conjure up wisdom, fate sent another struggle on their way.

"Hey, how about this storeroom?"

"It's pretty big... but they weren't in the other one, so... you start from over there!"



They heard voices from a corner of the storage area, presumably belonging to their pursuers.

Although they were currently hidden behind the set pieces and the shelves, the men were unmistakably heading in their direction.

"C-Carnea! You have to leave me and run!"

"I-I couldn't do that, Bobby! If they catch you, they'll kill you!"

Bobby and Carnea argued in hushed voices.

Meanwhile, the boy who had taken the knife listened carefully to them, and the voices that were searching the storehouse.

He then slowly stepped forward.

And pulled Bobby and Carnea along by the arm.

"Any luck?"

"No, I don't think--huh? Hey! You there, kid!"

One of the Mask Maker shouted at a small silhouette in the corner of the storage area.

"Turn around for a sec... what?"

As the dim lights brought the boy's face into visible range, the man practically screamed.

"Ch-Charon! You're Charon Walken, right?!"

"Whaaaaat?! No way! For real?!"

The moment they realized that the boy was the world-famous stuntman, the pursuers momentarily strayed from their mission to nervously talk to the star.

"Whoa...! It's Charon Walken in the flesh... I'm a big fan! It's an honour to meet you."

"..."

"This is awesome! He looks just like in the pictures!"

The atmosphere relaxed almost in an instant.

"..."

Bobby was standing alone, trembling and covered in cold sweat.

He was standing right beside one of the pursuers, shaking with a look of despair inside the full-body costume of The Gear.

Earlier, Charon had suddenly taken both Bobby and Carnea by the arm. He lifted Carnea and placed her inside the maw of the shark, and had put his own The Gear costume on Bobby.

The inside of the shark was surprisingly spacious, as they had shot a scene in which The Gear was swallowed whole by the creature. There was more than enough room inside for Carnea alone.

Meanwhile, Bobby was unable to finish putting on the costume. He was stuck in the unenviable appearance of a gear-demon upper body wearing plain jeans.

Even though the storage area was dark, it would not be difficult to spot Bobby if the pursuers looked closely. Bobby tensed, falling into panic.

"H-hey, hate to say this, but we gotta go."

"Oh, right. Hey Charon, did you by any chance see a couple of kids walking in here?"

Charon nodded at them and pointed to an exit different from the one they entered from.

"Over there, huh? Damn! We almost had 'em!"

"Sorry. See, those brats took off with our wallets."

The men chattered and began to hurriedly walk away, when one of them suddenly stopped and looked back.

"Whoa, what was I thinking?"

'He's on to us!'

It's over!'

The man's return rendered even Bobby's mind frozen.

"I completely forgot! I had a notebook and a pen with me. Could I get your autograph?"

The man took out a notepad. It took Bobby all his strength to keep his knees from buckling to the ground.

"Damn, that's pretty cool! Oh, yeah! Could you sign **this**?"

"But that's..."

"Who cares?! All right! Now I can show off to everyone later!"

The men left the storage area with these last words. Bobby heaved a sigh of relief and fell to the floor.

"Th-th-thanks. We owe you one."

Charon cocked his head and spoke to Bobby.

"...Pickpockets?"

"No! You gotta believe me! I didn't do it **this time!**"

"..."

Charon nodded.

Though Charon was quiet and somewhat creepy, Bobby gladly thanked the boy for saving their lives.

"Sorry... Even after I tried to threaten you with a knife." he said in an embarrassed tone.

Charon shook his head.

"...I'll go... look outside."

He then disappeared through the same exit as the pursuers.

Bobby began breathing deeply inside the The Gear costume. He looked over at the shark, and saw Carnea poking her head out slightly from between the teeth.

"A-are we saved...?"

"...Yeah... but now what are we supposed to do...?"

Although Bobby considered turning themselves in to the crew, there was no guarantee that the pursuers were not connected to the crew members.

It would be ideal if the crew would believe their account of the mysterious devices in the vents, but there was a chance that they might have already been removed.

"What to do...?"

Bobby bowed his head with parts of 'The Gear's lower body in hand, unsure of what to do next. He then began to finish putting on the costume, just in case the men returned before Charon.

But before he could finish, the storage area was completely lit up by electric lights.

At the same time, the doors opened with a thunderous noise and people began swarming in.

"Whoa..."

Bobby froze in the middle of putting on his right boot, the last piece of the costume.

Seeing this, the man at the centre of the swarm let out a shout.

"MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARVELOUS!"

'Wh-what the hell?!'

Bobby's psyche let out a scream at this sudden noise. His mind was having difficulty processing these waves of situations he was being put through.

"You kept us waiting, so we came to get you! And to think, you were already getting into costume! You are truly the god of The Gear! The cog child! And yet, who is this young man who refuses to become a cog of society? That's right! Your name is Charon! Who could it be but Charon Walken? This is great! I say, this is perfect!"

Following behind the chubby African-American man was a veritable avalanche of (presumably) crew members. They began to carry out the animatronic shark, with Carnea still hiding inside.

'Hey!'

He wanted to stop them, but letting his voice be heard would out him immediately.

How was he supposed to stop them without getting caught?

Ignoring Bobby's panic, the African-American--who seemed to be the leader of all of this--gave the gear demon a hearty slap on the back.

"Let's be off! Claudia's probably warmed up the crowd, so now we just need you to set them on fire!"

Having committed the absurdity of sending in the leading lady to warm up the crowd, the director dragged away The Gear--Bobby--by hand.

Bobby could neither refuse nor struggle as he found himself taken outside the storage area--without even a moment to imagine what could be awaiting him outside.

<=>

The lowest floor of the shopping mall. A cafe in front of the fountain.

It was only several metres away from the fountain. Two men and a woman were drinking coffee, sitting around a table.

"Pretty strange to find an outdoor cafe in a place like this."

"A lot of malls have indoor-outdoor cafes, though..."

"Maybe we should go for drinks at the prow once this is all over."

"Forget getting drunk, you'll probably fall overboard."

As they spoke about their next course of action and some defining traits of the Mask Makers, they realized that things had suddenly gotten very lively.

"What's going on?"

They turned around, and heard the voice of a very familiar girl from the other side of the fountain.

"Is that Claudia?"

"Come to think of it... I heard that they were putting on a promotional event for the movie today on the event stage at the fountain."

"Whoa... this close to the audience, huh? That's just like her."

"Claudia's always loved attention, even before her debut."

"You can say that again. Those kids don't even have managers, and they still get requests for roles..."

As Firo and Ennis cheerily spoke about Claudia, Angelo interrupted them with a curious look.

"What? You two know Claudia Walken?"

"I guess you could say we're family friends."

"I see... I'm a bit envious. Of her works, [The Wild Dog] is my favourite."

Surprisingly, Angelo smiled softly. And he looked around, without losing his expression.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I'm looking out to see if 'they' came here to see the event."

"D'you think they'd risk coming out into the open, in front of all these people?" Firo asked with a bitter smile.

Angelo's response was surprisingly serious, but it was as if even *he* thought it absurd--

"I believe they like movies. If they're really here to disappear from the public eye, there's a chance they'll show up to actually watch the event."

"I see."

Firo took Angelo's word for it and began looking around without much thought. As he didn't really know the faces of the members of the Mask Makers, Firo decided to first see if he could spot anyone who looked suspicious.

Having been a Camorra exec for seventy years, Firo had developed a knack for figuring out if someone in his vicinity was an honest man. Although there were some people who could hide it well, Firo had heard from Angelo that the Mask Makers were not such people.

'And I thought I could hide it pretty well, too...'

It seemed that being figured out as a man of the criminal underworld by Angelo the other day had hurt Firo's pride. He was determined to find these Businessmen, no matter what.

Firo continued to look around the event stage. Suddenly, there was a loud cheer. A gigantic shark made its way in from the hallway connecting the mall and the storage area.

"Whoa! They seriously brought that robot shark inside?"

Standing beside the almost photorealistic shark was the cog-clad hero, waving his arms in response to the cheers.

"Wow, that Charon's really into it."

"Isn't there something awkward about his movement?"

"Well, maybe he's just tense about doing something like this for the first time."

Although Ennis seemed to have noticed something strange, Firo continued to watch the gear demon with a smile.

"Glad to know that even Charon's still human."

<=>

Upper deck, the poolside.

It was an outdoor pool occupied by famous men and women relaxing in their swimsuits.

And as these people revelled in the luxury of fresh water in the middle of the sunset ocean, an eye-catching girl in a black and yellow gothic lolita dress passed through.

"They're not heeeeere. They're noooooooooot."

Having completely gone off the mark, Illness had spent half the day searching for--and failing to find--the stowaways. She could not even get in contact with the other Mask Makers, who had been going after them at the same time.

If things had gone according to plan, the seajacking should have already begun. But no one contacted her, and the passengers were just enjoying a relaxing cruise.

"I guess it all turned out okay. I'm glad. I'm so glad. It's a happy ending." Illness said as she swayed through the ship.

A glance at the pool's clock suddenly reminded her of something.

"Oh! Claudia's event is starting!"

Illness's thoughts instantly switched from 'stowaways' to 'Claudia'. She did not spare a second glance at the pool as she unfittingly waddled away from the poolside.

<=>

In front of the fountain, onstage.

'What do I do?!'

Stuck in the tiniest locked room in the world, Bobby moved his prison to wave at the crowds.

He was covered in sweat. The humidity dissipated his focus.

The stowaway had been dragged onto the event stage by the crew, unable to make his escape.

Carnea was still probably inside the shark beside him, which was chomping its jaws and moving its fins.

Although Bobby worried that Carnea might be injured by the shark's internal mechanisms, there was nothing he could do for her right now.

He watched the waves of people around him from inside the costume.

The crowds weren't just watching him from in front of the stage--countless passengers were looking towards him from the different floors of the shopping mall around him.

'Have I ever gotten this much attention in my life?'

He had most certainly not before, and he probably never would in the future.

The boy was faced with the greatest challenge of his life, in the mask of a stranger. But there was no time for him to go over all these thoughts with care.

'I-I don't know why, but looks like I don't need to say anything.'

Bobby desperately wracked his blank mind to find a way out of his predicament.

'For now, I'll just wave and nod and play along...' he thought, and looked around.

And when he spotted the men who had been pursuing them very recently among the crowd, his mind threatened to blank out again.

'What are those creeps doing here?!' he wanted to complain, but there was nothing Bobby could do.

What he feared most at the moment was the chattering girl and fat director beside him telling him to take off his mask.

But as time passed with no such request, Bobby began to wonder if he would end up being a spectacle forever.

Maybe this was all just a dream.

Maybe he was still asleep in the lifeboat, and maybe the tight fit of the gear suit was just Humpty or Tall pushing against him in their sleep. Bobby persisted in this line of thought until he realized that this would mean that Carnea would be just a figment of his imagination.

'No, I want Carnea to exist.

But I hope this is all a dream.

That's right! Maybe I started dreaming after Carnea squeezed in with us...'

The moment the stubborn boy began to make his wish, the voice of a different girl forcefully dragged him back into reality.

"Hey... you're not Charon, are you?"

"...!"

This girl, who looked to be around his age, had her arm wrapped around him for a picture.

Having taken off her mic, the girl whispered something into Bobby's ear so no one else could hear.

"Hey, it's pretty obvious. I think John's noticed too, but he's obviously keeping the cameras rolling for fun."

"...Uh..."

"Honestly, what is he thinking? What if you were an assassin, or a crazy stalker? ... but I have faith that Charon wouldn't lose this costume to someone like that. I'm sure you have a good reason for wearing this suit."

The girl laughed energetically and smiled at this perfect stranger, not a hint of fear in her eyes.

"All right. I'll play along for you, okay?"

"Uh..."

Bobby almost ended up turning towards the girl, but she stopped him with a quiet "don't move". The girl--the leading lady--then gave a certain order to the cog-suited Bobby.

Her smile as she uttered this command made her look as if she were the ruler of this world.

"In return, as long as you're in that suit--you have to play the part of a hero!"

<=>

"Hahaha! Charon looks pretty nervous up there."

Firo grinned cheerfully, watching The Gear's awkward movements.

"...Bingo. I found them." Angelo whispered to Firo and Ennis, having been looking around from his place beside them.

"...Really?"

Firo and Ennis tried to act natural as they also turned their attention.

Angelo quietly nodded, and began with a "keep calm"--

He then turned only his eyes towards them and continued.

"...They're the ones who just took a seat beside us."

"Argh, dammit! Can't see anything but the back of their head from here."

"I'm seriously jealous of Kevin and Baum. They managed to get Charon Walken's autograph. In any case, I don't think we'll be able to get to the front at this point. Wanna try upstairs?"

"Yeah. Dammit... All this is because of those damn stowaways."

The Mask Maker duo, who had been part of the team that attacked the restaurant, mumbled to each other and looked up at the stage.

Angelo and the others kept watch on them from behind.

With the information they gleaned from this conversation, they decided to follow the duo once they began moving to the second floor.

("That's enough. Leave the rest to me.")

("At least let us see things through.")

they whispered, and Firo sighed in relief, thinking things would end much easier than he had expected.

However, the moment he attempted to bury himself back in his chair, intending to watch Angelo's display of skill--

A voice echoed across the outdoor cafe, stirring up chaos.

"Ohhhhh!"

A girl's voice, still with the hint of childlikeness, rang out from right next to Firo.

"You! You're the awesome gunman from the other day, right?! Right? Right?!"

Firo and the others turned a confused eye to the source of the voice. It was the black-and-yellow gothic lolita girl from the other day, pointing at Angelo with her eyes wide.

"What a coincidence! Oh...! Or... are you here to kill people?"

In the girl's hand was a cup of hot chocolate, likely purchased from the cafe. This place was the most convenient place for obtaining food and drinks during the event. There were other eateries nearby, but this cafe behind the stage was the only place a latecomer like the girl could enter.

Not knowing this fact, Firo and the others hesitated for a moment. They then turned around in surprise.

They saw the Mask Makers, who were already beginning to draw.

Angelo had also already reached for his weapon. Although Firo hypothesized that Angelo would be able to fire before the Mask Maker duo, he worried that they would get a shot in first.

All this was still running through Firo's mind as he leapt off his chair and made a dash for it.

Gunfire.

Even with his vision partially obscured by Firo, Angelo managed to accurately hit the shoulders of the two men.

The bullets passed through flesh, eventually coming to a stop against the ship's wall.

Meanwhile, the Mask Makers' bullets made straight for Angelo's forehead.

But they instead buried themselves in Firo's shoulder, which had just barely made it in time. The low-caliber rounds came to a stop, still within Firo's body.

"Firo!"

Ennis, who was first to react, kicked up the table they had just been sitting at and stood up at the same time. She then kicked the table in mid-air towards their enemies.

The duo was thrown against the ground by the table.

Then, the passengers finally realized that the noises were gunshots--their screams began to fill the mall.

The fountain area was soon swept in complete chaos. Claudia, the director, and The Gear were safely escorted to the exit by bodyguards.

Making sure Claudia was making her way out safely, Firo sighed in relief and began to consider his next course of action.

'I can tell the security guards that those two suddenly began shooting... And I guess I have to play dumb about Angelo?'

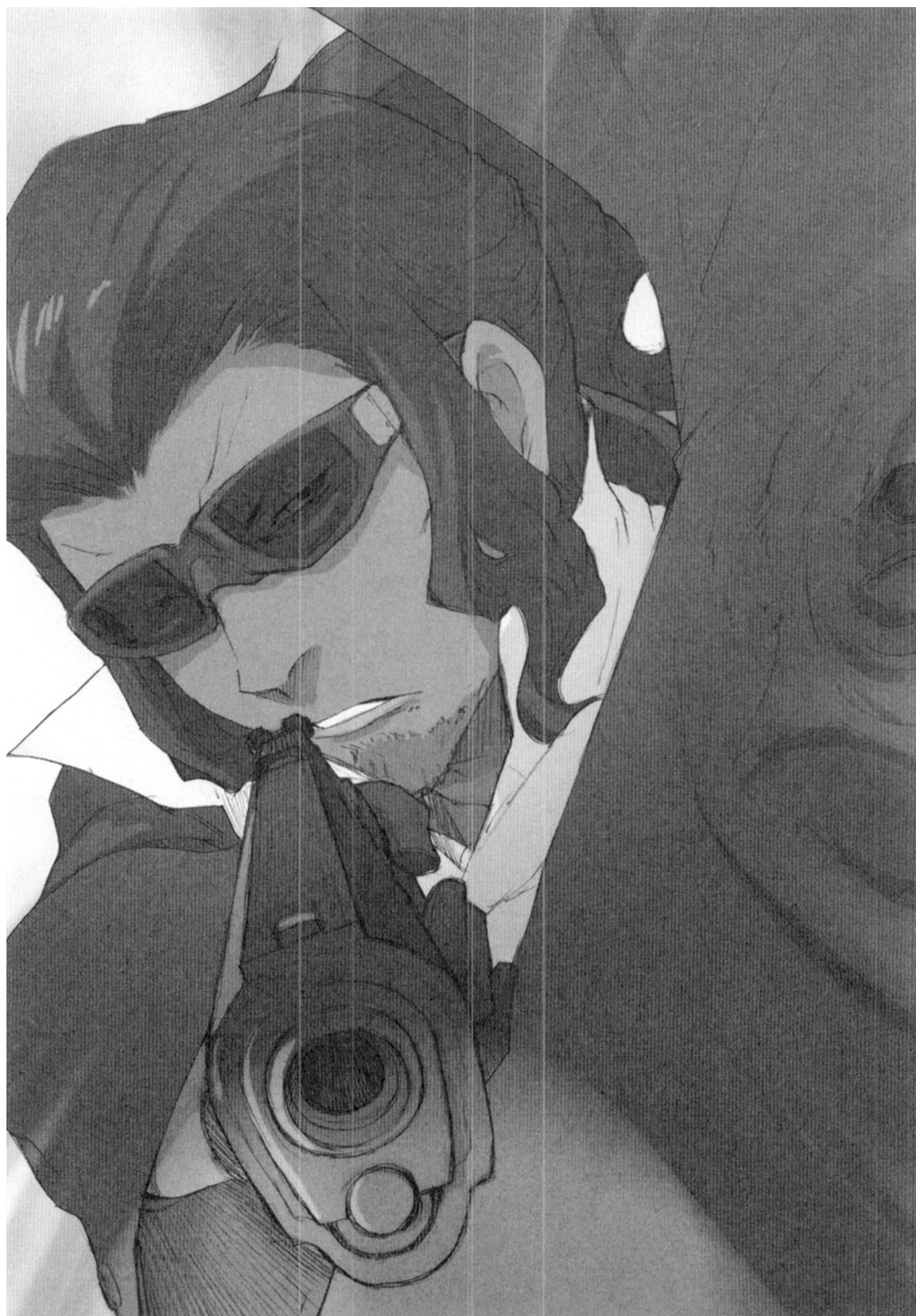
He began looking around to see if there were any crew members or security guards around--

When he noticed a group of passengers going against the flow of escaping passengers, looking in his direction.

Firo could tell at a glance that these people were dangerous.

Their hands had already begun reaching into their pockets.

"What, seriously?"



Feeling the pain in his shoulder that ran down to the rest of the body slowly dissipating, Firo took Ennis and ran into the cafe.

Angelo soon rolled in as well.

It was a little later that gunshots rang out, and the cafe windows shattered with a crash.

"SHIT! ARGH! He got me! DAMN!"

Meanwhile, the men who had been flattened by the tables rolled on the floor, nursing their wounded shoulders.

"You okay?" Illness asked languidly.

Their anger stoked by her attitude, the men directed their pained rage at Illness.

"Shut up! Why don't you just go lock yourself in your room?"

"It's all *your* fault, you stupid bitch!"

Faced with this absurd accusation, Illness pouted in the midst of the shootout.

"I'm not stupid! If I hadn't yelled, that gunman would have turned you into beehives! Hmph! And I can help out in shootouts, too!"

Illness's answer was still without a hint of desperation. The men got even more angry at her.

"Shut up! What can you do unarmed, anyway?!"

"You're no help right now! Go grab your stuff and cover us!"

In response, Illness put on a face that vaguely resembled tearfulness or rage--

"I don't care!"

And she left, yelling like a child.

Illness's form soon melded into the escaping crowd, no longer distinguishable or trackable.

And as if replacing the missing Illness, the Mask Makers who had been among the passengers entered the shopping mall, raising the curtains on a very abrupt shootout.

<=>

The bridge.

"Hey, what's going on over there?"

The masked man asked anxiously, having been contacted by a desperate teammate.

And as the teammate continued to report, the face under the mask soon began to blanch.

"...That gunman's on this ship...?"

He grumbled at the news that a shootout had begun, and calmly began to give out orders to his subordinates.

"...Keep him tied up there for now. I'll get in touch with the communications office so they'll block off passenger signals. In the meantime--

I'll send Life your way."

<=>

"Apologies. Looks like I've dragged you into a shootout after all."

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault."

As gunfire and screaming enveloped the mall, Firo and the others took cover in the cafe and took note of the situation.

The customers and employees in the store had already fled through the back door, so Firo, Ennis, and Angelo were the only ones inside.

Not only that, Angelo was the only one with a gun. Firo and Ennis were both unarmed.

"How's your shoulder?"

"What do you think? Seriously, at this rate, I won't have any clothes without bullet holes left over."

Relieved at Firo's joking self-deprecation, Angelo sheepishly apologized. He poked his head and arm out from the wall and fired multiple times.

They heard a groan from a corner of the mall. It was likely a hit.

"Is he dead?"

"No, I went for his arm. He'll die of blood loss if he isn't treated soon."

"You make it sound so easy."

It was almost insanity to aim for the arm with a handgun in this situation, but carrying out such an action meant that Angelo was already far beyond normal levels of competence.

"I can't let them die instantly, after all." Angelo replied calmly. Firo shook his head in disbelief, and mumbled, "I'm tempted to hire you as a bodyguard on the spot."

"Apologies. As I've told you before, I've sworn my loyalties to my boss."

"Yeah. I'm just a bit jealous of your boss is all."

Several minutes later.

"Dammit, how many of them are there?"

Firo quietly drew breath as he watched bullets flying in their direction from all over the mall.

Several of the attackers were likely injured or dead thanks to Angelo, but it was as if they were constantly replenishing their numbers.

And yet Angelo coldly continued to shoot them down.

Firo suspected that it would come down to a battle of numbers--either Angelo's bullets or the enemy's head count.

But suddenly, a deafening noise rang out through the mall.

Angelo looked up to assess the situation, but swiftly turned away just as quickly.

At that very moment, a noise rang out through the area, and the floor near the store entrance began rapidly chipping away.

"...Forget the handguns. How'd they bring in one of *those*?"

Firo quietly peeked out the window. His eyes were fixed on the fourth floor of the shopping mall. A shadow holding an assault rifle was standing in front of a luxury boutique.

From the fact that he was attacking them, he was probably an ally of the Mask Makers--but his appearance was very far removed from that of the other members.

He was fully covered by a black combat suit. A silicone mask covered his face, along with a pair of mechanical-looking goggles. Because his flesh was not visible, he could very well pass for a cyborg.

"You should stay back, Ennis. That guy's some serious sicko." Firo told Ennis, who was beside him with a weary look. He then turned to speak to Angelo.

"Hey. Who's that guy dressed like a video game character?"

"...There were only two dressed like that at the restaurant before. I eliminated one of them... so this one's probably someone else."

"In other words, there's at least one more of those guys?"

"Yes. A young lady who's more suited to carrying around a doll. You saw her a little earlier."

'What? Earlier, as in... the girl in the goth-loli dress?'

Though Firo wanted to ask for more details, now was not the time. If they tried to leave the store, they would be shot instantly--but they couldn't just hole up here forever.

When Firo peeked out again, he saw the man in the combat suit surveying the area, moving back and forth in front of the boutique's metal fencing.

Firo decided to leave it up to Angelo whether they escaped through the back door or took care of the man in the combat suit now.

Of course, he was planning to have Ennis escape through the back door either way.

In this moment of tension, Angelo noticed his cell phone vibrating.

He took it out, and seeing the name 'Demolisher' listen on the screen, took the call without hesitation.

[Yo, boss Angelo. How ya doin'?]

"You're watching me right now, aren't you? Do you even need to ask?"

[Guess not. You're in some serious shit there. Anyway, what's Mr. Casino doing over there with ya?]

"I'll explain later. If you can't provide any support, this is a waste of time. I'm hanging up."

As Angelo spoke over the phone from behind the wall, the Demolisher cackled and proposed a solution.

[Support, huh? So ya want me to stop that goggled son of a bitch on the fourth floor?]

"Can you do it?"

[Of course I can do it, since **civvies aren't around right now.**]

"...What?"

Angelo got a sinking feeling as his partner began to cackle over the phone.

"Hey, wait. Don't tell me you--"

[I set up my gear, so sit back and enjoy the show, boss Angelo.]

With these words, the Demolisher hung up--

And immediately afterwards, a powerful explosion rocked the hull.

There was no sign of fire, but the shock reached Firo and the others.

The roar rang out through the open-air structure of the shopping mall, and the passengers who had been rendered frozen by fear of the shootout stampeded in flight, escaping to the deck or their cabins. They did everything they could to get away from the mall.

When Firo quietly poked his head out, he noticed that the vicinity of the smoke-filled fourth floor boutique--where the man in the combat suit had been mere seconds before--had collapsed. It had been blocked off from the interior corridors.

The man in the combat suit was nowhere to be seen. He had likely been crushed under the debris or had escaped, cut off from the rest of the mall.

The gunshots had ceased with the explosion. The other Mask Makers seemed to have retreated--no shots were fired when Firo looked up.

Firo went back into the store and asked Angelo out of nagging paranoia.

"Hey... was that your partner on the phone just now? What the hell did he just do?"

Angelo, who was gripping the phone so hard it looked just about ready to shatter, gave a disdainful reply.

"He told me to stop worrying... because he's set up explosives like this all over the ship."

"... You mind if I give him a good smack later?"

"If you can reach him before my bullet." Angelo replied stoically. Firo said nothing as he looked around the mall once more.

And suddenly--

"Huh...? Charon?!"

On the lowest level of the silenced mall was the gear demon, running towards the animatronic shark beside the fountain.

"That idiot! What's he thinking?"

Firo ran out without a second thought. Angelo and Ennis's voices caught up to him from behind.

"Hey!"

"Firo!"

But Firo did not stop. He ran to the other side of the fountain and took hold of The Gear's shoulder, just as it reached for the inside of the shark's mouth.

"What are you doing, Charon?! It's dangerous here--"

Suddenly, The Gear flinched and quietly yelled, "F-Firo!".

'Huh?

That's... not Charon's voice.'

Firo then caught sight of something.

At the tip of The Gear's outstretched hand, inside the shark's gigantic mouth, was the form of a young girl.

"Wh-what the...? Is she all right?!"

'What's a little girl doing in a place like this?!'

Firo hurriedly reached for the girl inside the shark's gaping jaws. Careful not to get her caught against the robot's teeth, Firo got her out and gently let her down under the shark.

"You all right!?"

"A-are you okay?!"

Firo and The Gear asked at once. Firo confirmed his suspicion that the boy beside him was not Charon.

It seemed that the girl had been shocked out of her senses in the blast. She looked up at Firo and The Gear with blank eyes.

"They might start shooting at us any second now. Let's get her over there, quick!"

Firo lifted the girl into his arms and began running towards the cafe from earlier. The stranger in The Gear's costume followed him.

Angelo and Ennis ran into the cafe as Firo laid the girl down.

For some reason, Angelo's eyes were wide. Surprised by this expression, Firo was about to ask what was wrong--

"Oh... uh..."

But it seemed that the girl was regaining her senses, so he decided to save the question for later.

"Hey, wake up."

But the girl looked to a point in space behind Firo. Her eyes then widened.

"Angelo! Oh, it's really you, Angelo!"

She immediately got to her feet and embraced Angelo.

And the boy in The Gear's costume, who had been watching from beside her--

'Huh? Wh-what's going on?

So this guy... this guy's...'

The boy then recalled what the girl told them yesterday about her reason for stowing away.

'Right. Something about looking for someone like a father...

So wait. This tough-looking guy?!'

The boy just gaped in uncertainty, but the man called Angelo's next words sent him spiralling into a state of confusion.

"No... how in the world..."

"I'm so relieved... I'm so glad you're safe, Angelo!"

Angelo wrapped the trembling, wide-eyed girl in an embrace--

And, still reeling from shock, he blurted out a certain fact.

A fact that would end up flooring even Firo and Ennis.

"How..."

"How did you get here, **Boss?!'**"

<=>

Bridge.

"Captain! Why haven't you answered--ah... oh...!"

The masked men pointed a gun at the crew member who had just entered the bridge.

"Hey, hey, hey. This isn't some roach motel you can just walk into. At the rate you're going, we won't have enough room to keep you people tied up. Don't you think?"

It had only been about five minutes since they had received reports of a shootout breaking out. Oblivious crew members had barged into the Captain's quarters one by one, each ending up as another hostage.

The communication systems on the ship were a mess, and the chaos was compounded by the lack of contact with the outside world.

"Dammit! It was all fine until we cut off the satellite connection in the communications office... but at this rate, they'll figure us out!" The masked man anxiously sighed.

"...What was all that about not harming the passengers, you bastards?" the Captain spat disdainfully.

"We haven't shot any of the passengers **yet**, and we don't plan on doing so. We're just trying to get rid of a dangerous element, who's armed with a gun." the masked man replied with a snort. The Captain began to let off curses in his head.

The masked men turned from the Captain's murderous glare and began chatting relaxedly.

"But still, it's true things are getting kinda noisy."

"Who could've thought the gunman would follow us all the way here?"

"Seriously... I wasn't there, but he's the one who got Death, right?"

"How'd he know we were on this ship? And how'd he manage to pack a gun with him?"

"Shit. There's probably a Hannibal Lecter among us. No mistaking it."

"I think we'd have been swallowed already if Hannibal were here."

"He'd swallow our characters *and* our bodies."

Although it seemed that this untroubled atmosphere would persist--

"...Is it true Illness was there too?"

"Yeah. Though she went off somewhere afterwards, apparently."

"I see. She's probably unarmed, anyway."

The man who was first handed the weapons by Life put on a serious tone and gave his teammates an order.

"...Call in Illness. Have her fully equipped--no, she can come in street clothes. Let's just give her the weapons. We need to stop that gunman."

"Even *Life* was having trouble against that guy!" One member, who did not know about the restaurant incident, spoke up nervously.

But the man, who had been there when Death and many other teammates had been killed, smiled a twisted grin under his mask.

"See, this cool gunman's a real old-fashioned knight in shining armour--he can't kill women or children."

<=>

Several minutes later, Illness's cabin.

"Hey, Illness! You sleeping?!"

Having run out of patience at Illness's lack of response, one of the Mask Makers unlocked the door with a master key from the bridge.

"Hey, Illness! It's your turn...?"

Inside the cabin was a boy sitting in a chair, and three other boys who were in front of him, bound.

"Wh-what are you brats?! How'd you get in here?!"

Though the man was scared out of his mind at the unexpected sight, he interrogated the boys with a sharp tone.

"Don't tell me you're with those stowaways?!"

The boys looked at each other at the word "stowaways", but--

"Who are you, mister? The nice lady I met at the pool brought me here because she was going to play with me!" the youngest-looking boy said with an innocent smile, "You know, mister? Miss Illness said that she was going to **play with these kids later**, so I have to keep watch!"

"Wha...?"

"She said she was going to give me a really cool present if I did!"

Having drawn a conclusion from the boy's declarations, the man audibly grit his teeth.

"Th-that sick bitch! I knew she was sick, but she was a sex-crazed whore, too?!" he spat, "Hmph! Playtime's over, kids. Go back to your mommies!"

The man untied the ropes around the boys one by one and shooed them from the cabin.

"Stupid bitch! She left her radio in her cabin...! And it's not even on!"

Czes quickly glanced at the man as he shouted thus, and followed the other boys outside.

Following the silent boys, Czes put on a serious look and spoke up.

"Things aren't looking too great. Let's get away for now."

"Uh..."

"If you don't want to die, it's best you don't make any hasty decisions. I'll let you stay in my cabin for a while, if you want."

Czes returned to speaking in an uncharacteristically mature tone.

"Y-you--you're not an adult, but it's like you're an adult!" Tall yelled, gaping at Czes.

"That sentence doesn't make sense, Tall."

"Shut up, Troy! Adult #1, stay quiet!"

"Stop arguing."

In the midst of their yelling, the boys decided to follow Czes for now and escape.

Mentally, Czes sighed in relief.

'I had a bad feeling about all this. Dammit! First that village last year, and now this! Nothing's been working out since the 21st century began!'

Something had been nagging at Czes's thoughts ever since he first set foot on this ship. And as he considered the connection of this feeling to the current situation--

Czes was once again haunted by an ominous premonition.

'...?

What is this?

It's like...that bad feeling is refusing to go away...

No, I have to forget about it.'

Czes shook his head, blaming his imagination. He continued to run in order to do what he could.

He would have the boys take shelter in his cabin, and meet up with Firo and Ennis.

And without even getting a chance to assess his gains and losses, Czes trusted his instincts and stepped into the bullet-ridden situation.

Without even knowing what fate awaited before him.

<=>

Several minutes later.

It was as the passengers trembled at the gunshots ringing out from somewhere on the ship--

All too suddenly, a coarse male voice began playing from every speaker on board.

[Well, well, well. Apologies for the abruptness, but I'd like to make an announcement. It's English only--and no foreign language dubbing, either, so if you don't know English, please keep your eyes on the screens. Let's see here... We're a group of mysterious seajackers. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. We can get anything from brassieres to missiles, but don't ask us for airplanes~! Our purposes and identities are a secret, dear passengers~! What do you think? Isn't your heart positively racing?]

Many people considered that this strangely cheerful voice might be a part of John Drox's publicity event.

However, the gunshots and the commotion made sure that the passengers knew the truth.

That this wasn't a prank, or a staged event.

But they still wanted to believe--

That their cruise would be a safe one.

And their hopes were cruelly dashed by the scene that would soon play out before them.

[Well, well, well. As we don't believe our passengers would believe us even if we told you that we've set up bombs and poison gas on the ship, we'll show you proof! Proof that this ship is under our control. A round of applause, everyone! Ladies and gentlemen, please turn your gaze towards the windows! Passengers portside, look to your left! Passengers on starboard, please look to your right! In other words, I'm telling you to look at the sides, so hurry the fuck up!]

The inconsistent voice on the speakers yelled out a sudden command to the passengers.

And as the people looked out the windows as instructed--

"L-look! Over there!"

"Are those... the lifeboats?!"

The lifeboats had all been loaded onto their cranes, and were being lowered onto the sea--with not a single person on board.

This in itself was quite a panic inducing sight, but the emcee behind the speaker then staged an even more intense event.

[It's time for fireworks, everyone! It's still a while until night, but please give us a round of applause!]

Suddenly, clumps of light and smoke shot up from somewhere on the ship, towards the lifeboats--

A flash

A deafening roar

Light

Fire

And flame

One lifeboat on each side of the ship was hit by something and exploded. The rest of the boats soon disappeared along the waves, likely never to return.

This was all the information given to the passengers.

What kind of weapons are they wielding? Who is behind this? What are they after?

None of these questions were even close to being answered.

But the given information was enough to give the spectators an idea of what was going on.

[This is why, ladies and gentlemen, passengers and crew members, we ask that you do not wander the ships--please stay quietly in your quarters or your workstations. Since I'm at it, let me let you in on a little secret--we've planted many of our people among our spectators, so please enjoy the doubtfest that's about to begin!]

And several seconds after the facts sunk into the audience--

The people's screams began to echo from the floating city.

<=>

Bridge.

Once this specific warning had been delivered, the awkward announcement came to an end. It wasn't a very sophisticated plan, but it was conducted because they didn't absolutely have to keep the passengers under strict control. All they were doing was holding this ship hostage for the negotiation on *Exit*, so they just had to leave a route of escape for themselves.

It was an extremely unprofessional method, but the masked men never lost their relaxed attitudes, seemingly very used to such situations.

"Y'know, we didn't really want to resort to this. Don't worry. We're not planning on massacring the passengers. I'm just kinda looking forward to your company going bankrupt from all the lawsuits coming along. Haha!"

Turning off the communication switch, one of the Mask Makers laughed behind his mask and mumbled.

The Captain, still bound, was silently gritting his teeth.

The masked man looked on in satisfaction. He spread his arms and began tilting his head back and forth.

"If you wanna blame someone, blame that cool-as-ice gunman who boarded the ship. I guess he's probably wondering the same thing about us, but how'd he get a gun on board, anyway? Is security around here that lax?"

"Shut your mouth, you lowlife...! You say you're not going to kill the passengers? This coming from someone who abandoned the lifeboats?!"

"No, no. I told you, we're not planning to sink the ship. We've even got an escape plan ready. But! If we end up facing a rebellion on board, we might be getting some of that magic gas pouring out of the vents in the area."

"Bastard...!"

The man ignored the Captain's rage. Humming, he turned on his radio.

"Hey, communications office. I'll be contacting the other ship now, so can you make it so satellite connections only reach *Exit*?"

[You make it sound so easy... I can do it, and if things are going according to plan, they should be doing the same thing right about now on the other end.]

"Our employees are so reliable."

After a period of silence, the man was given a [It's working now] from the radio. He stopped humming and took out his cell phone.

"Wonder how Aging's holding up."

He pressed a speed dial key on his phone, and waited for the connection--

[Hey, it's me.]

"Yo, Aging! How's it over on *Exit*? We've had a bit of trouble, but we managed to take over the ship okay." the masked man reported, completely omitting anything about Angelo.

The person on the other end--Aging--gave a hearty laugh.

[Good to hear! I'm practically going crazy from all the fun I'm having over here!]

"Sounds good. How's everyone doing?"

'*Oh... I wonder if they've finished the job and gone to relax at the casino or something on that side?*' the man wondered, envious of the other ship. The reply was still as cheery as ever--

[Yeah, the boss managed to stay alive! Everyone else here is dead!]

"Yeah? Come to think of it, the boss was with you--"

The man froze mid-laughter.

"What did you just say?"

[**Just me and the boss left here!** Ain't it pretty entertaining?]

"W-wait. Hold on a sec."

The man broke out into cold sweat, and went over the information in his head.

They had considered the fact that **the boss would be aboard** *Exit*, and allotted more members to that side of the mission.

But everyone was dead--what did this mean?

"Wait... don't tell me you turned on us and killed everyone with the boss as a hostage?!"

[Wouldn't be half as fun as this, you rascal. Maybe Death just decided to take everyone along on his way! Gahahahaha!]

"Hey! What the hell?! What the hell is happening over there?! What, is Steven Segal or Jet Li aboard your ship?! Or did **he** find out about you before you even started?!"

[No, I doubt **he** knows about us yet. Besides, he's not the kind of guy who'd take initiative and kill us off.]

Hypotheses missed their marks, and the conversation began to lose coherency.

The masked man focused again and began questioning Aging again.

"Then what?! You got attacked by some tentacle monster, like in *Deep Rising*?!"

[Nah. How do I put this... Right! Let's use one of those movie examples you'd like.]

Aging continued, never losing the cheerful tone of voice.

And these words would plunge the Mask Makers on *Entrance* into the depths of fear.

[We got about two hundred zombies, and a bunch of Jasons and Freddie's. Sounds about right! Gahahahaha!]

<=>

Ship corridor.

Illness was running.

Without a destination. Without a purpose.

"Hmph. Who are they calling useless? It's not even my job if the police isn't around! See if I ever help out again! I hope they get shot by the gunman!"

She had an idea of what was going on in the ship. She also saw the lifeboats exploding from the outdoor walkways.

"Seriously! Those bastards! After all that talk about a 'smooth seajacking'! That's not it at all! How is Claudia supposed to escape if they get rid of the lifeboats, too?!"

Illness kept running, not even hiding her anger at her allies--but she didn't have a destination in mind.

In any case, she had decided that she would go along with anyone she knew that she might run into on her way.

'Oh, I wonder if Claudia's all right.'

I have to do something about Mr. Gunman.

Is Czes all right, too?

I wonder if those stowaway kids are still running around.

Oh, what do I do?! What am I supposed to do?!

It's all their fault!'

Illness huffed and puffed, contemplating greeting the Mask Makers with drop kicks to the face the next time they met.

Suddenly, the cell phone at her side began vibrating. Illness stopped momentarily.

'Oh yeah, I left my radio in my room.'

She hid herself behind a corner in the hall and answered the call. The 'caller unknown' display made her a bit suspicious, but the fact that a call came through at all meant that it was someone from the Mask Makers.

Illness took a big breath, preparing to give them a piece of her mind. She put the phone to her ear.

However--

She would not be able to breathe out immediately.

[...Death is a neighbour to dread]

"-----"

Her breath stilled.

[...Life is kin to be feared]

Everything froze.

[Anguish joins with light... Shame conjoined with shadow... I merely stand before the exalted one... And bring a single herb to my lips...]

"-----!!!"

Illness began hyperventilating--but before she even tried to steady her breath, she threw the cell phone into the wall.

"No..."

The scream left her mouth before her breathing could go back to normal.

"No, nononononononono... no... n-nonononononooooo... how... how... h-how...?"

That was all she was able to say. The moment her breathing calmed, she coughed up sticky vomit onto the floor. She had not eaten anything recently--digestive fluids forced themselves from her stomach, through her esophagus, and out of her mouth.

The series of poetic words that spilled from her phone.

What meaning did they have to her?

Illness staggered for a few steps, but fell to her knees and burst into terrified sobs.

It was like the sound of a lost little child crying in fear.

But her tears weren't even noticeable amidst the chaos enveloping the ship--her voice echoed against the walls and dissipated.

And without reaching a single ear, the sound merely carried along into this tiny space.



<=>

the gunman	the demolisher	and their master
	the stowaway boys	
"Mask Makers"	Illness	Life
the movie star	the stuntman	the director and the crew

And an immortal family that just wanted to enjoy a normal vacation.

The ship moved forward, carrying within a myriad of characters.

This infinitely expanding closed space--

Swallowed their emotions and sailed the sea.

As it spread the despair within over the surface of the ocean.

And at the end of this ship's path--

Interlude

"...No... what is this...? What is all this...? The lifeboats exploded... what's going on?!"

...?!"

H-hello?! Hello?! Misao?!"

[H-Hiroko! Is that you, Hiroko?! I'm so glad... I finally got through to you...]

"M-Misao! L-listen to me! The ship! This ship! It's--"

[You have to listen to me, Hiroko.]

"No, now's not the time--"

[LISTEN!]

"Ah...!"

[Sorry I yelled at you... But you have to listen to me. You have to get off that ship *right now*.]

"Wh-what... why... how... how do you know what's going on here?!"

[You have to get away... You have to... Ah--

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!]

"Hello...? Misao? Misao?! What was that sound...? An explosion?"

[Damn, dammit! This side is done for! I don't know if your ship's safe or not. The bastards might be on your ship too! But you *have to escape* there's no other way you have to escape-- get away get away get out of there now!]

"Calm down... calm down, Misao!!!"

[It's not tomorrow night--the ship's faster over there--dammit! They turned on the speakers! I can't turn it off! Shit! This ship's finished! Those monsters! The monsters! What the hell is going on?! Dammit! (Fear death, fear death fear life, fear life the body shall accept death the heart shall desire death yet the exalted ram persists in life)]

"What's going on?! What's happening over there?! What's that sound I hear in the background?!"

[Those crazies are broadcasting something over the speakers! But that doesn't matter right now! Listen to me! This ship! This ship is going to **collide with your ship tomorrow evening**! The bastards are dead-set on crashing it, dammit!]

"What...?"

[I don't know what'll happen to me, but please let me just say this, Hiroko. I...--Argh, what is this?! Bastards! Shit! Get away, Hiroko! You have to get off that--]

"Misao...? Misao?!"

[(Calm the soul to be devoured worship death our god...)]

"Misao! Misao!!!!!! No... Wh-what is going on here?! No... no... **NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!**"

Extra Chapter A

In the midst of the chaos.

Watching the frenzy, the shadowed figure began to write a song into the cell phone's note function.

<=>

My name is Copycat.
I'm just a simple imitator.
I'm just a lowly criminal.

Now, let's repeat, repeat.
Let's repeat that incident.
The bullet garden is ready.
Soon this place will be covered in gunsmoke.
Let's open a bloody sabbath.
The live sacrifice is ready.
And it will be here soon.
Soon, it will pierce this place.

Let's turn two ships into one.
Let's stir despair into the ocean.

My name is Copycat.
I'm just a simple imitator.
I'm just a lowly criminal.
What I have to copy isn't an individual.
What I have to duplicate isn't an action.
What I have to replicate is malice and coincidence.
If I replicate coincidence, will I become something?
Will I become a replica of god?
If I'm god, let's create a world.
Let's recreate, recreate.
Let's recreate a world.
Let's recreate the transcontinental (the world).
Let's recreate a closed world.
But this time, there's no hope in this place.
There's no hope in the bullet garden (the ship).
The players in the role of hope (Isaac&Miria) can't catch up this time.
We've never met, but this time, they're not on board.
Now, let's recreate, recreate.
Let's recreate only the despair.
If it succeeds, let's clap quietly.
All for them, all for them.
A mocking applause, all for them.

Clap clap clap clap clap clap clap